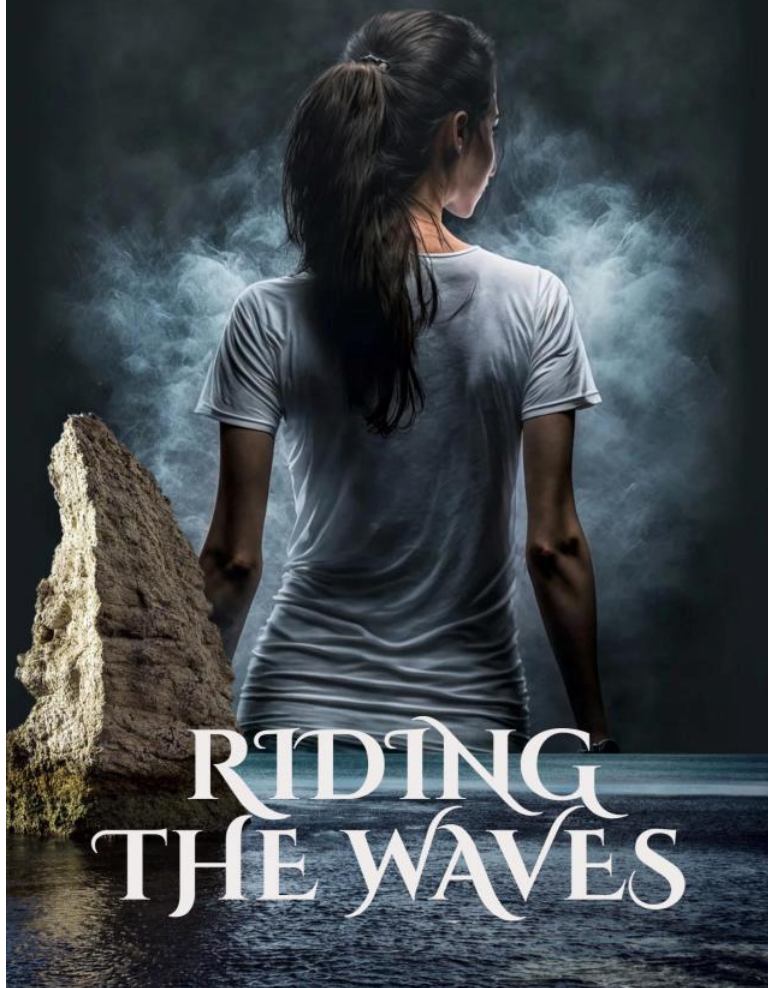


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #14



RIDING
THE WAVES

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by
Angela White

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American Spirit
Stay Away From Me
It's Not Just You
Close

Fearful Of The Crest

The long voyage continues;
We're all sick of the ocean.
We long for the land,
Not this horrible motion.

The ocean feels endless.
Will this ride never end?
It takes all we have,
Not to go 'round the bend.

It's never still;
We can never relax.
Even during moments of peace,
Fate always attacks.

It hits us in the back,
Then stabs us in the chest.
We ride the waves,
Fearful of the crest.

We keep hope alive
And flinch at every sound.
Dreaming of the day
We will claim our hard ground.

Chapter One
Don't Give Up
January 13th
Midnight

1

“It’s hot in here.” Samantha switched the room air conditioner to high. She stood in front of the vent, smiling in relief. “That’s good.”

Wade stood and put a hand on Amy’s arm. “She’s freezing. So am I.”

Neil grunted. “We went through this a few months ago. It’s the babies. William said they’ll need a lot of heat.”

“They’re making her temperature rise?”

Neil nodded. “Drop another blanket over Amy. She’s out from her playground time. She won’t notice.”

Wade covered Amy to her neck with the thickest quilt. Then he pulled on his jacket. The larger cabin was still cluttered in baby items, toys, books, and movie cases, but it felt nice to Wade, like a home. The thuds and voices from the cabins around this one helped that effect. They were a large family in a huge floating apartment complex.

Neil waved at the minifridge. “Ice packs help too.” Neil resumed writing in his book.

Samantha had ditched her jean jumper for stretchy pink boxers under a purple maternity tank top. Wade tried not to leer at her exposed skin as he got the ice pack, but it was hard. Her body was firm, rounded, perfect. *With her hair pinned up, even her neck is sexy!*

Samantha smiled at Wade as he extended the ice pack. “Will you hold it on my back?” Neil was in his Eagle gear, as was Wade. Sam felt safe with two Eagles once again protecting her.

Wade swallowed as she lifted her shirt. He held the freezing ice pack against her bare back. “I’m not as cold now.”

Samantha chuckled. She pushed against the ice pack. “Nice.”

Wade peered over at Neil. “How’s the baby book coming?”

Neil frowned. “Slow. I’m making a lot of guesses.”

Wade used his free hand to tug the chair over. He kept his hand on the ice pack until Samantha sat, letting her body hold it in place against the chair. Then he shoved his icy hand into his pocket. “But this is normal, right?”

Neil didn’t answer.

Wade moved toward the door. He shut it gently and went to the one person he hoped might be able to give him some answers. Now that he was part of Samantha’s life, his concern for her and the babies was growing.

“He’s very hyper.”

Neil snickered at her comment. “He has buildup now.”

Samantha laughed.

Neil glanced over at her. “I love that sound.”

Samantha grumped. “Don’t get all sex-eyed on me. I can’t be distracted that easy.”

Neil’s amusement faded. “You know.”

She rubbed her large stomach. “You’ve been studying William’s book and notes for a week. You’re scared.”

Neil wiggled his toes to pry his socks loose. He hadn’t showered or changed since the fight at the detention center. He wasn’t calm enough for that yet. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m surrounded by descendants with healing powers. As long as I carry to term, it’ll be fine.”

“I wish I had your faith.” Neil resumed working.

Samantha locked her thoughts. Neil didn’t need to know she was worried too. It wouldn’t help anyone if they panicked.

“What’s wrong with the babies?” Amy sat up, keeping the blanket around her shoulders. The yellow quilt and wild hair framed her sleepy face. “Is they okay?”

Samantha forced a bright smile. “They’re just being still right now. Nothing to worry about.”

“Okays.” Amy snuggled under the blanket and crashed out.

Neil and Samantha shared an honest stare, both terrified. The twins weren’t moving at all.

Wade hurried to the top deck and stopped next to Conner's bedroll. "What's going on with Samantha's twins?"

Conner peered up at him, confused. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because you know."

Conner didn't like being woken only an hour after he'd gotten to sleep on the top deck. "Why do you think I know?"

"Because you were in the labs and you store information like your father did." Wade dropped into a folding chair near the teenager's sleeping bag. "Please."

Conner sat up, blowing out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know why you guys are worrying."

"The babies stopped moving."

Conner smiled. "That's great."

"Why is that great?" Wade refused to relax.

"It means they'll be born soon. Descendant babies go quiet. The scientists don't know why, but it always means birth in the next month."

"She's got eight weeks to go."

Conner shrugged. "Maybe she miscounted."

"Yeah..." Wade leaned closer. "If they come early, can you heal them?"

Conner wanted to give Wade hope, but he couldn't. "We can't create; we only heal. If they come early and something isn't formed all the way,

they'll die." Conner now understood why Wade and Neil were full of panicked thoughts that they were trying to hide from everyone. "Is she hot or cold?"

"Hot."

"Eating a lot or less than normal?"

"Less, I think."

Conner flushed. "And sex?"

"No!"

"It sounds normal, except for the sex part. The closer to delivery, the more the women want it. You'll have to tell her no."

"Neil will. I'm not doing that while she's pregnant."

Conner grinned. "Gross, right?"

"No. Just disrespectful to Jeremy's memory." Wade studied Conner's bloodshot orbs and tense form. The boy hadn't changed his filthy clothes or showered. "You didn't take downtime with your team."

Conner frowned. "I didn't know I was supposed to."

Wade didn't say more, but it was clear from Conner's tension that he hadn't come down from the fight state yet. *Neither has Neil. Does that mean it isn't over yet?*

Conner grunted. "I'm just restless; no worries."

Wade's unease grew. The boy who had left wasn't the young man in front of him now. *Conner grew up. That sense of danger isn't coming from him, but he's picking up on it.*

Conner was busy yawning and missed that.

Wade let it go for now, but he stayed alert. It was common to be restless after a fight, but if it lasted, that meant the fight wasn't over.

The dark night clung to the ocean and made it impossible to tell where the water ended and the sky began. Conner hated it. *I never want to be on another boat in my life.*

Wade agreed, though he didn't say it either. They were Eagles; they went where orders sent them, but that didn't mean they had to like it. "How was your reunion with Candy?"

Conner didn't blink. "Nice. I set some limits. We should be good now."

Wade grinned. "You really have grown up."

Conner shrugged. "It feels a little different, but the old me is still there too. I didn't expect that."

"Welcome to manhood, where you now get to pick between the young, more fun, immature you and the older, wiser, a little boring you."

Conner laughed. "Yeah, that's about how I see it." The boy straightened, squaring his shoulders. "But I'll listen to both, at different times."

"Smart." Wade blew out a sigh. "I sure didn't. That young voice led me into places I'd never thought to go."

"Why are you like you are?"

Wade knew what Conner meant. "Maybe we'll have a beer some night and talk about it. And why you are who you are."

Conner snorted at the evasion, but he hadn't expected Wade to tell his life story anyway. "It's

cool. There will come a time when you want to tell me everything.”

Wade froze. “Why? Is it about Sam? What happens?!”

Conner chuckled. “Easy. I meant while you’re waiting on the birth. Having someone to talk to makes the time go by easier.”

Wade’s anger flared. “I’ll be with Samantha the entire time she’s in labor.”

Conner’s lips thinned.

Wade sighed. “No, I won’t, will I?”

“Neil has you on duty, *outside* the delivery room.”

Wade hadn’t spent much time thinking about that moment. His shoulders drooped. “Whatever they want.”

Conner gestured. “It’s all Neil. Samantha hasn’t said anything as far as I know. Neil doesn’t want you in the delivery room.”

Wade stood up. “Thank you for the information.”

Conner also stood, grabbing his sleeping bag. “I’ll crash on the couch by her cabin in case she needs something I can do.”

Wade followed his instincts. “Tell Morgan I want him in a cabin near us, just in case.” Wade marched toward the steps to the bridge.

Conner forced himself to walk below, fighting his new revulsion of being under the water line. *I survived. I’m home. It’s okay.*

The steps to the bridge were slippery. Wade was careful where he placed his feet as the wind continued to whip sprays over the ship. It wasn't storming, but the winds were reaching 40 mph in some gusts, according to the anemometer glued to the bridge window. Wade examined the other signs and notes for changes.

He found it all normal. The reminders to check the air quality up here once an hour sent a shudder through his bowels. He guessed it always would. Some traumas were too ugly to forget.

The clean bridge held newer, brighter bulbs in the fixtures and the light over the elevator was red, meaning it wasn't available for this floor. That was a trick to give their captain a slight edge if anyone came up here again with hostile intentions. Theo had rigged the light a short time ago, and installed a rack of guns painted so well they blended in perfectly with the wall of Grant's cubicle. The matching ammunition magazines were below those weapons. Velcro kept them from moving. Unless you were hunting for the differences, you weren't going to know Grant was armed. All the improvements were from Ray and he'd bumped them through in a few hours by going straight to the bosses.

Wade joined Grant. "If I need to call Adrian, do you know how to reach him?"

Grant frowned. "Yes, but I'd have to get permission from Marc or Angela. I doubt they'll clear it."

“If I need it, they’ll give the order.” Wade lingered, needing another piece of information he doubted Grant would want to give.

Ray came from the shadows by the elevator. “Just ask him and save us all the next ten minutes of chitchat. He’s working.”

Ray was twitchy and wired; his eyes spun every few seconds, searching for the next threat. Wade knew that was normal. Grant had been in serious danger from Joel. Wade hid a smirk. *Once he has that ass, it will only get worse. Men protect their mates. It’s hard to snap out of it.* “Grant, do you know why William flipped when we came through, but not before?”

Grant stiffened. “Yes. I’ve told Marc.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Why?”

“Because I think it concerns Samantha. I’m trying to confirm it.”

Grant turned to look at him. “It’s not Samantha he wants.”

Wade’s stomach churned. “The babies. Son of a bitch!”

Grant’s anger came through in his voice. “Twins have always been valued for spells, but your kind are special. William has wanted to reset the war since it happened. He said he needs three time keepers, or newborn twins and a time keeper.”

“He’s two thousand miles from here.” Ray tried to make them both feel better. “He’ll never make it to the island. The ocean promised Angela.”

Wade grunted. “But he could send someone.”

Ray hated that answer. “Son of a bitch!”

Grant sighed. “I think William was working with the UN. Our people didn’t know.”

Wade scowled. “Why didn’t he attack before we left? He could have taken Sam hostage.”

“He didn’t want to risk hurting the babies or making them come early, was my guess.” Grant hoped he was wrong. “I have no proof of this, you understand. It’s just comments he made and things I overheard.”

“It’s true. It all fits.” Wade’s big fists clenched. “He tried to charm Angela to get our time keepers!”

Grant’s brow puckered. “It’s not all about the reset. He really does want Angela, as much as Adrian does. I doubt we’ll be on the island long before he shows up.”

“I’ll be ready for him.” Nothing would be allowed to interfere with Wade’s new life. *If I have to commit mass murder and become byzan to fight him, I will.*

“Okay...”

Wade scowled. Grant appeared calm in his clean captain’s outfit, but Wade caught the muscle twitching in his jaw. It matched Ray’s constant scans. *Ray’s twitch rubbed off on him. That’s normal too.* Wade continued to find signs of trouble, but his training allowed him to match actions to causes, and come up with what was normal for the situation. *And yet I’m still not satisfied. It’s time for another check of the ship. I’ll do this one myself so*

I'll know it's all clear. Wade descended the steps, inspecting guard booths and patrolling Eagles for any signs that didn't fit.

3

“This is Somchai, calling the ship now approaching the Falkland Islands. Please come in. We need help!”

Everyone who heard the call turned toward their radios. The *Adrianna* hadn't had contact from land, any land, since the Cayman Islands.

Half a dozen people sat up or stopped what they were doing. They recognized the name.

In their cabin, Marc stared at Angela. “It's in the book. That name is one of the founding families of Ciemus.”

Angela was already reaching for her radio. “Do not answer them, Grant. Change course to get us close enough to scan.”

“Copy.”

Angela put the radio on the nightstand. She rolled over, studying Marc. The cool air blowing through their open cabin window smelled of fresh water and the freedom of late-night adventure. It made the hair on her arms stand up. “I have an idea.”

Marc frowned. “Who am I killing?”

Angela saw the haunted glaze hiding under his calm expression; she hated his guilt, but that would forever be a part of their lives now, like her decision to trek up the mountain to face Vlad alone. She

forced a chuckle. “I was thinking more along the lines of stress relief and cardio exercise.”

“We have to let you finish healing...” Marc’s breath caught as she arched, stretching. Hard nipples poked against her shirt. “We should wait...”

“Okay.” Angela ran hands up her ribcage and over her full breasts. “If you’re sure.”

Marc’s mouth went dry. “I... Uh...”

“You can stay over there. That way you don’t break the medic’s rules.” Angela ran her hands over her breasts again, lifting the tank top.

Her bare skin gleamed with good health in the lamplight. Her scars glinted at him too, but this time, he was able to find beauty in them. *She gives everything in life, no matter the job or chore. She’s fearless.*

Marc locked the door and leaned against it. “Yeah. I’ll stay right here.”

“Good. If I get too hot, you can call for help.”

Marc chuckled. “You’re mean.”

Angela rolled over and sat up, blocking his view as she pulled off her shirt.

“Now that *is* mean.” Marc moved toward the chair in the corner as his balls grew heavy.

Angela froze.

Marc groaned, already sure it was bad news. “What now?”

“Damn it!” Angela started fixing her clothes. “Morgan needs us in the infirmary. Allison just collapsed.”

Marc went right then, waving Ivan from the booth to guard Angela. He used the elevator to get there faster. *We're about to perform magical surgery for the first time.* Marc locked up his nerves and concentrated on everything they'd figured out about this side of their gifts. It wasn't much. *Please let her survive. I can't take anymore death right now.*

4

Jennifer paused near the QZ, reading the thoughts of those inside before she entered.

Kyle didn't disturb her even though he knew she was exhausted and the people inside were impatient. They needed this last chore finished so they could both rest, but it was important. He wasn't going to interrupt her.

Neither were the other three men he'd chosen to come along and provide security.

Jennifer felt the people inside become aware of her; she waited, letting the tension build.

The quarantine process had three stages now. The first was a holding area until the medics called them, one-by-one, for a checkup, blood work, and a conversation. The medics decided from there if the person returned to the same holding cell or if they were placed in the real QZ. The real QZ meant the medics were okay with the person. Being put back into the first holding area meant the medics wanted someone else to clear the person or group.

All the detention center people had been moved into the dorm-style quarantine zone that was still being worked on, even now. Each adventure had shown Safe Haven what they needed to update or upgrade. Jennifer was here now to move this group into cabins, after a basic tour of important areas. They'd all passed Tonya's blood tests. By the time they reached the camp living area, Ralph and Daisey would have the buddy-system in full swing.

There would be bags of clothes so they could change out of the basic paper pants and shirts the medics had given them after their showers. There would also be supplies, assigned cabins with a buddy, and a constant guard until their buddy declared them safe on their own. The other people they'd rescued were in the infirmary. They'd been sedated and their injuries were healed. Someone would debrief them as soon as the medics cleared it.

Jennifer strode into the quarantine zone, holding a sheet of paper. "Good morning, new people! You're all cleared to move into cabins."

Tobias and his wives stood, eager to thank their hosts.

Laura and her nieces frowned at the thought of being mixed with the camp.

Joey grinned. "Can I play on the swings now?"

Jennifer smiled at the cute little boy. "We'll stop by there first."

"Yeah!" Joey waved at Laura's nieces. "We get to play!"

The girls smiled at the boy. Jennifer estimated their ages to be around ten. With short, sandy blonde hair over thin, bruised skin, it was obvious they were much older mentally.

Both girls smiled at her, but they didn't send thoughts.

Jennifer sensed a lot going on in their minds. She didn't pry. She saved her energy for when it was needed.

Jennifer saw Laura's green eyes inspect each of the Eagles in her protection detail. She searched them in seconds, then turned her attention back. Jennifer lifted a brow. "See something you like?"

Laura nodded, causing her blonde spikes to wave. "Nice stock here."

Jennifer shrugged, cheeks darkening. "Not my department."

Joey tugged on Jennifer's arm. "Can I visit Cate?"

"Yes. Give me a few minutes and I'll take you, okay?"

Joey immediately sat and pinched his lips shut.

Jennifer studied Laura. "How are you settling in?"

"We'd be better off staying here." Laura put her arms around her nieces. "Normals don't like us."

Jennifer frowned. "We no longer have that problem here. Our camp won't attack you."

Laura snorted, but she didn't call the girl a liar. She scanned her instead.

Jennifer zapped the woman, using a child's strength. "Only with permission."

Instead of getting angry like the witnesses expected, Laura relaxed. "You follow the old ways."

"As much as we can, but be clear: we will not tolerate breaking camp rules. You'll get a cabin; you'll mingle." Jennifer's lips thinned. "People will accept you if you do that. Break the rules and our enforcer will handle you."

Laura paled. "You have an enforcer here?"

Jennifer let her eyes glow red. "And I'm very, very good at it."

"We'll follow the rules." Laura brought out her own red orbs. "But don't think we'll take their abuse. We're fighters, survivors. Our destiny doesn't change that."

Jennifer's eyes faded to normal. "You know."

Tobias snorted scornfully. "We've always known. Ciemus wouldn't accept it. They think we're meant to share that future."

"You know William."

When Tobias shook his head, Jennifer looked at Laura.

"I know of him. My parents took me away from that cursed town when I was little." Laura let her anger show. "He's there now, trying to blast through their walls. We heard their calls for your help."

Jennifer wasn't surprised. "We told them they should come with us. That was before William snapped. They wouldn't listen."

Tobias's profile darkened. "Then they haven't changed. He might kill them all."

Jennifer dug for more information. "Why is he only hurting our kind now? First reports said he was slaughtering normals."

"We think he's trying to lure you back since killing innocent humans didn't do it." Laura took the bag of gear that a black clad sentry handed her. "We're grateful you didn't fall for it."

Jennifer frowned. "Why?"

"Joel was worse." Tobias ran a hand through his gray hair, stopping to scratch behind his big ear. The other hand stayed wrapped around his dirty coat. He'd refused to burn it with the rest of their things. He and his wives had been treated for lice. The medic had sprayed the coat and put it in a sealed bag that he couldn't open for a week. Tobias was embarrassed, but his wives were thrilled that the itch was gone. They didn't care if their curls reeked of chemicals. The relief was worth it. "He would have consumed all of us."

Jennifer wasn't sure she agreed. "And that's worse than William burning people alive?"

Tobias snorted. "Yes. If Joel had gotten all our gifts, not even Safe Haven could have stopped him. William won't have that advantage."

Jennifer stored the information. She smiled at the twin girls huddled under their aunt's strong arms. "Do you like puppies? We rescued one from the water."

Neither girl answered, but their expressions lit up.

“They don’t talk.” Laura got them to their feet. “The government scientists cut out their tongues to prevent them from using charms.”

Jennifer was horrified. She sent out waves of kindness. “That abuse will never happen here.”

Both of Tobias’s wives flinched at the loud noise of an Eagle team going down the hall toward the hot tubs.

Kyle stuck his head out the door. “Hey! What is rookie rule Z?”

The three men stopped, staring in apprehension.

Kyle scowled. “You’re not alone yet. Do not celebrate until alone!”

Jennifer hid a smile as Kyle resumed his place. She turned to Tobias’s wives. She shoved into their minds. *Are you with him willingly?*

The females nodded, but they didn’t talk either.

Jennifer scowled. “Speak up!”

“I’m not sure they can. One of the spells Joel cast hit them both. I’m not getting anything from their minds either.” Tobias kept the nervous women close. “They used to talk all the time. I miss it.”

“Our medics might be able to help.” Jennifer led them out of the quarantine zone and up the stairs. “What do you know about Somchai?”

Kyle walked behind the group, scanning for trouble while Jennifer tried to get the information they still needed. He didn’t expect any problems from this group. They appeared to be good people,

except for Tobias. Kyle dug into the man's mind while Jennifer had them all distracted. *I'm not taking any more chances with her life. Joel was the first descendant to try to capture her, but I doubt he'll be the last.*

5

“What are you doing here?”

Conner stepped aside to let Marc enter the medical bay. “I made a deal. Helping the cancer patients is part of it.”

The infirmary was now separated by three large partitions. Minor issues were handled in the front, near the door that would send them to the lab for blood work. The center area, where they were now, was for emergencies and operations. It was wider than the other two areas. The third zone was for those who needed to be quarantined or healed. Morgan didn't know what they would try with Allison. He'd directed the other medics to prep the center area while he carried Allison from her post where she'd collapsed.

Marc scowled. “Mitchels and their deals.” He stomped over to the desk and waited for Morgan to update him. Allison's waxy face and sweaty skin said her body wasn't doing well under that Eagle uniform. *We don't need Mitchels here, getting in the way and forming their own plans that screw with mine.*

Conner let out a deep sigh. “Are we going to have trouble?”

Marc gawked at the cocky teenager, a little shocked. *I didn't think Conner had any balls.*

Conner locked eyes with him. “You’re pissed that I passed my test. I get it. Don’t take it out on Allison.”

Guilt swept Marc. He grunted. “Yeah.” Marc motioned. “What can you do?”

Morgan came over to Conner, needle in hand.

Marc braced for more ugliness even though he didn’t like Conner.

Morgan slid the needle into the vein on the first try and taped it in place. Blood began rushing into the tube. “We don’t know how to do this the other way yet, but Tonya’s working on it. We’re not sure filtering it is a good idea at all. Tell the boss she’ll need to make a choice on that.” Morgan directed Conner to the chair next to Allison’s bed.

Marc frowned. Morgan assumed Angela was back in charge now.

Conner smiled at Allison, who was staring in glazed fear. “We’re going to try this first. Marc will stay in case we don’t have time to wait for it to work.”

Allison shivered, breathing shallow, skin clammy. She was covered in thick medical blankets and she was still cold.

Morgan didn’t want to have the conversation now flashing in Marc’s mind. He gestured at Conner. “Tell him what you told me and Angela.”

“I’m an everyone type, literally. In the lab, they found out I’m immune to almost everything. There can be bad reactions if I mix with a non-descendant, but our kind will improve almost immediately.” Conner was glad to have it out in the open. He hadn’t wanted to hide it from Marc. He also felt more fear now. He planned to mix in other, more powerful ways later with Candy, and she wasn’t a descendant.

Marc was examining the boy’s thoughts now and storing everything for later examination and use. “But Samantha was fine when she got back to camp. She didn’t act like she’d had a medical treatment.”

“The lifeforce pushes it into remission. The antibodies in my blood kill the dormant cells that are still there. The lifeforce really isn’t needed unless the person is critical. They just need a few transfusions.” Conner shrugged. “Other than Angela, no one ever asked what we did for her.”

“We.” Marc sighed. “It wasn’t just you.”

“No. My dad gave her a lifeforce while I gave her blood. She was distracted by the magic; she missed most of the medical.”

Morgan had put the pieces together after hearing it a second time. “Are you telling me the government had the cure for cancer all along?”

Conner nodded. “Of course. Haven’t you ever wondered why Congress people never died from cancer? Neither did Supreme Court Justices or Joint Chiefs. Just like they had passes to bunkers, they

also had other advantages the average person never saw.”

Allison whimpered as the pain increased.

Conner regarded Marc. “We need the boss.”

Marc felt her approaching. “She’s on the way.”

“She’s here.” Angela loathed being back in the infirmary; the harsh smells of a clean room ready for use made her guts boil. She went straight to Allison, forcing a cheerful tone and grin. “Let’s get you back on your feet!”

Marc and Morgan both studied how Angela brought up the struggling lifeforce and then forced it into Allison. The screaming soul protested the entire time; it hurt Marc.

It made Morgan angry. He turned away from the sight and went to fill out the paperwork for this treatment.

Angela shuddered, gasping.

Marc put a hand on her arm to replace the energy she’d used.

Angela leaned against him, eyes closed while she recovered.

Conner didn’t usually get to witness this forbidden side of magic. He also studied it intently.

Allison groaned, heart thumping.

Marc connected to her like he had during the recharge. He narrowed in on the mass they’d found. “It’s breaking up!”

Morgan came over and joined the connection. “The pieces are dissolving!”

“They’re dying.” Tonya came hurrying into the room and sat at the desk with a stack of folders. Her wild hair covered her face as she sat. Tonya shoved it back impatiently, opening the top folder.

Marc kept inspecting the x-ray-like images as he spoke to Tonya. “Dying?”

“The good blood cells are killing them, using the energy blast from the lifeforce.” Tonya dug out a paper. “We have to stop my experiments.”

Marc and Angela both turned toward her. “Why?”

Tonya gestured. “Her blood work shows elevated levels again. The food cocktail I used actually fed the cancer. We have to stop.”

“Don’t you dare!” Allison fought the pain to yell at Tonya. “You find the one that kills it! People won’t have the options of transfusions and lifeforces after we’re all gone. You have to cure it!”

Everyone stared in surprised sadness.

Tonya’s shoulders drooped. “We at least have to tell them there can be side effects.”

Allison shuddered, tears welling as the pain finally began to subside. “Don’t give up on us, Tonya.”

Tonya smiled at the feeling of being needed. “I won’t, as long as we can tell them this might happen.”

“Also tell them there are not enough lifeforces left for everyone.” Angela’s tone hardened. “And no one outside this room hears about Conner.”

Tonya paused. “But I want to use his blood for the next cocktail.”

“So?”

Tonya frowned. Angela was saying she could do it, but she wasn’t allowed to tell the patients what was in the treatment. “I don’t think I’m okay with withholding information.”

“I understand.” Angela let Marc handle this one, hoping he was ready to really be trained for this job.

Marc had already thought it through. “Conner will be hunted for his blood. Someone with no medical knowledge will try to take it and kill him by accident. Then there’s no cure for anyone.”

Tonya didn’t yield. “This is one of those slippery slope moments. If we do it for this treatment, it’ll be easier to do it for the next one.” Tonya shrugged at Angela. “I need rules or I can’t be a part of it.”

Angela smiled. “Honor looks good on you.” She motioned to Marc.

Marc took out his notebook and recorded it. “Under privacy?”

“For now. It may get moved to a medical slot.” Angela turned to Allison, still smiling. “You’re patient zero in our first medical constitutional law. How does it feel?”

Allison grimaced.

Angela chuckled. “Rest for the next day or two. You won’t want to, but I’m ordering a recharge for you as soon as Conner and Morgan clear it.”

“And it covers Conner, right?” Allison hoped so. She didn’t want anything to happen to him because of this.

“Yes.” Angela focused on Conner. “We have to protect him.”

Conner’s mind had already moved on to other topics. “I saw you cut my dad loose.”

“It was time.” Angela swept him, finding the new maturity. “Are you ready for the next stage of your life?”

Conner shrugged angrily. “It won’t be much different. I’ll follow the rules and pretend I’m not a Mitchel.”

Angela winced.

Marc frowned. “It’s a good deal, kid.”

“No, it’s not, but it will give me what I need, so I’m doing it.” Conner glared at Marc, not holding back. “But it didn’t have to be this way. Both of you should step aside.”

Angela held up a hand to stop that argument. She switched the topic back to where it mattered. “I want you to donate, often.”

“I will, but it’s not just me.”

Angela’s expression brightened. “Really?”

“Add yourself and Marc to it.” Conner held still as Morgan detached the IV. “All founding families can do this.”

Surprise filled the medical bay.

“How do you know?”

Conner held the cotton ball while Morgan opened the Band-Aid. “The scientists.”

Marc denied that. “Mitchels? Sure. Bradys? Yes, but only recently. Angela’s family has never been in the labs. Try again.”

Conner regarded Angela. “Yes, they have. Joel had files on his private computer in the detention center. He had records on three of your bloodline. Two were from sixty years ago. The third was listed as your father—Darius Wells Jr.”

Angela had frozen at the revelations.

Marc asked the next question he knew she would want answered. “Who were the older two?”

“His parents.” Conner kept going even though he no longer wanted to. “They were both removed right after the war. No one knows where Darius went.”

“I have family alive?” Angela’s fury lashed out, warming the room. “He’d better not come here. If he does, I will have justice for being abandoned to that life!” She strode to the exit, needing a minute to get her anger under control. She’d swung to pissed in seconds.

Marc let her go out alone. Ivan was on her heels and she was pissed enough to fry anyone who threatened her. He caught a flash of people in the halls and sighed. “Zack’s coming.”

Allison knew what was expected. “Just the lifeforce.”

“And an IV treatment. You don’t know what was in it.” Conner smiled at her. “And you don’t, you know. It could have been anything. You were sick; it was hard to keep it straight.”

Allison slowly closed her eyes. “That’s exactly right. Thank you!”

Conner shocked them all by placing a soft kiss to her forehead.

“Get better.” Conner pulled her sleeve over the bandage as Zack came in.

Zack didn’t even notice the boy as he rushed to Allison’s side.

Conner held his chin up and enjoyed being one of the good guys. “I have a quick errand and then I’ll be on the couch outside Samantha’s cabin if you need me.”

Morgan watched Conner leave; he sensed the changes and was relieved that it had gone well. He was also glad the boy would be close if he was needed. *I have no idea how to birth one descendant baby, let alone two. We have to learn fast.*

Morgan ignored the need for rest and went to the rear right corner instead, where he opened the partition and began lugging in the boxes that might help them save those two precious lives.

Chapter Two

The Hive

1

Angela's anger faded. She didn't like letting people know she was upset, but it also didn't matter. The odds of fate bringing her and her father together were high as far as she was concerned. Before the war, she would have said things like that only happened in the movies. Marc's twins proved it wrong, as did the many Mitchels who kept popping up. Some families were harder to kill off. And now that she knew the moment might happen, she could plan for it and be ready. Conner's revelation was a good thing.

Angela winced at a weak cramp. She was glad PMS was over. The leftover hormone blast made it harder to be cool and calm in moments like this. A wave of lust slapped her next. Angela continued to the bridge. She could ravage Marc later. Right now, they were only 16 hours away from the debris site that had once been the international detention center. She wanted an update.

Ray met her at the top of the steps and quickly moved aside.

Angela approved of his caution.

Grant nodded to her. "Boss."

Angela joined him near the front of the bridge.
“How are things?”

Grant was ready for her. “You want the long or the short?”

“Just the full.”

Grant got started, enjoying the feel of having the real Angela back in charge again. He hadn’t liked it when she was locked. It felt safer now. “We’ve had a few blips on the radar, but nothing for the last two hours.”

“We’re leaving them behind?”

“I assume so. If they were going to attack, I would think it would have been sooner.”

“That’s good.”

“The ship is fine, but I’d feel better if we could check it out fully before we reach the tip.”

Angela heard the fear and understood sailing around South America scared Grant. She felt their bond light up. She was scared of it too. “Tell me now if you know you can’t do it.”

Grant let out a shuddering sigh. “I want the challenge; I can’t promise anything but to try my best.”

“That’s not good enough, but it’s all we’ve got.” Angela made a fast choice. “I’ll try to look ahead as soon as I stop swinging so hard.”

Neither man knew what that meant, but they were relieved she would try to find out what was coming.

Marc slowly came up the steps to join them, hating the idea. She was marked now and not allowed to search the timestream.

Angela gestured.

Grant resumed the update. “The weather radar still isn’t clear. I’d like to have Samantha...” Grant stopped as Angela began shaking her head.

“Samantha is off duty until delivery.”

Grant assumed the blonde storm tracker was having trouble. “Is there someone else who can try to read it for us?”

“I’ll find out.” Angela made a note in her book and waited for the rest.

“The ocean is calm, and it appears cleaner. We’ve fished out debris twice today and it’s had very low radiation levels both times. We’d like to start testing the fish.”

Angela was relieved. “Good. What about the air?”

Grant smiled. “No traces at all today.”

“Excellent.”

Grant stiffened as her pleasure came through their bond.

Ray frowned at Angela. “Leggo my Eggo.”

Grant chuckled. “No worries. She isn’t built right.”

Marc leered. “I disagree.”

Their laughter rolled across the deck and out over the water.

“The radio is quiet.” Grant revealed his biggest concern. “Dead quiet.”

Angela wasn't surprised, but she didn't tell him why. She lifted a brow at Marc.

Marc concentrated. "...people are waiting to discover who won?"

"Very good!"

Angela's pleasure hit all of them this time.

Marc immediately wanted to do it again. "Should we..." Marc recognized her expression. She was waiting for him to make this choice. "You already know the best way, right?"

Angela felt no need to baby him anymore. "I'll probably always be a step in front on most of this side. Don't sweat it. You'll cream me in other areas."

Marc leered again. "You know it!"

Angela flushed as they all burst out laughing again.

Marc finished thinking it through. "It depends on the call from land. If we answer them, people will know we survived. If we don't, maybe we can fade into the sunset until they come for us on the island."

"And are we okay with that plan?"

Marc nodded. "This time. It's been a rough trip. We need to get them to the island before we lose any more normals."

Angela was thrilled at his answers, but she held in the pleasure this time.

Marc frowned. "Hey!"

Angela snickered. "Work harder to earn it."

Instead of getting angry, Marc grinned. “Okay, I will. I want to make the pickup and refuel here. It will save one fill from our reserve. I’ll only need to find one good load when we’re ready to go home.”

“Perfect...except for two things. What are they?” Angela loved teaching. She knew how to reach most of her people and help them attain levels they might have missed if left on their own.

Marc wanted to please her. His obsession was starting to take over again. “Uh... Who makes the call...and what they say.” Marc realized she’d already covered that. *There has to be two I’m missing.*

Angela turned to Grant. “There are a lot of dark monitors in this room. What are they for?”

Grant pointed as he spoke. “Ship security, public places, employee areas, engine room.”

“When something happens, do alarms sound if the monitors are on?”

Grant thought about it. “There might be one for fires or leaks... I’ll work on it.”

“Good.” Angela looked at Ray.

Ray clamped his lips shut. *I’m locking it up. I got scared for Grant when Joel came aboard.*

Angela’s wave of anger singed them all.

Grant slowly turned around to stare at Ray, stomach churning. “What did you do?”

Ray didn’t want to do this, but only because he liked being an Invisible. Now, he wouldn’t be able to hide anymore.

Angela held out a hand.

Ray touched her. Bright blue magic flew through the air and sank into his chest.

Grant stared. “What happened?”

Ray let go, anger blazing. “She connected me to the damn hive!”

Grant didn’t know what to say.

Neither did Marc.

Angela waited for the full effect to kick in, staring into Ray’s eyes to make the emotional hit stronger.

Ray groaned as voices filled his mind; the other descendants onboard peered upward, sensing a new member. Ray quickly realized he now had a connection that would bring people to help him even if he couldn’t call for assistance. He immediately thought of Grant. *He’ll be safer this way. I should have done it sooner.*

“I’m not mad over the choice; you’re not allowed to be either.” Angela peered out the windows at the rising sun. Rare beams lit her hair and sparkled over her skin.

Ray admired the sight of her the same as the other males, but it wasn’t just them. Men and women across the deck turned toward her light. The Eagle outfit and jacket couldn’t hide the fact that she was different from the rest of them—even from the other descendants. Her hair glinted; her body had a glow. Ray blinked and it was still there. *What’s happening to you?*

Angela smiled. *I’m healthy again.*

Will that happen to the rest of us?

Some. Angela refused to tell him the people who'd helped her plan the mass murders in the detention center would also evolve. Her gifts had strengthened again. Her draw was stronger than it had been. Around strangers, she would have to assume an icy air of control to keep it in check. Angela moved toward the exit. "I'm still waiting for the other two things. We'll be back to scan in...?"

Grant found his voice. "Three hours will put us within ten miles of the Falkland Islands."

Angela walked down the steps.

Marc hurried to catch up, mind going in two directions now. *Ray is one of us. And what did I miss?*

Angela studied the water, giving him time to find the concentration to search for answers. She refused to look behind them.

The ocean sloshed against the boat, making unsettling noises that drew flinches from the sentries. No one wanted duty up here anymore. It was quickly becoming a punishment post that worked their nerves. If the noise didn't freak them out, the sight of so much water and no land did. Ocean sickness was starting to affect a few of their members, though most of the motion sickness had faded.

Marc got the first one as he realized why she didn't want to look behind them. "It will give Adrian time to catch up."

Angela nodded. "And?"

"I have to decide what to do if he does."

Angela turned to face him, leaning against the rail.

Marc wanted her more than anything in that moment. *She's beautiful!*

Angela gave him a sultry smile. "We could take an hour and find something fun to do."

Marc stepped closer, wrapping his arms around her. He whispered in her ear. "We should take a few days to celebrate our wedding."

Angela chuckled. "We aren't married yet."

"We could be." Marc kissed her cheek. "I know you aren't ready. But we should still take the honeymoon time now, while we can."

Angela shrugged. "If things go well on this run, we'll arrange it."

Marc leaned back. "What if *we* don't handle this one?"

Angela ran through the options. She matched them to the names in his mind. She smiled. "Make it so, XO."

Marc laughed. He wrote it in his book, marveling at the change between them.

Don't bring it up. Don't bring it up. Angela held her breath as his mouth opened.

"When do you want to tell them?"

Angela let out the breath in relief. "I can be packed in ten minutes. I'll need eighteen hours to get the kids settled."

Marc laughed as they walked toward the steps. He felt her stealing glimpses at him from the corner of his eye and made sure to keep his face

expressionless and his mind on the choice he might have to make in three hours.

Angela studied his handsome profile and lean body, hunger lighting up her mind with thoughts of being alone for days. The need between them had finally returned, but she had a feeling this was only the beginning. And he knew what had caused it. So did she; she just didn't want to talk about the two cancerous wounds that had been cut out of their souls. Reopening those injuries was dangerous. Either of them could bleed out, with no way to plug the hole.

2

“Make a hole!” Missy pushed against the adult legs in her way. “Move! My Shawn is out of the QZ!”

Most people moved, chuckling. They were happy she'd waited while Shawn went through his time in quarantine. The others frowned at her, not sold. They didn't like the relationship and they didn't like Missy.

Missy didn't care about any of them. She tracked Shawn to the deck below and flew down the stairs. She tried not to bump into anyone unless she had to. She was slowly learning to control herself.

Shawn appeared in the hallway outside the playground.

Missy threw herself into his arms. “Shawn!”

Shawn had showered in the QZ, but Missy could still smell the blood, smoke, and gunpowder under the clean sweats and black t-shirt. His damp hair pressed against her cheek. It was longer now. Missy tangled her fingers in it.

Shawn nuzzled the girl with his beard to make her laugh. He held her back and studied her, happy with the clean blue dress and short hair in two ponytails. She seemed like she'd been well-cared for.

"I was." Her happiness faded into misery. "You were gone so long!"

"I'm sorry." Shawn caught her in a tight, happy hug. *She's okay. I can breathe again.*

Missy moaned against his neck. *That's how I feel too!* Old magic swirled over them, bringing time to a slow crawl.

Missy smiled, lips slowly stretching. "*I never want this to end.*"

Shawn heard the distorted sound of her voice. He froze, almost unable to believe time really was slowing. Then he shifted her to his hip, aware of how slow, how wrong, it felt. *Let go right now!*

Shawn's mental shout hit Missy full blast. Her concentration broke; time snapped into motion, sending a pressure wave that delivered immediate headaches and nosebleeds.

Caught between that proverbial rock and a hard place, Shawn protected Missy. "We need to get checked out. Go to the medical bay! I think we were hit by a new wave of something."

The people who heard him followed the advice. The rest were already moving that way, holding their bleeding noses.

“Cleaning crew to the hall by play area one.” Shawn subtly swept for any other signs of time slowing. He didn’t see anything. *But I bet the boss felt it.* Shawn led her into the crowded playground area and acted like nothing had happened.

Missy tried not to cry. “I’m sorry.”

Shawn shushed her. “Swings or slide?”

Missy ran toward the slide.

Shawn followed, heart thumping at the looks he received from descendants who were here. They knew something had happened and they already suspected Missy was involved. Shawn pinpointed the right reaction and flashed worries over one of the new people trying to hurt them somehow. He was sorry to cast those doubts, like he was sorry to flood the medical bay with people who weren’t really injured, but when it came to Missy’s safety, he would always make this choice.

Outside the playground, a group of people paused with their escort.

Jennifer kept her mind blank, but she inspected the kids, searching for the one she would have to punish later. Keeping time gifts under control was the job of an enforcer, though Jennifer already hated it. She didn’t want to punish little kids, but only they had those gifts. It faded as they aged.

Jennifer quickly narrowed it to three possible choices, but it was hard to be sure when all of the guardians were blocking to keep her from finding out. Jennifer was touched by their loyalty to the children; she was also annoyed by the attempt. *No one keeps me out and only a few can get in. I'm special.*

The playground was covered in running, jumping, shouting, laughing children who were enjoying getting to be here early in their day. They hadn't even had breakfast yet. The colorful blurs of happiness were soothing despite the noise and the smells of babies being changed.

Jennifer pointed. "Cate's in there."

Joey ran in. "Cate!"

Jennifer watched as the little boy tore through the playground and made a beeline straight for the area lined in picnic tables. Cate, along with Cody and their Eagle escort, were staying back to avoid attention. Jennifer sensed things were getting tense. She hoped Joey's arrival calmed the little girl. Cate didn't like being thrust into public life. She wanted to be alone with her brother and maybe her father. Jennifer knew the little girl hadn't made up her mind about Marc yet. It was a little soon in Jennifer's opinion. They'd been apart for ten years. They'd been reunited for less than 24-hours. It took time to heal wounds, time that Marc wouldn't always have due to his position in leadership. Jennifer wondered if Marc might resign because of it.

Cate heard Joey coming. She braced to be touched and then opened her arms to the first happy hug she'd had since being split from her brother. The reunion with her father didn't count. Marc had only done it because he was feeling guilty. She could tell the difference between a sad hug and a glad hug.

Next to her, Cody caught the thought, but he didn't try to explain that things were different here. Cate would understand it in time. Until then, she was in Safe Haven, where she was allowed to think anything she wanted to. *Freedom still means something here.*

Joey wrapped his arms around Cate, little heart pounding.

Cate squeezed him. "I'm sorry for not picking you over the alpha."

Joey patted her arm. "I'm glad. This alpha is good."

That was the first time Joey had said anything about his father, in any form, since being brought aboard. Jennifer memorized it, keeping track of the conversation for later updates. The little boy didn't want to talk about his life. Jennifer understood, but at some point, Angela would ask questions and the child would answer.

Jennifer stayed in the entry, blocking access to their kids. The new people were being cleared, but they hadn't been cleared yet. Until then, they were off limits to certain parts of Safe Haven's population.

Laura peered over Jennifer's shoulder, observing the many magical signatures.

Tobias scanned as well. He matched the feel in the hallway to one side of the playground, but Jennifer moved them on before he could narrow it to which kid.

Laura and Tobias both turned their attention back to Jennifer.

Jennifer gestured in Eagle code; Kyle stopped his automatic instinct to take them out for their thoughts of tracking Safe Haven's time manipulator. He wiped his mind, assuming Jennifer was setting a trap by not responding to their thoughts yet. The new people usually wouldn't have been near the kids this soon, but after the fight, everyone was still wound up. Angela had ordered extra play time.

Jennifer led the group to the mess, switching from her plan of going to the medical bay first now that it was busy.

The mess was mostly empty, but not still. The cooks were serving batches of breakfast to those on duty, to the medics, to people who hadn't been cleared for the mess yet, and to those who were on their way to bed or to lessons. The den mothers were also in and out to gather meals and feed the kids at the play areas and in their cabins. The kids would get a nap soon, with quiet time for the ones who were too old for naps. The last few days had been hard on everyone; they all needed the rest.

Laura swept the mess and stopped, expression darkening. “I don’t understand. I thought Safe Haven was against slavery.”

“We are.” Jennifer’s frown grew as she realized what was happening. “You see a group of blacks working in the kitchen and you think they’re slaves.”

Laura flushed, but she didn’t apologize. “Everywhere we’ve been, the races are segregated. Those who do live together only do so through force.”

“You know we don’t support that.” Jennifer pointed. “The elderly man and woman are Thelma and Dwight. They’re Brittani’s parents and in charge of every meal that goes through this camp. They pick it and prepare it; we’re grateful and eat it without complaint.” Before Laura could speak, Jennifer pointed again. “Their daughter, Brittani, is on Angela’s Eagle team and the Safe Haven council. Her ex, Gus, is the huge guy in Eagle gear in the corner. He’s on duty over the mess in case you new people get out of hand. They’re all doing what they want, what they chose upon joining. Safe Haven isn’t like the rest of the world. And really, you know that or you wouldn’t have come to us.”

Laura stiffened. “We were captured. We didn’t have a choice.”

Jennifer gestured. “And if I check your niece’s memories, will I find plans to get captured because you heard we were going to destroy the detention center?”

Laura refused to lie.

Jennifer regarded Tobias.

Tobias's nostrils flared. "You're too smart for your age."

Jennifer chuckled without humor. "Funny. I've always thought I was too young for my mind." She waved. "You'll come here for meals. The food is free as long as you do the job we assign to you." Jennifer stepped aside so they could view into the mess. "We have three meals a day."

"You lie."

Jennifer smiled at Tobias, but her tone was icy. "Hardly ever. I find the truth easier to remember."

Tobias caught her warning; he flushed, chin dropping.

Laura chuckled, impressed. "A teenage enforcer. I never would have guessed that was the backbone of Safe Haven's power."

Jennifer followed her instincts. She let the woman believe that and pointed at the short line for coffee. "You can get a mug now to bring along if you like. I'll wait."

The adults all went toward the line, giving Jennifer and Kyle time to observe the kids who were staring around in surprise and unease. It was normal for the situation, but Jennifer wasn't sure about them. The sense of something being wrong was too clear.

Tobias came to where she and Kyle were standing. "It's me."

Jennifer glared. "Are you a threat?"

Tobias snorted. "I believe in the old ways. I need to talk to your boss. Our group needs to remain separate. We will not be consumed by this group either."

Jennifer believed him. She made a note in her book. "The boss will address your concerns."

"And when will that be?"

Kyle didn't like Tobias's attitude, but he let Jennifer handle it because she didn't need to be violent.

"But I want to be." Jennifer frowned at Kyle. "Is this the moment for it?"

Kyle reluctantly shook his head. "The nerves and attitude are normal. Let his rudeness go this once and we'll see what happens next time."

Tobias realized he'd offended them. He retreated, waiting for the fight to start.

Jennifer smiled at his wives, who were returning with their coffee.

Both females smiled back.

Tobias frowned, but didn't forbid them to have contact. He already knew that wouldn't be allowed. "When are we going to the doctor? And the boss?"

"When I clear you for it." Jennifer waited for the next complaint. *I don't like you. Keep pushing me.*

Tobias's anger came out in thick waves.

Kyle put a hand on his gun.

The wives stepped between them, shaking fingers at Tobias.

Jennifer and Kyle were surprised when Tobias immediately began apologizing to his mates.

Kyle kept track of the mental argument, glad the women had Tobias in line. *We don't need troublemakers here.*

Both women turned toward Kyle, silently begging for compassion.

Kyle grunted. "That's up to him. If he keeps that attitude, the boss will remove him. We won't have to."

Jennifer was glad the mess was mostly empty. The new people would have a bad reputation if there were more witnesses. Then Angela would find out and things would get ugly from there.

"Great Java." Laura joined Jennifer with a mug in hand. She kept observing the kitchen crew.

Jennifer's hand came to her hip. "Are you a threat?"

Laura frowned. "Listen, I'm sorry, but it's odd after so long. It's surprising you have no race wars here."

"Why do you keep coming back to race?"

Laura blew out a sigh. "You don't understand. These islands are segregated. That means you can only pick one group to come aboard or you'll be attacked by the others."

Jennifer didn't like the sound of that. "I'll make sure the boss knows. But we don't have that problem here. We have a common goal." Jennifer tried to sound menacing. "And we enforce the rules."

Laura patted her pocket. "I have my copy; read them all. It's fair to everyone except *our* kind."

Jennifer's scowl took over her entire face.

Laura waited. *Why should I listen to a child? I'm decades older.*

Jennifer snapped her mouth shut. She smiled coldly.

Laura felt a quick burst of danger run up her spine.

Jennifer continued to stare, digging into the woman's secrets.

Tobias and his wives retreated, not wanting to be part of the fight.

Kyle snickered at Laura's paling face. He put a gentle hand on Jennifer's shoulder. "Be nice. The boss hasn't made a call on her yet."

Jennifer slowly withdrew, sneering at the brick walls Laura had erected in defense. She sent a nasty zap to be sure her point was made.

Laura grimaced, hand clenching around the mug. Pain ran up her arm and sank into her neck. It traveled her spine and brought Laura to her knees in front of the angry teenager. "Please! Stop!"

Jennifer reluctantly pulled the power in. "Satisfied now?"

"Not really." Angela cleared her throat, standing in the doorway. Marc was right behind her. "I see you've angered our enforcer already. That's not a good sign."

Marc slid closer to Angela as she approached the new people; several Eagles, on duty and off, did the same.

Laura stood up, mesmerized by the sight of the power couple coming toward her. Her heart thumped. *I want them both!*

Marc snickered.

Angela concentrated on Jennifer. “Explain your actions.”

Jennifer replayed it word-for-word. She assumed she was in trouble, but she didn’t stop glaring at Laura.

Angela yawned. “Let it go, both of you. We have bigger things to discuss.”

Jennifer immediately let go of her anger and smiled at Angela.

Laura scowled. “That’s not fair!”

Marc and Kyle chuckled. The new woman was challenging the boss and XO on her first day. It felt like a rookie Eagle trying to make a name for herself on a new team.

And that’s what this is. Marc relaxed. He went to the coffee line.

Kyle stayed by Jennifer, but he got Marc’s thought and was also relieved. If Laura thought balls would get her onto an Eagle team, she was partially right.

“Balls without brains are useless.” Angela went to the counter and sat on the stool.

Jayda hurried to bring her a mug of tea.

Angela captured the woman’s hand. “How are things?”

Jayda relaxed at the contact. Angela’s touch was soothing. “Better. It’s almost normal again.”

“And your lessons?”

Jayda shrugged, not pulling away. “Hard, good. Thank you for asking.”

Angela patted her wrist. “May I look for myself?”

Jayda nodded.

Brittani listened as she worked, approving of the conversation. She was glad Angela was taking Jayda under her wing. Brittani began mixing the next batch of pancake batter. She studied the new people while she worked. The results weren't encouraging or disappointing. The new people were very closed off. She didn't get much, but what she did find was sad. Being hunted your entire life was awful.

Angela gently unlocked Jayda's gifts while drawing energy. She hid the discomfort at the mismatched levels.

Jayda felt their bond strengthen. She connected to Angela's mind easily.

Angela chuckled. *Hello.*

Jayda flushed. *I'm sorry!*

“Don't be.” She smiled at the sweaty black woman. “You were one of us before this. Don't forget it.”

Jayda was stunned. She'd wondered if she was an Invisible, but she'd been terrified to ask. She hadn't wanted to hear Angela confirm that she wasn't special.

Angela frowned at her, voice hardening. “What did I just say?”

Jayda forced it through her lips. “I mattered before; I was special before.”

“Yes. People will say your magic came before the important jobs. Many will be related, but the jobs are the effect, not the cause.”

Jayda tried to see it through Angela’s point of view. “The cause of the jobs is because I’m good. You’ve always known. Now, I can do more and that power should be used.”

Angela hesitated. “You spit that out too fast. This has been bothering you.”

Jayda sighed. “But not you or any of leadership. And most of those people are gone now.”

“There will always be race, sex, or gender haters in our group. I’m sorry, but they have a place here too. As long as they follow the rules, I will never persecute people for dreams of being the only kind to survive.”

Jayda teared up, dismayed. “Then it won’t ever end.”

“But it will.” Angela directed attention toward a small group now entering the mess.

The den mothers saw the new people and immediately turned the kids around and left.

“The kids will know it’s wrong. We’re going straight to the people who matter most in this fight. When the children no longer view color, the adults who did will be gone. We’re teaching all of them the old ways are wrong.” Angela shrugged. “Until then, we keep fighting to be fair for everyone.”

“Even the others.”

“Yes.” Angela handed Jayda a napkin from the counter. “Wanting to be with your own kind isn’t a crime. It’s not what Safe Haven will ever be about, though. You’ll help me by accepting the others as equal members who haven’t broken any rules.”

Jayda sniffled. “It’s hard when I know they don’t want me here.”

“I understand.”

Jayda grimaced. “How can you?”

“Easy. I’m a female leader. There are men here, and women, who don’t approve. And here’s another truth for you. Change comes in many forms.”

Angela smiled. “There’s nothing wrong with being the one to reach out. A few good moments in that way might give your life the meaning you’re searching for.”

“You think?”

Angela nodded. “It’s not about being the bigger man, or even a goal for peace, though both of those are noble and possible. It’s about handling your life in a way that satisfies you, makes you happy. And it isn’t standing behind this counter anymore, is it?”

Jayda slowly shook her head. “No. I need more.”

“Good.” Angela stood. “Workout?”

Jayda took off her apron, handing it to Brittani. She followed Angela out into the hall.

Marc stayed in the mess to give them privacy and to continue observing the new people before they got personal time with Angela.

“That was a great act for our arrival.” Laura ignored Jennifer’s glower, eyes finding Marc. “What does she want from us?”

Marc refused to give the new woman an easy way out. “You’re smart. Use that brain.”

Laura dug in harder, fighting the need to belong that had settled over all of them as Angela talked to the cook. The love between those two women was powerful. “She used us. She already got what she needed.”

“What she *wanted*.” Marc shrugged at the fresh snort. “Keep digging. You’ve missed the best part.”

Laura replayed the entire conversation, hesitating. She kept coming back to the kids... Her voice raised. “She just gave our children a lesson on getting along!”

Marc chuckled. “Not just the kids. All of you now know where she stands on it. She’s amazing.” Marc went after them, unable to take being away from Angela yet. His obsession was still growing, but this time, he wasn’t fighting it.

Jennifer motioned toward the other exit. “Next on our tour is the camp cabins. You’ll need to pick roommates. Our rule is at least three people in every room. You’ll also have a settling partner in there with you.”

Kyle stayed close to Jennifer as she led them out of the mess. He thought about everything that had happened, but he saved his questions for later. He didn’t trust the new people and he wouldn’t until

they proved themselves. *It's how life has to work now.*

3

“Should I call the boss?” Harry lowered his voice. “Or sound the alarm to get the plastic up?”

“No.” Morgan forced out a lie. “These ships experience pressure releases. People who aren’t used to them get nosebleeds and headaches.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Morgan finished writing in his notebook. “However, I’m about to give Angela updates on the new people. I’ll get her opinion. Be back in about ten minutes. You can save the blood work on the new people for me.”

Harry frowned deeper. “When I said boss, I meant Marc.”

Morgan didn’t reply. He wiped his hands on the alcohol rag and left the infirmary.

Harry realized Morgan didn’t agree. The medic resumed delivering cloths for the nosebleeds, but his mind stayed on that moment. *Who’s in charge of us now?*

Morgan saw Jennifer coming down the hall with the group of new people. Her quick gesture telling him they were going to the camp residence was a relief. The medical bay would need an hour to clear out and be reset.

Laura paused, gawking at Morgan. “Yummy!”

Her girls cringed in embarrassment as Kyle snickered and Jennifer snorted.

Not far enough away to miss it, Morgan flushed bright red. His embarrassment faded as he spotted Shawn escorting Missy through the far hallway. He was scolding her and she was submitting without a fight. *Must be bad...*

Morgan hurried toward Angela's location so he could deliver his notes and then go find out what had happened.

Pam appeared in the corridor in front of him. She kept going, tracking Shawn on her own. She didn't see Morgan.

Morgan felt better knowing she was on it. He rounded the corner and jogged down the steps to the training room that they were using for their private lessons.

He heard them before he saw them. The shouts and nasty words weren't a surprise, only who was saying them.

Morgan waited outside, flashed to his early days of training men for Adrian's army. All their fears and anger had to be pulled out so it didn't cloud their judgement during missions. Angela and Jayda were having one of those moments right now.

Morgan hadn't realized how angry Jayda was. Her hits were hard. She didn't care that it was the boss. Morgan wondered how Angela felt about it. He knew she would remain professional, but inside, she would have another reaction. *Her other face.* Morgan hated it that humans had to hide what they

really thought, who they really were, what they really wanted or needed to be happy. He hoped Angela was also able to affect that change for their future. It was sad to think they would just keep repeating the same mistakes.

He also didn't see how it was possible. Some of the things people thought, wanted, or needed were bad for everyone else. *Where do one person's rights stop or start? In America, it was supposed to stop when it encroached on someone else's rights, but the courts were clogged with cases that almost always contradicted older laws that then had to be challenged. How can we change a flawed system without destroying it?* Morgan's repair-minded brain brought up the image of a house that was leaning, cracking, crumbling. *Maybe we have to tear it down to the foundation and then rebuild.*

Angela came to the door of the training room, face bloody and happy at the same time. "Don't forget a check of those foundations. Maybe that's what caused the house to lean, crack, and crumble." Angela stepped by him, wiping off on a towel; she slung it around her neck like any other Eagle after a kai session.

Morgan peered into the room.

Jayda was at the small table, now going over the rookie handbook. "She didn't kill me."

Morgan saw Jayda's split lip matched Angela's. "You must have made progress."

Jayda's smile faded. "I was able to get a hit in on her this time. I hated it. *She* loved it. Crazy flip, huh?"

Morgan paused, mouth half open as his mind lit up. *Flip it...*

Morgan felt Angela stop and wait. He pulled the new ideas together, trying to make sense of the connection. *They have to make the rules and the penalties. Flip it on them.*

Angela stayed in the drafty hall as Morgan caught up. It was nice to have her plan validated, but she needed to be sure there wasn't a better way that she'd missed. "I need you in on this. Spend some time considering other options and be at the meeting. Someone will let you know when and where."

Morgan nodded. "I'd be honored." *She wants me to help rewrite the constitution. I'm special too!*

It bothered Angela how many of her people were showing that weakness. Wanting to be special wasn't the problem. *Not understanding they already are, is a problem waiting to happen.*

Chapter Three
Calling The Hive

1

“**U**pdates?”

Morgan didn't ask why she was upset. Like any man would, he assumed he'd caused it without meaning to. “I'm sorry. We had a medical issue. I wrote notes.” Morgan gave her the folded paper. He watched her face fall as she read it. Again, he felt like it was his fault. “I'm sorry. ...I think it was Missy.”

“She's the only one strong enough to do it.” Angela thought about it. Then she shrugged. “Camp people won't notice, making our people the problem on this. Do some listening and see what punishment they can all agree on.”

“Shawn and Pam are with Missy now. I haven't talked to them yet, but Shawn is handling her.”

Angela realized Morgan had come to her first. He was showing loyalty to the boss. His brief moment of weakness was a reminder that he had a high place here. Morgan was on a straight, narrow path for a while. *And I can use that.* “Go check on your family, then do my listening and digging. You also have a medical appointment with the new people. After...” She paused to let him get his book

out and start writing. “We’ve cleared the infirmary. People are restocking it. You’re putting equipment together and figuring out how to use it. Ideas to keep it quiet?”

“I’ll add a little QZ in the rear corner.” Morgan’s pen didn’t stop. “It’s on our list of procedures anyway. We’ll say it’s to handle more than one person at a time to explain the size.” Morgan shuddered. “And then I’ll pray we never have to use it.”

Angela didn’t tell him it was for a good reason. They didn’t know if it would turn out that way. It was too soon to tell. “You’ll be off duty then, but I’ll still want an update.”

“You’ll get several.” Morgan left, feeling better.

Marc came from the shadows. He didn’t think Morgan had known he was there. Practicing going dim had been at the top of Angela’s list last night. “That went well.”

“Yes. Morgan is smart. I’ve never needed to use my alpha pull on him.”

Marc thought about it. “Who else would be on that list?”

Now Angela paused to think, running through the hundreds of names in less than a minute. “You, Adrian, Conner, Debra, Greg, Gus, Ivan, Jayda, Jennifer, Kyle, Kenn, Morgan, Tonya.”

Marc ignored his twinge at hearing Adrian’s name. “What do all those people have in common, if anything?” Marc guided her toward the kids’ area. He knew her schedule because Kenn had cleared it

with him this morning. She was due to help get the kids settled for their naps.

Ivan followed the couple and swept for trouble. Things were calm. Allison's treatment had gone well. The kids were going to learn to get along in time. *So why is she still upset? I can see her hand clenching in her pocket.*

Angela relaxed her hand and gave Marc another smile. "Smart, inventive, hard-headed, fighters..."

Marc took her elbow to help her down the stairs. He tensed at the flare of heat.

Angela grinned, then went back to her list.

Marc knew she would keep working on it until they reached the play area. It gave him a minute to scan the ship and the people they were passing. Things felt better than they had since the illness. It had been calming under his leadership, but it hadn't been leading to this feeling of confident resignation. Only Angie gave them that.

Marc held the door for her, able to hear the happy kids now. He also smelled bleach from the cleaning crew that had just left. He didn't ask what Angela was going to do about the time slip. He didn't want to know. Camp people were already starting rumors about the migraines and nosebleeds.

He caught sight of his twins sitting at a picnic table, alone. He realized they wanted it that way. The kids had a shield up to make sure they were left alone.

Marc went that way.

Angela checked in with Molly, the top den mother here.

Molly didn't pull any punches. "Cate's wilder than even Missy. She demanded we unlock her. When we refused, she sent a blast of rage out even though she's locked. Little Amy blasted her back and then Cody brought up his shield. He refuses to lower it so neither girl fires again."

Angela caught Amy's eye.

Amy dropped her head.

Standing not far from Cate, little Joey didn't know what to do; he watched and worried, wringing his hands.

Angela joined Marc, not sure if his twins needed basic comfort or just more time alone with their dad.

Marc sat on the edge of the bench. He didn't try to get through the barrier.

Angela moved through it and sat across from the almost identical boy and girl.

Cate gasped.

Cody paled. "I told you she could!"

Cate braced for a punishment.

So did Joey. He wasn't sure if he could stand to be here when Angela delivered it.

Angela studied the nervous kids. They were clean and neat, wearing matching jeans and green shirts. If not for Cate's new shorter hair, it would have been hard to tell them apart. All she would have known for sure is that they were Marc's children. His glow of health and strength was all

over them. Pain lanced into her heart that she hadn't birthed them. Angela looked at Marc.

Marc was digging into Cate's mind. He didn't like what he found. "She thinks she's going crazy without her gifts. She...used the witch to stay sane."

Angela wanted to unlock the girl right away, but Cate had to learn to follow the rules. "Let's make a deal."

Cate's face grew dark.

Angela realized her mistake, but it was too late to pull it back. She went on. "Behave and I'll unlock you."

"Go to hell!"

"Cate!" Marc's parental instinct took over. "That's the boss!"

Cate began to cry.

Angela studied all of it, seeing some was an act but the rest was real. The little girl didn't know who she could trust. "It will get better here for you as soon as you stop fighting us."

Cate shoved her cup across the picnic table. Cold liquid splashed over Angela's shirt and face.

Marc froze; he didn't know what to do.

Angela did. She leaned in. "Go on. Do what you really want."

Cate slapped her. "He wasn't there for us! Because of you!"

Marc winced.

Angela barely felt the sting. "He wasn't there because he didn't know about you. Your mother took two children from him." Angela wiped her face

on her sleeve. “Tell me why you’re upset. Do it now, before I lose my patience.”

Cody whimpered. “Behave, Cate! We just got you back!”

Cate assumed she would be tossed overboard. “I’m sorry! I can’t stop it!”

“The anger?” Angela was still adding up the clues. “And deciding which voice in your mind is telling the truth?”

Cate nodded as big tears began rolling over her thin cheeks. “I need my witch. She helps me.”

Angela unlocked the child. She stayed ready to change that if the child’s witch was the problem.

Cate relaxed. Her frustration faded. “Thank you...Alpha.”

Angela listened to the strong voice in Cate’s mind and was comforted. She examined the child’s witch in depth, then passed the decision to Marc.

Marc nodded. They couldn’t take a few days away right now to have the honeymoon that wouldn’t be possible on the island. The kids needed them to stay close.

Cody smiled at Angela. “You said yes. You’ll be my mom?”

Angela tensed. “Is that okay with you?”

Cody dropped the shield as he lunged over the table and wrapped his arms around her neck.

Angela held him and tried not to cry. “I love you too. I always will.”

Cate’s lips curled.

Marc wanted peace for both of his children. He held out a hand. “Let me show you why he feels that way?”

Cate slowly put her hand against her father’s. She watched the images of Angela and all she’d done for their people, all she’d done for the children.

“She loves you guys more.” Marc knew it was true as soon as he said it, but he hadn’t caught that before. “The alpha has more hope for the kids than for the adults. She spends a lot of time making sure they have what they need to be happy. It’s not always time, though.” Marc didn’t want Cate thinking Angela would be able to spend time with her whenever she wanted. Like with the other kids, and even himself, their needs had to come behind leadership or none of them would survive.

“I’ll make special time for her, if she wants a bond.” Angela now knew how to handle the girl, but it was still hard. “I have enough love for her too. She’ll let me know when she’s ready to try. Right?”

Cate’s face squished up. *I think she tricked me.*

“I did, a little.” Angela set Cody next to her and kept an arm around his shoulders. “It’s called reverse psychology. I’m giving you what you need, by making you think you’re getting what you want.”

Marc frowned. “Is she old enough to understand?”

Angela ignored him. She waited for the girl’s response.

Cate’s witch helped her snap it into place. “That’s not right!”

“But it works.” Angela shrugged. “I could have been mean. I could have insisted and not given you a choice at all.”

“But I don’t have a choice.” Cate glared. “You won’t stop until you get what you want.”

Angela leaned forward, smiling. “Very good. Now tell me what I want from you.” Angela opened her mind.

Cate tore through it like a tornado, having no respect for anything she saw. Until she came to the loss of Angela’s daughter on the mountain.

Marc observed in horror as both females began to cry. He felt his own sadness try to wake up; he quickly shut it down.

Angela wiped her eyes. “Well?”

“For me to live, because your baby didn’t.”

“And that’s it. You’re special. You’ve been hunted because of it. All I want is for it to stop so you can have a life.” Angela studied the playground that had come to a quiet standstill as both kids and adults observed the moment and tried to take comfort from it. “I want all of them to survive, to live. The normals and the descendants matter to me. I’m the guardian of the future now.” Angela turned back, smiling at the girl. “And I want Marc to be happy. He has his children back. That hole in his heart can heal.”

Cate picked up her napkin and held it out. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Angela wiped off, smelling grape Kool-Aid. “For everything you’ve been through.”

She gestured. “Your dad has been through hell too. You can talk to him about anything, even me.”

Joey and everyone else relaxed.

Cate fell into respectful mode without realizing it. “I’ll try hard to behave.”

Marc didn’t like her submissive tone. Neither did Angela. They exchanged glances that said Cate’s wildness would not be crushed. She would be taught to control her emotions.

Cate smiled at Angela. “My witch likes you. She says you’re the true Alpha.”

Angela gave Cody another fast hug, then stood up. “Apologize to Amy and then spend a few minutes getting to know her.” Angela waved Amy over.

Amy had been listening. She sat on the bench next to Cody and crossed her arms over her chest.

Angela swallowed a snicker and went to the other end of the playground to give the kids privacy and a break from her presence. When she was here for good reasons, they could be around her all they wanted. When it was for a negative reason, her emotions smothered them unless she stayed closed off.

Angela noticed the adult descendants were purposely not thinking about the huge rule that had been broken. *Someone slowed time, but no one is thinking about it?* Angela snorted. *Sure. Okay.*

Adult descendants didn’t meet her eye.

“Morgan determined it was a pressure wave from the boat’s hull settling. Everyone will be fine.”

Nods and smiles met her announcement. Angela didn't smile. She liked it that they were protecting the kids, especially since it was Missy, but as the alpha, she was supposed to be upset because they weren't coming clean.

Marc joined Angela, but kept the table in sight. "How did Cate send a blast with her gifts locked and memory wiped?"

Angela knelt, digging a clean shirt from her kit. "Your daughter is unique. Like Conner can go through shields, Cate can go through locks. Not all the way yet, but I believe age has a lot to do with it. When she's older, no one will be able to lock her."

"Damn." Marc was proud of it. "She'll be safer."

"Yes. And more dangerous." Angela slid behind Marc and stripped her shirt. She yanked on the clean one and put the other into her kit. "Schedule them both time with every member of leadership. Add Missy, Leeann, Amy, Caleb, and Hawk."

Marc wrote it in his book. "Why the two normals?"

"You tell me."

"Uh... So both sides are still represented?"

"Yes, but also to encourage friendships."

"Cool. What do you want them doing?"

"Tell each adult to design a 10-minute lesson to teach our kids what they consider to be the most important part of society and why we need those kids to take our place when we die." Angela waved

at the kids and jogged over to the swings, leaving her kit.

Marc watched her rotate with the den mothers and guardians so every child got a turn with her. Even Cody and Cate went. It helped Marc's heart to hear the twins laugh like normal kids who'd never been separated from parents who loved them. For a brief moment, he was able to pretend he'd been with them since they were born.

2

“Samantha's babies will be born soon.”

Tim glanced up from the notes he was making in his Bible. “That's good, right?”

Neil nodded. Tim was surrounded by dusty books, folders, and loose papers. *I guess big plans require big space.* “She wants you to do the christening, at the birth.”

Tim frowned. “Besides not being ordained, I think they do it when the child gets older.”

Neil saw Tim had changed to slacks and a blue sweater and approved the choice. If you were going to be religious, dressing like an Eagle was a contradiction considering the violence it required. The slacks and sweater were warm, caring. The black Eagle outfits were cold and off-putting. “You can check on it, but Samantha is adamant about both of those.”

Tim scowled. “I'm not ordained. It will be months yet before I take the test.”

Neil clapped the man on the shoulder and walked away.

Tim understood he would be expected to perform the ceremony even if he hadn't taken the final test. He resumed his studies, hoping he could learn faster.

Neil entered the employee hall and used it to reach the infirmary without being seen. He peered through the window and was dismayed to find a group of people inside. Neil narrowed them to the new people. He hadn't met them yet, but he'd heard stories. None of those were bad yet. None of them were good either.

Neil took the steps to the cargo hold. As he reached the bottom, the sound of grunting and sliding echoed. "Who's down here?"

"Conner."

Neil joined the boy; he spotted the box he needed in Conner's hands. The boy was trying to tug it, carefully, to the cart he'd brought.

Neil went to the box and lifted it, but he let Conner help. There was no reason to be rude when the teenager was trying hard.

"Thanks!" Conner wiped dust from his hands onto his jeans. "Did you see all those people in the infirmary?"

Neil nodded. "I assume you're on team twins?"

Conner chuckled. "Yeah, but Candy's name for us is better. It covers all the births—single or double."

Neil braced. "Hit me with it."

“The Fetus Fighters.”

Laughter floated through the cargo room, drawing attention.

“Who’s down here?”

Conner and Neil grinned, responding together, “Fetus Fighters!”

Tonya’s laughter joined theirs as she found them. She shut off her flashlight. “That name will get around. I think I’m honored, but I’ll have to let you know.”

Neil saw she had a clipboard and so did Conner. “Who else is on the team?”

Conner swept the next stack of boxes in this medical section of the cargo bay. “I assume Wade and Morgan.”

Tonya took Conner’s clipboard so he could lift the next box. She compared it to hers. “Not the same.”

Neil glanced over her shoulder. “Who gave you the lists?”

“Wade, a few hours ago.”

“Angela, a week ago.”

Neil lifted the next box when Tonya pointed it out, heart easing. Angela was still helping him and Samantha even after what he’d done. All these boxes contained equipment and supplies to keep the babies alive if they came too soon, and she was doing it quietly, so Samantha wouldn’t know. Scaring her was a danger to the babies. Angela had sent orders last night. Samantha was on bedrest, with mood control and treatments. She was doing it

to all the mothers who were due in the next few months, but that was another cover to keep Samantha from freaking out. If Conner was right, Samantha would give birth within a month. They were on the way to being ready for it. Angela really did care about the kids.

“And you counted on that, didn’t you?”

Neil slowly nodded at Tonya’s sharp question. “Completely.”

Tonya pointed at the next box.

Neil lifted it.

Conner stored the dramas and details and enjoyed being home. His turn to worry over Candy would come soon enough. He didn’t need to be upset yet.

3

“You don’t need to be upset.” Morgan smiled at the older woman as he leaned in. “It will sting, but I’m only taking blood, not putting anything in.”

Daniella gazed into Morgan’s eyes. She knew he was using a calming charm, but she didn’t mind. This was much better than the fear that had paralyzed her at the entrance to the infirmary. She’d barely tolerated the medics doing this the first time. Now she had to go through it all again because she couldn’t speak. *This sucks!*

Morgan hurried, finishing in record time. He smiled again as he placed her hand over the cotton

ball. “Hold it right there and I’ll get you a Band-Aid.”

Daniella smiled back this time.

Tobias scowled, but he didn’t protest. “So what’s wrong? Or do you need to wait until those tests are done?”

Morgan labeled the blood and stored it in the refrigerator for Tonya. “The test might confirm it, but I think it’s normal for our kind. They’re locked because they’re in the middle of an evolution.”

“No!” Tobias rose, going to the door. He punched it repeatedly. “No!”

The ship groaned, walls dimming.

Tobias flinched, anger fading into fear. “What was that?!”

Morgan rubbed his shoe gently over the floor. “The ship doesn’t like being abused.”

Tobias stared at him.

Morgan switched the topic back. “Why don’t you want your wives to evolve?”

“It’s none of your business!”

Morgan shrugged. “The boss will discuss it with you at some point. Better have a good answer ready. She likes us to have gifts.”

“It’s dangerous!”

Morgan’s eyes narrowed. The wives were thin and scared, but they weren’t starving. Tobias was. His bones were poking through the skin in places. “True, but so is living.”

Tobias glared at the very fit medic. *I used to look like that too. Magic used me up; it'll do the same to you.*

Morgan frowned at the man. "Would you like a sucker for that bitter taste?"

Tobias flushed.

Morgan went to the other wife. "Would you like me to handle it the same way as I did your sister?"

Anna nodded, cheeks dark.

Morgan chuckled. "It's okay, but to be clear, I'm not on the market. Are you?"

Anna shook her head, eyes going to Tobias. Morgan saw the love there. He immediately marked the man from his list of people who might be dangerous to leadership. "Here we go..." Morgan used a light charm and saw the woman's nipples harden through her shirt. He dropped his eyes, mind spinning. His magnetism was stronger today than usual. He wasn't sure why, but he was trying to figure it out between his jobs and chores. "The gifts that are gone are the ones about to evolve. Sometimes they snap in and fire a blast. Try to keep those doors locked even when they feel empty."

The women nodded, both relaxed.

Morgan was proud of his way with patients. He'd gotten much better at it. *Now, if I could just learn how to handle kids.* The quick talk with Missy hadn't gone well. After being scolded by Shawn and Pam, she'd needed a break from it with someone who would listen to her. Instead, he'd yelled and made her cry. Morgan had quickly realized what

he'd done wrong, but it had been too late to take it back.

"Got a minute?" Shawn settled into the chair by his desk as the new people left with their camp buddies.

Morgan leaned against the wall. "I'll apologize to her."

"No, you won't." Shawn gave him a frustrated look. "Nothing gets that kid to follow the rules unless she wants to. Even Pam, a mother figure, has little control over her. But one short yell from you and she burst into tears. As I left our cabin, she was insisting that Pam teach her how to make your side of the bed."

Morgan recoiled. "No way. You're not using me as the dad!"

"Why not?"

Morgan tried to find a way out. "I can't discipline girls. Even the Eagles know it. They never give me that chore, remember?"

"I do, and it's funny you should mention it. I just saw Marc in the hall. I have a message for you."

Morgan groaned. "Shit."

Shawn got comfortable in the chair. "He said *you* can't be one of us if you can't treat *them* like one of us. You did well in your lesson with Wade, but it's not enough to retain your status on a Special Forces team."

Morgan hadn't known that was coming, but he should have. "I'll get my shit together."

Shawn tried to smile at him. “Good. The other descendants decided not to punish her. Marc told me that too.”

“I heard.” Morgan leaned down, voice a shocked whisper. “They protected her, man! Everyone insisted on leaving her alone. They said she’s just a kid learning to control her gifts.”

Shawn let out a miserable sigh. “She is. I wish I could make it easier for her.”

“Pam asked me to talk to you about Missy.”

Shawn’s face darkened.

Morgan sighed. “It’s true.”

Shawn gave a curt nod. He refused to speak it.

Morgan grunted. “We’ll both be watching every move you make with her. Can you handle that?”

“I’m counting on it.” Shawn let out a ragged breath.

“Good. We trust you, but we love her. It’s not personal.”

“I know.” Shawn took in another rough breath. “It shook me today when she did that. I saw the future for us.”

Morgan lifted a brow. “And?”

“And I need to go away. When she hits puberty and starts pushing, I won’t be able to tell her no.” Shawn dropped his head. “I’m not staying on the island for long. The first time she gets to me in that way, I’m gone until she grows up.”

Morgan put a hand on the man’s drooped shoulder. “Good. Don’t make me kill you.”

“I won’t.” Shawn looked up. “But don’t hesitate. Her life means so much more than mine!”

“I agree.”

Shawn was glad to move on. “We also need you to thank Jennifer. She spoke up first.” Shawn forced the rest out. Morgan had a right to know. “Jennifer said it was because they were all hurt in the labs for mistakes and they don’t want to do that here...”

“But?”

“Jennifer was never in the labs, Morgan. She defended our little girl for some other reason.”

“Not for me.”

Shawn shrugged. “I haven’t gotten farther than that since I caught the lie.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Morgan was angry. “It will cause trouble.”

“Actually, she’s trying to tell people to leave us alone, that we’re okay. You have to tell her thank you, Morgan. She didn’t have to defend Missy, but because the enforcer said she’s okay, Missy will be treated better. We owe her now. Start with thank you and we’ll go from there.”

“He’s not wrong.” Neil entered the infirmary, hands full. Neil pretended he hadn’t heard any of the conversation or thoughts. He was glad they were handling it so Angela didn’t give him an order to do it. “Now that Jennifer cleared her, Missy’s life will get easier and she’ll settle down, but it’s more than that.” Neil put the books on the table, then went back to hold the door for Conner. “Jennifer will need a successor. It would be a great job for Missy.”

“Yes, it would.” Morgan was relieved. “I’ll encourage that.”

“Good. Jennifer’s been working hard. She deserves to hear some good words from the senior Eagles.” Neil watched until Tonya was in her lab with the door shut and locked, then he turned to Shawn and Morgan. “Jennifer is just now going to bed even though shift change was an hour ago. On her way, she’ll check on Allison, who’s in the cabin across from her. Jennifer pulled another double today, on top of all the fun we had at the detention center. And right when she gets comfortable, Kyle will be pulled from her arms to go on the next run. Be nice to her. She’s earning it with every day that passes.”

“I will. I’ll be on that run with Kyle. I’ll let him know.” Morgan didn’t tell them the bell was already sounding in his mind. He wasn’t going to bed after this. *I’m going to land.* He gestured at Conner. “You should sleep soon.”

Conner grinned. “I’m young.”

“Asshole.”

The males laughed, aware of the connection glowing between them. They were Eagles. They mattered to the future. It felt good.

Morgan gestured. “Before you crash, check on the hot tub room for me? We have a noise report, but I need to go gather my gear.”

Conner swallowed a yawn. He really was tired now, but being given a job by a senior Eagle was part of his new status. “You got it.”

Neil waited until the boy was gone, then he grinned. “The kill team sent for him?”

Morgan nodded, also proud. “He did a solid job on their run; Conner is officially one of us now.”

4

“I have to go.” Daryl kissed Brittani’s cheek and gently eased out of the bed. Falling asleep with her in his arms was amazing, but he knew duty time was almost here even though he hadn’t been called or even officially assigned yet.

“Okay.” She’d only been back from her mess shift for an hour, but they’d made out and then dozed. She would sleep now, while he went off to do his shift. She didn’t know where he was going to be and she didn’t ask, though she wanted to. No matter where he was, she would worry over him.

Brittani rolled over to watch him, blushing a little. They’d had several intimate moments, but he refused to go all the way yet. Daryl insisted on waiting for their wedding; she’d agreed. There was honor in waiting.

Daryl pulled up his pants, then sat on the bed to get his socks and shoes on. He smiled as her hand trailed across his spine. He felt the urge to tell her to be careful while he was gone, but swallowed it. She was a full-grown woman who could do as she pleased.

“I’ll be careful.” Brittani kissed his arm, then rolled over. “First, I’m going to sleep for a few hours.”

Daryl tried to be quiet as he gathered the rest of his gear. For the first few months as an Eagle, he’d listened to Kyle and Neil say they could feel a call coming for their services. He hadn’t understood, but it was clear in his mind right now, like a little bell being smacked against a counter. *Is this the run where I don’t make it back?*

Daryl forced the thought away. *We all have to die sometime. Might as well be quick and today as versus slow in a month or a year.*

Brittani lifted her head. “But don’t you want that extra month, or year?”

“Of course.” Daryl shifted his gun belt into place. “I just know fate makes those choices, not me.”

“Is that part of the training?”

Daryl smiled. “It’s a guy thing, I think. If I accept that it could happen, it’s less likely to because I’m not fighting it.”

Brittani yawned. “Just bring your ass back here ASAP. I can’t sleep alone anymore.”

Daryl rubbed her arm and left the bed. He wasn’t anticipating their time apart, but at least he was the one going. *Waiting here while she goes on her first run might kill me.*

Daryl grabbed the kit he kept ready, muscles already protesting the weight. He ignored the discomfort, hoping he was able to keep up for the

entire run. There was a chance that he hadn't gotten a call yet because he'd been ill. The medics hadn't wanted to clear him for Eagle training, let alone missions, but Daryl was determined to do his share. *Angela put me on the Special Forces team; I'm going to prove I deserve it.*

Daryl saw Kyle coming down the hall, fully geared. He fell in behind his team leader, absorbing Kyle's approval. As XO, more was expected from him.

Daryl smiled as Jennifer sleepily shut her cabin door behind Kyle. He heard the lock click and approved. Jenny was popular with all the kids. They would go right on in if it wasn't locked. Jennifer needed to sleep while she could.

Kyle agreed. They'd only gone to bed an hour ago, but they'd both heard that mission bell ring. Jennifer had briefly looked ahead and found them bringing a group of new people onboard around this time tomorrow. It was a comfort he knew not to put faith in because shit happened and then things changed.

"Hey!" Cathy leaned against her door, vision blurry. "Who's ringing a damn bell at this hour?!"

Kyle and Daryl exchanged glances, stopping in the hall.

In the cabin next to Cathy, Molly poked her head out. "Stop with the bell already!"

Kyle grunted. "Both of you get dressed for a run and meet me on the top deck."

Molly's mood snapped into good. She shut the door. Loud noises echoed as she tore into her closet for her gear.

Cathy frowned. "Huh?"

"If you heard the bell, you have a mission run coming up. Get your shit and let's go."

Cathy shrugged. "Whatever." She slammed her door.

Kyle pounded on it, waking everyone in the hall. "Get your gear, Eagle! That's an order!"

"I'm doing it!"

Kyle and Daryl moved down the hall, snickering.

Morgan appeared in the far hallway. Ray was behind him.

Ivan stumbled along after Ray, trying to wake up. He'd only slept for an hour and then the bell went off.

"Why can't it be a woman moaning my name in ecstasy?" Jeff fell in behind Kyle's team. "I'm just sayin'. That would get any of us up."

People snickered, including Molly, who had kept her gear ready. She finished donning it as they went, not caring how much skin was showing.

Kyle frowned as another shadow joined them. "This should be a fun run."

Kenn yawned as he pulled on his kit. "She's expecting trouble if this is the pickup crew."

All of them realized Kenn was right. Kyle's mood improved. *Action! Yes!*

Everyone who caught the thought shook their head or glowered at him, but they agreed. Being stuck on this ship was mind-numbing. Action was a welcome relief now.

“Sounds like someone is enjoying the hot tubs.” Cathy glared toward the sauna room as she caught up. She shifted her kit onto her shoulders and took a place at the end of the line.

“The Kill Team.” Kyle led the group up the next steps. “Returning teams get leeway.”

“Downtime?”

Kyle was surprised Cathy knew. “Yes.”

She shrugged, shifting her bra straps around now. “Makes sense. What’s the run, Boss?”

Kyle stumbled, almost falling.

His group snickered, but they didn’t rub it in. Hearing Cathy sound like an Eagle was a surprise to all of them.

“Haven’t gotten the details yet.” Kyle held the door for them, preferring to appear last in this group. “Also haven’t been given lead.”

Cathy snorted. “Well, I don’t want it, and I doubt anyone else here feels like they can take your place, so that makes you the boss as far as I’m concerned.”

Daryl chuckled at Kyle as he walked by. “This is gonna be a fun run, *Boss*.”

Kyle sighed. “Maybe we should get a drink first.”

Chapter Four
Happy Hunting
January 14th

1

“Hello? Is anyone in here?” Conner paused, waiting for an answer.

The hot tub room was empty in the front, but it was obvious people had been in here recently. The garbage cans were overflowing, as were the ashtrays, and empty beer bottles were set along the edges of the empty tubs like carnival games waiting to be knocked over. The floor was covered in puddles and little piles of debris. The cleaning crew hadn’t been through yet.

“Hello?” Conner slowly moved toward the rear of the room, where a narrow hall took him to the private rooms. These were the rooms people used when they wanted to be close to each other in public without getting in trouble. Angela had gotten very serious about sexual activities occurring outside of approved areas.

Conner stepped into a wide room with two teams of Eagles enjoying the first private room that held two tubs. The private rooms were lined in benches, shelves with towels and lotions, a mini-bar with a fridge, and a cute purple and orange motif

that made everyone think of Halloween. It was nice in here.

Ten men stared at him as he shut the door. Conner straightened his shoulders. “Morgan told me to stop by.”

Greg motioned with his bottle of beer. “We want to talk to you about the run.” Conner appeared normal in his jeans, sneakers, and clean shirt, but his pupils were too large; his hands had a slight twitch. He was just starting to come down from all the action. *And he’s still too thin.* Greg made a note to make sure the boy ate more.

Conner moved a little closer. “What about the run?”

Jonny pointed at him. “We wanna know what you were doing while we were all getting beaten up, on, and over.”

Conner tensed. “I did everything you wanted me to do and then some.” Conner took a quick glance at the other hot tub, where Theo’s team was now silently staring from the hot jets. They had just finished the repairs on the top deck. A large sheet of wood was now nailed over the hole. The five men had been working on ship repairs since they left the international detention center. Conner looked back at Greg.

“Theo’s team knows how to keep secrets better than we do.” Greg lifted a brow, big body naked except for swimming trunks. “What *did* you do while we were busy?”

Conner began to get angry. “I planted bombs. I gathered information on Joel, Jordi, Alexander, and the UN. I know a lot of their plans. I stole passcodes and badges. I also took a few uniforms. I gave everything to Ivan. The boss has it all now.” Conner glared at Greg. “I also kept track of your thoughts so I could save your ass.”

Greg smiled at him. “And that’s why you’ll be joining us.” Greg swung his bottle toward the empty seat in their tub.

Conner’s face lit up. “Really?”

All of the kill team held up their drinks.

“To Conner!”

“Conner!” The men drank.

Conner frowned. “To Drew.” The body had been burned and his name had been added to the memorial, but it still wasn’t enough for Conner or Greg to let it go yet.

The room grew somber. Greg nodded. “To Drew.” Everybody drank again.

Conner moved toward the changing room, eager to spend time with them. Soaking in the tub with men who understood what he’d gone through sounded perfect. He looked over his shoulder. “What about the other things we learned?”

Greg shrugged. “Don’t remember anything else.”

Conner understood he wasn’t supposed to speak about those things. The fact that Drew had been Marc’s spy, Jonny was gay, Greg had hoped to die on the run because he was in love with Angela, and

Shawn was building credits to force their alpha to save the females in his life was supposed to be kept among them as part of their bond during the run.

“Wasn’t he your hostage?” Theo was holding a grudge against all Mitchels. He was following Marc’s lead. “You can’t trust him.”

Shawn snorted as he sat his empty bottle on the edge of the tub. “Conner already proved he can be trusted. We’re just hazing the new man.”

Conner smiled. “I’m honored.”

“You should be!” Greg gestured toward the small cooler they’d brought. “Pop a beer and climb on in. We want to hear how you survived your uncle.”

Conner went to the changing room and began to shed his clothes. “I’ll pass on the drink. My uncle, I’ll give you the full about.”

Every Eagle stiffened.

“Why are you passing on the drink?” Jonny was already on his third beer.

“I’m still on duty.”

Everyone assumed it had something to do with the coming run. Angela hadn’t officially declared one yet, but everyone assumed it was going to happen.

Conner stood under the small shower in the corner of the changing cubicle. He rinsed off another layer of the dirt that had come with his first run. *I can’t get my mind to settle.* Water ran into his ears, muffling the voices but not the buzzing in his

brain. The run was replaying over and over. He couldn't stop it.

The door opened. Stanley and Richie came in, both carrying trays with snacks from the mess.

"Stanley! Bring it this way!" Shawn was eager for a snack to soothe his boiling stomach.

"Over here, Richie." So was Greg. Hot water and beer were not mixing well together.

Richie was the only remaining Indian who had joined them from Natoli's tribe. His large nose and long black hair were stereotypical, but they were the most outstanding features on the thin, dark-skinned man.

Richie grinned at them, handing over the small, noisy bags of stale chips that were still all over the ship in the smaller shops and stores. "You call me Richard."

Everyone chuckled. It was a common joke from the man.

Stanley and Richie were both in rookie gear with empty toolbelts and jackets without a number patch. It reminded Shawn of his rookie days, but he didn't miss them. Knowing most of what he was doing was infinitely better than the opposite.

Theo waited until Richie turned around. "What's the big deal with the name? I mean, it's not your real one anyway, is it?"

Richie stood straighter. "My name was Fast Runner at birth. When I became a man, I took the name Swift Wind. When I joined Safe Haven,

Natoli recommended an American name so people would accept me. I choose Richard.”

Theo frowned. “I thought it was something special with the way you always insist on the full name instead of a nickname.”

Richie grinned again. “I like the nickname. It makes me feel welcome. I asked to be called Richard to remind myself I made a mistake.”

Theo’s frown deepened. “What mistake did you make?”

Richie’s grin took up his whole face. “I chose Richard because I thought it meant big dick.”

Theo spoke through his amusement as the other men laughed. “It actually does, depending upon who has the name!”

Greg captured Stanley’s wrist as he handed over another bag of chips. “How are you doing with Ramer being gone?”

Stanley’s happy face crumbled. “I miss him a lot. I’m sad.”

Richie shook his head at the clumsy man. “You’re not supposed to say it.”

“It’s okay with your fellow Eagles.” Shawn wanted the new man to be clear on that. “It’s what we’re here for.”

Stanley forced a smile onto his face. “I’m staying busy.”

Greg patted his wrist. “Special Forces team two has accepted you as our official gopher. Hang around in case I need something.”

Stanley beamed. "I'll do better than I have before. I promise."

Greg's tone hardened. "You'll have to if you want to keep that position. A lot of people want it. Richie was accepted as the gopher for Special Forces team one." Greg lifted his beer. "Congratulations. Half the men on the ship will now use you up between your own chores and duties until you're exhausted. The other half will hate your guts for getting the job."

Fresh laughter filled the room, covering the sound of the door opening.

Lisa paused in the doorway. "Hey, sorry to bother you guys. Is it possible for us to use one of the tubs in the rear room?"

Everyone looked at Greg. As Neil's XO, he was the senior man here.

Greg studied the bruised, tired women. All four had pinned up hair and wore rookie Eagle shirts, though their blue jeans broke the image of a team. He assumed they had come from a lesson. He also noticed how the females in the back kept glancing over their shoulders as if someone was following them. He waved. "Those three rooms are empty. Clean up when you're done."

"We will. Thank you."

The sweaty-necked, smudged, tired women all smiled gratefully. They were out of patience and finally coming to senior men so they would become aware of the issue. The women went straight by both tubs of mostly naked men, the gawking

gophers, and Conner, who had stopped with his pants halfway off, not speaking or looking at any of them. The women vanished into a rear room.

Shawn frowned. “What do you think that was about?”

Conner finished changing into one of the spare pairs of swimming trunks that Angela had insisted be kept in this room. “They’re all single. They haven’t had a minute’s peace in days.”

“From rookies or normals?” Jonny didn’t like it. Eagles were supposed to be honorable, and normals weren’t supposed to get first pick of rookie females. The rules were unspoken but they were still rules.

“A mix of both.” Conner joined Greg and the rest of the kill team in the hot tub, being careful not to slip. Conner tried not to stare at their bodies. They were all hard, buff, healthy. He felt like a wet rat around them, but he wasn’t going to let it interfere with this moment. “The rookies are ambushing them when they first wake up and get out of the shower. The normals crowd them during meals. That’s part of the reason the women have been in such a bad mood during the training sessions. They’re being harassed before you guys even get to them.”

The door knob rattled.

Every male in the room glowered in that direction, ready to give a stiff lecture.

Missy appeared. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jean jumper. “I was told to wait here.”

Men sank lower into the water, frowning.

“Told by who?” Shawn didn’t want the girl here. He wanted her out of sight so people would forget about what she’d done. The descendants had decided she didn’t deserve to be punished, but if she was already breaking another rule, that could change.

“The Alpha.”

Shawn still didn’t relax. He pointed to a chair in the far corner, away from both groups of men. “Sit there.”

Everyone assumed Angela would be joining them at some point. Greg’s heart thumped. So did Conner’s. Neither of them wanted to face her over Drew’s death. In the silence, the conversation of the females drifted out to them.

“Don’t think I’ve ever been that scared. I’m surprised he was able to get me through it.”

“I understand what you mean. When Wade grabbed me the first time, I almost pissed myself.”

“Wade is the perfect person to be giving us these lessons. He understands women.”

“I’ll say!”

Giggles echoed.

The men in the hot tubs relaxed as they realized the women they had let in were jumpy around men and needed protection. It was easy for them to fall into that mode despite this being downtime. It was part of the code to protect those who needed it. When their lessons with Wade were finished, the

four women wouldn't need it anymore, but until then, they had it without asking.

The steamy room settled into a comfortable mood that let the men finally start to crash emotionally. Conner's hand stopped twitching. Greg was able to shut his eyes for more than five seconds. Shawn's stomach settled. Jonny stopped checking the clock on the wall.

The knob rattled again, sending fresh adrenaline into stomachs. It opened to reveal three eager male faces with leers already flashing.

Greg threw his beer. It hit the man in front and smashed against his forehead. The rookie dropped as pieces of glass flew into the two men behind him, the wall, and the door.

Following the lead of the senior Eagle in the room, all of the other men also threw their beers.

Missy clucked at them, finger wagging. "You're gonna be in trouble!"

Conner used his gift to call a medic for the man who was down; the rest of the rookies fled, nursing small glass shrapnel wounds.

Silence held in the room for a few seconds and then Lisa's grateful voice echoed. "Stanley, Richie? We'd like to replace their drinks. And then take one for yourselves for cleaning that mess. Take it off our allotments."

The Eagles cheered.

Stanley hurried to find a broom so the medic wouldn't be crunching glass on his way through.

The unconscious, bleeding rookie lying on the floor was ignored.

Conner leaned back. “So, Alexander hated my dad, but I didn’t know until the final day. My dad was banging his wife. When the war came, my uncle strangled her and joined the UN because they promised to kill my father after a few weeks of torturing him.”

Conner didn’t open his eyes. He didn’t want to see the pity or the contempt for his family. He also didn’t want the few expressions of acceptance. He didn’t have the energy or the mental power for any of it right now. *I’m home. I’m alive. It’s enough.*

2

Angela turned toward the team coming up the steps to the front deck of the ship. Standing near the rail with her hair blowing and the sun lighting her face, half of the group stopped, gawking. The rest of them narrowed in on her tense shoulders and her dazed orbs and realized she was using magic.

Ray slipped around them all and went to the bridge to let Grant know he was leaving.

Angela searched deeper, seeing the next few hours easily; the next two days kept blurring by too fast. She reluctantly slowed it, wrist aching where the Demon of Time had marked her.

“Hurry. He feels you.” Marc was searching with her, lending strength. He could feel the threat coming their way.

Angela mentally slid behind him.

Marc stared at the shocked Demon in the same manner. Ugly and scary were weak words, but it was all he could come up with. “Let me pass.”

The Demon bowed to him and vanished back into the dark time stream.

Angela stayed in the rear, directing his energy to take them deeper.

Marc strained to keep them slow enough to observe events, but this was new to him. He snapped out of the groove all at once, leaving Angela alone. Power crackled across the deck.

Angela flew by the first meeting and didn't view any losses on their side. She withdrew, blinking at the bright sunlight. “It was clear for a while. Briefing in fifteen minutes in the mess. Eat and refill your rations for a three-day run.”

Kyle motioned his group to go there now. He stayed behind in case there were specific details he needed that the team wasn't supposed to have.

Marc wasn't sure if there were any. He ran through it while Angela recovered. Now that he wasn't connected, his energy was recovering quickly. Hers wasn't because her banks were much larger. After the recharges, she'd been full, but the fight with Joel had drained her again. He wanted to do another recharge set for everyone, but Angela had denied it this time. She said they had to learn to recover without special treatment.

“Did you see the fire?”

“But not where.”

“Me either. I know it’s a hallway with chairs.”

Kyle counted it before Marc could. “We have six halls with chairs, and two more where the halls meet in a little lounge that has chairs.”

“Get security on all of them before you go?”

Kyle nodded at her. “Anything else?”

“Just do your duty, Eagle.”

“You know it.” Kyle went below.

Marc studied the land finally coming into sight. They were still too far away to view more than trees and the outlines of buildings on the shore, but it gave off a sense of mystery that wasn’t comforting.

In the bridge, Grant and Peter exchanged glances at the display of magic, but neither of them spoke or allowed thoughts to form. They knew it was an honor to be close while it was happening. Both men were ready for shift change when they docked, but they didn’t want to sleep yet. With Ray leaving, Grant didn’t think he could.

Peter knew he couldn’t. This short shift wasn’t enough to tire him. He sent a message in Eagle code.

“Yes.” Coffee after their shift sounded good. So did a slow walk around the deck of the ship in the sunlight. After standing on this bridge for hours at a time, Grant needed movement when he was off duty. The weather here was amazing. The skies were crispy blue with the sweet scent of clean water and fish waiting to be caught. *I need some downtime.*

Angela looked at him. “You’ll get it.”

Grant flushed. "I'm fine. Just letting thoughts wander."

Angela smiled. "As soon as Ray gets home, we'll get you a break together."

Grant's face lit up with a huge smile. "Awesome."

As Marc came up the steps, Ray went below to join the team in the mess. His mood was rough.

Marc was surprised Ray had even agreed to go, though he was an Eagle. His obsession with Grant's safety was well-known.

Angela leaned against the wall by the trophy case and got things rolling. "Before you do it, I need to know why you made this choice."

Marc was ready for her. "The pros outweigh the cons. By answering this call, we are letting people know we survived. That makes us the dominant power on this side of the map. It will give people hope, and maybe even convince any hostiles here to avoid us instead of attacking during the pickup and refueling."

Angela nodded in satisfaction. Marc was as sharp as she'd always believed he would be when he put everything into the job. "Go ahead."

Grant turned on the radio. A male voice with a light accent immediately echoed through the speakers. "This is Somchai! Please answer!"

Marc keyed the mike. "This is Safe Haven Mobile Refugee Camp. What can we do for you?"

There was an instant of stunned silence and then the radio lit up again with blaring excitement and

desperation. “Thank you! Thank you! We need a ride out of here!”

“Who are you and how many? Where do you want to go?” Marc settled onto the stool by the radio with his notebook and pen ready in case he wanted to take notes.

The radio crackled. “There are ten of us. Some are American. We are being hunted! We must leave soon!”

Marc keyed the mike again. “Who’s hunting you and why?”

“The natives here are not friendly. My family and I ran a hotel for tourists, but the locals took over after the war. They killed or enslaved every other race. Survivors of their attacks hide in the jungle to avoid the patrols, but the natives won’t make deals or negotiate; they kill or die using the old tactics that were successful before.”

Marc’s mind spun through the options. It had taken an army to conquer the Indians the first time and it had been ugly for everyone. Safe Haven didn’t need to get involved. “Can you meet us at the dock near the refueling center? We can talk more then.”

“No! We cannot get near there! We try to evacuate survivors whenever boats come near, but we are low on food and water, and we have no ammunition for our weapons. We need an escort.”

“Standby.” Marc regarded Angela.

Angela was already scanning the stranger, searching for lies or a trap. All she found was

desperation—the same kind that had led her to pick up other survivors. “They’re more of ours.”

Marc was relieved. “We’ll send a pickup team. I need a location.”

The radio immediately crackled. “Highest geographical location within ten miles of the dock.”

Marc studied the map Grant had brought up on the radar screen. He glanced at Angela. “It’s two hours from the dock.”

Angela waved at Grant. “Take us in.”

Marc continued with the call. “We will be there three hours after we dock. Any fuel in that center?”

“Yes. We have no use for fuel. The jungle does not allow for many vehicles. Other boats have also refueled there, but they were much smaller.”

“10-4. Be ready for us. Out.”

“Thank you, Safe Haven! You have no idea what we’ve—”

Marc hung up the mike. They all listened for anyone else to pop up on the radio to spread the word that they’d survived and where they were located. They had to wait for Somchai to stop babbling first and realize they’d hung up.

Peter stayed in the shadows and kept an eye on the deck and steps below them.

Angela moved toward the exit. “After the briefing, I want you to rest. It’s going to be a long day.”

Marc didn’t argue, but he hoped she also found some time to rest. Neither of them had slept well since the action at the detention center. The after-

action crash was starting to hit him. He knew it had to be hitting her too.

Marc followed her toward the mess where two full teams were now waiting. Both of those were going to be merged into one large team that would hopefully pick up their new members and get back without having trouble.

Marc sighed. None of the runs had been peaceful. Assuming this one would be was crazy.

3

Two other teams were in the mess when Kyle arrived, but they left as he entered, all going to other chores and shifts. Kyle scanned those who remained. He'd thought nine was their number, but it had grown by one. Gus was now sitting at the first table, appearing surprised to be here.

They all looked at each other curiously. None of them had expected this many people for one pickup. The call hadn't sounded rough enough to even need one Special Forces team.

Brittani's parents served the teams a big breakfast, with powdered milk and hot coffee. Light chatter accompanied the meal, but no real conversations took place. They all wanted to know what they were doing on this run. From the look of this, Angela was sending a small army and that meant there would be a need for it. Fear of dying began to circulate through some of their minds. They tried not to dwell on those thoughts.

The eight men and two women stilled, pulse speeding up at the sound of familiar steps coming toward them. Clad in full Eagle gear, all they were missing were the specific kits that went with every run. The mood was serious. Everyone knew they could die next. Safe Haven wasn't protected once they left the ocean.

The mess had been cleared and the chilly room was empty except for the cooks. The pickup team was at the first four tables, minus the two women, who were together but apart from the men. *That will change before this run ends.* Angela swept the men and found thoughts of having to protect the women as well as their targets. *Maybe, but I hope it will go the other way.*

The descendants nodded to her in recognition of the wish. They would try to make it happen for her. They heard her other wish too, but they were already planning to help keep everyone alive. There was no need to acknowledge it.

"I've seen a lot of dark spots in this run." Angela moved to the center of the mess, silently counting bodies. *Everyone's here. Good.*

Marc leaned against the wall to provide protection and to watch her handle the briefing. He had done this many times over his career and several times as a member of Safe Haven, but there was always something new to learn about handling a team you were possibly sending out to die.

"I know you heard the call. Your team leader and XO will make the choices on what gear to take

and plans to make.” She regarded Kyle and then Daryl.

Both men nodded to her in acknowledgment of the duty.

Angela sat on the edge of the table and handed Kyle a folder. “I want radio clicks for check-ins once an hour, and a cold camp if you have to stay overnight. The site is two hours away. We’ve told them three hours from docking to give you an extra hour for recon and set up. You are picking up ten refugees, some of them American. You will handle them like any other group that might join us. As you travel, find out all the information you can about the people in the area and where these refugees want to go. That was one of the questions they didn’t answer on the radio. It doesn’t matter until later, but it does matter.”

Marc winced as he realized he’d forgotten that during the call.

“You may also have to find sleep time for the few people who haven’t yet.”

Kyle already knew. “I’ll handle it.”

“I expect apocalyptic conditions. We saw no signs of life when we scanned, but we’re too far away for that to mean much. Do not engage unless there’s no other choice. If you are attacked, respond accordingly.” Angela looked around. She didn’t have much else for them. These were experienced men who knew what was expected of them. She gave the two females a quick glance, but she didn’t deliver private instructions. They had a team leader

and an XO who would cover it. She waited for questions.

There were none.

“Happy hunting.” Angela turned away before she could spend time comforting each of them about their fears and her own. *I hate sending them out.* As she neared the door, Angela locked eyes with Morgan. “I’m getting ready to handle Missy’s punishment. Do not interfere.”

Morgan’s face fell. “But they all voted not to punish her.”

Angela shrugged, walking out. “I overruled it.”

Marc followed her, approving of the decision. He didn’t want to hurt Missy, but she had to understand controlling herself was important.

Morgan sent a quick mental message to Shawn and Pam, but he didn’t warn Missy. The alpha had told him personally not to interfere and he wasn’t going to. *But if Shawn and Pam help her, then I don’t get in trouble.* Certain they would handle it, Morgan concentrated on Kyle as their team leader began laying out plans for the run.

Molly and Cathy, sitting at a small table together, realized they were the only females going. Both women were proud and nervous. They kept their mouths shut and paid attention. That pleased the men who were still not comfortable going on runs with a co-ed team.

“What do you think the punishment is?” Jeff didn’t like it. It was hard enough growing up in the

world as a normal person, let alone one with so much power inside.

Morgan shrugged, refusing to think about it. He pointed at Kyle so Jeff would also pay attention.

Jeff let it go, hoping the punishment wasn't bad. It was very easy for him to see Kimmie making the same mistakes even though she didn't have the same gifts. He believed in being lenient on their girls.

Morgan sent him a silent scold. *That's why they take advantage of us so much. You're supposed to treat them like anybody else.*

Jeff lifted a brow in challenge. *Are you able to?*

Morgan blew out a harsh snort. *Not even in my dreams.*

Kyle stood up. "We'll do assignments; then go gather your gear." He held up the paper to let them see it only had names and notes, but no assignments other than CO and XO. Angela had left it all to him.

Everyone understood; Kyle was the boss for this run.

"Morgan is our medic. Kenn will man the radio. Jeff and Ivan are snipers. Ray will negotiate if needed. Gus will support him with his knowledge of five languages, while providing close protection. Molly will track and hunt if we need food. Cathy..." Kyle cleared his throat. "She'll keep our gear sorted and organized."

Cathy flushed at the smirks. They thought she had to be given make-work because she didn't know how to do anything else. *And that's true, for now,*

but I'm willing to learn and it's more than I can say for half of the people in this room. They think they know it all. Time always proves people wrong.

“I’ve decided to take us over the water instead of land. This is a jungle and none of us are familiar enough to be on foot unless there’s no other choice.” Kyle held up a wrinkled, faded map he’d found in one of the gift shops. “This little inlet here will put us within three miles of the pickup location. We’re taking the two largest rafts. We will try to bring them out the same way we go in. If something goes wrong, it’s an eight-mile hike to the dock.”

Kyle stored the map as some of the team muttered. “I will go in one boat with Molly, Cathy, Ray, and Jeff. Everyone else will be in the other raft with Daryl. Standby for instructions on gathering our gear.”

Everyone waited patiently as Kyle flipped to the correct page in the notes he’d been making while waiting on Angela.

“We need thirty ration packs and two cases of water. It gives us five bottles each before we have to find a water source and clean it. Do not drink the water here, from any source. Daryl will cover the food and water.” Kyle pointed at Ivan. “You still have the keys to the weapons room. After you let Cathy and Kenn in to pick up their list, make sure those keys get to the security officer on duty before you meet us in the cargo area.”

“I will.” Ivan was mad he’d forgotten to do that earlier, but he would have still needed to go get the keys anyway.

Kyle gestured at Kenn and Cathy. “I want the ten kits picked up; boss already has them packed. While you’re there, grab a few extra rifles, knives, and mags.”

Kenn didn’t say anything about being assigned duty with a woman. It was a heavy load. He resigned himself to carrying most of it.

“There are a lot of snakes and spiders. We’re going to take medications for as much of it as we can.” Kyle looked at Molly. “When you pick up the standard med packs for a double mission team, tell them I also want the South American venom packs Marc and I have been working on.”

“You got it.” Molly wrote it in her book to make sure she didn’t forget.

Kyle pointed at Jeff, and then Morgan and Gus. “We need two radio packs, ten vests, and a stack of the candles the camp members have been making. If we have to move quick, we won’t feel bad about leaving them behind. I also want a case of grenades out of the weapons room. You three should be able to cover all that, right?”

The three men snorted at the obvious joke and flashed rude gestures.

Kyle continued, glad to almost be finished. “Ray has been promoted to third in command for this run.” Kyle grinned at the shocked man. “You’re my mouthpiece in both ways now.”

People congratulated Ray, but they didn't spend a lot of time on it. Everyone was nervous now that the time to leave was almost here. The cool shield of battle hadn't fallen yet. When it did, the anticipation of an adventure would be the thrill they hadn't gotten in a while. During the chaos, they would just try to stay alive.

Kyle finished the briefing. "Keep your skin covered; wear your tall boots. Say your goodbyes and think good thoughts. Meet me in the cargo hold as soon as you finish. Dismissed."

Daryl immediately got up and went to the counter. He did a fast sweep and realized the next shift was about to arrive. Thelma and Dwight, along with the rest of their family and the kitchen crew, were busy resetting stations and cleaning up.

Daryl slid behind the counter and went to the pantry. He quickly pulled the ration packs and cases of water. He shoved the ration packs in his kit and then put the kit on. He stacked the two cases of water and hefted them onto one shoulder. His body shuddered at the weight.

A warm, large hand settled onto his empty shoulder, sending up the smell of fresh baked bread. "Don't push yourself too hard, son. We need you to come home."

Daryl almost cried. Dwight and Thelma had been polite so far, but this was the first gesture of friendship either of them had extended. Daryl realized he had been recovered long enough now that he should have already had a conversation with

Brittani's father. "I'm sorry. When I get back, I'd love to buy you a beer."

Dwight retreated to clear room. "Sounds good. We can talk about whether or not you're good enough for my daughter."

Daryl tripped, juggling the cases of water. One slid down his chest. He caught it with the other arm and swung it up onto his empty shoulder so the balance was even on each side. He gave Dwight a huge grin. "Looking forward to it."

Thelma chuckled, dusting flour from her hands. "Later, Dwight."

Dwight nodded. "Count on it."

Daryl smiled at Thelma as he left. He jogged down the steps with his load, heart already starting to pound. The workouts he'd done since being released from the infirmary clearly weren't enough. The medics had told all of them full recovery was unlikely, but Daryl was determined to reach his previous health level. If he didn't, he wouldn't be able to remain on the Special Forces team.

He braced, tightened his grip on the water, and jogged the rest of the way to the cargo area.

Chapter Five

Situational Awareness

1

Marc followed Angela down the next flight of stairs, glad most of the camp and the kids were now sleeping. The after-battle crash had finally hit. He didn't ask about Missy's punishment, but he was curious.

"I'm going to soak and snooze until we dock."

Marc understood she wanted a few minutes alone, but her guard was leaving on this run and the next shift wouldn't take Ivan's place for hours. "Okay..."

Angela kept going. Marc would also have to learn to control himself. She wouldn't always be there to guide him or comfort him. Like when the pregnant females went into labor. They were all expected to come in two batches that would likely deliver at the same time. She would be very busy then and Marc would have to keep the camp together. She had no doubt that he would. He'd already proven he was capable of it.

Marc followed her until she got to the hot tub room and then continued on his way for a check of the camp hall. He was trying to give her space whenever she asked for it, but it was hard. He

wanted to be in the water with her, holding her and stealing some alone time.

Angela sent him a soft smile and then stepped into the room. *Sometimes a girl needs a few minutes to herself.* She sighed. *But I'm not going to get it. That's why I came here instead of going to our cabin. I can't crash yet.*

Shawn glanced up as Angela entered the warm room. He'd gotten Morgan's warning and chose to do nothing. Pam wasn't flying in here in defense, so he assumed she felt the same way. *Angela won't hurt our kids.* He still tensed as she swept the room and saw Missy on the chair in the corner.

The other men noticed her arrival.

"Hey, boss!"

"Stanley, get the boss a beer."

Angela waved off their offers as thick steam filled her nose, slowing her breathing and her mind. It felt good. She ignored the faint bloodstains that hadn't been scrubbed well enough and the floor crunching under her feet. She didn't read any thoughts to find out what had happened. If it had been important, she would have already been told. Everyone knew to wear shoes in these rooms until they got in the tubs and then to use the safe path to reach the changing room. Anything and everything ended up being dropped here, including condoms. Angela was glad those were absent right now. She liked it that people were being careful, but it was gross to find on the floor and they needed the babies.

She sat on the edge of the tub with the kill team, thrilled they had accepted Conner for downtime. That meant his run had gone as well as it had seemed. "I'm sorry for the loss of your teammate." She sent out a wave of peace. "Don't feel bad for Drew. He honestly is in a better place now and he's watching us, waiting for us to fulfill our duty to the dream he gave up his life for. We will honor him by living our lives to the fullest." It was her way of telling them she wasn't going to tolerate them feeling guilty, especially Greg. Drew had given his life for a teammate. There was no higher honor. "Have you read the new team placements list yet?"

The kill team all shook their heads.

Angela smiled. "A couple of you have earned your own team. By the time the pickup run is over, I want to know your goals, hopes, dreams, and fears. Leave nothing out. If you want fame or just steady accolades for your team, make it clear where you stand on the issues our camp is, and will be, facing."

The males nodded, all curious where they'd been placed.

"Congratulations on your success, gentlemen." Angela wanted to spend a minute leering to let them know she cared, but she was tired. Searching ahead still took a lot out of her.

Angela waved at Missy to follow, then went to the rear room.

Everyone understood she wanted to be left alone. They immediately decided to stay longer to make sure she wasn't disturbed.

Angela left the door open as she got undressed and slipped into the deliciously warm water in her bra and underwear. She looked at Missy, aware of how scared the girl was. “You’re going to be my personal gopher. You’ll spend most of your time with me once we reach the island. I’m going to teach you how to control your gift. If you fail at this, you’ll be locked, probably for years.”

Silence fell through the other rooms as people listened. Shawn was relieved. Lessons directly from the alpha were special and meant to help someone in one main area at a time. He didn’t know how Angela knew the old lessons; he assumed it was a multitude of sources. Adrian had certainly taught her a lot and left books for her, but her witch was brilliant, and the dreams filled in most of their history over time. The alpha also had access to a vast expanse of information from the past. They just had to be able to dive under the muck of years to retrieve it. Pam had given him a lot of information.

Angela tried to relax so she could rest. “Wake me in half an hour. I want to be ready when we dock. Right now, go to my cabin. There’s a bag under my bed. It needs to be delivered to the Eagle evaluation happening in the small gymnasium. Then I want the radio updates.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Missy immediately left to go perform the first of many chores.

Angela leaned back, letting the warm water send her to a place where she could rest until she was needed. She doubted it would be long. Safe

Haven didn't get many breaks. *It's all or nothing with us. God help the world if we ever decide to just give nothing. That would be ugly.*

2

“Is everyone here?”

Standing next to Neil, Tommy shook his head. “We’re waiting on Wade and Zack.” He didn’t say Zack was probably in Allison’s cabin, caring for her while she rested. The camp had been told she’d had a minor procedure and now needed to rest. Neither man would be surprised if Zack didn’t show at all.

Neil swept the waiting Eagles. There was one low-level team, along with Ian, Quinn, Harry, Ed, and Tommy. Once Wade arrived, they would get started. Greg and Jennifer were part of his team, but they were both still on break. Greg had been on the run to the detention center and Jennifer had been up for almost 24-hours straight. Neil hoped this would still be enough Eagles to get the job done.

He turned around and swept the thirty-two waiting women. All of them were here in hopes of being on the next two teams of rookies. This wasn’t an official tryout, but at the same time, it was. Almost all of the females were from Ciemus. No men had shown up. Neil thought about his conversation with Kyle and realized the former mobster had been right. The men were definitely outnumbered now, in every way.

“When does this thing start?!”

Neil turned to see Megan, one of the more promising people at this evaluation, glaring at him with bloodshot eyes and wild blonde hair in a twisted bun. He frowned at her. “When I tell you.”

Megan flipped him the finger.

Neil stared in shock.

Next to him, Tommy groaned. “I think it’s going to be one of those days, Boss.”

Neil grimaced. “Makes me wish I’d worn a cup.”

The Eagles snickered; all the women glared at them for the perceived insult they hadn’t heard.

Neil heard familiar footsteps coming and gestured. “Eagles, take your places. We’ll get started in a minute. Ladies, there are three areas we’re going to evaluate you on. A third of you need to go to the weapons area. A third will go to the defense station. The rest will go to the awareness and speed area. This evaluation will take roughly an hour and a half. The boss will post the results.”

None of the women budged.

Neil frowned. “Move it!”

Megan gave him the finger again and moved toward the weapons area, grumbling.

The other women followed her, all arguing, sniping, whining, or reaching in their pockets for bottles of pills. Neil paled as his mind connected a possible explanation.

Next to him, Tommy took a step backward. “Shit. It *is* going to be one of those days.”

The gym was crowded with three stations, boxes and crates, and all the people. It was also warm. Neil wished he'd thought to ask the boss for air conditioning in here.

"Honest! I got it from one of the shops no one has been into yet. I'll trade you for a two-week rental on the GTA game you have."

"OK, but if you're lying, I'm gonna beat your ass."

Neil turned toward the two rookies in the corner of the gym. Those two weren't paying any attention to anything that was going on. They were busy making a trade. *Idiots.*

Wade entered the gym. He walked toward Neil and then stopped. He swept the women who were reluctantly taking places around the three training sessions. Wade narrowed in on bulging pockets and loose-fitting clothes. "They're all wearing sweats..."

Neil frowned at Wade, placing another clue in the puzzle. "No makeup either. No flirting. No eye contact. No perfume. Did we piss them off somehow?" Neil didn't really care about that himself, but he knew it was important to Angela's breeding tree.

Wade didn't answer. He walked out of the room, going back down the hall. He paused at the intersection and waved to Monica. As he came down here, she'd been slowly walking toward the steps that would take her to yet another day on kid duty. "Want to trade shifts?"

Monica's mood lifted. "You know it. What are you doing?"

Wade chuckled at her eagerness. "Rookie evaluations. It's all female. I'd rather deal with the kids."

Monica laughed. She respected Wade for avoiding the temptation now that he was officially off the market. "When?"

"Right now, in the big gym."

Monica switched directions. "You have five minutes before the kid shift."

Wade went immediately. He didn't need to stay behind and witness the chaos.

Monica walked straight to Neil. "Where do you want me?"

Neil shrugged. "That depends on why you're here."

"I just traded shifts with Wade."

Eagles groaned as they realized the one man among them who might have been able to control the women had sounded the retreat.

"Wade's station was to record results and anything important about the trainee." Neil gestured toward a stack of clipboards.

Molly and the others gathered the equipment that was already stacked for them and then moved toward the stations where the uneven numbers of women stood around in small groups, glaring at the men and each other.

Zack came running down the hall. He hurried over to Neil and waited, catching his breath.

Neil didn't scold him for being late. He had more important things to worry about. He punished Zack by pointing to the station where Megan was waiting to demonstrate her proficiency with a firearm. "That post."

Lost in his thoughts about Allison, Zack headed for his post without noticing the tension in the room.

Megan opened fire as soon as Zack neared the station. All seven shots landed near the center of the target.

Zack frowned. He motioned to the next woman while he went to change the targets.

Hannah, almost Megan's twin even though they'd never met until Ciemus took them in, immediately stepped forward and snapped the safety off the next loaded gun.

Zack heard it and hit the ground.

Bullets flew over him and smacked into Megan's target.

"Hey! Put the gun down!" Neil ran over and snatched the gun out of Hannah's hand. "You could have shot him!"

Hannah pouted. "He waved for the next person to go ahead." She walked over and joined Megan in the speed line.

Neil stared after her, mouth dropping open.

Zack stayed on the floor. "Anyone want to trade shifts with me?"

Some of the rookies immediately began whispering about that possibility, but it was too late

to leave and find someone to take their place. All of them resented Wade for his fast thinking.

Covering the defensive area, Monica snickered. She knew what the problem was now, which is why he had chosen her to trade with. Another woman was safer here than any male at the moment.

Monica got her pen ready to record the first defensive match results, but she also kept an eye on the other stations so she could avoid the crossfire when shit started hitting the fan.

Ian slid closer to Neil instead of going to take his place. “I’m not feeling good, man. Can I go to the sickbay?”

Neil grabbed Ian’s arm and shoved him toward the ring. “No. Go take one for the team.”

Ian walked toward the ring, muttering. “I’d rather take one *from* the team.”

Neil wanted to laugh, but it was hard with his balls shriveling up. He observed as Doris, a short, fat homemaker, entered the defense station opposite Ian. Doris appeared innocent and incapable of doing the job. Neil assumed she would be cut during this evaluation, but he wasn’t positive. Some of the most dangerous people he’d met since the war weren’t bulging or perfectly fit. Angela was a prime example. When he’d first met her, Neil had viewed a hothouse wallflower that would have to be cared for, like Tonya. Neither of those women had turned out to match the first impression, so he couldn’t be sure about Doris.

Ian relaxed at the sight of his opponent. He slid between the ropes and entered the ring, grinning at the glaring female. “Just do the best you can. I’ll try not to hurt you.”

Doris’s lips thinned. Her hands clenched into fists... She launched her body and smacked her forehead into his crotch.

Ian screamed. He went down hard, slamming into the floor.

Doris launched herself in the air.

“No!” Ian cringed into a ball. “I give! I give!”

Doris landed with her knee in his thigh and a fist in his kidney. She swung again as soon as she got her balance, pummeling his stomach, the arms up in defense, his hip, and all the while, she ground her knee into his thigh.

Shrieks echoed through the training room.

Neil’s mouth dropped open again.

Women near the ring waved it off.

“Get up, you big baby.”

“What a wuss!”

Next in line to take a place in the defensive ring, Tommy detoured toward the stacks of gear in the corner. “I want a cup before we go any further.”

Every Eagle there followed his lead, abandoning their posts for the perceived safety of technology.

The stations were now surrounded by angry, impatient women who fingered the equipment and argued with each other instead of listening to the

instructors. They weren't the only ones not paying attention.

“What about my shift tonight on the top deck?”

“Ugh. You'd better have a great trade for that.”

The two rookie males in the corner weren't part of the lesson. They were here to sleaze on the women after the lesson was over. They didn't pay attention to the shouts, screams, or the mood. Until it was over, they didn't care.

Neil caught the vest Tommy tossed and quickly strapped it on. He waved at the others to restart the evaluation, swallowing as the temperature rose in the small gymnasium.

Quinn lined up at the speed station, not looking at the angry woman next to him. “First around the course gets the win. After you're done, we'll ask questions about what you saw during the run. Okay?”

“Whatever.” Hannah was busy giving Neil and Zack glares for embarrassing her. “Just call it.”

Quinn nodded to Ed, who was recording the results for this station.

Ed clicked the watch. “Go!”

Quinn took off running, aware of Hannah keeping pace. Signs with pictures glued to them popped up next to the course as they ran. They hit the turn together, bumping. Quinn didn't use his bigger body to win. He used speed.

Hannah threw her hip out and knocked Quinn from the lane.

Quinn flailed, trying not to hit the wall. He rolled, hands covering his face. He stopped inches from a broken nose.

Hannah kept running.

Ed remembered to click the watch as she crossed the line. He retreated as she came toward him.

Hannah snatched the watch and held it up. “Beat that, bitches!”

The gym filled with taunts and threats.

“Don’t bang it!” Zack hurried over to take the gun Erin was smacking on the table to make the magazine go in.

Erin let go of the gun. It fell to the floor and fired.

The bullet skimmed Zack’s boot and skidded across the floor.

“It’s your fault!” Erin retreated as Zack stood up. “You scared me!”

Zack stomped over to Neil. “Switch me out.”

Neil wanted to call it a day period, but he had a reputation to maintain. “You’re not bleeding.”

Zack kicked Neil in the shin and walked out of the gym.

“Damn it!” Neil hobbled after him, but stopped at the entrance. He felt something coming and dropped as he spun.

The bullet hit the wall next to the doorframe.

Neil stayed crouched for flight as other Eagles hurried over to get the gun from the woman who had been next in line after Erin.

Dog came into the gym in a hurry. *What's the problem?!* He spotted Neil on the floor and went to him. He sniffed the trooper, catching his fear.

Neil didn't look away from the gun area. The weapon wasn't secured yet. "They synced."

Dog studied the gym, confused. He caught a scent... Dog's fur rose. His ears went down. He backed out of the gym, making it look easy. *I'm getting a call from the boss. Have to go!*

Neil snorted. "Sure." He swept the gym, coming to rest on the two males in the corner. They still hadn't noticed the problems.

"Wait. I have chocolate." The rookie man began digging in his pocket. "I'll give you both bars."

"Deal!"

Heads snapped up all across the gym. Women paused, eyes glazing, mouths parting.

"Stop!" Neil rose, arms waving. "Don't do it!"

The rookie pulled up a hand with two familiar candy bars in brown wrappers.

The scent of lust filled the air.

Neil yanked Tommy out of the way as every female in the gym took off running toward the rookies. Guttural growls spilled from their mouths as they bumped, pushed, punched, and kicked their way across the floor, leaving a trail of blood. It moved like a tornado, sweeping up screaming men trying to flee.

Neil and Tommy eased closer to help their fellowmen as several of them were left trampled by the mob.

“It’s mine!”

“Give it to me!”

“That’s my hair!”

“Move, fat ass!”

“Make me, bimbo!”

Under the pile of fighting women, two rookie men cowered, now wishing they’d been knocked out by Greg’s fast beer shot instead of this. Women kicked them, claws raking away chunks of clothes, skin, and hair.

Neil ducked as a boot flew toward them, almost sure it didn’t belong to any of the women. He helped Ian and Quinn up, shoving them toward the exit. “Call for the medics.”

Dazed, both men grabbed at their radios as they vanished.

“Fight in the gym!”

“Medics needed in the gym!”

Women began falling from the pile, rolling with a target as they headbutted, spat, cursed, kneed, and yanked on anything that would give. Loud punches echoed under the din.

“Neil! Help! Neil!”

Neil shook his head at Tommy as the screams from the rookie men grew louder. “There’s nothing we can do for them now.”

Megan got a hold of the chocolate bar in Hannah’s grip.

Hannah punched her so hard that even Neil looked away.

Tommy winced as a tooth landed near his boot. “That’s not right.”

“No, but they are still getting the defense eval.”

Tommy chuckled. “Fair enough. And speed was that snap and run. Megan won it hands down.”

“Agreed. And we know who needs training in situational awareness.”

Tommy flinched at another loud shriek from the bottom of the pile. Only six women were left there, but it was clear they hadn’t given up. The rest of the gym was now littered with groaning, bleeding, injured women without a candy bar. “Train the rookies if you want, but it isn’t needed for those two. They’ve learned their lesson.”

Neil laughed. “Good point.”

Missy stepped by the two senior men, bag in hand. “I have more chocolate.” Her eyes lit up in bright red warning as injured women found new strength and rose. “Line up or I’ll eat them all!”

The moody females lined up in front of the little girl.

The fight stopped. The losing women hurried over to the line.

Hannah and Megan grinned, both clutching a squished candy bar in a bloody hand. They also joined the line, hoping for an extra.

Neil stepped aside as Harry and Terry hurried in with their medical bags. He pointed at the two rookie men who’d stopped screaming, but hadn’t unclenched from their fetal positions. Naked, bruised skin glared at the medics across a trashed

gym. None of the stations had survived. Guns and gear were scattered across the floor. A lot of it was streaked with blood and hair.

Missy finished doling out the edible treasure, then came over to Neil. “That’s only going to buy you half an hour. The alpha wants them resting and medicating. The evaluation is over.”

All the remaining men breathed sighs of relief or flashed smiles at the girl.

Missy went to the chalkboard, where twenty empty slots waited for the winners of the evaluation and the actual tryouts. She printed Hannah and Megan’s name in the first two slots, putting Megan first because she’d made seven solid shots in the weapons area.

“Yes!”

“All right!”

Megan and Hannah slapped palms and accepted muttered congratulations from the other women who were devouring their candy bars.

The mood in the room settled back into easy-going women eager to learn to be Eagles.

Neil let his balls drop; he gestured. “Evaluation is finished. You are all ordered, by the boss, to clean up, eat, medicate, and rest.” He waited for another cheer and was surprised by the disappointment. *They really are just like the men, only with bloodier claws.*

Missy left the gym, glad she’d been allowed to help. All the gophering would make her tired, but it

was fun. She didn't feel like she was being punished. *Thank you, Alpha.*

Angela smiled in her mind. *It's my honor. Now get those radio updates to me in the next six minutes. Let's go!*

Missy took off running.

3

"It's time."

Angela's call from the rear room drew an immediate response. Everyone rose from the soothing water to gather their clothes and shoes. Water dripped all over the floor.

The four women in the other room waited for orders, hoping Angela had something for them.

"I need four volunteers to help patrol the ship. See Debra for assignments."

"We've got that covered, Boss." Lisa and the other three women hurried, delighted to have the chore.

Greg yanked up his pants and slid aside to make room as Angela came out.

Angela quickly dropped her wet underclothes and pulled on the jeans and shirt from her kit.

Greg kept his back turned even though the others didn't. His heart pounded.

"You'll stay with me as a guard."

Greg nodded. "It's my honor."

Angela tugged on her socks and boots. "Conner and Jonny, go to bed. You have work later."

Shawn waited for his assignment as Conner and Jonny left.

Angela smiled at him. “Pam will go to the infirmary soon. You should be with her.”

“Excellent.” Shawn finished tying his laces and left, carrying his shirt and kit.

Dog nosed his way into the room.

Angela saw him. “Missy needs an escort.”

Dog snorted, golden eyes filling with refusal. *She’s mean.*

“I know.”

Dog whimpered. *Isn’t there something else?*

Angela laughed. “Afraid of a little girl?”

Dog’s fur rose. *A girl? No. That girl? Yes. You should be too.*

Angela dried her hair. “Agreed, but she’s also a sweet child who needs protection.”

Dog left the room with his tail between his legs. *Fine. If she pulls out all my fur, I’m blaming you.*

4

A faint bell began to ding in Neil’s mind. He recognized it immediately, though it wasn’t welcome. That bell meant the evaluation wasn’t his only duty for the day. He was still going to be away from Samantha.

Neil moved through the drafty hall, aware of several other Eagles doing the same around him. He assumed they were also getting the alpha’s call, though he wasn’t sure if the normals heard it the

way he did. When he'd been invisible, the bell had sounded exactly like someone ringing for him. Now, it echoed louder and deeper, and reached into parts of his mind. It was overwhelming and impossible to ignore.

None of the men spoke. They weren't scared of whatever chore Angela was about to give them, but they were cautious. It wasn't a coincidence that Safe Haven was half an hour from docking and they were being called.

Theo came from an adjoining hallway and fell in behind Neil and the other men. "Grant wants the bottom of the boat checked for cracks or other problems before we sail around the tip of South America." Theo tapped the pocket where he had his notes. "We're going to refuel at the same time. I'm not sure what equipment your team will need for the dive, but Trent should have it covered."

Neil almost tripped. "Dive?"

Tommy slapped Neil on the shoulder, grinning. "Wanna go back and work with the women?"

Neil moved faster down the hallway. "Last one in the water is a rotten egg!"

Marc paused at the intersection to let the energetic men go by. He did a sweep of their thoughts and spent the rest of his walk chuckling. *I'm glad I didn't have that duty.*

Marc opened the camp door, scanning Charlie and Ralph. They were in the sentry station in the center of the main hallway. Daisey was sleeping. She would join them when the rest of the camp

woke. Marc didn't expect that to be long despite the small amount of sleep everyone had gotten. The camp knew they were near land again. So did the kids. Instead of coming straight here, he'd had to spend the last two hours helping settle them down.

Marc did a scan of those who were awake to determine the mood. It was possible that some people would want to leave now, while they had the chance. They wouldn't care about the bad news from the land call. All they would see was earth instead of water.

Marc was relieved to not find anything he had to handle yet. The repaired door to this hall was a glaring reminder of the rebellion and his first choice to kill them all. He knew he should feel bad for that, but he didn't. *I'm not the same type of alpha as Angela and Adrian. I don't always put the normals first. I don't think I can.* Marc smiled at Ralph. "Ready for the big day?"

Ralph chuckled. "No."

All three males laughed, but they kept it quiet so they didn't wake the people sleeping in the dozens of cabins around them. Most of the doors were shut, but it wouldn't take much tension to bring people right out of slumber to face the next threat. Or to run from it.

"We're a week out now." Charlie was nervous. "We chose to do a double wedding. The party is in two days."

The table next to the guard post was covered in piles of ribbon, paper, markers, and glittering

invitations. Marc was glad it was keeping Charlie busy, but he sensed the unease under his son's happy demeanor. "Tim said a few other couples are considering joining you."

Charlie shrugged. "I don't mind. Tracy probably won't either."

"Good." Marc assumed that was because Tracy still hadn't fully rejoined camp life. Now that everyone knew she was pregnant, that could change, but only if she could take the public disapproval she would get.

"I'll help her with it." Charlie studied Marc. He found a powerful man pretending nothing was wrong with his life. *Something was supposed to change when Adrian left.* Charlie frowned. "How's mom?"

Marc thought about it before he answered. He knew what Charlie meant. He finally sighed. "Surviving."

Charlie's voice lowered. "What about you?"

Marc tensed. "I'm fine."

"Uh-huh." Charlie didn't push. If his dad wanted to talk about Kendle, he was probably the last person Marc would choose for that conversation.

"Not true." Marc's voice hardened. "I just don't want to talk about it."

Charlie shrugged. "Okay."

Marc glanced toward their cabin. "Things okay?"

Charlie tried to smile. "For now."

Marc wasn't comforted. "Tim talked to her?"

"Yeah, but no dice." Charlie repeated what he'd said to Ralph. "She needs something he can't give her."

Ralph repeated his answer. "Do you know what it is?"

Charlie sighed miserably. "Not a clue, but she needs to find it soon or I'll lose her—we all will."

Marc nodded. "I'll make sure your mom knows."

"Cool."

Marc wanted to stay and chat more, but there was work waiting and the clock was ticking. "Shift change in half an hour."

Marc studied the new people as he walked by their cabins, going deeper than he had the first time he'd run into them in the mess. Once again, he didn't find problems, but he also didn't find explanations for some of their behavior. Until he did, they would stay on his mental list.

Marc paused in the middle of the hallway as Tobias came to the door of the cabin he was sharing with his two wives. Laura and her nieces were in the cabin directly across the hall. That door was closed, but Marc knew she was listening too.

Marc didn't like Tobias. He appeared normal in his jeans and red shirt, but those hard green eyes said to be careful. "Why didn't you want your wives to evolve?"

Tobias didn't say anything right away. He spent a moment giving Marc the same treatment he was

receiving, except he couldn't get through Marc's shield unless Marc let him in.

Marc allowed the man to view a small amount of the trip they'd made here. He lingered over the radiation scenes and the betrayals from people they'd thought they could trust. "We will kill to survive. Please don't forget that."

Tobias stiffened. "We will leave at some point. We do not want to be a part of your haven."

"Answer the question."

"Our children will be hunted."

"They would be anyway."

Tobias snorted. "Higher level women breed higher level children."

Marc assumed the man feared trackers would find and hurt his family. "We'll help keep you safe."

Tobias snorted. "Not possible."

Marc walked up to the descendant hall. He wasn't in the mood to argue with the man or try to convince him to stay. Until the new people checked out, it wasn't worth putting in that effort.

Marc saw Conner was now crashed on the small couch outside Samantha's cabin. When the teenager got up, he was scheduled to report to the infirmary to help with Pam's first blood treatment. Right now, Conner was snoring loud enough to make Marc think they had a sawmill in the room. He couldn't hear anything from the other areas over it. Even the sound of the water was muffled.

Samantha's cabin door opened. She leaned against the frame, both hands holding her huge

stomach. The white maternity shirt made her appear even bigger than she was.

Marc shook his head before she could offer to help with anything. “You’re on bedrest now. A gopher will be sent to you.”

Samantha stuck out her tongue and slowly went back into her cabin.

Missy came down the hallway with Dog on her heels. Marc didn’t ask what was in the bag over her shoulder or why she was wearing a coat in this warm weather. He assumed it was Angela’s orders.

“The alpha wants you on the bridge now.”

“Okay.” Marc finished his check of the cabins and then followed the little girl up the stairs. He liked it that Dog was escorting Missy on her errands, but he also worried about the girl. She was too small to have any sort of job yet, let alone one as important as passing information throughout the ship that couldn’t go over the radio or through mental waves.

“I’m older than I look.”

Marc sighed. “Where have I heard that before?”

Chapter Six

Farewell

1

Kenn and Cathy walked behind Ivan as they went to the weapons room. None of them spoke.

Kenn slowed near the hallway to the infirmary and lab, spotting Tonya behind the glass.

“I need a quick minute here.” Cathy detoured toward the guard on the infirmary.

Kenn waved Ivan on, curious what Cathy was doing. Then he spotted the guard and frowned. “We don’t have time for this.”

Cathy ignored him. She went to the teenager standing guard in the corner. “I’m sorry I have to do this right now, but I’m going out on a run.” She pressed a soft kiss to Timmy’s cheek. Then she stepped back. “I can’t see you anymore. As soon as you’re old enough, that can change.” She turned around and walked toward Kenn without waiting for the boy’s reaction.

Everyone stared; even the medics gawked.

Waiting for her shift to start over the infirmary, Emma smirked. *So that one’s free now, huh?*

Kenn watched Cathy’s back, expecting Timmy to fly off the handle. He approved the choice, but it could have been handled later or at least when they

were alone. There were a dozen witnesses right now.

Timmy's expression didn't change. He'd felt it coming. Zack had also mentioned it to him recently. He kept his expression blank this time and pretended his heart wasn't shattering. "Good luck on your run."

Kenn gave Tonya a quick leer through the glass as Cathy walked by him. He fell in with her, picking out flushed cheeks and clenched fists. "Why did you do that?"

"I didn't expect to get this run." Cathy shrugged. "I didn't expect to get any runs. The boss is giving me a chance to prove my worth. I can't throw it away on a piece of ass."

Kenn chuckled. "Welcome to the Eagles."

Cathy snorted and kept her true feelings to herself.

Kenn swept the infirmary as they went by, seeing Molly was gathering the medical supplies for their run. He didn't speak to Tommy or Quinn. The men were tired and annoyed. Kenn did a quick mental scan and discovered the chaos that had happened during the rookie evaluations. Quinn and Tommy had helped the medics get the more seriously injured people to the infirmary. Kenn delivered a mocking wave and kept walking.

"He's still a dick."

Quinn nodded at Tommy's comment. "Always will be. Are we done here?"

Tommy walked toward the exit. “Yes, even if they say no.”

Quinn hurried to catch up. “I have a short shift over the mess. Then I’m gonna get a shower and eat. After, do you want to play cards?”

Tommy started to say no and then realized Quinn was asking for one of those bonding moments they’d silently agreed to. Tommy searched his heart and found he was willing. “All of that sounds good. I have a short shift with my team and then we can hang together if you want.”

“Cool.” Quinn refused to show more emotion, but he was thrilled that Tommy had accepted his suggestion.

Monica rolled her eyes as the men walked by. “They might as well get married.” Monica was in a chair next to Morgan’s desk and the medical cabinets. She was here for her food treatment follow up.

Molly snickered as she re-locked the cabinets and began to store the vials and boxes in her kit. “Men sure are hard to understand.”

Monica shrugged, standing up. “I don’t usually bother. I swing the other way.”

Molly froze as she understood. A blush crept up her cheeks.

Monica studied her for signs of anger or interest. She didn’t find either. “You have a great poker face.”

Molly tried to recover. “Sorry. I guess I just don’t know what to say.”

Monica stared into her eyes. “Have you ever thought about it?”

Molly’s cheeks turned darker. “I don’t know you well enough for this conversation.” She slid her kit onto her shoulders. “I have to go.”

Monica took a chance. She stepped forward. “Have a safe trip. Hurry home.” She kissed Molly firmly on the lips, lingering for a brief second. Then she stepped back and sat back down in the chair to wait for the medic to get to her.

Molly forced her feet to move, hand coming up to her lips. *Wow.*

Morgan chuckled as she walked by. “You seem surprised.”

Molly nodded. “I am. I didn’t know.”

Morgan chuckled again. “You’re the only one. That’s why none of the guys hound her. She’s one of us.”

Molly didn’t answer. She went toward the cargo area, mind in a spin.

“Must have been a great kiss.” Morgan went to Harry, who was in charge of the infirmary while he was gone. He gestured and led Harry toward one of the partitioned areas.

Harry stepped through the curtain in surprise. Morgan and Neil had made it clear that no one was allowed to be in here yet.

Morgan gave Harry a minute to understand what all the equipment was for. “If something happens while I’m gone, you’ll have to handle it. Tonya, Conner, and a few other people will assist.”

Morgan pointed at a stack of books. “Those will help you.”

Harry sank down in the chair next to the incubator boxes and began to flip through the stack of books. “Tell Terry he’s in charge while I’m on my break.”

Morgan liked that immediate response. He filled Terry in on Harry’s break while he waited. Pam was due here for her blood test. Later this afternoon, she would get her first treatment from Conner.

Pam entered the room and went to Morgan. She wrapped her arms around his neck, not speaking.

Morgan didn’t talk either. It wasn’t because they had witnesses. It was just that there was too much to say in the short time they had.

Morgan kissed her on the forehead and then walked to the door. He still needed to get supplies from the closets by the camp area. Their important gear had been moved closer in case there was another uprising.

Pam went to the chair next to Monica and plastered on a smile. “So, I hear you made a move?”

Monica sighed. “And I still don’t know how it went.”

Pam’s brow lifted. “I’m confused.”

Monica shrugged. “So is she. I’ll talk to her when she gets back.”

“Molly didn’t say anything?”

“Nope. Just walked that cute ass out the door.”

Pam laughed. “Sorry.”

Monica sighed. “Me too. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

Morgan listened to the women chatter until he got out of hearing distance. He hurried down the stairs to the supply closet and found it already open. Gus had removed a few items and stacked them up, but he was talking to Ralph now. Morgan listened.

“Will you look after her for me?”

Ralph nodded at the big man, smiling. He liked Gus. “Bernice and her daughter will be fine while you’re gone. Be safe.”

“Thanks. Will do.” Gus joined Morgan at the closet.

Morgan didn’t offer comfort. He stacked the heavy vests over Gus’s arm and added the case of grenades that Gus had already collected from the weapons room.

“Let me have some of that.” Jeff came down the hall and took part of the load.

Light steps echoed behind him.

Jeff didn’t turn around. If Kimmie tried hard to keep him here, it might work. It also might drive him away from the girl; he didn’t want either of those things to happen.

Missy came through the employee door next to them. “The alpha has a job for you, Kimmie. Come on.” She took Kimmie’s arm and tugged the reluctant girl toward the stairs.

Jeff was relieved and grateful. He helped load the rest of the gear, eager to be out and about.

Kimmie understood Jeff needed time to himself for the wild adventures of life. She missed it too, but she couldn't help being worried about him.

"He'll be fine." Missy leaned closer, whispering. "The job is good. You'll like it."

Kimmie let Missy distract her, mood lifting at the thought of spending time with Angela.

Ivan stepped inside as the two girls joined him at the bottom of the stairs to the bridge. Jayda was giving Angela updates from the rest of the ship. Ivan didn't want to interrupt them.

Kimmie and Missy entered the bridge and waited out of the way for the adults to finish.

Angela waved Jayda on and looked at the girls. "Both of you will stay close while we dock and for a while after. When I need messages carried, you'll handle it."

Thrilled, both girls hurried to the stools she pointed at, eager to help.

Jayda was impressed by how Angela was covering the wild children. She went down the bridge steps, stopping next to Ivan.

Ivan handed her the keys to the weapons room. "We're all done down there now."

Jayda gave him a sultry smile. "We should spend some time together when you get back."

Ivan surprised them both by smiling back at her. "You're doing a good job; keep it up." He walked toward the ramp without glancing at the bridge. He could feel Angela in the doorway now, observing him. If Marc was right, his time with her would

come. Right now, he still had to earn it. *And that doesn't include a relationship like Jayda wants.*

2

“Are you ready to talk yet?”

Greg stiffened at Angela's mild question. “About what?” He was trailing her, but his mind was on the detention center run.

“Your new fear.”

Greg brought up a confused tone and expression. “No idea what you're talking about.”

Angela didn't have the patience to pry it out of him. She brought her demon out and turned around.

Greg flinched, hand going for his gun.

Angela resumed her walk and her normal form.

Greg realized she'd been testing him and he'd failed miserably. He hurried to catch up, not sure what to say. He was scared of magic now. Alexander had almost taken his life and then Conner had shoved Drew's lifeforce into him against his will. He felt guilty and angry, with no way to release those ugly emotions. He waited for her to scold, threaten, or at least push.

Angela let the tension build as she went down the hall to the animal bay. The smell of fresh manure filled her nose, making her stomach turn.

A voice echoed from the long bay.

“Please? No one will know.”

Angela and Greg listened for a response, but there wasn't one.

Angela paused to scan for trouble. She didn't find any, but that didn't always mean it was clear.

Greg slid by her and went in. *I'm an Eagle. We aren't scared.*

Angela snorted.

Greg flushed.

Leeann looked up from the stool she was sitting on. "He won't talk to me."

Greg and Angela saw Jack's horse munching from a bucket. No one else was in here.

Angela walked the stalls, glad their few animals were doing okay. The stalls were clean—freshly from the look. The bucket of waste on the pull cart was full and ready to be used in their garden. Angela motioned. "Help me."

She shook her head at Greg when he would have gone to the cart. "Not your job, Eagle."

Greg stiffened, not sure if she was pissed at him. Her tone was rough.

Angela and Leeann lugged the cart toward the door.

Leeann glanced over her shoulder at the horse. "If I find you a treat, will you talk to me then?"

The horse kept munching.

Leeann sulked as she helped pull the cart. "I know he talks. Maybe he just doesn't like me."

Angela put more ass into the pull so the cart would go faster. "I don't think he feels comfortable with any of us."

Leeann let go of the cart, hands coming to her little hips. "But we're the good guys!"

Angela sighed, pulling harder. “We are, but people only see the unknown with us. Even when they say they love us, we’re still feared. Animals are no different.”

Leeann tried not to cry.

Angela looked at Greg. *I feel the same way she does. How do you get females to stop being sad over something they can’t control?*

Greg’s heart broke. “I’m sorry. It was a rough run.”

Angela steered the cart into the large garden center. “Answer the question.”

Greg tried to concentrate. “Tell a joke?” He knew plenty of those, but they weren’t appropriate for a child.

Angela pointed at the first row of buckets. “Each pot gets two scoops with a small hand shovel. Can you do that?”

Leeann smiled eagerly. “I’ll be careful.”

“Good. I’ll send some help down later.”

Leeann didn’t answer. She was already searching for the hand shovels.

Angela left the garden, almost smiling.

Greg made the connection. “Distraction.”

Angela shrugged. “But it only works if the distraction is something they want to do. Otherwise, use humor or danger.”

Greg paused. “You used danger—on me!”

Angela chuckled. “You stopped thinking about the run for a minute.”

“You’re sneaky.” He grinned. “I admire that.”

“So do I.” She slowed. “I think that’s part of why Adrian was able to get under my skin.”

Greg was surprised by the admission. “Do you want to talk about him?”

Angela nodded, voice sad. “But some other time. I need to get topside; we’re docking soon.”

Greg realized she had opened a mental line between them. “Is it because of my...fear?”

“A little.” She let her walls down. Incredibly thick waves of pain radiated down the hallway. “It’s mostly for me.”

Greg stayed close as they neared the steps to the top deck, hearing voices of people moving through the halls. “You can’t talk to Marc about it...”

“No. Just like he can’t talk to me about Kendle. That part of our lives may never cross again.”

Greg didn’t think that was good for a relationship, but he didn’t argue. “How about we get a beer later, after the pickup team returns?”

Angela didn’t answer.

Greg groaned. “They aren’t coming back tonight, are they?”

Angela’s voice hardened. “They all wanted some action. They all wanted to be off this ship. They’re getting exactly what they wanted.”

3

Ed caught up with Marc as he neared the ramp to the top deck. “I have updates for you.”

Marc paused, not reading the man's mind like he usually did now. He was saving energy in case it was needed during this stop. He'd learned a hard lesson; his energy banks needed to be held in reserve for emergencies.

Ed began reading from his clipboard. "All the new people are now cleared and out of the infirmary. They have settling partners. Do you want to hear who they were matched with?"

"Yes." Marc could tell by the way the ship was just now starting to slow that he still had time before he was needed on the bridge.

Ed flipped to a rear page for those details. "Jennifer is covering Tobias and his wives. Kyle argued with her openly on that one, but Jennifer refused to budge. Jayda and Debra are splitting Laura and her nieces when they have time."

Marc waved him to keep going, able to feel Angela's impatience.

"Ralph and Daisey will work on the rest of the new people. Charlie is their guard. He'll record any issues they can't hear. It works well because they have the excuse to be together a lot for the wedding."

"Good." Marc didn't like Charlie being an undercover spy, but it was as close to the Eagles as he was allowed to be right now.

"Harry and Terry are getting along well with the Cayman refugees. Their cabins are close. Harry said they often finish the evenings playing games or cards. Nice people."

“Sounds fine.”

Ed could feel Marc’s attention drifting. He tried to hurry through the rest of the updates. “All the teams are ready to go. Neil’s team will be getting a fast lesson from Trent on the rear deck while we’re waiting for the engines to cool down. The refueling team will be setting things up and clearing the dock. As soon as Theo and Grant say it’s clear, the refueling will begin. The guard posts are all up and running, and the mess has a cold buffet out because of the odd hours tonight. They’ll stay open until you call it.”

Marc held up a hand. “How did you end up with the updates from so many different areas?” It wasn’t the communication set-up that Marc had switched them to.

“Jayda asked for volunteers to run information.” Ed shrugged. “She’s not Kenn. He usually does this.”

Marc frowned. “Isn’t Debra keeping things in line?”

Ed shrugged. “She thought it would be good to have someone who can do it quietly. She didn’t want to use Missy.”

Marc shrugged. He was happy to have Ed on duty with the rookie females anyway. He liked all of them and they were easy to trust, but even though Debra had been with them since the mountain, she still hadn’t been trained enough for the position she’d been given. Having Ed there would help. “Go on then.”

Ed got back to his place in the notes. “We had a serious issue during the evaluation session. Thirty-something Ciemus women were there to be evaluated as the next rookies. Something about a chocolate bar and a sink.” Ed shrugged. “I have no idea what happened. When the patients came in, they were raving about claws and teeth and crying. I couldn’t get a straight story out of any of them.”

Marc snickered. He’d already put it together from the images he’d viewed in Dog’s mind while the wolf escorted Missy on her errands, but he still needed to hear the official damage count.

Ed ran his finger along the paper as he spoke. “We had two males hurt, along with fifteen women who all needed basic medical care. They had three broken fingers, two teeth knocked out, or ripped out. Four black eyes, so much hair it looks like a barber attacked them, and too many bruises and scratches to count.” Ed flipped the sheet over. “Now for the injuries on the fifteen women.”

Marc burst out laughing. He waved off the rest of the update. “Let me know if any of it turns out to be serious. And pull the two winners. Add them to the rookie training schedules. Do it now, before the Midol and chocolate wear off.”

Ed wrote it down. “Anything else?”

Marc leaned in a bit, grinning. “Angela just sent an order. As soon as you finish the shift you’re on, you are officially a member of the medical team. See Harry for a training shift assignment.”

Ed's mood lifted. "I've been thinking about it since helping during our outbreak. I guess the boss knew."

Marc didn't say it was his idea. He no longer felt the need to compete with Angela. Though he was still a bit uneasy to not have the official title anymore, Marc was enjoying co-leadership. He had grown beyond the need to immediately challenge anyone who had authority over him, male or female. He had finally figured out that was his real issue. The fact that he had been dominated by his mother, and Angela was a female leader, had certainly increased the level of desperation for him, but he had reacted that way to everyone in authority since he was a kid. He wasn't a sexist, masochistic pig. He just hated being told what to do, by anyone. That was the part of himself he had to crush and so far it was working. Not having Adrian around to instantly attract that side of him was a relief.

Marc paused as he saw who was coming down the stairs.

Ivan didn't slow down. He wasn't sure what to say to Marc.

Marc stepped in front of him, forcing Ivan to stop. "Did you say goodbye to her?"

Ivan shook his head. He hadn't even looked at her.

"I would do it mentally if I were you. She doesn't like not getting to say goodbye."

Ivan glowered. "Is this a trick?"

Marc snorted. “It’s actually for my benefit. She’ll stress and frankly, I don’t want to deal with it.”

Ivan could feel Angela monitoring the conversation. “The mission has to come first; she knows how I feel. That’ll have to be enough.” Ivan moved off down the hall at a rapid pace.

Marc shook his head and continued up the stairs. “I swear that was me not long ago.”

Marc saw Neil’s team lining the rail under the bridge as he hit the top of the stairs. As soon as Grant finished docking them, Trent would join Neil for instructions on how to check the bottom of the boat. Until then, Neil’s team was providing guard duty for everyone up here.

Feet hurried up the stairs behind Marc.

Jayda, Trinity, and Debra were all on duty together over the ship during the refueling. They were supposed to stay together, but Debra was the only XO while Kenn was off ship, so she had to make reports and run private errands. The trio was going to cover a constant patrol of the ship.

Debra smiled at Theo as she walked by.

Theo just stared. He hadn’t expected her to be friendly.

Neil laughed. “Things are better now.”

Theo shrugged. “You know what they say. You don’t know you’re missing something until it’s gone.”

Neil immediately thought about Adrian.

Angela didn't. She was standing in the bridge, listening to everything. "Where are we?"

Grant answered her, voice distracted. "This is the primary port of the Falkland Islands. It's called Stanley Harbor. They had an interim port and storage system. There's also a commercial wharf, but the floating system has the fuel."

Angela studied the land behind the dock. She'd been expecting a massive jungle, but the island was flat around the sides, leading to a small mountain. The terrain was rough, rocky, and open. All of the hundreds of homes and businesses lining the port were getting a full view of the ship.

Marc also scanned, but he was encouraged by the sight. There wasn't a lot of damage here, though everything appeared empty. The sprawling town around the port was dark and still. There were no other ships in sight, but there also weren't hostiles waiting with weapons and hatred. "Kyle won't need those venom packs."

"Just their stamina. The pickup is on that mountain."

Marc snickered. "They won't need their usual workouts for a while."

Angela rolled her eyes. "They also won't be prepared for the terrain. We sent the wrong gear in their packs."

"I'll let them know to improvise..." Marc paused. "We're being scanned. I can't contact them."

“I know.” Angela studied the port as they neared it. “If people make contact, we will not respond. The souls still surviving here are as hard as we are. We don’t need another war. Kyle will adjust for the terrain.”

“Agreed.”

Grant hit buttons and turned levers. “I need a minute here...”

Angela and Marc retreated to make room for Grant. He had a camp member helping him with the controls, but Terrance didn’t have real experience. Grant had chosen him because he followed instructions to the letter.

The ship’s engine cut off the rest of the way. Grant handled the wheel, gradually turning the cruise ship.

“What’s he doing?” Terrance scowled. “We won’t be able to get back out.”

Angela waved at him to be quiet. Grant was their captain. When it came to sailing the boat, he was the boss.

The ship began to turn, slowly switching directions. The long, floating dock setup got closer, very fast.

Angela braced as it neared. They were going too fast.

“Damn it!” Grant spun the wheel. “I didn’t cut the engine soon enough!”

Angela sent a mental call. *Brace for impact!*

People all over the ship grabbed onto handles and walls; people shot up in their beds and scrambled toward their kids or valuables.

The ship slowed as it made the turn, but it still bumped into the floating dock, knocking people to their knees.

The floating dock bounced and then smacked into the side of the ship. They finally came to a grinding halt that made everyone wince.

Grant shut it all down, breathing hard. “Next time, cut the engine before the turn.” He hadn’t been sure if they would still have enough power for the turn. “Now I know.”

Angela let Marc help her up, aware of Greg and Peter glaring at their captain. “As do we all.”

She stepped closer to the glass for a better view. She didn’t move toward the exit yet. They were in open view of the land half a mile away. It was easy sniper distance. She frowned. “How *do* we get back out?”

Grant kept checking gauges, trying to see if he’d done any damage. “The tugs will pull us out.” Grant frowned. “Never been here before. Didn’t know I had to turn it until I saw the dock.” He pointed.

Angela saw they were in position for the refill. If Grant had brought them straight in, their hoses wouldn’t have reached the fuel. “You did well. We’ll cover leaving when it’s time.” He didn’t tell them she’d already drafted men to man the tugs. “Take your break now, while you can.”

Grant reluctantly secured the controls. He didn't like being away from the ship's bridge right now. He was eager for the break, but being stationary made him nervous.

"I'm staying here. It's covered."

Grant felt better knowing Angela would be here. "You'll call for me?"

Angela snorted.

Grant flushed. "Sorry."

Angela waved it off. "Your dedication is why you have the job. Now get out of here. Take your volunteers, too."

Grant laughed as he left, followed by Peter and Terrance.

Marc waited until they were alone. "What gives?"

Angela's eyes darkened. She waved at Missy. "Go make sure my guys have the tugs ready. Tell them to be set for a fast exit."

Missy got up and went down the steps.

Marc realized she'd seen trouble. "Where did I miss it?"

Angela pointed at the deck, where Missy had paused by the Eagles. Her little face was squished up and her mind was flying.

"Damn." Marc hurried down the stairs, leaving her in Greg's protection as he went to make sure the tug crew was ready.

On the deck, Wade watched the cargo doors open on the rear of the ship, barely able to view it from where he was standing. "Hurry home, guys."

Missy shook her head, eyes dazed. “The pickup team isn’t coming back.”

Everyone froze.

Neil forced his mouth to work. “They’re not coming back tonight, right? They’ll be here tomorrow.”

Missy’s voice echoed with the double timbre of her witch. “I just saw us sail away without them; this island is bad.”

Chapter Seven
You Missed A Spot

1

“**A**re we all set?”

Marc nodded from the steps to the bridge, studying the island and the water around them. “Tugs are launching right now.”

Port Stanley sat silently behind the floating fuel system. The quaint red and blue topped homes and businesses winked at him in the bright sunlight. “Trent and most of Neil’s team are meeting on the bottom rear deck for a diving lesson now. As soon as the lesson is over, they’ll hit the water. We’ll send the fuel crew out while Neil’s team is still in the water. We’ll be ready to fill long before the engines are cool enough. That crew will stay on the floating dock until we’re finished.”

Angela swept Marc’s black tank top and big arms. His skin was tanning again and the mass he’d lost while ill was recovering. *He looks good!* She forced her mind to the duty at hand. “What about below?”

“The new people are covered right now; no signs of problems with the camp. The kids have morning classes, and non-working people are busy with preparations for the party. Kyle’s team already

left. I'm not sure how they went without me seeing, but I have them on my grid now. They're already a mile inland." Marc stared at her, attention caught by a flash of sunlight on her dark braid. The pale skin under her white top gleamed in invitation.

Angela waited for him to continue, eager to know everything was covered. They couldn't have a lot of activity going during the refueling, so it had to be handled now. Angela enjoyed the breeze, smelling salt water and fish. *It seems beautiful here. I wish that impression was true.*

"So far, there are no signs of anyone on land." Marc brought up his grid to check again.

Angela frowned at his pause, sighing. "What did you see?"

Marc shook his head. "Nothing. Maybe that's what's bothering me. We know there are people here. We felt the scan. I should be able to pick them up on my grid, but I can't."

"Descendants."

Marc reluctantly nodded. "I don't know how else they would be able to cloak their presence. I've got double guard shifts around the ship and dock to make sure we don't miss any problems."

Angela felt the mood shift and sighed. "Good, because here comes one now."

"Incoming!"

Everyone on the deck tensed at the shout from their sniper on top of the bridge.

Angela stepped into the doorway. "Clear the deck!"

Eagles hurried to the dozens of people loitering on the deck to view the island. “Get below! Get below!”

“Where?!” Marc wasn’t getting anything on his grid. He groaned as he understood. “Bad time for an evolution!”

“Lookout!” Their sniper lifted his rifle.

“Don’t!” Angela stopped at the top of the steps. “No noise!”

Grant saw the birds coming and hit the radio button for the ship’s broadcast system. “We have a small problem on deck. The top deck is off limits until further notice.”

The flock of birds wasn’t large, but it was determined. The thin gulls shed gray and black feathers as they fought each other for room. Their cries echoed continuously in an effort to stay together. The blind black eyes didn’t see the humans or the ship. They just smelled fish and sensed something they could land on.

People flinched and ducked, swatting at the confused birds.

Droppings splattered over the bridge windows and the stairs, bringing groans of disgust.

“Get those people downstairs!” Marc slid down the rail and began grabbing people.

Angela stepped into the safety of the bridge as odd cries filled the air. “Go help.”

Peter hurried down the steps, eager to be a part of the action. With Angela in the bridge, she and

Grant were both safe. Their quick break had been good for both men.

The flock of sea gulls homed in on the front deck, where fishing lines were heavy for the tests that were going to be run after the refueling. The flock arrived in a thick cloud of sightless feathers and obnoxious cries. More people fled, ducking and swatting at the football-sized birds. Following smells and the sounds of each other, the birds weren't detoured by hitting people.

"Their senses have adjusted." Angela waved off camp members rushing up the steps to help. "They want the fish. Let them have it."

The birds covered the front deck of the ship and the rails. They tore into the hanging fish, sending blood, scales, guts, and shit all over the deck and the furniture.

Angela groaned. "We just got it cleaned up!" She spotted movement without feathers and narrowed in on two furry shapes inching along the deck. "Get them!"

Marc ran across the deck, swatting and knocking down birds still trying to land. He grabbed the first cat and tossed it onto Peter's shoulder. He lunged for the male tabby.

The cat squirted through his hands and leapt onto the rail. It jumped at a bird.

"I got him!" Stanley dove through the gulls and snatched the cat from the rail; a dead gull hung from its mouth.

Stanley looked at Marc. "What do I do now?"

The cat growled and raked its claws down Stanley's arm.

"Ow!" Stanley let go.

The cat dropped to the filthy deck and pranced off down the ramp with its prize.

The female lunged from Peter's shoulder and snatched a gull from the air. The cat bit into the gull's neck and stopped its screeching. She followed her mate, plump stomach waddling as she vanished down the ramp.

"Let us up there!"

"You can't keep us on this ship!"

A small crowd of normals shoved by the Eagles and pushed their way to the bridge stairs. They stared at the mess and the birds, but they didn't stop their march to the boss.

Marc glowered at them, angry he hadn't sensed this coming.

Angela came down the steps, ignoring his head shake. "Let them go."

Marc moved to her side to make sure she was covered.

The normals were dressed in thick coats and sweating heavily from layers of clothes under the coats that wouldn't fit in their bags. Their faces carried shame and defiance in equal measures and their bodies were stiffened for a fight. They weren't going to be talked out of leaving.

Angela didn't try; she pointed. "Take the lifeboat on the end. The Eagles will lower it for you." Angela refused to give them a clue to her

breaking heart. She stared impassively as they glowered and walked away from her leadership.

“They won’t survive here.” Marc wanted them gone and at the same time, he didn’t.

You feel my pain. Angela clamped down on her heart. “Make sure they get to land.”

Marc waved Peter closer to her, then went to do it. “I see you all packed bags. I hope you stole enough to last because you’re not getting more of our supplies.”

The group glared at him but didn’t argue. They were within two hundred feet of land. They didn’t want anything to interfere with leaving the ship.

“We’re seeding the south.”

Angela stepped back into the bridge at Grant’s comment. “What?”

Grant nodded toward the leaving group, voice full of anger. “We’re dropping our people all over the southern half of the map. If they survive, we’ve seeded these islands too.”

Angela frowned. “They already have life here.”

Grant shrugged. “Doesn’t change the fact that Americans may breed and flourish in some of these places.”

Angela’s stomach churned. *The immigrants used to come to us; now, we’re going to their lands. It’s not right. None of this is right!* Angela turned toward the steps to beg the people to stay.

Peter caught her arm. “Don’t. Please.”

Angela shrugged out of his hold; she still didn’t like to be touched by most men. “Why?”

Peter stepped back into the shadows as Marc turned to glare through the glass. “You can’t avoid fate.”

Angela shuddered, emotions flying. *They’re my people! They’re going to die here!*

Peter knew what she was feeling without having gifts. He gave her a sad smile. “It’s fate, Boss. Let them go.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. She slowly moved to the console by Grant and stared at the barren land next to the huge ship.

Grant hated her pain. He put an arm around her shoulders and tugged her close.

Angela stopped the tears; she refused to think about anything as Marc and the Eagles helped lower the lifeboat while shooin off gulls. The birds were all over the fish now, fighting with each other for the easy meal.

Grant let go, wishing he could ease her pain. He observed the deserters who were rowing frantically. They reached the shore a minute later; people fled into the town, carrying their belongings. *We have to do more to keep the normals with us or we won’t have any on our island.*

Angela left the bridge. She went down the slick ramp into the ship, leaving it in Marc’s very capable hands.

The three men in wetsuits grimaced.

Trent chuckled. "I understand. There's nothing like having elastic seal itself to your balls."

The blue wetsuits were incredibly tight and the belts were heavy. The team assumed it would be better when they entered the water. Right now, it was miserable as sweat pushed through their skin in rivulets.

"These are full dive skins. That means one piece. Ours are made of lycra, which is like elastic. They're perfect for tropical or cool water. Never use these in cold water. It isn't enough." Trent pointed at their feet. "Those are fins. Just like fish, your fins will displace more water and let you propel yourself." He tapped his wrist setup. "This is your dive computer. It tells the depth you're at, the maximum depth you can go, length of time you're underwater, and how much longer you can stay down. We all have an hour of air. We'll only need thirty minutes." Trent clicked it. "Turn it on."

Neil and the others followed Trent's example. Diving was an adventure none of them had experienced yet.

Neil studied the water they were about to enter. The calm waves weren't clear. Their arrival had stirred it into a muddy, silty mix he couldn't view through from the deck. The strong odor of fish and salt hit him with every light breeze, taunting his misery.

He glanced at the busy deck above them where the cleaning crew was muttering and groaning. The

entire flock had departed the deck together a few minutes ago, dropping droppings as they went. The cleaning crew was hard at work sweeping corpses and feathers into piles. The droppings would be sprayed off after the sweeping was finished. Feathers floated through the air; some of those landed on top of the water and began to sink.

“The kit you’re wearing is a buoyancy compensator. It has air pockets we can fill to control the depth we can go. It would be hard for our bodies to dive without them. Same for the weight belts around your waists.” Trent pointed at the tanks on the deck by each person. “Air, obviously. The regulator attaches to the top of the tank and allows you to breathe. You also have an alternate air source in case your regulator fails.”

Trent put on his tanks, motioning for them to do the same. “You’re getting the fast class here, but people used to get a lot more training before they went out. We’ll be going in together, attached by rope to keep anyone from getting lost. I’ll lead us around. All you guys need to do is shine your light as we go and search for problems on the hull.”

Neil frowned. “What will that look like?”

Trent pulled on his fins. “Different is the best I can say. I’ve never actually done this on a boat. I’ve only studied the ocean floor. Grant says there should be some barnacles on the hull and the rest of it should be like the bottom of any other boat.” Trent motioned to Stanley, who was holding his notes.

Stanley held up a printed page with several images of boat hulls.

Trent pointed. “Grant said right here in the center is vulnerable, and the attack at the detention center definitely hit it. We’ll concentrate there.” Trent’s voice lowered. “Stay together; move slow and breathe evenly. If you start feeling weird, try not to panic. We’re along a shoreline; you’re not going to be pulled out into the open ocean. If you feel like you have to get out of the water right then, let me know and I’ll bring you up. Do not cut that rope for any reason. Are we clear?”

Everyone nodded, nerves now coming into the mix.

Trent tugged on his goggles. “These let you see, clearly. When we go in the water, don’t take your goggles off. Salt water stings. Very few people can keep their eyes open underwater for long.” Trent ran through it in his mind, trying to be sure he’d covered everything. “Questions?”

Neil lifted a finger. “How do we get in? Jump?”

Trent grinned. “We’ll do that fancy back roll into the water that you’ve all viewed on television.”

Neil grinned. “Awesome.”

“These goggles were sprayed with defogger so they probably won’t fog up. However, they might, and these masks can also leak. Here’s how you clear your goggles. Do what I do.” Trent demonstrated breathing normally, holding the top of the mask, and then breathing out through his nose while tilting his head back. “You may need to do it a couple times.

The most important thing to remember is to keep breathing normally. Don't panic. If you need help, tug on your rope in two sharp pulls and I'll know you need me. Everyone clear?"

The team nodded.

"Good. Let's do it again."

"How far down are we going?" Wade didn't want to leave Samantha alone on the ship, but he was eager for this.

"I'm not exactly sure. I think about forty feet. This is not considered a deep dive and we are using Nitrox, which is safer. When we come up, we'll still stop every ten feet to allow the nitrogen and possible bubbles to get out of our system. If we have to go right back down, we can only stay half as long. Nitrox shortens the break time between dives, but it's still not safe. The excess oxygen can make you drunk and that's dangerous when you're underwater." Trent motioned toward the empty place in the railing where stairs were usually connected upon disembarking. "When you hit the water, roll and come up. Then we'll attach the ropes I have ready. Everyone has a clip, right?"

Everyone patted or tugged on the metal clip attached to their suits.

"It's easy to get tangled underwater. If you do, just stop and find where it's tangled, then move *yourself* around the rope. Don't untie it to fix it." Trent eased onto the edge of the rail and demonstrated the position. "When you hit the water, relax; find your bearings, then use those fins to push

yourself to the top of the water. Turn your tanks on now, like this.” Trent grinned. “Everyone ready?”

The nervous team nodded.

“Cool. Come down one at a time. I’ll attach the rope and then the next one can come in. You’ll do it like this.” Trent flipped backwards over the rail and dropped heavily through the air and into the water below.

Neil and the rest of his team watched Trent surface, relieved when he waved.

“Let’s go!”

Neil waved for his team to go first, not sure why his stomach was upset. “Get secured and I’ll join you. If something goes wrong, I’ll come right in for you.” Neil didn’t want to be tied until last so he could help his team if they needed it.

Wade flipped over the rail first. He hit the water and went under without fighting.

The water surrounded him in cool relief, bringing a smile. He hadn’t been swimming for years even before the war. *I missed this.*

Wade took a normal breath and blew it out through his nose. He opened his eyes and searched for the light.

Wade used the awkward fins and propelled himself to the surface.

Trent grabbed his arm. “Nice job.”

Wade cleared his mask with one hand.

Trent chuckled. “Showoff.”

Wade motioned to the next member of the team while Trent attached his rope. “Let’s get this dive rolling.”

Tommy flipped his weighted body awkwardly off the ship. He hit the cool water with a grunt and sank under the waves.

On the top deck, Grant sipped his coffee and watched the team go into the water.

Next to him, Peter observed their surroundings and tried to figure out how to bring up the subject on his mind. He wasn’t sure how Grant was going to take it. Grant was dressed in all white, declaring his job to anyone who saw him. Peter didn’t like it. Grant was a direct target in that outfit. *He should dress in all black, like me, so no one knows who he is.*

Grant swallowed and grunted. “Spit it out.”

Peter frowned. “What?”

“You’re all gummed up. Say what you want and get it over with.”

Peter sighed. “I know it isn’t my place. I wasn’t sure if I should.”

Grant turned toward his guard. “Is this about my love life?”

Peter grimaced. “Sort of.” He took in a deep breath. “The Eagles are going to insist that Ray isn’t your private guard anymore unless you’re in direct danger.”

Grant’s face turned ugly. “What the hell are you talking about?!”

“None of us are allowed to be with our mates on duty. You two have been getting special treatment.”

“Because we’re gay?” Grant tossed his mug onto the nearest table, startling the cleaning crew below them. “That’s ridiculous! We don’t fool around on duty!” Grant’s voice became a low mutter. “We don’t fool around at all.”

Peter forced himself to finish the awkward conversation. “That doesn’t matter. You’re breaking the rules with every soft glance and hand touch while on duty. The rest of us can’t get away with it.”

“Bullshit. I’ve witnessed repeated proof of that rule being broken.”

“When mates are in danger, exceptions are made. You’re not in danger anymore. Ray can’t be your guard.” Peter stepped closer. “If you ask for the switch before the Eagles insist, you get credit and so does Ray.”

“Why didn’t this come down from the boss?”

“Because she’s scared of your reaction.”

Grant snorted harshly. “I’ve seen her fight. She isn’t afraid of anything.”

“You’re wrong.” Peter pointed at the empty lifeboat now bobbing at the shore. “All of this hangs by a thread on any given day and that’s without the fights that others bring to us.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re our only captain, Grant. If you get pissed and threaten to leave, it all falls.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Even over Ray?”

“No! I believe in what we’re doing.”

“Good. Don’t be the reason Ray loses his place in the Eagles.”

Grant stilled. “That would crush him.”

Peter nodded. “Which is why I’m telling you. We all like Ray; we respect him.”

Grant calmed down. “I’ll handle it.”

“Good.” Peter motioned at the listening cleaning crew. “You missed a spot.”

The crew chuckled and groaned. The entire deck was still a mess.

Peter resumed his normal blank façade and resumed his post over their captain. He hoped Grant followed through, but he doubted Ray was going to take it as well. Ray’s obsession with Grant’s safety was well known. It wouldn’t have normally been an issue since Grant now understood, but if Ray lost his spot in the Eagles, he might convince Grant to leave and then they would be stranded without a captain. *We need someone else who can sail this ship.* Peter waved to his relief and went down the ramp into the ship.

Zack stared after him.

Grant frowned. “What’s his problem?”

Zack sighed as he caught Peter’s thoughts. “It’s actually a problem for all of us, Captain.” Zack took his post and refused to say more.

“What’s going on up there?”

Angela sat at the counter. “Flock of birds landed on the deck. Big mess.” The neat cafeteria was a nice change from the chaotic filth of the top deck. Angela breathed in deeply, helping her stomach settle. The gulls had reeked of decay.

Brittani and the other four cooks wore aprons over their jeans, but they were once again dotted in flour and sweat. Working hard, they were ready to feed the first wave of early risers.

Brittani chuckled. “Glad I don’t have to clean that up.”

“Same.” The mess tables were only a third full and all of them were women hoping food would ease their pain and let the medications work faster. Angela motioned toward the trays of biscuits. “Are those for anyone?”

“Sure!” Brittani hurried to get a plate, surprised. Angela’s appetite was normally low and she hardly ever ate a morning meal. “Feeling okay?”

Angela shrugged. “Stomach’s upset. Need the bread to soak up the acid.”

Brittani set the plate in front of Angela. “Are you late?”

Angela smiled. “No; that’s why the stomach’s upset.”

Brittani laughed. “We’re all synced now. I feel a little bad for the men this week.”

Angela snickered. “I would too, but they don’t have to go through this, do they?”

Brittani grunted, pulling a new tray of biscuits from the oven. “Imagine if they did. The med bay would be full for a week out of every month.”

Angela tore the steaming biscuit apart, eyes closing as she inhaled. “You are a wonderful cook.”

Brittani stopped, turning. “I heard the tone. What’s up?”

Angela opened her eyes to stare.

Brittani flushed. “What?”

“Why do you make me come to you when you need something?”

Brittani’s shoulders drooped. “Past conditioning, I guess.”

“You expect to be told no, no matter what it is.”

“Yes.”

“How can I help you get over that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you tell me about your life, before the war?”

Brittani tensed. She forced herself to relax, to keep working. “I’d rather not.”

“Okay.” Angela tore off part of the biscuit and put it in her mouth.

Brittani frowned. “That’s it?”

“Yep.”

Brittani felt resentment enter her heart. “I’m not worth the effort, right?”

Angela stood up and took her plate to a small table. She sat down and kept eating.

Brittani slapped the counter. “Answer me!”

The mess of people all turned toward her.

Their surprised expressions annoyed Brittani. “What are you looking at?!”

People went back to what they were doing, but they kept track of her.

“You’re scaring the normals.” Jayda stepped by Brittani and took the tray the woman had sat down. “Stop blaming everyone for your bad dreams.”

Brittani opened her mouth to keep the fight going.

“Can I get some butter over here, waitress?!” Angela’s loud voice brought the entire dining room to a frozen pause.

Brittani’s eyes flamed. “Excuse me?!”

Angela shrugged. “You want to be treated badly; I’m giving that to you.”

“What?”

“I want some butter. The food is great, but the service here is terrible.” Angela put another warm bite into her mouth.

Brittani snatched the butter packet bowl and tossed it across the room. It slammed into the wall by Angela’s chair and shattered. Butter packets went flying.

People fled. The mad rush to get out of her path embarrassed Brittani. Shame came right behind it. “I’m sorry! It’s okay! Don’t go!”

No one listened. The mess was empty a few seconds later.

Tears rolled over Brittani’s cheeks. She leaned on the counter. “I’m sorry.”

Angela kept eating, stomach starting to settle.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Brittani marched over to Angela, ignoring the Eagles appearing in both doorways. “Why aren’t you pissed?”

“I am.” Angela picked up a butter pack, shaking off the shards of porcelain. Angela’s orbs lit up bright red. “Sit down. Tell me your problem and do it right now.” Angela faded back to normal, voice unconcerned. “Or just keep cooking for me. I like your biscuits.”

Brittani didn’t know how to respond; she slid into the chair across from Angela.

Angela swallowed. “Let’s hear it.”

“You sent him out on a run.”

Angela knew who she meant and it wasn’t Gus. “So?”

“So he was sick! He almost died!” Brittani’s anger boiled over. “If anything happens to him, I’ll kill you!”

Angela ignored the surprised Eagles now moving closer. “There it is.”

“What?” Brittani was already braced to be attacked.

“Love. It gets in the way of logic almost every time and makes us do stupid shit.”

“Stupid was sending him out when he isn’t ready!”

“Did he say that?”

“Of course not! He thinks he’s fine.”

“Maybe he is.”

Brittani's anger grew. "Don't pull that horse shit on me. I sleep next to him. I feel it every time he shudders or moans or twitches. He wasn't ready!"

Angela tore off another piece of the biscuit. "What do you think would happen if I grounded Daryl until you decide he's healthy?"

Brittani crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know."

"Don't lie to me." Angela didn't need to yell. The rage in her voice was clear.

"Fine! He'd be upset." Brittani refused to back down. "And he'd get over it while he recovered."

"And in that time, he would lose his slot as Kyle's XO. What would happen then?"

"Kyle would hold it for him. He wouldn't lose it."

"No." Shawn spoke from the doorway. "The XO slot on a team is important. It has to be filled."

"Shut up!"

"Brittani." Angela's patience was running low.

Brittani didn't care. "I don't want to hear from your damn Eagles."

"And yet, you want to be one." Angela studied the angry woman. "Or do you? You're not fighting for it anymore. Did Daryl's close call and you being shot change your mind?"

Brittani wanted to say no. She couldn't. "Maybe."

"Because you fear death—yours and his."

"So?"

“All of these men and women fear dying. It’s what makes us human. We don’t rush into danger because we’re unfeeling. We do it because anything else is a guarantee of our deaths. We have to be Eagles because no one else will take those risks.” Angela tore off another piece of the biscuit. “Tell me about your life before the war.”

“I lost someone.” Brittani’s heart ached. “My first love died trying to save some idiot whose car went off a bridge.”

“Did the victim survive?”

“Yes.”

“Then he didn’t die in vain.”

“I know!” Brittani tried not to sob. “And it doesn’t matter. I don’t want Daryl to give up his life for anyone.”

“You want him to resign.”

Brittani’s voice dropped into misery. “I’ll lose him when you tell him that.”

Angela snorted. “I’m not telling him; you are.” Angela stood. “When you finish cleaning this up, go do a workout with a male who isn’t afraid to hit you. You need your ass beat. I’m just not in the mood to do it.” Angela left.

Brittani stared after her, mouth hanging open.

Jayda chuckled from behind the safety of the counter. “She got you.”

Brittani nodded, emotions boiling. “She’s good at her job.”

Jayda slid the freshly-loaded tray into the oven. “She needs you on her right.”

Brittani frowned. “She has Jennifer.”

“Jennifer has her left. You’re meant to be on her right. She needs you to stop fighting who you were meant to be. Take your real place among Safe Haven’s leaders.”

“What if I don’t want that anymore?”

“Then officially resign.” Jayda didn’t pull any punches. “The boss is tired of waiting for you to make up your mind. You’re either one of us or you’re not.” Jayda smiled. “It’s okay to just be a camp member. That’s who she’s fighting for.” Jayda stood straight. “That’s who *we’re* fighting for. You have the right to live and not be in the front lines for the danger. Just make up your mind. Her patience is almost out, and that slot she’s been holding for you has others waiting for it.”

Brittani realized Jayda was a full convert now. “You want it!”

Jayda nodded. “Yes, I do and I don’t care about the fear or the danger. I won’t wait long to start showing what I can do and then you’ll be out of time.”

4

“All you guys ragging at the same time is dangerous.”

Angela laughed as Peter fell in step. “No lie, but nature decided to get it all over at the same time whenever we’re together. I think it’s to give you guys a break for three weeks every month.”

Peter chuckled. “Maybe. Either way, the men on the ship are in hiding if they don’t have duty.”

“I did notice the mess only had women. Guess word already spread.” The neat hallway had been swept recently and the windows were open to let in a fresh breeze. The inside of their ship definitely looked better than the outside. *I need to reward the cleaning crew. They’re doing an amazing job.*

Peter escorted her down the hall, again not sure how to bring up what was on his mind.

Angela knew. “Marc might do it for a while. After, we’ll train people.”

Peter was thrilled. “Nice. Marc’s dependable. And he’ll train a good replacement for our captain.”

“It’s not a replacement. Grant isn’t going to leave us.”

“He might if Ray doesn’t make it home.”

Angela didn’t answer. There were no guarantees for anyone who was sent out on a run. This location was no different. It was definitely possible the pickup team would have problems. Like she’d told Brittani, Eagles knew that risk and did their duty anyway. *It’s why they’re Eagles and not just camp members.*

Peter stayed with her until they reached the camp area. He veered off as her next protection detail fell in step.

Ed frowned. “What’s his problem?”

“Fear of the future.” Angela sighed. “And fear of the past.”

Ed didn't understand, but he didn't ask for details. He was on duty. Paying attention to the job was rule number one.

Chapter Eight

Fear Spoils The Meat

1

Neil and his team instantly loved diving. The rushing water surrounded them in cool comfort. Thanks to their gear, they were able to see and hear parts of the ocean most people missed out on during their cruises. Sea life swam by in startled jerks, not used to humans being back in their home. Schools of brightly colored fish darted under the murky bottom silt that had been stirred up by their arrival.

The team stared and pointed, grinning around their regulators at the views and the feel. They were in a new world, one where they felt safe with their ropes and their guide. The water didn't have a smell, but the salty taste covered their lips. The cool relief after standing on the deck distracted them. The three men twisted and kicked, getting a feel for their new weight in the water.

Neil spotted a small school of yellow fish and pointed in delight. It was a relief to know the water here was safe. He'd expected another dead zone after their radiation trials.

Trent gave them exactly two minutes to get adjusted and to enjoy the feel and sights. At that

two-minute mark, he tugged on the two ropes attached to his belt, then pointed down.

Neil, Wade, and Tommy nodded eagerly. None of them were spooked; they were on a new adventure.

Trent slowly positioned himself, waiting for the team to do the same. He gently kicked, taking them down.

Neil studied the ship as they descended. He saw layers of barnacles instead of the few they'd been told to expect. He knew not to touch them and shred his hands but he still wanted to. They didn't appear dangerous upon sight.

Trent turned on his belt light, pleased when the team did the same. He rotated the light toward the ship, examining the hull as they descended. He'd positioned them near the rear of the ship to start, wanting to work their way to the front that was bobbing near the floating fuel dock. *When we finish, we'll come up near the fuel crew and shout at them. Should be a great laugh as long as their guards don't shoot us.*

Neil caught the thought and snickered mentally. Trent was definitely one of them. Neil noticed a heavy feeling pressing in on his body and realized it was the pressure from going down. They hadn't reached the bottom of the boat yet. He breathed in and forced his mind to a calm place where he could concentrate on the hull as it went by. So far, he didn't view anything that was a problem.

The hull of the ship was enormous next to them; all the men felt small in comparison. It brought home how important their ship was to survival. If the hull had damage, they were in trouble.

Wade stayed close to Neil and searched the water. They did have sharks in this area, though Trent had started their lesson with a list of reasons why the animals wouldn't be interested in them. The biggest was none of them were injured or bleeding. Trent had ruled out females coming on this dive for that reason. Their periods would have made them a target. The men didn't have to worry about that as long as none of them got hurt down here.

Tommy breathed in and out, heart now thumping a little. The water was absolute. It was worse than a thick quilt over his head or a room without the light on. He couldn't see the ocean floor, though Grant had told them it was only a hundred feet deep here. The muddy water didn't allow him to view straight down. Tommy swallowed the fear and followed his team.

Trent slowed them as they finally reached the bottom of the ship. He rotated his belt light again so he had a better view.

The other three men did the same, illuminating the foundation of their ship.

It was rough. Scrapes and minor dents were all over the rear hull. Trent frowned, pointing.

Neil spotted the small crack, heart dropping. It hadn't broken through all the way, but there was enough damage to be concerned.

Trent kicked, leading them under the ship. He ran a hand along a clear spot, becoming worried. There wasn't just a single crack back here. There were three. He moved slowly forward, examining the rest of the hull.

Neil and the others stayed in formation so the rope didn't tangle, but they peered at the ship in concern. They were nearing the center now and the damage was increasing. Tiny fractures were all over this part, looking like a shattered windshield. Neil wasn't sure how dangerous it was, but he had a feeling Grant was going to insist on repairs before they set sail again.

Wade agreed with Neil. He also assumed repairs would be necessary.

Trent paused directly in the center, breathing growing rougher. A large crack marred the hull here. It had broken through, allowing water in. It wasn't a large hole yet, but it would spread.

Neil tugged on the rope. When Trent shined his light on the team, Neil put a hand on his belt.

Trent nodded. He was eager to seal this if they could.

The team carefully unfastened their pouches and removed their can of two-part epoxy. The repair putty had to be mixed; being underwater made it easier because it kept it from sticking. The four men each took a scoop from their cans and then clasped

hands with a teammate who had the other half of the mixture. They squeezed their hands together, kneading the epoxy until it turned dark green.

Trent pushed his handful against the crack and began filling it in. Neil helped him while the other two men studied the muddy water and waited until the first two men had used theirs.

The epoxy stuck to the hull like a thick glue, easily spreading into the crack. Trent and Neil were empty-handed quickly and switched places so the others could use theirs.

After four large handfuls, the crack was only half full. All of them scooped the last of the epoxy from the cans tucked snugly in their pouches and mixed it, repeating the process. The epoxy would set in two hours and be completely cured in six. Trent had found it in the cargo hold and given them a short lesson on using it. Everyone hoped it would be enough to get them to the island. Replacing the ship was impossible, as was hauling it from the water for real repairs. On the island, they would have more time for things like this, but not now and not here.

Trent tugged on his ropes and pointed toward the front of the ship. He moved them slowly forward, checking the rest of the hull.

Wade stiffened at the feel of danger. He scanned, but his mental grid couldn't cut through the murky water below them. *I hope Trent was right about sharks not being interested in us.*

The water was full of silt in the front of the ship; sight was down to inches. The team was forced to slide along the ship bottom so their lights could cut through the darkness.

Neil checked his wrist. *We've been down here for almost half an hour.* He was surprised. It hadn't felt that long.

Trent took them all the way to the front of the ship, concern growing. Those tiny cracks in the bottom were all along the ship, though only the one in the center was a problem right now. However, he knew it wouldn't take much for any of the smaller cracks to widen, and they didn't have enough epoxy to cover all of them. He moved a little faster, eager to be done. Angela had a hard choice to make now.

The water swirled around them, bringing darkness their lights couldn't cut through. The team waited for Trent to lead them out, all now ready for the fun to be over. Not being able to see was a serious detriment.

Neil felt his rope go slack. He grabbed at it, pulling. His heart dropped when it came toward him easily. *It's not attached!*

Wade caught Neil's panicked thought and grabbed one of his ropes. He pulled on it, bringing Tommy to his hip. The other rope had no resistance. It floated against his hand in tiny tatters. *Trent!*

There was no answer.

“Are you sure it was cut?”

Marc grunted angrily. “I examined the rope. It was cut.”

Angela and the others were still scanning for any signs, but Trent wasn’t trying to contact them and no one could find him. Neil’s team had just gone back into the water despite the danger of a repeat dive. They’d only come up for fresh air tanks.

Angela made a hard choice. “When they come up this time, get them back on the boat.”

“And Trent?”

Angela didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what to do yet. If he’d been kidnapped, there should have been a ransom note with demands by now. If a shark had gotten him, the rope would have been ripped, and the team attached by that rope would have felt the fight and seen blood in the water. *It doesn’t make sense.*

Marc left her alone in the bridge to go deliver her order to the Eagles on the deck watching for Neil’s team to surface.

Angela concentrated. *What am I missing?*

“The refueling crew is leaving.” Grant didn’t want to interrupt her, but those people could be in danger too even though the floating system was in view and appeared empty.

“They have extra security.” Angela went to the steps and lifted her glasses toward the land. It all appeared the same, but the feeling had changed. The sense of action coming soon was impossible to miss. “How long until Kyle’s next check in?”

“Another hour.”

Angela went toward the steps, followed by Ed while Zack stayed with their captain. “Make sure we’re all accounted for. Tell Mike to get on the radio in case Trent tries to call.”

Ed waved a rookie over to shadow her while he handled those things.

Angela opened the door to the future, hoping to catch sight of Trent there.

“*You!*” The Demon of Time swiped out, catching her hair as she jerked backward.

Angela slammed the mental door shut, rubbing her head where a chunk of her hair was now gone. “I guess I won’t be doing that again for a while.”

Marc glowered at her from the deck.

Angela gestured at him. “Your turn.”

Marc immediately opened the door to the future and began searching.

Angela went to stand by him in case he needed help. *One of these days, I’m going to challenge that demon.*

Marc stiffened. “There’s a descendant here.”

“Yes. Somchai.”

Marc shook his head, energy draining fast. “This is an older man with white hair and green eyes. He’s American!”

3

“Everyone ready for a long walk up a short cliff?”

The team laughed at Kyle's joke. They'd reached the inland shore and pulled their two boats into the cover of the weeds and brambles. They were all checking gear and preparing for a long day toiling under the sun. For most of them, it was a perfect break from being on their ship. They hadn't been on land in months. They'd expected a jungle, but Port Stanley was almost the opposite. Kyle was relieved they'd been given the wrong information about the terrain. This was safer than a jungle.

The small port town in the distance wasn't visible through the thin trees, but each of the team was comforted by knowing it was there. If they had trouble, they could go to that port and wait for Angela to send help.

The black-clad team stood out in contrast to the brown, barren landscape that boasted little growth and no signs of life. If not for the light, dusty breeze, there wouldn't have been anything moving except them. The thin trees in the distance beckoned invitingly.

"Stay in sight of each other even when we take breaks. If you have to handle nature, take a buddy and deal with the embarrassment." Kyle said it for the women with them. The men didn't care about pissing in front of each other. Kyle glanced at Ray, brow lifted.

Ray nodded. "I'm good."

"What about you?"

Daryl frowned. He didn't like being singled out. "Let's roll. We're burning daylight."

The team snickered. It was only 9 am. They had plenty of daylight left.

Kyle held up a hand.

The entire team went stiff, jumping from joking to full alert in seconds.

Kyle grinned. “Very good.” His face lost all expression. “Defend yourself accordingly, Eagles. We’re on a search and rescue mission. We will retrieve our targets no matter the resistance we find.” Kyle walked toward the small, dusty-looking mountain. “Our pickup point is that slag of rock. Conserve your energy. You’ll need it.”

The weaker members of the team refused to think about how much they were dreading the climb. The only consolation was the faint path they could view that led up one side. Walking was infinitely easier than climbing.

Kyle led them out, hoping it went smooth and fast. He needed this break from their ship, but he hated being away from Jennifer and their kids. Kyle smiled mentally. Little Roy was already growing on him. *I always wondered what it would be like to have kids. Now, I get to find out.* Kyle sealed up his emotions and led the large team into the thin bushes that lined the shore where they’d just hidden their rafts. He hoped those rafts would still be there when they needed to go. Kyle was almost certain they would be moving fast.

“Something’s happening on the boat.”

The descendants in the team nodded at Ray. He was new, so he was getting the panicked, angry thoughts a few seconds later than everyone else.

“Let it go; the Eagles will do their jobs—on the ship and out here.” Kyle had also felt Neil’s anger and concern. “One job at a time unless otherwise ordered.”

The team moved steadily toward the trees and out of sight of the water, all hoping Neil and his men were able to handle whatever was happening.

“Our contact said there are ten people. When we find them, I expect a fight for their release, based on what we were told. We’re all carrying an extra vest. Get it over a target as quickly as you can. We don’t want to be carrying back bodies.” Kyle knew they wouldn’t take bodies back, but using those words was always a good way to remind a team these missions were life and death. “Don’t drink the water; don’t eat any of their food. We brought rations. If we run out, we will clean or hunt our own. Do not use any supplies from the new people. We have no way to know for sure this isn’t a trap. Even way out here, they may have heard our calls and know who we are.”

“Should we be scanning?” Jeff didn’t know all the Eagle rules anymore.

“Yes, but if you sense panic because of it, pull out and tell us.”

Jeff began to search, enjoying the walk.

The other descendants let Jeff use his energy, saving theirs. When he ran low, they would take a turn.

Molly walked behind Jeff, admiring his wide shoulders in the sunlight, but her mind was on Monica and their kiss.

“Clear that shit and pay attention.”

Molly flushed at Jeff’s curt order, but she did as he said. Getting distracted right now was a bad idea. “Sorry.”

Jeff grunted but didn’t scold. Missions were learning experiences for new people. Molly had been on a few runs though, so she should know better.

Cathy walked in front of Gus and Ivan, who were bringing up the rear on Kyle’s orders. Cathy didn’t care that Kyle felt the need to protect the women by making sure they were surrounded by men. *When the time comes for me to use my skills, you’ll see it wasn’t needed. I’d rather prove it than argue.*

Jeff glanced over his shoulder at her. “Good.”

Cathy glared at him. *Stay out of my brain.*

I’m scanning.

Yeah, us. Do your job.

Jeff turned around, lips thinning because she was right. He hadn’t been able to resist checking his companions for trouble.

“We’re fine.” Morgan adjusted his kit, feet not even on the hard ground. “Save it for later.”

Jeff sent his grid out to the land instead of the team. It came back empty.

Morgan walked next to Jeff, also reading the images and signatures around them, but he was searching for animals that were going to be a problem, not the people. He had faith Jeff would cover that side; nature could also be an issue. Other than storms, they hadn't been attacked by nature since leaving their homeland because of Angela's deal with the ocean. Morgan expected that to change now that they were within reach again. *Ah, Nature. Can't you give us a break?* Morgan cleared his thoughts and followed his team into the unknown.

"It's still nice here." Kenn was sweeping with his glasses. "I don't see any damage or signs of the war." Kenn stored his glasses. "I also didn't view any people even though I can feel them."

"I noticed that too." Gus frowned. "If they aren't a threat, why are they hiding?"

Kenn shrugged. "They might be scared of us. Suddenly seeing a cruise ship after a year of nothing would spook anyone."

"I guess." Gus preferred Occam's Razor. *The most logical answer is they don't want other people here.*

Kenn sighed. "Yeah, but I have hope they're just scared."

Gus chuckled. "You really have changed."

Kenn scowled. “How would you know? We’re not close and you’ve only been with us since the mountain.”

“Long enough to notice the changes.” Gus decided to try reaching out to his fellow man. “And maybe we could be closer if you didn’t ignore everyone but that redhead and the boss.”

Kenn’s face darkened. “That redhead has a name.”

Gus grinned. “Touchy.”

Kenn snorted. “Why are you pushing now?”

Gus sighed. “No idea. My bad.”

Kenn grinned at the man who was his size. “You always quit so easy?”

Gus realized he was being hazed like any other member of the team. “It’s your charming personality.”

The others chuckled, glad everyone was getting along so far. Missions were always harder with a team that couldn’t stop fighting.

“You got anything?” Kenn was keeping track of Jeff’s thoughts, but he wasn’t getting a clear view yet.

Jeff nodded, eyes glazed. “There are a dozen bodies east of here, but they aren’t moving. I think they’re waiting until we find the refugees. Then they’ll attack.”

“And we’ll be ready for it.” Kyle increased pace to keep them from talking as much.

The team caught up, feeling his disapproval. They marched in silence and examined their

surroundings while trying not to think of anything but the run. Everyone, even Kenn, wanted Kyle to be pleased with their performance. He was their top Eagle. Almost all of this team also wanted his job, but they wouldn't get close if they failed this mission.

Satisfied, Kyle led them into the thicker woods lining the small mountain.

Ivan didn't have any trouble putting everything from his mind while he was on a run. He'd perfected it during his time in the army. He let his senses run his brain, observing their surroundings with a sharp eye that saw things the others were missing. The insects and birds were quiet. He hadn't heard a single call after the gulls flew away. There were no soft rustles in the underbrush that said smaller wildlife was near. He also didn't feel a breeze. It was as if they were totally alone on this island; it was great.

Ivan knew not to have faith in that impression. He'd spotted one small sign of people, though it was only the smell of feces and quickly gone. It could have been a fart or an animal drop pile, but Ivan knew it for what it was. Not only were people on this island, they were closer than the rest of the team assumed. That was enough to keep him alert and ready to kill to make sure they all made it back to the ship alive.

“We have to warn them.”

Somchai shook his head, whispering. “If we do, Chuck will know where we are. He’ll get here before the Americans. Be quiet.”

“But they’re walking into a trap! Chuck knows we’re on this mountain!”

Somchai grabbed the scared teenager and pulled the boy down next to him. “Tie these snares so we can set them. Maybe we will get lucky with a rabbit.”

“We haven’t caught anything in snares for a month!” Renard grabbed the snares and tossed them into the trees. “We have to warn them!”

Somchai stared at the red and brown haired teenager, trying to be patient. “You are young and without patience.”

“I’ve been patient while my family starved to death! This is my last chance to get out of here!”

Somchai opened his arms as the teenager began to cry.

The thin boy hugged his rescuer, grateful that not all of the adults had turned on them. *I might be the youngest person left on this island.*

They’d been hiding here for weeks, hiding and dying of starvation. Renard had buried his parents only a few days ago. Their graves were unmarked so no one could dig them up and eat the bodies. Renard let the man hold him, but the comfort didn’t ease his mind or his heart. “I lost my family. I can’t lose this way out too.”

He pulled away from Somchai and took off running into the thin trees that surrounded this part of their hideaway. Set into the side of the mountain, the single tent was only visible from a few feet away. It held no food or water.

“Let him go.” Somchai waved the others to stay. “He is doing what he thinks is right. We cannot keep him here.”

“But he’ll be killed, Papa.” Bo frowned at his father. “You should stop him.”

Somchai waved his son to the log seat next to him. “Join me. We will dig up these plants for dinner.” Somchai swept his group and found weary people ready to give up. Their sunburnt faces, ragged clothes, and injured bodies said they weren’t going to last much longer.

Bo looked at the faint path where Renard had already disappeared. “I could go after him, help him...”

Somchai didn’t believe in ordering people around, even his own family. “I will not stop you; I will mourn your death.”

Bo dropped down onto the log and began gently pulling the weeds.

Somchai smiled at his eldest son. “You’ve become a man since the war. I am proud of you.”

Bo placed the first long weed on a clear spot, aware of his father’s emotions. “Easy. Careful.”

Somchai locked it up. The rest of their group didn’t know they weren’t normal. If these people found out, he and his son would be killed on the

spot. The few survivors with them didn't want magic in their lives for any reason. *Wait until they find out where we're going.* He hid a chuckle and helped his son dig their dinner.

The rest of their group rested in the shade of the trees, not assisting. They were too weak, too hungry, to expend energy digging more greens that were barely keeping them alive anyway. Most of them were out of hope and all of them were injured in some form.

If not for Somchai, they would have already been eaten. Without supply ships and the farmers who had joined Chuck, everyone was starving. They'd also lost people to fighting and diseases over the last year, but hunger was an enemy they couldn't fight. If they didn't eat, they died. Chuck hunted them so much that there was no time to grow food or fish. The greens were their only sustenance now.

"It will be better soon, my friends." Somchai felt their misery. He hated it. "Have faith. The Americans are coming."

Weak glares met his words, even from the two men who were American. These people didn't have faith in a rescue anymore. They were just waiting to die.

Please hurry, Safe Haven. These people won't last another night out here and I don't want to abandon them to save my last son. But I will. Please get here in time so I don't have to make that choice.

Renard ran down the mountain path as fast as his weakened body would allow. The sight of the cruise ship in the harbor kept him mesmerized. *Don't leave me! Don't leave without me!*

He flew through the tree line and hit the open path that would take him directly to the port.

Thud!

Renard hit the ground, moaning.

Isaac lowered the bat, grinning. "I told you someone was coming."

Isaac grunted as he knelt near the sunburnt boy. "It's Renard. We're close." He shook the boy. "Where's the rest of your group?!"

Renard spit blood at his captor. "Go to hell!"

Isaac punched the boy, knocking him out. He grabbed the teen's arms and lifted him over one shoulder. "The rest of you, keep going. When you find our runners, do not eat them. Our boss will be very upset if he can't have a conversation first."

"What about fingers?" Vennie was always hungry now. "They don't need fingers, do they?"

Isaac walked toward the trees. "No. But if they bleed out before the boss gets to talk to them, he'll take both your hands for our soup."

Vennie frowned. "Then I can't jack off!"

Isaac chuckled and kept walking.

Vennie waved the rest of their group onto the path. They'd slid into the trees when they heard Renard coming. "There are only nine more of them missing. Get up that mountain and find them or you don't eat."

The group went up the path, stomachs growling.

Isaac trudged toward their village, almost sure the group wouldn't return. The cruise ship in the harbor had been covered with healthy bodies all carrying guns and rifles. They thought they knew what they were getting into. *But you really don't. We're not just a starving population that the rest of the world forgot about. We're the future, and we're going to use your ship to get back to the real world. Now is the perfect time to take over this miserable, broken world.*

Isaac reached the edge of the village a few minutes later. He walked through the open gates and went toward the center where a small hut had been built almost a year ago. Mold was growing on the hut now; it was falling apart from lack of repairs, but Chuck refused to let them waste energy and resources fixing it. *He's a true leader who always puts us before himself.* "Boss, I've got a live one here."

The village was a few hundred feet wide and held a community cooking area in the center where the females prepared whatever the men found on their daily hunts. The last of their chickens clucked in a pen nearby. It appeared like any other village until he swept and found the bone piles, the bare spots from slaughtering, and the poles for their captives to be tied until dinner. *I love it here.*

A rustling noise echoed. The woven flap opened. "Is it a redhead?"

Isaac shrugged. “Not a pure one, but he’s one of Somchai’s group. Vennie is close to pulling them all off the mountain.”

Chuck grunted as he knelt, knees popping loudly. “It’s Renard!” Chuck grinned up at Isaac. “We’ll have a good breakfast.”

Isaac frowned. “Why not a good dinner?”

Chuck waved toward three women. “Bring your scrubbers. He’s filthy.” Chuck rose, walking to the side of the hut where he performed his prayers every morning. “The food must be cleaned, blessed, and slaughtered at a sunrise. You know this.”

Isaac didn’t answer. He didn’t believe in the gods the way Chuck did, but he was willing to wait for the meal.

Chuck lifted a brow. “Did the water warriors succeed?”

“I don’t know. We were tracking Somchai’s people.”

Chuck nodded. “It’s fine. I know they will bring the redheaded diver.”

“Why do you need a redhead again? I forgot.” It had been a long time since they’d had anyone with that coloring on this island.

“Redheads are fate’s wildcards. I need their blood and their lifeforces.” Chuck let his orbs glow. “You will be rewarded for Renard’s capture as soon as Somchai is brought in. Go help.”

Isaac turned toward the gate even though he was ready for a break. When Chuck gave an order, it was followed or pain came in thick waves that couldn’t

be fought. *Not that I want to fight with him. I love my alpha.*

Chuck knelt in front of the prayer icons he'd carved and woven. He wanted to scan the cruise ship again to discover if they had more redheads, but once had already been too much. They knew there was a descendant on land. Hopefully they would think the magic was coming from one of the hiders they were set to rescue.

"Thank you for sending me what I need." Chuck bowed his head.

The three women all grabbed a limb and dragged Renard's thin body toward the creek. They tore off his clothes as they traveled.

One of the women stuck a quill in his arm to make sure he didn't wake up too soon. Chuck liked their victims awake for the sacrifice, but for the cleaning and carving blessing, people had to be drugged. It wasn't because they would shout or try to escape. Their fear would spoil the meat.

5

"You guys heard that call for help too, right?"

The descendants nodded at Jeff's question. The team didn't stop their march up the mountain, but hands slid closer to weapons and bodies tensed for a fight. They listened for verbal shouts and didn't hear anything.

"They caught him."

Jeff's dazed voice got Kyle to stop. He waited with the others as Jeff gave them what information he'd gleaned.

"They took him to a small village. They plan to eat him. The rest of that group is going to the same place we are."

"How many?"

Jeff frowned, trying to count the feet through the teenager's blurry sight. "Five? Maybe a few more. I can't see behind him."

Kyle found it fascinating that Jeff was connecting to a stranger and relaying what he was viewing. He stored the information for later examination and waved. "Let's go save the day, Eagles." He increased their speed to a light jog.

The team kept up easily despite being on land for the first time in months. Kyle had given them stomach meds as soon as they'd gathered in the cargo area, but they were also strong enough to fight the feel of their legs being confused. They used their memories of being on land and forced their bodies to keep up. Even Cathy, who'd insisted on carrying more than her share, was doing well.

The path leading up the mountain was narrow, forcing the team to go in a single line. Kyle didn't like that, but there wasn't room for two people side-by-side. He glanced at Ivan, who was bringing up the rear.

Ivan nodded at him. *If I have issues, you'll know.*

Kyle nodded back and increased pace again. The urge to get there early was too strong to ignore. *If we don't hurry, we're going to miss them.*

Kyle assumed that was the plan. They would arrive expecting grateful refugees, and instead, there would be a small fighting force and nine bodies. He assumed the teenager who had been taken down the other side of this mountain was a loss. *I'm not risking ten lives for one. Those odds aren't good enough.*

Jeff frowned. He didn't want to leave anyone behind. "I can go get him."

Kyle considered it. Then he shook his head. "I need you here."

Jeff didn't argue. *But if that kid cries out for help again, I'm going and Kyle can't stop me.*

Kyle sighed. *I miss having a team I can count on to follow orders.*

Jeff flushed, but he didn't make a promise he knew he couldn't keep. *That boy is an American. I'm not leaving here without him.*

Tracking everything, Ivan nodded. *Angela wants them all. If Jeff goes AWOL, he won't have to go alone.*

Chapter Nine
Maybe Next Time

1

The camp area was almost empty. Most people had gone to the mess for breakfast or started their shifts. Samantha saw Ralph on duty and a few normals lingering near him, but that was it. She ignored their glares as she came from her cabin and spotted the teenager on the couch.

Conner smelled of hot tub water and beer. Samantha wondered if he'd partied with his team. She decided he had as his bloodshot eyes opened over a green face. *He has a hangover and hasn't had a shower yet, but he's here instead of sleeping it off in his cabin.* She frowned. *Something's going on. I know it is.*

"Why are you here again?" Samantha tapped the couch with her foot. "Are you on guard over me?"

Conner frowned up at her. "I'm sleeping."

"You're lying." Samantha sat on the edge of the couch by his feet. "What's going on?"

Conner sat up. He yawned. "I can't be around Candy. Wade said this couch never gets used."

"You have a cabin."

Conner didn't meet her eye. "I get lonely."

“Uh-huh.” Samantha rubbed her back. “I’m going to the mess.”

He hurriedly sat up. “I’ll come with you.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t eaten either.”

Samantha’s lips thinned. “How do you know I haven’t eaten?”

“It’s morning and you’re just coming out; I assumed.” Conner peered into her cabin. The room was perfectly neat and freshly dusted judging from the smell of polish. *She isn’t supposed to be cleaning.* He frowned at the empty bed next to hers. “Where’s Amy?”

“Den mothers collected all the kids a few minutes ago. Surprised you didn’t hear them.” Samantha stood up.

Conner offered an arm.

Samantha took it, grumbling about her size and lack of balance.

Conner led her toward the elevator.

“What are you doing?”

“Orders came down last night. If you won’t stay in bed, you at least have to skip the stairs.”

Samantha didn’t protest. Her spine was full of needles and pinches. Steps wouldn’t help.

Conner spotted Stanley hurrying down the hallway and quickly pushed the button that would shut the elevator door.

“I saw that.”

“What?” Conner hit the button to take them to the mess deck.

Samantha saw Stanley go straight to Jennifer's door as the elevator shut. "What happened?" She wasn't allowed to use her gifts right now.

Conner didn't want to tell her, but he knew she would find out anyway when they hit the mess. "One of Neil's team is missing."

Conner saw her face freeze; her skin went cold. "It's not Neil or Wade! Calm down."

Samantha leaned against the cool wall. "I was dreaming when the den mothers came. There was muddy water everywhere and I couldn't find Neil."

Conner felt goosebumps break out on his skin. He laughed awkwardly. "You need some food."

Samantha's guts churned. "Then I want to talk to the boss. If she's calling for Jennifer, I have work to do too."

2

Knock-knock! "Boss needs you on the bridge! Get up!"

Jennifer already knew. She yanked the door open and hurried to the steps. "Stay with my kids until a den mother comes for them." She hadn't been ready for the den mothers to take them yet when they'd arrived for the others.

"I've got them." Stanley entered the cluttered cabin and sat in the chair, eager to help.

Jennifer ran up the steps and flew up the ramp to the top deck.

Angela waved at her. "I need your new skills."

“I’m already on it.” Jennifer went by the bridge steps and dropped down the rail to the rear lower deck. It helped her to be close to where the action had taken place.

Still in the water, Neil’s team was arguing with Marc, who was standing on the stairs and insisting they come in now. Jennifer leaned over the rail. “Get up here! I need to see what happened.”

Neil realized Jennifer was going to use her new gift. He pushed toward the slick metal steps and grabbed Marc’s hand.

Marc pulled him up and shoved him toward Jennifer so he could help the rest of the team.

Jennifer opened mental doors. She held out a hand.

Neil clasped it, mind full of regret and panic.

“Stop it.” Jennifer squeezed his wet, shaking fingers. “Help me find him.”

“I don’t know how!”

“Calm down. Replay it all.”

Neil’s team waited next to them, willing to go back in the water and keep searching if Jennifer said Trent was down there.

“The water swirled... It became muddier...” Jennifer stiffened. “There were other people in the water. I can see eight heartbeats.” Jennifer let go. “Someone took him.”

She walked toward the front of the ship, now latched onto Trent’s signature. “I feel him.” She pointed. “A mile due south. He’s not awake.”

“Connect to his mind.” Angela met Jennifer at the steps. “If he’s dreaming, you can get in and let him know we’re coming.”

“He’s out. I think they drugged him.” Jennifer tried anyway. She slapped the railing. “I lost it!”

Angela put a hand on her shoulder. “You did great. Neil will find him.”

Neil and his team hurried toward the steps to get their gear, fighting the drunk feeling of a repeated dive. They dropped fins and other equipment as they went.

“They’re tired and upset.” Jennifer lifted a brow, trying to figure out what she’d missed. “Why send them?”

“Because Neil won’t stop until he finds Trent and brings him home, even if it’s his body.” Angela turned toward the bridge. “Damn it, Conner!”

Conner flushed. “Sorry. Was I supposed to wrestle with her?”

Samantha pushed by the boy and eased down the bridge steps. She’d taken the elevator up against Conner’s demand that they stay below.

Angela met her at the bottom.

Samantha waited for the scold and then the job.

Angela sighed. “I’ll send some paperwork to your cabin.”

Samantha smiled. “Thank you!”

Angela waved at the bridge. “Use the same way you came up.” Angela put a hand on Samantha’s arm to keep her balanced while she went back up. She looked over her shoulder.

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, I would.”

“Good. Join your team.”

Jennifer flew down the stairs to join Neil.

“Kyle won’t like that.” Marc followed the women.

“I know.” Angela moved aside to let Marc handle what needed to happen next.

Marc waited for Samantha to get in the elevator, then leaned in. “It looks bad on the boss when one of her council doesn’t follow orders. Do it again and you’re suspended.” He pushed the button and shut the elevator before she could respond.

“If they don’t find him, Neil will want Missy to search. That can’t happen.”

Marc was relieved by Angela’s decision. “I agree.”

“We’re also not leaving without Trent.”

Marc nodded. “I’ll handle it if I need to.”

Angela swept the floating dock. “We have to get started. Find out if we’re cooled enough.”

“You got it.” Marc left the bridge.

Angela leaned against the console, shaking with her fury. “If they bring back Trent’s body, I’m going to set this island on fire and watch it burn.”

3

“It’s time to go eat.”

“I don’t want to.” Tracy jerked her thumb at the tray of snacks he’d brought in last night. “I’m fine.”

Charlie frowned. Tracy's face was pale and her eyes were sunken. She wasn't eating in the mess or having trays brought to her. She was losing weight instead of gaining it and she wasn't showering or changing her clothes. She didn't care that the cabin was filthy or that she stank. She didn't seem to care about anything. "Chips aren't good for the baby."

Tracy glared. "Neither is harassing the mom." Tracy wanted to feel an attraction to the teenager. She scanned his jeans and tank top, but she didn't feel anything like she used to.

Charlie sat in the chair by her bed; he cleared his throat. "I spoke to the medics last night."

"About what?"

"You, the baby...and abortion."

Tracy froze.

"I want it, but I want you more. If you don't want to have my child, the medics will try to handle it for you." He stood up and walked to the door. "They said it's easier on the woman if the pregnancy hasn't gone past four months. If you feel the baby move, you might feel guilty later." Charlie left the cabin, heart breaking. Whatever was wrong with Tracy wasn't going away. The last thing she needed was a baby to care for when she couldn't even take care of herself.

Tracy stared at the wall. *I've shut down again. I don't understand why. I was doing so good for a while!* She felt her mind trying to supply an answer, but the connection didn't go through. *I'm broken.*

“Hello.” Bernice peered into the cabin. “Can you tell me where Gus is?”

Tracy frowned at the beautiful woman and her daughter. Bernice and her daughter had adopted the Safe Haven standard of jeans, a tank top, and gym shoes. The clothes made them fit in, but their haunted glances said they weren’t over whatever had happened to them either. “I don’t know. Ask one of the Eagles.”

Bernice didn’t comment on Tracy’s smell or the state of the cabin. She assumed the woman was ill in some way. “Okay. Sorry to bother you.”

Tracy sighed. “He’s probably on a run. He might even be on the refueling crew.”

Bernice smiled. She started to leave, but paused. “Are you okay?”

Tracy wanted to say yes. She felt tears rise up. “I’m not sure.”

Bernice entered the cabin. She motioned at the chair by Tracy’s narrow bed. “This is Crissy.”

Tracy forced a smile for the little girl. “I’m Tracy.”

Crissy ignored the chair and climbed into the bed with the sad woman. “You need a hug.”

Tracy stiffened as the girl wrapped arms around her. She thawed slowly and returned the embrace, heart hurting.

Bernice sat in the chair and stayed quiet. Her daughter was great at getting people to talk.

Crissy rested her head on Tracy’s shoulder. “Why are you sad?”

Tracy shuddered. "I miss my other life."

The girl hugged her tighter. "Me too. My daddy was killed. So were my brothers. Now it's just me and momma."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Tracy felt the girl shake and tried to comfort her. "Saying goodbye is hard."

"We didn't get to say goodbye." Crissy sat up, wide eyes full of unshed tears. "We left him there. He's rotting now."

"Damn." Tracy reached for the girl this time. She wrapped her up tight. "Maybe we could have a service for them. We have a...preacher now."

"Will you come with me?"

Tracy sighed. "Your mom will take you."

Crissy shook her head against Tracy's shoulder. "You have to come too. Say goodbye to your old life. Maybe you'll feel better too."

Say goodbye... Tracy nodded. "I'll take you to the chapel."

Bernice held the door for them. Her daughter didn't let go of the sad woman as they walked out of the cabin.

Ralph hurried over as he saw them. "Gus is on a run. He asked me to help you if you need anything."

Bernice smiled in relief. "Thank you. This woman is taking us to the chapel so we may pray for the past."

Ralph frowned at Tracy. "You're okay to do it?"

Tracy nodded. “We’ll go by the mess after. Then we’ll come here.”

“You’ll call for me if you have trouble?”

Tracy snorted, leading them toward the exit. “I’m engaged to the boss’s son. We won’t have trouble.”

People stared as they walked by, drawn by the contrast—not of dark and light skin but their state. Bernice and her daughter were clean, wearing clean clothes, and they appeared content. Tracy was a mess in every way.

As Ralph went back to his post, he caught Bernice’s satisfied smile. *Did she do that on purpose? If so, was it to help Tracy or to help herself?*

Tracy frowned over her shoulder. “She’s being nice. Relax.”

Bernice stiffened. “You have the magic.”

Tracy patted her mostly flat stomach. “The baby does. I’m a normal.”

Bernice resumed walking, not sure if she was okay with it.

Crissy tugged on her mother’s wrist. “She’s got a baby in her belly!”

Bernice smiled at the girl. “Yes, like when I carried you and your brothers.”

Crissy peered up at Tracy. “Does it hurt?”

Tracy chuckled. “No. It won’t hurt until it comes out.”

“Are you scared?”

Tracy sighed. “A little, but not of the pain.”

“Why then?”

“I’m scared I won’t be a good mom.” Tracy realized that was her biggest fear. “I don’t know how.”

Crissy grinned. “You can practice on me.”

Tracy laughed. “You have a mom, doll, but thank you. You’re sweet.”

“I know.”

The women chuckled at the girl as they walked toward the steps.

Ralph watched them go, mood lifting. *That little girl is special.*

He spotted Missy coming down the opposite hallway with Dog on her heels. *So is that one, in a different way.*

Missy’s cute dress and neat braids implied she was sweet too, but Ralph wasn’t fooled. *She’s also dangerous, like her escort.*

The wolf was huge compared to the girl. Ralph still wasn’t sure about letting the animal have the run of the ship. *If he attacks someone, they’ll die. Even an Eagle would have a hard time fighting off an animal that size.*

Missy waved at Ralph and took the employee door. She skipped into the dim corridor, happy for a change. She liked having a job.

Dog stayed close, ready to defend the child if it was needed. He didn’t like this chore, but Angela said Missy needed the escort. Dog wasn’t sure why. The child was strong enough to defend herself.

“She wants me to have a friend.” Missy detoured toward a shelf in the employee hall. She dug under a pile of aprons and came up with two sticks of jerky. “Want one?”

Dog’s ears went up; his tail wagged.

Missy opened one of the packs and held it out.

Dog took it and groaned at the taste. *Bacon flavor!*

Missy grinned. “I don’t like jerky. You can have mine too.” She opened the second package.

Dog licked her hand and then took the treat. *Good girl! Good girl!*

Missy rubbed his ears, then pointed at the hall. “We have a few minutes if you want to check on the cats.”

Dog shook his furry head, still chewing. *Don’t know where they hid this time.*

Missy pulled back a dust skirt on the shelf.

Dog peered in and found both cats sleeping. They were covered in blood and feathers. The two carcasses were nearby and half stripped.

The male cat hissed as Dog sniffed the female.

Dog growled.

The female swiped out and scratched his nose.

Dog yelped and flinched.

“Bad kitty!” Missy knelt by Dog, wiping away the thin line of blood. “Poor doggy. You need a band aid.” Missy stood up. “Let’s go to the med bay. The alpha wants an update from there anyway.”

Dog followed the girl, whining at the stinging in his nose. *Okay.*

Missy walked with her hand on his shoulder. She glared at the Eagle who snapped to attention as they came from the employee hall. “Sleeping on the job is not allowed.”

The rest of the security booths on this level were empty. The extra hands were needed on other jobs.

“Get back to your area.” Ian sneered at her. *She’s such a brat!*

Dog’s fur rose. He growled.

Ian paled, retreating.

Missy pranced by him, grinning. “I have a friend now. You be nice to me.”

Ian swallowed, nodding as Dog’s golden eyes warned him to be careful. He let them go by without saying or thinking anything else.

Missy held the medical door. “My friend has a boo-boo. Can you give him a band aid?”

The medical bay was empty except for two of their medics and it smelled of cleaning products. Missy didn’t mind being in here now. Before, when her friends had been dying, she’d hated this room.

The medics paused as they saw who it was. Terry came over when the others didn’t. He examined Dog’s injury and went to the cabinet. “Will he bite me if the sticky part pulls his fur?”

“Let me ask.” Missy whispered in Dog’s ear.

Dog licked her face.

Missy giggled. “He can take it. He’s a big boy.”

Terry carefully wiped away the blood and stuck the band aid on the top of Dog’s nose. “There you go. All better.”

Missy frowned as Terry walked away. “Hey! Where’s his sucker?”

Terry stared. “You’re kidding, right?”

Missy’s hands came up to her little hips. “Patients always get a sucker.”

Terry pointed at the bowl, not sure what would happen.

Missy held the bowl down so Dog could sniff it. “The red are the best. Don’t pick yellow. They taste like the floor.”

Dog gently scooped out a red sucker with the claws on one paw.

Missy put the bowl back and unwrapped Dog’s sucker. “Don’t eat the stick.”

Dog gently took the sucker and began crunching.

Missy looked around at the surprised medics. “What?”

The adults laughed, amused by the new friendship.

Missy waited until Dog was finished, then she went to the exit. “The alpha wants an update when you have time.” She walked toward the lab, where Tonya was working.

Tonya didn’t see the girl or the wolf. She was staring down the opposite hall, where Timmy was standing next to Emma. *She’s supposed to be on duty over the infirmary.*

Tonya went to her neat desk. *If Angela finds out she’s shirking duty to flirt, she’ll lose her place.*

Tonya grunted in annoyance and returned to her notebooks.

Emma didn't notice the attention on them. She smiled at Timmy, who had come back after eating to ask if the medics needed a hand. *They don't, but I do.* "I hear you're single now."

Timmy shrugged, aware of Emma's hot gaze traveling his body in open invitation. "Just until I'm older."

"So you're waiting on Cathy to change her mind?"

Timmy frowned. "We're waiting until I'm older."

"You wouldn't have to wait with me." Emma batted her lashes and flipped her hair. "I like you how you are now."

"I'm sorry, no."

Emma kept trying, leaning in so he could view down the front of her unbuttoned Eagle shirt. "That's sweet."

Missy walked by the lab, eyes glazing.

Dog's ears went up; his tail bushed out.

Emma saw them coming and smiled. "You've got a great escort there."

Missy stopped in front of Emma. Angela's voice came from her mouth. "You are suspended from the Eagles. Report to the brig."

Emma paled. "What?"

Missy's eyes cleared. She smiled at Timmy, who had flinched. "The alpha says you're doing a

good job. Keep it up.” Missy pranced off to her next stop.

Emma stared after them, mind panicking.

Timmy felt her about to say something stupid. He moved away before she could.

Emma slowly headed for the steps to the brig. *I made a huge mistake. I’ll never be one of them now.*

4

“I have to check the bottom deck.” Missy ran down the steps. “Catch me!”

Dog obligingly trotted after the girl, not hating the chore anymore. He licked the sweet taste from his lips. *Suckers are good!*

“Candy is why it’s good to be a kid!” Missy pushed the door to the garden open and stepped inside. The garden smelled like dirt and it was hot. A few of the plants were starting to grow, but most of the pots only had dirt in them. Planting hadn’t been a priority while everyone was ill, and now Samantha wasn’t allowed to do labor, so the work had slowed.

Leeann looked up from a bucket of dirt with tears rolling over her cheeks. “I broke one.” Leeann was covered in dirt streaks; even her shoes were layered in earth. She didn’t care about the wolf or her friend. She was too upset.

Missy hurried over and hugged the girl. “It’s okay. The alpha won’t be mad.”

Leeann pulled away. “It’s Samantha’s garden; she doesn’t like me.”

Dog sniffed the pot and then joined the girls. He looked around. Movement caught his attention. *Who let the ants out?*

Missy clucked. “Someone’s in trouble!”

Leeann cringed. “I just wanted to look at them! They won’t go back in!” She began to sob.

“What’s going on in here?”

They saw Mike in the rear corner.

Missy pointed. “The ants got out. And she broke one of Samantha’s plants.”

Mike moved carefully through the narrow row of pots and bags so he didn’t knock anything over. He went to the ant tank and lifted the lid to the side.

The ant colony was small but busy. They had formed a line to the nearest pot that had dirt in it.

Mike picked up a honey packet and began placing a thin layer along the top that led down into the tank. “They’ll catch the scent and follow it. No worries.” Mike went to the broken plant and examined it. “It’s only the top of the stem. Just snap it off and it’ll start growing again.”

Leeann wiped her face. “You promise?”

Mike smiled at her. “Come help me.”

Missy went to the ant tank, staring at the long line of insects that were all going to a nearby potato plant. “Maybe they need food.”

Mike shrugged. “We can’t let them wander the ship. They’ll get into everything.”

“Maybe Dog can tell them to stay here in the garden.”

Dog huffed. *I’m not the ant whisperer.*

“Yes, you are.” Missy pointed at the line of insects. “Tell them and then we’ll go to the mess. Brittani’s mom made something with bacon.”

Dog’s ears went up. *Bacon!* He padded to the ants and leaned down.

Missy didn’t hear anything. “Are you telling them?”

Dog stepped back. *They don’t have enough dirt in the tank to build their homes. They’re bringing it from the pots.*

“Dog says they need more dirt.”

Mike went to the pallet of bags. He tore a hole with his finger, then lifted the bag. He dumped it into the tank.

The line of ants immediately reversed course.

“I guess they don’t just follow the orders of the ant queen.” Mike waited until all the insects were back in the tank, then closed the heavy lid. “There.”

“I’m done. Is this okay?” Leeann looked at Mike.

Mike examined the plant. “Put more dirt around the bottom, in a mound. Then water it. In a couple days, you’ll see new growth.”

Leeann beamed. “Thanks!”

Mike went toward the closet in the rear of the wide room. “You’re welcome. I need to work for a while. Don’t tell anyone I’m in here.”

“We won’t.” Missy waved at Dog. “Let’s go eat.”

Dog trotted into the hall. *Bacon!*

Missy giggled. “I like you.”

Dog licked her cheek as they walked down the hall.

The Eagle guard on the hall stayed in the shadows, glad to have good things to report on the kids. Duty on this level was usually boring. This time, it had been nice.

Gabe slid further into the shadows and listened for trouble. Angela had told him to come here when he woke, but not why. Gabe understood now that he was protecting the kids. *That means the boss is worried about them.*

Gabe swept the empty hallways, hand resting on his knife. Angela had told him to handle any trouble quietly. *And if I kill someone, they go in the furnace instead of letting the kids view it.* It was time their children got the chance to grow up without always being part of the fight for survival.

Gabe tensed at the sound of footsteps. He spotted Candy waddling toward the cargo area, hands in the pockets of her large jumper. *What’s she doing?*

Candy turned around and looked right at him.

Gabe frowned. *I’m well hidden. How does she know I’m here?*

Candy shrugged and went into the cargo area.

Gabe slowly followed, assuming she’d felt him but hadn’t seen him. He peered in.

Candy stared around, nose wrinkling. “This place *is* a mess. I knew it.” She went to the far corner and began tugging boxes back into the lines where they belonged.

Gabe waited, but when she only kept tidying the cargo hold, he returned to his post. She was keeping busy. *I wish all of our people would do that. More stuff would get done and they’d be too tired to start trouble.*

5

“Come on.” Missy led the way to the counter. She climbed onto the stool. “I need some bacon food.”

Dog sat down next to her and gazed up at Thelma.

Thelma grinned. “For you or the wolf?”

“Both!”

Thelma got a small plate for Missy. “I’ll put his in his bowl. Don’t feed him from your hands. It’s not sanitary.”

Missy shoved a piece of bacon into her mouth so she didn’t have to promise.

Thelma dropped a few burnt pieces into Dog’s bowl.

Dog whined at her, hurt.

Thelma frowned. “It’s like he knows.”

Thelma knelt down and retrieved the burnt pieces. She put them in the cat bowl. “What does he want?”

Missy pointed at the plates.

Thelma scowled. “No. Animals don’t eat from our dishes.”

Missy glared at the woman. “Dog is my friend!”

“And he’s still an animal. It could make people sick.”

Missy got off the stool and scooped the rest of her bacon up. She held it out to Dog, daring Thelma to argue.

Thelma snorted and turned away to keep the child from seeing her smile.

Dog refused to take it. *Do not break the rules.*

Missy threw the bacon at Thelma. “You’re mean!” She marched to the exit with Dog at her side.

The crowded mess of people stared, some muttering. Most people thought Missy needed to be corrected more often. The others didn’t like her being upset, but everyone got out of her way as she left.

Dwight put a hand on Thelma’s shoulder. “Maybe we can make exceptions here and there.”

Thelma knelt to clean up the mess. “No, we can’t. That little girl needs to learn to behave.”

“I agree, but the wolf is...different.”

Thelma paled. “He’s like them?”

“I think so.” Dwight glanced around the mess, seeing disapproval and understanding. “What if we assign him a plate instead of a dog bowl?”

Thelma sighed. “We do have a few cracked ones that I don’t want people to use.”

Dwight kissed her cheek. “Perfect.”

Thelma went to get one, muttering about how much the world had changed.

Dwight held in a chuckle. He had no doubt his wife would be won over by the wolf at some point. She’d loved their pets... Dwight frowned as he understood. They’d been forced to put their pets down after the war. *We needed the meat.* Now, Thelma refused to show compassion to any animal in case she had to eat it later to survive.

Dwight moved around the counter and went to the guard on duty. “I have a tiny problem. Maybe you can help me?”

Quinn smiled at the older man. “Sure. What’s up?” Quinn liked Dwight. Any man who could survive in a kitchen full of females was a hero in his book.

“I’d like my wife to get out of the kitchen more. Can she help care for the cats or the wolf?”

Quinn frowned slightly. “The wolf doesn’t need to be cared for, and the cats belong to Tonya—the woman who runs the lab. You’d have to ask her.”

Dwight nodded. “I’ll do that.”

Quinn didn’t like not being able to give the man what he wanted. “The puppy is in quarantine right now. In a few days, it will need a care provider. I’ll let the boss know your wife volunteered.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

“It’s my honor.” Quinn watched Dwight go back into the kitchen. The couple were solid, nice, helpful. *I wish more of our people were like them.*

Quinn looked at the table in the far corner, frowning at the group of single men who were catcalling nearly every woman who walked by. *Some of the so-called men here could take lessons from them on respect.*

Sitting nearby, Greg frowned toward the table. “We may need to step in there again.”

Shawn and Jonny glanced over; both men scowled. The table of single males was getting louder.

Greg spotted Lisa and her team coming in. The women were covered in sweat and the pride that came from a great workout. Their confidence was sexy. Men stared, but only the loud single males at the end table voiced their thoughts.

“Why won’t you sit with us?”

“We can be your good friends!”

Lisa led her tired team to the table in the rear, rolling her eyes at the male hands coming out to pat them. Her girls slid out of the way and tried to ignore the begging and leers.

Shawn started to stand up and go handle it.

Greg put a hand on his arm. “I’ve got a better idea.” He leaned in and began whispering.

“Come on, good-looking!”

“Sit with us.”

“We wanna be friends!”

Lisa sighed, cheeks red. “They’re not Eagles. They don’t understand the rules. Just ignore them.” She glanced at the table next to them and found

Greg. She glanced away quickly, cheeks darkening further.

Her team laughed and smiled, catching it.

“Shh.” Lisa didn’t want anyone to know she was interested in Greg. *He has to make the first move and he won’t. He doesn’t show interest in any female. I wonder if he’s gay.*

Walking by on rounds, Debra held in a snort and lifted her squirt gun.

Please don’t. Greg caught her attention. *The Eagles are about to handle it.*

Debra read his thoughts and chuckled. She went to the counter and sat on a stool, eager to observe the fun.

Greg studied the mess. The tables were full of grouchy, fidgeting, medicated women who were all in a rough mood. Greg dug in his kit. He found the box he wanted.

Shawn got up and went to the counter.

Dwight came over, frowning. “Is everything okay?”

Shawn nodded. “But keep everyone behind the counter for a few minutes, okay?”

Dwight moved into the open space to prevent anyone from going through. “What’s happening?”

“Just watch.”

Dwight narrowed in on the table of loud men who were still calling and whistling at the women around them. He scowled. “I thought that wasn’t allowed.”

“It’s not.” Shawn stayed where he was.

The table of rowdy men laughed, waving at the next women who entered.

“Park those sweet asses over here.”

“We won’t bite—unless you like it!”

More obnoxious laughter and comments flew through the room.

Greg carefully spun the brownie box through the air. It landed in the center of the male table.

Shawn cleared his throat. “Hey! Where did they get chocolate brownie mix?!”

Female heads snapped up, eyes sweeping, noses sniffing.

One of the men at the table held up the box. “Whose is this?”

Greg laughed as women rushed the table.

“Oh shit!” The loud man tossed the box into the air, but it was too late. A dozen females attacked, fighting for it.

“Help!”

“Get them off me!”

“That’s my nipple! Let go!”

Greg lifted his coffee cup, grinning. “You wanted them at your table...”

Dwight burst out laughing, arm coming up to stop Thelma from going out into the chaos. He was laughing too hard to explain.

“Not the balls! Not the balls! Let go!”

Dishes scattered across the floor; the table collapsed under the weight of the fighting females. Men screamed for mercy and found only furious

female bodies shoving and punching their way to the box of brownie mix.

Shawn smiled at Thelma. “We’ll make sure they clean it up.”

Thelma realized the crude men were getting a hard lesson. She smiled at Shawn. “More coffee?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

She filled his cup, sniggering as the male cries grew louder.

“That’s not the box! Let go!”

“That hurts! Stop it!”

Greg scanned to make sure no one was in real danger. He found Lisa staring at him with a smile playing on her lips.

Lisa lifted a brow.

Greg shrugged, grinning.

Lisa chuckled, sure he was responsible. She mouthed thank you, not sure he would be able to hear her if she just said it.

Greg went over to their table and dropped down across from her, ignoring the automatic lean-back her team was now doing; they were still expecting to be hit on.

Lisa leaned forward to let him know she was willing.

“I have a gift.” Greg slid a bag over.

Lisa saw what it was and quickly slid it into her lap. He’d saved the mix. The women were fighting over an empty box. “You’re smart and cruel. I like that in a man.”

Greg grinned at her. "It's my honor." He left the table without saying more.

Lisa shoved the bag into her kit, heart thumping. *He's so cute! I wish he was interested.*

Greg seemed to catch her thought. He stumbled as he sat, dropping heavily into the chair.

Jonny laughed.

Shawn met Greg's eyes over the din, then looked at Lisa.

Lisa was gazing at him in clear desire.

Greg thought about it. Then he got up and left the mess.

Lisa sighed in disappointment. *Maybe next time.*

Shawn began to plot on how he could get her alone with Greg. Angela wanted his DNA in their breeding tree and Lisa was clearly willing.

Greg went toward the workout room, eager to lose himself in the physical pain so he didn't have to deal with the new emotions that had just sparked. *I'm not ready for a relationship. When I am...* Greg refused to finish the thought.

Chapter Ten
Another Nutcase

1

“**T**en minute break.” Kyle stopped the team, heart thumping. He glanced back and found most of the team already dropping to the rocky, weed-littered ground. There was no breeze to cool them and no shade to hide them from the sun. Climbing a mountain wasn’t easy even when you were in shape. It was brutal for a team that had weak members still trying to recover from medical issues. Kyle was proud of them for not quitting.

Daryl gasped in air, chest heaving. He’d refused to complain, but he wasn’t sure he could have gone much farther without collapsing.

Next to him, Ray was feeling the same. *I thought I was ready for this, but I’m not even close to being healthy.*

Morgan sat between Ray and Daryl. He picked up Daryl’s wrist and began to count his pulse beats.

Daryl pulled away, frowning. “Fine... I’m fine.”

Morgan turned to Ray.

Ray let Morgan check him out. He wasn’t feeling well.

Morgan motioned at the canteens where they’d dumped their share of the water. “Drink while we

cool down.” Morgan stayed by them, hoping he could help if either man fell over. The last half hour had been rough listening to them wheeze and groan.

Molly laid on her kit, lids shutting. Sweat ran down her neck and dripped into the dirt. “This feels good.”

The others snorted at her joke.

Molly frowned. “I happen to mean it. Working out on the ship isn’t the same.”

Jeff nodded. “Nature always has better obstacles to overcome.”

Molly opened one eye to peer up at him. Jeff was still on his feet. “How long did it take you to get in shape?”

Jeff shrugged. “My entire life, but it didn’t get this good until I went out on my own. I had to do it all, so my body grew stronger.”

“You had Kevin.”

The others snorted again between drinks and sweeps of the trees.

“Can I make a personal comment?”

Jeff frowned. “Not if you’re going to tell me Francesca is a sweet girl and I should give her a chance.”

“Okay.” Molly tried to get her breathing under control.

Jeff waited. When he realized that was what she’d been about to say, he chuckled but didn’t encourage it. He already knew Francesca was great. *I’m just not interested in a relationship right now.*

Morgan snorted this time. “You’re so full of shit. You just know she can’t be used and tossed aside, and you don’t want to break her heart when Kimmie grows up.”

Jeff decided to be honest with his team. “I won’t be on the island long enough to start a relationship, let alone finish one. When Marc leaves, I’ll be with him.”

Kyle swallowed and capped his canteen. “Marc isn’t leaving without Angela, no matter what he says.”

“I think he will.” Ivan shrugged at the immediate dirty looks. “It’s not wishful thinking. Marc isn’t going to be happy on a 2-mile island for long and you all know that. He was barely content in America. He needs the adventure.”

“And you’re ready to step right in with the boss when he goes, right?” Cathy glared. “Vultures pick off leftovers and dead things too. It’s in their nature.”

Kyle considered telling them all to shut up, but he decided to let them get this out of the way now, before they were around strangers who wouldn’t understand. He scanned their surroundings for problems and let the team sort itself out.

“What about you?” Ivan pointed. “Child molesters used to go to jail.”

Cathy flushed, but she didn’t snap like he was expecting. “I’m single now. I ended things with the kid before we left.”

“Good.” Ivan wasn’t sure what else to say.

Cathy dropped her eyes. “I’m sorry. He draws me. When he’s old enough, we’ll probably get married. I’m not a molester.”

“You’re also not an Eagle.” Ray agreed with Ivan. “This is the first time you’ve even been out of camp. Forgive us if we don’t believe you’ve gone straight.”

“It only matters that the boss believes it.” Cathy sighed. “I’m sick of the fighting and the stress. If I do my part, we can get those people settled on the island and have some peace. None of us can really have relationships until that happens.” She glanced at Ray. “And that includes you. It’s almost time for you to pick between Grant and the Eagles, so mind your own rule-breaking before you call out someone else.”

Tension flew over the group at her reveal. Men frowned at her for doing it this way.

Ray glowered. “I’m not breaking any rules.”

“Actually, you are.” Daryl decided they might as well get it over with since the cat was out of the bag. He met Ray’s eyes. “You can’t be with Grant anymore on duty. If you don’t ask for a schedule switch as soon as we get back, I’m going to the boss about it.”

Ray stared in hurt surprise.

Kenn didn’t like Ray being upset. He tried to explain. “It’s not because you’re gay or because you love him. It’s because you’ll get distracted and we’ll lose him. Or he’ll get distracted and we’ll lose

everyone. One of us will guard the captain and you can just play with him.”

Ray snorted bitterly. “Whatever.”

Kenn grinned. “Spoken like a true Eagle.”

Ray calmed, but his heart continued to thump.

They’re going to split us up.

Kenn grunted. *Just during duty. Your private time is your own.*

“This sucks.” Ray pouted, lip coming out. “What about everyone else? You guard Tonya. Kyle guards Jennifer. Marc guards Angela. Gus...” Ray frowned. “What do you do again?”

Gus laughed. “I kick your ass in training and then make the lightest biscuits you’ve ever tasted.”

Gus laughed with them, glad he could help lighten the tension.

People turned to Kyle and Kenn for their responses, expecting them to protest.

Kenn let Kyle handle it. *Hearing the truth from me won’t go well. No one believes in me yet either.*

Kyle met their curiosity with cool indifference. “I’ll tell the boss I can’t do it anymore. So will Kenn.”

Mollified, Ray nodded. If the top men were obeying the rule, so would he.

“Now that we have that settled, can we talk about the normals’ meeting coming up when we leave here?” Morgan didn’t care as much about the personal issues. “Angela mentioned giving control to them when we leave the island.”

Instant protests came from the other descendants.

The normals on the team frowned and waited for their turn to voice an opinion.

“Why can’t it be half and half?” Molly wanted equality in every way for all their people. “Both sides have things to contribute.”

Kyle shook his head. “The normals aren’t like us. They don’t want magic in camp at all. If we give them control, it won’t be long before they drive out all the descendants.”

“Would that be a bad thing?” Jeff withstood the glowers and snorts. “We’re dangerous to them. They have a right to control their own destinies.”

“But we can’t.” Cathy kept her mind blocked as she spoke. “Magic was gifted to us by the creator. Without it, humanity will blow itself up again. We need magic to remind us of how special life is so we don’t screw it up.”

Kyle checked his watch and did a fast mental scan with his new gift. Finding nothing, he gestured. “Three minutes left.”

Daryl cleared his throat. “Do you think the normals will allow marriages of mixed couples?”

No one spoke for a minute. Everyone had considered the gay angle and the race angle, but few of them had thought about the prejudices that would come with marriages between normals and descendants.

“Unlikely.” Molly felt it best to tell the truth. “They talk around me because I’m one of them

when I'm not in Eagle gear. They don't like it. They don't like magic. I don't even think they'd let the kids stay."

"But they're just kids." Jeff was horrified at the thought of taking all the kids back to America for the final fight.

Molly shrugged. "I'm just telling you what I've heard. They know all our stories and how much help we could be, but they don't want us."

Gus frowned. "You keep saying them and us. What gives?"

Molly smiled. "I chose to be one of the magic users."

Gus snickered. "Your mom said you could be whatever you wanted when you grew up, didn't she?"

"Yep." Molly's voice dropped into anger. "She also told me I was useless and I'd never find someone to love me. I only listened to the good stuff."

Gus winced. "Sorry."

Molly waved it off. "Many of us had rough childhoods. It's in the past."

Gus didn't know what to say. He went with what felt right. "Some scars last a long time."

Molly looked over at Kenn. "They're hoping Tonya stays behind. They want you to take the baby."

"Neither of those will happen. She's already made it clear she's going back for the fight." Kenn's

face darkened. “And I’d never take the baby from her.”

“What about Courtney’s child?”

Kenn didn’t answer.

Molly sat up, concerned. “You have no right to take her baby when it’s born.”

“Tonya could raise it.”

Molly snorted harshly. “I won’t support that. Most people won’t. Forget that idea right now!”

Kenn grunted. “It wasn’t my idea.”

Everyone realized Tonya had come up with that plan. No one told Kenn it wouldn’t work. They didn’t need to. He knew.

Kyle stood up. “One minute. Get the rest of your dramas out now.”

Some of them clammed up, not wanting to spill more than they already had. The others waited for the next topic to be brought up.

“Why are you on this run?” Kenn wasn’t feeling as good about Molly now. “You have cancer. You should be in the sickbay, resting and trying to survive.”

“Says you.” Molly’s voice hardened. “I’m on my last adventure. The boss understands I’d rather die during duty than in the med bay.”

Kenn shrugged. “It’s your life.”

Molly sighed. “It used to be. Now it belongs to the disease eating my stomach.” She hefted her kit on. “Are we rolling now or what?”

“No. We have thirty seconds and I need to know something.”

“What now?” Molly didn’t want to answer the question Kyle was about to ask.

Kyle forced her to meet his eyes. “Did you come on this run to die?”

Molly stepped by him, taking the lead. “Yes.”

Kyle fell in behind her, letting her use her tracking skills. “That isn’t going to happen on my watch. We all go back alive or we don’t go back at all.”

Molly stopped.

The team tensed for an ugly argument.

“There’s blood here.” She knelt. “It’s fresh, and there are footprints.”

Most of the team began trying to estimate how many people had come through here. Jeff and Kyle swept the path in front of them, both catching the vibe.

Jeff nodded at Kyle.

Kyle snapped his fingers once. His teammates, used to the call, stood up and got in line, hands dropping to their weapons.

The others didn’t notice.

Jeff cleared his throat. “Get up; get in line. Do it now.”

Kyle pointed at Molly, Kenn, and Daryl, then patted his rifle.

The trio brought up their weapons, adrenaline filling their throats.

Kyle motioned to Jeff and Ivan, then pointed to the nearest tree that appeared sturdy enough for the two men.

Jeff and Ivan slipped into the shadows and disappeared.

Kyle counted to one hundred to give them time to get in place, then gestured to the rest of the team to get behind him. As soon as they were in place, Kyle led them up the path. He didn't hear anyone yet, but he had dots on the grid in his mind. He gave the signal for their rifle trio to flank him as well. The positions of the dots on his grid implied bodies, not hostiles. That meant the enemy was laying a trap. *Or they got here first and killed our targets.* Kyle hoped it was just an ambush. He didn't want to go back to the ship without the refugees.

Their snipers looked down at Kyle. Jeff signaled how many targets they were facing while Ivan informed the team of their position. It only took a few seconds.

Eight targets.

Standing, with hostages on their knees.

Kyle was confident against those numbers. He advanced, rifle now in hand. "This is Safe Haven. Put your hands up!"

"Stop!" Somchai struggled against his bonds. "It's a trap!"

Kyle spotted the hostages first and then their captors. The eight tanned locals held knives to their captives, ready to slit throats.

Kyle pinpointed the leader by the way the others looked to him for orders. Before the tall, muscular man could give one, Kyle lifted his rifle and popped off one shot.

The leader fell backward, raking his knife across Somchai's face.

More shots sounded as their snipers opened fire.

The locals didn't have ammunition or they didn't think to use it. Bullets hit them before they could kill their captives.

"Behind you!" Somchai ducked over his son as more shots rang out.

Kyle and the team spun around, opening fire at the half a dozen shadows coming from the thin trees. Bullets flew at them.

Kyle fired, hitting a thin man in the chest. He dropped to a knee and fired again, getting another thin man in the leg. He fired a third time and got a chest shot.

"Run!" The remaining locals fled down the path and vanished, one of them trailing blood from an Eagle trim.

Molly reloaded and brought her rifle back up. Before she could fire, Kenn put a hand on her arm. "Save your ammo."

Molly obeyed immediately. She hadn't been sure of hitting the moving targets now anyway. "I can track that blood trail."

"No need." Kyle moved toward the cowering captives. "We have who we came for."

Their eyes were sunken and angry, but their bodies were the hard part to view. Bones poked through the skin and swollen bellies fought their ragged clothes for room. *They're dying.*

The nine men and women all needed medical care, but none of their injuries were life-threatening. Kyle chose to get them back to the ship and let the medics handle the worst of it there. Kyle untied Somchai and helped the man to his feet. “Basic medical care; full perimeter guard. We move out in five.”

Half the team took up guard posts around the injured men and women. The others began checking injuries to let Morgan know who needed his care.

“Over here.” Cathy held the man’s shirt to his arm. “Looks like a stab wound.”

“It is.” Somchai put an arm around his son’s shaking shoulders. Blood dripped down his cheek. “He tried to fight when we were captured.”

“Good for him.” Kyle held out a hand. “You’re Somchai?”

“Yes.” Somchai shook, smiling tiredly. “Thank you for helping us.”

“It’s our honor. Help with their injuries and get ready to move fast.”

Somchai bobbed his head, taking his son along. “We’ll do the best we can to keep up.”

Kyle already knew this group wasn’t going to be able to go far on their own. They would start out on their feet and the Eagles would let them use what energy they had. Get what you can from your targets was an Eagle standard. They would have to be carried after that. Kyle now understood why the entire team was made up of the bulky, stronger Eagles. He frowned. *Except Molly. She’s meant to*

lead while we carry. Kyle waved her over. “You’ll lead us out.” He wanted time to observe her before he had to carry anyone.

Molly nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Kyle scowled, picking up excited thoughts from someone who shouldn’t be here. “What I need is for my wife to stop risking her life. She’s on land.”

“Because of the problem on our ship?”

Jeff and Ivan both nodded as they rejoined the team.

“Someone’s missing.”

“Neil’s team was sent to get them.”

Kyle didn’t say anything else. Like the other Eagles with mates, he was finding it hard to pretend it wasn’t the love of his life out there risking her neck for someone else. “Do our check in, then get them on their feet. I want us back at the rafts in an hour.”

Isaac hunkered down in the weeds, trying to keep his mind blank in case this group had a magic user. Chuck had taught them how to cover themselves around others like him.

Isaac wanted to attack, but his thin body couldn’t fight even one of this group, let alone all of them. *When they leave, I’ll go back to base. Chuck will know what to do.*

Isaac tensed as one of the females glanced toward his hiding place. He pretended he was one of those they’d rescued. *So glad to be safe! The Americans are my heroes!*

Isaac breathed a sigh of relief as the woman turned back to the others and cracked a joke. *You may have saved these people, but you won't be able to get back to your ship. Have fun trying.*

2

“Do you have him?”

“No.” Jennifer jogged behind Neil, fighting the first stages of land sickness. “Move faster.”

Neil increased their pace, glad Jennifer was with them. She was a reliable shot if they had to fight to get Trent back, but her tracking ability was invaluable. “Keep trying.”

“I am.” Jennifer ignored the sweat and the upset stomach. She forced her grid out further, searching for Trent’s signature. She’d copied it from Neil’s memory of the kidnapping, but she hadn’t been able to get it back since.

“No damage here. And no people.” Wade studied the town. “I think this was owned by Britain before the war.”

“What makes you think that?” Tommy was just glad to be off ship for a while, and out of the water. He felt slightly drunk. Being on land was helping.

Wade pointed. “That’s the post office. See the crown logo? And the phone booth, and mail boxes? Plus the colors? It all looks British.”

Neil didn’t care. He jogged through the empty, paved street with his rifle in hand. Rescues were easier when the town was abandoned. He didn’t

have to worry about being slowed up by locals with questions and fears, and there was no one to get caught in the crossfire when the shooting started.

“You’re right.” Jennifer gestured at a tall statue with a British flag still flying. Other than weather damage and bird droppings, the small memorial park below the flag was beautiful.

Jennifer stayed on Neil’s heels and tried to send her grid out again.

“You’re using too much energy.” Wade also scanned the park, but unlike Neil, he was hoping for signs of life. A quick talk with locals might tell them what they were up against.

Tommy studied the cathedral as they ran by. The old building was gray and red, with a whalebone arch memorial in front of it. Tommy had never been away from America before the war, but he enjoyed other lands and cultures. *Just not when they kidnap our people.* “Why do you think they took him?”

Neil’s lips thinned. “Mind on the job!”

Tommy frowned. “It is. If we know why, we’ll have a better chance to negotiate for his release.”

Wade shook his head at Tommy.

Tommy’s frown grew as he realized Neil had no intentions of negotiating. “So we roll in and start shooting?”

No one answered.

Tommy looked to Jennifer, expecting her to protest.

Jennifer kept her thoughts to herself. Tommy expected her to have more compassion because she was a woman. *He doesn't understand. Someone took one of our people. They deserve whatever Neil decides to give them as payment.*

Wade agreed, but he hoped they could get Trent out of the way first. He didn't want to take back a body.

"I've got him!" Jennifer moved around Neil and took the lead, running full out.

Neil stayed on her heels this time, finger ready to fire on anything that got in her way. *We're coming, Trent. Hang on.*

"He's tied up. He can't see or hear anything, but he's alive." Jennifer moved faster as they reached the edge of town and found a barren landscape surrounding several small mountain peaks. "He's behind that one."

Neil pushed and got up next to her. "Don't wear yourself out yet; we need you to track."

"I can't slow down yet. He might blink out on me again." Jennifer went faster, breath coming in large heaves.

Neil reluctantly tugged on her shoulder and slowed them down. He glared when she would have protested.

Jennifer sullenly let him take the lead. "Straight ahead, half a mile."

"Wait." Wade moved toward a line of huts at the edge of the thin trees. He knew they were empty, but something had caught his attention.

The team followed Wade behind the huts, noses wrinkling at the smell. Three graves lined the rising ground. All of them were empty and ready for use.

Jennifer pointed. “They were dug up. Those are old bones.”

Bones and dried blood were piled between the graves.

Tommy was confused. “Why dig up old bodies?”

Jennifer’s stomach twisted. “I see marks on the bones. It might be from teeth.”

“They ate them!” Wade turned to Neil. “That’s why they took Trent. They’re starving and he’s a lot of meals.”

“Son of a bitch!” Neil tried to control his anger, but it was hard. *If we don’t get him back, I’ll sink this island with my rage.*

Wade and Jennifer agreed as they caught the thought.

Neil inspected the small mountain in front of them and chose to go around. He detoured off the dirt path that led back to the port, taking them onto the rougher terrain instead. Small, empty farms lined the dirt, growing nothing but hard weeds that tried to tangle around their boots. Nothing moved out here, not even bugs. It looked like the land had been stripped of anything edible.

They reached the layer of thin trees a few seconds later and vanished into the shadows.

3

Trent groaned as the rag was yanked from his mouth. “Let me go.”

Slap!

He recoiled from the sting, groaning again at the pain in his brain. “What do you want?!”

Slap!

Trent understood he wasn’t supposed to talk. He blinked rapidly as the hood was taken off. His blurry vision showed a small village of thin people in front of his naked legs. *Naked? I’m naked!* “Where are my clothes?!”

Slap!

Trent felt rage rising. “Keep hitting me; I won’t forget it.”

Slap!

Trent clamped his lips shut. He needed to gain his balance before he tried to escape. He couldn’t do that if they kept hitting him. He glanced up, squinting against the rising sun; he stared in shock at three women holding axes.

He spotted bloodstains on the weapons and flinched, hitting his head against something hard. He tried to stand and found himself unable to. *I’m tied to a pole. What the hell is going on?!*

“He’s awake too soon. Go tell the alpha.”

One of the women ran off at the order. The other two resumed chopping the heads off the chickens in the pen next to them.

Trent tried to relax as he realized the women were using the axes on the animals and not him. He opened his mouth to ask a question.

The tallest woman held up the axe and motioned at his bare body.

Trent crossed his legs over his shriveled manhood, understanding she would hit him with the axe if he spoke again. He settled for glaring back and then scanning his surroundings. The village was all around him. He'd thought he was at the edge of it, but upon turning his head, he could see dozens of huts and twice as many people. They were working on various chores and they were all hungry. He could tell by the way they gazed at him and then the women butchering the chickens. *God, I hope the chicken is meant for their pots.* He swept their thin bodies, spotting bruises, injuries that needed to be treated, and a general look of bad health. *These people are dying.*

“Yes, they are.”

Trent swiveled around and found a tall man with long white hair and bright green eyes walking toward him.

“Welcome to Port Stanley. I'm Chuck Abbot.”

Trent didn't respond yet. He was studying his captor and coming up with ugly theories. Chuck wasn't starving. He was as healthy as any of the people on their cruise ship. He was also crazy. Trent didn't need more time to know that. The odd symbols carved into his skin, combined with the

glaze in his eyes was enough. *Another nutcase. Great.*

Chuck stepped on Trent's ankle and rocked.

The bone shattered.

Trent's screams echoed through the village.

No one came to help. They only observed with that same glaze of hunger and hatred.

Chuck knelt in front of the screaming redhead and grabbed his hair. He slammed Trent's head into the pole repeatedly, finally stopping when he passed out. "That's better."

Chuck rose, waving at the women. "He's strong. He can take the drugs again. When sunset arrives, feed him the chicken and I'll paint him for the ceremony."

"Will he survive overnight?"

Chuck nodded. "I told you—he's strong. Do as I say and tomorrow we will have a beautiful sunrise feast."

"Will you wither his body first, like last time?"

Chuck frowned at the tall woman for the reminder. "I will stop before the meat is gone." His eyes glowed. "More questions?"

The woman hurriedly shook her head and went back to carving up the chickens that were part of the ritual. Her stomach ached at the thought of wasting the meat on a man they were about to kill, but Chuck was the boss. When he gave an order, everyone followed or he consumed them. She didn't wish for rescue or think of the cruise ship in their port. *No one can defeat the devil.*

Chuck laughed as he walked to his hut. “That’s just who I am; If I tried to be something else, I wouldn’t have survived being marooned here for the last year.”

The women didn’t think bad thoughts or glare at him. Chuck was their alpha. There was no escape. The people on the cruise ship would also learn that lesson. Slavery and cannibalism were the new normal; peace was the myth.

Chapter Eleven
Conflagration

1

“**I** have to stop.” Somchai’s son slid to his knees, gasping for air. “I’m sorry.”

Kyle and the team stopped, surrounding the exhausted refugees. They were only half a mile from where the rafts were hidden, but the people were too weak to make it.

Kyle began matching team members to refugees. “Get them on your back; we’re not stopping. Molly will keep leading us.”

Molly stayed in that position with pride and a bit of nervousness. She wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t think they were alone anymore. *Someone’s watching us.*

Jeff, Ivan, and Kenn all nodded. They felt it too.

Kyle frowned. “Speak up next time. When a teammate thinks something is hinky, we always listen.”

“I will.” Molly wasn’t used to functioning as a team. *I’ll adjust. For now, let’s get these people to safety.*

Molly stiffened as pain slammed into her body; blood ran down her arm in a huge gush.

“Incoming!” Morgan pulled her down and quickly shoved the arrow through her arm, wincing at her scream. He used magic to seal the holes as the Eagles returned fire at a line of locals running toward them with axes and arrows.

“No mercy!” Kyle fired, hitting two with one bullet. The locals didn’t know to spread out.

Gunfire filled the air.

Molly tried to smile at Morgan as the pain receded. “Thanks.”

Morgan frowned, tying on a bandage so the refugees wouldn’t know she was healed. “Guess you don’t really want to die after all.”

Molly’s eyes filled with tears. “I just want the pain to stop.”

Morgan whispered in her ear. “*We have a cure now; don’t give up.*”

Molly let him help her to her feet. The locals were dead already. The Eagles didn’t miss and they had better weapons.

“Why did they rush us?” Jeff was disgusted. “They know we’re armed.”

Kyle knelt by a body, examining the scars and the fresh wounds caused by someone carving symbols into their skin. He saw thin bodies and bruises on top of old injuries. “I’m not sure they were willing.”

“What do you mean?” Daryl shoved a body over with his feet and found awareness under all the blood. “Why are you attacking us?”

“Ordered.” Blood gushed through the man’s cracked lips. “The alpha ordered it!” His body arched; a last breath slid between his lips.

“A descendant is doing this.” Daryl glared at Somchai. “You didn’t tell us there were magic users here.”

Somchai hung his head. “We feared you would not come if you knew.”

“Leave the bodies. We’re getting out of here now.” Kyle knelt in front of the man. “Climb on. You can tell us what you know on the way.” He hadn’t asked sooner because the refugees didn’t have the strength to talk and walk at the same time.

Somchai waited as his son and the others were loaded up, giving them smiles of comfort when they hesitated to trust the strangers. As soon as the rescue team started walking, he started talking. “Chuck washed up here after the war. We had listened to the radio in horror, unable to believe what had happened. Chuck verified it. He told us he had been a fighter in the war. He was without clothes or food, so we cared for him. As he regained his health, we began to lose ours; people went missing. We began to suspect he was not good. Our women feared being alone with him; our children cried when he entered the room.”

Somchai locked his arms around Kyle when the man kept pace with their female leader. She was moving fast now. “We confronted him, but it was too late to stop Chuck’s terror. He conquered us one by one until he had an army.”

“He didn’t kill everyone?”

“No. He enslaved them.” Somchai stared at his son. “Bo and I returned from fishing and found our town empty. We tracked our people to the mountains. We tried to help them. Many people have left this island alive because of us.”

“That’s what good guys do.” Kyle led the conversation and followed Molly, approving when she chose to take a different path back. The team was able to move faster now even though they were all carrying someone. Those weak people held on tight and tried not to resent the good health of their rescuers. Everyone else listened to the conversation and swept their surroundings. “Why didn’t you go with them?”

“The boats that came were not big, like yours. They had little room.” Somchai fought his twisting stomach. “We let the others go first, hoping more would come.”

“How long since the last boat?”

“Six months. I had almost given up hope.”

Kyle felt the man shudder. “Where is Chuck hiding?”

Somchai carefully pointed south. “He forbade us to live in town or try to contact outsiders. They built huts in a village on the other side of the mountain where you rescued us.”

“Tell me about the routine for that village.”

“The men go out to hunt or fish every morning. They return at sunset. The women never leave the village.”

Kyle could feel the man hiding something. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Somchai forced himself to answer. “The women protect him. If you wish to free my people, you will have to kill his guards. Those females love him. They will never surrender.”

“What about the kids? We don’t want to hit them in the crossfire.”

Somchai’s anger emerged for the first time. “There are no more children. He eats them!”

The team muttered and frowned, all now eager to challenge the magic user here.

Kyle knew. “We’ll get these people to the ship; then we’ll handle it.”

“Will the boss go for that?”

Kyle nodded at Jeff’s question. “Slavery is not allowed. She’ll order it even if we don’t volunteer.”

Jeff shrugged. “I’m game.”

“We all are.” Ivan was furious. He came alongside Kyle to look at Somchai. “What else do we need to know?”

“There is a teenager who left us today. He wouldn’t wait for your arrival. His name is Renard. Chuck probably captured him right after he left us. He’ll be consumed at sunrise.”

“Well, now we have a timetable.” Kyle jogged behind Molly, impressed with her constant pace. “We’ll get him out if he’s alive, along with anyone else who wants freedom, but we won’t spare those who fight against us.”

Somchai heaved a fresh sigh. “They are better off dead than to live as slaves.”

“I agree.” Kyle frowned as he remembered what they’d been told by the woman from the detention center. “What about race wars you’ve had here? Will the others on this island attack us for saving you?”

Somchai stared in confusion. “What race wars? What other people?”

Kyle’s mind alarm began to blare. “Laura told us about your segregation. Safe Haven doesn’t allow that.”

“I don’t know a Laura, and we have not split along race lines.” Somchai held on as the team went faster. “You were lied to.”

2

“Those are Eagle rounds.” They’d stopped as the gunfire echoed. Jennifer was now torn on the direction. “Should we go help them?”

Neil shook his head. “It’s already over; they have a job to do and so do we.”

Jennifer frowned, but she didn’t argue when Neil stepped around her to take over the lead. They’d gone around the base of the small mountain. They were now nearing a line of thicker trees where she could still feel Trent on her grid even though the dot was gone again. She was just learning to use her new gifts. She had figured out that when the dot vanished, the person was either dead or knocked

out. Trent's dot kept appearing in a light pattern suggesting he was fighting to stay awake.

Tommy walked behind Jennifer, glad they'd slowed. He couldn't seem to get control of his breathing here on land. He didn't understand why it would be different from being on the ship in the training rooms, but it was. He'd been struggling to keep his team from knowing how much trouble he was having.

Wade brought up the rear, scanning for messages from their people and trouble from the locals. They hadn't spotted a single person yet, but that was about to change. Wade could hear thoughts now. *We're close.*

Neil and Jennifer both agreed. Neil picked a faint path through the trees. He brought up his rifle.

The others understood he was going straight in. They brought up their weapons as well, adrenaline flowing thickly behind the anger.

Neil saw the shadows of huts and reluctantly stopped. He slid to the ground and slowly eased forward, finger twitching. He couldn't wait to pull the trigger this time, but he didn't want to endanger his team by rushing in without knowing what they were facing.

The team eased into the tall weeds around the village. They saw Trent right away. Fury filled the air.

"They're carving him!" Tommy flipped off the safety and prepared to fire.

Neil spotted a dozen women guarding a center hut and aimed there. “Wade and I will handle whoever is in that hut. Jennifer and Tommy will get Trent.”

“Copy.” Jennifer removed the safety. “Mercy?”

“None.”

“Excellent.” Jennifer stood when they did, hurrying in behind Neil.

“Look out!”

“The strangers are here!”

Neil fired three fast shots, clearing a path to the hut.

Jennifer veered toward Trent’s location, also firing. She didn’t feel guilty as women dropped. *It’s justice.*

Wade watched Neil’s back, popping off shots at men hurrying in from the tree line. He followed Neil to the hut.

Tommy watched Jennifer’s back as she shot at the line of women forming to keep them from reaching Trent. He winced as two of them fell; he didn’t join Jennifer in clearing the line. He spotted two men near a bloody cleared space and hit them both.

Jennifer fired again and knelt to reload.

Tommy was forced to fire at the three women who rushed her; he got them all.

“Thanks!” Jennifer ran to Trent and drew her knife to cut him loose.

Tommy stood next to her and made himself shoot the rest of the attacking females. They weren’t

stopping or screaming or showing any emotion. *What's wrong with them?!*

Jennifer didn't say they were enslaved. It wouldn't make it any easier on her normal companion, but she mourned them. *I'm sorry, ladies. At least you aren't slaves anymore.* "Trent!" She pulled the rag from his mouth and shot a blast of healing energy at his chest. He was covered in bruises and blood. He had symbols carved into his skin that refused to heal from the tiny blast. "Trent!"

He didn't respond. Jennifer took over guard position so Tommy could lift the naked man over his shoulders. They ran for the tree line together, hoping Neil and Wade had the same luck.

Neil kicked the hut door open and fired, not caring that the woman inside had a hand up for mercy. He stopped his quick finger from firing again as he saw a captive on the cot. "Get that one."

Wade hurried in and lifted the bloody teenager from the filthy cot. He ran toward the tree line where Jennifer and Tommy were waiting. "Let's go!"

Neil waved him on. "I'll catch up!" He turned to scan and found glowing green orbs flying toward him from the shadows of another hut.

Neil fired.

The man brought up a shield. The bullet bounced off and slammed into a hut, hitting someone inside who began to scream.

Neil also brought up a shield, lips curving into a mocking smile when the crazy descendant stumbled in shock. "You're no longer the power here!" Neil

concentrated, gathering energy for a powerful blast. If it didn't work, his finger was ready on his trigger.

“Who are you?!” Chuck ran at Neil, hand lifting.

Neil held his shield against the blast of ice. It formed a layer and began to crack, restricting his view.

Chuck fired again, rage filling his eyes with flames. “This is my island!”

Neil struggled to hold his shield, waiting for the right moment. He saw the man pause to fire again and decided the time was right. He lowered his shield and fired with his mind. Then he fired with his rifle just to be sure.

Neil's righteous anger blasted through Chuck's shield and hit him, driving him backwards. The bullet slammed into his chest. Blood bubbled from his lips as he fell.

Neil raised his shield and walked toward the man, ready to fire again. He looked down at the dying descendant, rage starting to fade.

Chuck stared up in confused pain. “Who are you?!” Blood ran from his nose.

Neil refused to answer. The man didn't deserve knowledge. He just needed to die for his crimes.

Chuck sagged, breath rushing out.

Neil put his rifle to the man's head and fired once to be sure the job was done.

Fighting male villagers stopped and turned, blank expressions lighting up with fear and awareness.

Neil realized the people hadn't been willing. He felt bad for them, but he refused to show it. "You're free now. The slavery on this island has ended."

The woman on the ground by Chuck's hut spit toward him.

Neil ignored it. The woman had one of Jennifer's bullets in her stomach. She wouldn't be alive much longer. He swept the others and saw most of the men wore grateful expressions. The women hated him. They glowered with a rage that would need to be satisfied.

Neil looked toward Jennifer, not sure what to do now. He'd come to kill the one who'd taken a teammate. He wasn't here to slaughter brainwashed females.

Jennifer took pity. She stood up and began picking off the more devoted women. They were never going to forget this and they would always be a danger to their men. She spared the younger females, hoping those might recover.

Neil and the team were grateful Jennifer was here to do it so they didn't have to. Her judgment as their enforcer was final.

Jennifer didn't go after the few women who fled, but she knew it wasn't a good idea to let them live. In his year here, Chuck had brainwashed them into believing slavery was the right way to live. The fact that he'd been consuming their neighbors and kids didn't seem to matter. Whatever spell he'd put on the females hadn't broken upon his death.

Neil and the others waited for the surviving men to rush them over those deaths, but the feeling of gratitude only grew.

“I don’t understand.” Tommy wasn’t able to read their thoughts like the rest of his team.

Jennifer got her medical kit out, leaving the rest of the shooting to the men. “They were abused. They watched their wives sacrifice their children. They finally have justice.”

Tommy scowled as he got a long shirt from his kit and began tugging it over Trent’s body. “Why can’t we land somewhere good? I miss the days when they would hold a party with food and dancing.”

Jennifer grunted, lifting Trent’s leg. “Same. Hold his leg up while I see what I can do for his ankle.”

Tommy knelt to help, spotting the bone poking through the skin. His rage returned. “Maybe we shouldn’t spare any of them. The men should have fought back, even if it was one of you.”

Jennifer frowned at the wording. “That’s up to the boss.”

“Angela won’t send us back out here to do it.”

“I meant Neil. On this run, he’s the boss.”

Neil nodded at her from across the village, but he didn’t give the order to kill the male survivors. He pointed toward the shore. “Go back to your town. Live by the old rules of society. When we come back, if we find slavery, we will remove every life here.”

Some of the men promised it wouldn't happen. The others refused to speak to him as they went through the huts and collected their belongings. They'd witnessed the magic; they didn't want to face another descendant, even one who had freed them from Chuck's charms.

Neil wasn't satisfied. He brought up his shield, making them all flinch and cower away. "I mean it. Don't make me come back!"

All of the males nodded now. The younger women didn't look at him. Neil could feel their hatred and their terror. "Your women need a lot of care to keep them on a good path. Remove them if you need to, and try to resume your lives as free men." Neil walked to Jennifer, eager to hear how Trent was doing.

"He'll live, but he may never walk again." Jennifer was wrapping a bandage around Trent's ankle. "I can't heal broken bones and his ankle is shattered, like Zack's ribs were. Maybe Angela can, but I can't."

Neil knelt for Tommy and Jennifer to put Trent on his back. He needed to leave now. Hearing that had brought his rage back to life again. "Remember what I said. Don't make me come back here and kill you all." Neil walked into the trees with his team, leaving the villagers to handle their own injuries and dead.

Jennifer looked over her shoulder and grimaced. "They're about to cut up Chuck's body. I think the women are going to eat him."

Neil grunted. “Fitting end. Let’s haul ass. I want us on the ship in an hour.”

“You got it.” Jennifer fell in next to him with her rifle in hand.

Wade brought up the rear, carrying the unconscious teenager from the hut.

Tommy took the lead, now eager to get home.

3

“That’s it. It’s out.” Angela lowered the almost empty fire extinguisher. She shoved hair off her face, spreading ashes into her sweaty curls.

“Both teams are on the way. They should be here in about fifteen minutes. Grant’s fine.” Marc had just come from checking on the bridge. The small fire in this lounge had been under control when she’d told him to go make sure their captain was okay. The hallway was now covered in ashes and smoke damage, along with foam from the extinguishers. It reminded them all of the moment when Becky had attacked. That hallway still bore the marks.

“How long on the refueling?” Angela sat the extinguisher next to the other empties as she surveyed the damage.

“Another hour.”

“Stay up there and make sure things go like we need them to for leaving.”

“You got it.” Marc jogged up the steps, nodding to Ed, who was still on guard duty over Angela. The

fire alarm had brought a large group of Eagles to fight it, but the small end table and couch hadn't taken all of them to put out.

Angela studied the damage closely, trying to figure out how the fire had started. She narrowed in on a blackened ashtray on the couch. "It was an accident." She was relieved, as was everyone else. They were all tired of constantly being under attack. Accidents were always better than it being deliberate.

"We'll get the cleaning crew down here as soon as they finish with the top deck." Shawn motioned toward the ramp.

Angela ignored him. She didn't want to go topside yet. She had a feeling this was where she needed to be.

Shawn caught the vibe. He looked to Ed.

Ed shrugged. He didn't see anything, but he didn't doubt her instincts.

Footsteps sounded. Everyone turned to see Debra hurrying toward them. She was gesturing wildly.

Angela tried to get it from her mind, but Debra wasn't calm enough. The deaf woman's panic was making her thoughts jumbled. Angela concentrated on her hands. "She needs...the extinguishers! There's another fire." Angela grabbed two of the full tanks and shoved one into Debra's arms. "Show us!"

Debra ran toward the lounge by the camp area, still trying to tell them what had happened.

Ed stayed close, hand on his gun. One fire could be an accident. Two was a pattern and a problem.

“She says there was an argument and an ashtray got knocked into a garbage can. The extinguishers there aren’t working.” Angela got ready to spray.

Ed got in front of her and entered the camp hall first. He scanned quickly, then stepped aside to let her in.

Angela and Debra got the small fire under control right away, hitting it at the bottom in a sweeping motion. The flames died down to smoldering embers that smoked heavily.

“Open the windows.” Angela coughed, ducking her mouth into her shirt as they finished putting out the fire. She still didn’t think it was intentional, but this proved she needed to make rules about smoking on the ship. *I’ll have Marc draft a new law. We’ll post it tonight after we’re back on the open ocean.*

Debra smiled at Angela. *We got it. We’re okay.*

Angela tensed, picking up another panicked voice. “Wait for it..”

Heavy steps ran by the camp hall. “We need help in the bathroom! Fire in the bathroom!”

Angela hit her radio. “Lock us down, Grant.” She followed the running men, aware of Zack falling in and bringing up a shield around her. People around them gaped in surprise. Most of them hadn’t known Zack was a descendant. The rest of them worried over the reason for it. They knew it meant trouble.

Angela shoved into the bathroom and sprayed the flaming trashcan, anger growing. Three fires in twenty minutes was not an accident. *Someone's leading me away so they can do something stupid.* She shoved the tank into Shawn's arms so he could finish it. *What would be the stupidest thing someone could do right now?*

Her eyes narrowed. "I want all the kids accounted for right now." She'd sent Kimmie back to the den mothers upon getting the fire call, and Dog was with Missy on errands again.

Zack keyed his radio. "Den mothers do a count."

"Copy."

"Copy."

Angela gestured at Zack. "Find out where the new people are. Take Ed. If you find an issue, handle it."

Zack didn't argue. He and Ed went down the hallway, peering into every cabin.

Angela waited for the next alarm to sound, hoping she was wrong.

The ship speaker crackled. "This is the captain. Everyone needs to go to their rooms for a check in. I repeat: go to your cabin right now, no matter what chore you're on."

Angela instinctively turned toward the steps to the top deck. She walked quickly, aware of fear now pounding in her brain. By the time she reached the top deck, she was running.

“Fire!” Theo waved frantically at the bridge.
“Shut it down! Shut it down!”

Grant saw him and began hitting buttons.

The floating system was a long wide dock with the tops of the fuel tanks that were under the water. The hoses were all coiled neatly on the tanks, sending fuel into their ship in huge sprays.

Theo tried to reach the hose to shut off the fuel from the floating system. The spark he’d viewed hadn’t caught, but it was only a matter of time.

He disconnected the heavy hose and gently put it on the ground. *How did this hose get loosened? I tightened them myself before we started!*

A new spark flared from the hose next to him.

“Get out of here!” Theo shoved the crew toward the steps, praying now. *Don’t catch. Don’t catch!*

The spark flashed again as another loose hose nozzle made contact with the pipe. Bright flames flared up. They flashed over the hose and grew.

“Shit!” Theo rushed forward and grabbed the hose. He tossed it toward the water and ducked as the fumes hit the flames.

Brittani fired her gift at the fire as hard as she could, trying to smother it. The ice sank over the floating system and layered it in frozen water. The flames hissed out.

Brittani blew out a breath, heart thumping as she fired again.

Theo ran to the three men still on the floating fuel dock with him. He shoved them up the steps and followed. "Get us out of here!"

Grant began to fire up the engines.

Brittani met them at the steps, helping pull the men onboard. "It's out. I handled it."

Theo ran toward the bridge. "It went down the hose! Get us away from here!"

Brittani concentrated, bringing up more energy than she usually used. She fired a stronger blast of ice, trying to freeze the entire dock.

Grant used the radio to let the tug drivers know they were ready. A few seconds later, the giant cruise ship began to leave the harbor.

Flames rushed up the hose, melting the icy shield over it. They flew along the rubber and ran down into the fuel tank.

Brittani used the last of her energy to shove her shield over the entire dock as it exploded, slapping against her barrier.

Angela added her shield, doubling the layer. They felt each explosion as the fuel tanks blew.

Marc put a hand on both shoulders to lend his strength. He didn't know how to project his shield unless he was inside it, but he did know how to share his energy.

Grant kept directing the ship away from the fiery fuel system, stunned by how fast things had gone wrong. If not for Angela and Brittani using shields, the ship might have been so damaged that their trip would have ended right here.

Theo pointed at the shore, where one of their teams was emerging from the tree line. “They found Trent!”

Jennifer stared with the rest of the team, shocked as the ship inched out of the harbor. “They’re leaving without us!”

“Something’s wrong.” Neil and the others ran faster with their burdens.

Brittani let go of her shield, unable to hold it. She sank to her knees and hoped Angela was strong enough to keep it covered.

The fire ran through the tanks and under the water. A huge bubble rose in front of the ship as one of them exploded. Water and fuel flew into the air, bringing flames with it.

Marc brought up his shield over the front of the ship.

Angela let go too, gasping. Containing the first explosions had almost drained her.

Debra added her shield to Marc’s, shielding her eyes from the bright flashes as the floating fuel system was engulfed. Debris slammed into the shields instead of the ship, jarring them. Huge pillars of smoke rose into the air as they let go.

Both land teams stopped and stared, stunned. Sharp, hot wind blew over them, bringing debris and sparks that immediately set the dry weeds on fire.

“Shit!” Neil scanned for a safe way to get them back to their ship.

“I have Kyle on my grid!” Jennifer pointed.
“They have the two rafts!”

Neil waved her to take the lead.

Jennifer took off running, calling mentally.
We're coming! Don't leave yet!

Flames blew with the wind, catching the port buildings on fire. More smoke rolled into the air. It rushed over the dry, wooden structures without mercy.

The deserters from their ship fled the shore buildings as the fire turned their way. They ran toward the dock, now wanting to get back on the cruise ship.

The dock exploded in a conflagration of fire and wooden shrapnel, hitting half of the deserters. Port Stanley began to burn to the ground.

Jennifer led her team along the path, now picking up thoughts from the ship. “The fuel crew had an accident.” She spotted a group of black-clad people and waved. “Kyle’s team is coming here.” She slowed, saving her energy.

Wade was also scanning thoughts of the team and their ship. “Angela says there’s a lifeboat... There!” Wade slid Renard gently to the ground and detoured toward the shore. “Help me pull it in.”

Tommy and Neil put Trent next to the refugee and went to help Wade while Jennifer met Kyle near the burning fuel system. Neither of the men had woken yet.

Kenn felt an ugly moment coming and tried to direct the conversation away from that dangerous

edge. “Someone cut up our rafts. How did your run go?”

Kyle glared at Jennifer. “You shouldn’t be here!”

Kenn sighed. *I tried.* He went to help with the lifeboat.

Jennifer waved off Kyle’s concern. “We can all fit in the lifeboat.” She grinned at the tired team who had refugees on their backs. “We got the bad guy!”

The team gave her nods, but they saved their breath, exhausted.

Kyle walked by her, furious.

Jennifer frowned at him. “What’s your problem?”

Kyle slid Somchai from his back and turned to face her. “You’re my problem! You’re carrying my son! Try caring about him instead of yourself!”

Jennifer stared in shock. Anger filled her.

“Later.” Molly grabbed Jennifer’s arm and pulled her toward the lifeboat.

Jennifer let Molly lead her to the boat, mind racing with ugly words as Neil and Wade went back for their wounded men.

Kyle didn’t care about any of it right now. He pointed toward the cruise ship. “I want you on that ship and you’re not leaving it again! You’re suspended from the Eagles until you give birth.”

Jennifer stopped. “You can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can. I’m the top Eagle.”

“Angela’s the boss. She gave me permission.”

“Fuck Angela!” Kyle also didn’t care about the instant disapproval from everyone. “She already lost her baby! It doesn’t matter to her. You’re not killing my kid just to prove you’re good enough to be one of us. Get in the lifeboat and shut up!”

Jennifer considered the ugliest response. It was time. “When we get back, pack your shit and get out of my cabin. We’re done.”

Jeff helped Molly into the lifeboat, not sure which side he agreed with. *If it was my pregnant wife, I might feel the same. He just handled it the wrong way.*

Kyle’s hands clenched into fists. “You want me out? Fine. But my decision stands. You’re suspended, and not even the boss can overrule it.” Kyle got into the life boat and refused to take it back.

Jennifer looked toward the ship and then back at the island. *I can survive here, and Angela will send Autumn and Roy to me...*

Ivan sighed. “Think about the dream. You can’t help us from here.”

Kyle stiffened as he realized Jennifer was thinking about staying. He grabbed an oar and began pushing them away from the shoreline.

Jennifer tensed to jump.

Ivan looked around, not sure what to do.

Gus understood both sides. “Let the boss sort it out. She’ll do what’s right.”

Jennifer stayed in her seat as the lifeboat left the shore. She looked at Kyle.

Kyle glowered.

Jennifer's decision firmed. *I mean it. I've had enough. You don't own me.*

Kyle slipped his ring off and tossed it into her lap.

Jennifer felt her heart break.

Kyle refused to look at her again. *I may have lost our life together, but at least she'll be on the ship and my son will survive. He's more important to me than my marriage.*

Chapter Twelve

Accidents Happen

1

“Are we far enough from the fire?”

“Yes.” Grant hit buttons on the pristine control panel. “Our team won’t be able to catch up unless we stop.”

Angela studied the island again. “We destroy something everywhere we go.”

“It’s human nature.” Grant shrugged. “And an accident.”

Angela’s lips thinned. “I’m not so sure about that.”

Grant wasn’t either. “Is this a bad time to ask for a schedule switch?”

“Yeah, a little.” Angela went to the steps so she had a better view of the lifeboat. “We’ll have a meeting later. Kyle pushed an issue that I have to make a call on. I’ll do it at the same time.”

“Cool.” Grant lowered the anchor, wincing at the loud clangs and bangs. “I should have warned people. Sorry.”

Angela snorted. “They’re already on edge. It wouldn’t have mattered.”

Grant frowned. “That fire wasn’t an accident, was it?”

“None of them were. One of us is starting trouble. I need to figure out why.”

“Are you thinking the new people or one of us?”

Angela frowned. “No idea yet.” Angela went down the steps with Ed on her heels and the sniper on top of the bridge observing them both. She went to the ramp and descended, not eager for the next chore she had to handle.

Ed followed her down to the cargo area, examining the guard stations. All of them were manned now.

Marc was already in the cargo hold, inspecting the neat room. He didn’t know who was responsible, but it looked great down here. He went to the loading doors and hit the button to open them.

Angela waited in the entryway, reading the thoughts of those about to come aboard. Other than Kyle and Jennifer, she wasn’t picking up any new problems.

Marc keyed his mike as he scanned. “We need the medics; get the QZ ready for new arrivals. Tim, report to the cargo area.”

Angela realized Marc wanted their new preacher to talk to the fighting couple. “That won’t work.” She sighed. “But it might buy me some time.”

“Have you made the choice yet?”

Angela’s voice lowered to a mutter. “Half the ship is about to hate me.”

Marc wanted to know which half.

Angela walked to the loading doors, not wanting to consider all the yelling she was going to hear. “Kyle is right; I shouldn’t have sent her out.”

Marc’s frown grew. “We might not have gotten Trent back without her tracking him.”

“Kyle could have gone back out. He can track.” Angela gestured. “So can you. Or me. I was wrong.”

“Wow.” Marc grinned. “Did that hurt?”

Angela chuckled. “Yes.” She narrowed in on the group now approaching the loading ramp. “And since you find it so funny...”

Marc groaned. “I don’t want to tell her!”

“Welcome to leadership.” Angela motioned to Gabe. “Stay with Marc and keep him safe. He’s about to piss off half the population of this ship.”

Gabe laughed. Then he realized he would be in the crossfire. “Hey! Not fair!”

Angela nodded. “None of it’s fair. Jennifer may leave us over this.”

Marc scowled. “She’s your heir.”

“Jennifer made an ugly choice. If she and Kyle don’t reconcile, she won’t stay with us. He’s the only reason she’s stayed this long.”

“Is that why you chose her?”

“No. She’s the best person for the job—when she grows up. Right now, she’s still a wild child who needs to learn to follow the rules even when she doesn’t agree with them.”

“What about Kyle?” Marc wasn’t clear on all the rules for the Eagles. “Does he really have the authority to ground the women?”

“Yes. Adrian wanted the Eagles to govern themselves.” Angela frowned at the mobster who was now begging her silently to support him. “However, the Eagles can overrule him and Jennifer’s going to call for an official vote on it. His choice might have cost him leadership as well as his marriage.”

Marc secured the hook to the wall while Wade and Jeff secured their end to the lifeboat. The winch began pulling them in.

Jennifer hopped from the boat as soon as it reached the ramp. She marched straight to Angela.

Marc stepped in front of her. “QZ first.”

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed as she read his thoughts.

Marc wasn’t scared of her. “Don’t make me be mean, because I will.”

Jennifer huffed. She turned toward the side door and disappeared into the other holding room that had a direct path to their QZ.

Kyle also tried to approach Angela. Marc pointed. “Rules are rules.”

Kyle glanced at Angela. “Please.”

Angela denied him. “QZ first; decisions second.”

Kyle followed Jennifer to the QZ while everyone else helped the new people from the lifeboat so the medics could examine them.

Morgan waved Harry over. “We need a stretcher for Trent. He goes straight to the medical bay. Put him in one of the new isolation corners.”

“Will do.” Harry motioned to Stanley. “Bring it in.”

Stanley pushed the stretcher, happy to be helping. *I’ve had a good day!* He tripped over his shoelace and slammed into the gurney. He slid to the floor, rubbing his jaw.

Marc laughed as he helped the man up. *It’s actually good to know some things aren’t going to change.* “You okay?”

Stanley flushed. “I was doing so good!”

“You still are.” Marc took the stretcher over to the lifeboat so the team could load Trent onto it. “Go make sure the QZ is stocked for two dozen people.”

“You got it.” Stanley ran from the room.

Angela let Marc handle things while she searched their minds for everything that had happened. When she got to the cut-up rafts, she frowned. “We missed one. He was watching you the entire time.” She slowly rotated toward the front of the ship.

Marc tried to see what she had, but holding the shield over the ship had drained him. He couldn’t push his grid out to the shoreline now that they were so far away from it.

“It’s all right.” Angela hoped that was true. “The magic user is gone. Maybe the other man will go straight and help the other survivors.” She smiled at the father and son standing alone, waiting to be told what to do. “Welcome to Safe Haven, gentlemen. May it become your home.”

Somchai bowed to her, as did Bo. “We are grateful.”

“Good. Pay me back by keeping your people in line with our rules.”

Somchai frowned. “I am not their leader. You are now.”

Angela smiled again. “Great answer. Get settled in the QZ and we’ll talk later.”

Somchai went with the others when Gabe pointed the way.

Marc inspected all the new people, viewing future problems. He waited until they were gone, then turned to Angela. “They don’t know Somchai and his son are like us. They also don’t know this ship is full of people like us.”

Angela sighed, shrugging. “They’ll adjust or we’ll drop them somewhere.”

“They’re weak. They won’t survive on their own.” Jeff wanted that clear. The people they’d brought back were not fighters in any way.

Angela didn’t answer. She wanted every soul on this ship to be on Pitcairn with them. *Except for the bastard who set those fires. They have to go—maybe overboard when I catch them.*

Angela left the cargo area and went to the camp deck to talk to their newest cleared people.

Marc waved Gabe and Ed to go with her. “Make sure she doesn’t fry anyone until we have proof.”

Ed snorted.

Gabe frowned. “If she finds proof, I’ll handle it. She won’t have to.”

Marc didn't doubt the man's words. Their arsonist was about to be hunted down and eliminated. *I wouldn't want to be you right now.*

Marc followed the medics to the infirmary, hoping he had enough energy left to help Trent.

2

"We want to go to the play area."

Francesca looked down at Cody, holding onto two kids who were pulling her toward the bathroom. "We'll all go after dinner."

"Can't we go now?" Cody stuck out his chest. "I'm almost a man."

Francesca smiled distractedly. "No." She let the little ones pull her closer to the door. "It won't be long."

"I can take them. I'm going there now with my nieces." Laura smiled at the kids. "But only if your guardian says it's okay."

Francesca swept the new woman who was already making friends. She didn't see a guard on the woman and her nieces were already making friends among the other kids. "Are you sure?"

"I don't mind. It will give my girls someone to play with."

Francesca took another step toward the bathroom as the little kids pulled harder. They'd been waiting to use the bathroom for ten minutes now. Waiting was hard on the younger children.

“Okay, but check in with the guard station when you get there so Marc knows where his kids are.”

“No problem.” Laura smiled at the happy twins again. “You’ll be good, right?”

“Yes!”

“Thank you!”

Francesca didn’t watch them go. She opened the bathroom for the anxious little ones, breathing a sigh of relief. *I’m not cut out for this duty.*

Laura led the way down the hall. “It’s good here. I like this Safe Haven.”

Cody smiled. “Me too.”

Laura opened the door to the wide hallway and motioned. “Let’s go have the time of your lives.”

The kids went out; Laura immediately pointed at the employee hall. “We can get there quicker if we go this way.”

Cody pushed the door open and held it. “After you.”

Laura chuckled and went into the dim corridor that wasn’t used by the public.

Cate went in last, starting to frown. *Something doesn’t feel right.*

Cody took her hand, smiling. “The Eagles use these when they’re in a hurry. It really is faster.”

“Okay.” Cate stepped into the employee hall; the door closed.

Angela entered the camp hall and went to the guard. “Is everyone accounted for?”

Ralph swept the cabins. “They’re all here, according to the lists the den mothers just gave me. I haven’t had a chance to verify it yet.”

“Stay at your post.” Angela stalked the hallway, stopping at each cabin. She searched minds without mercy, even those she knew weren’t guilty.

The people didn’t resist, though several of them pushed ugly thoughts at her for the violation of their privacy.

Angela moved on to the next cabin without replying, digging for their traitor.

She stopped at Laura’s cabin and opened the door without knocking.

The two girls cringed, terrified. Angela swept the room. “Where is Laura?”

She told us to stay here and keep the door shut.

Angela tried not to panic. “Ralph! Where is she?”

Ralph joined her in the doorway, frowning. “How did she get by me?”

Angela keyed her mike. “Laura is not in her cabin for the check-in. Eagles will find her and escort her directly to me.”

Angela went on with her search, unwilling to assume Laura was their arsonist. She kept checking the people, normal and descendant alike. She gleaned thoughts she didn’t like, but no one here had knowledge of the fires other than seeing them put those flames out.

Angela stopped at the last cabin.

Tobias and his wives stared back with open minds. They knew better than to resist.

Angela scanned all three of them deeper than she had the others, storing their fears and their prejudices against authority. She didn't find thoughts of the fire, but she did discover two locked doors that Tobias didn't want her to open. "Do it or I will."

Tobias glared at her as he opened the barrier to his secret thoughts.

Angela laughed at the sight of him adding a third wife to his small harem. "Good luck with that."

Tobias flushed. "It's a fantasy. I know she won't agree."

"My future daughter-in-law will slit your throat while you sleep if she finds out."

Tobias sighed. "She's hot. And talented."

"It's the baby."

Tobias snorted. "Keep believing that."

Angela frowned. "She's Invisible. How did you know?"

"I can see them." Tobias locked eyes with her. "Why do you think Joel didn't kill me? He wanted my gift."

Angela hadn't known any of their kind could spot Invisibles. "That's a very handy skill."

"Yes, but I won't use it for you either. Invisibles have a right to their privacy."

“I agree.” Angela’s voice lowered. “Do you have a gift you *will* use for me?” She assumed the second locked door held another power that he didn’t want anyone to take advantage of.

Surprised, Tobias nodded. “I can help you get the truth from people. I hear lies like some people hear voices.”

“Will you use that gift for my dream?”

“No.” He sighed. “But I’ll use it for our survival. When you find Laura, I’ll help you question her.”

Angela walked away, fury growing. “You may not need to. If she’s found doing something wrong, she won’t make it to an interrogation.”

Tobias shrugged. “One less problem.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Angela wasn’t hung up on always having a trial anymore. *If they’re guilty, we’re not wasting time. I’ll burn them alive.*

4

“Would you like a piece of my candy, little girl?”

Missy paused in the dim employee hall. “I’m not allowed to take candy from strangers.”

Laura smiled, holding out the candy bar. “I’m part of your camp now. I’m not a stranger.”

Missy frowned. “You’re not ‘posed to be here.” Missy put a hand on Dog’s shoulder. “My friend doesn’t like you.”

Laura's smile didn't falter. "Your friend just doesn't know me." Laura put the candy bar on the shelf and retreated. "See? It's all yours."

Missy looked at the candy bar. She wanted it. "Step back more."

Laura took two steps backward, still smiling. "I could be your friend too."

Missy snatched the candy bar from the shelf.

Laura nodded. "It's okay. I'm one of you now. You can trust me."

Dog growled, fur bushing out.

Missy patted his shoulder. "She was cleared. She must be okay." Missy held up the candy bar. "And she gave me this!" Missy tore open the wrapper, sniffing. "Hershey bars are the best."

Don't eat it! Dog snapped at the candy.

Missy spun away and shoved it into her mouth. She chewed quickly, swallowing and then biting again.

Dog whined as Laura watched, grin turning ugly. *Not good! Marc!*

Missy paused in chewing, lids drooping. "Tired. Need a nap." She curled up right there and put her cheek on her arm.

Laura came forward, lifting her hand.

Dog shoved into the woman's mind. *I'll rip out your throat!*

Laura hesitated. She was shocked at the clear communication.

Dog lunged, teeth clamping around her thigh.

Laura sent a blast of her fire spell directly into the wolf's head.

Dog fell heavily to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, whimpering at the heat, the pain. *Too hot! Put me out!*

Dog rolled to smother the flames.

Laura fired again, furious that her plans were being interrupted.

The flames hit Dog's leg, catching the fur.

The female cat lunged from under the shelf and landed on Laura's face. It dug in claws and then jumped to the top of the shelf before she could retaliate.

Laura drew energy to fire again.

The two cats took off running.

Dog rose from his roll and ran down the opposite hall, howling and calling for help.

Laura knelt down and picked up the remaining candy. She tossed it in the garbage can and carefully lifted the child, not caring about the blood dripping from her leg or the intense pain. She limped down the opposite hallway. "I have important work to do, little girl, and none of it would be possible without you."

5

Marc flew through the hallway; Angela was on his heels. Eagles tried to keep up, but they couldn't hear the wolf shouting.

“This way!” Marc shoved the employee door open and stopped as the wolf appeared, running full out.

*Missy needs help! The woman gave her candy!
She fired at me!*

Marc pointed. “Show us.”

Angela let Marc and the Eagles go by, mind spinning. *We’re being led away again.* She turned toward the camp area, concentrating. *If someone wants Missy, it can only be for her time gift. Are they trying to view the future... Angela’s rage turned her eyes red. It’s not the future. It’s the past.* She ran to the camp area, followed by her confused guard.

She slid into that hallway and ran to the craft room where the den mothers were keeping their kids occupied.

Den mothers looked up in concern.

Angela ignored them, sweeping for her twins. She found them resting peacefully next to Autumn’s bassinet.

“Hey, that new woman took Marc’s kids to the play area. She said her nieces wanted someone to hang out with.” Francesca smiled at her. “The kids were really excited. I hope that’s okay.”

Angela’s heart dropped. *Cody! Cate!*

There was no answer.

Marc! Play area!

On my way!

Angela waved her guard to stay. “No one leaves this room; no one comes in.”

Gabe and Ed took up posts on the door, frowning at Francesca.

Francesca stared as Angela ran down the hall. “Did I do something wrong?”

Ed scowled at her. “You handed Marc’s kids over to a stranger. I’m sure he’ll be fine with it.”

Francesca paled. “She was cleared! And we were busy with the other kids.”

Ed didn’t say anything else. He didn’t need to.

Francesca realized her job as a den mother had just ended. “Marc will never trust me again.”

Monica frowned at her. “Shouldn’t you care about the missing kids instead of yourself?” Monica pointed at a chair in the corner. “Go sit over there. When Marc comes for you, I don’t want to be in the way.”

6

“Get out of the way!” Marc shoved by the guards in the hallway and slid down the rail of the steps to the lower deck. He ran full out, heart pounding. *I just got them! Don’t take my kids! Please, don’t take my kids!*

Marc flew into the play area. It was empty. *Not here!*

I’m checking the other one! Angela was also running full out, but she wasn’t begging fate to spare them. *Hurt those kids and I’ll keep you alive while Marc skins you!*

Both adults reached the second play area at the same time. Angela let him go first, seeing the door was locked.

Marc slammed into it with his body and snapped the lock. He barreled in and drew up short, mind blazing with panic and fury.

Angela entered the playroom in a cool walk, narrowed in on the woman in the rear by the slides.

“Stop there.” Laura had chosen this play area because it had just been checked by security. She’d hoped to have more time before anyone found her.

Marc saw the knife against Cody’s throat and Cate’s blank expression. She was on the turf next to them. Missy’s prone body was behind Laura. The kids were arranged in a tight circle around her. All on their sides, with hands clasped around ankles, there was no way he could rush Laura without her being able to hurt one of the kids with her knife.

“I’ll make it fast. They won’t feel it, I promise. And then we can all go back to our old lives.”

Marc realized she was trying to do the reset; then he understood what she meant. *They have to die for us to reset time! I didn’t know!*

“I don’t have to kill them all.” Laura smiled, madness showing. “Just two of them. You can pick which one I spare.”

Angela motioned the Eagles around the room, using her hands to tell them to take the shot as soon as she called it.

Marc slowly advanced, mind spinning. There was no way he could grab all three kids. He paled as he spotted the blood on them and the floor.

“I’m sorry, really.” Laura pressed the knife tight against Cody’s neck. “When time resets, you won’t even know you had them. It’s a win-win.”

Angela knew Marc wasn’t capable of negotiating their release. His rage was burning too hotly. She grabbed his wrist and took the front position. “Okay, but I get to pick.”

Laura liked that answer. “As the alpha here, that feels right. You should get to pick who lives and dies.”

“I’ve never done a reset. How does it work?” Angela inched closer, forcing Marc to stay behind her. She gave him an order with her hands, hoping he obeyed and let her handle it.

Laura frowned, grip tightening on the blade. “They have to bleed at the same time. When it mixes together, my spell will reset time to the date in the charm.”

“Cool. What date did you pick?” Angela made one more motion to those intently observing her hands.

Laura’s expression tightened. “The day before the war. I lost my husband and my mother.”

Angela pinpointed the blood to Laura’s leg wound. *Dog got a great bite in on her.* “Don’t the kids have to be awake for it to work?”

Laura nodded. “Missy will wake up soon. The candy only had a little hydroxyzine.”

Angela studied Cody and Cate and found them aware behind their dazed eyes. “Did you charm Marc’s twins or drug them too?”

“It’s an obedience charm. Only I can remove it.”

Angela didn’t give away the shadow moving into place. “I’m sorry you lost your family.”

Laura stared at her in pain. “I can’t live without them.”

“I understand. You won’t have to.” Angela snapped her fingers.

Shawn fired once.

Laura let go of the knife and fell backwards with a single round in her forehead.

Marc and Angela rushed to the kids, both calling for their medics.

Shawn lowered the rifle and left the play area. *I hate the job some days; this isn’t one of them.* He keyed his mike. “The threat has been neutralized. Cleanup crew needed in playground two.”

Shawn leaned against the wall, trying to get control of his heart. Witnessing Missy’s body lying there had almost broken him. *When she wakes up, she’s getting the first spanking of her life.*

Pam flew by him and ran into the play area. “Where is she? I’ll kill that bitch! Point me at her!”

Shawn stayed where he was, now fighting the need to go talk to Kyle. *If I was one of them, I would have known Missy was in trouble. Kyle became a descendant with Jennifer’s help...*

Angela came out and glared at Shawn.

Shawn lowered his chin. *I'm sorry. I can't help wanting to protect her.*

Angela relented. *You have my permission. You just have to talk Pam into it. Only a mate can share gifts with a normal and I doubt she'll agree.*

Shawn frowned. "Why? I'm clearly one of the good guys."

"You are. That's why she's not going to agree."

"She will when I tell her you gave me permission."

"No, I won't." Pam came out with Missy over her shoulder and walked toward the elevator. "I'm taking her to the med bay. The medics are still busy with Trent and the new people. Come on."

Shawn followed, but he didn't ask why she wouldn't agree. *It can wait. Right now, Missy's safety has to come first.*

Angela was proud of both adults. Pam might eventually give in, but right now she was blaming this attack on Missy being a descendant. She wasn't going to sentence Shawn to that too.

Marc came out next. He was carrying both children who were still dazed and unresponsive. "I don't know how to help them!"

"Get them to the med bay. I'll ask around."

Marc nodded, mind saying everything he couldn't put into words yet.

Angela smiled at him. "It's my honor. Go care for your babies." She walked down the hall and went back to the camp area.

Tobias was waiting next to his cabin. “It wears off. Let them sleep. They won’t remember much.”

Angela let out a sound of relief. “Thank you.”

Tobias went into his cabin and slammed the door.

Ralph scowled. “Should we move him to the brig?”

“No. He’s not the problem.” Angela stopped in the doorway of Laura’s room. Her two nieces stared back with fear all over them.

“Did you know what she was planning?”

Both girls gestured wildly, denying it.

Angela believed them. She waved Ralph over.

“No one goes in—not even Marc.”

Ralph gently shut the door and leaned against it.

Angela sat in the chair by the craft room. Once Marc made sure his kids were okay, he would come here. If they didn’t stop him, he would kill Francesca. *And as much as I’d like to let him, she made an honest mistake and we don’t execute people for that. If we did, none of us would be here.*

Angela stewed on her guilt as she waited. *I think I’m losing my edge. I wish Adrian was here to keep me sharp.*

7

“They’ll be okay.” Harry was glad to give Marc good news. “We’ll keep them overnight. You can stay with them.”

Marc walked to the two cots and sat on the stool between the sleeping children. The medics hadn't sedated them. The twins had both crashed shortly after they'd been brought in. Marc put a hand on each wrist, finally starting to calm down.

Cody shifted toward Marc's hand, instinctively sensing his comfort.

Cate didn't move.

Marc tried to connect with her. He hated the thought of her being alone in her mind. *I know what that feels like.*

Harry went to Pam, who was sitting near Missy's cot. "Tonya said the lab tests will be done in about an hour. So far, it appears that she was drugged, but her vitals are all fine."

Pam breathed a deep sigh. "Thank you."

Harry patted her shoulder and joined Terry in the far corner where Trent was resting. They'd sedated him and started working on his open wounds, but neither of them knew what to do about his shattered ankle. Marc hadn't had enough energy left to help. They'd sent for Conner and Angela, hoping they could help.

"Someone carved him up." Terry was pissed. "What the hell is wrong with people?!"

Harry shrugged. "I'd say the apocalypse flipped their switches, but people were doing shit like this long before the war." He checked Trent's vitals on the sheet, frowning. "Where's Conner?"

"Right here." Conner hurried over. "Sorry. I had to wait until the Eagles gave Samantha a new

guard.” Conner put a hand on Trent’s wrist and began to send healing orbs in large gushes.

“Am I in the right place?” Trinity entered the infirmary, not sure who to report to. “Angela told me to come help.”

Harry waved her over. “His ankle is crushed. Can you do anything?”

Trinity frowned. “Maybe.” She took Trent’s other hand and concentrated.

Harry and Terry retreated to let them work, both mentally filing Trinity’s name as a healer. The orbs coming from her hand were bright green instead of rainbow; they floated above Trent’s body where he slowly breathed them in.

Marc stood up. He motioned Shawn over. *I can trust him. His baby is here too.*

Shawn slid into the shadows, hand going to his sidearm. If someone came in here right now and started trouble, they would leave in a body bag.

Marc walked calmly from the infirmary, but his mind was chaotic. *Francesca turned my kids over to a stranger; they almost died!*

His pace increased until he was flying through the halls.

In the lab, Tonya watched Marc leave. *Someone’s about to pay for that mistake.*

Her stomach lurched.

Tonya rubbed her belly, smile playing on her lips. “Yes, your daddy would be that upset too, if you were in danger.” Tonya checked the timer on the test and sighed. “We need a faster way to do the

blood work.” She had a stack of tests waiting from their injured people and more were coming soon from the two teams that had gone out. “Or I need an assistant.”

Tap-tap.

Tonya saw Timmy standing at the door.

“Boss said to come help you in whatever way you want.”

Tonya unlocked the door, grateful to Angela. She locked it back and pointed at the stack of folders on her desk. “The file cards have results. Record them in the correct patient record.”

Timmy sat at the desk and got started, glad he was able to help. *I’m also glad to be in here with Tonya. She won’t hit on me.*

Tonya chuckled. “I might if you get those cards done really fast.”

Timmy laughed, certain she was joking. “Don’t let Kenn hear you say that.”

Tonya snickered and resumed working, mood lifting. *Angela knows exactly what we need when we need it. I hope she’s always our boss.*

8

“Don’t give up.”

Angela tensed at Adrian’s voice. She looked up to find him walking toward her. His blue eyes glowed with love and pride.

“You’ve done too good to give up now. Just try harder.”

“I’m tired.”

Adrian knelt in front of her. “I know you are. You need a break. Get them to the island and you can take one.”

Angela understood she was dreaming, but he was so real! She reached out and slapped his bearded face.

Angela snapped awake. She saw Marc coming down the hall and smiled. *I always prefer him.*

Marc reached for the handle to the craft door.

Angela clasped his wrist, sending out a command he couldn’t refuse.

Marc felt the fury leave. In its place, came regret.

Angela stood up and held him, able to feel his heart furiously beating against her chest.

Marc let her calm him down before he went in. He slowly thawed, arms coming around her.

Angela inhaled of his fiery scent, mind going to the dream. *I don’t need anyone’s approval or support. I’ll do this job until I’m dead. It’s why I was born. No more dream walking.*

Marc heaved a sigh, letting out his fear and misery. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor, always.” Angela gestured. “Now go put the fear of Marc into Francesca.”

Marc cracked a reluctant smile.

His demon breathed a sigh of relief. Marc’s anger when it came was scary even for the spirit inside.

Angela didn't go in with him to make sure he didn't hurt Francesca. The room was full of bored kids and nervous den mothers. Marc wouldn't hurt anyone now unless they were a threat.

Angela moved toward the hallway, waving off her guard. "Your shift's over. Go eat or something."

Gabe and Ed ignored her order, following anyway. They assumed she was going to the QZ to check on the teams and the new people.

Angela went to the infirmary and joined Conner and Trinity. She began shooting healing orbs before she reached them.

Gabe and Ed joined Shawn in the shadows, both pleased with her for putting an injured team member first.

Conner sat down in a nearby chair, grinning at Trinity. "Now you get to see what real power is."

Trinity chuckled. "I already knew she was a badass, boy."

Angela ignored them both as she tried to heal the rest of Trent's injuries. She concentrated on his ankle, trying to master a new gift. She'd just copied bone healing from Trinity without the snare-master even knowing it.

Conner stopped himself from saying he'd noticed. *I'm different. It's not a surprise.*

Angela looked over at him.

Conner flushed. "What?"

"Have you eaten yet?"

Conner nodded. “Samantha and I stopped by the mess after Marc threatened her place on the council.”

“Well, Candy hasn’t, and she’s going there now. Go keep her company.”

Conner’s grin lit up his face, making him look like his father.

Angela glanced away from his happiness. “Go on. Get out of here.”

Conner was gone a few seconds later.

“That was nice of you.” Trinity liked Conner. “He’s a good kid.”

“Yes, he is.” Angela sat in the chair Conner had vacated, yawning. “He’s also a wild teenager with gifts beyond belief.”

Trinity lifted her brow. “Are you okay?”

Angela forced a smile. “Fighting self-doubt. I’ll be good in a few.”

“As soon as you lock it all up and pretend it isn’t there?”

Angela sighed. “You’re a smart cookie too.”

Trinity tugged the curtain closed so people coming in to help with the other patients couldn’t see the boss. “Got a minute to talk?”

Angela nodded. “I’m all yours for about three minutes and then I’ll have to go stop Kyle from throwing away his only chance to hold onto his marriage.”

“Well that helps, since it’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Angela frowned. “Kyle’s marriage?”

“No. Yours.” Trinity met her eyes with compassion. “You and Marc need a break; I think you should elope and spend a couple days hiding from everyone. You’ve more than earned it.”

Angela snorted lowly. “We can’t take two days away right now.”

“But you could if your XO was handling things, right?”

Angela was tempted. “But Marc needs to be with his kids right now.”

“The den mothers feel bad. Many of them want another chance to prove to Marc that they can be trusted, and little Cate needs time with the other kids.”

“Agreed, but still. After this, Marc won’t go for it and I wouldn’t feel right bringing it up.”

Trinity frowned. “I think you’re scared of being married. It wouldn’t matter if things were completely peaceful right now. That ring on your finger doesn’t mean anything because you can always take it off.”

“That’s not true.”

“Then why don’t you want to tie the knot with Marc?”

Angela sighed. “I’m not ready yet.”

Trinity shrugged. “This is the part where you usually tell the person to grow a pair, isn’t it?”

Angela laughed. “Yes.” Her amusement faded. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Sure. Just don’t think about it too long or Marc will assume you’ve changed your mind.” Trinity left the area, closing the curtains behind her.

“She’s right.” Trent opened an eye, heavily drugged and not feeling much. “It’s okay for you to be happy. It’s not neglecting us.”

Angela came over to the cot and ran a hand over Trent’s brow. “How are you feeling?”

Trent tried to grin, but his mouth muscles didn’t work right. It came out in a grimace.

Angela immediately began shooting healing orbs again.

Trent sighed in cool relief. *I love my alpha.*

Angela shuddered at his memories. “I’m sorry you were taken.”

“So am I. I wasn’t paying enough attention. Don’t blame yourself for my screw-up.”

“Accidents happen; no one is perfect.”

Trent stared at her pointedly. “Same to you.” He shut his lids and let the drugs pull him down into a deep sleep.

Angela stayed with him, heart healing a little. *We really do have a lot of good people here. I can’t let the few bad apples turn me against them or myself.*

Chapter Thirteen

Normalist

January 15th

1

“You wanted me?”

Angela waved her in. “I need you to do something.”

Tonya entered the room and sat down across from Angela. The neat office held only a long table, a few chairs, and a stack of folders. The smell of polish told her the cleaning crew had been in here recently. Tonya never let them into the lab. She did that cleaning herself to make sure none of the tests or equipment got damaged. “What’s up?”

“I need to know if the ship can make it the rest of the way to the island without repairs.”

Tonya tensed. “Why ask me?”

Angela slid a folder across the desk.

Tonya opened it and read the notes.

Tonya has a connection to our ship somehow.

She patted a counter and the lights got brighter.

The ship seemed to groan and she rubbed it; the ship started to sail faster.

Tonya looked up, cheeks flushed. “So?”

“Tonya, do you communicate with this ship?”

Tonya gave a curt nod. “It’s odd, right?”

Angela snorted. “Everything about our lives is odd now, but this is a good thing. Neil and his team applied a layer of epoxy into the worst crack, and we pumped water from the bottom deck, but I’m concerned about other damage. We can’t continue unless I know the ship is okay.”

Tonya shrugged. “I’ll ask.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Can you do it now?”

Tonya stiffened. “With you watching?”

“I’d like to copy it if I can, for direct communication later.”

The walls immediately dimmed.

“That’s interesting.”

Tonya’s head tilted. “The ship doesn’t like you; it doesn’t like the other descendants either.”

“Why not?” Angela wasn’t offended, but it did increase her concerns about their safety.

“Danger follows magic. The ship fears...dying.”

“Don’t we all.”

Tonya ignored Angela’s mutter, listening to the ship. “The epoxy helped. We can sail for a while now. When we get to the island, it wants real repairs.”

“Agreed.” Angela studied the pregnant redhead. Tonya’s hair was curled into a cute, fluffy bun and her face held a light layer of makeup. She had earrings in and wore a blue maternity dress over black leggings. Angela felt a bit self-conscious about her own appearance. The usual braid, jeans, and tank top felt boring in contrast to the vibrant

woman. Even her fruity perfume was nice. “You look good.”

Tonya grinned. “Are you flirting with me?”

Angela snickered. “Just an observation. It’s nice to see you happy.”

“I really am.” Tonya beamed. “This life is great for me.”

“Because you’re needed.”

“Yes. We all have to have that, right?”

“I knew descendants did, especially the alphas. Before the war, I never considered everyone felt that way.”

“You’ve learned a lot since then.” Tonya decided now was a good time to reveal another need. “I want you to give me custody of Courtney’s baby when it’s born.”

Angela stared. “What?”

“Courtney is a whore who tried to steal my man. She has no experience with kids, and she doesn’t have a partner to help her. There’s no way she’d be a good mother.”

“And you will be?”

Tonya was offended by the doubt in Angela’s voice. “I’ve come a long way. I’ll make sure their baby has a good life.”

“What makes you think Courtney won’t?”

Tonya shrugged. “She’s a relief provider.”

“So were you.”

Tonya immediately denied that. “I never serviced the Eagles. I chased power through sex. Low-level Eagles couldn’t give me that.”

“And how is your past better than hers?”

“I’ve changed; she hasn’t.” Tonya stood up. “You don’t have to decide now. We have months to go.”

Angela sighed. “Do you have proof that Courtney is still a relief source?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t mention it if I didn’t.” Tonya motioned toward the stairs. “She’s down there now, trying to arrange a moment with Tommy since Wade isn’t giving her the time of day anymore.” Tonya left the office, confident that Angela would side with her. *And if she doesn’t, I have other aces to play.*

Angela made a note on it and cleared her throat. “Next!”

Theo came in and took the warm chair, glad to be sitting for a minute. “There’s no damage from the explosions, though we can’t know for sure about the hull unless we go down there again. Grant said he’s ready to sail us out as soon as you call it.”

Angela nodded at the stained, tired man. “I want the rest of the updates first.”

“In case others want to leave now that you scared them again?” Theo grimaced at her expression. “I’m sorry.”

Angela hid her unhappiness. “So am I. Tell the Eagles a group of camp people may come up to leave; let them go.”

“I will. Anything else for me?”

“Are the tugs in?”

“Yes. Terrance and Jonny did a great job pulling us out of the harbor.”

“Jonny will probably be joining the sailing team.” *Though Terrance won’t. Grant didn’t like him up there.*

“Excellent.” Theo got up, but he paused. “I am sorry.”

Angela sighed. “It’s the truth. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I don’t blame you for doing it. We have to get rid of the traitors.”

“But?”

“But we’re losing too many normals.” His voice lowered. “Unless you only want descendants on your island.” Theo left before he could say more, not wanting to make her feel worse.

Angela made another note in her book and gestured. “Next!”

Jayda came in, but she didn’t sit. “Emma and Francesca are in the brig. I’ll be on duty there overnight.”

“Good. Is the play area cleaned?”

“Almost finished.” Jayda rolled her eyes. “Stanley tried to help and dropped the bottle of bleach. We’re letting it air out.”

“What about Laura’s nieces?”

Jayda frowned. “Debra wanted to handle that one. Since she knows sign language, I agreed. She’ll give the report to you when she’s done, but so far they’re sad, not angry. Debra thinks they knew

Laura was unstable, but they didn't have knowledge of the reset spell."

Angela noted it, smiling. "Go enjoy some off time until your next shift."

Jayda shook her head as she left. "Too much to be done right now. I'll have downtime tomorrow, maybe."

I like that woman. She's solid on her priorities. Angela closed her notebook. "Anyone else waiting out there?"

No one responded.

Angela was relieved. She went to the exit and scanned the hall. Angela frowned at the woman in the chair by her door. "Why didn't you come in?"

Brittani didn't look up. "I'm not sure you want to hear what I have to say."

"I probably don't." Angela crooked a finger. "Walk with me. I have to get to the QZ."

Brittani fell in step, trying to figure out how to bring up her problem.

Angela already knew. She took pity on the tired woman who was still dotted in ashes and sweat. "Are you happy being our cook?"

"Yes."

"Do you still want to be an Eagle?"

"Yes..."

"But?"

"But I'm scared of screwing it up because I can't put my feelings aside."

"And you still want Daryl to resign. You know that won't go over well."

“Yes.”

“So what’s the problem you can’t tell me?”

Brittani drew in a deep breath. “Daryl wishes he was still a normal. He wants to lock any kids as soon as they’re born. I don’t. I like being a magic user.”

“Ah.” Angela wasn’t surprised, only disappointed. “A lot of people are evaluating friendships and relationships based on that difference.”

“And it’s wrong, right? I feel like shit.”

“Making sure you’re going to be happy isn’t wrong.”

“But basing the choice on this is.”

Angela shrugged. “Race, religion, politics—those used to be what we judged on. Were those wrong?”

Brittani nodded. “Some of them, yes.”

“And you think you’re being...racist?” Angela didn’t have another word for it yet.

“We’re using the term *normalist*.”

Angela laughed. She couldn’t help it.

Brittani smiled tiredly. “I know it sounds stupid, but I’m really worried our differences will ruin any chance we have.”

“How does Daryl feel?”

“He’s worried both sides will hassle us. So am I.”

Angela stopped and locked eyes with the beautiful woman. “What if they do? Will it change how you feel about him?”

“Never. But things like this can stress a long relationship. We’ve only been together for two months, and half of that was spent with him in the infirmary and me recovering from a gunshot.”

“I understand. I wish I could tell you those things won’t happen, but you’re smart enough to know there are no guarantees in life. All you can do is try to be happy with him.” Angela walked away. “Or you can lock up your gifts and pretend to be something you aren’t.”

Brittani didn’t follow. Those words rang in her mind with loud slaps that hurt her heart. *I can’t do that. I’m a descendant. I won’t give that up, not even for my soulmate.*

Angela caught the thought and approved, but she doubted it was over yet. She would probably have to intervene at some point. *I’m not anticipating that moment.*

Angela neared the QZ, picking up the rough mood before she got there. *Not looking forward to this one either.* Marc hadn’t gotten to tell Jennifer anything yet. He was with his kids in the infirmary right now, which left it to her to set down the law to everyone. *This part of the job stinks.* Angela tapped on the QZ door and stepped inside. Angela smelled gunpowder, sweat, and fading adrenaline. *I miss that.* “Let’s talk.”

No one spoke.

Angela scanned them and chose to save the worst for last. She went to the small table where

Gus, Kenn, and Jeff were playing cards while waiting for their tests to come back.

The QZ was well stocked with boxes and bags that none of them had opened yet. They knew Tonya would clear them before they needed to use those supplies. She'd already been by for their blood work.

Angela took the empty chair and waited.

Kenn knew why she was here. "It wasn't my idea."

"I assumed. But you agreed?"

Kenn shrugged, voice even. "Tonya wants it, and I want Tonya."

"That doesn't make it right."

"That's why I told her we need your blessing." Kenn didn't ogle her like he wanted to. "You're not going to agree, so I'm in the clear."

Angela waited.

Kenn frowned. "You don't agree, right?" He blew out a frustrated sigh, slapping his cards down. "You can't do that to Courtney. She deserves the same chance to change that the rest of us have received in Safe Haven."

Angela was relieved to know Kenn hadn't reverted. "Agreed. *You* can tell Tonya I said no."

Kenn waited for the other shoe to drop. He could feel it coming.

"You can also tell Courtney if she wants to keep being a relief source while she's pregnant, I may change my mind."

Kenn's anger filled the room. "She's still doing that?"

Angela looked over at Tommy.

Tommy concentrated on the table as he answered. "She came by a few minutes ago and used Eagle code to ask. I said no."

"So did I." Jeff shrugged as people rotated to stare at him in surprise. "When Tommy turned her down, she switched to the best-looking guy in here."

People laughed.

"Wait. She didn't ask me and I'm definitely better looking than you." Gus grinned.

Kenn shrugged. "Maybe she was scared of your ex. Trinity's snare is wicked."

Laughter broke a layer of the tension among most of them, but not between Jennifer and Kyle. They were on opposite ends of the room, pretending to sleep while ignoring each other.

Angela moved on to Ivan. "How'd the run go?"

Ivan shrugged. "Fine. We got in, killed some people, and came home with our targets."

Angela lifted a brow. "And?"

Ivan frowned. "And why is Marc so pissed? I can feel it from here."

Angela included everyone as she filled them in. "One of the new people from the detention center kidnapped his kids, along with Missy, and tried to perform a forbidden spell. Laura died for it. His twins are still in the infirmary. They haven't woken yet from the charm she used. Missy woke and is

fine, but we're still keeping her in the infirmary overnight."

Morgan breathed a sigh of relief. Now he knew why Shawn and Pam were upset.

Ivan didn't ask his next question.

Angela answered it anyway. "Marc is taking a leave of absence to spend time with his children."

Mutters went through the wide, tiled room.

Angela denied their thoughts. "I'm not searching for a replacement. I have an XO." She looked at Jennifer.

Jennifer rolled over to glare. "I can't believe you're not supporting me."

Angela sighed. "He's right; I endangered his child by sending you out." She gestured at Neil. "How did she do?"

Neil was ready for the question. "She was solid. She gave us all a break when the village women attacked."

Angela frowned, sensing he was holding something back. "All of you?"

Neil grunted, not looking at his team. *Sorry, I tried.* "It gave Tommy a break. But he came through when she needed to reload. He handled his share."

Tommy dropped his head, ashamed. "I'm done. Take me off the roster."

"Are you sure?" Angela didn't want to lose any Eagles. She needed all of them.

Tommy nodded at her. "I made up my mind when it happened. I can't be Special Forces if I can't deal with female bad guys."

“Agreed.” Angela didn’t read his mind. She already knew what was going to happen. “You can still provide security over the kids and our captain. I’m not pulling you all the way unless you really want that.”

Tommy wasn’t sure, but he felt bad for disappointing her. “Thank you...”

Angela turned back to Jennifer before the girl could start protesting. “It’s a leave until after the birth and then you’ll be reevaluated.”

Jennifer crossed her arms over her chest. “Do whatever you want.”

“And you’ll do the same, right?”

Jennifer’s voice hardened. “I might leave over this. Start searching for another heir.”

“I already have been.” Angela wasn’t going to be bullied into making another bad choice. “A group is going to the top deck shortly to take a lifeboat to the island. Go with them, or suck it up and do the job I gifted you with.” Angela turned to Kyle before Jennifer could complain. “You were wrong. You understand why?”

Kyle nodded stiffly. “I interrupted a run for personal drama.”

“Yes. Do you accept my punishment?”

“Of course, Boss.” It was easy for him to give in because Angela had sided with him about the baby.

“As the top Eagle, more is expected of you.” Angela delivered a harsh blow. “You’ll spend time with the level ones while Daryl leads your team.”

Kyle stiffened. “What?!”

Jennifer sat up. “That’s not fair!”

Angela ignored them both, moving on to Ray. “Schedule changes are in the works. Your team made it clear why this is happening?”

Ray grunted. “I just don’t agree.”

“As long as you understand why.” Angela motioned at Daryl. “Brittani gave me shit because I sent you out before you were recovered.”

“She what?”

“She wants you to resign. I’m telling you now so you have time to calm down before you talk to her. Throwing away a great relationship isn’t a good idea—for any of us.” Angela swept the surprised, sullen team. “Anyone else need to be reamed right now?”

Molly held up a hand. “I’m still alive.”

Angela walked toward the other room of their QZ, where the new people were listening and eating. “Yes, and you’re going to stay that way. Report to the infirmary as soon as you’re cleared.” Angela entered the next room and went to Somchai.

Somchai hurried to meet her, thin hand out and smile lighting up his gaunt, stitched face. “Thank you!”

“It’s my honor.” Angela sat at the center table, ignoring the guards who moved closer to provide protection. “Come tell me about your lives since the war.”

The two teams listened as Angela pulled horror stories from the new people. Her words were kind

but firm, spreading Safe Haven rules with every comment.

Wade shut his eyes and tried to go to sleep. He was the only one, other than Neil, who hadn't been chewed on or hit with a surprise. *It feels nice to not be in trouble.*

Neil caught the thought. *I plan to keep it that way. Let the others screw up. We'll be the top Special Forces team soon.*

Wade smiled. *I'm good with that. So who's our new XO?*

Neil had already made that choice. *Greg.*

Wade relaxed. *Perfect. Can I tell him?*

Neil grinned. *We might do it together while we all get drunk. Depends on what duty we get when we're out of here.*

Wade suddenly frowned. *How does Samantha feel about drinking?*

Neil wasn't sure. *We'll find out when we stumble back to the cabin and collapse.*

Wade chuckled. *I love my life now.*

Neil sighed. *Me too. I'm just sorry I had to murder two people to get it.*

2

“Can I come in?” Thelma held up a small bag. “I have something for two of your patients.”

Harry waved her in, smiling. *She's hot for being older.* He turned to Trent so he didn't stare. *Always did like them with a few age lines.*

Resting next to Trent's cot, Conner sniggered. "Not a chance with that one, man. She loves her husband." Conner had just helped Molly. She was now sleeping in the cot next to Missy.

Harry laughed. "Figures. All the good ones are taken." He squinted at Trent's chart. "Your vitals are great. How are you feeling?"

Trent flexed his leg and grimaced. "Better. I couldn't do that before. She really helped me." Trent leered at Conner to show he was only joking by not including him.

Conner shrugged, chuckling. "Trinity's got style."

Trent's expression softened. "She can snare me anytime."

Harry and Conner laughed at his dreamy tone. Trent had woken up to find Trinity leaning over him and he'd forgotten how to speak. He hadn't said a word until she left.

"Thank you!"

Harry looked over to find Missy hugging Thelma. He scanned and found Dog on the floor, eating from a pristine plate. The wolf had serious burns. They'd applied medication and told him to stay here, but Harry doubted the wolf would cooperate much longer.

Thelma hugged the little girl back. "You're welcome. Come by the mess when you're out of here and I'll give you both all the bacon you want—on any plate you want."

Dog licked the woman's hand.

Thelma carefully rubbed the wolf, smile playing on her lips. *So soft!*

Missy climbed from her cot and walked over to the next partition. She eased inside and stood between the two cots.

Marc was in the chair against the wall.

Missy crawled into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. “They’ll be okay; it’s all right.”

Marc didn’t hide his tears as he held her. “I’m sorry we didn’t protect you better.”

Missy’s arms tightened. “It was my fault, not yours. Don’t feel bad. Laura was a big meanie.”

Marc let out a surprised laugh. “Yes, she was.” He set her on her feet. “You should rest.”

Missy immediately went back to her cot. *I’m never breaking the rules again.*

Dog jumped onto the cot with her and curled up on her ankles. His fur was singed and burnt in several places and a small part of his ear was gone. It hurt, but he was proud of getting a bite in on the evil magic user. He put his head down and let out a tired huff.

Thelma rubbed his good ear, then cleaned up the empty plate.

The three injured refugees from Port Stanley observed them all nervously. They were bandaged, medicated, and they’d been fed, but no one was speaking to them and the guards swept them continuously with pinched faces. It was obvious the guards didn’t trust them.

The refugee with the stab wound motioned to Terry. “Are we okay to be here?”

Terry nodded. “The rest of your companions are in our quarantine zone. You’ll be moved there when your vitals are good enough.” Terry patted the man’s thin leg. “Don’t worry. Once you’re cleared, the guards will relax.”

The man shut his eyes, eager to rest now that he was safe.

Terry glanced at the guards and shrugged. As a medic, it was part of his job to comfort the new people, but it was a lie. After this latest attack by new arrivals, the Port Stanley people would probably spend months being watched before they were really accepted.

“I have some test results.” Tonya went straight to Marc. “They’re fine. All clear for the hydroxyzine she used on Missy.”

Marc frowned. “Then why aren’t they waking up? It’s been hours.”

Tonya tried to offer comfort. “The obedience charm takes a while to wear off, according to the information I gathered. When people fight, it takes longer because it uses up their energy. I would imagine your wild children fought her the entire time, so they’ll need to recharge.”

“Their energy is low?” Marc was relieved. *I can fix that!*

Tonya frowned. “I think so. Tobias verified the information.”

Marc immediately began sending energy into both kids.

Tonya observed, eager to discover if the information was correct.

Cody's lashes fluttered.

Tonya pointed. "It's working. Keep going."

Marc pushed harder, straining.

Cate's hand twitched.

Tonya reached out to help.

"Don't you dare!" Kenn came into the infirmary. He'd just been cleared. "*I'll* help him. You get that sweet ass back to the lab and clear the rest of the team."

"Yes, dear." Tonya smiled at him and went back to the lab.

Kenn placed a hand on Marc's shoulder and opened his energy bank.

Marc accepted it gratefully. Energy rushed into both children, filling them in seconds.

Cody opened his eyes. "Daddy?"

Marc scooped the boy into his arms and held him, fighting not to cry again.

"Cody?" Cate slowly sat up.

Marc opened his other arm, hoping the girl hadn't reverted back to not trusting him at all.

Cate scrambled up and jumped into his arms, jostling Cody for room. "You came for me!"

Marc buried his face against their shoulders to hide his tears.

Kenn left them alone, tugging the curtain shut to give privacy.

Missy smiled at Kenn. “That was nice.”

Kenn came over; he stopped when the wolf growled at him.

Missy put a hand on Dog’s shoulder. “It’s okay. He’s my friend too.”

Kenn was surprised. He grinned at the girl. “You’re weird. I like that.”

Missy giggled. She pointed at the chair. “Will you read to me?”

Kenn obligingly sat in the chair and picked up the book from Missy’s cot. “Once upon a time...”

The guards gawked. None of them would have guessed Kenn could be compassionate to kids, let alone be friendly.

Molly sat up, also shocked at the scene. “The world really has come to an end.”

3

“This is your captain. We are setting sail in fifteen minutes. The boss says anyone who wants to stay here should report to the top deck immediately and we’ll lower a lifeboat for you. Everyone else is to resume their normal shifts now that the teams are out of the QZ. That is all.” Grant hung up the mike, hoping no one showed up. *We can’t keep losing people.*

Port Stanley was still smoldering, but the flames were gone. The entire port town was a loss, and the water along the shore was filled with charred debris, but the fire had stopped there, leaving a smoldering

port back-dropped by the same barren landscape they'd found upon arriving.

Grant frowned at the quick appearance of five normal camp members coming up the ramp. He breathed a sigh of relief as that group went to the fishing nets and began retying strings to catch more fish for their testing. Ralph had begun organizing people to handle the extra chores.

Grant saw movement and lifted his glasses. He spotted a few of the deserters from earlier erecting tents near the burnt town. "Good luck; you'll need it."

The elevator dinged. Grant turned around, automatically stiffening.

Zack stepped forward to meet the person, hand on his gun.

Ray stepped out, ignoring Zack. He went to Grant and hugged him.

Grant clutched him, heart thumping. "I'm glad you're back."

Ray retreated, sighing. "They're splitting us up."

"No. We're following the rules now." Grant smiled. "It'll be fine. I'll meet you in our cabin when my shift ends."

Ray went back to the elevator. "The medics pulled me from duty again. I'm on recovery for another week—elevators only."

"Good. Go rest. Zack has me covered."

Ray reluctantly went below to get settled.

“He’s such a good guy. I’m lucky.” Grant turned back toward the island and watched the deserters set up a base camp.

Zack agreed, but he didn’t speak. He was trying very hard not to think about personal drama while on duty. Hearing that Kyle had been demoted was a wakeup call. The boss wasn’t going to tolerate more rule-breaking and Zack didn’t want to get in trouble. He liked the new trust Angela had in him. *I’m not going to ruin it by missing something important.*

Zack saw movement and stepped to the doorway. “Damn it.”

A group of normal camp members were coming up the steps with suitcases and bad attitudes. Zack stayed there, glowering.

The group didn’t look up. They went straight to a lifeboat and waited for the angry Eagles on duty to get it set for them. He tensed as another figure appeared on the steps. *Angela!*

Jennifer walked up the ramp and came toward the bridge. She glowered at Zack. “I’m not leaving. Stop shouting for the boss.”

Zack flushed, retreating.

Jennifer joined Grant. “I’ll be your student until we get to the island—boss’s orders.”

“Excellent.” Grant pointed at the deck. “As soon as they’re gone, we’ll pull up the anchor and get moving.”

Jennifer slid into the XO seat. The view from here was amazing. Her rage began to ease as she

studied the calm water and slowly sinking sun. *Maybe this will be okay.*

Grant handed her a clipboard. “Those are the procedures for pulling up the anchor. You’ll handle it. Start memorizing where those buttons are on the console.” Grant kept her busy, eager to train his relief. He enjoyed being their captain, but Peter’s words had bothered him. He didn’t want to be the only captain. *It’ll use me up too fast.*

Jennifer caught the thought and felt another chunk of anger fall away. *I really am needed up here. It’s not make-work or a punishment.*

Zack slid back into the doorway and observed the group that was leaving. If one of them made a move, he wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger. Their thoughts were ugly, dangerous. Zack felt bad for the group on land. He assumed these people would join them, but just because they had more bodies didn’t mean they were going to be able to get along.

“We’ll be sailing the tip of South America in about twelve hours.” Grant was still nervous about it. “I’ll be up here with you before then.”

Jennifer started to get excited. “So while you’re sleeping, it’s on autopilot or something?”

Grant shook his head. “You’ll monitor the maps and radar, and you’ll use this wheel to keep us on course.”

“No autopilot?!”

“Nope. You’ll be sailing the ship.”

Jennifer grinned. “This is so cool!”

Grant laughed. “I think so too. If you have issues, you’ll call me and I’ll be up here in a minute flat.”

“What if something goes wrong in that minute?”

Grant shrugged. “It’s the risk we take as captain. Do the best you can.”

“What can go wrong?”

“Debris areas, ship springs a leak, another fire, hitting a reef, pirates.”

Jennifer swallowed her case of nerves. “I don’t know how to handle any of that. Start showing me what to do now. My gifts aren’t enough in those situations.”

4

“I want your gifts! Tell that baby to do exactly as I say or I’ll snap your neck!”

Matti didn’t struggle in Vennie’s tight grip. She also didn’t answer.

Vennie shook her, not caring that the other villagers were glaring. “I’ll kill you! Tell it to obey me!”

Vennie had returned to find Chuck roasting on a spit and the men free, but none of them had challenged his right to be here or to take control. “I mean it! Chuck’s dead! I’m the alpha now!”

Women across the village turned in tandem; their orbs lit up bright red. Hands dropped to stomachs.

Vennie didn't notice. He tightened his grip on Chuck's girlfriend. "I know you're pregnant! Chuck told me the baby has gifts!"

Matti sent the order. *Kill him.*

The other women lifted their hands.

Vennie screamed, staggering at the pain. He spun around to find the angry women forming a circle around him to prevent an escape. "No! Help me!"

The men stayed back, terrified at the evidence of Chuck's power still being with them.

The two dozen women lowered their hands; Vennie fell to the ground, clutching his chest.

The women blinked. Their eyes faded to normal. They resumed their chores without speaking.

The men hurried to dispose of the mess, hoping Chuck's unborn children didn't target them next.

Chapter Fourteen

That Island Is Mine

January 16th

1

“**W**ake up!” Kendle shook Adrian. “We’re lost!”

Adrian groaned at the rough movement. He pried a lid open. “What?”

Kendle pulled on his arm. “We’re lost. Get up. You have to find them!”

Adrian tried to sit up. “Damn it!” He clutched his side, unable to reach the worst of the pain.

“Come on! You have to get up!”

“What’s all the yelling?” Sadie entered the room with bleary eyes and wild hair.

“I lost sight of them and now I don’t know where we are!” Kendle didn’t care that she was yelling.

“You lost them?!” Sadie ran up the steps to check the monitor.

Kendle slapped the couch. “Get up, Adrian!”

Adrian stayed down. “I need to heal. A couple more days.”

“Fine!” Kendle stood up. “Unlock me so I can track them.”

Adrian frowned at her, teeth clenched against the pain in his ribs and side.

Kendle stared expectantly. “They’ve been out of sight for ten hours, Adrian! We’re going to lose them!”

“We know where they’re going.” Adrian sucked in another rough breath. “Try to relax.”

“But I don’t know how to sail this ship! I need to see them to follow the path they take or we’ll all die!”

Adrian shuddered as fresh pain lanced through his body. “No.”

Kendle’s eyes narrowed. “Would you like a pain pill?”

Adrian groaned. “Yes!”

“Then unlock me.”

Adrian stared at the bruised castaway in dislike. “Are you sure you want to threaten me?”

Kendle snorted. “A fly could take you out right now, so yes.”

“And what about later, when I’m back on my feet and pissed over the way you’ve treated me?”

Kendle shrugged coolly. “I’ll have my gifts then.”

Adrian didn’t snort like he wanted to. “If I unlock you, Angela will kill me.”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Nice try. Unlock me so I can get us back on the path.”

Adrian stuck to his guns. “No.”

Kendle kicked the couch.

Adrian stiffened. “Kick it again. Maybe you’ll break your foot.”

“Asshole!” Kendle stormed out and up the steps. She went to the bridge to find out if Sadie could operate the controls and monitors. This ship had radar, but she didn’t know how to get it working. The buttons weren’t labeled and she was afraid to just hit them and hope.

Sadie was staring into the distance.

Sadie’s hair was fading to its normal color, but her clothes were still the ragged UN uniform and boots she’d been assigned. Kendle knew her own Eagle clothes were also starting to fall apart, but she refused to wear the UN uniforms Sadie had removed from the first trap team, and they hadn’t thought to keep clothes from the pirates. “Any luck?”

Sadie slowly came out of the daze. “No.” She turned to face Kendle, leaning against the console. “There are other ways to unlock power.”

Kendle sneered. “I know, but unless you want to break my heart or get me pregnant, it won’t work.”

Sadie brayed laughter. “You’re funny.”

Kendle tried to calm down. “What other ways? Maybe I haven’t tried them all yet.”

Sadie enjoyed the salty breeze on her sweaty skin. “What have you tried?”

Kendle sank down on the stool, shoulders slumping. “Anger, love, hatred. None of it works.”

“That’s because you’re trying to invent an issue.” Sadie gestured toward the open ocean glinting at them in dawn’s light. “We’re in trouble. Try fear.”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “I’ve been in worse places than this. I’m not scared.”

“You sounded like it.” Sadie shrugged. “I’m not scared of being alone on the ocean or of sailing rough water. You’re terrified of both of those things.”

Kendle clamped her lips shut to keep from lying again. Sadie was right. *But is it strong enough to break the locks? Marc did it. That can’t be easy to remove...*

Sadie smiled at her. “I’ll help you get there. And then you can unlock me.”

Kendle crossed her arms over her chest. “Why don’t we find *your* fear and you can do it all?”

Sadie sighed happily. “My only fear was the UN. They’re gone now. I’m not scared of anything else.”

“Liar.”

Sadie’s expression darkened. “It would hurt me if he died, but even that isn’t enough. I already tried to use it; my mind knows better.”

Kendle leaned against the wall and braced. “Okay. Do it.”

Sadie frowned. “It’s your fear.”

“You said you’d help.”

“And I will, but you have to get it rolling. I can’t do that for you.”

Kendle shut her eyes. “Stupid idea.”

Sadie waited quietly, observing Kendle’s face to time it.

Kendle ran through her fears, but the terror that had hit her earlier was gone. Adrian had reminded her they knew where Angela was going. They had food and a water filtration system. There was no reason to panic.

“If Adrian dies, so do we.” Sadie played the trump card. “His wound is infected. He’s running a fever. And he’s the only one who knows how to sail this ship.”

Kendle felt fear creeping up on her. “Keep going.”

Sadie did. “If Adrian dies, Marc and Angela will be together forever. He’ll forget all about you.”

Kendle’s heart thumped.

Sadie lowered her voice, enjoying the moment. “They’ll make cute babies.”

Tears stung Kendle’s lids. “Bitch.”

Sadie grinned. “Can you imagine their wedding?”

Kendle’s heart ached. “Yes.” Marc would be stunning in his tux. And his face would light up as Angela came down the aisle... “No!”

Kendle’s fury burst through her mind. “He’s mine! I’ll kill her!” Kendle felt the snap. Her witch flooded in, filling her mind with power and plans.

Sadie grinned. “Now you can unlock me.”

Kendle shuddered. Magic filled her mind; confidence edged in with it. “What do I get out of it?”

Sadie’s smile faltered. She hadn’t expected that. “What do you want?”

Kendle stilled, examining the plan her witch was providing. The time locked up had angered her demon.

Sadie waited, not sure she wanted whatever deal Kendle was about to offer.

“I’m not offering a deal.” Kendle slowly stood up. “You owe me for this. I’ll call in that debt when I need it.”

Sadie grunted. “Fine. Get it done.”

Kendle recognized the crazy glaze hiding behind Sadie’s eyes. “Not yet.” She paused, letting her witch fill in the blanks. “We’ll need to hide it from Adrian.”

Sadie frowned. “How? He has his gifts.”

Kendle walked to the control panel and placed a hand over it. “Distract him.”

“How?”

Kendle shrugged distractedly. “Give him a pill. Or bump his injury. That’ll work.”

“Wow. You’re mean.”

“You have no idea.” The panel lit up, showing an empty radar screen. “You’ll care for him while we sail. When we get to the island, I’ll unlock you.”

“I need time to bond with him before he sees Angela.”

Kendle swept the bridge and found books with images on them related to sailing. She picked up the first one. “If we do this right, he won’t ever see her again.”

Sadie had no choice. “I agree.”

Kendle skimmed the first page of the book. “Go spend time with him while you can.”

“What does that mean?!”

“It means I’m busy; get out.”

Sadie stomped from the bridge.

Kendle kept skimming the book, enjoying the feel of the vicious demon whispering exciting plans in her mind. *I’m coming for you, Angela, and that miserable bastard below won’t be able to stop me. Neither will Marc.*

2

Sadie slammed the door to Adrian’s cabin. “She’s such a bitch!”

Adrian grunted, face twisting.

Sadie hurried to get the bottle of pills from the kit that had belonged to James. “You have to get out of those clothes. And we need to clean the wound again.”

Adrian stiffened, then groaned in pain. “Leave me alone, woman.”

Sadie got the bottle and plopped down on the couch, jostling him.

Adrian flinched. “Careful!”

“Don’t be such a girl.” Sadie opened the bottle and shoved a pill in his mouth. “Swallow that.”

Adrian tried. The pill got stuck. He coughed, tears coming as he spit it out.

Sadie scowled. “We’re not wasting that.” She grabbed the pill, blew on it, and shoved it back into his mouth between groans.

Adrian managed to get it down this time.

Sadie thrust her canteen against his arm.

Adrian grabbed it, but he didn’t want to lift his arm because of the pain it would cause.

Sadie tilted the canteen; water spilled over his arm, chest, and the couch.

“Stop!”

Sadie began pulling on his shirt. “Sit up.”

“Get off me.” Adrian pushed her away.

Sadie stood up. “Fine! Take care of yourself!” She threw herself into the chair and glared.

Adrian slowly forced himself to sit up. Tears rolled over his gaunt cheeks and dripped down his beard. He pulled on his shirt, ripping it off instead of trying to remove it the normal way.

Sadie ogled his chest. “You need a bath.”

Adrian pried off the bandage, not wiping away his tears. “Don’t trust Kendle.”

Sadie frowned. “Why not?”

“She’s dangerous.” Adrian tossed the gory bandage onto the dirty floor, breathing rough.

Sadie got up to help.

“No!” Adrian flinched as she ignored him and reached for his wound.

Adrian's scream echoed up to the bridge.

Kendle smirked. "Guess she bumped him. I didn't think she had it in her." Kendle checked the radar again and carefully adjusted their course to the tip of South America. "I'm coming, Marc. We won't be apart much longer."

3

Jordi directed the dented pod toward the rear of the wooden ship, hoping the vivid sunrise would hide any flashes of metal. He didn't know if they had radar, but he was certain the ship didn't have any defenses other than the few people on board. *I'll take my chances.*

His pod was almost out of fuel. If he didn't make a move now, he would be stranded. He'd chosen to follow this ship and claim it instead of scavenging for supplies or fuel. He'd recognized it from the detention center fight and assumed there were normals on board who would be easy targets for his magic.

Jordi swept the deck of the ship and the steps on the side, but he didn't spot anyone. He hit the grapple button.

A metal hook shot out and flew upward. It sailed over the tall railing and wrapped around it with loud clangs.

Jordi immediately popped the hatch and climbed onto the top of the pod, being careful not to

lose his balance as waves rocked the small, dented transport vehicle.

The winch pulled him toward the ship. He waited until it bumped against the hull, then jumped.

Jordi caught the railing and began to pull himself up.

Kendle appeared, paling as she spotted the pod. She took off running. “Adrian!”

Jordi moved out of the shadows and followed her.

Adrian jerked as Sadie shook him. He’d been sleeping deeply for the last two hours.

“She’s yelling again.”

Adrian was in too much pain to use his gifts and find out why. “Handle it.”

Sadie stood up as the door opened.

“Someone found us! There’s a pod!”

Sadie frowned. “From the detention center?”

“Yes!” Kendle gestured at Adrian. “Get up and help me!”

“I can’t. Too weak.”

Kendle looked at Sadie.

Sadie nodded eagerly. “You can trust me.”

Kendle waved a hand and unlocked her.

“No!” Adrian tried to get up.

Sadie immediately blasted him with the charm she’d been mentally practicing.

Jordi blocked the exit, gun in hand. “Isn’t this sweet.”

Sadie’s eyes widened. “Jordi!”

Jordi scowled, recognizing her. He gathered energy to kill her.

Faster than him, Kendle and Sadie fired at the same time.

Jordi stiffened as both spells hit him. He slid to his knees; blood began to gush from his nose and ears.

Sadie grinned. “Never liked him. He was a mean trainer.”

Kendle sighed in relief. “Can you get him topside? I need to go cut that pod loose. The extra weight will use our fuel faster.”

“Sure.” Sadie glanced at Adrian.

Adrian smiled at her. “Nice work, Sweetheart.”

Sadie blushed to the roots of her hair.

Kendle chuckled. “The rest of this trip might be fun.”

Sadie grabbed Jordi’s arm, aware that he wasn’t dead yet. She jogged up the steps and heaved him over the rail, laughing at his terror. She turned to go back down to Adrian and froze.

Kendle scowled as she came up the steps. “You okay?”

Sadie shook her head. Her hand slowly rose.

Kendle sucked in a breath, pulse starting to race. Four pirate ships were catching up fast. She recognized all the huge boats from the detention center fight. *What do I do?!*

Sadie recovered first. “Go along with whatever they want. We’ll pick them off when they sleep.”

Kendle’s terror grew. “They’ll hurt us.”

Sadie swallowed the taste of bile and hurried down the steps. “I have to hide Adrian.”

Kendle watched the ships get closer. She gathered energy to fire on them, but she hesitated to do it. Every one of those ships had big guns. If she sank one, the others would still be able to sink her. *Either way, I’m in deep shit again.*

The radio in the bridge crackled with a hard male voice. “Attention! We will board you now. Do not resist.”

Kendle didn’t fire on them. There was a tiny chance they wouldn’t hurt her, especially if she made a deal. “I need to figure out what they want and give it to them.”

Kendle heard Adrian yelling. She hurried down the slick stairs, mind racing over the few options. *Maybe I can trade Adrian for my freedom. Angela would.*

4

Toshi motioned his boarding team to go without him. He wasn’t sure if anyone was on the ship, but he recognized it from the fight at the detention center. The powerful woman on the cruise ship had severed the cord and let this ship go. At that point, many of his men had been on it, along with at least one descendant. Toshi stayed on his ship and let his men take the risk. Following the pod on their radar had been a good idea. He’d already sent a man to cut it loose.

Toshi frowned when the silence dragged on. He didn't hear anything and his men were never quiet. It made him worry.

The radio on his ship crackled with an incoming call. "We have a problem. You must come handle it."

Toshi went to the wheelhouse and took the mike his man, Omar, held out. "What is this problem that ten of my men cannot handle on their own?"

"We have three prisoners. One is badly injured. The two women guarding him are both magic users; they swear this is Adrian Mitchel."

Toshi scowled. "So get them over here."

"We can't. They have shields up, and the scarred woman has a knife to the Mitchel's throat. She says she will kill him."

Toshi handed back the mike and went to the ramp they'd lowered. Adrian Mitchel was a very wanted man. *I will kill the women and take him to the UN in Europe. They will pay for him and for my services.*

Toshi jogged across the ramp and followed the stairs down into the captured ship.

"Stop right there!" Kendle tightened her grip on Adrian's neck as the pirate leader appeared in the doorway. "I will kill him!"

She studied the leader as he did the same to them. Toshi looked like a pirate from his dreadlocked hair to his trousers and sword. His salty, angry scent filled the room. She'd been hoping for someone more civilized.

Toshi recognized the fighter who had slaughtered many of his men on this very ship. The need for vengeance flared hotly.

Kendle read it. “We want revenge too. We’re going to Safe Haven’s island.”

Toshi considered the possibilities and lifted a brow. “They are close.”

Kendle hoped he couldn’t tell she was lying. “We’re a day away from them. You should help us.”

Toshi realized the scarred brunette had information he needed. Taking down Safe Haven was more important to him than joining the remaining UN forces. He gestured. “Let him breathe or we will have nothing to discuss.”

Kendle let go of Adrian’s neck, but she kept her knife in hand and stayed right next to him so she could resume her grip.

Sadie glowered at Kendle.

Kendle ignored her in favor of finishing a deal that might save all their lives. “Angela, the boss of Safe Haven, loves Adrian. We can trade him.”

Toshi shrugged, fingering his mustache. “And what do I need you for?”

“I can kill her. While we’re fighting, you can take over her camp.”

Toshi nodded immediately. He didn’t want to face Safe Haven without magic. “You will fight for us. In return, you will be spared.”

His men muttered as they realized they weren’t getting the two women yet.

Kendle kept bargaining. “And we’ll be left alone on this ship until we reach them. You can follow.”

Toshi nodded again. His ships were faster than this one. “If you betray me, you will be turned over to my men.”

Kendle shuddered. “We have a deal. I won’t break it.”

Toshi finally looked at Sadie. “And what of this one?”

Sadie smiled. “I’m a fighter too. You’ll be happy with me when I snap Angela’s neck.”

Toshi motioned his men to go up the steps. When they were alone, he stepped further into the warm, cluttered room. “You are magic users. I do not trust you.”

“Same.”

Toshi stared at the scarred woman for a long time. He finally turned to the door. “Be very careful. I will not tolerate disobedience.”

Kendle waited until they could hear the ramp being removed; she lowered the knife. Both women lowered their shields.

Adrian gasped, releasing his agony.

Sadie ran to him and helped him lie down on the couch.

Kendle went to the door and leaned against the frame. “That was a bad deal.”

Adrian nodded. “But you did well. He really thinks you both want to kill Angela.”

Neither woman answered.

Adrian leaned against the couch. “I need to rest.”

“I’m going up to check the radar.” Kendle swallowed her fear and left the room. She was scanning, but fear was preventing a clear image. She couldn’t view the top deck. It was entirely possible the pirates were waiting for her to get away from Adrian.

Sadie smiled at Adrian. “You look terrible.”

Adrian blew out a snort, grimacing. “I feel the same.”

Sadie reached out and clasped his hand. “I’ll sit with you while you sleep.”

Adrian yawned. “Okay.” He relaxed his stiff body.

Sadie gazed at him in adoration. *He’s so cute! And now he’s all mine.*

5

Kendle paused at the top of the steps. She found the four ships right behind them, loaded with hearty men.

Kendle went to the wheelhouse. Her heart thumped at the sight of Toshi expertly manning the wheel.

Toshi didn’t look at her. “There are no ships on your radar. Where is Safe Haven?”

Kendle thought fast. “They’re sailing the tip already.”

“And you are sure?”

Kendle stayed out of his reach as she stopped in the doorway. “This ship doesn’t go as fast as theirs. They got ahead of us.”

Toshi heard the tremor in her voice. “Make sure the Mitchel does not die. If he does, I have no reason to keep you and your friend alive.”

Kendle found her courage. Being weak now was a mistake. “We’re both descendants. Don’t throw away our power for jealousy or revenge.”

“It is *your* power. You will not use it for my gain without coercion.”

Kendle leaned against the wall. “We have a deal.” Kendle didn’t read anything in his thoughts to suggest he was going to betray it. “We can make another.”

“Why do you want all the people in Safe Haven gone?”

Kendle stiffened. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. I’m very good at reading my enemies.”

Kendle frowned, not sure what to say.

“I assume it’s personal.”

She snorted.

Toshi glanced over his shoulder. “I will remove their leaders first. Many people will die in that fight.”

Kendle shrugged. “I only want two of those lives spared.”

Toshi turned to the wheel. “That can be arranged. You will fight with us.”

“What happens after the fight?”

Toshi adjusted course, taking the ship into the rougher current. “You may stay with us, if I deem your skills needed. If not, I will let you take this ship, and your chosen lives, and leave our lands forever.”

“Our lands? You’re from there?”

“My people have controlled the remote islands for a century. The United Nations came after the war and promised we would still control them after Safe Haven was defeated.”

“And now the UN is gone and the target is still alive.”

He scowled. “They underestimated our enemy.”

Kendle was getting a lot of his thoughts. “It confuses me that you didn’t try to join Safe Haven. You seem...honorable.”

He tensed. “The power in that camp is dangerous to all who are normal. My people will not survive.”

Kendle considered telling him Safe Haven liked normals and would have protected them. Instead, she encouraged his hatred. “Angela controls everyone in that camp. She pretends to care, but she’s evil.”

“You are bitter about being left behind.”

“Of course, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. She cut us loose when shit got rough. You were there; you saw it. Human lives mean nothing to her. She only wants power.”

“Like Joel.” Toshi was glad that evil man was gone. “We will remove her.”

“Good.” Kendle eased into the room. “How long have you been a captain?”

“Since I was a teenager. My father taught me to love the ocean.”

Kendle tried to bond so she would have more power to negotiate. “I hate the water. I didn’t want to leave America. Angela forced me to come out here and lead them to the island.”

Toshi knew she was lying. “And yet she cut you loose before you arrived...”

Kendle hurried to cover her lie. “They’re low on fuel. We were dragging them. And I’d already given her the location.”

Toshi sighed, no longer as angry. “Your lies will get you killed.”

“I’m not lying.”

“I hear it in your quick answers; I smell your fear, outcast.” Toshi turned around to face her. “And it does not matter. I know the man below is not welcome in Safe Haven because he chases that leader. He has no value to them.”

Kendle refused to answer, trying to think of another lie.

Toshi didn’t give her time. “However, he is valued by the survivors in Safe Haven. Keep the Mitchel alive and you may also survive.” His eyes blazed. “Leave my presence.”

Kendle spun around and quickly fled down the steps.

Toshi signaled his XO to take the lead with their flagship. He’d already guessed where Safe Haven

was going. He'd just needed to verify it. "But that island is mine; it has always belonged to the pirates. That did not change with the war."

6

"We have a problem." Kendle joined Sadie and Adrian, keeping her voice low. "He knows Angela doesn't want Adrian. We need to come up with a different plan."

Sadie scowled.

So did Adrian. "Everyone knows she only wants Marc."

Kendle stared at him, not sure if he was trying to trick her. "You're kidding, right?"

Adrian gently shook his head. "She's a good leader; she doesn't need me."

Sadie beamed. *He's mine now.*

Kendle changed the subject, thrilled that Sadie's charm had worked. "Toshi said if you die, we all die." She motioned at the medical kit. "Add more ointment."

Sadie grabbed the bandage on his side and ripped it off.

"Stop!" Adrian tried to climb over the filthy couch to get away from her.

Sadie jerked him back by his arm; Adrian landed on his injury.

His harsh screams echoed through the ship.

Sadie held him down. "You're so sensitive."

Kendle chuckled. Adrian was getting paid back. It was great.

Adrian glared at Kendle through the tears. “Stop enjoying my pain.”

Kendle laughed at him. “Why? I’m not done causing it.”

She joined Sadie in tending the ugly, infected wound, uncaring about Adrian’s weak struggles, his tears, or his hoarse pleas for mercy. *I only care about one person on this planet and it isn’t you. If not for Marc’s feelings about Charlie, I wouldn’t spare him either.*

Toshi listened to the ugly noises, but he didn’t interfere. As long as Adrian lived, he didn’t care how it happened. *Safe Haven is the last threat to us on this side of the world. They have to be conquered. I will do it or die trying.*

Chapter Fifteen

The Spice Of Life

1

“It’s too quiet.”

“Yeah.” Dwight ladled the evening soup into bowls on the counter. The mess was almost full now, but hardly anyone was talking and the mood wasn’t good.

Thelma sat slices of bread on the plates by the bowls, adding packets of butter. “Is it because of where we are or things that have happened?”

Dwight placed napkins over the bread and then topped them with spoons to hold the napkins in place. “Both, I think.” He nodded toward the empty center table. “The council isn’t here; the boss isn’t here. They can let their true feelings show right now.”

“Their true feelings are ugly.”

“Yeah.” Dwight waved at the servers who’d volunteered to help with meals.

The three camp members hurried forward to take the trays of food. The smell of fresh bread and soup wafted over the tables, bringing smiles to some faces.

Dwight gestured at the door. “She’s coming now. Angela will calm them down.”

Thelma frowned, catching sight of Angela's pinched face. "I'm not so sure."

Angela went to the center table and opened her notebook. She thanked the server who quickly fed her, but she didn't speak to anyone. She got out her pen and began making notes.

Gus came in next. He joined Angela at the table, also getting his notebook out.

The mess held a rough mix of both normals and Eagles, though most of the haters hadn't come. They were eating in the lounge of the camp hall. That bothered Angela, but she hadn't insisted they take meals here with everyone else. The haters would only interrupt the vibe she was trying to build between the two groups.

Neil and Wade came in, taking the seats across from Angela and Gus. They dug into their food as soon as it was set in front of them.

The mood lifted a bit; people began to talk a little more.

Greg and Daryl, with Ivan and Shawn, joined them next. All four men were joking and laughing, lifting the mood again.

Still observing, Thelma leaned closer to her husband. "I don't think they're hiding their true feelings. They feel better when leadership is here."

Dwight saw she was right. He kissed her cheek and went to get the silver pitchers they were now using for filling water glasses. The antibiotic properties in the silver were known to help with health; the medics had agreed with Angela that they

shouldn't wait until they were on the island to use them even though they only had two.

Zack and his three sons filled the small table to the right of Angela's, laughing and nodding to people. Debra, Trinity, and Jayda went to the table on her left. When Grant, Brittani, Ray, and Pam took the table behind them, the sound of chatter increased noticeably.

Angela was aware of the difference. *We have to get together more often. People need this.* Angela put her notebook away, deciding not to destroy the improving mood with business. *We'll have a mini meeting later.* Angela lifted her cup and held it up. "Nice work, mission team!"

People in the mess clapped and sent their own congratulations to the cleared men. They didn't notice some of that team wasn't here.

Angela slid down to make room for Tracy, Bernice, and Crissy. She waved at them when they hesitated. "Join us."

Bernice smiled at Gus as she sat next to him. "Hello, again."

"Hi!" Gus tried not to leer at her. "Having a good day?"

Bernice nodded. "We went to the chapel, and then Tracy gave us a tour of the ship. After, Crissy wanted to play. We've been at the playground for the last hour."

Crissy grinned at Gus. "I made them push me on the swings. I can do it. I just wanted them to feel needed."

The adults chuckled.

Gus dropped his head so he wasn't caught ogling the beautiful woman.

Crissy giggled. "He likes you, mama."

Bernice blushed as the adults laughed again.

Brittani stared at Gus, surprised he was interested in someone else. "I thought you and Trinity would get back together."

Trinity shrugged. "I was his rebound."

Gus flushed. "I chose to be single and I'm sticking with it."

Across the mess, Harry caught Trinity's attention and lifted a brow. "Busy later?"

Trinity laughed. "I have duty. So do you."

Harry grinned. "Just want it known that I'm interested. You won't be my rebound." He didn't care that Trent also wanted her. *First to try, first to enjoy.*

Trinity shrugged. "You're not black. I like my men dark."

Harry wasn't embarrassed or discouraged. "Variety is the spice of life, I'm told."

The mess filled with laughter.

Trinity began considering it. "I'll get back to you."

Greg swept the mess for the males who'd been attacked over the empty brownie box. He spotted them at a far corner table. All of them were bruised, scraped, and quiet. *Now that they've learned a lesson, we should get them into Eagle training.* He saw Lisa and her team sitting at the counter nearby.

He turned toward the single males, waiting for them to glance over. When they did, he smirked. “Did you enjoy those brownies?”

The mess filled with fresh laughter as the males realized Greg had set them up. They glared sullenly, but didn’t protest. Greg was a high-level Eagle. Arguing with him was a bad idea.

Greg chuckled. *No balls. Maybe they’re not ready yet.*

The laughter died as Kyle entered the mess with Roy and Autumn.

Kyle ignored everyone as he went to the long table of level one Eagles and got the kids settled. He didn’t look at the men and women who were all on Angela’s team. “I’m with you guys for a while.”

The level one team was thrilled. They welcomed Kyle and fawned over the kids.

Kyle’s embarrassment faded a little.

Angela caught his eye from across the room. *Sometimes a new start can be a good thing.*

Kyle turned his attention to Roy, not wanting to say something he might regret. *I’ve already done that today. Not repeating that mistake.*

Angela was proud of him for accepting the demotion. She turned her attention to Daryl, who was just learning he’d been promoted to leader of the top Special Forces team.

Daryl’s eyes lit up. Then his face fell. “I don’t want it this way. I’m just holding his spot. He’ll be back. You know he will.”

Ray and the others nodded.

Angela liked it that they all had faith in Kyle's ability to regain his place, but she didn't want Daryl only giving half effort because he thought he wasn't keeping leadership. "That's not going to happen. It's *your* team now."

Silence fell. Kyle stiffened, heart dropping. *I've lost my team and my wife.*

"I'll do a good job with them." Daryl gestured at the surprised team. "Meeting in the training room in half an hour."

Daryl felt Brittani's unhappiness. *I'm an Eagle first. You knew that when we hooked up.*

Brittani sighed. She didn't want to do this publicly, but Angela had insisted. "I'm officially resigning from the Eagles."

"Noted." Angela looked around, stomach starting to churn. "Anyone else?"

"Me." Marc entered the mess with his twins. "A leave of absence won't work for me. I'm a father first."

Shock ran through the room.

"Noted." Angela swallowed her disappointment and scanned again. "Now's the time to tell me what you want, people."

Molly lifted her hand. "I'd like to be considered for the open slot on Daryl's team."

A dozen hands shot up.

"Me too."

"Same here."

Angela waved toward Daryl. “He’ll let you know. Make sure he has your name.” She scanned one more time, feeling another bomb coming.

Tommy stood up. “When we reach the island, I’m leaving.” He and Quinn had spent their shower time talking and coming to hard conclusions. Neither of them was happy here now.

Quinn joined him amid the mutters. “We’re going back for Kendle. The rest of you can rot on that island.”

The two men walked from the mess, leaving a stunned silence.

Angela refused to react badly. *I’m losing them, Adrian, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I wish you were here.*

Marc didn’t react, but his heart broke.

Angela forced a smile onto her face and lifted her spoon. “We now have slots open for people to advance. Training sessions will resume in the morning. Be there or be square.”

2

“How are things going up here?”

Jennifer yawned. “Fine. No problems.”

“Good.” Grant hesitated even though he was exhausted and needed to go to bed.

Jennifer waved. “I’ll call you. Go spend some time with Ray.”

Grant left the bridge. He joined Ray for the walk he’d suggested as an excuse to get up here.

Jennifer snickered. She didn't mind Grant checking up on her. "Though he is a little obsessed." It was a good thing in her opinion. Jennifer refused to think about her personal life while she was on duty.

The radar beeped.

Jennifer studied the monitor, hoping nothing appeared. *Please be a blip. Please be a blip.* She didn't want to face any of the problems Grant had mentioned earlier.

Beep-beep-beep.

"Damn it!" Jennifer mentally called for Grant as a green dot appeared on the radar in front of them.

Grant ran up the stairs. He'd heard the beeping. He leaned over the console and picked up the mike.

Jennifer shook her head. "Quietly; I'll call her."

Grant hung up the mike. It wasn't a good time to panic the entire ship.

"Can you tell who it is? She'll want to know."

"I think they're anchored. We're already gaining ground."

"Any chance it's someone from the detention center?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

Jennifer called for Angela.

Grant adjusted their speed to buy time. "If we get lucky, it's a dead ship with fuel."

"And if we're unlucky, it's the UN." Jennifer sighed. "I think we need more security up here."

Standing in the shadows of the bridge, Gabe keyed the mike on his radio. “Next shift, report to the bridge now.”

“Copy.”

Angela appeared on the deck below them. She went to the front of the ship and concentrated. “All duty teams to the cargo area.”

The radio was a jumble of replies from the excited low-level teams who were on duty now.

Angela went up to the bridge. “It’s a ghost ship. We’re stopping to scavenge.”

Grant blew out a sigh of relief. “When I see it, I should be able to tell you if it has fuel.”

“Good.” Angela didn’t tell them the fuel wasn’t what she was after. The ghost ship now appearing in front of them held something more valuable. She scanned and caught that faint heartbeat again.

She turned for the steps. “Grant has the wheel. Jennifer has the ship.” *I’m going with the team to collect another life for my herd.*

3

Angela paused in the doorway to the cargo area that wasn’t part of the QZ.

Three low-level teams turned to meet her. All of them were wearing Eagle gear, but the lockers held their jackets, weapons, and kits. Angela saw Candy had been in here too. There wasn’t a speck of dust on any of the crates, boxes, tables, or lockers. “We’re doing a quick pick up from another ship.

Our target is down in the hold. We will stay together, make the pickup and get back here within an hour.”

She pointed at Jayda and her team. “You’re staying. You are in charge of security on this ship. Jennifer is the boss while I’m gone. Keep them in line and rolling through normal routines. If you have real trouble, go bug Marc with it. He’ll get pissed enough to kill, so don’t call him unless you actually need him.”

Peter waited for orders, standing with Pam, Allison, and Terry. Peter was surprised the ill women had shown up. He was also impressed.

Angela waved at Pam. “You’re manning these cargo doors. Allison will help you.” Angela moved on before either of them could protest. “Trinity, Gabe, Harry, and I will take Madison, Peter, Terry, and the rest of the rookies. Suit up. We’ll take a raft over in five minutes.”

Angela went to the locker to get her gear. “The two best shooters need a tranquilizer gun and extra darts.”

“What about me?” Kyle was in the doorway.

Angela smiled. “Team leader.”

Kyle moved to his locker, heart easing a little. Angela could have bumped him to rookie level and taken away all authority. He was grateful she hadn’t. “The rafts are sturdy. They have handles built into them. Hold those handles or you’ll go flying out at the first wave. Clear?”

“Clear,” the team echoed, even Angela. She’d never done this before, like almost everyone here.

“It launches slowly. Don’t try to help it along. It’s supposed to be slow so it doesn’t flip when it hits the water. Clear?”

“Clear!”

Kyle pulled on a life vest. “Do what I do, from this minute on. Clear?”

“Clear!”

Everyone hurried to get their vests.

Marc observed it all from the opposite exit, torn. He didn’t want Angela to leave the ship, but if she had to go, he wanted to be with her.

Angela shook her head. *You’re distracting me; go take care of your kids and be ready to assist Jennifer if she needs it.*

Marc sighed. *Be careful.*

He went to the camp area where he’d taken his twins to Samantha and her guard. He felt bad, but it would have been worse if he had to leave the kids alone again. The bond he had with them was fragile, especially with Cate. If he wasn’t there for her now, she might go bad. Her thoughts were already ugly. *She needs me.*

“This camp needs you.” Charlie was angry that Marc was letting Angela off the ship without going along. “You signed up to be an Eagle. You’re the XO!”

Charlie went into his cabin and slammed the door, startling Tracy. She looked up from the boring book she was trying to force herself to read. “You

should give your dad a break. He's trying to keep Cate from going corrupt."

Charlie hadn't considered that, but his bitterness wouldn't let it go. "He commits to things and doesn't follow through! He's supposed to be a leader; he's supposed to be helping my mom save our way of life. And then *they* come and he can't do anything he promised because they *need* him." Charlie's face pinched. "Where was he when I needed him?!"

Tracy put the book down and gave him the truth. "People screw up. It doesn't mean he doesn't love you. He's trying not to make the same mistakes." She let out a sigh. "So am I. I'm keeping the baby. I don't want to feel awful later in life and I think I will."

Charlie dropped into the chair by her bed, relieved but nervous. "Are you sure?" She still hadn't cleaned in here, but she had taken a shower and put on a clean pair of jeans with a white shirt. Charlie was thrilled with that sign of progress.

Tracy shook her head. "But I spent time with an adorable girl today and I got to thinking about her and her mom. If Bernice had aborted her, Crissy wouldn't be here and she's so sweet! I have no right to deny our child a chance to live." She looked away. "But I'm giving it up if I'm not in a better place by the time it's born. We'll talk about it then."

Charlie took her hand. "I think that's a great idea." Inside, his heart ached, but it was still better

than her getting rid of it. *At least I'd get to visit the baby that way.*

Tracy let out a long sigh. "Tim is coming by. He offered to spend some time talking with me about the rape again. I still don't think it will help, but I'm going to try."

"Why Tim?"

"He's nice; he offered." She sighed. "He's our preacher now and we don't have a shrink. It's the best we can do at the moment."

"Other girls here have gone through it."

"I know. Tim wants to have a weekly meeting with a few of us. We'll see how it goes."

"I'm glad you're trying. I love you."

Tracy felt warmth for him that hadn't been there in weeks. "I love you too. Now go be nice to your dad and your new sister. She's very scared even though she's hiding it. Put her first for a little while."

Charlie wanted to protest, but he rose anyway and left.

Tracy rubbed her stomach. "I don't like being an adult very much, and I hate the apocalypse. I wish we could all go back and do it over."

4

"Room for one more?"

Angela glowered at Ivan, hand hovering over the launch button. "No."

Kyle overruled her. "Yes. Right here by me."

Ivan hurried over and climbed into the raft.

Kyle instantly felt better having someone with real experience along for the run. He nodded at Angela. “Go.”

Angela slapped the button and grabbed the handle, secretly glad Ivan wanted to come. This was supposed to be a quick pick up, but anything could go wrong, and Ivan was solid in an emergency. The same couldn't be said of all her choices for this mission. She was hoping the rookies could handle it.

The launch system began to slide the raft toward the open cargo doors where the ocean waited to carry them to the dead ship now floating in front of the cruise liner. Angela had only gotten a quick view of the ghost ship; she was eager to see it up close, like any other Eagle who was excited to be going on a run.

Ivan stayed ready to grab anyone who flew out as the raft slid into the water and bounced. Bodies rose into the air and dropped down.

Angela laughed at the feeling. She hadn't been out on a real mission in a long time. *I've missed this.*

Her happiness washed over the team, bringing smiles. Kyle relaxed. *This will be another good run.*

He looked up to find Jennifer standing in the cargo room. Her expression was full of concern.

Kyle took a chance. *I'm sorry. I love you.*

Jennifer smiled at him, unwilling to send him out upset.

Kyle's fear of the future faded. He fired up the engine with hope in his heart. "Let's roll!"

Jennifer watched until the raft was out of sight, glad she'd come down. They had a huge problem to settle, but it didn't have to be the end of them.

She walked toward the steps, still smiling. She knew Kyle cared about her safety and he wanted the baby. That was already more than some women got from a partner.

And I used to like it that he's overprotective...
Jennifer sighed. *I just can't give in to him this time. He needs to see me as an equal.*

Walking behind her, Zack snorted.

Jennifer spun around, hand coming up to her hip. "What?"

"You're endangering his baby, but he's the problem." Zack rolled his eyes.

"The baby wasn't in danger."

"Were you shot at? Attacked? Bumped? Did you have to fight?"

Jennifer wanted to deny all of those, but she couldn't. "I had a vest on and I'm an excellent shot."

Zack shrugged. "So am I, but I've still had issues on runs. You got lucky nothing went wrong."

Jennifer didn't want to admit that he was right. "Whatever."

Zack's lips twitched. "Give him a break. He loves you and wants to protect his kid. And you love him for that even if you won't admit it."

Zack faded into the shadows around her as they neared the play area. He didn't say anything else.

Jennifer opened the door to the playground and did a fast scan.

The kids and den mothers all looked up with nervous expressions; the Eagle in the room moved toward the door and then stopped upon seeing who it was.

Zack spotted Brittani coming toward them with a determined expression and sighed. *I hope this is something good. I've about had it with people starting shit.*

Jennifer nodded. *Same.*

Brittani frowned at both of them. "Marc wants me to stay with you and pass messages."

Jennifer gestured. "I can do that. What do I need you for?" She'd heard about Brittani resigning.

"Company and another brain." Brittani was aware of the hostility without reading their thoughts. "Just treat me like a normal camp member."

Jennifer tried not to be bitter that Marc had sent someone to keep tabs on her. "Fine. Keep your mouth shut so I can work."

Brittani grinned. "Marc was right. You are in a bad mood."

Jennifer sighed. "Sorry. I do understand the choice you made."

"You just don't agree."

"Honestly, I couldn't care less. I have other shit to worry about." Jennifer shut the door to the playground and moved toward the camp hall.

Brittani followed a few feet behind, aware of Zack giving her hard looks. “Did you really kick him out of your cabin?”

Jennifer huffed. “What did I say about keeping your mouth shut?!”

Brittani smirked. “I don’t have to. I’m not an Eagle.”

Jennifer’s lips twitched. *She’s got me there.* “Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

Jennifer scowled. “Why do you care?”

“He’s the top Eagle and you’re the XO. It isn’t good for anyone when you two fight.”

Jennifer didn’t respond.

Brittani tried again. “A lot of women on this ship hope you do split up. They’ve seen how good he is with kids, and he can defend them against anything.”

Jennifer’s jealousy sparked, sending heat through the hallway, but she still didn’t comment.

Brittani decided she needed to use the big gun. “They won’t mind being a stepmom to Autumn, by the way. Several have already told him that.”

Jennifer spun around. “They said what?!” Her anger heated the hallway another degree. “They’re already making moves on him?!”

Brittani was glad she hadn’t actually witnessed it so Jennifer wouldn’t know who it was. “Marc told me. He said Kyle was surrounded as soon as he left the mess. One of the women even took Roy and Autumn to the den mothers for him.”

“That skank!” Jennifer blew out a breath, feet moving again. “Wait until I find out who it was. Her ass is mine!”

Brittani swallowed a laugh and followed.

Zack was glad Angela had arranged this intervention. Jennifer and Kyle belonged together. It would be awful if they split up.

Brittani caught Zack’s thought and agreed. The couple was perfect together. *But it was my idea, not Angela’s. I need to show her I can still be useful as a camp member. And I like Jennifer. She’s the wild little sister I never had.*

Jennifer snorted, walking faster. “I should have known.”

Brittani frowned. “Known what?”

“You’re trying to make sure you can still be an Eagle in the future. You’re making amends for disappointing the boss.”

“It’s not about amends.” Brittani sighed. “I’m scared. I have to get over that.”

Jennifer’s anger faded a little. “I’ll help you when I have time. So will Zack.”

Zack scowled. “I will?”

Jennifer nodded. “Of course. You’re one of the good guys; you hate it when you see a female who’s scared.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve changed.”

“For the better.” Jennifer opened the door to the camp area. “Now shut up, both of you. I have work to do and I can’t have you guys yapping in my ear or my mind.”

Zack and Brittani clamped their lips together and followed the teenager into the camp hall where nearly everyone grimaced or glared at the sight of her. They expected the enforcer to enforce things.

Jennifer glowered back. *And that's exactly what I'm going to do, even with Kyle.*

5

“What’s our target?” Kyle tied the raft to the rusting steps of the small yacht. The weathered white and yellow paint said it had been here for a long time. Kyle wasn’t getting any life signatures.

Angela went up the steps slowly, giving her team time to follow so she wouldn’t be alone on the deck for long. “A goat.”

Kyle stared with the others. “You brought us over here for a goat?”

Angela reached the top of the steps and brought up her rifle, sweeping for trouble. “And fuel. It may finish filling our tanks. We had to leave Port Stanley before we were full.”

Kyle was mollified by that answer. He waited until the rest of the team joined her on deck, then followed.

Angela hated the feel of the ship. It was ugly.

Kyle gestured. “Masks on.”

The low-level people struggled to get their masks on correctly. Angela and Ivan helped them while Kyle stood guard. He picked out dried bloodstains near the wheelhouse, along with debris

that wasn't from the weather. Piles of belongings had been burnt. *They had big issues on this ship.*

Angela stepped back, finished.

Kyle pointed. "Lead us in, rookie."

Angela snickered. She went toward the steps without looking in the wheelhouse. She'd already spotted the gory situation there. She agreed with Kyle; bad things had happened on this yacht.

The steps held more debris, and the yellow walls were streaked with bloody handprints that hadn't dried completely in the damp environment. She stepped carefully over a body as she reached the bottom. She identified a stab wound in the chest. *This was recent. It isn't the weather keeping the bodies and blood wet. It just happened.*

Kyle followed the team down to the cargo hold, picking out things the rookies were missing. He smelled food going bad. The shelves they were passing were still full of supplies. The lights were on in some of the luxurious rooms. *This was an internal problem. Our ship might be the same if Angela didn't keep such tight control over everything.*

Angela stopped at the cargo steps. She waited for Kyle's nod and then hurried down into the darkness with her gun in hand.

She went straight to the narrow room in the rear, storing details about the stacks of supplies that were still here. Only one thing really bothered her about this ship. She stewed on it as she stepped into the final room.

The goat recoiled in terror. It tried to run, but it's thin, weak legs wouldn't cooperate. It flopped and bleated in fear.

Ivan lifted his tranquilizer gun and fired a single shot.

The dart hit the goat in the stomach; it dropped, eyes closing. As it fell over, the team saw two small forms behind it.

“Goat babies!” Madison hurried forward.

Angela grabbed her wrist. “Tranquilize them. The kids are dangerous too.”

Madison frowned. “You want me to shoot the babies?”

“If you can't do this, you can't do the work of the higher teams.” Angela had included Madison on a whim. It was obvious that she shouldn't have.

Madison swallowed, realizing her future as an Eagle depended on it. She fired twice, then wiped away the tears. “Happy now?”

Angela scowled at the Ciemus woman. “No. We're only knocking them out for transport. You can't do this job. When we get back, resign from the Eagles.”

Madison nodded, aware of relief blooming in her heart. “I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.” Angela waved at Ivan. “You get the mom. I'll get the babies.” Angela slid her kit off and knelt down.

Ivan lifted the light adult goat over his shoulders, not worried about the steps down to their

raft. The adult goat was thin; it wouldn't be hard to balance.

Angela gently placed the first struggling baby goat into her pack and zipped it all the way. She handed it to Madison. "They'll need care."

Madison took the light load. "I can do that."

"Good." Angela took the second kit from Kyle and loaded the other baby. The small goats were only a few weeks old, but they were in good shape. The mother had decimated her own body to make sure her babies survived. *Parents have done that since the beginning of time. Nature is both amazing and awful.* Angela slid the kit over her shoulders and waved at Harry. "We'll be here for a couple hours to collect all these supplies and the fuel. Pick two people to stay with you and set up security posts."

Harry pointed at two rookies.

Angela and the others went up the steps, stomachs starting to turn. The stench from the goats was rough. Their pen hadn't been cleaned in a long time.

Ivan went to the rail first and twisted his body over the steps. His foot slipped.

Angela grabbed his shoulders and yanked him forward so he didn't fall or lose his load.

Ivan's face landed in her generous chest. He froze. *Give me strength, Lord!*

Angela snickered.

Her red cheeks told him she'd felt it too, but Ivan didn't crack a joke or even think about it. *I'm a man. I can handle anything.*

She held onto him until he found his footing and began the descent. Then she waved Madison to go next. "Watch that first step."

Madison went down easily, followed by the rest of the team.

Angela went next to last, aware of Ivan and Kyle braced to grab her if she slipped.

Kyle waited until they were all in the raft. "Permission to stay?"

"Denied. The rookies have to earn those spots and you can't avoid what's waiting for you."

Kyle climbed down the rail and untied the raft. He refused to think about anything. It was a quiet ride back to their ship.

As soon as they got on board, Angela motioned toward the two women manning the doors. "More teams are going over for scavenging. Are you good here for a few hours?"

Pam and Allison both nodded.

Allison looked better and she felt great.

Pam looked rough and felt awful.

Both women were determined to do their share.

Angela carried her load to the QZ. She heard one of the guards radio and tell everyone she was back on board.

The wave of relief from most of their passengers made her feel better. *I needed some time away. It's*

good for all of us. “I’m going out on the next run too. Who wants to go with me?”

Every hand lifted, even Madison.

Angela pointed at the goats they were placing in a large cage together. “Get started on their care. Give them a lot of water and only a little oats.”

Madison moved closer to the pen, relieved. *I thought I wanted to be an Eagle. I was wrong. I just need a job that’s useful.*

The rest of the team gathered around Angela as she began to explain how they would unload the supplies from the ghost ship. There was too much to leave behind, but their raft was too small to collect it all.

Kyle listened with half an ear, hoping to hear Jennifer’s thoughts so he would know where they stood.

Silence met his scans.

Chapter Sixteen
You Bother Me
January 17th

1

“Can I bug you for a minute?”

Marc gestured. “Come join us. It’s just UNO, but I haven’t won a single hand.”

His twins giggled and snickered.

Marc knew they were cheating, but they were having a good time and Cate was bonding with her brother. He put his cards down and turned to Ralph. “What’s up?”

Ralph held out a sheet of paper. “We’ve had a lot of engagements. The party is tonight, but I’m not sure who all it should be for.”

Marc skimmed the list.

Charlie and Tracy

Ralph and Daisey

Brittani and Daryl

Marc and Angela

Sam and Neil

Candy and Conner

Kenn and Tonya

Marc sighed. “Take us off there. She isn’t ready for this yet. As for the others, you’ll have to ask

them, but I doubt Kenn and Tonya want to be included either.”

Ralph took the list back. He smiled at the kids and left the lounge where they’d set up tables. All around them, den mothers and guardians were playing games with the kids, giving them bonding time while making sure they were protected during this stop.

Cody frowned at Marc. “Why isn’t Angela ready to get married?”

Marc shrugged. “No idea, son.” *But I’m not going to push her, especially not after quitting on her like this.*

Cate laid down her cards and frowned at Marc. “Is it because of me?”

Marc felt that old pain again. “I hurt her a long time ago. I think she still hasn’t forgiven me for leaving her all those years ago.”

Cate’s frown grew. “Do you feel sorry for it?”

“Yes.”

“Then she should forgive you.” Cate yawned. “I talk to her.”

Marc hated the baby talk Cate used when she got tired, but he didn’t correct it. She’d been locked away. She wasn’t used to communicating with adults or even with other kids.

“I’ll help her.” Cody didn’t want Cate to be made fun of. *Ten-years-old is too old for baby talk. Even I know that.*

Cate fought not to cry.

Marc smiled at her. “No rush. You have time to learn now.”

Cate liked Marc, but she didn’t trust him. She looked around, hoping to find someone who could understand what she’d gone through.

All the tables and couches in this lounge were filled with happy kids and content den mothers who were glad for the good moment. The kids didn’t always cooperate with their lessons and schedules, but with Marc here, they were behaving. Cate hated it.

Joey waved at her from a few tables over. He was playing Candy Land with Leeann and Monica. Dressed in jeans and a colorful shirt, he fit right in.

Cate smiled; the mood of the room lifted noticeably.

Marc stared. *She’s special.*

Cody pointed at the cards. “It’s your turn.”

Cate ignored him. She got up and went to the table where Joey was sliding over to make room. She sat by him and leaned on his shoulder.

The little boy hugged her.

Cate relaxed against him.

Marc recognized the moment. Cate had chosen Joey, much like Angela had chosen him. *Then why won’t she marry me?* Marc searched again for the answer, but all he came up with was what he’d already decided was the most likely reason. *We can’t move on because she doesn’t trust me.*

Walking by on rounds, Jayda caught the thought. She went to the guard station for a check

in, storing the information. She hated to see any of their leaders upset, and even though Marc had resigned, she still considered him their XO. Kenn and Debra did a good job, and Jennifer was hell on wheels at any given time, but Marc and Angela were the bosses and she wanted them to have some happiness. “Things good here?”

Ian snorted. “Like we’d have problems with Marc on this deck.”

Jayda grinned. “Had to ask.” She swept the cabins and people, aware of a slight tension, but no hostile waves. Everyone was on their best behavior right now. The normals were even playing with the kids and they weren’t casting dark glowers at the magic users.

Jayda left the hall and went to the brig, where she would be on duty once they set sail. She didn’t mind missing the engagement party. She preferred silence and being alone.

The brig was clean and neat, but it wasn’t quiet. Emma and Francesca were sharing a cell. Their bickering was filling the hallway.

Jayda didn’t go in. She could hear that they were fine. She made a note to send their dinner in soon and walked to the medical bay to check on things there. Emma and Francesca were being punished enough by sharing a cell. Their nasty comments about each other’s failures might lead to a fight at some point, but Jayda didn’t plan to interrupt them then either. As far as she was concerned, both women needed a beating for what they’d done.

Spending a few nights in a cell was a small price to pay for those mistakes.

Jayda went into the medical bay, glad to find it almost empty. She joined Morgan at Trent's cot. "How is he?"

"Better." Morgan hung up the clipboard. "Trinity volunteered to help any time we need it."

"She's got skills." Jayda walked by the other cots. They'd all been cleaned and prepped for the next patients who needed them. She stopped next to Dog. "They couldn't heal him?"

"Fire is rough." Morgan checked the morphine drip to make sure the wolf wasn't getting too much. "Marc tried. So did Conner and Angela. We have to let him rest and heal on his own. It's not as bad as it seems, but we sedated him when he tried to take Harry's hand off for giving him a vaccination. I added the painkiller. He earned it." Morgan rubbed the wolf and moved on.

Jayda followed, studying the patients for problems. "What about the rest of them?"

"Not bad since Conner gave them all a healing session. They just need time to recover. They were starving."

Jayda saw the truth in that as she swept their thin bodies and gaunt faces. One of the refugees smiled at her and Morgan, but no one spoke.

Jayda frowned. *Why are they scared?*

Morgan sighed. *They were terrorized by a magic user. They sense what we are.*

Jayda shrugged. “They’ll adjust when they see we’re not all bad.”

“I agree.” Morgan moved to the desk and gestured at the files. “So how’s running security for this floating city?”

“A little boring, actually.” Jayda shrugged. “I’ll be over the brig later. Might be a rumble if you guys want to come down and place bets.”

Morgan chuckled. “My money’s on Emma. I don’t like her, but she’s scrappy.”

“I’ll take that bet. I’ve seen Francesca in the training sessions. She can fight.”

Morgan’s amusement faded. “Neither of them should be let out. We should have left them on the last island.”

Jayda wasn’t surprised by his bitterness, but she didn’t share it. “People make mistakes, and they’re both normals.”

“That’s not an excuse. Emma’s a predator and Francesca is an idiot.”

“Neither of which are offenses that earned people death before the war.”

“Maybe it’s time that changed.” Morgan waved to Ed. “I’m out of here.”

Ed took over the shift, nervous and excited to be manning the med bay alone already.

Jayda followed Morgan. “What do you mean that should change?”

“Just what I said. Jail doesn’t work. We’re rewriting the constitution. I think that should include changes to the penalties for breaking laws.”

Jayda fell in step with him. "I'm not sure I can agree; sell me."

Morgan held the door for her. "I need a beer. Catch me sometime when you don't have duty and we'll chat."

Jayda shrugged. "That will be a while. I can't be promoted if I take off days."

Morgan didn't tell the ambitious woman that she would long for a break at some point in the future. *Rookies have to learn that for themselves.*

2

"You don't have to do this." Charlie sat next to Tracy, who was crying down the front of her new dress. "They know we broke the rules. You don't have to marry me."

Tracy wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'll go tell Ralph." Charlie rose.

"No." Tracy grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry I've put you through this. I'm emotional right now. It's okay." She gave him a weak smile. "I don't know why you put up with me."

"Because I love you." Charlie leaned in and kissed her.

Tracy clutched his shoulders, body and heart lighting up. *I missed this!*

Charlie tried not to get carried away, but it was impossible with her responding to his kiss after months of not even a smile. He moaned against her lips, holding her close.

Tracy slid onto the bed and opened her arms.

Charlie took a deep breath. “The party...” He forgot to breathe as she unbuttoned the front of the dress. “Can wait. The party can wait!”

Tracy giggled, mind starting to clear from the ugly haze it had been in for months. “I love you too.”

“Oh, Tracy!”

Outside the door, Ralph grinned and kept going. He’d come to ask if they minded sharing the spotlight if the other couples agreed, but he didn’t think they would care.

Ralph motioned to Kenn as he came down the hallway. “Got a minute?”

Kenn frowned. “Take us off your list.” He kept walking.

Ralph scowled, but marked them off. He went to the mess, hoping to find Neil.

“Neil said no too.” Conner caught up with Ralph. “I’m on my way to ask Candy, but I don’t think she’d want this yet either.”

“Let me know.”

“I will.” Conner veered toward the steps to the cargo bay, tracking her. He didn’t know why Candy was down there again, but her mood was good.

Neil came from the employee hall next to the cargo stairs. He held the door for Conner, aware that they were going to the same place, but he wasn’t happy about it. “I may need to put Samantha to sleep for a while. I might need your help to distract her.”

Conner frowned, stopping halfway down the steps. “Why?”

“She’s supposed to be on bedrest.”

“What’s she doing?”

Neil went around him. “Cleaning. I blame it on Candy. She came down here and triggered the rest of them.”

Conner followed. “The rest of them?”

Neil opened the cargo door and pointed.

Conner stared in surprise at the half dozen women dusting, filing, sorting, and organizing the boxes. Everything was in piles and it appeared cluttered, but both males could see an organizational system emerging.

Neil spotted Samantha in the far corner on a stool and stomped that way.

Six pregnant women turned toward him in disapproval.

Neil ignored them. He stopped in front of Samantha, waiting for her to open her eyes.

Samantha’s face clenched; her skin went cold.

Neil’s heart thumped as he knelt. “Is it the babies? Are you okay?”

Samantha groaned. “Not even close.”

“Shit!” Neil ran to Conner and dragged the boy over. “Help her. You have to help her!”

Conner pulled away. “I can’t.”

“Why not?! She’s in labor!”

“No, she’s not.” Conner pointed at her hand. “She tore off a fingernail on something. It’ll have to grow back.”

Neil spotted her bloody finger and slid to his knees, breath rushing out. "I'm not gonna make it."

Samantha put a hand on his shoulder, grinning through the pain. "Gotcha!"

Neil covered his face with his arms. "I need a nitro."

Samantha laughed. She stood up carefully and slowly waddled toward the door. "Let's get me a Band-Aid and then go eat."

The other women laughed as they shuffled toward the elevator.

Conner offered his arm to Neil, grinning. "Women are so mean."

Neil took the arm up, sighing. "And yet we love them. What does that say about us?!"

The two males followed the women, but they took the steps after making sure all the females got into the elevators. The guards down here were busy monitoring the QZ. They didn't have time for the nesting females. They were listening to make sure these newest arrivals weren't like Laura and the dozens of others who'd infiltrated.

3

"We're full again on fuel." Theo yawned. "And everyone's aboard. The party is starting soon."

Jennifer smiled at the tired man who had just stopped by with updates. "Going to bed?"

Theo nodded, yawning again. He staggered down the steps.

Jennifer examined the ghost yacht that was now sitting much lighter in the water. It was a shame to leave it, but she wasn't sure if towing it was a good idea either. The images she'd gotten from the pickup team said that yacht was a mess. No one knew what had triggered the bloodbath there, but only the goats had survived it. Jennifer found it odd. If someone had snapped and killed everyone, that killer should have still been on the ship.

Jennifer turned around and stared through the glass, where she could barely view the edge of the island they'd left behind. "Maybe Chuck did it."

"That's what I think too."

Jennifer jumped.

Kyle stepped into the bridge. He studied her, not sure how to begin.

Jennifer stared back, sorry things had gone so badly.

Kyle moved aside so Grant could come up.

Grant gestured. "I've got it now."

Jennifer tried to concentrate on the job and not the drama. "Can I stay with you until we're in the clear?"

Grant liked her loyalty to the job. "A few others will be up here too, but we can't leave until the fumes have dissipated a little more. Angela sent word to set sail after the party."

Jeff moved into the bridge and switched places with Jonny, who'd been on duty over Jennifer for the last three hours.

Kyle went down to the deck to wait while Jennifer updated Grant on her shift. He saw the pity on the faces of the guards here and didn't react to it. *I screwed up. I'm paying for it. Their kindness will only make it worse.*

"I think so too." Jennifer joined him.

The sun was setting over the water, casting beautiful rainbows on the calm waves. It was romantic, but neither of them felt that way right now. They were too miserable.

Eagles retreated to give them privacy, though they watched for another shouting match.

"I'm sorry."

Kyle didn't move. "For what?"

"Endangering our baby. I didn't think about it first. I should have. I wanted to help find Trent."

Kyle let out the breath he'd been holding. "I was terrified when I heard the gunfire. That's never happened to me before. I'm sorry for yelling at you. I wanted to calmly talk about it; I just wasn't able to."

"I understand." Jennifer fingered the ring in her pocket.

Kyle saw it. He started to beg, but stopped himself. His voice broke. "Whatever you want, Jenny."

"Will you lift my suspension?"

Kyle reluctantly shook his head. "I can't. It's going to be a rule that pregnant women can't be in the Eagles."

Jennifer's anger returned. She controlled it this time. "Fine."

Kyle waited for her to yell. He knew she wanted to.

Jennifer took the ring from her pocket and held it out. "Pam said my hormones made the choice, I didn't. She was right."

Kyle took the ring and slid it on his finger. His heart stopped thumping.

Jennifer felt his happiness and relief. She lifted her chin. "We've got big problems with your control issues."

"And your recklessness."

"Yes." Jennifer sighed. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No. You?"

"No."

The couple walked toward the ramp without saying anything else.

Grant smiled, happy for them. *Relationships are hard no matter who you are or how old you are. Add in an apocalypse and they become almost impossible.*

4

"We need to talk."

"Impossible; I'm very busy."

Ivan scowled. "You're in a hot tub having a cold beer."

“Exactly.” Kenn took a long swig. The jets were beating on sore muscles and relieving some of that discomfort. He was where he’d wanted to be all day.

Ivan waited.

Kenn leaned against the tub wall. “Go away. You bother me.”

Ivan ignored the old joke. “We can’t let Marc quit—even for his kids.”

Kenn took another drink, keeping his mind shielded.

“I’m talking to you!” Ivan reached down and splashed water in Kenn’s face.

Kenn took another drink and smacked his lips. “Watery beer. Yummy.”

Ivan blew out a frustrated breath. “I need your help!”

“No. I’m not tricking him or conspiring against him. Those days are over.”

“But she needs him!”

“The sooner he flips out, the sooner you get to enjoy the perks.” Kenn’s voice lowered. “Shut up and let nature take its course.”

“It’s not right! She needs him!”

“She needs Adrian.” Kenn set his mostly empty bottle on the edge of the hot tub. “She wants Marc. There’s a difference.”

“Adrian is gone; he isn’t coming back.”

Kenn snorted. “You don’t know him like I do.”

Ivan was caught off guard. “He survived?”

“Yes.” Kenn could feel Adrian’s occasional scan. He was searching for them, but Kenn hadn’t answered.

Ivan sat on the edge, body crying for a break after the long day. The hot water looked good. “She doesn’t think about him much now.”

“She’s covering and enduring.” Kenn grunted. “Exactly what he, and I, taught her to do. In reality, Angela doesn’t need any of us. If she didn’t care so much about the future, she would have already left with her kids and her chosen protectors. That includes you.” Kenn shut his eyes. “Stop feeling guilty. You didn’t make this happen.”

“Who did?”

Kenn shrugged. “Fate, I assume. She isn’t allowed to be happy. She’s meant to save the world. There’s no peace in that job.”

Ivan surrendered to his body and began removing his boots, but he didn’t give in to Kenn’s tempting words. “If Marc resigns, it looks bad and leaves her a man down.”

“And his cracks will grow faster.” Kenn had already considered the implications. “Like I said—shut up until it happens and then enjoy the perks.”

“I can’t do that.” Ivan shed his clothes until he reached boxers. “I’m not a piece of shit.”

“Sure you are. You just hide it better.”

Ivan eased into the hot water. “I’m not hiding anything. They both know.”

Kenn was surprised. “Marc knows you love her and yet he keeps you around. Interesting.”

“I don’t love her.”

“Liar. If it wasn’t love, you’d be rooting for Marc to melt down so you could have his spot. Love gave you ethics.”

Ivan groaned as he eased all the way down until only his head was above the bubbling jets.

Kenn studied the man, finding determination and slight panic. He frowned. “What’s your problem? Your real problem?”

Ivan moved to the seat and leaned back. The truth came out against his will. “I’ll never be able to match either of them. I don’t want to be a tolerable substitute.”

“Ah. That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

The two men soaked in silence for a minute, both running through future scenarios. Kenn wasn’t upset or excited by the prospects. *I know I’ll never have her again. Maybe Ivan has a shot, but he’s right—he really can’t compete. None of us can.*

Ivan’s misery increased. He reluctantly broached a subject he’d been afraid to discuss with anyone else. “How do you fight it and never let her know how you feel?”

Kenn stiffened. “This is a dangerous conversation.”

Ivan scowled. “Because you still can’t be trusted.”

“No, because the guard hiding in the corner is a blabbermouth. He’ll run straight to Marc.”

Ivan turned and spotted Ian's dismayed face. He glared. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Ian held up a hand. "I'm on duty. It's not my fault you didn't see me."

"On duty over who?"

Ian pointed at the hallway.

"Then get out there and stop snooping!" Ivan grabbed Kenn's beer bottle and threw it.

Ian caught it and threw it right back.

Ivan's slippery hands missed. The bottle smacked into his arm and broke, sending glass over him and Kenn.

Kenn's lips thinned at the stings. He began to stand up.

Ian retreated. "Sorry, man. He started it!"

Kenn casually stepped out of the hot tub and began drying his feet on the non-slip rug. His boxers shed water in thick streams.

Ivan waved. "I'd run."

Ian took off down the hall and out the door.

Kenn calmly went to the next hot tub over and turned on the water.

Ivan frowned. "Aren't you going after him?"

Kenn stepped into the filling tub and sat on the seat. "Later."

Ivan snickered as he rose and joined Kenn in the tub without glass shards. "You're bleeding."

Kenn didn't care. He leaned against the edge of the tub. "When I was Invisible, I had a natural shield over my mind that she couldn't get through. When my gifts popped, I practiced that shield more than

anything else. Neil did the same. That's why we're so hard to read. You need to learn that skill. As for the emotions, they never go away." Kenn let Ivan feel his pain. "I'll always love her and want her; she just doesn't need to know so she can't use it against me."

"Does Tonya know?"

Kenn sighed. "Probably. It's a sore spot we don't ever talk about. People used to say you should be able to tell your partner anything, but that's wrong. Discussing the awkward stuff will sink a relationship if it isn't handled right, and I've never been good at communicating."

"Ugh. Me either." Ivan waited for Kenn to keep talking, eager to work out his drama.

Kenn splashed water into his face.

Ivan flinched, not expecting it.

Kenn grinned coldly. "Don't ever think we're friends, Ivan. We'll talk and bond, but you want Angela too. I won't ever forget that."

Ivan wiped his face and eased down into the filling tub. "So it's okay for you and not me?"

"No; that's just the way it is."

Ivan's mouth dropped open. "You're jealous of me!"

Kenn's eyes lit up bright red. "You may get to be with her in the end. I hate you for that. So does Marc, despite his tolerating you. If he gets the chance, you'll be shot in a crossfire or accidentally dumped overboard."

"And you?"

“Of course. Marc isn’t really a boy scout. He never was, and now he has almost unlimited power. Be very careful with your thoughts around him. If you cross a line, it could be the last mistake you ever make.”

5

“Can he have visitors?” Neil and his team waited for Ed’s choice.

“Yes.” Ed was filling in while the other medics slept or had fun. “Why aren’t you guys at the party?”

“We were for a while.” Neil went to the corner of the infirmary. “Now we’re here.”

Wade grinned at Ed. “Brittani’s mom made a cake!”

“Did someone say cake?” Trent pushed himself up in the bed. “Was it chocolate?”

“You tell us.” Neil handed Trent a fork and a small plate with a huge slice of cake.

Trent groaned. “I smell it; it is chocolate!” He shoved a bite into his mouth. “Vasts goof!”

Neil, Wade, and Tommy sat in the chairs around Trent’s bed. Tommy didn’t look at any of them. After his revelation today, he wasn’t one of the Eagles anymore, but he felt he owed it to Trent to be here.

Neil cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, man. We didn’t know you were in trouble.”

Trent swallowed, shrugging. “I didn’t either. They hit me with something that took all the fight right out of me. I woke up in that village.” Trent cut out another large bite. “I’m good now. Marc, Conner, and Trinity hooked me up, and the boss finished it off. No worries. I’ll be out of here tomorrow.”

All the men were relieved to hear that. They turned at the sound of footsteps nearing the corner where Trent was stashed.

Daryl joined them. He nodded at Trent, then handed a notebook to Neil. “I’d like to coordinate our teams for the joint runs.”

“Why aren’t you at your engagement party?”

Daryl frowned at Tommy. “The party isn’t for us. Candy and Conner bowed out too. No one wanted to take the attention away from Ralph and Charlie.”

Neil skimmed the first few pages, trying not to be mean.

Wade glared. “This is wrong.”

Daryl nodded. “Agreed. But I’m going to do a good job while Kyle’s on leave.”

Trent swallowed the bite of cake. “Kyle’s on leave?”

“No.” Wade shook his head. “He was demoted to Angela’s level one team. He isn’t coming back. Daryl got his slot without earning it.”

“That’s not true.” Tommy liked Daryl. “He works hard.”

“It’s not fair.” Wade refused to give in. “Daryl should have refused the slot.”

“The way you did by sliding into Jeremy’s place?” Daryl walked away. “Hypocrite.”

Neil put a hand on Wade’s thick wrist before he could go after Daryl. “Let it go.”

Trent set the plate down. “What the hell happened out there?”

Neil waved at Wade. “You tell him. I want to go over these notes.”

Wade dropped onto the stool near Trent’s cot and started to fill him in.

Tommy stood near Neil, eager to read the notes.

Neil scowled at him. “You’re leaving, remember? Find something else to do!”

Tommy sighed. He wanted to explain how wrong things felt now, and how much he missed life under Adrian’s leadership. *They don’t understand.* He left the infirmary.

“I missed a lot of drama.”

Wade nodded at Trent’s comment. “Quinn and Tommy resigned and told Angela they’re going to go find Kendle once we reach the island.”

“Wow.” Trent’s head tilted. “Maybe she used a charm.”

Neil had already considered that. “We might do an intervention before they leave. For now, they’re on the outside.”

“I miss them too.” Trent shrugged at the surprise. “Adrian never gave up on us like Marc.

And Kendle can fight like a man. I just wish they were more ethical. We'll need them on that island."

Wade refused to agree. He motioned at the plate. "You gonna eat or what?"

Trent frowned. "There's nothing wrong with missing Adrian's leadership."

"He's a traitor!"

Neil left them to the old argument, going to the desk to sit down and finish reading Daryl's notes. His ideas for coordinating the teams were good. *And they look exactly like what Adrian used to give us.* Neil's frown discouraged Ed from speaking to him, but he didn't care. *Where did Daryl get these ideas? Is he in contact with Adrian?*

Chapter Seventeen

Doomed

1

“**T**he party is ending soon. Thank you for coming!” Ralph held up his glass of champagne, smile stretching from ear to ear. “The next time we do this, I’ll be a happily married man!”

The guests clapped and cheered. The hundred people here had enjoyed the party and the stress-free time together. Many of them were dressed up, and several had brought small gifts for the two couples. A long buffet table of snacks, soup, and desserts had been provided by Thelma and Dwight, though it was almost empty now. In the corner, the drink cart was also wiped out, but the CD player next to it was still going strong.

“Come here, bride to be!”

Daisey blushed as Ralph spun her around and kissed her passionately.

She returned the embrace, causing more cheers.

Charlie and Tracy laughed. They’d made their toasts, as had Marc and Angela, but they preferred to let the older couple have the spotlight.

“This was nice.”

Charlie grinned at her. “So was earlier.”

Tracy snickered, cheeks darkening. “I agree. Think you can do it again?”

Charlie stood up and offered her a hand. “Let’s go find out.”

People cheered and clapped again as the younger couple left the party.

Angela and Marc didn’t. They were busy getting the kids to line up for a hand wipe, face wipe, and a trip to the bathroom to brush their teeth. Angela had offered to give the den mothers a break. She and Marc were in charge of all the kids, even little Autumn, who was nestled securely in Marc’s big arm.

Across the ballroom, Candy was impressed by how they handled the kids. “I may need some lessons from them.”

Conner chuckled. He was at the table with her, though he’d only been here for a short while. The medics were keeping him busy. “Are you nervous about being a mom?”

“Not really. I’m a little scared of the pain, but I think I’ll like being a mother.” Candy lifted a brow. “Are you nervous about being a stepfather?”

“Of course. I’m not crazy.” Conner reached over and clasped her hand, rubbing the ring on her finger. “We’ll have a party when we’re on the island. I want you to be celebrated too.”

Candy smiled. *He’s so sweet to me.*

“I always will be.” Conner stood and offered his arm. “Quick stop at the bathroom before bed?”

“Yes.” Candy grunted as she stood up. “I need a cabin with a bathroom, I think. Do you think that’s allowed?”

“I’ll find out, but I don’t see why not.” Conner wanted to ask if she would share a cabin with him, but he doubted Angela would agree yet. “There’s a big cabin open next to mine...”

Candy grinned. “Ask her anyway. All she can do is say no, right?”

Conner flushed with happiness. “I love you.” He kissed her hand.

Candy dimpled prettily. “Right back at ya.”

Conner’s happiness faded as he spotted a medic hurrying toward him. “Damn. I have to go. Will you be okay?”

“I’m all good.” She gave him a playful shove. “Go keep proving you’re a good guy.”

Conner kissed her cheek and went to meet Harry at the intersection.

Candy moved aside as Marc came out leading the long line of tired kids who’d eaten, danced, and played for the last three hours. It was almost midnight.

Marc motioned. “Care to tag along?”

Candy was surprised. “Sure. What can I do?”

“Just trail us and make sure none of our herd strays.”

Candy laughed. “I can do that.”

Angela approved. They didn’t really need the help, but Candy’s expression had been lonely for a

second. Marc had caught it. *He's becoming more compassionate. That's good.*

Cody came over to her. "That's not why."

Angela frowned as she considered who Candy's mate was. *He doesn't trust Conner, so he's going to dig information from Candy. Damn it!*

Cody took her hand. "There's nothing to find. I didn't find anything when daddy asked me to search them both."

Angela's scowl quieted the rest of the kids. Marc heard her clearly.

"Kids are not to be used as evil-sniffing dogs!"

Marc stiffened. *She wasn't supposed to find out.* Marc waved, using a cheerful voice. "Who wants a bedtime story?"

The cheers echoed through the ship.

"Hey!" Samantha pushed her big body over to Angela. "I need permission—"

"No." Angela didn't have a good feeling about the coming storm either, but she wasn't going to take a chance on sending Samantha into labor early. "We'll handle what comes. You take care of those babies and get off your feet."

Samantha stuck out her tongue.

Angela forced a laugh.

Samantha returned to the table with the other pregnant women, eager to enjoy more of the sweets before they were gone. She didn't want to risk labor either, but she felt bad for not being able to warn them when a storm was coming. *I miss having a job.*

Angela followed Marc and the kids, gradually falling in next to Candy.

Candy heard all of it, even the mental thoughts. “Let him search if it makes him feel better.”

Angela tensed. *Power rubs off...* “Tell Conner to move your things into the cabin next to his so he can be close if you need him.”

Candy beamed. “Awesome.”

Angela walked next to the pregnant woman who was almost as big as Samantha. Candy’s mind was sane again and her mood was good. *She’s got her Mitchel; she’s happy.*

“Yes, I am.” Candy waved at the kids. “Can I help more with them? I need to keep busy and the practice will help me.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” Angela felt the woman wanting to ask for something else. She slowed a little to give them a few seconds of privacy. “Make it quick. More people are coming down this hall.”

Candy forced it out, hoping Angela didn’t get angry. “Conner’s young, so he doesn’t always see things clearly. The medics are using him too hard. Tell them to give him a day or two between healing sessions or he’ll get used up and then all the patients will suffer.”

“Agreed. Why did you think I’d get upset over advice?”

Candy shrugged. “Most people in leadership don’t like it when normals try to tell them things, even if it’s right.”

Angela assumed Candy had been told to mind her own business. “Who?”

Candy shook her head. “I’m not a snitch, and you’re observant enough to figure that out on your own.”

Angela chuckled. “Fine, and so noted.” She quickly narrowed it to Jennifer or Debra, and settled on Jennifer. Debra wasn’t rude to anyone. Angela went to the end of the kids’ line, expression calm, but inside, anger boiled.

Candy assumed it was because of what she’d just learned.

Marc knew better. *She’s not upset about rudeness or even me using the kids for drama searches. She’s pissed because I quit.* He sighed. *And she has every right to be, but I’m not changing my mind. I’m done.*

2

“We’re done. Just relax and try to sleep now.” Morgan smiled at Pam. “You did well.”

Pam tried to stop crying. She hated the feeling of a lifeforce being trapped inside her body, but she was relieved that Conner had been able to kill the cancerous cells. She reached out for him. “Anything you need, you come to me.”

Conner patted her hand and staggered toward the exit. “Just some sleep.”

Harry took the boy's arm and led him toward the nearest empty bed. "Boss sent word to keep you here for a bit and make sure you get that rest."

Conner didn't argue; he was exhausted. He collapsed on the cot, groaning.

Harry stuck him with a needle and taped it in place.

Conner barely felt it. He was aware of a cool liquid running into his arm a few seconds later, but he didn't ask what it was. "Tell Candy I'll help her move in a bit."

"I will." Harry wrote the dose of medication on Conner's clipboard. "No worries. Sleep now."

Conner let the darkness claim him, grateful.

Pam wiped her face. "What did Harry give him?"

"Just a saline solution and some antibiotics." Morgan sanitized his hands. "We need Conner to stay healthy so he can keep helping us."

"Good." Pam slowly sat up, grateful to not feel the usual sharp pains in her gut that had accompanied that movement for so long. "It really worked."

"Yes." Morgan connected their minds so she could view the x-ray image he was now great at bringing up from his patients. "That tiny lump is all that's left, and it's breaking up."

Pam burst out crying.

Morgan held her, heart settling into a normal rhythm. "Shawn wanted to be here too, but he had duty."

“I know. Tell him it’s fine. The captain has to be protected.”

Morgan didn’t want to tell her, but she was going to find out at some point. “He’s not guarding the captain, Pam. He’s learning to sail the ship.”

Pam shuddered, paling. “He’ll be in danger forever.”

Morgan sighed. “Yes. But we need someone we can rely on and so many of our people have shown themselves to be flaky. Angela is using the best people for the hardest positions.”

“She’s a good leader...”

Morgan caught the tone. “I agree, but don’t say it, okay?”

Pam nodded. Morgan didn’t want it known that they both missed Adrian. Marc had disappointed them too many times and this was no different.

“Stop! Make her stop!”

The adults spun around to find Missy tossing on her cot.

Dog woke up, whining.

“Make her stop. She has to stop!”

Morgan went to the girl and put a hand on her brow. “It’s okay, honey. You’re safe now.”

Missy quieted.

Pam smiled. “You’re good with her.”

Morgan sensed Pam about to bring up her lack of fertility. He chose a distraction. “I had an evolution.” He lifted a hand.

Pam’s bottle of water flew into his grip.

Pam grinned. “Nice!” Her smile faded. “Angela will use you more now. You won’t get to stay just a medic.”

Morgan gently brushed her hair off her cheek. “I never planned to. I like being a top Eagle. That won’t change.”

Pam had already known, but hearing it sealed the worries she had. There was only one thing she could say. “The apocalypse sucks!”

Morgan chuckled, but he didn’t make any promises he knew he couldn’t keep. When the boss called for the next run, he would answer and do his part to ensure the survival of those he loved. *It’s who I am; that will never change.*

3

“Who is that?” Ian relaxed as he picked out female shapes coming down the hall. *As long as it’s not Kenn.*

He watched Debra and Laura’s two nieces go down the steps to the entertainment floor. He assumed Debra had been told to get the girls some clothes. Their old pants and shirts were torn and faded. So far, the girls were adjusting well to being without their crazy aunt.

Ian swept the empty halls, nerves on edge as thunder cracked outside the window. The motion of the ship was rougher than it had been. Ian hated storms. *I hope it’s over quick.*

Ian jumped as the radio on his belt crackled in time to the ship's PA system.

"This is the Captain. The storm is about to hit us. Please get to your assigned area and secure your belongings. If you need something, talk to the Eagles on duty in your zone. Do not wander the ship during the storm."

Ian's stress rose another level. If the lights went out, there would be chaos again. He hadn't forgotten the panic from the last time it had happened. He had little faith in Theo's repairs. *Nature's a bitch. She always finds a way to screw us.*

Ian walked his zone, stopping near the brig to peer in.

Jayda didn't get up. She was on a cot in the cell across from the prisoners, trying to rest. "We're all good here. Right, ladies?"

Emma and Francesca nodded sickly. The motion of the ship was upsetting their already fragile stomachs.

Ian moved on, glad to have other people on this deck. He hated to be alone now.

Thud!

Ian spun around, searching the dim corridor. "Who's there?!"

Thud!

Ian reluctantly moved toward the hot tub room to check on the noise. *It's just unsecured belongings falling. It's not a problem.*

Ian opened the door.

Kenn stepped from the shadows. "Boo!"

“Ahhhhh!” Ian felt warm piss run down his leg. Kenn burst out laughing. He walked down the hallway, shaking his head.

Ian sank to his knees, gasping for air. *Asshole!*

Kenn took Ian’s post so he would be able to go change, chuckles filling the hallway.

The walls near him lit up.

Kenn kept laughing, but he stored the reaction. Tonya was usually the only one who could get a response from their ship.

On a whim, Kenn rubbed the window ledge. “It was funny, right?”

“Who are you talking to?”

Kenn jumped, smacking into the wall.

Jayda frowned from the doorway of the brig. “Who was screaming?”

Kenn put a hand over his thumping heart. “Me if you do that again.”

Jayda snickered and went back into the brig.

Kenn went down the hall, still amused. “Karma sure hits some of us quick and leaves it for years with other people. Who makes up these crazy rules?”

Kenn heard a door open in front of him. He eased around the corner and found Dog coming toward him. Kenn tensed. *Speaking of Karma...*

Dog stopped near Kenn and looked up with golden eyes that sent clear dislike. He’d snuck out of the infirmary after chewing the needle from his paw.

Kenn felt his old rage try to respond to the challenge. He shoved it down and forced a bored tone. “What do you want?”

Dog padded down the steps toward the entertainment floor, tail bushed out.

Kenn followed, stomach twisting. He assumed the wolf had caught a scent that didn’t belong here. Kenn keyed his radio. “Ian needs a shift change ASAP.”

“Copy.”

He followed Dog down the dim steps and into the shadows of the entertainment zone that was off limits right now unless the person had permission. He spotted Debra and Laura’s nieces going into a clothing store, but the wolf went right by them. Kenn kept following. *I hope this isn’t a setup.*

Dog huffed. *It’s a pick up.* The wolf pawed at the door to the bookstore.

Kenn understood. He swept his tank top and shorts, and sighed. “Bad time to not have a vest on.” He entered the bookstore and quickly shut the door. “Here, kitty-kitty.”

Dog padded to the darkest corner of the bookstore and pawed at a tall cabinet that wasn’t shut all the way. *In here.*

Kenn opened the cabinet.

Both cats lunged, attaching to his legs with all their claws.

“Damn it! Stop! Let go!” Kenn flailed around the store, knocking things over as the cats dug in and held on. “Bad! Bad cats!”

Dog chuffed laughter.

Kenn grabbed both cats by the scruffs of their necks and limped toward the exit. He glared at the wolf. “Open it.”

Dog immediately jumped up and turned the handle with his mouth.

“I knew you could do that.” Kenn followed the wolf through the hall, ignoring the laughter and pointing from Debra and the nieces. *This is what I get for paying Ian back.*

Dog’s amusement fell. *This isn’t payback. I trust you to care for them during the storm.*

Kenn almost shed real tears. He swallowed the feeling and walked up the steps without replying.

Dog chuffed again. *What an asshole.*

4

“Let me in!” Kenn’s grip was slipping on the angry cats.

Tonya flipped the lock and opened the door. She relocked it as soon as he was in. “Where did you find them?”

“I didn’t.” Kenn knelt and let go. Both cats scrambled under the counter near their litter box. “Dog did.”

Tonya chuckled. “Their relationship is funny.”

Kenn wiped blood from his wrists where both cats had curled around and dug in their claws. He went to the sink to clean up. “Yeah, funny.”

Tonya helped him wash away the blood, frowning at the deep scratches. She clucked at the cats. “Bad, kitties!”

Kenn tensed as she dumped peroxide over both wrists. “Damn it, woman!”

Tonya snickered. “Big bad man.”

Kenn snorted. “In a fight, sure. Against those evil gophers? No.”

Tonya offered him the bandages.

Kenn shook his head, drying off. “They’ve stopped bleeding. I’m good.”

Tonya grabbed the edge of the counter as the ship rocked harder. “But that’s not.”

Kenn took her arm to steady her. He frowned as the lights flickered. “The ship’s unhappy.”

Tonya stared, surprised. “I didn’t know you could feel it.”

“Neither did I until now.” Kenn thought about rubbing the wall, but didn’t. “What’s the problem?”

Tonya concentrated. Her eyes widened. “I think it’s afraid.”

“Of what? Us? All the fighting?”

The ship rocked to the left and then righted. The lights flickered again.

“Of the storm.” She shuddered, picking up an image that terrified her. “We’re not going to make it!”

Kenn saw it too. He flew to the door. “Lock this!” Kenn listened for the click as he ran. When he heard it, he increased speed and keyed his radio. “Stop us, Grant! You have to stop the ship!”

Kenn didn't get a reply. He wasn't sure why, but it didn't matter. He slammed his hand into the alarm button for the fire system as he ran by.

Wails and flashing lights began circling the ship.

Kenn flew up the last ramp, aware of several people on his heels. "Grant! Stop!"

Kenn felt the ship lurch into a faster current. *Too late! I'm too late!*

Kenn ran to the bridge, seeing Grant frantically hitting buttons and sawing on the wheel. He groaned. "No!"

Grant stared at the giant waterspout coming toward them through the rainy darkness. "Brace for impact!"

Everyone grabbed onto something, hearts pounding as the water tornado neared the front of the ship and kept coming.

5

Adrian jerked awake, gasping. *Safe Haven!*

"Are you unwell?" Toshi was standing in the doorway.

Adrian sucked air into his lungs. "They're in trouble. Safe Haven is in trouble."

"That is good news." Toshi leaned against the wall. "Maybe you will be all that is left of your great legacy."

Adrian glowered at the pirate leader. “Why do you care? If not for the UN, you wouldn’t even be here to hold me captive.”

Toshi’s face darkened. “I will settle with them in time.”

“Why us? Why Safe Haven?” Adrian made a connection. “It’s personal.”

Toshi stiffened. “I hate your kind! Your family! I came for you.”

Dear old dad just bit me in the ass again. Adrian sagged against the uncomfortable couch. “Wife? Daughter?”

“My village!” Toshi drew his knife and stomped over to the couch. He shoved the blade against Adrian’s throat. “He picked my village! He slaughtered my people and turned us out to the tides like unwanted animals!” Toshi twitched, fighting the rage. “I will kill you, slowly.”

He straightened, stepping back. “But not before I return the favor. Safe Haven will burn under my command and then you will die!” Toshi stormed from the cabin.

Sadie came in as Toshi left. “Are you okay?”

“Peachy.” Adrian rubbed his throat. “Where were you?”

“He told us to gather the fish and cook.” Sadie’s face darkened. “Kendle agreed so we could poison it. I don’t know why she doesn’t just kill him.”

“She isn’t strong enough to get them all, and I’m too weak to help her yet.” Adrian began to pry his

bandage off. “Help me cut away the infected parts. Then we’re going to cauterize it.”

Sadie grimaced. “Are you strong enough to handle that?”

Adrian groaned as he ripped off an end of the bandage. “We’ll find out.”

“Why not rest and heal? I heard him say he won’t kill you until he defeats Safe Haven. We have time.”

“No, we don’t. Safe Haven is in trouble. I need to regain my strength and help them.”

Sadie scowled. “Help her, you mean!”

Adrian gazed up at Sadie in confusion. “Her, who?”

Sadie cleared her mind, thrilled. “Never mind. How are you going to help them? Kendle said you don’t have any real gifts.”

“Kendle is trying to keep our captor from turning her over to his men; she’ll say whatever she needs to.” Adrian used the bandage to start scraping off the layers of ugly green and yellow pus that were already reforming. “Get over here and cut me!”

Sadie snickered, moving forward. “Never heard that from a man before.”

Adrian tensed as her knife neared his injury. “When I heal up, you’ll hear a lot of new things from a man.”

Sadie paused. “You promise?”

Adrian sent out a weak charm. “I want you.”

Sadie cut into his injury with a smile on her face.

6

Kendle listened to Adrian's screams with a hard heart. *It's not about him anymore.* Kendle joined Toshi as he resumed control over the wheel. "Food's cooking. What's next?"

Toshi was still trying to get his anger under control. "You will eat it first."

Kendle shrugged. "Okay. Is there something else you want me to do?"

Toshi spun around. "Take off your clothes."

Kendle retreated. "No."

Toshi didn't really feel like raping her, but he needed to make sure she understood he was the boss. He drew the knife from his belt.

Kendle fired a mental blast that swarmed over the pirate leader but had no visible effect.

Toshi rushed forward and put the knife to her throat. "I am immune to all but death spells. Your magic means nothing to me!" He slid the blade down her shirt and cut off the first button.

Kendle kicked him in the knee and leaned into an elbow hit that slammed against his jaw. The knife slid across the floor.

Kendle kicked again, now committed to the fight.

Toshi punched her in the stomach.

Kendle fell to the deck, breath gone. She forced her leg to work and kicked out, catching him in the same knee.

Toshi slammed his head into hers and scrambled on top of her as they both fell, hands going around her throat.

Kendle jerked forward and smashed his nose with her chin. Blood began pouring over both of them.

Toshi punched her in the face and then did it again.

Kendle reached out and found his groin. She squeezed and twisted, ducking his hold as he screamed.

Kendle grabbed his hair with her free hand and slammed his face into the wall. Something crunched.

Toshi curled up to avoid her hands, body screaming in pain.

Kendle rose and kicked him in the kidney.

Toshi shrieked.

Kendle kept kicking, rage in control. She knew his men were trying to board the ship now to help him, but she couldn't stop.

Toshi felt death coming. In a desperate attempt to stay alive, he rolled away and drew his gun.

Kendle stopped inches from the barrel, eyes glowing vivid red. "Do it. Do it!"

Toshi had never faced a female who didn't care about pain or death. He slowly lowered the bloody weapon.

Kendle fought with herself. She wanted to rush him and force him to pull the trigger. *I still want to*

die. That feeling has haunted me since Ethan's abuse. It's never going away.

Toshi slowly hit the button on the radio. "Stay where you are. I do not need you."

His men reluctantly stopped throwing grappling hooks, but they observed the wheelhouse in concern.

Toshi studied the bloodied, bruised woman as he wiped blood from his broken nose. *She's magnificent—a fitting pirate queen.*

Kendle snorted out blood and snot. "Hell of a way to ask me."

Toshi grinned through the pain, feeling a loose tooth. "Will you have dinner with me?"

Kendle felt a spark. She considered hitting him again. In the end, she yielded. "I might be willing to do more if you give me what I want."

"And what is it your heart desires?"

Kendle saw no reason to lie. "Kill Angela. Destroy her Safe Haven."

Toshi's grin widened. "I already have that planned."

"It won't work unless you do it my way. Her gifts are too strong." Kendle sank down on the stool. "You're not immune to fire either and she's very good with it."

Toshi knew that to be true. He'd witnessed it. "I will threaten the man below that she desires above all others."

“Angela won’t trade Adrian for her camp.”
Kendle slung blood from her hand, body aching.
“You have to take away her power.”

“How?”

“Drain her energy. Fire at her kids until she runs out of power shielding them. Then kill her in front of everyone.”

Toshi slowly pulled off his shirt and wiped his face, balls aching. “We will eat and talk.”

Kendle waved toward the cooking soup. “I’ll need another hour on the food.”

“Why? It is done. I can smell it from here.” He grimaced. “Sort of. You broke my nose.”

Kendle leaned against the cool wall. “If you have men you want to get rid of, send it to them.”

Toshi realized she had poisoned the food, like he’d been worried about. He laughed through the pain. “Dump it overboard. I will cook for you, and you will tell me all Angela’s secrets.”

Kendle grunted. “In a minute. I can’t feel my stomach.”

Toshi sank down next to her on the floor. “My balls are swelling. You are a vicious fighter.”

“It’s all I know how to do now.”

“What were you before the war?”

“Weak.” Kendle reached over and put her hand on his bloody wrist. A blue spark flared and vanished. “I knew it!” Kendle shoved to her feet. “Call me when it’s time to eat. I need to clean up.”

Toshi watched her limp toward the shower setup. He continued to observe as she shed her

clothes and stepped under the water. He didn't know what that blue spark meant, but he suspected it was important. He scanned her scars, not turned-off and not aroused. He was in too much pain to view her that way. *I've never had a woman beat my ass before. I think I liked it.*

Kendle groaned, catching the thought. *So did I. What the hell is wrong with me?!*

Adrian's scream echoed up the steps.

Kendle spit out blood and let the water wash it away. *Serves you right. If not for you, Safe Haven wouldn't exist and I wouldn't have become this evil thing that craves agony.*

Kendle turned to face Toshi, mind in chaos. *I need to be put down.*

Toshi pushed up off the floor and turned his back to her.

Kendle grunted. *If he starts treating me nice, I'm doomed.*

7

“Are you ready?”

Adrian groaned. “No. Do it anyway.”

Sadie shoved the glowing metal spatula against his side. It was all she could find to cauterize his wound. She cringed from his screams, but she didn't remove the spatula until she was sure the wound was closed. Then she did it again on the next spot.

“I'm sorry!” Adrian screamed it. “Angie!”

Sadie's eyes narrowed. She held the spatula against him longer than she had to. *I hate that bitch! Even charmed, he's still thinking of her!*

Adrian missed it, crying hard tears. He replayed every second of the rest stop horror as Sadie reheated the spatula and cauterized the rest of the red, infected wound.

Sadie finally finished and tossed the gory, stinking spatula into the corner. "Are you okay?"

"No." Adrian didn't wipe away the tears. "Hit me again. It broke."

Sadie stiffened. "What broke?"

"Your charm, you sneaky bitch! Do it again!"

"What?"

"Do you think I want to feel this way?" Adrian opened his mind and lowered his mental defenses. "Do it now before I change my mind!"

Sadie gathered energy and blasted him as hard as she could.

Adrian fell over onto his side, tears flowing thickly as he fought not to pass out.

Sadie curled up on the floor next to him, confident her charm had gotten him this time.

Adrian used the agony as a shield to keep her from reading the truth. He let the fire fill his mind, hunting peace in the darkness where he could dream about the woman who was once again fighting with all her might to save his people. *You can't charm someone who's already in love. I know. I tried and it cost me everything.*

“What did the blue spark mean?”

Kendle paused with a bite halfway to her mouth. “We’re compatible.” She shoved the bite in to keep from saying more. *I had that with Luke and Marc too, and look where it got me. I don’t want to be matched with a pirate. I already know it won’t end well.*

Toshi also took a bite. His fish stew was good, but his stomach still hurt from their fight. He couldn’t hold much. He admired her stamina when she kept shoveling it in.

Kendle belched, grimacing. She reached for her water.

“I have wine.”

Kendle nodded. Being drunk might ease her pain. She was one huge bruise from head to toe.

Toshi retrieved the bottle from the supplies he’d ordered from his flagship. He opened it and sat it on the table between them. Then he forced himself to keep eating the warm stew.

Kendle pushed away her empty bowl, grimacing at the pain. She hadn’t had a full stomach in a while and the fight had hurt her.

“Why do you not heal yourself?”

“Healing takes a lot of energy.” Kendle reached for the wine. “I’d rather save it for fighting.”

Toshi leaned back from his half-eaten bowl. “How do you get more energy?”

“Sleep, usually.” Kendle sniffed the wine and took a large drink. “Mmm. That’s good.” She took another large swallow.

Toshi kept her talking. “How else can you gain energy?”

Kendle met his eyes. “A lifeforce.”

Toshi made a face. “I will not sacrifice my men in that way.”

Kendle shrugged. “I didn’t ask you to.” She took another drink, then set the bottle between them. “Other descendants can share energy.” She shook her head before he asked. “Adrian’s too weak.”

“What of the other one?”

Kendle belched. “She’s a fighter. She needs her energy in case you betray us.”

Toshi gathered the bowls and took them to the cooking shelf he’d erected. He scraped his bowl back into the pot and put the lid on it. “Are you finished with the wine?”

Kendle shook her head, reaching for it. “A little more.”

Toshi finished cleaning up, enjoying the cool breeze blowing over the deck. The lantern on their table gave a soft, romantic feel that didn’t match his mind.

Kendle felt weariness starting to set in. She took another long drink, then capped the bottle. “I need to sleep.”

Toshi came back to the table and sat. “Tell me about Angela and how to defeat her.”

Kendle's head swam. She fought to give the right answer. "Her kids. Her people. She'll die for them."

"Her people... You mean the descendants."

Kendle shrugged tiredly. "Any kids. Adult normals."

Toshi was shocked. "She doesn't protect the magic users?"

Kendle leaned against the wall of the ship, eyes shutting. "Not over the normals. I think she misses being one."

Toshi didn't believe her. "Nothing that comes from your mouth can be trusted."

Kendle heard the anger and knew she was in danger again, but she couldn't find the strength to open her eyes. "We have a deal..."

Toshi watched her fall over, glad he'd thought to drug the wine. "And I will honor it, my vicious liar. You will be below during the fight. After I conquer Safe Haven, I will do the same to you."

Kendle felt Toshi lift her into his strong arms, but she couldn't fight. She fell into the darkness with the taste of fear in her throat.

Chapter Eighteen

Bluffing

January 18th

1

“Do you know where we are?”

Grant gestured at the dark screens. “Not a clue.” He bent over the maps he’d spread across the control panel. “We’re anchored now, but we drifted with the storm after we lost power.” He pointed. “Somewhere around here is as close as I can get right now.”

Angela leaned against the wall behind him, exhausted. It had been a long night of calming people and healing the minor injuries of the guards who’d been on the top deck, and cleaning up the water and debris, and that was after a training session and full day of normal duty. “How long?”

“Maybe not until nightfall. I can chart it by the stars.”

“Damn.”

Grant nodded. “Yeah. Theo says it may be that long before we have power again if we don’t find the other relay soon.”

Angela forced her fried brain to keep functioning. “We’ll make it work. Do the best you can.”

Grant moved to the other console, where he had another map spread out.

Angela rested for a few more seconds, then forced her feet to move down the stairs. All around the deck, tired, dirty Eagles stared at her, hoping she had good news.

Angela swept the front, where Theo and his crew had roped off a large area. The waterspout had widened the hole from the detention center while destroying the entertainments up here. The pool was cracked; the tables and chairs were missing, and thousands of gallons of salt water had gone down into the ship. The pump had cleared most of it before the lightning strike that had once again destroyed their relay and shut down the power, but the cleanup was still ongoing on multiple decks. They'd been dead in the water for the rest of the storm, and the strong current had carried them off the chosen path. *We have to get moving before someone finds us like this.*

Greg came up the ramp. "Injuries are all minor. Morgan has them covered without Conner's help, so I sent him to help Candy move. When they finish, she's going to help the den mothers. So is Molly after she gets her final checkup." Greg scanned the busy deck and the foggy water, frowning. "We're not going anywhere anytime soon, are we?"

"We don't know yet. Kenn is searching for our last relay, but he isn't having any luck yet. I sent people down to help him." Angela stared toward the east, willing the sun to rise sooner. They were using

flashlights and lanterns, but there still wasn't enough light for most of the repairs they needed to do. "Other damage?"

"Not that we found." Greg and his team had finished a complete walk of the ship to search for trouble. "Lot of messes to be cleaned and tempers that need to cool down, but we're okay for the moment." Greg took her arm and led her to a small table. "Put your head down and take ten minutes." He could feel how tired she was.

Angela sat down, but she got her notebook and pen out.

Greg sighed. He moved a lantern closer to her and stayed by her side. "Why don't you take some energy? A few of us have it to spare."

Angela knew; she still hated doing it.

Greg lowered his voice. "You could also take a lifeforce."

Angela scowled. "Our prisoners screwed up. That doesn't mean they deserve to die."

Greg shrugged. "Emma is a bad seed. So are a few of the normals."

"Stop it."

Greg didn't let her sharp tone end the conversation. "You can't keep going like this. I know you need something and you're not getting it. Tell me what it is so I can help."

Angela sighed. "My witch has been gone for a while. My gifts are limited."

Greg wanted to help, but he didn't know what to do.

“There’s nothing you can do. I have to tough it out.”

Greg knew she wasn’t going to ask for energy from anyone. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Take what you need. I give it willingly.”

Angela tried to resist, but she was famished.

Greg stiffened as she sucked energy from him as if she had a straw. Pleasure flew over his skin. He swallowed a groan, sensing someone coming up behind them. *My timing stinks.*

Angela let go of the energy stream, breathing harshly. She shrugged off his warm hand and tried to concentrate on her notebook as his energy revived her. “Thank you.”

Greg shuddered at her raspy voice. “My honor.” He staggered back and tried to ignore the man who was glaring at him.

“Tobias volunteered to help Theo. He said he was an engineer before the war. I agreed, but I sent Ray along as a guard. He refused to stay in his cabin to rest.” Marc stepped between her and Greg. “I would have done that for you.”

“You can’t spare it.” Angela ran a finger along her written list. “Gus had a break right before the storm. Put him on duty over Theo after Ray and tell him to dig into Tobias’s thoughts. If there’s an issue, he has permission to remove the man.”

Marc waited, anger and jealousy clear in his tense stance and clenched fists.

“Keep the Eagles rotating. We can’t have them falling down on duty. Anyone could hit us right now.”

“Anything else?”

Angela looked up at him with Greg’s energy flying along her skin. “We’re off the path, Marc. That means we no longer have protection from the ocean. If we don’t get moving, we’re not going to make it to the island. Use that anger and find a solution.”

Marc marched down the ramp, casting a last glare at Greg.

Greg ignored it. Everyone knew Marc was jealous and possessive. *I tried to do it while he wasn’t around. Sorry.*

Angela waved it off. “We have bigger problems. Nature knows we’re an easy target right now. Get Samantha up here, carefully. We don’t have a choice.”

Greg hurried down the ramp, but he took a different hallway than the one Marc had. *It’s a bad time to tempt the tiger.*

2

“No.”

“She’s not going!”

Wade and Neil stood in front of the door, blocking Greg.

Greg glanced over their big shoulders, tone pointed. “Samantha?”

Sam pushed up off the bed and went to the closet for her shoes.

Neil pointed at Greg. “You just lost XO.”

Greg shrugged. “Didn’t know you were going to give it to me, so it’s not a loss.”

“She can’t use her gifts!” Wade stepped forward, furious. “What’s wrong with you?!”

Greg tried not to get mad. “You’re Eagles first, remember?”

Wade tensed to swing.

“Stop it!” Samantha’s sharp voice cut through the anger. “I’m going up to help the boss save our asses. You hens can fight after I leave. Just take it to a training room; I’m not cleaning this cabin again.”

Wade and Neil reluctantly moved aside so she could exit the spotless cabin.

Greg held out his arm. “Boss said carefully. Go slow.”

“Elevator?”

“Yes. The emergency backup power covers the elevators too. We’re only using it for vital services, like that and the coolers. Go straight to the top, and you’ll stay in the bridge to avoid the steps.” Greg ignored the angry males behind them. “Angela wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“I know.” Samantha waddled down the hall, face not showing the discomfort in her spine. *I’m needed. Finally!*

Neil stifled another protest. He waved at Conner, who was peering up from the couch. “Stay close to her.”

Conner hopped up and followed, boots in his hand.

Neil scanned the quiet hall, relieved that most people were sleeping. After such a rocky night, he’d expected a mini riot from the normal camp members and flat out defiance from a lot of the descendants.

“What should we do?” Wade wasn’t willing to let it go. “Will Marc support us?”

“No, and I won’t ask him to.” Neil let out a heavy sigh. “We have to let her do her job.”

“This isn’t right, man.”

“No, but nothing about this life is right.” Neil went to the guard station. “Where does the boss want us?”

Zack skimmed his list, yawning. “You’re off right now. Probably means you have a long shift waiting, so I…” Zack stopped as Neil and Wade hurried down the hall to the stairs. He shook his head and resumed sweeping the cabins for trouble.

Neil and Wade made it to the top deck at the same time as the elevator. They marched up to the bridge steps, anger growing as Angela came from a table near the railing.

Angela’s eyes lit up bright red. “Problem?”

Neil immediately retreated to let her go by.

Wade crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Angela lifted a hand.

Wade fell to his knees, trying not to scream at the pain.

Angela walked by them and went up to the bridge. She met Samantha's hostility with a shrug. "He said he wasn't scared of me."

Samantha snorted. "He won't do that again."

"Over you, yes, he will." Angela moved to the console. "And I do understand. I'm sorry I had to ask this of you."

Samantha knew why she'd been called. She eased onto a stool and concentrated.

Nothing happened.

Samantha frowned. "Neil."

Neil hurried into the bridge and knelt by her.

Sam held out a hand. "Unlock me."

Angela scowled as she realized Neil had locked Samantha's gifts, but she didn't scold him. He'd done what he thought best for the babies. Angela understood the choice.

Neil reluctantly removed the mental lock. He'd hoped she wouldn't notice.

"I suspected, but I really didn't know. I've been a good girl and followed the rules." She smiled at Angela. "It almost killed me. Thank you, Boss."

Angela sighed. "You're welcome, though I hate this choice. Please don't push any harder than you have to."

"Can I help too?" Wade was in the doorway now.

Samantha's answer came fast. "Yes. Make up with Greg. I don't need the tension."

Wade glowered at Greg.

Greg glared back.

Sam grunted. "Asking too much, I guess."

Wade didn't like her tone or her words. He caved. "I'm sorry."

Greg didn't want to fight with his friend. "So am I. Some orders are hard to follow."

"Yeah."

Samantha smiled. "Much better. Now get out of here, both of you. I need room for this."

Neil held out a hand, as Greg and Wade exited the bridge. "Together?"

"It would be my honor."

Neil began to gather the energy Samantha needed for the spell.

Samantha let her witch lead, opening gifts and choosing strength levels, but she pushed the demon aside when it would have cast a protection spell over the ship. "You only come forward when I need you."

As you wish, Master.

It was the first time Neil had heard the other voice. There was little sympathy in Samantha's witch, if any.

Samantha's grip tightened on Neil's hand. "Hold on."

The spell was unlike anything Neil had seen. Golden light came from her hand. The powerful blast immediately exploded into millions of tiny orbs. They settled over the ship, then rushed into the morning fog like a horde of insects bent on meeting

an invading enemy. The glowing, flying orbs spun around the boat, then dived into the water.

Neil could feel the magic shoring up weak spots and molding into the boat. *It's a shield!*

Samantha's heart was thudding, stomach clenching. The past weeks had been busy. The stress of Amy falling ill on top of Neil's trial could have been a terrible trigger if not for Angela locking the gifts of her children. She opened the mental door and peered inside.

Everyone on the bridge stiffened in surprise as they shared the vision. Fog moved over the restless water like a blanket, invading with white clouds that smothered even the sound of the ocean. It came fast, covering, concealing.

White clouds covered her, bringing fish rot into her lungs. Samantha dropped her head to her arm to block it from her face. The tendrils sank into her hair and her clothes, weighing her down. She concentrated only on breathing, feeling defenseless.

Creak...

The deck groaned under heavy footsteps, making Samantha flinch. She instinctively went dark, cloaking her presence.

Creak. Tap-tap-tap.

The steps came closer, slowly, as if searching for her.

The thoughts now flying around were filled with blood and screams, flashing halls of darkness. Samantha cringed as the steps moved closer.

"I know you're here."

Samantha slowed her breathing, stopping the gasp. She knew that voice.

“You have nothing to fear from me. I promise to spare you. These culls have no place in the herd of humanity.” The footsteps moved away.

Samantha shuddered. “I need to go higher. Up.”

Neil thought to protest, but Samantha was already reaching for the ladder of the Crow’s Nest that was attached to the bridge. He followed her closely, lending his strength.

Samantha pulled herself into the windy crow’s nest, grateful for Neil’s hard body against hers. There was something else they had to see. “You have to send it out. I’m empty.”

Neil tossed out a huge rock of energy that skipped across the water like a radar gun.

“Show me as it comes.”

Neil labored to get it all. She wasn’t strong enough to connect their minds right now; he opened the link between them as the first impressions came back.

“Thousands of fish and dolphins.”

“All of those?” Neil frowned. “Isn’t that a lot for a single mile?”

“Yes. They’re following the light of Safe Haven.” Samantha examined the other impressions in Neil’s mind. “Dying whales. Over a hundred. The sharks are eating them, but only the injured ones that fall behind. Nature is starving them all.”

Neil understood without it being explained. It was the equivalent of starving a guard dog to make

it a better killer. Anyone who went overboard wouldn't survive.

Samantha didn't have the strength to search further. She slumped against his side.

Realizing he would have to do it on his own this time, Neil threw another ball of radar. "Show me!"

Power flew out into the foggy darkness, leaving a trail of bright light that slowly sank into the fog and disappeared. "That's our path."

Neil memorized it and turned his attention to the woman now shivering at his feet. He sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. Samantha curled against him.

Neil wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly as she shivered. "Good job, Sam. Good job."

Samantha snapped out of the daze, immediately yawning. Peering into the future was exhausting.

Everyone in the bridge blinked at the sunlight and clear view. Sharing a vision with Samantha was odd, creepy. They'd all been looking down from the crow's nest a minute ago. Her vision was also definite. There was no doubt about what was coming.

"We'll have more fog, along with animal issues, and pirates waiting." Greg faced Samantha. "Who's our newest killer?"

She sighed. "It was one of the camp members we let in during our time in the mountain. He plans to copycat Chris."

Angela winced at the reminder of their old vet. Samantha gasped, brow furrowing.

“Shit. Conner!” Neil jerked the boy closer.
“Help her!”

Samantha held up a hand. “Rib kick. I’m good.”

Angela and the others chuckled.

Neil sucked in air. “I’m not gonna make it.”

Below them now, standing guard, Wade nodded. “The delivery can’t be this stressful.”

Neil snorted. He felt Wade wanting to ask why he wasn’t welcome in the delivery room. *I want you on the door so no one can get to her while we’re vulnerable.*

Wade relaxed. *I didn’t think about that.* “We’re good. No one will get by me.”

Neil knew. When Wade was riled, he would challenge anyone. *Including the boss.*

Wade glanced up, brow lifting.

Neil shook his head. *Later.*

Wade turned and studied the ocean. He didn’t see any fog, or the long line of migrating whales, but he knew both were coming. *How do we handle that? We can’t kill them. The Ocean King won’t like it. We also can’t sit here in the path. They’ll damage the ship.*

Angela slid by Neil and went down the steps. “We have to get the repairs done before the line arrives; there is no other option.”

Wade followed her. “I’m sorry.”

Angela kept walking. “So am I. Please don’t ever make me do that again. Next time, I might not stop.”

Wade stopped, stung.

“Sam needs an escort to her cabin.”

Wade immediately turned and went up the steps at Neil’s call.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief as they both got into the elevator. Wade had a rough temper some days. *He’s not like Jeremy in that way.*

Neil followed Angela to the front of the deck, sure orders were coming.

“Candy organized the cargo area. Have her help search for the last relay... And get Kenn up here. It’s time he used the gift he’s been hiding.”

Neil scowled as he turned away, but he didn’t think bad thoughts about the Marine. *I hid mine too. I can’t be mad at him for it.*

Wind fluttered through Angela’s wild hair, bringing the damp smell of fish. The fog was already close. She could almost taste it.

Greg came to her side, waiting for the next order.

“We need snipers up here with the biggest ammunition we’re carrying. Kenn will be in charge. I don’t think we can clear out sharks with guns or magic, but we have to try to buy time on the repairs.”

“What if we use grenades? Maybe the vibrations will turn the line.”

Angela sighed. “We all saw how hungry those animals are. I doubt anything will detour them, but yes, bring the grenades up too. It won’t hurt to try.”

Greg keyed his mike. “Shawn, Wade, Molly, Jennifer, and Kenn to the top deck. Bring your best gun, along with a case of noisemakers.”

Greg didn’t wait for the garbles to clear. He went below to get his rifle.

Angela breathed in deeply again, mind flying through Samantha’s vision. They’d still been right here when the fog came. “We’re in their path...” She turned around and went back up to the bridge. “Grant, I need you to thread a needle.”

3

“I found it!” Candy held up the relay.

Theo snatched it and ran, followed by most of the people who’d been searching for it.

Candy frowned. “You’re welcome!”

Theo appeared back in the doorway. “Thanks!”

Candy chuckled as he vanished. It had only taken a description of the device and five minutes for her to find it. She swept the mess they’d left, frown returning. “I know how I’m spending my day.”

“Need some help?” Mike and Leeann entered the cargo hold. “Marc said it was okay to keep us busy.”

Candy was happy to have company, even if it was just two kids. “Sure.”

The guard on the area approved the choice. The wilder people needed to be kept busy so they didn’t start trouble in their boredom.

He spotted the snipers coming down the hall to take a shortcut up to the main weapons room. Peter's eyes narrowed. He couldn't read thoughts, but he could tell something was up with one of them. *Greg's not usually so reserved, and he never walks near Kenn. I wonder what's going on there.*

Peter returned to the cargo post and resumed his duty. *I'll find out later. There are no secrets on this ship.*

Kenn caught the thought. He agreed, but he didn't know why Greg would have a problem right now. Despite Neil's anger, Greg was going to be that team's new XO and the boss was very happy with him. He also had Lisa sniffing him like expensive chocolate. *He's got nothing to be unhappy about.*

"Can I get a minute while they grab the grenades?"

Kenn frowned. He stepped into an unused office space and faced Greg.

Greg shut the door and took out his notebook. He scratched quickly.

Kenn frowned as he understood Greg didn't want anyone to overhear them. He pushed into the man's mind. *What?*

Greg kept writing.

Kenn's unease grew. *He doesn't want the other descendants to pick it up either.* Kenn brought up the mind shield that was so effective and waited.

Greg handed him the paper, heart thumping. *If I've misjudged you, I'm in deep shit now.*

Kenn read the paper in shock. He reread it to be sure he wasn't missing something that would explain it.

“Please? I’ll make any deal you want.”

Kenn crumpled the paper and tossed it back to Greg. “Get rid of that.”

Greg burned it right there and stomped out the flames.

Kenn leaned against the wall, keeping his voice down. “Tell me why. No one can hear us in here, not with all the banging from the repair team and the squealing from kids going to breakfast.”

Greg still stepped closer. “I can’t keep up without it. I hate being different. It will make me a better Eagle.” Greg grunted. “I need this.”

“I get all that, but what you’re asking goes against the rules.”

“No, it doesn’t. There are no rules about this—yet. If I wait until they finish the new constitution, then it will be.”

Kenn snorted. “There are unspoken rules about this stuff. The boss will be pissed. So will Marc and everyone else.”

Greg rolled his eyes. “Like you care if Marc’s pissed at you.”

Kenn grinned. “True-dat.” His smile faded. “But I do care if the boss is pissed. I don’t want to be on her bad side.”

“Maybe she won’t know.”

Kenn laughed harshly.

Greg flushed. “Okay, but I don’t have to tell her who helped me.”

Kenn shook his head. “I can’t do it without permission. If she wants you to be one of us, she’ll say yes. It’s up to you to get the balls to ask her for it.” Kenn opened the door and joined the frowning snipers coming down the hall. “Greg’s evaluating us for the boss.”

Greg was grateful Kenn had covered for him. He followed the team, mind locked down to keep Wade from reading him.

Wade put his anger aside. He made a quick hand motion. *Ask Kyle.*

Greg stared in shock.

Wade shrugged. “I’ve got skills.”

Greg chuckled. “So I see.”

Jennifer and Molly fell in step from the next hallway. Carrying their rifles, neither woman smiled or talked. They understood being on the sniper team was serious business.

Molly nodded to Monica as they went by the infirmary where she was on duty.

Monica smiled at the acknowledgement. *She’s feeling better. She’s not pissed at me. Awesome!*

Collecting messages for the boss, Cathy let them all go by, gazing in longing at the sniper team. “I want that too.”

Peter heard her. “I can give you an eval later and let you know what needs work.”

Cathy brightened. “Cool. I’m off duty in two hours.”

Peter took a chance. “How about dinner after?”

Cathy flushed. “I don’t know...” She didn’t want to hurt Timmy’s feelings, but she did need to prove she’d moved on for now.

Peter turned on the charm. “It’s just dinner with a muscle-bound hunk. I’m not asking to tattoo my name on your ass.”

Cathy laughed. “Okay. Just dinner. We can talk about my evaluation.”

Peter beamed. “Awesome.”

Timmy slammed the door to the lab. He stomped by the infirmary with an ugly glare at Peter. He’d heard it all.

Cathy took the updates and left the infirmary.

Peter nodded at Jayda as she went by. He was floating through the ship, like she was. They were both listening for trouble. He was glad neither of them were finding any.

He spotted Courtney coming down the hall for her medical checkup.

Ed moved by him and held the door for her.

Peter grinned. *So that’s who he wants.*

Courtney gave Ed a distracted smile as she entered. “I hear you’re a medic now.”

“In training.”

“It’s good.” She didn’t tell him she wished they would add a female doctor. The thought of an exam like this being done by a man was embarrassing. “So how does it work?”

Ed led her to an empty side with curtains around it. “We’ll do an exam, take your vitals and history.”

Courtney fingered the paper gown, paling. “I can’t do this.”

Ed leaned in. “I can get Wade to come down.”

Courtney frowned. “Not funny.”

Ed held up a hand. “It’s okay, really. Morgan is very professional.”

Courtney sighed, stepping into the partitioned area. “Tell him the quicker the better.”

Ed finally understood. “Oh! Tonya will come in for that part of it. Morgan refused to do the...inside stuff. He’ll pull up an x-ray when Tonya’s done and check on you that way.”

Courtney was relieved. She picked up the thin gown. “Still, the quicker the better.”

Feeling the mood improve, Ed decided to take a chance. “Can I escort you to dinner tonight?”

Courtney froze. “What?”

Ed tried again. “I’d like to have dinner with you.”

She scowled. “Everyone knows I’m pregnant, and I prefer descendants. Why are you setting yourself up for rejection?”

Ed shrugged. “Why are you skipping normals?”

She dropped the gown on the cot and began pushing off her shoes. “That’s none of your business.”

Ed studied her face. He found unhappiness and loneliness. “There’s nothing wrong with normals.”

“I didn’t say there was.”

“But you won’t date one.”

“No.”

“Because you want a powerful baby.”

“I’m not like that.”

“Then tell me why or that’s what I’ll assume.”

Courtney tugged the curtain shut. “Go away, Edward. I’m not interested.”

Ed walked away with his chin up and his pride dented.

Courtney sat on the edge of the cot, trying to calm down. *They don’t understand, and I can’t say it without everyone knowing.*

“Without everyone knowing what?” Tonya came in and shut the curtain behind her.

Courtney didn’t know if Tonya was aware of the coming fight between descendants and normals. She shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Okay.” Tonya took the stool and rolled it over. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Not very hungry these days.”

“That’s normal.” Tonya pretended she was talking to a stranger. “Is this your first baby?”

“Yes.”

“Any history of your family having trouble?”

“I was a C-section. Nothing else that I remember.”

Tonya wrote it down. “We’ll do a urine test and then a pap test if you’re okay with that.”

“I am.” Courtney was surprised, but that was the truth. Despite the animosity, she knew Tonya was capable and good at her job. “Are you?”

Tonya forced an even tone. “We need babies. I would never hold a grudge against your child.”

“Good.”

Tonya resumed her questions. “We have medics in training, including me. Morgan is good, but he’s still training too. Do you understand we may make mistakes?”

“Yes. I also know he has gifts so he can help me if I have trouble.”

“What about pains or bleeding?”

“No. Not tired either.”

Tonya put the clipboard down. “There are medical history questions we’ll need you to answer and a form saying you agree to let us help you give birth.” Tonya decided to be honest. “None of us have experience with C-sections. If you need one, we’ll do the best we can and that’s all I can promise.”

“I understand.” Courtney thought of Morgan’s gifts again.

Tonya frowned. “You really have a thing for descendants.”

Courtney flushed at the tone. “So?”

“So they may not be around when you give birth. Will you consent to the normal medics helping with the delivery?”

Courtney reluctantly nodded. “But only if there’s no other choice.”

Tonya’s frown grew. “You don’t trust normals.”

“No.”

Tonya didn’t push. “Okay. Fill out those forms and then give me a urine sample. Just bring it to the lab.”

“Do I have to use one of those stupid wipes?”

“Yes, but don’t worry about the front-to-back thing. Only an acrobat could manage that position and you don’t need to be twisting in crazy shapes right now.”

Courtney chuckled. “Thanks.” She locked eyes with the redhead. “You’re being very professional.”

Tonya forced a smile and left. She went to the lab and gently shut the door. *I hate that bitch!*

Courtney waited until Tonya was in her lab and let out a breath. *She hates me, but she’s doing her job without showing it. There has to be a catch.*

4

“Did you catch all that?”

“Yes.” Jayda tensed as Ivan joined her outside the infirmary. Fresh from a shower, water dripped down his neck, drawing her attention. Heat curled into her stomach. “I’ll let the boss know.”

“Cool. Is your shift about over?”

“Yes. I’m done as soon as I deliver these updates.”

“Can I take you to breakfast?”

Jayda slowed. “I can’t. You only want a partner until the boss calls for you.” She smiled at him to soften the blow. “I can be your friend though.”

Ivan grunted. “Cool. Catch you later.”

Jayda watched him walk down the hall, heart hurting. *I want him, but not as his relief source.*

Ivan stumbled as he caught her thought. *Relief source...* Ivan detoured toward the top deck, where the snipers were gathered.

Wade turned toward Ivan as he hit the top of the foggy stairs. *Not now.*

Ivan joined them anyway. He eyed the poker game. “Waiting for a duty call?”

“Waiting for Jennifer to make her bet.” Kenn gestured. “I can read minds, but I can’t tell if she’s bluffing!”

Ivan chuckled. He leaned against the rail and watched the hand, but his mind stayed on his new plan.

Wade slammed his cards on the table. “I’m out.” He looked up at Ivan. “Your cabin, after midnight. I’ll be busy until then.”

Ivan’s brows came together. “My cabin for what?”

Wade scowled. “For what you want. I read minds too, remember?”

Ivan grinned as he realized Wade was willing to help him. “Great. I’ll have beers ready, nice and cold.”

Wade sighed. “Bring extra. You’re not the only one who wants a lesson.”

The other men and women at the table laughed, as did the listening guards around them.

Wade shook his head. “I’m serious. A dozen guys have pulled me aside and asked how to become a relief provider. The men are hounding me more than the women!”

Laughter rolled across the deck, drawing attention. Angela hoped the good moment lasted. She didn't want to unleash them on the ocean life, not even the sharks. *But I will. We're a week from Pitcairn Island and I'm sick of the delays. Once we set sail again, I'm not stopping for anything.*

Chapter Nineteen

That's Not Normal

1

“Why are you still here?”

Marc glanced up from the board game, frowning. “I’m on duty.”

Monica snorted. “You’re too valuable to be a den mother. You should be helping the boss get this ship moving.”

“Theo has it covered. We should be getting a call from the captain at any point.”

Monica gestured at the wide room of playing kids and disapproving adults. “We don’t need you here.”

“Tell that to my kids.”

Monica frowned. “Francesca made a mistake and she’s paying for it. Don’t hold that against the rest of us.”

Marc sighed. “I’m not. They need me here, and Angela wants someone in the den mothers who can protect all of you. Did you notice there’s no guard now?”

“I did.”

“It frees up the Eagles as long as I’m with you.” Marc flipped over a yellow card. “Go to jail?!” He groaned, grinning at the three kids around the table.

Monica wasn't ready to give up. She switched tactics. "How long do you think she'll tolerate you not pulling your weight?"

"As long as I need her to. Now if you don't mind, we're in the middle of a game here."

Monica stomped back to her own table, but she waved at the kids to go on without her. *Doesn't he see what's going to happen? We need him in his real job.*

Marc ignored the frowns and thoughts. *I'm not leaving my kids alone again. Someone else can carry the weight for a while. I've done my duty over a lifetime of service. I've earned a break.*

The radio crackled. "The ship has been repaired!" The lights and appliances clicked on, making people jump and then cheer.

"The boss says we're setting sail at sunset. We are a week away from the island, folks. Spend the next few days preparing yourself and your neighbors for that beautiful moment. Grant, out."

Marc didn't try to find out why they weren't leaving right away. He was serious about the break. He had little doubt arriving on the island would require him to change his routine, but he planned to keep the kids with him then too.

He glanced down. The infant twins were almost asleep. He used both feet to gently rock their pumpkin seats like Angela had taught him. *And I like this job. The kids don't stress me out or make me feel bad.*

Kimmie rolled the dice. “Six.” She moved her piece. “Ha! I already own that one.” She pushed the dice toward Cate. “Your turn.”

Cate yawned. “This is boring.”

Cody grabbed the dice. “I’ll roll for you.”

Cate smacked the dice out of his hand. They hit the wall and skidded across the floor.

The room went silent as everyone waited for Marc’s response.

Marc stared at his daughter, chest heavy. “What would you like to do?”

“I want to play with the puppy!”

All the kids cheered her answer.

Marc swept the den mothers. “Is that breaking a routine?”

Monica reluctantly denied it. “This is a play day for them, but the puppy is still off limits, as are the goats.”

“What about playground? Is it aired out now?”

She nodded. “Should be. Does that work for everyone?”

The kids cheered again, even Cate.

“Good.” Marc leaned down to pick up the pumpkin seats. “Let’s go.”

Monica came over to help him. “I’ll take one.”

Marc reluctantly surrendered the little boy so he would have a free hand. “Thanks.”

Monica smiled at him. She walked to the exit. “Line up, kids, and remember what we talked about—the camp members don’t need to view you

acting badly. That means no screaming and running. Behave in the halls.”

Amy came over and stood by Cate.

Cate glared at her. “Go away.”

Amy held out a hand. “The alpha wants us to be friends.”

Cate started to gather energy for a nasty blast.

“Cate!”

Marc’s shout snapped Cate’s head around to him. “Yes, Daddy?”

Marc’s lips twitched at her innocent tone. He forced a hard voice. “Do you want the alpha to lock you up again?”

Cate paled. “Please don’t.”

“Then be nice.”

Cate obediently turned to Amy and held out her hand.

Amy took her hand. “You’ll like the cage fights with Jeff.”

Cate pulled the images from the younger girl’s mind, face lighting up. “Yes! I want to do that!”

“Me too, all the time.” Amy’s smile faded. “We’re not allowed if we get in trouble or don’t do our lessons.”

“I’ll be good. I promise.”

Marc was shocked. *She wants to fight like the other kids. She has the rage illness!*

Kimmie stopped by Marc. “She’s like us. We’ll help her.”

Marc followed the line, mind racing. *We need to find the cure and fast. I don't think I can stand to see her in the cage with anyone.*

“She can fight. She won't get hurt.”

Marc sighed, shifting the pumpkin seat to his other arm. “It's not about fighting. I want her to be normal.”

Kimmie snorted harshly. “The normals hate us. She'll never be one of them, even if you lock her gifts.” Offended, Kimmie moved up the line to take her place near Cody.

Marc hated it that Kimmie was right. *There has to be something we can do to keep the war from happening.*

No, there isn't.

Marc looked over. Joey was walking next to him. Marc hated the boy's sadness. Because of his father, Joey wasn't being welcomed by the camp, the den mothers, or the other kids. That was part of why Cate wasn't responding to their gestures of friendship. “Why not?”

“My dad said normals ruined the world, not us. If they have control again, we'll all be gone.” Joey's voice trembled. “I don't want anyone to die.”

“We'll find a way to work it out so that doesn't happen.”

Joey shook his head. “Your people will never accept magic. No matter what you do, it will never be enough.”

“You don’t know for sure.” Marc assumed the hostility the boy was getting was making him feel that way. “Give us time to draft the new laws.”

“I can’t. They hate me because of who I am. They hate you for the same reason. Search their hearts. The normals don’t want peace. They want us gone.” Joey shuddered. “If your alpha leaves us on that island, we’ll all be killed.”

Cate waved at Joey. He smiled and hurried to walk next to her.

Marc’s decision formed in a split second. *Then we won’t leave them behind. When we go back for the final battle, the kids will be with us. They just won’t fight. I won’t allow it.*

2

“We’re all set.” Theo carefully went down the ladder. “We can go whenever the boss calls it.”

Debra wrote it down and lingered, admiring Theo’s hard body as he stretched the kinks from his spine.

Theo felt her attention, but he didn’t leer at her like he wanted to. “Are you okay?”

I’m fine. Why do you ask?

Theo shrugged. “You seem sad.”

Nope. I’m 5-by.

Theo grinned at her. “You’re fitting right in, doing a good job. I’m proud of you.”

Debra liked how that felt. She thought about asking him to have dinner, but she didn’t want to go

through the drama of him begging for another chance at a relationship. *Thank you.*

She scanned the decks below them and then the vast ocean surrounding the anchored ship. Fog was covering the water in thick layers now, as well as the bottom levels. It made her skin crawl. *Never did like the fog.*

Theo also swept their surroundings. They were the only ones up here now. Kenn and the others had left when the power came on. They'd taken Tobias back down to his cabin. Then they were going to make sure none of the suddenly activating appliances caused a fire. Theo had stayed to finish wrapping the wires.

Debra sighed as the fog thickened. *Are you hungry?*

Yes.

His fast answer made her frown.

Theo knew without being told. *No drama—just a meal.*

Debra smiled. *Perfect.*

Theo waited for her to go down, then followed. Kimmie's advice came to mind, but Theo pushed it away. This wasn't a good time to reveal more secrets. He walked next to her with a blank mind. If she didn't want drama, he would make sure he didn't provide any.

Debra moved through the halls with smiles to the people who said hello. She enjoyed the feeling of respect it gave her to know she was needed and liked.

Theo did the same, also glad to be useful. His job was hard, but he was good at it.

Debra moved a bit closer, letting their hands brush.

Theo sucked in a breath at the immediate spark. He tried not to think about it.

Debra let their hands brush again.

Theo curled his fingers around hers, heart thumping as he waited to be rejected.

Debra smiled. *Nice.*

Theo's grin carried all the way to the mess.

"That's sweet."

Angela looked up from her spicy soup. "I agree. They're a good match."

Jennifer frowned. "He can't have kids."

"Not every relationship will produce offspring." Angela felt her stomach settle and breathed a satisfied smile. "Much better."

Jennifer snickered. "I don't miss that at all."

Angela dug out her bottle of Advil and swallowed two of them. "How are you doing? Checkup go okay?"

Jennifer made a face. "Other than the gown and it being Tonya, yeah. Heartbeat is strong and no signs of issues."

"Excellent." Angela put the bottle away. "How about mentally?"

Jennifer sighed. "I'm still pissed. I can't believe he did that."

"Really? I'm only surprised it didn't happen sooner."

Jennifer watched Theo pull out a chair for Debra. “Why are they so possessive over us? It’s not just the war. Men were like that long before the world ended.”

“DNA. It’s hardwired into their genetic code.” Angela waved at Brittani, who was coming in to help with the lunch shift. “As is our jealousy. Nature made sure humanity would survive, even if we don’t want to.”

Jennifer shrugged. “Nature sucks.”

Angela rubbed her gut and laughed. “I agree.”

Brittani joined them at the table, expecting to be scolded or pushed into something she didn’t want.

Angela gathered her bowl and bobbed her head toward Jennifer. “You two have a lot in common. Spend a few minutes talking while I go get a refill.”

Both women gawked as she went to the counter. “What does she mean by that?”

Jennifer shrugged, voice hardening. “Kyle wants me to resign; you want Daryl to resign.”

Brittani hadn’t heard why Jennifer and Kyle were fighting, only that they’d had an ugly moment and no one was sure if they were splitting up. “I’m sorry you’re having trouble.”

Jennifer pushed away her half-eaten bowl. “He’s right. I didn’t want to admit it. I would have had to take a leave anyway in a few months. I just hate the way he did it. He doesn’t own me.”

Brittani realized Angela was giving her an opportunity to avoid having the same result. “How should he have handled it?”

“Privately, with consideration for my feelings. He knows I want to be an Eagle more than anything else. He should have respected that.”

“And you would have agreed?”

Jennifer grinned. “I would have fought him tooth and nail.”

“And then agreed?”

Jennifer grunted. “Probably. He could have reminded me the baby has to come first. That might have worked.”

Brittani didn’t have pregnancy to use as leverage. “Is there anything else he could have used?”

Jennifer knew what the woman was trying to do. She delivered the truth that Angela needed Brittani to accept. “Daryl’s right; you’re wrong.”

Brittani tensed. “No, I’m not.”

“You are, and I can prove it.” Jennifer gestured toward the rear tables, where Daryl and his team were going over the plans Angela had asked for. Their first workout as a team had gone well. “Look at him right now and tell me what you see.”

Brittani studied the table, frown growing. “A sick man...who’s thrilled to have team lead.”

“Exactly. He’s happy being an Eagle, Brit. If you take that away from him, kiss your relationship goodbye.”

“Like yours?”

Jennifer admitted the truth. “Kyle suspended me, but as soon as I recover from the birth, I’ll resume my full slot and he’ll support me all the way.

He knows I need it to be happy. Our issues will make our marriage stronger. If you want the same, don't make Daryl choose between you and his duty. You won't like the choice he makes." Jennifer stood up, taking her dishes. "We can talk more later if you want."

Brittani nodded. "I do."

Jennifer snickered. "Remember those words."

3

Angela sank down on the bed, moaning at the relief. "This feels so good." The kids were all in a large cabin next door with two den mothers and Dog, all happy after time at the playground. This would only be a two-hour nap, but she needed it.

Marc finished removing his boots, grinning at her noises. "You sound like I'm rubbing on you."

Angela stretched, spine cracking. "Can't be; you still have clothes on." She rolled over, pushing off her socks with her toes. "Let me sleep for a bit and I might ask you to."

Marc eyed her scarred and silken skin. "You say the word." Now that the medics had cleared them both, he was eager to be intimate again.

Angela inhaled deeply, enjoying being clean and smelling like it. *Free for another three weeks.* She still had mild cramps, but the worst of it was over.

Marc stretched out next to her, letting out a groan. "Damn."

“I know, right?”

Marc lifted an arm to clear room, hoping she felt like being held. He knew better than to try it during PMS. Now that it was over, he could hold her again without it hurting.

Angela crawled onto his chest and collapsed. “This is what I need.”

Marc kissed her curls and relaxed, refusing to think about anything except this moment with her.

Angela let her mind roam, but she also avoided the harder topics and trials that were coming. They didn’t get much time alone. She didn’t want to ruin it.

Marc felt her fall out. Her body relaxed on his; her breathing evened out. Peace filled the cabin.

Marc joined her, eager to rest.

Angela followed the dim light, feet walking through layers of fog. The darkness was absolute around her but for that tiny speck of light in the distance. She moved faster, sensing a familiar being. “Are you there?”

The witch appeared. Her fiery outline was causing the dim light. She smiled at her host. “I knew you would find me.”

Angela lifted a hand. “Come back with me.”

“I can’t yet. We are stuck here until the future plays out.”

Angela saw Marc’s demon on the foggy ground at her witch’s feet. “I don’t understand.”

The witch grimaced, gruesome face twisting. “You are both too powerful now. Until the future plays out, we must stay here.”

Angela still didn’t understand. “Are you in danger?”

“Your world is in danger. Marc’s cracks and your loyalty to the traitor have created a moment that neither of us can predict. If you take the wrong path, we will be lost.”

Angela felt Marc walking toward them. His demon woke, lifting its ugly head.

Master!

Marc knelt by his demon, close to panic. *What happened?!*

Angela’s witch placed a clawed hand on Marc’s shoulder. *You are considering a dangerous path. We will not return until that future happens. Please choose carefully. Our survival depends on it.*

Angela snapped awake. She looked at Marc.

He stared back at her in stunned horror. “They’re lost.”

Angela’s heart thumped. “We’re on our own for a while. Whatever happens from here, we have to handle it.”

“Do you know what she meant about the dangerous choice?”

Angela’s raspy voice lowered to a mutter. “I’d bet everything I have that it involves Adrian and Kendle.”

“Evening mess is now being served. As soon as you finish eating, return to your cabin for a check in. Make sure your belongings are secured. We are about to set sail.”

Low cheers echoed through most of the rooms and decks. Everyone was ready to be off this boat. Knowing they were less than a week from the island had tension levels higher than usual.

The mess filled up quickly. Thelma and Dwight, along with the other cooks, were busy. They scurried around the stoves and counters, placing trays and plates as the lines grew longer.

Dwight did a fast scan and saw the center table was still empty. “Do we need to send meals to leadership?”

Thelma pulled a tray of bread from the oven and put it on the counter. “No idea. Let’s wait and see if they show up.”

Dwight began slicing the hot loaf and putting slices on the plates. He kept studying the room, uneasy feeling growing. *We’re missing something. They should be here.*

Several descendants caught his thought. Trinity rose from the counter and left. *If a normal is picking up on something, there might be a real problem.*

She hurried up the ramp, going to the bridge. Angela had told them the captain was the most important person on the ship, to always check on him first.

Trinity stopped on the ramp and gawked with the other Eagles. “That’s a lot of fins.”

“Yep.” Wade was on duty over these steps until the snipers were needed. “I think we’re setting sail now.”

Wade didn’t look away from the line of whale and shark fins stretching into the distance as far as he could see. Samantha’s vision had been spot-on. The sharks were on either side of the whales, occasionally picking off one that swam out of the line.

“That’s not normal.”

“No.” Wade tried to snap out of the shocked daze. “Without all the human interference, the sharks are targeting a meal source they can count on.”

“Because so many of the fish died from radiation!” Trinity added another clue. “But sharks don’t pack hunt. Something’s making them act like this.”

Wade kept studying the animals. “Nature.”

Trinity nodded. “The sharks are hers. The whales are ours.”

“How is that possible?”

“I’m not sure.” She shivered. “Maybe it’s connected to their black eyes.”

Wade motioned to Angela as she came up the ramp. “I think we’re supposed to help the whales.”

Angela nodded. “I do too. My deals were predicated on never passing up evil.”

Wade frowned. “When we’re back on the path, are we protected again?”

“Yes, but it has to be now.” Angela was relieved to feel their ship starting to slide forward through the water. “If not for the storm, we would have been ahead of this already.”

She didn’t mention the trouble they would have run into instead. Wade already knew and Trinity wasn’t on her council yet, but she was worried. Angela wasn’t sure pirates would be easier than a migration. The giant whales were coming straight at them. If they didn’t get out of the way, the terrified animals would crush this ship to get through. *And I hope they will do the same to my enemies.*

“They’re catching up.” Wade felt the call coming and gestured at Trinity. “Guard these steps. No one comes up without orders.”

“You got it.” Trinity watched the snipers gather on one side of the deck. She doubted their shots would do much damage through the dense water, but the grenades they were now passing out might cause enough disturbances to get some of the sharks to break off the line. *But it still won’t stop those whales.*

Angela went to the top of the steps so she had a clear view, gathering energy.

Kenn came up the steps from a quick check of the lab. “Clear a hole.”

Trinity stepped aside without asking if he had orders. His determined face said he was supposed to be up here.

Kenn went to the sniper group and evaluated their weapons before doing the same to the threat. He scowled. "Save the ammunition. Don't throw the grenades until I call it." Kenn gathered energy as he opened a mental gift he hadn't used yet.

Tonya came up the steps and stood by Trinity.

Trinity frowned. "Do you have orders?"

"No, I have his baby. They share the same gifts."

Trinity moved aside to let her through.

Kenn sighed as he felt Tonya come to his side, but he didn't order her to go below. *I might need the help.*

Tonya placed a hand on his arm, staring at the sharks now catching up to their ship. The predators were staying in front of the line, trying to herd the whales. *If we split that front line, we might have a chance.*

Kenn nodded. "Aim right behind the front line, snipers. On my call."

The snipers pulled pins and lifted their hands, holding the spoons as they waited.

Angela sent a blast of hatred at the front of the sharks to disorient them.

"Now!" Kenn fired a mental order as well. *Leave! Death! Pain! Hatred!*

Tonya echoed the spell, arching as power flew from her stomach.

The snipers threw the first grenades and ducked with everyone else.

Explosions rumbled near the ship, lifting the water in huge bubbles that sprayed water over the side of the ship and the deck. The sharks sent out cries of confusion and agony, darting away from the blasts.

Kenn waved. “Again!” He fired a second mental order, using more strength.

The sharks darted under the water, clearing the front line.

The grenades lifted the water again along the hull, jarring the ship and breaking up the next wave of sharks.

The whales kept coming, cries echoing through the waves.

Angela fired again, willing the ship to go faster.
Come on!

Grant increased speed as the engines finally caught full gear. The ship moved quicker, but he already knew it wouldn’t be enough.

Tonya put a shaky hand on the soaked rail.
Please help us!

The ship lurched forward, clearing the path by seconds.

The whales streamed by them on one side, calling and flipping their huge tails.

“Hang on!” Angela held the rail as a tail smacked into the side of the ship: people all over the boat were knocked down. Belongings flew across the rooms and mess, bringing shouts and screams of panic.

Kenn caught Tonya and held her, being careful of her stomach.

“Damn it!” Grant steered them south, avoiding the rest of the giant animals.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. “As soon as the last of the line goes by, get behind them and follow. Don’t lose them.”

Grant grinned as he realized what she was doing. “That’ll be a nasty surprise for anyone waiting for us.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re an evil genius. I admire that.”

Angela snorted. She went down the steps before he could ask anything.

Marc came up the ramp and moved to her side. “Can I do anything?”

Angela shook her head. “We’re out of the path now. When they go by, we’ll fall in behind them. If we can keep up, it will help us with what’s waiting.”

Wade frowned. “The sharks returned. We didn’t help the whales.”

“Patience is a virtue.”

Wade assumed Angela was planning something else and shrugged. “I’m a master at taking virtue, not exercising it.”

Angela’s laughter floated over the deck.

Marc understood he wasn’t needed. He fought the jealousy and went back below to help the den mothers comfort the upset children.

Trinity followed, but she went to the camp area when he didn't, certain the normals were terrified. *When they get scared, they make stupid choices.*

"Don't we all." Kenn took Tonya's arm and escorted her down the ramp. "You'll need water and a nap now. Don't fight the crash."

Tonya walked under his big arm, happy she'd been able to help. "I'll miss this after I give birth."

Kenn leaned closer to whisper. "Maybe you won't have to."

Greg heard it. He searched for Kyle and sighed in disappointment. Kyle was with Angela's team, doing a training session to start catching them up. There was no way he could interrupt.

Angela pointed at Greg. "Go help Trinity make sure things are covered below."

Greg vanished down the steps.

Angela watched him with a thoughtful expression.

"Is everything okay?"

Angela rolled her eyes at Wade. "We have to sail the tip of South America, fight off pirates, and settle an island. Should be easy."

She enjoyed his laughter, but she didn't join in. The last few hurdles they had to face weren't going to be easy even though they knew what was coming. *Our ship isn't set up for a sea battle, but we're going to have one anyway.* "I want all descendants in the large gym after the camp is asleep. We're going to learn something new."

“We should have left.”

“The island was on fire!”

“We could have rebuilt it.”

“They aren’t giving supplies to anyone who leaves now. We would have starved.”

“Better than drowning.”

Trinity lingered outside the camp hallway, listening to the group of normals who were venting. So far, it was the same complaints, but she expected it to get worse.

“We should have helped that new woman kill those three kids so it all reset.”

“You knew what she was doing?”

“No, but if we’d reached out to her, we would have. We have to stop hating all the descendants so we can use them.”

Trinity walked away, going to the guard station in the hall.

Ian tensed as she approached. “Everything okay?”

She shook her head. “The normals are conspiring again. Tell the boss we’ll have trouble again from them soon.”

Ian wrote it down, muttering under his breath. “Damn normals are going to cause their own deaths and they’ll still blame the descendants for it.”

Trinity returned to the shadowy place outside the door, hoping they would reveal which descendant they planned to approach.

“Her man resigned, as did a few others. We should try them.”

“Marc won’t flip on her.”

“He might if we threaten his kids.”

“If we do, the other magic users will kill us all. We need to find one of them who’s on the outside and feels like they’re being mistreated.”

“What about the cook who resigned? She threw a bowl at Angela. She isn’t happy.”

“Maybe. She’s also engaged to the new leader of the top Special Forces team. I don’t think she’d agree. Plus, her parents are here.”

“Exactly. Her parents are normal, like us. She has to know they’re in danger.”

“Maybe we should talk to the parents and get them to convince her.”

“I agree.”

“That’s a good plan!”

“The reset spell is dangerous. We need to learn more about it before we try it.”

“True. I didn’t know there was more than one kind of magic. I heard one of them call it dark.”

“I wonder if the dark magic makes them more powerful and lets them descend to hell. We heard the rumor that’s where she sent Joel.”

Trinity heard steps coming. She moved from the shadows and held up a hand to stop Ivan from going in. *Just listen.*

Ivan joined her at the doorway, unease growing. Their words and thoughts angered him, but it wasn’t a surprise.

Trinity kept her voice low. “What does the boss want us to do?”

Ivan sighed. “Nothing. She thinks we can have peace by proving they’ll be protected too.”

Trinity frowned. “They haven’t been. More of them have died on this trip than us.”

“We couldn’t stop the radiation sickness.”

“I know, but from their side, we’re killing them off to save ourselves.”

Ivan got her point; he just didn’t agree. “I’ll talk to her about it, but I doubt it will matter. Unless we stage some rescues, we can’t change that impression.” Ivan went back up the stairs.

Trinity stayed, listening and struggling to find a solution.

Chapter Twenty

Going Through The Motions

1

“**W**hy is it so quiet?” Greg stopped at the guard station. “Are they all asleep?”

Peter grinned. “The pregnant women came in from pigging out in the mess. Their men showed up, together, about ten minutes later...”

Greg snickered. “They’ve synced sex? That’s awesome.”

Peter chuckled. “Makes me wish I had a mate. Every night at this time, the men get laid.”

“You’re terrible.”

“I know, but it’s true. Hang around and watch. The men come out after an hour, hit the lounge for a smoke and drink, and then they go back in and do it again!”

Greg went toward the steps. “I’m on rounds.” He’d already been a camp relief source, and he occasionally still was, but it held little appeal for him now.

Peter settled on the stool and leaned against the wall. The leadership hall was easy duty. *Nothing bad ever happens here. People are too scared of Marc and Angela to screw up. It’s great.*

Greg caught the thought. He agreed, but at the same time, he didn't like Peter thinking it was okay to snooze on duty. *I'll be quiet when I come back. I'll give him a reminder he's not allowed to do that.*

Greg went down to the small training room, where Kyle was drilling Angela's team again. He heard them before he reached them. He listened for a minute, flashed to his own training days as a rookie. *Adrian yelled at us like that too, and he turned us into hard fighters with ethics and honor. Why couldn't he hold onto it like we did?*

"I've wondered the same thing." Kenn joined him from the employee hall where he'd finished doing rounds. They'd added those empty halls to every shift now.

"Do you think they're still alive?"

Kenn nodded. "Adrian's a survivor. So is Kendle."

"It sucks that Quinn and Tommy are stuck on her."

"Yep." Kenn went by him and entered the training room. He scanned, ignoring Kyle's scowl at the interruption. "Boss wants a count and check in. As you were."

Kyle turned back to the exhausted team. "Stay here and practice for another hour."

The rookies were bruised and disheveled, but they were still willing. Working with Kyle was the dream of all the low-level teams.

Kyle joined Greg. "Where does she want me now?"

“She has all the descendants gathering in the large gym for a new lesson after the camp crashes for the night.” Greg shrugged. “I assume we’re on downtime until then.”

“Good. Let’s take a walk.”

Kenn watched them leave, frowning. He knew what was going on. *Don’t do it, Kyle. Greg doesn’t want it for the right reasons.*

Kyle didn’t answer.

Kenn sighed. He went to his cabin for a shower and a check on Tonya, who had crashed almost as soon as he got her to their cabin. Kenn was also tired. Using magic was exhausting.

Greg and Kyle went down the hall in silence, waiting until they were out of hearing range from both normals and descendants.

Greg assumed Kyle knew what he wanted. He also assumed Kyle was going to agree or he would have shut it down right away.

Kyle led Greg to the rear of an unused office and dropped into a chair. “Tell me why and we’ll go from there.”

Greg shut the door. “I’ll be able to do my job better. I hate being on the outside. I want to go back for the final fight. Leaving me behind with the normals might kill me.”

Kyle lit a cheroot and inhaled. He grinned at the taste and feel. “Jennifer’s stomach gets upset now when I smoke around her.”

Greg frowned.

Kyle exhaled a cloud of thick smoke. “Tell me the real reason, or get out and let me enjoy this in peace.”

Greg’s heart dropped. “You already know.”

“Yes, but I need to hear you say it.”

Greg forced the truth through numb lips. “I’ll never have a chance with her unless I’m one of you.”

“There it is.” Kyle stared at him. “You don’t have a shot at all. You know that. You just don’t want to accept it.”

Greg sighed, shoulders drooping. “I’m in the friend zone. I can’t stand it. If I have gifts, I can compete and maybe get her to see me as a man who loves her and not just a tool to be used.”

“You’d shove Marc and Ivan aside to get what you want, even if it hurts her dreams?”

Greg had come too far now to lie. “Yes.”

Kyle inhaled again, sweat dripping from his neck and arms. “Only a mate can share, as far as I know. I can’t help you.”

Greg’s anger came through in his voice. “Then why even go through this farce?!”

Kyle met Greg’s anger with bright red orbs. “Because you’re a threat. I needed to verify it so I can warn her.”

Greg left the room, slamming the door.

Kyle stayed where he was, wishing Greg had chosen not to follow through. *Now I have to tell Angela what you’re doing.*

2

“Dinner was nice. Thank you.”

Peter laughed. “Catching the plates gave me a workout.” He’d come straight here from guard duty, a bit surprised she’d shown up.

Cathy chuckled. They had more food on them than they’d eaten, thanks to the whales. “I think it went well.”

Peter snickered. “Most people wouldn’t agree.”

Cathy didn’t tell him she’d been so bored that the ship’s wild lurches had woken her up. She was trying hard to give him a chance, but there wasn’t a spark. She’d agreed to this walk of the entertainment floor in hopes that if they were alone, an attraction might show up.

Peter knew she wasn’t having a good time on their date, but he didn’t put in the extra effort. He didn’t really want to be here with her either. They were both just going through the motions.

Cathy saw the guard on this floor and paled.

Timmy refused to look at the couple as they went by. *I don’t need her. I don’t need her.*

Cathy’s shoulders drooped.

Peter frowned. He waited until they got out of hearing distance. “It’s not wrong to fight for what you want, as long as you pick the right battles.”

She froze, flushing.

Peter shrugged. “I’d rather a woman was with me because she wants me and not as a quota fill to prove herself. I also want you to be happy.”

Cathy looked over her shoulder at Timmy. “He’s pissed.”

“I would be too. You’re a sweet woman with a great work ethic.” He grinned. “And you can bench press more than me.”

Cathy resumed walking. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Maybe you could talk to some of the other couples who’ve gone through it.”

Cathy snorted. “They all did it wrong too, and Emma’s in the brig for it.”

Peter scowled. “Emma is a predator. You’re in love.”

Cathy sucked in air. *Love? I love Timmy?*

Peter gestured at her. “That right there makes the differences for me. Emma will use him and then move on to the next one. You’ll stay with him forever because it’s love, not lust.”

Cathy smiled. “I do love him.”

“And it shows. You gave him up. And you accepted my date invite to keep out of trouble. We all respect that.”

“I still don’t know what to do. Should I ask Angela for permission?”

“I think that would be a good start. Tell her how you feel and see what she says. If it’s a flat out no, you still only have to wait for a few more months until he’s legal.”

Cathy gave Peter a smile. “You’re a good man, you know?”

He nodded, grin widening. “I absolutely do. Now let’s go get you a brownie. Lisa gave the box to Thelma.”

“Lisa’s good too. I wish Greg would give her a chance.”

“So do I. He deserves to be happy.”

They walked toward the mess in a better mood that radiated peace and calm as they went by the camp hall.

Still in the shadows, Trinity registered the shift in mood and wished it would hit the camp people. They weren’t going to sleep yet; they were still conspiring against the alpha. *And there’s going to be a price for that, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you can pay the tab.*

3

“Damage? Injuries?” Angela opened her book to take notes as Neil joined her.

“No injuries. Lot of damage to deck C, but it’s above the waterline. Theo says we’re good unless the waves get too high.”

“Can we seal it from the inside?”

“I asked that too. Theo and his team went down to find out. Trent’s with them.”

Angela smiled. “It’s good that he’s back on his feet.”

“Yep.” Neil waited, not sure if she needed him for anything else until the training session.

Angela waved him off. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

Neil left, eager to get a shower and check on Samantha. Letting her use her gifts might have encouraged her to do more. He wanted to be sure she wasn't pushing herself.

Angela finished her notes and shut the book, enjoying the quiet of the descendant hallway. She was using a table in the lounge. Around her, most people were resting or chatting lowly so they didn't disturb her.

Angela swept the corner table, where Quinn and Tommy were drinking and playing cards. Neither man had spoken in hours except to groan over a play. She wanted to talk with the two bitter men, but anything she had to say would fall on deaf ears. *Maybe one of the Eagles can get through to them.*

Neil was still close enough to catch the thought. He stored it and kept walking. He still needed to make amends to the boss, but now wasn't the right time to try and reason with Quinn or Tommy.

Neil opened the cabin door and found Samantha sitting on the bed, crying. He hurried over to her. "What's wrong? Are you in labor?"

Samantha sniffed. "They're talking to me!"

Neil didn't know who she meant. "Were you having trouble with someone not talking to you?"

Samantha rubbed her huge stomach, tears rolling over her cheeks. "Give me your hand."

Neil sat on the edge of the bed and let her put his big hand over her stomach.

Daddy!

Neil shivered. “They know me. They already know me!”

“We’re going to be parents, Neil. Jeremy should be here!”

Neil held her while she sobbed, heart breaking all over again.

Wade stood in the doorway, fighting not to cry with her. The misery was thick. *I need to do more to distract her from the past.* He tapped. “Boss wants all of us in the large gym shortly for a lesson. She said Samantha too.”

Neil was sure Wade was lying to get Samantha to stop crying. He rubbed her arm. “Let’s get a shower and get ready.”

Samantha let him help her up. “I’m sorry. I ruined a good moment.”

“You didn’t ruin anything.” Neil leered at her. “Let’s get naked.”

Samantha chuckled through her tears. “You’re so bad.”

“I try.” Neil held the bathroom door for her. He gave Wade a nod and then shut them inside the small space.

Wade was glad he’d been able to help, but it wasn’t enough. *I can’t stand her misery. There has to be something we can do to keep her from being sad every time she thinks of Jeremy.*

“Hey!”

Wade turned to see Courtney walking down the hall toward him with an expression that said

whatever she wanted wasn't good. Wade shut the cabin door and forced a smile onto his face.

Courtney stared at him, trying to decide if she should ask her question.

Wade read her thoughts and hoped she didn't.

Courtney drew in a breath. "Is Kenn planning to take my baby when it's born?"

Wade's stomach fell. He tried to avoid answering. "How would I know?"

Courtney knew from that. "Son of a bitch!" She marched down the hall, fists clenching.

Wade sighed. He'd heard that rumor. Apparently, Courtney had too.

4

"I don't want anyone in here unless they're descendants." Angela studied all three of the guards she'd chosen for the entrances. "You'll practice on your own. I picked you because I know you can absorb the lesson and still keep us protected."

Gus, Ivan, and Marc all nodded.

Angela waved a hand toward the kids drawing at three long tables in the corner. "Kimmie and Leeann are keeping them occupied. If they can't, you'll need to handle that as well."

"We will. No worries." Marc gave the tables a sharp glance.

All the kids quieted.

"I'll be working with them too, but not tonight. I need the adults to get this first so the kids can't use

it against the caregivers and sneak off.” Angela turned to face the descendants who were waiting eagerly for her to teach them something new. She did a fast count, frowning. “We’re missing a few.”

Ivan checked his book. “Ray just finished a shift over the mess instead of resting like the medics wanted him to do. He should be here shortly.”

Gus waved at the hall. “He’s coming now. Jayda is behind him.”

Angela mentally marked them off her list. “Who has the brig?”

“No one. I didn’t trust any of the normals not to conspire with Emma.” Ivan waited for her call on it.

Angela swept the room. “We’re missing Conner and Tonya.”

“Tonya isn’t a descendant.” Kenn glowered. “And I don’t want her here. She’s in our cabin, sleeping off that eighteen-hour shift.”

“Go get her.”

Kenn almost argued. He forced his feet to move.

No one asked why Tonya was allowed to be here when none of the other normals were, but they immediately suspected she was an Invisible.

“Who has Conner on their grid?” Angela waited, hoping she was wrong about the bad feeling in her gut.

Marc frowned. “I’ve got nothing.”

“Anyone?” Angela marched toward the exit as everyone shook their head or frowned. “I’ll be back.”

Angela waved off the Eagles who wanted to come with her. “All of you stay here. No one leaves. I’ve got this covered.”

Angela went straight to the camp hall, aware of the ugly feeling shifting into danger. She slammed the door open. “Where is he?!”

The three waiting camp men glared at her.

“Get out of here!”

“This is our hall now!”

“We don’t want you here!”

Angela was sick of moments like these. “You have ten seconds to release Conner before I fry you alive.”

The three men ran at her, bringing up the guns they’d stolen from rookies. They’d waited for this moment, certain they could handle her.

Angela used her gun instead of her gifts. She dropped to a knee, avoiding their bullets. Three fast shots rang out, followed by deafening silence.

Angela scanned mentally and found Conner’s signature down in the cargo hold. She waved at Ralph, who was coming from his cabin in his nightclothes. “Get a cleanup crew to handle that.”

She reloaded as she ran through the hall and slid down the rail to the bottom.

Gabe saw the gun in her hand and ran toward her.

“Other door!” Angela entered the room, gun coming up. “Surrender or die!”

“Kill her!”

“She’s alone!”

“Get her!”

Gabe aimed carefully from the other doorway, hitting the two normals who were trying to launch their last raft. Conner was in the middle of it, tied and unconscious.

Angela eliminated the rest of the unarmed men and women, heart shattering as she did her duty.

5

“That’s Angela’s gun!” Marc ran toward the gym door.

Gus moved in front of him. “Boss said non-Eagles stay here.”

Marc shoved him out of the way.

Wade and Neil grabbed Marc, both bracing for ugliness.

“Follow orders!” Jayda’s shout was ignored.

Neil brought up a shield around Marc, preventing the tiger from leaving the cage.

“You’ll pay for that.”

Neil winced at Wade’s comment and concentrated on holding the shield. *Get up here, Boss. I can’t hold him!*

Brittani and Gus brought up shields over Neil’s, trapping Marc.

The other descendants did the same, all sure it wouldn’t be enough. Marc was byzan. He couldn’t be contained for long.

Neil tried to reason with Marc. “She’s fine. We can all feel her sadness. It’s over now. Stop fighting.”

The blasts of magic stopped suddenly.

No one wanted to lower their shields.

Cody grabbed Cate’s arm and dragged her over to Marc. He looked at Neil. “Let go.”

Neil and others lowered their shields, but they brought them up around themselves.

Marc barely stopped the blast. Seeing his kids in the way got through to him. “Move!”

Cody hated to go against his father, but he did. “We obey the alpha. So do you.”

Marc tried to control his rage so the kids didn’t get hurt. “You need to move!”

Cate understood Marc’s anger. She reached out and took his hand. “I’m scared.”

Marc shuddered.

Cate wrapped her arms around him. “Don’t hurt them, Daddy.”

Marc forced himself to move. He went to the long table of frightened kids and den mothers and dropped into a chair.

Cate crawled into his lap. “It’s okay. Shh... It’s okay.”

Cody smiled at Neil. “He’ll be okay now.”

Neil lowered his shield, breathing a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Marc let go of the blast he’d been holding.

It flew through the room and hit Neil and Wade, barely missing Cody.

Neil and Wade both dropped to the floor, stunned.

Morgan hurried over.

Cate sighed against Marc's neck. "I forgive you, Daddy."

Marc began to cry.

"Well, I think we've all learned a lot here."

People snickered awkwardly at Brittani's attempt to lighten the mood.

Morgan went to check on Neil and Wade, not seeing real injuries. Marc's spell had been meant to knock out, not kill.

Kyle kept an eye on Marc. *His cracks are widening.*

Marc put Cate on the chair next to him and rested his head on the cool table, heart thumping. *I can't do this. I'm not strong enough.*

Descendants realized Marc was having a moment of self-doubt. Several of them wanted to offer comfort. They were all distracted by the sound of footsteps coming down the hall.

Angela and Gabe came in. Gabe had Conner over his shoulder. He put the teenager next to Morgan. "I'll float for a while."

Angela nodded. "Thank you."

Gabe went toward the exit. "It's my honor." He didn't look at Kenn.

Kenn cleared his throat. "Will you check on her?"

Gabe kept walking. “I already did. She’s still snoring.”

Kenn hated the man in that moment, but he was also relieved. He didn’t spew his jealousy. He’d known Gabe and Peter had a spark with Tonya for weeks now, but this was the first time he’d had to confront it. *They all want her. Vultures!* He looked at Angela. “You still want her here?”

Angela reloaded her gun. “Let her sleep. We’re not having the lesson now.” Angela quickly filled them in. “A dozen camp members need to be disposed of. The cargo hold is a mess again. I want a complete patrol of the ship and doubled guards on every station. We’ll do this lesson in small groups over the next few days and you can pass it on to each other. We can’t leave the normals alone again. They’re the enemy now.”

6

Courtney lingered in the lounge of the leadership hallway, mind racing. She’d spotted Angela running through the hall and knew it was a bad time to protest Tonya’s plans. She’d come here, hoping to catch Tonya, but the redhead was snoring so loud that it was echoing through the mostly empty cabins.

Tommy and Quinn had also witnessed Angela’s run by, but they hadn’t joined her. Neither man felt the need to rush to her aid anymore.

Tommy tossed a card onto the pile.

Quinn did the same.

Neither of them spoke to each other or to Courtney.

Courtney sat on the couch behind them, observing the game.

Daryl opened the door to his cabin. “Everything okay?” He frowned when no one answered. “Hey!”

Tommy shrugged, a little drunk. “Ask someone who cares.”

Daryl slammed the door and grabbed his boots. *I know that was a gunshot.* He hurried, coming out with his laces tucked into his boots. He glowered at the two men playing cards. “If you can’t pull your weight until we hit the island, maybe you won’t make it there at all.”

Tommy and Quinn exchanged glances.

Courtney didn’t like the mood. *It’s a bad time to find supporters.* She got up and left the hall.

Molly came from the cabin next to Daryl’s. She’d heard it all. Instead of yelling or threatening the two men, she joined them at the small table. “Deal me in.”

Tommy did, ready to tell her to go away as soon as she started trying to remind them of their duty to the dream.

Molly skimmed her cards and arranged them, mind flying.

“What do you want?!” Quinn didn’t have Tommy’s patience.

Molly shrugged. “I heard something. Not sure who I should tell.”

Quinn gestured. “If it’s about the camp, we’re not interested!”

“It’s about Kendle.”

Both men tensed, heads snapping toward her.

Molly discarded. “Keep playing. I hear footsteps.”

The two men acted like they hadn’t just been yanked from their bitterness.

Gabe paused in the doorway, surprised to find Molly sitting with the outcasts. He moved on, frowning.

Molly waited a few more seconds, then let out a sigh. “She’s alive. I heard Marc and Angela talking about a shared dream. They expect her to come to Pitcairn, with Adrian.” She drew a card as her turn came around. “That means you don’t have to leave the island. She’ll come to you.”

“Why are you telling us this? Aren’t you one of Angela’s little minions?” Tommy didn’t care how rude that sounded. He meant it.

Molly nodded. “I absolutely am. I’m telling you to save the boss a hard choice.”

“What choice?” Quinn smirked. “Which guy to ensnare next?”

Molly put her cards down to show a winning hand. “The choice on killing you both or tossing you overboard to those sharks.”

She stood up. “Goodnight, gentlemen.” She went back to her cabin and got ready for bed.

Tommy and Quinn exchanged glances that said they'd already been worried over Angela ordering them removed.

"Maybe we should go do rounds."

Tommy agreed. "Just so we don't push her too far."

"And when Kendle reaches the island?"

Tommy let out a harsh breath. "We'll fight for her, to the death if necessary."

"Agreed."

Tommy and Quinn rose together and went to check in with the guard on duty.

Gabe approved. *Molly's smart. We need more of that.* He had circled around to listen in case Tommy and Quinn were conspiring like the normals. He'd been disappointed by their attitudes over the outcast. Now, he was pissed. *You can't fight over something that's dead. If Kendle comes to the island, she won't survive the first day.*

7

"What's going on?"

"Why are they taking belongings from those cabins?"

"Did something happen?"

Normal camp members gathered in the lounge of the camp hall, watching as Eagles emptied them. The cleaning crew would be by next.

Monica frowned at the men and women. “Another group of your people kidnapped a descendant. They were removed.”

Gasps and mutters went through the crowd.

Monica scowled. “If you don’t stop these people, you’re all going to get the blame. The boss is sick of this shit and so is everyone else. The magic users are not the problem—you are!”

Eagles nodded in support.

Bernice came down the hall and stopped next to Monica. “We do not agree with them. My daughter and I are grateful for Safe Haven.”

Monica sighed. “I am too, but it’s getting bad. If things don’t change, Angela might drop us all off somewhere and we’ll be on our own.”

Bernice realized Monica was a normal. She moved closer. “How can we help?”

Monica gestured toward the other normals who were observing with expressions ranging from regret to anger. “Get them in line before Angela’s patience runs out.”

“It already has.” Gus came down the hall. “She wants everyone down here in their cabins right now, pending a choice on the future. Get on it.”

Monica pointed at the normal people. “See what you’ve done?! Get in your cabins and wait for her decision.” She slid a hand on her gun. “Or face the Eagles openly right now and let fate make the choice.”

People fled into their rooms, slamming and locking the doors.

Gus smiled at Bernice. "I was bluffing to get them into their cabins. Don't worry."

Bernice chuckled. "Sneaky. It's good." Her smile faded. "What happens now?"

"That's up to the boss, but probably nothing. She doesn't kill innocent people, no matter what the normals may have told you."

Bernice had already figured that out. "We will go to our cabin now."

"I'll walk with you and make sure you get there." Gus wanted to be sure none of the others gave her trouble because she was a convert to the dream.

Bernice blushed. "That is nice of you."

Monica watched them go, aware of the spark. "They'll make a cute couple."

Ian heard her and frowned. "He's just her settling partner. They're not a couple."

"They will be. Anyone can see it coming."

Ian glared at her, then stomped down the hall.

Monica sighed. "Another dumbass. Just what we need."

Coming out of a cabin with a bag of belongings, Shawn paused. "You're in a mood."

Monica snorted. "Aren't we all?"

"Yep." Shawn studied her and took a guess. "She didn't get back to you yet."

"I shouldn't have done it."

Shawn grinned. "If you didn't, one of the men would have. Molly's hot."

Monica laughed. “I think so too. Still, I had no right to kiss her. I need to apologize.”

Shawn shrugged. “She’s in the cabin right behind you. Just came in from den mother duty. No time like the present.”

Monica slowly turned to that door and gave a soft knock. “Can I come in?”

“Okay.”

Monica didn’t hear any anger in Molly’s voice. She opened the door, but didn’t step inside. “Can I tell you something?”

Molly was in her robe and slippers, with a hot cup of tea. She sat it on the table and gestured. “Shut the door. The idiots out there don’t need to know my business.”

Monica closed it and turned around. “I’m sorry that I—” Molly was standing right in front of her. Monica forgot to breathe.

Molly slowly leaned forward and pressed their lips together.

Monica wrapped her up and delivered the kiss she’d dreamed about.

Shawn walked down the hall, smiling. *At least someone on this deck is happy now.* He went to the cargo bay to store the belongings he’d gathered. Most of the dead normals had taken their things, but a few of them had decided last minute to join in. He assumed that because they’d left a lot behind. He didn’t think the plan to take Conner had been very old before they’d acted on it. “They saw we were busy and took a chance. It could have been any of

the descendants, including Pam. If we don't get it under control now, the normals will be in danger from all of us.”

Chapter Twenty-One
Do You Mind?

1

“**A**re you okay now?”

Marc shrugged. “Hell if I know.” He was still at the table, though most of the kids were in their cabins with the den mothers.

Angela scooted her chair over and rested against his arm. “What can I do?”

Marc kissed the top of her head. “Don’t give up on me.”

“Never.” Angela lifted her chin.

Marc let her kiss him, hoping she could distract him from all the ugly thoughts.

Angela wanted to, but she knew that wasn’t what he needed. She looked into his bloodshot eyes. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m cracking.” His voice trembled. “I thought I could control it, but it’s so loud in here!”

“I understand.” Angela waved at the three people coming into the gym. “They’re going to help you, like they did for me. I can’t allow you to crack any further.”

Marc didn’t resist. Being so emotional all the time, so guilty, wasn’t good for any of them.

Angela held him as the girls hit him with their charms.

Marc sagged in her grip.

Kimmie and Missy each took the hand of their guard and went back to their cabin. Jeff had brought them up after using a bathroom break as an excuse.

Kenn and Ivan came over from their posts on the door and lifted Marc.

Angela walked behind them to their cabin, relieved that Marc hadn't put up a fight. His desire for adventure wouldn't lessen, but the cracks would be gone and his mind would give him peace. For a while, anyway. She hadn't forgotten what William's book said about two byzans in the same group repelling and eventually destroying everyone around them.

"Why did it happen so fast?" Ivan was confused. "You had cracks for months before you started showing even small signs."

Angela opened the door for them. "He was counting on the reset so he didn't have to feel guilty. He planned to hunt Julia and take his kids away from that life. When he found out they had to die for it to happen, he lost hope. That depression widened the cracks."

Ivan and Kenn put Marc on the bed, being careful. Neither of them envied him in that moment.

"Do you want a guard tonight?"

She snorted. "I'm still running hot. If someone messes with him, they'll die."

Ivan frowned. "I meant for you, not Marc."

“Guarding me is a waste of manpower.”

Kenn chuckled. “You got that right.” He walked to the door. “Night, Boss.”

“Kenn.”

Kenn stopped, tensing. “Yes, Boss?”

“Is there something you should be telling me?”

“Not unless I have to.” Kenn glanced over his shoulder, blue eyes regretful. “Do I have to?”

“No.” She smiled. “I’m proud of you.”

Kenn lit up, cocky attitude filling his voice. “You should shoot more people. It looks good on you.”

Angela laughed.

Kenn went down the hall with his chin up and a spring in his step.

Ivan scowled. “Why are you encouraging him?”

Angela sighed. “I’m not. I rewarded him for making a hard choice.”

Ivan frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“Kenn said no to something that might have hurt my relationship with Marc.”

“What was it?”

Angela rotated toward the doorway, where Greg had just appeared.

Ivan’s anger grew as he read Greg’s open thoughts. “You son of a bitch!”

Greg dropped his chin. “I’m here for my punishment.”

“There isn’t going to be one.”

Ivan and Greg both gaped in surprised confusion.

Angela sat down to remove her boots. “Like you told Wade, there isn’t a rule against it yet. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I don’t agree.” Ivan pointed. “And I’m watching you now.”

Greg glared back. “Stop sniffing at Marc’s heels before you call me out!”

Angela groaned at the feel of having her boots off, aware of both men turning toward her.

She did a long, slow stretch that made their hearts pick up a beat.

Angela stared at Marc. Love shined on her face so clearly there was no denying the truth. She spoke it just to be clear. “No matter who I’m with, who survives, or who gets lucky in the end, it will always be Marc in my heart. You’d both be better off settling down with a nice Ciemus girl and forgetting about that future. It’ll never be enough for me.” Her tone hardened. “Now get out.”

Both men left in disappointment and resignation.

Angela climbed into the bed and rested against Marc. She shut her eyes and let sleep start taking her. “I’ll find a way for us to stay together. My word on it.”

2

Marc woke to the sound of squealing laughter. He heard Cody and Cate among the din. Their happiness was evident.

Marc took stock of his mind and found it healthier.

“Good morning.” Angela smiled as he rolled toward her. “Better?”

“Yes.” Marc stretched. “Thank you. I thought I had it under control.”

“I understand.” Angela felt the sparks as her body lit up. They hadn’t woken together in a while.

Marc yawned and rubbed his face. “What time is it?”

“Almost dawn.”

Marc tensed. “We’re sailing again.”

She nodded. “We’re a few hours from the rougher ride. Grant and Shawn are on the bridge. They’ll give a warning when we need to worry.”

Marc saw her eyes sparkle, body responding. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then went toward the bathroom.

Angela admired the view in the dimmed lights. *He’s a beautiful man.*

Marc snorted. “Beautiful?”

“Yeah, baby!”

Marc chuckled as he shut the door.

Angela gave him a minute, then rose from the bed. She removed her clothes and went into the bathroom.

Marc spit out the toothpaste and looked up in the mirror. His breath caught.

Angela slid by him and bent over to turn on the shower.

“Damn.”

Angela laughed. “Wash my back?”

Marc swallowed. “Back, front. Whatever you want.”

Angela switched the water to shower spray and stepped in, moving over to make room.

Marc removed his pants and boxers, and joined her.

Outside their cabin, the squeals grew louder as the Eagles encouraged the game of tag to continue. The adults knew Marc and Angela needed some alone time, and the kids needed to have fun together so they could bond. All the descendant children who were old enough to play were here. They ran through the halls and open cabins, tickling and shouting.

On each end of the hall, Eagles guarded the entrances and enjoyed the good mood.

It wasn't the same down in the camp hall. The mood there was tense as everyone waited for Angela's decision. Molly's words had reminded them that the boss held the power to remove anyone. Not even the descendants knew which way she would go. They guarded that hall and refused to show sympathy.

“New people coming through.” Trinity led Somchai and his group into the camp hall, pointing at things and areas as she explained them. “We keep coffee going most of the time. If you find an empty pot, feel free to jump in and make one. Instructions are taped to the wall.” Trinity led them by the nervous normals lingering in doors. “Those of you

without gifts will live here. Those with gifts can stay in this hall, but our camp has segregated, so most people here won't like it."

Somchai frowned as the others in his group stopped in fear and anger. "They do not mix?"

Trinity didn't lie. "The normals think we're trying to kill them. The descendants think the normals are trying to kill us. It's been ugly. We have no trust."

Somchai stared in dismay. "I had heard Safe Haven was open to everyone."

"We are, but there have been bad people on both sides who've almost ruined it for everyone." She gestured toward the empty cabins they were passing. "Just last night a group of normals kidnapped one of our people and tried to leave with him. They paid with their lives." Trinity tried to be fair. "The day before, a magic user kidnapped three of our kids and tried to do a forbidden spell. She also paid with her life."

Somchai's group didn't follow Trinity as she walked down the hall.

"Magic users!"

"We want nothing to do with magic!"

"We're not safe here either!"

Somchai sighed, moving closer to Trinity. "My son and I cannot stay here."

Trinity frowned. "Because you hate magic too?"

Somchai braced for ugliness. "No, because we are like you."

The group he'd saved immediately turned on him, throwing insults and punches.

“You liar!”

“Get him!”

“You brought us here!”

“You'll pay!”

Eagles hurried in from their posts.

Trinity brought up a shield around herself, Somchai, and his son.

The normals stopped, glowering and making threats.

Trinity pointed. “That's the hall to the descendant deck. We have normals up there too, but they aren't like the idiots down here.” She kept her shield up as she escorted them. “Ralph, settle your new haters.”

Ralph frowned at her, but he understood the bitterness. “Calm down, my new friends. You don't want the boss to come down here.”

The new people kept yelling insults as Somchai and his son left.

Ralph let his anger show. “Shut up! Pick a cabin and get in it, or I'll send you to the brig!”

Most of the normals did as ordered, still glaring at the older man.

Renard came to Ralph, whispering. “I'm not like them. A magic user saved me. I want to be with Bo and Somchai.”

Ralph smiled. “Go with Trinity.”

Renard hurried after them, relieved he didn't have to stay down here.

Ralph went to the center of the hall so everyone could hear him. “The boss is pissed about what happened. If we don’t learn to get along with them, she’s going to drop us off somewhere or remove us. Try harder, please, or we won’t get to the island at all.”

The normals who’d already been here knew he was right. Not all of them hated the descendants; they just feared them.

The new normals made plans to get off the ship as soon as possible.

3

Trinity took the three males to the leadership deck where all the magic users were living now. She paused at the entrance, enjoying the fun scene. “We don’t usually let them run wild like this, but they needed a good moment.”

Somchai laughed with the kids as they squealed and giggled. The mood up here was definitely better. *We’ll fit in.*

Every descendant turned toward him and began to scan.

Somchai didn’t resist. He put a hand on Bo’s shoulder when the teenager tensed. “It’s what our kind does, boy. It’s okay.”

Renard watched, curious, but without the animosity of the other normals. He felt them also digging into his mind, but he had nothing to hide.

Renard smiled at the older girls playing cards. They stared back curiously.

Trinity pointed at a small cabin on the end. “That’s all we have open up here.”

“It will be fine.” Somchai followed her to the cabin and moved aside so the boys could go in first.

Trinity sighed, catching thoughts. “How old are they?”

Somchai frowned. “Too young for those thoughts.”

Trinity shrugged. “We have an age rule of fifteen here.”

“That is too young for sex and marriages!”

“Many of us agree, but the rules stand. How old are your boys?”

“They are both fifteen. Renard is not my son. He can make his own choices, but Bo will not be hounded. I will not allow it.”

Most of the females ogling the teens turned away, disappointed. Bo and Renard were cute, and fresh.

Trinity smiled. “Most of them will honor your wishes. As for the others, it will be up to you to make it clear the parent rules are what matters.” Her smile faded. “And it won’t work. If he sparks with one of them, things will happen. We need babies.”

“Yuck!” Bo was also catching some of the thoughts. “Not interested!”

Somchai laughed, proud of his son. “Yes. Women are trouble. So are men. Concentrate on your lessons and the future. Relationships can

wait.” Somchai sent a hard look toward the two women who were still leering. “Don’t make me ask for help from your alpha.”

The women immediately dropped their heads and found other things to think about.

“Well done.” Trinity pointed. “We also keep coffee going up here, along with snacks. On the normal deck, they hoard everything we put out, so we stopped giving them treats. They have to go to the mess now for snacks and meals. On this deck, people are different. You can talk to any of us about problems or to ask questions. Just follow the rules you were given and you’ll be fine.”

Somchai gestured toward the cabin at the far end of the hall. “She is having trouble.”

Trinity and others turned toward Samantha’s cabin.

“She’ll give birth soon.” Somchai smiled. “It is a beautiful day to welcome new life.”

Trinity paled. “Today?”

Somchai smiled as Eagles ran toward that cabin. “Before the sun rises again, she will no longer be pregnant.”

4

“He’s wrong. I’m fine.” Samantha stared at the anxious men standing next to her chair. “No pain today, even in my back. I feel fine.”

People frowned toward Somchai’s cabin for the false alarm.

Neil and Wade exchanged glances.

I don't believe her.

Neither do I.

Samantha snorted. "Worrywarts." She gestured. "I was about to tidy the cabin and then go to the mess for breakfast. You can help me and you'll see I'm not lying."

"I'll bring you a tray." Wade went to the door. "Neil will clean up. You sit there."

Samantha stuck out her tongue.

The witnesses chuckled and moved away from the door so Wade could get through.

Den mothers gathered the kids. "Let's get washed up and we'll go have breakfast. Who's ready for pancakes?"

The kids shouted and lined up.

Cate looked toward the cabin where Marc and Angela were still in the shower. She reluctantly lined up when Cody tugged on her arm.

Missy came over and took her other hand. "You can be my good friend. We'll sit at the counter. Thelma will give us treats."

Cate brightened. "What kind of treats?"

"Cupcakes and tarts. She's making them for lunch and she'll need tasters."

"Cool!" Cate felt a piece of the outsider shell crack and break off. She let Missy keep her hand as they followed the den mothers to the bathrooms that were already full.

Amy paused, looking into the neat cabin at Samantha.

Her little frown caught Neil's attention. He lifted a brow. "You okay?"

Amy pointed at Samantha. "Her belly changed. It's lower."

Neil saw what she meant. Samantha's stomach had dropped. *The new guy's right*. Neil got up and led Amy toward the line of kids. "Will you be okay for a while? I can ask Molly or Monica to stay with you."

Amy shook her head, grinning. "Thelma wants to be nice to us now." She ran over and took Missy's other hand.

Neil went to the guard on the hall and leaned in. "Let the boss know she'll be without a few of us for a while."

Zack nodded. "I'll handle it."

Neil caught Morgan's attention.

Morgan was already moving toward the exit. He and Neil left together.

On the couch again, Conner sat up, groaning at the pain. He got to his feet and went to the bathroom line.

"Should he be up yet?"

Tonya shrugged at Kenn's question. "He took a hard hit, but he's fine. He just needs a day or two to fully recover."

Kenn took her arm as she stood up from a lounge rocker.

Tonya yawned. "Let's get some food and then you can take me to the lab."

“That sounds good.” Kenn spotted a familiar, angry face coming into the hall and groaned. “That figures.”

Tonya saw Courtney and tensed. She didn’t need to read Courtney’s mind. “She knows.”

“Secrets don’t last in this camp.” Kenn stepped in front of Tonya, glaring at Courtney. “Bad time.”

“It’s always a bad time!” Courtney pointed at Tonya over his big shoulder. “You’re not getting my baby, bitch!”

Tonya stepped to the side so Kenn wasn’t between them. She lifted her hands. “Do it now before the boss comes out.”

Courtney rushed forward and slapped Tonya as hard as she could.

Tonya fired back, using her fist.

Courtney hit the opposite wall and slid to the ground. Blood trickled from her lip.

Tonya rubbed her knuckles as Eagles hurried toward them. “Get up and try again. That was weak, even for you.”

Courtney stayed down, holding her jaw. “I went easy because you’re such a cow!”

Tonya’s eyes narrowed.

Kenn got between them again and took Tonya’s arm. “Come on. You made your point.”

“Not really. She still doesn’t get it. She thinks that baby makes her one of us. She’s going to use its gifts.” Tonya kept going as the witnesses muttered. “The new laws are coming soon, and I’m on that council. The first thing I’m going to ask for

is a law to protect our kids—from people like you!” Tonya kicked Courtney in the arm, making sure she didn’t hit anything important.

Kenn gently dragged Tonya down the hall, mind racing. He hadn’t suspected Courtney’s real reason for wanting to be with a descendant. Now that he knew, he was pissed.

Courtney let the Eagles help her to her feet. She didn’t deny the accusations. She stared at Angela’s door, hoping the boss would come out and support her anyway.

Marc’s annoyed voice echoed through the door. “I’m trying to get laid. Do you mind?!”

People laughed, most of them motioning for Courtney to leave.

She did, casting ugly glares at all of them.

“She’s trouble.” Jayda sighed. “And she’s right. We can’t let Tonya take her baby.”

Ivan didn’t want anything to do with it. “That’s a call for the boss to make.”

Jayda didn’t agree. “Not really. If she’s going to use the baby, we need to make sure it’s for the greater good and not her own selfish desires.”

“What’s the difference?” Ivan scowled. “It’s still wrong.”

Jayda frowned. “We’ve been using the kids the whole time, Ivan. We do it for the right reasons. Tonya assumes it will be for bad ones. We need to verify which is the truth before we ask Angela to intervene.”

Ivan saw her point. "I'll see if Wade can get an answer."

Jayda lowered her voice. "It's not his baby. Kenn has to do it."

Ivan grunted. "That could be ugly."

Jayda gestured. "Uglier than this?"

"Fair enough. We know Kenn won't hit her."

"Do we?" Jayda walked away. "If he did it once, he could do it again. Make sure they aren't alone for that conversation or there might not be a baby to worry about at all."

5

"You're both out now. Report to the boss's office."

Emma frowned at Ian. "For what? I served my time."

Francesca exited the cell. "This was holding. Now we'll be sentenced."

Emma's anger grew. "Not me. I want off this ship."

"No problem." Ian slammed the cell door. "The boss will be down at some point to toss you overboard."

He locked it while she paled, then tossed the keys onto the desk. "Have a nice wait."

Ian followed Francesca toward the office, glad Emma wasn't out yet. *She's trouble. We need to drop her somewhere. I hope Angela gives her what she wants.*

Francesca was nervous. “Is Marc still mad at me?”

Ian shrugged. “You almost let a stranger kill his kids, so I’m gonna guess he is.”

Her chin went down. “I’m sorry.”

Ian had sympathy, but he couldn’t show it until Angela made her choice on the punishment. “Sit here and don’t move without permission. Even if you just need to use the bathroom, ask a guard first.”

“I will.”

Ian went to his post, stomach growling. He was off duty in a few minutes. *As soon as my relief gets here, I’m heading for pancakes and coffee, and then I’m going to sleep for ten hours.*

Jeff paused at the end of the hall, spotting Francesca.

Francesca smelled him coming. Jeff wore a light scent that drove her crazy, but she was sure he didn’t want anything to do with her after such a huge error. She looked at the office floor and hoped Angela would have mercy.

Jeff stopped near her chair. “It was a mistake, not intentional. Try to relax.”

She glanced up in surprise.

Jeff smiled, unable to fight her need for comfort. “We’ve all screwed up at some point and we’re still here. Take it like an Eagle.”

“I will. Thank you.” Francesca looked away, not wanting him to think she was hitting on him.

Jeff went to the guard station, frowning at Ian’s grin. “What?!”

Ian sniggered. “Nothing. Here’s the list of her appointments for the day.” Ian gave Jeff a minute to skim them, then left.

Jeff entered the guard station and began organizing. Ian was a slob who always left garbage on the desk, and he never emptied the trashcans. He said the cleaning crew needed to feel needed. Jeff didn’t like that, though he did like Ian. *All of us have quirks. Being a slob is just one of the nastier ones.*

“Can I hit the bathroom?”

“Yes.” Jeff watched her go in, mind racing over the possible punishments she could receive. He didn’t hear Gus coming up behind him.

“Things all cool here?”

Jeff jumped, knocking his clipboard to the ground. He bent down to get it, letting out a loud fart.

Gus moved out of the way, grinning. “Did I scare the shit out of you?”

Jeff chuckled. “That was yesterday’s soup.”

Gus rubbed his stomach, grimacing. “I feel ya.” He’d had heartburn for hours afterward.

“Are you with me today?”

“Yep.”

“Good.” Jeff meant it. Duty over the boss when she was handling problem people always went better with the bigger men on the shift. The people waiting to be scolded took it better when they knew two muscled monsters were waiting to enforce her choices.

Gus chuckled. “Muscled monsters. I like that.” He went to the other guard station and began reading the notes.

6

“Are we all set up here?”

Grant pointed. “The line’s still in sight, but we’re falling behind.”

“Boss said to stay on their ass.” Jennifer took the seat next to the window, observing as the sharks in the rear picked off an injured whale that had fallen to the rear. “They regrouped right away.”

“Yes. It will take something big to split them up permanently.”

Jennifer considered that. “We have rough seas coming. Will that have an effect?”

“I doubt it. They’ll just go below. We don’t have that option.”

“Will we lose them then?”

“Maybe, but it appears they’re on the same path we are. I have them on the new radar monitor too, so it should be okay.”

Jennifer swept the bridge and found every monitor active. “What all are you tracking up here?”

“Everything except sound.” Grant shrugged. “I have that muted so I don’t get distracted by all the dramas.”

“Smart.” Jennifer spotted the hallway outside Angela’s office. It was full of impatient, nervous people. “She isn’t in there yet?”

Grant shrugged, smiling. "I heard she was...occupied for a while. She'll be along when she finishes with Marc."

Jennifer laughed. It was good to know the boss was taking a moment for herself. Jennifer saw Brittani coming up the steps to the top deck. "Is she with us too?"

Grant frowned. "No. I think she's waiting on our guard."

Jennifer looked over at Shawn.

Shawn shrugged. "I'm here for a lesson as soon as Daryl relieves me."

Jennifer sighed. "I guess she hasn't told him yet."

Shawn pointed at the man coming up a different ramp. "I think he's avoiding her. He slept in the normal hall last night."

No one spoke as Daryl cleverly slid around the bridge supports and came up the steps before Brittani reached him.

Daryl waved at Shawn, voice hardening. "I'm on duty."

Shawn checked his watch. "You still have three minutes."

Daryl moved into the shadows. "I'm on duty."

Shawn moved to the other empty seat. "Whatever you want, man."

"I want you guys to tell her I'm on duty."

Brittani came up the steps.

Jennifer met her in the doorway. "He's working. Handle it later."

Brittani looked at Daryl, silently begging.

He refused to meet her eye.

Brittani's heart fell. She sucked it up and went back down into the ship.

Jennifer frowned at Daryl. "You can't avoid her forever."

"Not trying to."

Jennifer read his thoughts and smiled. "A little taste of what it will be like without you?"

Daryl nodded, angry. "And if she still asks me to pick, we're done." He didn't want to do that to either of them. *But I will. I'm an Eagle first.*

Jennifer respected that. She also respected Brittani. "Wouldn't it be better to talk to her?"

"No. She'll try to beg me into it."

"And you're scared of that." Jennifer frowned. "Because you might agree."

Daryl sighed. "I want her as much as I want this job. I shouldn't have to pick."

Jennifer felt Grant's impatience and turned to the monitors. "So what's first, captain?"

Grant gestured. "There is no first. This isn't a lesson. You're both here to help me sail this big bitch through the roughest waters on the planet."

Shawn and Jennifer exchanged grins, thrilled with the revelation.

"Awesome."

"Cool."

Grant snorted, but he was happy with their responses. *Angela gave me a solid crew this time. If*

we survive Drake's Passage, I'll be sure to thank her.

7

Morgan shut the curtain. "We're alone for the moment."

"Good." Neil opened the next box. "We'll get this ready and plug it in to make sure it works."

"My gifts are still a little wonky right now. I'm not sure how much help I'll be during the delivery." Morgan lifted the incubator onto the stand so Neil could tighten it in place.

"Hopefully you won't need to do anything. I might be wrong."

Morgan nodded. "No offense, but I do hope that. We're not ready for Samantha to give birth yet. We haven't even found the premie diapers in the cargo area."

"Yeah, Candy's down there again with a few of the other pregnant women." Neil chuckled. "She was pissed when she saw it after the whale hit us."

Morgan snickered. "That nesting stuff is crazy."

"So are the syncs. The fathers are putting out sex on a schedule and the PMS women were all griping together. It's so odd."

"That's nature, man."

Neil finished tightening the incubator and plugged it in. "Flip it on."

Morgan hit the switch. The incubator lit up in soft light and began to put off warmth.

“Excellent.” Neil adjusted the temperature. “Our babies need more heat. Make sure you check on that a lot.”

Morgan began attaching the various hoses and other extras. “I’ll touch their skin on each check. I’ll tell the other medics to do the same.”

Neil frowned. “I don’t want the others caring for my babies, Morgan.”

Morgan scowled, surprised. “We have three other medics, Neil. They’re all good.”

Neil shook his head. “They’re not descendants. I can’t take the chance. Wade and I will be here on alternating shifts until the babies are released. Tonya can help, but I don’t want anyone else around them unless they’re like us.” Neil stepped out of the partitioned area before Morgan could respond.

Neil went by the lab, spotting Kenn and Tonya entering the glassed space. He nodded to Tonya, aware of her surprise. Neil was just as shocked, but he’d come to trust the redhead over the last few months. Her defense of Courtney’s baby was flying through the ship, firming Neil’s choice. *The normals can’t be trusted, even the ones we have in authority.*

Kenn was stunned.

So was Tonya. “That’s not good.”

Kenn considered it, dismayed by his own thoughts. “Maybe he’s right.”

Tonya went to the desk and got settled. “It sounds like the boss needs to make a final choice on dropping the normals somewhere. If not, she better

find a way to bring us together or your true purpose won't matter."

Kenn knew she was right. "I'll mention it. I'm scheduled for time with her later."

Tonya pointed. "Go do it now. I may need you back here for the delivery."

Kenn paused. "What delivery?"

"Samantha's in labor."

"She said she's not."

Tonya gestured at Wade, who was coming down the hall with more medical boxes. "Then why are they bringing in the equipment we need to care for two newborns?"

Chapter Twenty-Two
Riding The Waves
January 19th

1

Angela took a soothing drink of her steaming coffee, then cleared her throat. “Start sending them in, Jeff.”

Jeff pointed at Kyle. He was certain the boss needed their top men on duty. He didn’t consider Kyle’s demotion to be legitimate. He assumed Kyle would be back with the Special Forces team soon.

Kyle entered the office, leaving the door open. “Morning, Boss.”

“Good morning. What can I do for you?”

Kyle handed her two sheets of paper. “Plans for your team, and old plans I had for my team that I didn’t get to.”

“I’ll read them tonight.” Angela handed him a paper from her book.

Kyle skimmed the paper, frowning. He locked down on his thoughts. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No, but they’ve left me no choice.”

Kyle understood the rough position the normals had put all of them in. “I’ll make sure the Eagles know to be nice so it doesn’t break. Anything else?”

Angela nodded. "I'll need a workout later. Be in the small gym after evening mess."

"You got it." Kyle was still frowning as he left.

Jeff waved toward Zack. "You have duty shortly. Go next."

Zack shut the door and dropped into the chair across from Angela.

Angela immediately nodded. "We'll try tonight, providing there are no other issues we have to handle first."

"Thank you!" Zack had been prepared to beg.

Angela smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner. If Eric can be healed, we'll do it."

Zack let out the breath he'd been holding for weeks over this. "I'm only on a half shift over the brig. Where do you want me after that?"

"Keep track of our new people, quietly."

"No problem." Zack blasted her with his gratitude.

Angela soaked it up like a sponge, adding it to the good start to the day that Marc had given her.

Jeff kept it rolling. "Kenn."

Kenn also shut the door when he entered.

Angela studied him and his thoughts.

Kenn waited, not sure what to say now that he was facing her. He didn't want to take the baby from Courtney, but he also didn't want her using it for personal gain.

Angela approved. "The new law will require medics to lock the baby's gifts at birth, no matter who their parents are."

Kenn relaxed. “Why didn’t I think of that?!”

She shrugged, grinning. “That’s why I get the big bucks.”

Kenn stood. “You deserve a raise.” He left the office, whistling.

Jeff pointed at Francesca. “Go now while her mood’s good.”

Francesca entered the office, leaving the door open. “I’m sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

Angela sighed. “I believe you, but you’re done as a den mother. No one will ever trust you to protect their kids.”

Francesca held in the tears. “I wouldn’t trust me either after what happened.”

“You also can’t be an Eagle, for the same reason.”

“I understand.” Francesca stared at her feet and waited, willing to accept whatever punishment Angela delivered. *Better her than Marc.*

Angela made another note in her book. “Have you heard of FND?”

The upset woman paled. “Work to get in the good graces of the camp or to build a high place in camp.”

“Well said. Report to Marc.”

Francesca paled. “Marc?”

“Yes. When he forgives you, you can try out for the Eagles again and go from there.”

“He’ll never forgive me.”

“Then you have a lot of work waiting. He’s with the den mothers. Get going.”

Francesca got up, heart thumping. “Will he hurt me?”

“Not physically. Emotionally, maybe.”

Francesca straightened her shoulders. “I deserve it.” She left with her stomach twisting.

Jeff gave her a comforting nod, then gestured at Theo.

Theo yawned as he went in and handed Angela the update sheets. He waited as she read through his notes, too tired to talk unless he had to.

“This is all good. Go to bed.”

Theo yawned again.

Angela did too. She frowned. “Don’t pass that shit to me. Get out of here.”

Theo chuckled as he left, staggering down the hallway that was quickly emptying.

Jeff chose Debra next. She was just as tired as Theo. She needed to get done and get to bed.

Debra lingered in the doorway, too tired for sign language. *Trinity and Jayda have things covered on the normal deck. Brittani is still pacing through the halls, and Dog took off from the infirmary as soon as the ship started rocking. He’s with the kids now.*

Angela chuckled. “I assume the cats are in the lab?”

Yes. Debra yawned. *As soon as I shower, I’m crashing on a cot in the brig, so you can free up the guard there if you like.*

Angela nodded. “Sounds good. Do you need or want anything from me?”

Yes. Debra yawned again. But it can wait. Call me if you need me.

Angela watched the deaf woman leave, reading her thoughts. She had no problem with assigning Laura's nieces to a cabin with Debra, but they had to be evaluated a little more to be sure they weren't hiding trouble like their aunt. So far, the girls were sad about what had happened. If they got angry, Debra wouldn't be safe to share a room with them.

Jeff lifted a brow at Greg. "You ready?"

Greg shook his head.

Jeff's lips thinned. He motioned to Charlie. "What about you?"

Charlie bounced up and entered the office with a smile. "She's keeping the baby!"

Angela smiled back, relieved. "Excellent. What changed her mind?"

Charlie shrugged. "I'm not completely sure. She spent some time with Bernice and her daughter, and changed her mind a few hours later."

Angela made a note to thank the new woman. "And the wedding?"

Charlie blushed. "We worked it out."

Angela laughed, happy for him. "That's great. In two days, you'll be a married man."

"Actually, Ralph and I talked. We'd like to wait until we reach the island, if that's okay."

Angela studied him. "Are you sure?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes. We might even ask one or two of the other engaged couples to do it at the

same time. Might be a great way to say hello to the island, you know?”

Angela agreed. “I have no problem with that. Where are you going after this?”

Charlie hesitated. “I thought I’d hang with you while she takes a nap.”

Angela’s smile lit up the room. “Perfect. Come over to this side.” She raised her voice. “Next?”

Cathy appeared. She glanced at Charlie and thought better of asking him to leave. *Maybe it will help my cause.* “I’d like to have an exception to the age rule.”

The lightly chatting people in the hallway fell silent to hear the answer.

Angela had been expecting it, thanks to updates last night. “I assume you two are serious?”

Cathy thought of her conversation with Peter. “I love him.”

Angela made notes in her book. “See Jennifer for an evaluation appointment. Then send Timmy to Kyle.”

Cathy frowned. “Kyle doesn’t like Timmy. It won’t be a fair eval.”

Angela frowned. “Kyle knows the right questions to ask. Send Timmy to him or forget it.”

“I’ll send him.” Cathy waited, not sure if there was more.

Angela gestured. “There is more, but I see no point in going through it unless you pass the evaluation.”

“Okay.” Cathy’s frown stayed in place as she left.

Jeff glared at Tommy. “You’re up.”

Tommy and Quinn went in together. Neither man was sure what to say after embarrassing her in front of so many people.

Angela closed her book. “What do you want?”

Quinn looked at Tommy.

Tommy sighed. “We’d like to apologize for how we handled it.”

“So noted.”

Both men hesitated again at her cold tone.

“I’m busy, gentlemen. Speak up.”

Quinn shook his head. “This is a bad time.”

“No, a bad time was in the middle of the mess. Speak up!”

Tommy cleared his throat. “We want to pull our weight until we leave.”

Angela’s voice didn’t soften. “Fine. I’ll find work for you. Anything else?”

Tommy wanted to say a lot of things. He settled for another apology. “I really am sorry.”

“So am I, for trusting you. Get out.”

The two men left together, faces darkening as everyone in the hall glowered.

Jeff scanned the remaining people and pointed. “Your turn.”

Greg grimaced. “Yeah, send me in now that she’s pissed. Thanks.”

Jeff shrugged. “I tried to send you in while the mood was good.” Jeff pointed. “Get in there and take it like a man.”

Angela looked up as Greg came in. “Shut the door.”

Greg did, frowning. He took the chair across from her, aware of Charlie digging into his thoughts and finding the truth.

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. He didn’t say anything, but his anger hit Greg in thick waves.

Angela shut her book. “I’m going to agree, with conditions.”

Greg stilled, shocked. “What?”

“I want to study it for future use.” She glanced over at Charlie pointedly.

Charlie paled at the thought of her also doing it to Tracy. “You’re kidding, right?”

Angela snorted. “No. The normals are all jealous. I refused to let them know they could be like us because I was afraid of them going corrupt. It doesn’t matter as much now; they’re already going bad faster than I can get them into the Eagles.”

Greg scowled. “That wasn’t what I had in mind.”

Angela gave him a bright, fake grin. “I know. As usual, I’ve found a way to use it to our advantage. I’m good at that, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Greg waited, sure it couldn’t be this easy.

“It’s going to be hard on you. I want to experiment.”

“I agree.” Greg sighed. “You knew I would. All of this was leading up to my being your magical guinea pig.”

“Yes.” Angela studied him. “We’re not mates. I want to know if it will still work. That’s test number one.”

“And test number two?”

“We’ll find out if you can pass it to someone else. After, I’ll consider informing the normals and letting them try out to be next in line.”

Greg held in a chuckle. “I’m guessing the requirements will include Eagle status.”

“I knew you were smart.” She lifted a brow. “When would you like to try it?”

“Now?”

Angela chuckled. “In a week or so, but you’ll prepare between now and then.” She handed him a sheet of paper. “Kyle told me those things would have helped him. Do them, and do them quietly. If the normals find out before I’m ready for them to know, you’re done.”

“No one will know.”

“Good, because I don’t just mean you’re done with this experiment. I mean you’re done in this camp.”

Before Greg could protest, Angela stood up. “I need coffee.” She stepped into the hall and met Jeff’s eyes. *I have a hard job that needs to be handled by a cold soul.*

Jeff already knew what it was. *I'm your ice man.* He waved Greg to take his place and went to the brig.

2

Jennifer rubbed her chilly arms, inspecting the open ocean rolling toward them in ominous waves. “Why is it getting colder?”

“We’re near Drake’s passage.” Grant checked the temperature on the monitor. “It’s down to 41°. We’ll need our coats before we get all the way through here.”

“I’ve heard of this.” Shawn frowned. “It really is the roughest place to sail.”

“Most of the time. They called it Drake’s Shake or Drake’s Lake. Sometimes it’s easy sailing. Other times...” Grant gestured at the roughening seas. There was no doubt which one they were about to face. “When you start seeing icebergs, we’re through it.”

“Icebergs?” Jennifer’s heart thumped. “We’re sailing through icebergs?”

Grant pointed at the monitor. “For a small stretch, yes. We’re close to Antarctica here. After we get through the passage and turn north, the water warms and the temperature will rise.”

Shawn now understood why Theo and his crew had brought the box of winter gear up and stuffed it in the rear corner of the bridge. “What happens if we hit one of those icebergs?”

Grant frowned. “You’ve heard of the Titanic, right?”

“Great.” Shawn keyed the mike on his belt radio. “Turn off the air conditioners and open the windows. The temperatures are dropping. Get some fresh air while you can.”

The lights in the bridge brightened as appliances all over the ship were shut off.

Jennifer dug her Eagle jacket out and put it on, already chilled. She zipped it up, aware of it being tight over her waist now. She settled into the seat and resumed watching the ocean. The waves were already noticeably rougher. The tops of the swells were turning foamy white as they crashed into each other. Jennifer swallowed nervously, not as eager to do this now.

Shawn was the opposite. He wanted the adventure. Going to the detention center had been hard because it was below the water, and because of what he’d had to do. Snapping the woman’s neck was still haunting him. He wanted this adventure to replace that one in his mind.

Grant adjusted their speed, hoping the faster ride would help them cut through the rough waves.

The ship groaned a little and settled into the faster speed.

Jennifer pointed at shapes in the distance. “They’re still at the surface.”

Grant used his glasses to scan the migrating whales and their shark escorts.

A rough swell rolled under the ship, jarring all of them.

The stabilizers automatically straightened them out.

Grant forced a laugh. “Here we go.”

Shawn didn’t like the nervous tremor in Grant’s voice, but he didn’t call the man on it. *If he’s nervous, he has a reason to be.* Shawn keyed the mike again. “Secure all belongings and pass out the barf bags.”

Jennifer laughed, glad her stomach was strong. She’d only had a couple weeks of morning sickness and it hadn’t been bad. She didn’t expect trouble from that.

Another rough wave hit the ship and rolled under them. The bridge lurched sideways and slowly straightened.

Grant adjusted the controls to help the stabilizers even them out faster. He took the wheel in hand, deactivating the autopilot. “If I ask you to take over the wheel, remember to aim for the waves. We always face them head-on. If they come from the side, we can be rolled.”

Shawn smothered the feeling that came from those words. “What else?”

“That’s mostly it for steering. The monitors will start beeping if we get too close to anything, like a landmass, a reef, an iceberg.” Grant pointed. “This screen shows those things when we’re near them. At one point through this passage, we’ll see both land and icebergs. I’ll help steer us through those. If for

some reason I can't, you two will cover it with one on the wheel and the other calling distances on the screen."

Jennifer and Shawn exchanged glances. Neither of them wanted to be in charge of the ship for that.

Another tall wave rolled toward them; Grant placed his feet firmly so he didn't slide. "These little nubs on the floor are for your feet. Make sure you use them or some of the waves will throw you around."

As if to demonstrate his point, the ship lifted and shuddered to the right.

Jennifer grabbed the chair arm to keep from falling.

Shawn bumped into the wall as he tried to stay on his feet.

They both chuckled.

Grant steered them toward the next wave, cool shield of battle falling down in a split second. "Let's ride the waves."

3

"It's not that bad."

Wade groaned again as the ship lurched, sending more dishes and chairs across the mess. "How can you take this?"

Samantha chuckled. "Strong stomach, I guess." She grabbed her travel mug before it could go off the end of their booth table. "Just pretend it's an amusement park ride."

Wade tried to fight the nausea. “Didn’t like them.”

Samantha swept the mess and saw many people were in the same boat as Wade. Green faces met her scan. She was the only one laughing and joking. Everyone else was holding onto something while trying not to puke.

Samantha noticed several males staring expectantly at Wade. She frowned. “Are you supposed to be in a lesson or something right now?”

Wade leaned against the booth. “Private lessons. I delayed it.”

“You should go on. It will distract you and them.”

“Not leaving you.”

Samantha smiled. “I’m enjoying this. And I’ll stay right here until it’s over. Go have your lesson.”

Wade didn’t want to leave her alone, but if he didn’t find a distraction, he was going to hurl all over their booth. He stood up, grimacing at another sharp lurch from the ship. “An hour.”

Samantha giggled as he hurried from the mess.

The males who’d been hoping for it followed, most looking as bad as he did.

Samantha leaned back and relaxed. *I feel great today. I’d forgotten how nice this is.*

Sitting at the next booth, Megan grunted. She didn’t mind the rocking boat, but she was bored. “I have a deck of cards.”

“Sounds good.” Samantha propped her feet up as Megan joined her.

The females placed towels at the end of the table to keep the cards from sliding off and enjoyed the time together without anyone bugging them for anything.

4

“Grant calls this riding the waves because the ship spends more time on top of the water than down in it.” Wade grabbed a rail as they went down the stairs. “I call it bobbing for balance.”

The men following him gave the expected chuckles, but few of them were actually amused. Like Wade, they hated this new, awkward motion of the ship.

“He said we’ll be through this part in a couple hours.” Wade led the men to an unused lounge near the camp hallway. Angela had descendant guards down here now, but Wade wanted to be close in case they needed help. “Get comfortable. Someone find the Dramamine.”

“I brought an extra bottle.” Ivan tossed it to Wade. “I’ve used two. If I get sleepy, kick me in the balls. If I survive, I’ll be awake.”

More weak chuckles echoed.

Wade tossed the bottle to the next green-faced man, then turned to the water cooler for a drink to wash down the pills. He saw a shadow carrying a heavy burden step into the employee hall. Wade quickly thought of other things. These men didn’t need to know the ugly duty Jeff was performing

right now. “So, I guess you’re all here to learn how to be a camp relief source.”

Men exchanged grins and leers as they picked a chair or sofa.

Wade picked a welded seat, trying to ignore the sloshing water right outside the hull. “There are three basic rules to follow. Once we cover those, I can give you tips to make sure they ask for a repeat performance.”

“What if we’re just here for those skills?” Shawn smirked. “I have a woman. I want to make sure she stays happy.”

Wade laughed with the others. “That’s a better reason than just being horny.” He felt the Dramamine start to burn in his stomach. “Who brought snacks?”

Shawn opened his kit and began tossing out bags of chips and wrapped biscuits from the mess.

Wade caught two of those. “Perfect.” He quickly ate the soft biscuits and felt his stomach gurgle gratefully.

Everyone got settled and looked at Wade expectantly. Some of the men were Eagles and some were camp members. For the moment, all animosity was put aside to learn something new.

Wade pulled a small square package from his pocket. “Never leave home without it.”

They all snickered as Wade stored the condom.

“Never approach a woman without a rubber. You’ll be surprised how many of them won’t wait for you to go get protection. Have it on you, even if

you're just setting up a private moment. Angela may want us to breed, but a lot of the women in this camp aren't interested in families yet." Wade belched. His stomach started to settle despite the rocking boat. "That's better."

"Do we get them from the medics?" Terrance was hoping he was better at this than sailing. Grant hadn't wanted him to come back and help anymore.

Wade nodded at the rookie. "Angela made sure we're covered. The infirmary is stocked with four years' worth of prophylactics. When we're done here, swing by there and grab a couple packs."

The men grinned, already enjoying the lesson.

"The second basic rule is to pick carefully. No woman will repeat a service with you after being caught in a compromising situation. Pick unused rooms and areas; check the guard posts to see who's on duty. Some people will interrupt you because they're jealous or because they think it's funny. Be picky about where you take them, and never, I repeat, never, go into their cabin or tent. Couples use cabins. Relief sources don't."

The men stilled as Jayda and Trinity came by on rounds. The boat shifted to the left and plunged down, drawing moans from the men.

Both women grinned at them, but they didn't say or think anything that might interrupt the lesson. They didn't mind the rough motion of the ship.

Wade held up a hand. "Can I use you two for a moment?"

Trinity leered.

Jayda blushed.

Wade pointed. “Those are good responses, but neither of them said yes. Those are clues. A woman who wants a service will give a verbal sign or use Eagle code.” Wade waved them on. “Thanks!”

The two women understood he was already done with them. They both snickered as they left.

“To be fair, they both know I didn’t mean it, but the rule still stands: get verbal consent, but only ask them once.” Wade’s voice hardened. “No one wants to be accused of sexual harassment.”

The mood dipped a little at his warning; so did the boat.

Wade swallowed the nausea. “So, you have the three basic rules: protection, the right place, and verbal consent. All good so far?”

The men nodded. Some of them leaned forward, eager for the next part of the lesson.

“You have to learn how to approach them before you learn how to please them. There’s no point in having the skills if you never get to use them.” Wade gestured toward the hall where the two women had gone. “They knew I was joking. I would never use such a crude line unless I know the woman is into that. You have to match your words to their brains.”

The men groaned and blew out sighs.

“No one can match words to a woman’s brain.”

“Yeah, they’re too confusing.”

Wade shrugged. “And yet, I’ve been doing it for years. Even before the war, I was good at it. I’m

going to teach you how. It starts with observation. A woman's face will show you everything she's thinking. You'll practice reading them, and then we'll get to the skills. All you have to do is study their faces as they interact with other people. It's easiest when they're talking to a man." Wade gestured. "Take notes."

Wade was surprised by how fast the men got out notebooks and pens. He snickered. "I love willing students." He drank half his bottle of tepid water and capped it. "Your homework is to observe and record. Don't use their real names in your notes. Don't use shit like big tits or big ass either. If any of them read those notes, we'll all be in trouble. Make sure no one else can identify your subject. Pick half a dozen women who are already in relationships and observe their responses to their mate, and to the other men around them."

Terrance frowned. "Shouldn't we pick single women?"

"No. You're not good enough to read the single women yet. Start with women who are happy. Observe what makes them laugh, what makes them mad, and what draws a sexual reaction. Then study their men for the same thing. Gather at least ten signs of emotional responses and we'll go over it the next time we do this."

All the men were disappointed.

Wade shrugged. "I told you it's a learned skill. If you don't have the patience for this, you can't be a successful relief source."

“Ah, hell. I thought this would get me laid tonight!”

Wade frowned at Terrance while the others laughed. “That’s the biggest mistake you can make. Those moments are not for *your* pleasure. You’re a relief source. That means they get pleased and you may leave with blue balls. If you can’t handle it, walk away now. One rushed moment with a woman will give you a reputation that prevents you from getting another offer from any of them. Women talk to each other. Never put your fun before her satisfaction. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

5

“Are we done now?”

“Yes.” Jayda stretched, cracking her spine. “Debra and Kenn have security covered now. We’re all finished until tomorrow.”

“Cool.” Trinity glanced down the hall toward the lounge where Wade was holding his meeting. “Do you think we could get close enough to listen without Wade knowing?”

Jayda held the wall as the ship dipped again, snickering. “No, but I don’t think he’d mind. Come on. We’ll take the employee hall.”

Trinity grinned, hurrying along behind Jayda. “This is fun.”

Jayda slipped into the employee hall and stopped, smothering a gasp.

“Ladies.” Ivan hid his grin and moved around them. He knew where they were going. *Too late, ladies.*

Jayda stared after him.

Trinity saw it. “You should try harder.”

Jayda shook her head. “He decided to be a relief source. I’m not into that.”

Trinity shrugged. “Some relief moments have turned into relationships.”

Jayda’s face clouded over. “Not when the provider only dreams about the boss.” Jayda left the hall.

“Hey! I thought we were going to snoop.”

“The meeting ended. We’re too late.” Jayda kept walking. “I’m going to bed.” *Alone, like usual.*

Trinity snapped her mouth shut as the rest of the men from Wade’s class came down the main hall. A few of them smiled at her, but none of them spoke.

Wade grinned. “Give me a few weeks. They’ll be ready.”

Trinity blushed down to her roots. Wade’s charm was strong and that part of it was natural. Trinity went down the employee hall, heart thumping. *You’re a lucky girl, Samantha. Any of us would trade places with you.*

Angela slipped into the shadows and went dim as Wade and his group came by. She kept her thoughts blank, aware of how talented Wade was.

The men went by her, passing within inches.

Wade pointed at the steps. "I'm doing a quick check of the infirmary and then crashing. You guys go on." He waited until they were alone and then turned toward Angela.

Angela let go of her shield and stepped forward, not speaking.

Wade read her thoughts. "I'll come with you..."

"No. Just buy me a few minutes alone."

Wade followed her toward the camp cabins. He waited in the intersection so he could see both halls and distract anyone who came down.

Angela was glad the camp people were all in their cabins. Most of them were sleeping. She joined Jeff at the guard station.

He nodded at her unspoken question. "It's done."

Heavy guilt settled onto her shoulders.

Jeff knew what she was feeling. "It had to happen."

"I know." She examined the hall. "Any trouble down here?"

Jeff snorted. "They know I'm keeping track of their thoughts."

Angela sighed. "I have one more for you."

Jeff shrugged. "Just need a name."

Angela frowned. "Don't you want to know why?"

“No. I trust you.”

Angela’s guilt grew heavier. *So do the normals and I’m sentencing one of them to death.*

Jeff waited for her choice, not feeling bad for removing Emma. He’d burned her body after a fast neck snap.

Angela pointed at a cabin near the end. *Future serial killer.*

Jeff moved that way.

Angela gathered a powerful blast of energy and waited.

Jeff came from the cabin a minute later with a body over his shoulder. He walked into the hall and vanished into the employee corridor.

Wade saw him and understood. *Jeff has Kyle’s old job.*

Angela fired the chosen spell, using her strongest level.

The memory charm swarmed through the hall, going under doors to settle over all of the restless people. Silence fell.

Angela cleared her throat. “Magic users are the best thing to ever happen to the world. We saved you from the apocalypse. You love us.”

The mood immediately lifted; peace filled the air as light murmurs of appreciation for their hosts began to echo.

Angela left the hall, knees shaking. Memory charms took a lot of power.

Wade locked eyes with her as she came out. “Will it hold?”

Angela fought the weariness. “I bought us a few weeks, unless something ugly happens. Tell our people to be nice now and maybe it will hold a little longer.”

He frowned. “What happens when it snaps?”

“All hell will break loose again.” Angela sighed miserably. “Emma jumped ship. We’re not stopping to search.”

Wade understood that was the cover story. “It was the right call, Boss.”

“Maybe.”

“If she’d been a man preying on our girls, would you still feel bad?”

Angela sighed. “Yes, but I would have done it sooner.”

“And now?”

“I won’t hesitate. Our boys deserve the same protection as the girls, and I’m going to make sure they get it.”

“Good.” Wade went to stand at the guard station until their new executioner returned to his post.

Angela went into the nearest bathroom and cried.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cool As Ice

1

Francesca stopped in the doorway. “Can I talk to you?” She was afraid to enter the room until she judged his mood.

Marc looked up from his notebook. Anger ran across his face.

Francesca dropped her eyes. “Please?”

Marc shut the book, glad that the ship was sailing evenly again. “Sit down.”

Francesca hurried in and took the seat across from him. “Angela said to come to you for my punishment.”

Marc felt her terror, but he didn’t enjoy it.

Francesca couldn’t take the silent treatment. “I’m sorry. I really am. I made a mistake. I would never intentionally hurt anyone’s child. You have to know that.”

Marc gave a curt nod. “I believe you.”

She heard the controlled anger and lifted her head, fighting not to cry. “You can beat me. I know I deserve it.”

“I don’t beat on women.” Marc sighed. “And you don’t deserve it. But you can’t ever be on duty over the kids again.”

“I know. No one trusts me now.”

“With good reason.” Marc didn’t enjoy her wince. “But you’ll earn it back like any other Eagle who screws up.”

She sighed in relief.

Marc snorted. “It’s not as easy as it sounds.” He opened his book and flipped to a rear page. “You’ll start with listening to the normals for problems. I assigned you a cabin in the middle of that hall.”

Francesca frowned, but didn’t argue.

“You’ll also join the cleaning crew. That will give you an excuse to be in their cabins. Search carefully. If you get caught, you’re on your own.”

She froze. “You’re making me a spy?”

“After your error in judgment, the normals will talk around you because they’ll believe you’re an outcast.” His anger returned. “Until you earn my trust, *you are.*”

“What if I don’t want to do this?”

Marc shrugged. “The chores are the same. You just don’t get the second chance.”

Francesca considered it, and slowly nodded. “I accept the chance you’re giving me.” She stood up. “When I get your respect back, I’m going to ask for something.”

Marc frowned at her. “What?”

She drew in a deep breath. “I want to be like you and the others.”

Marc scowled. “That’s not possible.”

“I’ve never known you to be a liar.”

Marc flushed, anger rising. “Get out.”

Francesca moved toward the exit, forcing the words through scared lips. “I know you can, Marc. I’ve heard the rumors, but if I can’t be one of you, I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Stop.”

She froze, expecting that beating now.

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Jennifer and Kyle. They didn’t know I was close enough to hear.”

“Why does it matter if you’re one of us?”

She turned to face him, thoughts open so he wouldn’t think she was a future problem. “There’s another war coming. I want to help you fight it, not die in it.”

Marc sighed unhappily as she left. *Everyone knows. I hope Angela has a plan for this.*

Tap-tap! “Got a minute?”

Marc grunted at the voice in the opposite doorway. “What can I do for you, Courtney?”

Courtney came to stand in front of him. Her puffy, swollen face told him how she’d spent the last few hours.

“I need your help.”

Marc already knew what she was going to ask. He opened his mouth to deny her.

Courtney started crying again. “Please, Marc. Don’t let Angela take my baby. You’re the only one who can get her to change her mind.”

Marc tried not to feel pity. “She hasn’t made a choice yet.”

Courtney's voice rose as she pointed at the shadow lurking nearby. "Then why do I have a guard now?"

Marc frowned. "I didn't know."

"The boss assigned me an hour ago." Trent joined them near the table. "She assaulted Tonya."

"They're both pregnant..." Marc was relieved. "Angela's just trying to save the babies."

Courtney gestured. "So am I."

Marc scowled. "I heard you want to use the kid for its gifts."

"Only to protect us."

"From what? The normals?"

Courtney's mind was full of fear. "We all know there's a big fight coming. My baby can protect us both since Kenn won't."

Marc waved at Trent. "She'll stay here for a while. Go take a break."

Trent left the room, glad it had worked out that way. He didn't like following Courtney around. He didn't view her as a threat, though he did get the sense that she wasn't entirely stable.

Marc pushed out a chair with his foot. "Sit down and tell me why you think Kenn won't protect you if you need it."

Courtney sat on the edge of the chair. "Tonya won't let him. She can't deal with what happened. If she can't have custody of the baby, she wants it gone so I don't have a tie to Kenn anymore."

"Can you prove that?"

"No, but you can."

“How?”

Courtney gestured. “Ask her. She won’t lie to someone she’s scared of.”

Marc didn’t like it that women were scared of him, but he recognized the advantage it gave him. “If I do and you’re wrong, it will lend proof to her claim that you’re not okay to care for a baby.”

Courtney shrugged coldly. “I’m not wrong, Marc. She wants me and my baby gone. Tonya should have the guard, not me. I’m the one in danger.”

2

“This is dangerous.” Jennifer shivered at the cold, hard wind blowing through the bridge. “You should be doing this.”

“You’re fine.” Grant was hip-to-hip with her, feet braced on the floor studs. He was ready to take over if she made a mistake, but now that the rougher seas were behind them, he wanted to get them trained. He glanced at the monitor Shawn was covering. “How’s it looking?”

“We’re close, but it’s within the margins you set.” Shawn didn’t take his attention from the monitor. “Is that Antarctica?”

“No. It’s a remote island without a name. Antarctica is a bit further south.” Grant smiled. “Do you think the boss wants to stop here and let off some of our hotheads? It will cool them down.”

Shawn snorted. “We could just toss them overboard. Those icebergs look inviting.”

Grant chuckled. The ship was surrounded by small and large chunks of ice moving along the current. So far the icebergs were spaced out enough to allow the huge ship to glide through.

Jennifer took a deep breath and gently adjusted their course to avoid one of those icebergs. It was small on top, but Grant had told them most of any iceberg was underwater. This one was wide and short, implying a large base.

“Good.” Grant stayed ready to take over, but he was feeling more confident about Jennifer now. She hadn’t asked first. She’d adjusted on her own. “You have good instincts.” He pointed.

Jennifer shuddered. The small iceberg had been half hidden by the water. As they passed it, she could see a massive, jagged edge sticking out. “We might have hit it! Take over!”

“Nope.” Grant checked the time. “You have another ten minutes at the wheel and then Shawn will have another turn.”

“Cool.” Shawn was enjoying his time up here. After they’d passed the rougher water and made it halfway through Drake’s Passage, Grant had put him on the wheel. *I like sailing. When we get to the island, I’ll volunteer for every ocean run.*

Jennifer wanted to roll her eyes, but she didn’t take them off the view in front of her. “You men and your adventures.”

Shawn grinned. “Tell me you aren’t loving this.”

Jennifer huffed. “Whatever.”

Grant and Shawn both chuckled. Despite her nervousness, it was clear that Jennifer was good at this.

“Someone’s coming up the steps.” Gus moved to the doorway. “It’s the boss.”

Jennifer caught a wave of pain. “She’s feeling bad.”

Angela stepped into the bridge as Gus went back to his shadowy post. “Once we get out of this colder water, the current will pull us faster, right?”

“Yes.” Grant checked their speed. “We might make the island sooner than you estimated.”

“Good. I want full speed as soon as it’s clear.”

“We lost the whales.” Jennifer still hadn’t looked away from the cold, iceberg-littered water.

“They went under where it’s warmer.” Angela gestured at Grant. “Full speed until the island comes up on your radar, then stop us so we can handle what’s waiting.”

Grant nodded. “The engines will need a long cool off after full speed.”

“That’s not a problem. We’ll be at the island then.” Angela nodded at Shawn and jogged down the steps.

They all saw her linger on the deck to inspect the frozen landmass to the south. After a minute, she went below, rubbing her arms to warm them. The temperature up here was below freezing.

“She didn’t feel upset.”

Jennifer frowned at Grant. “She was cool as ice. That’s the problem.”

Shawn cleared his throat. “Speaking of ice...”

Grant checked the monitor. “That’s a big one. Very gently, steer us to the right.”

Shawn frowned. “We’ll be too close to the other landmass.”

Grant pointed. “That little blue flare on the screen means the underwater part has spread and started to freeze the water around it. If we take that side, we could hit it and do damage, or even get stuck. Stay close to it, but go around.”

Jennifer gently adjusted their course.

Ice smacked into the front of the ship as they neared the iceberg.

“Damn!” Jennifer adjusted again, trying to avoid the bigger chunks floating all around the iceberg.

“You’re fine. The front of these ships are made for this.” Grant watched her hands on the wheel. They weren’t shaking. *She’s good.*

Shawn pointed at the monitor. “We’re coming close to that edge.”

“We may scrape a bit. It’s a tight fit.” Grant flipped on the PA system. “Things might get rough for a minute, folks. Brace for it.”

All over the ship, people groaned.

So did the ship. The walls dimmed as the hull began to slide along the underwater land.

3

Tonya rubbed the counter of the lab. “Shh... It’s all right. You’ll be okay.”

Tonya winced as the scraping noise got louder. Harsh vibrations rattled the bottles and vials.

Tonya kept comforting the ship. She’d already nailed the stands and holders to the shelves so she didn’t lose anything. She wasn’t worried about the few unsecured books and files. “We’re almost through... It’s okay.”

The noise and vibrations stopped suddenly. Tonya smiled. “Just a little boo-boo. You’re okay.”

The walls brightened; the ship picked up speed.

Tonya let out the mental breath she’d taken. “I hope we don’t have to do that again.”

She increased the heat a little and stood by the vent, enjoying the warmth. Most people were under their blankets right now, but she wanted to get the rest of her tests done before the next emergency hit. “I hate backlog.”

Tonya saw Jeff go by the infirmary. She felt safer knowing he was roaming down here. *These dark, quiet halls are creepy.*

Jeff caught her thought and agreed. He came around the corner and went to the guard post in sight of the lab.

Tonya smiled at him. *Thank you.*

Jeff nodded, now scanning the few people in the medical bay. *It’s my honor.*

Tonya wondered why his mood felt bad. She lifted a brow. *You okay?*

Jeff flashed a cheerful smile. *Good as gold.*

Tonya didn't believe him, but she doubted he would open up to her about whatever was bothering him. She resumed recording the finished test results.

Jeff settled in at the guard post, obeying the instinct that said he might be needed here. He refused to think about the two ugly chores he'd performed today. *Every society has garbage, and they all need someone who can take it out.*

Footsteps echoed down the hall.

Jeff turned, hand sliding to his gun.

"Just me." Kyle came down the hall. "Any trouble?"

"No..."

"I feel it too." Kyle saw Tonya in the lab. He frowned. "Where's her guard?"

Jeff shrugged. "I don't think anyone knows she's here. She's supposed to be in her cabin. Heavy security up there."

Kyle didn't consider scolding the redhead. He wasn't able to sleep right now either. "You'll stick around until she's done?"

Jeff gestured. "Already planned on it."

"Good." Kyle felt Jeff's cold shield. He lowered his voice. "If you need someone to talk to, I'm available."

Jeff stiffened. "Why would I need that?"

“Being an executioner isn’t easy; I know.” Kyle left the surprised man there and continued to the next deck for a walk through.

Jeff stared after him. *How did he know?*

Kyle kept walking. Killing people always left a trace. Most people had good kills and it let them sleep. The number one sign of an executioner was a cool mind, a blank face, and not being able to sleep. Jeff had all the signs. *Plus, I smelled burning flesh even though he vented it, and I saw fresh ash in the incinerator. I may not be the camp killer anymore, but I know my own kind.*

Kyle went through the camp hallway, aware of a peaceful atmosphere. He didn’t know what had happened to settle everyone down, but he was happy about it. Kyle spotted Francesca cleaning out a cabin that had been occupied earlier. He immediately connected it to Jeff.

Francesca gasped as she stood up and saw Kyle. “You scared me!”

Kyle snickered and kept going. He didn’t find a guard on this hall. He turned around. “Did the boss come down here?”

Francesca nodded. “She was leaving as I came in.”

“Thanks.” Kyle quickly figured out what Angela had done. He approved completely. *Maybe we can all have a little peace now.*

Kyle checked his watch, then went up to the leadership hall. There was still another hour before

Jennifer was off duty. The kids were with den mothers, who also had Marc's twins.

Kyle walked the leadership hall, glad most lights were out in the cabins despite the high wind now howling around the ship.

"Damn it!"

Kyle flinched. He spun around to find Samantha coming from the bathroom. "Are you okay?"

"No. I pissed myself." She scowled at the mess that was still puddling on the floor. "And I just used the bathroom!"

Kyle saw clear liquid running down her bare leg from under the boxers she liked to sleep in. It kept coming. "That's not piss." Kyle keyed the mike on his radio. "It's time. All Fetus Fighters report to the infirmary."

"Sam!" Neil flew from their cabin, followed by Wade.

"Sam!"

Doors opened; people rushed toward them.

Samantha flinched in surprise. She turned to go back into the bathroom so no one would know she'd had an accident. Sharp pain lanced through her abdomen and began radiating up her spine. She clutched the door handle, breath flying out in a long moan. She looked at Neil, who was staring at the mess in panic. "I think I'm in labor."

“Do you want to go down and help them?” Grant smiled. “I know this is a big deal.”

Jennifer sealed up her broken heart. “They have enough help. I’d bet people are flying to the infirmary right now. Morgan will need to kick some of them out to make room.”

“Maybe we should go down.” Shawn stood up. “They’ll all be distracted right now. It’s a perfect time for stupid people to do bad stuff.”

Jennifer kept her voice even. “You go. Call me if you need an enforcer.”

Shawn nodded at Grant. “Thanks for the lesson.”

“No problem. Again tomorrow?”

“You know it.” Shawn went down to the front deck and started his rounds there.

Grant examined Jennifer’s pale face. “Are you sure you don’t need to go too?”

“I’d rather not. It reminds me of my son.”

Grant winced. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” He’d heard about Autumn’s twin being murdered, along with Safe Haven’s first doctor and his wife.

“I’m fine.” Jennifer pointed. “It’s clear now. Is it okay to increase speed like the boss wants?”

“I think so. Let me check the monitors.”

Jennifer swallowed tears and tried to be happy for Samantha and Neil. *I hope both your babies survive.*

At the bottom of the bridge steps, Shawn studied the ice-covered land he’d always wanted to visit. He

didn't mind the cold or harsh conditions. *Maybe on the way back...* Shawn frowned at himself as he remembered what Grant had told them a few hours ago.

"When we go home, it's a straight shot northeast. We'll hit California in less than a week if we're at full speed."

Now, gazing at a foreign, uninviting landmass, it was hard to believe they were so close to home. *It feels like a million miles from here.*

Shawn made his way across the deck and went down into the ship, aware of activity on every level. He went straight to the infirmary, sliding aside for running medics and people carrying items up from the cargo area.

Morgan spotted him. "Door duty! No one comes in here without permission!"

Shawn moved in front of the medical entrance and pasted an angry glower on his face to discourage the gawkers.

Shawn didn't see Samantha in the infirmary yet, but he did spot Tonya, Conner, and Harry opening packages in the far corner. Tim and Terry were moving the other patients out. Shawn held the door as the three recovering Port Stanley men were wheeled out so they could be taken down to the camp hall to bunk with the other normals.

Ding! The elevator opened.

Wade hurried out. "Easy. Easy."

Neil gently pushed the wheelchair forward, wincing when it bounced over the threshold.

“I could have walked.” Samantha rolled her eyes when they both ignored her. “It doesn’t even hurt now.”

Shawn smiled at her as they neared him. “Welcome to the last hours of your life with normal sleep patterns.”

Samantha chuckled. It turned into a grimace. “That stings!”

Neil hurried her over to the far corner and locked the brakes. He turned to Morgan. “I have no idea what happens now. I didn’t get this far in my research.”

Wade went to the door and joined Shawn, but he stayed inside. Conner joined them, hoping he wasn’t needed.

Neil was on the edge of panicking. “Well?”

Morgan held up a medical book Tonya had shoved into his hands. “I’m working on it. Just get her settled in the bed.”

“Stop.” Tonya came over with a wide belt, stepping around Conner. Electrical cords hung down from it. “Let’s find out how far apart the contractions are first. She might not even need to be here yet.”

Samantha slowly stood and lifted her loose shirt so Tonya could put the fetal monitoring band around her huge stomach. “The pains are about five minutes apart, I think.”

Tonya sucked in a breath and forced a smile. “You probably won’t have to wait long then.” She

took Samantha's arm. "Come over here so I can plug you in. You can stand or lay down."

"Which one is better?"

"Home birth women said lying down made it hurt more, so I'd guess you keep moving if you feel okay. Just let Neil keep a hand on you in case you get dizzy."

Neil flew over and clamped a hand around Samantha's arm.

"Ow!"

Tonya stiffened. "Another contraction? Already?"

Samantha grunted, prying at Neil's hand. "Tight grip."

Tonya chuckled. She plugged the cords into the monitor and turned it on.

A steady beep filled the room, followed by a whooshing sound.

"That's a heartbeat." Tonya scooted a chair over and moved toward Morgan. "You ready?"

Morgan quickly shook his head. "Not even close! What if she needs a C-section!"

Conner heard that and paled. "I don't think I can help with surgery."

Tonya put a hand on Morgan's arm. "If it comes to that, you'll handle it. *We'll* handle it."

Morgan tried to calm down. "If the contractions are within five minutes like she thinks, we have to hurry up."

"I know." Tonya took a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay. All the recommended equipment is on

the table next to her bed. We'll open it as we go, so it doesn't get contaminated. We'll need someone who doesn't mind catching feces and urine. When women push, those things happen."

"We're not giving her a catheter?" Morgan relaxed a little. "Great."

"We're also not using any pain medications, unless she does need a C-section." Tonya looked over her shoulder at Samantha. "I'm sorry. We don't know what dose to use that won't hurt preemies."

Samantha tensed as another wave of pain rolled through her lower back and began climbing her stomach. The monitor beeped loudly.

Tonya checked her watch, frowning. "First kids don't usually come this fast."

"Not...my...first!" Samantha clenched her fists as the pain swelled. "Was thirteen. Baby didn't make it!" She let out a whimper as the pain peaked.

Neil's mouth dropped open. "You never told me."

Samantha let out her breath as the pain receded. "Barely remember it. Very drugged."

"Still..." Neil remembered his own secrets and shut up.

"Close the curtain, Neil." Tonya hurried over to Samantha. "Let's get you out of those clothes."

Morgan flipped to the section on emergency births and skimmed as fast as he could without missing anything.

Tonya dropped Samantha's wet boxers in the corner and guided her toward the bed. "I need to know what happened to the baby last time."

Samantha shoved her rounded body onto the bed. "The cord tangled. He couldn't breathe." Samantha admitted something she'd always suspected. "But I heard him cry; my parents gave him away."

Tonya breathed a sigh of relief. "That's actually good news." Tonya pulled on the medical gloves she'd put on the tray. "I need to see if you're dilated. I've never done this before, but the books have great pictures and descriptions."

Samantha nodded. "I trust you."

Neil looked away, heart pounding. His palms were sweaty and the taste of acid was coating his tongue.

Wade sent a weak charm at him, hoping it helped.

Neil took in a deep breath, calming a little. "Thanks."

Wade grinned. "You're gonna be a daddy soon."

Neil's tension went right back up.

Wade scowled. "Don't waste that!"

Neil chuckled distractedly, fighting the urge to make sure Tonya was doing a good job.

"I think you're over halfway dilated. A couple more contractions and you'll be ready." Tonya dropped the gloves into the waste can. "I felt one of the heads. No breech birth on the first one, and the

monitor is showing two strong heart beats.” She saw the monitor speed up. “And here comes another one. Neil, hold her hand and let her yell at you if she wants to.”

Neil hurried to the chair next to the bed and held out his hand.

Samantha gripped it so tight he thought the bones would snap. He saw her face twist into something ugly and realized her witch was going through it with her. *That’s good, right?*

“Do you need me?” Conner wasn’t sure how to help.

Tonya pointed. “Just rest in a chair. I’ll call you if something goes wrong.”

Ding! The elevator outside the infirmary opened again.

“Sorry, you can’t go in there right now.” Shawn stepped in front of Tobias.

Tobias went to the line of chairs by the door. “They might need me. I’ll wait.”

Shawn frowned. “Why would they need you?”

Tobias grunted as he sat down. “I assisted with a few births while we were running from Joel.”

“Descendant births?”

Tobias shrugged. “Both. Tell her to keep the babies calm while it’s happening or it might unlock the charm on their gifts.”

Shawn’s frown grew. “How do you know the babies are locked?”

“Because I’ve been reading all of you.” Tobias refused to apologize. “I needed to know what kind of people you are.”

Shawn tapped on the glass. “Did you get that?”

“I got it.” Wade sent it to Neil silently, not wanting to interrupt the medics.

Neil put a hand on Samantha’s stomach. “It’s okay, guys. It’s time for you to come out now.”

Samantha smiled. “They stopped kicking. Nice!”

Neil winced at the thought of her being kicked while already in pain.

Wade stepped out into the hallway, glaring at Tobias. “What else?”

Tobias dug in his pocket and handed Wade a sheet of paper. “I wrote it down. I didn’t think you’d let me in to help.”

“You’re right. I won’t.” Wade read the notes, frown growing. He took the paper in to Neil and came right back to guard the door.

Neil read the list, aware of Samantha’s grip tightening on his other hand.

She’ll get cold too. Extra heat for the mother after the delivery.

No spells, even for pain relief. It will slow the birth and interfere with the baby’s heart rate.

Our babies come quick. Be ready to catch the second one right after the first.

No IV. Let the mother eat and drink lightly.

Never give them names right after birth. That’s the alpha’s job.

“What the hell is this?” Neil turned toward the door, annoyance blocking the pain from Samantha’s crushing grip on his other hand. “We’ll name our kids!”

Outside the infirmary, Tobias shook his head. “The alpha’s job is to assign a name and check them for evil. If you skip it, they won’t have her protection.”

Wade glowered at the man. “I think you’re making this up.”

“He’s not.” Angela came down the hall with dripping hair. She’d gotten a quick shower so she wouldn’t contaminate anything. “Adrian did it for Jennifer too. He used the name she wanted.”

Wade held the door so she could go in, but he kept glaring at Tobias. “What happens if they don’t have her protection?”

Tobias gestured. “Every tracker within a hundred miles will see those twins pop up on their grid, without the protection of an alpha. It’s not a big deal out here, but anywhere else, it would make them instant targets.”

Shawn grunted. “We just passed two land masses, Neil. There could be people closer than we’ve estimated.”

Neil stepped aside for Angela, caving. “Will you name our kids and offer your protection?”

Angela smiled at him. “It would be my honor. What names did you guys pick?”

Neil waited for Samantha to answer.

Samantha wiped away sweat as the contraction faded. "After their fathers."

"Todd and Jeremy Junior it is." Angela motioned at Tonya. "Morgan and I will assist. You're in charge."

Tonya paled. "Me? You worked at a hospital."

Angela nodded. "But you need the practice."

"True." Tonya checked the fetal monitor again. "It won't be long. The contractions are only two minutes apart now." She began opening packages on the tray. "Morgan! Get those incubators over here and warmed up."

Neil skimmed the list again. "Should I read this to you?"

Tonya shrugged. "If you like. I already have a copy."

"How?"

"Where did you get a copy?"

Neil and Wade were instantly suspicious.

Tonya pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. "I went to Tobias right after I finished his blood work. He listed midwife on his paperwork, and I wanted to know what to expect for my own birth." She grinned at Samantha. "I get to practice on you."

"How do you know you can believe him?" Neil didn't trust any of the new people.

Tonya opened the medical book on the tray. "Because he hates Adrian. That was good enough for me."

Neil grunted. "That isn't a qualification."

“Around here it is.” Tonya smiled at Samantha as the monitor began to beep louder and the whooshing echoed again. “Tobias refuses to lie about anything. Spend some time with him; you’ll see it.”

“How much time did *you* spend with him?” Neil was worried the man had put a charm on Tonya.

Tonya flipped to the right page. “Long enough to figure out his nasty attitude comes from always being shut out. He’s one of us. You just don’t know it yet.”

Samantha moaned. “It hurts!”

Neil looked at Samantha’s face, and then Morgan. “It’s time.”

Morgan put the baby book down and did what he didn’t want to. “Clear the infirmary, people. Everyone out.” He gestured at Harry and Terry first, then Tim.

All three medics gazed back in surprise.

Morgan pointed. “Let’s go.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Harry was shocked.

So was Terry. “We’re medics. You can’t make us leave.”

Morgan flashed an ugly glare. “As your medical boss, I’m telling you to leave. Now.”

The three men went out, casting confused looks at Morgan and Wade.

Wade shrugged. “He’s the boss.”

“Is it because we’re not descendants?” Terry was offended. “Because we would never hurt Neil’s kids. He knows that.”

Wade crossed his arms over his chest and turned toward the window.

Kenn came down the hall and joined Wade as a guard. He glared at Shawn pointedly.

Shawn sighed. "I'll do rounds." He walked away with his head up, but it was clear that he was hurt too.

The medics followed him, muttering.

"Thanks."

Kenn grunted at Wade's gratitude. "When it's our turn, I expect you guys to return the favor."

Wade nodded. "We'll be there."

Tobias stared at Kenn, expression darkening as he tried to read the man and got nothing. "Great mind shield. Your kid will probably inherit it."

"Don't talk to me." Kenn didn't like it that the new man had been alone with Tonya. "You're new, and the bitch you came in with tried to kill three of our kids. Until we clear you, keep your mouth shut unless we ask you for something."

Tobias grinned. "You guys don't trust anyone; I like that." He dug a book out of his pocket and opened it. A few seconds later, he was engrossed in the story.

Kenn tensed as Samantha's scream filled the infirmary.

Wade almost fainted.

“I can’t believe he threw us out!” Harry shoved the door open to the normal camp hall. “Morgan’s got control issues.”

Terry went to the lounge and got a bottle of water from the mostly empty cooler. “He’s enforcing. That order came straight from Neil.”

Harry paused. “You think?”

“I do. I’ve been asking Neil for weeks if he had enough hands for the birth and he refused to give me an answer every time.” Terry took a drink and sat at the table. “It’s hard to blame him after everything that’s happened.”

“Maybe. It still sucked.”

“Agreed.” Terry swept the quiet hall. The mood down here was good for a change. “I think we should get cleaned up, get fed, and go ask Marc if he has anything he needs covered.”

Harry made a face. “I don’t feel like helping on a guard shift. I’m a medic, damn it! We should be there.”

“We could go back and wait in the hall with everyone else.”

Harry brightened. “Yeah! Just in case other injuries show up.”

Terry grinned. “We can peek through the window at the babies.” He’d been looking forward to that since becoming a medic on this ship.

The two medics went down the hall, hoping they didn’t get into a fight with Neil or Wade over being there.

Ralph came from his cabin as they left. “Sam had the babies!” He smiled over his shoulder at Daisey, who was resting on the wide bed. “We have a lot of party supplies left over...”

Daisey sat up and reached for her shoes. “You’re a good man, Ralph.”

Ralph leered at her. “You know it.” He turned around as other doors opened.

Several camp members came out with excited expressions.

“Can we help?”

“We should make a card.”

“Can we go visit the babies?”

Ralph was thrilled with their reactions. He led them to the lounge table, pointing at the boxes of supplies that he and Charlie hadn’t put away yet. *It’s almost as if their hatred was erased...*

As soon as he had the thought, Ralph figured it out. *Angela came down here and charmed them so she didn’t have to remove them.*

He flashed a large smile at the cluster of men and women, delighted with Angela’s choice. “Let’s start by making a banner. We can figure out where to hang it while we work.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cold Enough

January 20th

1

“Welcome to Safe Haven, boys. May you have a long, happy life with us.” Angela ran a light finger over each of the infants that were now diapered and swaddled in thick blankets. Blue light swarmed over both children and vanished.

The delivery had gone well. They hadn’t even needed Conner, who was snoring in one of the cots. Angela was proud of them.

Samantha smiled tiredly. “Thank you, Alpha.” Angela’s simple blessing would keep the kids safe long enough for her to recover and then she would be able to protect them herself.

Neil forced the words out. “Thank you, Alpha.”

Angela looked at Wade.

Wade glanced up from the floor, where he’d been for the last hour. He hadn’t left the door, but he also hadn’t been able to stay on his feet.

Angela waited.

Wade understood she was including him and he was grateful, but he was still on the edge of passing out. “Thank you, Alpha.”

“It’s my honor.” Angela carefully rolled the first incubator next to Samantha’s bed. Morgan brought the other incubator over. They both withdrew, shutting the curtain to give the new parents privacy.

Neil took Samantha’s hand, gazing down at the kids in awe. “I love you, Sammi.”

Samantha shut her eyes, weariness swarming her. “Stay?”

“Always.” Neil moved his chair over so he was between the curtain and the incubators. “Sleep now. We’ll be right here when you wake up.” He didn’t think she would get to rest for long. Most of the mess had been cleaned up, but her legs were still streaked in blood and other fluids, and there were small garbage piles all over the floor around her cot.

Angela stopped next to Wade, trying not to snicker. “Will you be okay?”

Wade let out a ragged breath. “I don’t think so. I’ll hear the screams now every time I try to sleep.”

Angela chuckled. Wade was definitely connected to Samantha. “Go get cleaned up and trade with Neil so he can do the same.” She held out a hand.

Wade took it and pulled himself up. He was too traumatized to be embarrassed. “Will you stay here for me?”

“I need to clean up too. Marc’s coming.”

Wade was happy with that. “I’ll wait until he gets here.”

“I’m here.” Marc took Wade’s place, smiling at him. “Have a quick shot of something to steady

those nerves, then get back here and meet your kids.”

Wade left without saying he wasn't the father. Neil and Samantha wanted him treated as if he was, but Wade didn't feel like a dad. *I feel like a bowl of jelly. No spine at all.*

Marc chuckled. “He's fried.”

“Yep.” Angela went out and headed for the nearest shower.

“Hey! Can I have a minute?” Tobias stood up to go after her.

Kenn used one hand to shove the man back into the chair. “Sit. Stay. Good boy.”

Tobias stayed in the chair. “I need to talk to her.”

“She'll be back, and you'll keep your ass in that chair or we'll have trouble.” Kenn delivered the ugliest look he had in his arsenal. “You don't want to cross my line.”

Tobias didn't accept the challenge. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Tell them to keep the placenta and everything else. You might need it for the next one.”

“They did.” Kenn was out of patience with the new man. “We don't need you. Why are you still here?”

Tobias finally showed emotion. He slumped against the seat. “I just wanted to help.”

Kenn understood, but he didn't give in. “You'll get a job soon, but it won't be here. Not even the

normal medics will get near our kids. Give up that idea right now.”

“Why are you so rude?”

“Why are you so stupid?”

Marc tapped on the window. “Shut up.”

Neither man knew who he was talking to; they both stopped their next remarks.

“Nice.” Tonya moved by them and went out into the hall. “I need a gopher.”

“I’ve got it.” Terry skimmed the list, frowning. “A case of condoms?”

Tonya shrugged. “There was a run earlier.”

Harry went with Terry to get the supplies from the cargo area.

As Tonya stepped back into the infirmary, Marc leaned in. “I want a word when you have time.”

Kenn stiffened. “A word about what?”

Marc ignored him. He waited for Tonya.

Tonya nodded easily. “I have to go check on tests as soon as we get Samantha cleaned up.”

“Neil and I will handle her.” Morgan had already read Marc’s thought. He wanted an answer right away.

Tonya shrugged. “Cool. Let’s go.”

Marc waved at Kenn. “Pay attention to your job.”

Kenn tensed. “Be careful, Brady.”

Marc’s eyes narrowed. “You too, Harrison.” Marc followed Tonya to the lab and shut the door. He leaned against it and crossed his arms over his

chest. “Courtney made a very serious accusation against you.”

Tonya tensed. She forced herself to face Marc. “It’s true. I do feel that way. I won’t follow through—it’s just an innocent baby, but I can’t help hating her, and it.”

“Damn.” Marc had been hoping it wasn’t true.

Tonya sat on the stool behind the counter. “By the time she delivers, the other medics will know this stuff. I won’t be there, and I’ll stay away from them. But it won’t matter in the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it won’t matter. She probably won’t carry to term.” Tonya gestured toward the files. “She has the markers of a genetic issue. If the baby is born, it might have Down Syndrome. We’d have to try some invasive tests to know for sure.”

Listening, Kenn’s heart fell even as his mind celebrated.

Marc caught it all. “Are you sure about the markers?”

Tonya winced at a pain in her ankle. “I’ll have Morgan double check it and then he’ll do the test again to make sure I didn’t screw it up. She doesn’t know, but she feels it.”

“That’s why she thinks you’re going to kill the baby.”

“Yes.” Tonya sighed. “It will probably need to be aborted, and I’m the only medic here cold enough to do it. In a way, she’s right.”

2

Angela left her hair up and stepped into the shower. She stayed still for a minute, enjoying the feeling. She heard the door open and turned.

Tobias's wives entered, but they stayed right there.

Zack peered in. "Boss?"

Angela nodded. "We'll be fine."

Zack propped the door open and went into the hall.

The two females stayed by the counter. Neither of them spoke.

Angela sighed. "I'm not falling for it, ladies. Speak up or get out."

Both women frowned. The taller woman cleared her throat. "We need help."

"You're being abused?"

"No. We're having an evolution. We wish you to lock us."

Angela soaped up her washcloth. "Why?"

"We do not wish to be like you."

Angela paused. "You'll be byzan."

"Yes. We do not want it."

Angela made the connection. "That's why Tobias was so upset."

"Yes. He knows we cannot stay together if we evolve."

Angela frowned. "There's only one way to reach that level. What did you do?"

Neither woman wanted to tell her.

“I’m very tired, ladies. Don’t make me dig for it.”

The shorter woman spoke this time; her voice was layered in regret. “We worked for the government, many years ago. When we realized our gifts were being used to win wars, we found an escape.”

“You had Tobias lock you.”

“Yes. He was also used, though not as much. He helped us hide.”

Angela gathered energy to do what they wanted. “I’ve been told this won’t last. When the lock breaks, go to our enforcer.”

The women paled.

Angela locked them both, energy running down faster than she could recover it.

Zack watched from the hall, not eyeing her naked skin. He scanned her face. “Boss?”

Angela leaned against the stall. “I’m good.”

The two women gazed at her in concern.

“Escort them to their cabin, please.”

Zack gestured. “Let’s go... What are your names?”

“Daniella.” The taller woman smiled at her sister. “She’s Anna.”

Zack led them down the hall, flashing a quick message to the guard on duty.

Trent went toward the bathroom. “Coming in!”

Angela didn’t move. She was too tired and the hot water felt too good. “I need a minute.”

Trent stared at the floor as he approached her. He put a hand on the stall. “Take what you need, Boss. I give it willingly.”

Bright blue light filled the bathroom and flowed out into the hall.

Greg saw Trent come from the bathroom with a stunned expression he instantly hated. *Bastard!*

Jennifer appeared in the intersection in front of him. Her eyes were bright red. She didn’t give him time to talk.

Greg stiffened as her charm landed and sank into his mind.

You don’t love Angela. You’ve never loved Angela.

His mind scattered into clouds. “I don’t love Angela. I’ve never loved Angela.”

Jennifer waited for him to go by, then she went into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Thank you.” Angela quickly scrubbed, grateful for Trent’s energy so she could finish the night. “How long will it hold?”

“Forever.” Jennifer shrugged. “Unless you decide you want him. It’ll take you returning that feeling to break it.”

“Perfect.” Angela rinsed off. “I need you to go behind me and use your enforcer power on a few others—including the two women who just left.”

“I will.” Until recently, they hadn’t known an enforcer’s spell was harder to break. “I’ll do the kids tonight.”

“Good. Make sure you do Samantha’s newborns too.”

Jennifer frowned. “Why?”

“All kids will be locked at birth from now on. No gifts, no trackers. No power, no accidents.”

“But they won’t be able to protect themselves.”

Angela shut off the water. “That’s our job. Start with all the time keepers.”

“Even Cate and Cody?”

Angela sighed. “No. Those two have to take their place in my army.”

Jennifer went to the infirmary first, braced for an ugly moment.

Wade met her at the entrance. “Thank you.”

Jennifer frowned. “You know.”

He nodded. “We asked Angela to do it, but she said an enforcer has more power than an alpha on this issue.”

Jennifer approached Samantha’s bed, attention centering on the little boys. “They’re not preemies!”

Samantha smiled. “No. I miscounted the date. They’re small, but healthy.”

Jennifer waved a hand over the sleeping infants. She stared for another long minute, then left.

Neil frowned. “She’s pregnant herself. Shouldn’t she be over that loss?” He looked over to find Samantha crying.

Samantha forced the words out, heart thumping. “You never get over the loss. You just learn to live with it.”

Jennifer walked faster, needing to be away from the babies.

Her sadness slammed into the man coming down the steps, stopping him in his tracks. Morgan saw her wipe away tears. He ignored the urge to comfort her and went to find Kyle instead.

Jennifer went to the den mother cabins, locking gifts in almost every room as she walked by them. Her energy drained fast.

Jennifer staggered to her cabin, where Monica was sitting with Roy and Autumn. Both children were sleeping.

“Are you okay?”

Jennifer groaned as she fell onto the bed. “Just tired.”

“I can stay if you want.”

“I’m okay. Thank you.”

Monica left, shutting the door gently to keep from waking the kids.

Jennifer forced herself to roll over. Thin tears ran from her eyes. She slowly lifted her hand and used the last of her energy to lock her daughter’s gifts.

Her weak hand fell to the bed, withering.

Kyle froze as pain ran up his arm. It traveled over his neck and sank into his chest, stealing his breath. *Jennifer!*

Kyle took off running, heart pounding. He flew through the halls, drawing attention. Guards called

it in, but stayed at their posts like they were supposed to.

Kyle reached their cabin a minute later. He fell on his knees by the bed and began shooting energy into her withered body.

Morgan arrived seconds later. He'd tracked Kyle here. Morgan paled at the sight. "She needs a lifeforce."

Kyle slid over to make room, wishing he had one to give her.

"No..." Jennifer tried to resist.

Morgan forced it into her, terrified he wouldn't be able to save her. "She used up her reserve energy on purpose."

Jennifer arched on the bed, crying out as the lifeforce lit up inside her body and began repairing the damage.

"Thank you!" Kyle grabbed Morgan's arm. "I owe you."

"Love isn't a debt." Morgan staggered, groping for the door handle.

Pam was there to take his hand and lead him away. She didn't scold him. She couldn't. She wasn't mad.

Morgan wanted to apologize, but helping Jennifer wasn't something he had a choice on.

Pam knew. She got him settled in their bed and crawled in to hold him.

Shawn came in and dropped into the chair next to the bed.

None of them slept; none of them spoke.

3

Angela stopped in the entrance of the small gym. Ivan was in the center of their battle cage, without his guns.

Ivan fought his queasy guts. “Kyle couldn’t make it.”

“I know.” She frowned. “I sent for Kenn.”

Ivan snorted. “He said to go fuck yourself.”

Angela laughed. “Good answer.” She studied his braced stance and clenched fists. “You think you can do this?”

“No.” Ivan sighed. “But I’ll try.”

Angela hung up her guns and jacket, and moved toward the cage.

Ivan knew she was healthy enough for a real workout. He’d observed her in the cage more than once, and with Trent’s energy filling her, she was capable of handling about anything he dished out. *But I can’t do this.*

Angela blocked the cage exit. “I need a workout, and you’ve sworn to give me anything I need.”

“I want to. I’ll try...”

“But?”

“But you’re going to be disappointed.” Ivan retreated as she stepped inside. “I can’t hit you.”

“Even if I provoke you?”

“No.” He forced a smile. “I’ll stand here and you can still get your workout.”

Angela's disappointment hit him hard, but Ivan still couldn't do it.

"Ivan?"

"Yes, Boss?"

"Go fuck yourself."

"I've tried. Not built right."

Angela turned around to leave the cage, anger and frustration flaring. She spotted Marc in the doorway.

Marc slowly nodded.

Angela gestured at Ivan. "Get out."

Ivan hurried around her, breathing a sigh of relief and failure. "I'm sorry. If it was anyone else..." He walked by Marc without meeting his eye.

Marc understood. He didn't add to Ivan's misery. "We could use a guard. The Eagles may think they need to interrupt."

"I've got it." Ivan leaned against the wall, not looking forward to watching Marc hit her. *I can take this. I can take this.*

Angela took up her kai stance as Marc set his guns on the edge of the mat and entered the cage.

"You'll tell me when you've had enough?"

"I won't have to. You'll know."

Marc stepped forward, hand clenching into a fist.

Ivan suffered through the ugly fight, hating himself, her, and Marc. With every hit that landed and every gasp and grunt of pain she let out, his hatred grew.

Thud! Blood flew across the mat and splattered the floor.

Thud! Marc's blood joined hers as they traded punches.

Why is she doing this to herself?! Ivan flinched as a hand settled onto his shoulder.

Jeff let go and walked toward the cage. "Room for one more?"

Marc waved, glad to have an opponent he could hit as hard as he wanted to.

Angela pointed at the woman in the opposite doorway.

Brittani joined her in the cage while Jeff and Marc used the mat in the corner.

Ivan caught a fast flash of a death, and then another. He understood from that. *They all feel guilty. They're punishing themselves!*

More Eagles came into the gym and squared off without talking. Vicious swings filled the warm room with pain and blood.

Ivan didn't join them. *I don't have anything to feel guilty about.*

He left the gym. They didn't need a guard. Marc had just wanted him to understand how lucky he was to not feel that way. "I don't know if I love him or hate him."

"What's going on in there?"

"Self-abuse." Ivan went by Ian's post before the man could ask another question.

Ian frowned. "What does that mean?" He shrugged it off and swept the hall again where the

normal camp members were twining blue ribbons or working on a banner to celebrate the birth of Samantha's babies. He found the sudden change in behavior odd, but it was definitely better than the way they usually were. Even the new people from Port Stanley were helping. Everyone was chatting and joking like they were the happiest people on the planet.

Ian felt the ship increase speed. It was barely perceptible, but he noticed it. No one else seemed to. Ian hoped Grant was getting them to the island faster than they'd planned. He was sick of being on this boat.

Ian tensed as Dog came down the hall. He narrowed in and saw both cats were on Dog's back. He snickered at the sight.

Dog chuffed as he went by and disappeared through an employee door.

Ian assumed Dog had retrieved the cats from the lab. He wrote it in his shift notes, along with the odd behavior of the normals. He also noted who was here and who wasn't. So far, only three people were absent from this hall. Ian assumed they were still at the infirmary or gathering supplies from the cargo area. Harry, Terry, and Tim hadn't liked being kicked out of the medical bay while Samantha gave birth. Ian knew they needed time to get over that before trying to sleep. *I expect some awkward moments tomorrow when they try to go in there and work.* He also doubted there would be real problems

over it. Their medics were all good men who could be trusted.

Ralph left the group of decorators and came over to Ian. “Do you think we have more balloons below? Conner usually gets the stuff we need, or Charlie, but they’re both sleeping.”

Ian smiled. “You can go. No worries.”

“Thanks.”

Ian wrote it down, then paused. *He said Charlie’s sleeping, but he isn’t in the cabin with Tracy. I know. I just checked there. She’s in the bed alone.*

Ian wrote it down, not sure if he should call someone. He struggled to remember the last time he’d seen the teenager. He narrowed it to Angela’s meeting. *That was almost twelve hours ago. Where is he?*

Ian keyed his mike. “Check in for Charlie.”

Silence echoed for a moment, and then the radio crackled with Angela’s out of breath voice. “Who has eyes on Charlie?!”

Guards checked notes from the previous shifts; Angela, Marc, and others began scanning the ship.

The radio stayed silent.

4

“If you need to go help them search or something, I’ll be fine.”

“Eagles don’t leave their post.” Gus stepped closer to the door so he could view the steps. If someone came up here, he was ready to handle it.

Gus studied the dark land and water, eager for their trip to be over. Movement caught his attention.

Grant also saw it. He scowled. “Why are they dragging garbage up here? Angela told everyone we’re not allowed to dump trash in the ocean.”

Gus squinted, stomach dropping. “That’s not trash. It’s...a body!”

Grant came over. “A what?”

“I don’t recognize that man. Do you?”

Grant studied the tall, thin man wearing all black. “No. I’ve never seen him before.”

Gus drew his gun, torn. He wasn’t allowed to leave his post, and he wasn’t getting anything from the tall man’s thought, but he knew this wasn’t right.

Gus handed his gun to Grant. He grabbed a rifle from the cleverly hidden rack, and stepped out into the howling wind.

The man below dragged the body toward the edge of the deck.

Gus understood he only had a few more seconds to make a choice. He scanned again and still got nothing from the man’s mind. His eyes widened. *Invisible!* Gus lifted the rifle.

The man on the deck bent down to lift the body.

Gus prayed the wind didn’t interfere. He fired.

The man jerked forward, dropping the body. He fell over it and stopped moving.

Gus hurried down the steps, aware of people rushing up the ramp toward them. He approached the body with his finger on the trigger, ready to fire again. The trash bag over the body blew aside in the wind, revealing a familiar face. “Charlie?”

Gus kicked the man he’d shot and got no response. He kept his rifle on the dead man anyway.

“It’s Charlie!” Angela grabbed the bag and began ripping it off, searching for injuries.

Marc helped her while Kenn and Ivan checked on the man they already knew was dead. Gus’s shot had been good, and amazing considering the darkness and high wind.

“He’s breathing!” Angela ran her hands all over Charlie’s body. “No blood!”

Brittani brought a lantern over so they could see better. She stared at Gus.

Gus felt it and enjoyed the moment. She hadn’t wanted him to be an Eagle because she’d thought he would get hurt. She’d never considered that he would end up being a hero.

“Marc! Help me get him up!”

Marc lifted Charlie into his arms and hurried toward the infirmary. The garbage bag slid across the deck and flew over the rail.

Angela motioned angrily. “He’s trash too.”

Ivan and Gus lifted the body and tossed it overboard.

“Anyone know who he was?” It was bothering Gus.

“I think he came from the yacht we stripped.” Ivan couldn’t find another answer. “If not, we had a stowaway for a long time and didn’t know about it. I doubt that’s the case.”

Given an answer, Gus went back into the bridge to resume his post over their captain.

Grant returned the sidearm. “Nice job. Maybe you should join the Eagles.”

Gus’s laughter echoed across the front deck.

Brittani finally understood how wrong she’d been. *If he’d given in to me, the crazy man would have tossed Charlie overboard in a trash bag. Even if Gus gets hurt after this, it was already worth it to him because he saved a life.*

She turned toward the steps, mind buzzing. *It’s the same with Daryl. If I take him away from Angela’s army, someone may die because of it. He can’t resign. And neither can I.*

5

“He’s waking up.” Morgan retreated so Marc and Angela could reach Charlie’s cot. He waved to Tracy, who was coming from the elevator.

Tracy hurried over, paling at the sight of Charlie’s bruised body. “What happened?!”

Charlie groaned, hands coming up in defense.

Angela put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay. You’re okay now.”

His lashes fluttered. “Tracy?”

“She’s right here.” Angela scanned his waking thoughts, catching ugly flashes of a fist.

Charlie opened his swollen eyes, groaning again. “It hurts.”

Angela used her reserve energy to heal his injuries, grateful they weren’t severe. “Do you remember what happened?”

Marc leaned against Angela and sent energy into both of them until he yawned.

Charlie slowly sat up, groaning. “I was in the cargo hold to find more party supplies. Someone hit me.” He grimaced. “And then kept hitting me.”

It matched with what they had already figured out.

“Someone attacked him?” Tracy had been sleeping. Ralph had woken her and sent her here without telling her why.

Angela sighed. “The killer from the yacht that we stripped got onto our ship. No idea why he chose to attack Charlie.”

“I think he was crazy.” Charlie relaxed as their healing began to take effect, easing his pain. “I kept hearing him humming, but he didn’t have any thoughts. I tried to use a spell, but he hit me too much. The last thing I remember is him rustling a bag and then I passed out.”

Angela smiled. “Gus saved your life. He shot the man. It’s all over now.” She didn’t say he’d been wrapped in a trash bag like garbage.

Charlie grinned. “I like Gus.”

Tracy nodded. “He just became my favorite person on this ship.”

“I have a theory.” Tonya hurried over with a small kit. “I’ll know for sure after I run this test.” She swiped the swab along one of the scratches before it could heal. She stuck the swab in the vial. “I think he had the rage illness. It explains him flipping out and killing everyone on the yacht, and why he didn’t talk or have a personal reason. If Gus hadn’t caught him, he probably would have tried to kill everyone on this ship.” Tonya went back to her lab with Peter, who was her guard.

Angela hated that explanation even though it made sense. “That means this area was contaminated too.”

Marc nodded. “We have to prepare for people on Pitcairn to be sick.”

Angela acted like she wasn’t already worried about that. “Kendle said the island is empty.”

Marc’s voice hardened. “She lied about too many things for us to trust her word on that. I say we go in heavy and clear it before we set up camp.”

Tracy stared between them. “If there are people living on Pitcairn, we can’t just go in and take over. It’s their island.”

Charlie smiled at her. “Don’t worry about it, okay? The Eagles will clear them out.”

Angela reluctantly shook her head. “No. We don’t kill innocent people. If it’s populated, our trip won’t end there.” *Unless they’re infected. If the*

contagion has spread, the Eagles will provide mercy.

Marc and Angela turned together as loud voices echoed through the hall.

“I’m not ready!”

“Don’t care.”

“But I might screw it up!”

“Don’t care.”

Tim let Wade drag him into the infirmary. He saw all the people waiting and stopped complaining. He sighed, straightening his clothes. “Fine. Give me the book.”

Wade handed Tim the Bible that he’d tried to leave behind as an excuse to buy more time. Then he held out the canteen of blessed water he’d dipped from the church.

Neil waved him over. “We’re ready.”

Tim walked over to Samantha’s cot, spotting the infants. His heart melted. “Cute kids.”

Samantha smiled. “Thank you for doing this.”

Confidence restored, Tim opened the book. “We are honored with the privilege of being present here today to witness and support in faith the christening of...”

Angela and Marc listened, both wondering if it was too late to have him do it for their kids. None of them had been given this blessing. Both parents suddenly wanted it desperately.

Wade felt their need. “Go get them while Tim’s still here. I’ll make sure he waits.”

Marc hurried from the infirmary.

Angela smiled at Charlie, who was opening his mouth to protest. “Please?”

Charlie nodded stiffly, unable to deny her anything right now. “I love you, Mom.”

Angela hugged him. “You just made my day.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

I Tried

January 21st

1

“**W**elcome to our first parenting class!”

Monica smiled at the ten impatient, annoyed men who’d been summoned here for a dawn lesson. “The boss wants you to graduate this class as soon as possible since many of you are about to be fathers...” She gestured at Neil. “Or have just become fathers.”

Men clapped and offered a fresh round of congratulations.

Monica pointed at the long table in front of her. “There are ten dolls up here. They are realistic—meaning they will act like real babies. Everyone ready?”

A few of the males nodded. Most didn’t respond at all.

Monica pointed at the chalkboard. “Today, we’ll cover feeding, diapering, putting on clothes, and soothing their cries.” Monica swallowed an uneasy feeling and flashed another bright smile. “From this moment, I want you to pretend these are real children. Come get your baby.”

Monica retreated as the men hurried up, all eager to get this class over with.

Kenn grabbed a doll by the feet and lifted it, turning toward his seat.

Waaa!

Kenn flinched, letting go.

The doll hit the floor and kept crying.

Men laughed at him, now bracing for the noise as they each grabbed a doll.

Baby cries filled the room.

Monica frowned, but didn't correct them yet. "Take your seats, please."

"How do you turn it off?" Kyle flipped the doll over, searching for a switch. Yellow liquid flew from its mouth and splattered Morgan.

Morgan recoiled from the odor. "That's gross!"

Kyle flipped it again, ducking the stream.

Charlie held up his screaming doll to block it. Fake vomit flew out.

Terry froze. "It's in my hair. And my ear!"

Monica tried to get control. "Put the dolls on the desks!"

Cringing, groaning men didn't hear her as they tried to stop the liquids.

Tim put a hand over the doll's mouth; liquid immediately squirted from its rear, coating his shirt. "Ugh! Make it stop!"

"Shut it off!" Neil smacked his doll against the desk. The screams increased to a deafening pitch.

"Let me help." Wade reached over and stuck a finger in the hole.

Liquid squirted from its mouth again, hitting Neil in the face.

“My eye! My eye!” Neil swiped at it, knocking the doll to the floor.

More liquid squirted into the air like a small geyser.

Monica scanned the chaos. “This is not what I planned.” She smacked the table, rattling the supplies. “Let go of the dolls!”

Men immediately dropped them.

Monica cringed as nasty liquid flew toward her. She crawled under the table. “Fail! You’ve all failed!”

Drawn by the noise, Dog poked his snout into the room.

Fake vomit oozed across the floor; fake pee squirted.

Dog’s fur lifted; his snout wrinkled. *What died in here?*

Monica spotted him in the doorway. “Can you do something?”

Dog backed out of the room. *I don’t play with dead things. Ask the cats.* He took off running down the hall.

“Coward!”

Dog kept going. *Better a coward than to smell like that!*

Monica stayed under the table as the men left through the other exit, all splattered, and in some cases, covered, with fake pee and vomit. Crying, leaking dolls littered the floor around the desks. She

rested her head on her arm. “Still looks better than the play area after the kids are done in there.”

2

“Thank you for trying.”

Angela put a hand on Zack’s shoulder. “Conner and Morgan will try too. They’re at the baby class right now.”

Zack shook his head, voice thick with emotion. “If you can’t heal him, they won’t be able to either.”

Angela believed he was right, but she didn’t say it. “Trinity also works with us on patients now. Is it okay if she tries?”

“Yes.”

Angela waved Trinity over from her guard post on the door. Angela took her place. They weren’t letting anyone in while Neil and Wade were gone. She’d had to insist that they both go to the baby class, along with promising she wouldn’t leave the medical bay until they returned.

Angela swept Samantha’s corner area. She and both boys were sleeping. Tonya had done the blood work on the infants while Neil and Wade were gone. Everything looked good so far.

Angela peered through the window toward the lab.

Jeff nodded at her. *No issues.*

Tonya frowned at them both and kept working. She didn’t see why she needed a guard now that she’d been proven right about Courtney.

“It’s about safety.” Jeff moved closer to the door. “We had a stowaway.”

Tonya clucked her tongue. “You’re not telling me something. What is it?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

Tonya stared at him through the glass.

Jeff didn’t blink; he held his mental shield.

Tonya returned to her tests. *I think I know, anyway. Someone’s after me for something.* Her thoughts grew ugly. *I hope it’s Courtney.*

Jeff turned back toward the infirmary, dismayed by how fast Tonya had figured it out on her own. “She hasn’t been spotted in hours...”

Tonya frowned, pausing. “And?”

Jeff sighed. “And her vest and gun are missing from her locker.”

Tonya sat the vial down and went to the corner cabinet. She slipped her vest on and put the handgun on the counter where she was working. “You should let her in if she shows up.”

Jeff chuckled. “You redheads are dangerous.”

Tonya nodded. “We’re the wildcards. When you flip us, you can get anything.”

Jeff heard a group of footsteps coming. He recognized them as male Eagles by their confident, heavier strides. He still put a hand on his gun.

Kenn came straight to him as the others kept going down the hallway or into the infirmary. “Problems?”

“Nope.” Jeff stayed in front of the exit, seeing all the men had just come from the showers. “She’s covered.”

Kenn wanted to stay, but he had work waiting. “You’ll call me?”

Jeff nodded. “You know it.”

Kenn went to stand by the infirmary door.

Neil and Wade went to Samantha, both scanning the thoughts of everyone for trouble.

Angela smiled at Morgan. “How did it go?”

Morgan gave her an annoyed glance. “I couldn’t explain it if I tried. We all failed.”

“You’ll get another shot.” Angela looked at Kenn. “We’re ready.”

Kenn pointed at Tobias, who had been here for hours. “Come with me.”

Tobias slowly stood up, knees popping. “Where are we going?”

“Debriefing, with Marc.”

Tobias frowned toward the medical doors. “I’ve been waiting here, silently, for hours. I need to talk to Angela.”

“If Marc clears you, that might happen.” Kenn pointed. “Let’s go.”

Inside the infirmary, Angela joined Trinity at Eric’s cot.

Trinity gestured. “There’s nothing I can do. It’s like I’m being blocked.”

“Same here. I wonder…” Angela waved a hand, muttering.

Eric arched on the cot, lids flying open.

“Try it now.” Angela watched as Trinity’s spell settled over Eric and sank in this time.

Eric’s eyes shut; his body relaxed.

“I think that helped.” Trinity smiled at Zack. “His mind shield wouldn’t let us through.”

Zack stared between them, brows together. “I don’t understand.”

“Eric was Invisible.” Angela walked to the door and paused, waiting for her guard to come over and clear the hall first. She didn’t need security with her gifts, but she was trying to set an example for the others who did need protection.

Ivan appeared. “Clear.”

Angela took the same path that Kenn had.

Ivan felt her going dim before he saw it. He grinned, trying to copy her. *I love stealth work.*

3

Shawn glanced up as a female form entered the empty quarantine zone.

Courtney stopped, startled. “Why are you hiding down here?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Shawn glanced at the corner, where he’d found a made up bed and a small stack of supplies. “Are you living down here now?”

Courtney gave a curt nod and went to the bed. “I’m not safe with the normals or the descendants.” She studied his ‘I don’t care’ body language. “Why are you down here?”

“Do I need a reason?”

She sat on the bed, shrugging. “Only if you’re spying on me.”

“You aren’t my problem.”

Courtney waited for more.

Shawn thought about finding a different place to sulk and think. Instead, he let the truth emerge.

“They’re shutting me out because I’m normal.”

Courtney sympathized. “It’s an ugly feeling.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Me either. I tried to be like them, but it’s not working.”

Shawn felt an unwilling bond with her. He tried to help. “You’ll be accepted once the baby comes. Angela won’t let them shut you out because of the kid.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you in hiding?”

“Because it’s not enough.”

“You want their gifts.”

“I want my own gifts.”

Shawn rubbed his chilly arms. “I’ve heard we’re all like them; we just have to figure out how to unlock it.”

Courtney laid down. “I tried. I don’t know how to do it, or if that’s just a lie to keep the normals hopeful.”

“I don’t either. I want it to be true, but if they don’t trust me, I can’t trust them.”

“Have you talked to Pam or Morgan?”

“Not yet. I don’t know what to say.”

“Because they’ll think you’re jealous?”

“Exactly.”

“What about your team?”

“My team are the ones shutting me out.”

“Oh.” She sighed. “I guess that just leaves the boss. Unless one of the new people know how to make it happen...”

“The new people can’t be trusted yet.”

Courtney shrugged. “They’ll be cleared soon. You can try then.”

“So can you.”

“No, I can’t.” She shuddered. “I’m staying down here where I can’t get in trouble or be blamed for anything.”

“You can’t live down here. Angela won’t go for it.”

“We’ll see.” She grinned. “You can share my dorm as long as you don’t snore and you take a turn cleaning the bathroom.”

Shawn laughed. “I do snore. Pam’s always waking me up to make me roll over.”

“Figures.” She grinned. “Guess you get to do all the cleaning since I’ll have to sleep while you’re awake.”

“Deal.” Shawn fell silent, mind going back to his misery. As soon as the baby class order had sounded, he’d come down here to avoid Pam’s questions and that class.

Courtney tried to rest and ignore the ugly thoughts in her mind.

They both tensed as heavy steps neared the main cargo door.

Gabe peered in and stopped, frowning.

Shawn glared at him. “We’re not set up for company.”

“What?”

Courtney sneered. “Whatever you’re selling, we’re not interested.”

Gabe retreated. “Nuts.” He went to the guard post, keying his mike. “They’re in the QZ.”

The radio cracked with Angela’s voice. “Send them to my office.”

Gabe hesitated. “Uh, I think you’ll have to come down here.”

“Why?”

“They told me I can’t come in.”

“Say that again.”

Gabe sighed. “They’ve set up a clubhouse, Boss, and they won’t let me in to play.”

Jennifer’s angry voice echoed through the ship. “I’ve got this one.”

Gabe grinned toward the QZ. “Na-na. You’re in trouble now.”

“Snitch!”

Gabe laughed at Shawn’s growl, but he stayed away from the door.

4

“Should I go help her?”

Angela shook her head. “No need.”

Ivan frowned. “We’re guarding Tonya from her. She’s dangerous.”

“We’re not guarding Tonya against Courtney.”

Ivan frowned in confusion. “Then who are we on guard against?”

Angela put her finger to her lips as they neared the office where Marc was holding his meeting.

Ivan stayed on her heels, hand sliding to his gun as he understood who the threat was.

Angela used some of her energy reserve to go dim all the way.

Ivan blinked as she vanished. *I want that.*

Then do it.

Ivan accepted her challenge. He concentrated on going dim and shoved energy at it.

Very good.

Ivan couldn’t see himself in the office window near them. His shield was providing full camouflage. *This is so cool.*

I agree. Now shut up. Angela walked to the doorway and stood in it, listening to Marc’s interview.

“We know all about the UN. Why do you need to tell Angela yourself?” Marc gave Tobias a hard stare. “Are you trying to get close to her for something?”

Tobias yawned, shaking his head to clear the sleepy fog. “Yes. I need to check her for cracks.”

“Why?”

“Because we can’t stay in a camp with her if she’s cracking.”

“She’s not.”

Tobias snorted. “Someone on this ship has cracks. I felt it. She’s the most likely since she’s byzan.”

“She isn’t the only byzan here.” Marc grinned as the man tensed and leaned away from the table. “I think you’re hiding something. Tell me what it is and receive mercy if you deserve it.”

Tobias hesitated. “I’ll tell the alpha. You don’t have the authority to handle it.”

Marc shrugged. “Tell me or forget it. You’re not getting near her without being cleared.”

“Your little enforcer already cleared me.”

“If that were true, we wouldn’t be having this meeting.” Marc lifted a hand and brought up a shield around the man. “And frankly, I’m tired of waiting.” Marc dug into the man’s thoughts without warning.

Tobias tried to fight the deep scan, but Marc’s power was levels above his own. He strained, trying to hold his mental shield.

Marc broke through in seconds. Secrets appeared like jewels glimmering in the sun. “You’re a tracker!”

Tobias stopped fighting. He stared in dislike. “I used to be.”

Marc didn’t find anything else. “Why wouldn’t you tell us?”

“Because he’s tired of being used by alphas.”

Both men jumped and turned.

Angela stayed dim, enjoying the moment. “He’s clear. Let him go.”

Marc lowered the shield, stunned. *I know she’s there and I still can’t see her.*

“Do you see me?” Ivan was also enjoying it.

“No.” Marc frowned. “Did she just teach you that?”

“Yes.” Ivan let go, running out of energy quickly. He gasped in air.

Marc waited for Angela to appear, impressed once again.

Angela walked away, mentally chuckling.

All three men waited for her to appear. When she didn’t, Ivan and Marc exchanged looks that said they knew she was gone.

Tobias didn’t. He was scared. “I’m sorry, Alpha!”

Marc snickered. “She’s not there anymore. Some tracker.”

“Really?” Tobias let out the breath he’d been holding. “I thought she changed her mind and decided to fry me.”

Ivan was the only one who understood what had just happened. Angela had been feet away from an older, experienced tracker and he hadn’t been able to find her. He’d heard stories of others who could do that, but he hadn’t really believed it. *We have a true defense now. Neil will be thrilled.*

Marc frowned at Ivan. “Why are you still here?”

Ivan scowled. “Great. I get to play hide-n-seek with a ghost.” He walked away, not sure where to start searching for her.

Marc recognized the moment. He waved at Tobias. “Go teach him how to find her.”

Tobias brightened. “Really?”

Marc nodded. “She just gave you a training job. Don’t screw it up.”

Marc keyed his mike as Tobias hurried out to catch up with Ivan. “Stand down, Eagles. The threat is over.”

5

“I’m not the threat.” Courtney frowned at Shawn in confusion. “When I saw all the extra security, I thought they were worried about me.”

“Is that what made the final choice for you to come down here?”

She nodded. “I was hurt that they thought I would do something violent.”

“You did assault Tonya.”

“She told me to come on, so I did. And it was only a slap.” She rubbed her bruised jaw. “I got punched and knocked down.”

Shawn glanced up as Jennifer came in. “Maybe the boss will take that into consideration.”

“She already did.” Jennifer dropped into the chair at the table where Shawn was sitting. “Angela said no punishment is needed. She wants you in the baby class, and spending time with Tonya.”

“What?! I’m not spending time with that bitch!”

Jennifer snickered. “That’s what Tonya will say too, I’d bet. Kenn got the order to tell her.” Jennifer’s amusement faded. “But you’ll both do it and you’ll learn to adjust or you’ll both spend time in the brig.”

Shawn tensed as Jennifer looked at him. “What?”

Jennifer frowned. “If it was your newborns, would you trust Neil and Wade around them?”

“Of course.”

“And if those babies had gifts that any descendant would want?”

Shawn nodded again. “I trust them.”

“Good. Now imagine there were people around you who were so closed off that you couldn’t read their thoughts or have honest conversations with them.”

Shawn’s lips thinned.

Jennifer kept going. “And one of them was already fooled into helping an enemy. He also has a desire for a child that shouldn’t be there, even though it’s innocent right now. Would you still let that person around your infants?”

Shawn didn’t answer.

Jennifer wanted to be kind, but that wasn’t her job. “You’re in an odd relationship with Missy, and you’ve had past issues. Expecting Neil to trust you with his babies is unreasonable.”

“I’m not like the picture you’re painting!”

“I agree. However, Neil is an outcast right now because of his own mistakes. It makes it hard for him to forgive other people’s errors. Add in the recent attacks and you have a paranoid father who can’t trust anyone. That’s his issue, not yours.”

“He only kicked out normals. How am I supposed to deal with that?”

“You call him on it, like you would anytime he makes a mistake.”

“I don’t want to fight with Neil.”

“I wouldn’t either. He’s a badass, but I doubt it will come to that.” Jennifer smiled at Shawn. “Pam said to get your ass back to the cabin. She needs a rub.”

Shawn chuckled. “I thought you were going to threaten me.”

Jennifer shrugged. “I would have if you needed it, but you don’t. You’re hurt. You have every right to be, as do the medics they kicked out. Neil has some atoning to do with all of you. He can’t if you hide down here.”

“I’m going.” Shawn stood. He looked over at Courtney, who still had her arms over her chest. “What about her?”

Jennifer leaned back in the chair. “We’re going to have a nice chat and then go find a snack.”

Shawn hesitated. “I’ll stay if you want.”

“No need. It’s girl talk.”

Shawn left the cargo room, hoping Courtney gave the right answers during the chat. *It would bother me to see her in the brig.*

Jennifer turned to Courtney. “So what’s the deal with you and power?”

Courtney huffed. “You tell me.”

Jennifer dug in, not skipping anything.

Courtney didn’t fight it. She assumed Jennifer already knew about the coming war with the normals.

“There’s not going to be a war. The boss is working on it.”

“Not fast enough. We hate each other; we try to kill each other.” Courtney sucked in a breath of courage. “I want Adrian back in charge. He knew how to get us to work together.”

Jennifer gave the truth as she saw it. “Adrian hid magic from them. If Angela hadn’t taken over, all of us would still be in hiding.”

Courtney didn’t hold back either. “Maybe that’s how it should be. Blending us isn’t possible. No matter how many charms you guys use, we’ll always know you’re different.”

“How do you know she charmed the camp people?”

Courtney snorted. “I have a brain that works. What else would she do? It’s clear that she cares more about them than her own kind.”

Jennifer stared in shock as she finally understood why Courtney wanted a magic child. “You think Angela will turn against us to protect the normals.”

Courtney nodded, voice scornful. “Don’t you?”

Jennifer refused to answer. She got up and left the cargo room.

Courtney stayed where she was, now positive that she was right. She rubbed her stomach bump and tried not to cry. “Even Kenn thinks Angela is on his side, but all the descendants are in danger—from her.”

6

Gus entered the small gym as the group of Eagles came out. They’d just finished a training session. All of them were covered in sweat and excitement over their successes.

Gus nodded to a few of them, but he didn’t encourage chatter. He went to the man now at the small table alone. He sat in the opposite chair and glared.

Daryl tensed. He didn’t know why Gus was putting off hostile waves, but he braced for a fight.

“Stop being mean to her. I’ve had enough.”

Daryl scowled as he understood. “Mind your own business.”

“Brittani is my business!” Gus leaned forward. “She’s not a doormat for you to wipe your shoes on. If you’re ending things with her, at least have the balls to tell her to her face!”

“I’m not, unless she pushes me.” Daryl pointed. “You told her the same thing about the Eagles.”

“Not like this.” Gus gestured. “I didn’t avoid her and ignore her like she’s garbage. This is your only

warning. Handle it like a man or I'll beat your ass." Gus shoved up from the table and stomped from the gym.

Daryl wanted to take him up on the open challenge, but the guilt was too heavy. *Gus is right. She doesn't deserve this.*

"Yes, I do." Brittani came in and stood near him. "Can we talk?"

Daryl closed his book and scooted the chair around to face her. "I'm listening."

"I was wrong to handle it like I did. I should have come to you instead of letting everyone in on our personal life."

"I wish you had."

"Would it have mattered?"

"No, but I would have respected that. I handled things this way because you went behind my back to the boss. It embarrassed me."

"So you gave me a taste of that."

"Yes." Daryl stood up and gently took her hand. "I love you. I want you to be my wife. But please understand who I am. I won't ever quit the Eagles, not even for you. Stop asking for something I can't give."

Brittani held his hand, tears rolling over her cheeks. "I'll try to accept it."

"The other mates get scared too. You're not alone."

"I know."

Daryl wiped away her tears with his free hand. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to be cruel. I

didn't know how else to handle it without us having a huge fight and breaking up."

"Me either. I didn't think you would listen without getting mad."

"I'll always listen to you. My word on it."

Brittani drew in a steady breath. "Can I talk to you about something else?"

Daryl knew what was coming. He moved forward and kissed her.

Sparks flew, lighting them both up with waves of need.

Daryl drew back so he could see her face. "It doesn't matter that we're different in every way. As long as you love me, and you want to be with me, it'll work out."

Brittani smiled through her tears. "I'm a hot mess. Are you sure?"

Daryl chuckled. "You are hot." He wrapped her in his arms and held her close. "I can't wait to marry you and live a great life together."

Brittani clutched him tightly. "Me too. I wish we could do it right now."

Daryl's heart thumped. "We can if that's what you want. Tim's back in the chapel..."

Brittani grinned against his chest. "I do."

Daryl immediately led her from the gym.

Watching them from the opposite door, Gus smiled in satisfaction. *Sometimes, people just need a little push.*

He headed for the shower, pleased with himself.
*I finally let her go. Now it's up to her to find
happiness.*

Chapter Twenty-Six
Not My Call

1

“Welcome to the second baby care class.” Monica glared around the room. “I expect this one to go better than the first.”

The ten women snickered and laughed. Stories about the male class had already made rounds of the ship.

“Some of you already have kids. Some are pregnant or want to be. This is important, so pay attention.” Monica pointed at the blackboard. “We’ll be diapering, feeding, clothing, and soothing them. These dolls are realistic. They will pee, spit up, and cry if you don’t handle them correctly.” She drew in a breath and braced. “Everyone, come get a doll.”

The women formed an orderly line and gently took a doll into their arms.

Monica smiled, breathing again. “Excellent. Take a diaper with you and go back to your desk.” She observed as the females carefully freed up an arm to take a diaper from the large stack next to the dolls. “Place the baby on the desk and open the diaper. Then you’ll gently lift it by its leg and slide the diaper under it.”

Candy lifted the doll too high. It let out a shriek that made her jump. “Sorry, baby!” She let go of the legs, causing the cry to grow louder.

Next to her, Tonya motioned. “Like this.” She lifted the legs and slid the diaper under. “See?”

The doll released a stream of fake urine. It squirted down the front of her shirt.

“Oh, hell.” Tonya tried to wipe it off. She bumped the doll, knocking it to the floor.

Loud shrieks echoed through the room.

Tracy bent down and grabbed the doll by its arm.

The arm popped off.

Tracy paled. “I killed it!”

Jayda grabbed the squealing doll and the arm, and shoved it back in place. She thrust the doll at Tracy, frowning.

The motion triggered the spit up reflex. It belched all over Tracy’s arm.

“Gross!” She slammed the doll onto the desk.

The head popped off and flew across the room. It bounced off the wall and rolled under the nearest desk.

Tracy started to cry.

Monica sensed things approaching the point of no return again and tried to get it under control. “Just stop. Don’t move!” She hurried over to grab the head and slipped on the fake spit up. She flailed, grabbing onto Debra for balance.

Debra pulled Monica onto her feet, bumping her own doll. It slid off the desk, squirting fake vomit across the front three desks.

Courtney ducked, laughing. She hadn't wanted to come when her name was called, but she'd been scared not to. Now she was glad she had. *This is funny.*

Megan and Hannah ran for the door. Neither of them were pregnant, and now, neither of them wanted to be.

Trinity snared both girls, yanking them back. "You don't get to run when things get ugly!"

Both women fell, hitting the rear desks. Dolls flew into the air and onto the floor, releasing fresh streams that sprayed the walls, the desks, and the shocked women.

Monica ducked under the long table again. "Fail. You've all failed!"

The women ignored her as they wiped away nasty liquid and retrieved their dolls. The crying slowly subsided as they soothed the dolls, laughing at each other.

"You can come out now." Candy frowned at Monica. "The teacher isn't supposed to hide."

Monica stayed where she was. "Fasten the diapers at the corners and we'll feed them." She listened, trying to judge a safe moment to get up.

When nothing else sprayed or shrieked, she slowly stood.

The women all had the diapers on and were staring at her expectantly or wiping away parts of

the mess. Monica smiled. “Okay. Nice recovery.” She picked up a tray of bottles. “Take one and start feeding. Stop every couple minutes and burp them so they don’t get a stomach ache.”

Monica moved between the desks, being careful not to slip in the mess this time. *The cleaning crew will be pissed. They just finished in here an hour ago.*

Monica started to relax as her simple instructions were followed. She moved back toward the front of the room.

Jayda’s doll began to cry. She smiled. “It’s okay, fake baby. We’ll get you burped.” She lifted the doll to her shoulder and patted its little back.

Spit up flew out.

Courtney ducked.

Tonya didn’t. The mess landed in her hair and dripped down her face.

Courtney laughed. “Awesome. Do it again!”

Tonya’s eyes narrowed.

Courtney held up a hand, smile fading. “Don’t do it.”

Tonya grabbed her doll and slapped its back. Vomit flew out, coating Courtney.

Tonya sniggered at the woman’s shouts.

“That was mean.” Trinity lifted her doll and slapped it to shoot pee at Tonya.

Tonya did duck this time. Megan was hit in the face.

“Oh, my God!” Megan threw up.

So did Hannah.

“No! Stop!” Monica cringed as women threw up, dolls screamed and peed, and women ran for the door to the bathroom. She ducked back under the long table, hitting the mike on the radio. “I quit! The baby class is now closed!”

Eagles ran toward the room, drawn by the shouts and screams. Ian and Zack slid to a stop in the doorway, paling, stomachs twisting. Both men immediately turned around and went back down the hall.

“Cowards!” Monica crawled toward the exit, ducking a doll someone threw at her. Fake vomit splashed over her back and legs.

Monica got angry. “Fine! You wanna play? Let’s play!” She grabbed the filthy doll and slapped its back as she stood up.

2

“Cleanup crew to deck C.”

“Copy.” Francesca pushed her cart away from the cabin she’d been about to clean and search. Tobias had been cleared, as had his wives, but Marc still wanted her to search their cabin for any problems they might have missed.

She joined the rest of the cleaning crew in the wider elevator, nodding to Stanley and the others. They weren’t friends yet, but at least this crew wasn’t being hostile. Everywhere she went, people made snide comments. Francesca wasn’t sure how

much more of it she could take. *I know I deserve it, but it's hard.*

Stanley smiled at her, able to sense her unhappiness. "Things will get better."

She gave a weak smile in return, shrugging. "I'm okay. This job isn't bad. It's just emptying waste cans and mopping up fake pee."

The others laughed with her. The male baby class had been a mess, but knowing it was all fake had helped. They'd knocked it out quickly.

The elevator opened, letting them out into a hall that stank. Long streaks of liquid and vomit were smeared across the floor, leaving clear trails to the showers.

Francesca's stomach churned. "What the hell?!"

Stanley stepped over a puddle and pushed the cart down the hall. "Where do we start?"

"At the source, I guess, and then we'll make our way back out here."

The others followed her, all getting whiffs that told them this mess wasn't fake.

Francesca followed the filth to the room they'd just cleaned an hour ago. "What the hell happened in here?!"

Francesca and the rest of the cleaning crew stood in the doorway, shocked. Monica was in the chair behind the long table. Her state was indescribable. The rest of the women had already left.

Monica pointed at the blackboard.

Francesca read it, trying not to laugh.

*Dear Angela,
Please don't let these people breed.
-Monica*

Monica slowly stood up; liquid dripped from her clothes, hands, and hair. "I'll be in the shower and then my cabin. Do *not* call me."

Francesca frowned. "Sorry. The boss wants us all in the mess or the hallway by the infirmary. Kenn has the list for where people should go."

Monica kept walking. *I'd rather fight to the death with pirates than do this again.*

3

Shawn tapped on the window of the infirmary. "Coming in."

Wade turned from Samantha's cot, scowling, but he didn't tell the man to leave.

Neil stepped forward. "I'm sorry. I did what I felt best for my family."

Shawn stood his ground. "I understand, but you can't kick us out. The medics are on the way back in too. They have work to do. So do I."

Neil gestured at Wade. "We've hashed out a schedule now. We won't keep them out, but my choice about them not touching Samantha or the boys stands."

“No, it doesn’t.” Samantha made sure her voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. “My body, my choice.”

Men and women groaned at the reminder of that old fight, but Samantha was tired of the drama. “You can scan them and watch them, but I’m not okay with discriminating because they’re normal.”

Neil turned toward her. “But I don’t–”

“You heard me.” Samantha glared. “I can call the boss on this one if you like.”

Neil crossed his arms. “Whatever.”

Samantha snickered, relaxing against the bed. “Go get some rest. Wade has me covered.”

Neil left the infirmary without saying anything else.

Wade went to the chair by Samantha’s bed. “Thank you.”

Samantha knew Wade hadn’t agreed, but he’d supported Neil all the way. “He’ll calm down once the next fight is over.”

Wade laughed.

Samantha joined him. “Okay. We can *hope* he’ll settle down.”

Wade flashed a charming grin. “I don’t blame him. You are amazing.”

Samantha blushed, smiling back. “I’m a lucky girl.”

Shawn waved at the medics to let them know it was okay to come in. He spotted Courtney moving toward the lab, but he didn’t call for a guard to go with her. He had faith that Courtney wasn’t a threat,

and he knew Tonya could be reasonable. *Work it out, ladies. You don't want the boss to get involved.*

Tonya nodded at him through the glass. She'd also spotted Courtney coming her way. Both women were freshly showered from the baby class mess. They'd enjoyed the release, but their hatred hadn't ended.

Tonya went over and unlocked the door. She retreated to let Courtney inside, then shut and locked the door back. It was Kenn's rule and she agreed with it completely.

Courtney sat down in the chair in the corner. "I want your help."

Tonya stayed by the exit, keeping distance between them. "With what?"

"Protecting Kenny."

Tonya frowned as she began reading some of Courtney's nervous thoughts. "You think he's in danger."

"Yes."

Tonya wanted to say Angela would keep them all alive, but she couldn't. *I'm not sure. Courtney might be right.* "What do you have in mind?"

"We just have to use the babies to protect him when that last battle happens. Angela said magic users shouldn't have been born, that descendants only exist to die for the normals." Courtney stared at Tonya. "We both love him. When that fight starts, we can knock him out and take him away so he survives—so our kids survive."

Tonya slowly nodded. "I'll think about it."

“Good.” Courtney crossed her arms over her belly bump. “Until then, we can call a truce.”

“No, we can’t.” Tonya went to the counter and opened a folder. She took the genetic test result out and handed it to Courtney. “I’m sorry.”

Courtney read it, heart pounding. “This can’t be right.”

“It is. I had Morgan recheck it three times.”

Courtney panicked. “There has to be something you can do!”

“I wish there was, honestly. I’ve been researching it in my spare time. So has Morgan. I’m going to ask the boss to try, but it doesn’t look good. I’m sorry.”

“What happens if she can’t help me?”

Tonya sighed. “The medics will recommend aborting.”

“No!” Courtney lunged to her feet. “You’re not killing my baby!”

“No. Because of our issues, everyone will think I wanted to do it. The boss said she’ll help the medics.” Tonya shrugged quickly, trying to avoid the rant she felt coming. “Or you’ll have it anyway and sentence the baby to a miserable life. That’s not my call—it’s yours.”

Courtney dropped down into the chair, tears rolling over her cheeks.

Tonya approached her slowly. She put a hand on Courtney’s shoulder.

Courtney leaned against Tonya’s big stomach and bawled.

“What’s going on in there?” Kenn had just come through the hall and spotted the crying females.

Shawn had been keeping an eye on them. “There’s something wrong with the baby. Tonya just told her.”

Kenn had already pulled it from Morgan’s mind. “The boss will be able to help her.” He went to the guard coming on duty. “I need a word.”

“Okay...” Gabe followed Kenn to the office across from the infirmary.

Peter joined them, also worried about why Kenn had called him.

Kenn left the door open. He didn’t care who heard. “You two are being put with everyone else down here during the fight. I want you to watch over Tonya and make sure nothing happens to her.”

Both men stared at him in apprehension.

Kenn flashed an ugly glare. “I know how you feel. I’ve always known.”

“Then why would you ask?” Peter was sure it was a trick.

“Because you’ll guard her like I would.”

Peter was floored. “I don’t know what to say.”

Kenn looked at Gabe.

Gabe nodded quickly, but he didn’t speak. He was stunned that Kenn knew he wanted Tonya.

Peter scowled as Kenn's hard gaze came back to him. "You know I will. I just don't know why you'd ask this of men who want your woman."

"Because I might die." Kenn gave them the truth. "If that happens, you two will care for her and the kids. I trust you to love her like she deserves." Kenn walked out, leaving two shocked men behind that now had a bond with him they didn't want but couldn't fight.

Kenn spotted a group of women going to the infirmary. He recognized all of their cancer patients. After the treatments, they were a lot better. Today's appointment would confirm the cancer was either gone or in remission.

Kenn nodded at them, aware of Pam's surprise as she read his thoughts about Peter and Gabe. "Ladies."

Kenn went up to his post over the captain, heart hurting, but his mind was clear. *Tonya's life means more to me than my own.*

Coming down from getting updates, Angela smiled at him and kept going. Kenn's change was remarkable.

Debra came to Angela and walked with her. *Updates.*

Angela put them in her book. "Give me the basics."

The nieces are fine. Jennifer cleared them. We think Laura locked their memories because they can't recall anything before the detention center. Jennifer tried to unlock them, but it didn't work.

“I’ll give it a shot after we get settled on the island. As long as they’re happy and not a threat, it can wait.” Angela didn’t have extra energy to spare right now. “Anything else?”

Debra shook her head. *I’m going to lunch...with Theo.*

Angela grinned. “I’m glad you’re working it out.”

We are, but on my terms this time. Debra hurried down the ramp.

Angela lingered by the rail, no longer enjoying the open ocean in front of them. *We’re almost there.*

Kyle joined Angela by the rail. “We can’t find Daryl. His team is gathered for the meeting he set, but he isn’t there.”

“Have the XO cover it. Daryl and Brittani are taking a leap of faith.”

Kyle grinned as he understood. “They’re eloping?”

Angela chuckled. “You could call it that. Tim is about to marry them. We’ll leave them be until we arrive.”

Kyle’s humor vanished. “Are we ready?”

“As much as we can be.” She sighed. “One of us has an ugly choice to make. If he goes the wrong way, I may need you and Neil to help then.”

“We’ll be there, even if we don’t like it.” Kyle frowned. “Wait. You’re not using either Special Forces team during the fight?”

“No.”

“Can I ask why?”

Angela sighed. “I need another group of people to step up or winning this fight won’t matter in the end.” She went down the ramp before he could ask anything else or read her mind.

Jennifer came down from the bridge and joined Kyle at the railing. She studied the ocean with a greater respect.

Kyle waited for her to speak. They hadn’t talked about their issues. He hated the uneasy truce, but he was afraid to push things. She’d given him his ring back. He didn’t want her to change her mind.

“I won’t.” Jennifer wrapped her arms around him. “I don’t want you to change. I love you for who you are.”

Kyle held her, but he couldn’t let it go like she wanted. “I won’t ever do that to you again. If I have an issue, you’ll know it, but I won’t embarrass you again.”

“Thank you.” Jennifer tightened her grip. “I’ll try harder to not be so reckless.”

Kyle sighed. “I don’t want you to change. I love you for who you are.”

Jennifer smiled. She tilted her chin up.

Kyle wasn’t an idiot. He kissed her, making sure she felt how much he cared.

Molly came up the ramp and whistled. “Get a room!”

The couple broke apart, laughing with her.

Jennifer’s grin widened. “I heard you spent the night with Monica.”

Molly blushed. “We just talked...and kissed.”

Jennifer laughed. “That’s how it starts.”

Molly snickered. She was glad people appeared to be okay with it. Gay relationships weren’t new to Safe Haven, but she’d still been worried.

The PA system crackled. “This is the head of security for this shift. The following people need to report to the infirmary hallway for assignments during our arrival on the island. Debra, Wade, Kenn, Morgan, Marc, Ray...” The list went on for a while.

Jennifer and Kyle followed everyone else down the ramp, adrenaline now flowing in thick waves.

5

Angela scanned to be sure everyone was here. She’d gathered them in the hall outside the infirmary so Samantha and her men could also be part of it.

The descendants and Eagles waited nervously.

“We’ll be there in two days or less. Grant’s riding the waves.”

Half of the people let out small cheers and sighs of relief or excitement at Angela’s announcement. The rest frowned, worried about what was waiting for them.

Angela confirmed their fears. “Some of the pirates from the detention center are already there. We’re in for another fight.”

Neil tapped on the window of the medical bay. “We’re ready, Boss.”

Many of the gathered fighters nodded in agreement. The descendants and Eagles were eager to use their skills.

Angela gave them the next bad news without confirming Neil's opinion. "I believe Adrian's ship passed us while we were at Port Stanley."

Scowls and mutters went through the crowd.

"I don't know which side they'll be on, though I'd like to think Adrian will help us." She forced herself to finish it. "If he died, Kendle is in charge and we all know who she'll be aiming for."

Sympathy and determination to protect Angela ran through the group.

"If that's the case, she'll go for my weak spot—our kids. During the battle, you have to protect them so I can fight. She'll tie my hands and drain my energy unless you have it covered." Angela waved at Ivan. "We're going to teach you something new. Practice it tonight and then store your energy until we arrive. You'll need it."

Ivan swallowed his nervousness and stepped forward. He concentrated and went dim.

Gasps and claps echoed.

Ivan pushed harder, shoving energy into the shield to make the camouflage work.

"He's gone!"

"Where did he go?!"

"I didn't see him leave."

Ivan let go of the shield, making people jump and flinch.

Angela clapped and was joined by everyone else. “Excellent.” She gestured. “Now do it to me.”

Ivan froze, cheeks going dark.

Marc reached over and smacked him in the back of the head.

Ivan shook it off. “Thanks!”

Marc chuckled. “Anytime.”

Ivan concentrated and brought up his shield around Angela. He shoved in energy again, but he only managed to dim the shield. It didn’t disappear.

Angela looked at Marc. “Smack him again.”

Marc did it verbally. “She’ll be unprotected during the fight.”

Ivan’s anger flared, lending strength. The shield dimmed further.

Marc sighed. “Do I really need to tell you if you can’t do this, you can’t take my place?”

Angela vanished.

People clapped again, impressed and eager to try it for themselves.

Ivan let go, gasping. His skin started to wither.

Marc sent energy into the man. “That’s what I expect—your life for hers.”

“I will.” Ivan leaned on his knees, breathing deeply against the pain of a different level energy merging with his own. Marc’s power was incredible; it hurt.

Neil and Wade observed from inside the med bay, wanting to join in but unwilling to drain themselves and be unable to defend Samantha if it was needed.

Tracy motioned to Tonya. “We can’t do this right now anyway.”

Tonya nodded. The women went in, waving the two men out.

Neil and Wade both went, already bringing up shields around each other.

Tonya and Tracy sat with Samantha, both smiling at the sleeping infants next to her bed.

Samantha dozed, feeling safe and warm. *I don’t know what’s waiting for us, but I know we’ll come through it. I have faith in my alpha.*

Trinity moved closer to Angela. “I have a question. Sorry if it’s stupid.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well, why don’t we just have the fire users blast them all? There are enough of you guys. We can cover the kids while you blast holes in their ship with fire.”

“We need their fuel.”

Trinity slapped her forehead. “I’m so stupid!”

Angela smiled. “Not at all. If we didn’t need the gas, we’d be doing exactly what you suggested.” Angela pointed at Jayda. “Work with her. You two are evenly matched. I’d bet you can share energy without pain.”

The two women immediately began trying.

Marc walked through the group like Angela had asked him to do earlier, occasionally giving energy to the people who drained themselves. He was impressed with most of them.

So was Angela. She also walked among them, giving pointers, but she didn't share energy. She was already low.

Recharge later?

Angela nodded at Marc's question. *For all of us.* "Three minute break and listen." Angela waited until they were all looking at her, some gasping for air. "They're going to see a dead ship when we arrive. It will bring them close. When I give the call, you'll switch to covering the kids while a dozen of us fight."

"Will that be enough?" Ivan frowned. "We saw a lot of men on those pirate ships."

Marc shrugged. "They were all normal."

"Still..." Ivan looked at Angela.

Angela gave him the confirmation he wanted. She sent a weak spell over the group. "Slap yourself."

Every person in the hall slapped themselves.

Angela let go of their minds, energy almost gone.

They all stared at her in shock and approval.

"Twelve of us will be more than enough." Angela leaned against the wall. "Read the names, Kenn."

Kenn drew the paper from his pocket, disapproval clear in his voice. "The fighters will be Angela, Brittani, Charlie, Debra, Trinity, Ray, Zack, Conner, Pam, Kimmie, Cate, and Cody."

Shouts and anger filled the hall.

"She's using the kids!"

“Those people don’t have enough experience!”

“This is wrong.”

“Boss?”

“What?!” Marc glowered at Angela. “My kids are not fighting!”

“Pam needs more time to heal!”

Angela let them vent. She leaned against the wall and waited for them to fall silent. When they finally did, she looked at Kenn again.

Kenn hated it, but he obeyed her order to make them understand. “The people chosen for this have special gifts. They also have hatred that needs to be released. The enemy will view them as weak and underestimate them.” Kenn spoke louder to be heard over the new shouts. “Shields over the fighters will be Marc, Jeff, Gus, Morgan, myself, and Wade.”

The shouts resumed.

Angela turned toward the hallway, where three kids had just come through the employee hall. “Show them what you can do, but go easy; stay in control.”

Kimmie brought up a shield. So did Cate and Cody.

Kimmie lifted her hand. “On your knees!”

Half of the adults in the hall dropped, slamming into the tiled floor.

Cate and Cody repeated her spell.

All but the strongest descendant fell.

Kimmie lifted her other hand. “Now kill each other.”

Adults were horrified by their own hands reaching for weapons.

“Let go!” Angela was relieved when the spell broke.

All three kids turned to her for their next order.

Stunned adults stared at the kids as silence fell.

Angela smiled tiredly at the three happy kids.

“Welcome to my army.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven
I Forgive You

1

“**D**on’t do this. Please, Angie.” Marc followed her down the hall to their cabin. “Please!”

“Your kids are fighters, Marc. I need them. *We* need them.”

“They’re just kids!” He hurried to get in front of her, forcing her to stop. “They need a chance to be normal.”

“But they’re not normal. They accept what they are. You need to do the same.” Angela went around and resumed her walk to their cabin. She’d refused to stop for any of the people trying to get a moment alone with her in hopes that they could change her mind. She went into the cabin, motioning Ivan and Kenn to guard the open door.

Ivan reluctantly stepped in front of Marc.

Kenn didn’t hesitate.

Marc glared at both men, but he yelled at Angela. “Think about what you’re doing!”

Angela sighed. “I’ve spent weeks thinking about it, Marc. I also searched ahead several times, which is why I’m so low on energy. This gives us a quick win.”

“I won’t allow it!” Marc used his trump card. “I’ll lock them!”

Everyone around the cabin tensed, waiting for her response.

Angela wasn’t surprised or hurt, only disappointed. “They’ll hate you for that.”

“At least they’ll be alive!”

Angela laid down on the bed. “Before we left America, you were told hard, ugly choices were coming. You promised you would think it through and make the right decisions based on the future. I promised I would do the same, and I have. As their parent, you can refuse this assignment, but it will cost us everything—including your kids.”

“I don’t believe you!”

Angela winced, but she didn’t show her pain. “Go talk to them, Marc. Let them help you look ahead. And then give them a recharge or lock them up. The choice is yours.”

Marc punched the wall and stomped down the hall. People hurried out of his way.

Ivan turned toward Angela, mouth opening.

Kenn put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve got this one.”

Ivan retreated. *She won’t listen to me. Maybe Kenn can get through.*

Kenn stepped into the cabin and stated the truth as he saw it. “Marc isn’t the only one who has to make a choice now. We’re all sick of his shit. Get him in line or some of us will call a leadership vote.”

Angela sighed. That wasn't a surprise either. She gave Marc a last defense. "And if I'd listed Tonya as a fighter?"

Kenn grunted. "I would have bitched and caved, because it's her choice to make."

"And what if it was your abused orphans?"

"The same, I think. I would hate it, but I trust you. If you think using them is for the best, then it is."

"And what if they died?"

Kenn frowned. "I'd hate you forever and do everything I could to kill you and your dreams."

She stared at him. "Even though you love me?"

Kenn slowly nodded. "Yes."

"That's the risk I'm taking with this choice. Marc knows. He isn't just giving me shit. He's trying to fight for me as much as for them. If they die, our relationship is over."

2

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." Tim smiled. "You may kiss the bride."

Daryl leaned in and kissed Brittani.

Tim, Harry, and Terry clapped.

Daryl drew back, grinning. "I love you."

Brittani kissed him again, happiness overflowing into tears that soaked them both.

Daryl led her down the aisle and took her toward the next room that Tim had prepared for them while they waited on Tonya to do their blood work.

Brittani giggled as he lifted her into his arms and entered the room, kicking the door shut.

Tim began cleaning up the few items they'd used, while Harry and Terry wished happy thoughts on the newlyweds.

Tim cleared his throat. "You guys should go up so no one notices we're missing."

"Do you need help with anything?"

"Yeah, we could stay."

Harry and Terry were still feeling like outsiders.

Tim was ready to be alone. "No. Go tell Neil how you feel and resume your jobs."

Both men slowly went toward the steps.

Tim went to the rear of the chapel, where he'd placed a cot and his belongings.

Tap-tap!

Tim paused. "Who is it?"

Cathy came in. "Can I talk to you about something?"

Tim gestured toward a front pew. "Have a seat." He assumed she wanted to discuss her desire for a teenager. "How can I help you?"

Cathy perched on the edge of the pew. "I'd like to arrange a marriage."

Tim frowned at her.

Cathy flushed. "I'm going to ask him to marry me as soon as Jennifer does my evaluation."

Tim forced himself to agree. He didn't approve of underage unions. "If the boss clears it, I'll do it." He tried to be nice. "Are you sure this is the path

you want to take? Many people will disapprove, and he may change his mind as he ages.”

“No, I won’t.” Timmy came in and joined them. He’d followed her down here, hoping she wasn’t meeting with Peter. “I love her. She loves me. We’ll be together forever.”

Tim wanted to be happy for them, but he doubted it would end as well as they hoped. “As soon as you’re both cleared, come talk to me about the arrangements.”

Cathy stood up. “Thank you for not judging me.”

“That’s not my job anymore.”

Timmy held the door for Cathy to go out, flushed with delight.

Cathy didn’t kiss him like she wanted to. She waited until the chapel door shut, then led the way up the hall.

Timmy followed, mind on how great their life would be.

Cathy just hoped their interviews went well. *Jennifer sees everything. If she finds out I’m going to leave Safe Haven, there won’t be an evaluation. I’ll be dropped overboard.*

3

Panaji tossed the net overboard and retreated to avoid the unfurling rope.

The fish trap hit the water and quickly sank below the waves. He moved to the next one as the

rest of the fishing crew went below. They'd spent the last hour tying the traps and baiting them. Everyone was ready for a warm shower. The temperatures were rising again now that they were moving north, but it was still chilly enough up here for all of them to be wearing their heavy coats.

Panaji nodded to Selito and Raheem as the men walked by. Neither of them had been given full time jobs yet. They'd been floating between duties, trying to find a match for their skills. Panaji was sure they would join the fishing crew.

Both of the Cayman Islands men nodded back, but they didn't stop to talk. Angela had asked them to check the air up here. They had Geiger counters in hand, though neither of them were registering a problem so far.

Quinn followed the two men, bored with the chore. It was obvious that they weren't a threat, and this was make-work.

Quinn gazed at the ocean behind them as the two men took a reading on the rear deck. *Where are you, Kendle?* Quinn sighed. *I don't want to miss you or need you; I just do.*

Walking up to the bridge, Ray caught Quinn's thought and detoured. He still had a few minutes before Grant's shift ended. "Are you okay?"

Quinn flinched. A scowl filled his face. "I'm working."

Ray snorted. "They aren't a threat."

"Doesn't change the job." Quinn understood Ray wanted to help him, but Quinn wasn't willing

to trust anyone at this point. “I don’t need you snitching on me, Ray.”

Ray controlled his anger. “But you do need a friend. You don’t have many on this ship now.”

Quinn shoved by him. “Leave me alone.”

Ray sighed. *Hotheads have no place in Safe Haven. Maybe it’s better this way.* He expected Quinn and Tommy to abandon ship as soon as they reached the island. He went toward the bridge and stood at the bottom of the steps to wait until Grant’s shift was over.

Quinn followed Selito and Raheem below, mind racing. *I have to get off this ship. If we don’t arrive soon, I’ll go crazy.*

Jennifer went up the steps without acknowledging Quinn or his bad thoughts. She could have told him they were close, but she didn’t trust him not to do something stupid. She joined Grant in the bridge. “How long until we get there?”

Grant pointed at the monitor, where a small set of islands were glowing brightly. “One day, maybe less.”

Jennifer stepped in front of the wheel when Grant gestured, putting her feet on the braces. “Inform the boss and then keep Ray company during his recharge. He’s going to need every bit of energy he can store up.”

Marc went straight to the play area, where all the kids were enjoying fun time under the watchful eyes of half a dozen Eagles. He jerked the door open, scanning for his kids. "Let's go!"

Cate and Cody came to him, each taking a hand.

Marc led them from the playground, not caring about the curiosity from the Eagles.

As soon as they were out of hearing distance, Marc stopped and knelt. "I have to do something you won't like, but it's so you'll be safe. I need you to trust me."

Cody nodded.

Cate cringed, pulling away. "Don't lock me! Don't lock me!"

Marc grabbed her and hugged her close. "I'm sorry. I have to."

Cate's power flashed out, bringing up a shield that knocked Marc backward.

Marc hit the wall and bounced. He shook his head, trying to recover.

Cate cringed from him. "Alpha!"

Marc stared in regret. "The alpha wants to use you in the fight. If I lock you, she can't endanger your life."

Cody brought up his shield too, glaring at Marc. "We want to help."

"No." Marc stood up. "Lower your shields. When the fight is over, I'll unlock you."

Cate took off running; Cody followed.

Angela appeared at the end of the hallway, drawn by Cate's shout.

Both kids cowered behind her.

“Don’t let him lock me!”

“You said she doesn’t have to be locked!”

Angela waited for the right moment as Marc stormed toward them. *Please make the right choice.*

Marc was furious that his kids had run to her for protection. His anger flared hotter as he caught her thought. “You did this!”

“You will not hurt the alpha!” Cate assumed Marc was going to attack. She lowered her shield and fired.

Angela stepped in front of the blast, taking the hit in full. She sank to her knees, gasping.

“Alpha!”

“No!” Marc caught her before she could fall, anger gone in an instant. “Angie!”

Cate sobbed. “I’m sorry!”

Cody lowered his shield and knelt by Angela. He put a hand on her arm.

Bright blue light filled the hallway. It increased to a blinding level before fading away.

Angela sucked in air, trying to recover. She turned her head toward Cate. “I forgive you.”

Cate hurried over and hugged her so tightly that Angela had to pry her little arms away so she could breathe.

Marc lifted his hand.

Cate’s eyes lit up red. “You made me hurt the alpha!” She flew at him, punching and kicking. “I hate you! I hate you!”

The words hurt Marc. It broke through his anger and misery. He stood still and let the little girl beat on him.

“Stop.” Angela struggled to her feet. “Come here.”

Cate punched Marc in the balls.

Marc wheezed, falling to his knees.

Cate slammed her head into his chin and ran to Angela. “Yes, Alpha?”

Angela saw Marc’s face turn red and then blue. “Help your father, Cody.”

Cody shot a weak stream of blue light at Marc, frowning.

Marc groaned as the pain began to fade, but he stayed down.

Angela locked eyes with Cate. “You’re wild, reckless, and unhappy. You hate almost everyone and you don’t listen to any adult because you don’t trust them.”

Cate teared up.

Angela sighed. “We’re so much alike you might as well have come out of my body.” She smiled soothingly at the scared girl. “I want you to talk with Marc. If he decides you can’t fight with us, you will honor his choice.”

Cate’s tears spilled over. “Don’t lock me!”

“We won’t.” Angela looked at Marc. “Right?”

Marc forced a nod.

“He’s lying!” Cody stepped forward, eyes half blue and half red. Purple flames lit them from the inside. “He doesn’t trust you.”

Marc wanted to deny it, but he couldn't. "No fights; no final battle. You are not taking a place in her army!"

"We already have." Cody dug deeper in Marc's mind. "You're the one who keeps fighting our destiny."

Hearing it from his son broke Marc. He hung his head, voice cracking. "I just want to go back to when the world was normal, so we can all start over."

"We can't; you can only destroy us by trying." Angela rubbed Cate's arm. "Adult minds work differently. He's not bad for wanting a normal life, a normal family. Don't hate him for the way he feels. He can't help it."

Cate wiped at her face. "He can't love us like this. He wants us to be normal!"

"That's because *he* still wants to be normal." Angela gave the girl a gentle push. "Go talk to him. You'll understand he's fighting himself with every day that passes."

Cate brought up her shield and took a step toward Marc.

Marc was crushed by her fear and Cody's anger. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

Cody's eyes flickered again. "If we were normal, we would have died in the war! Then you wouldn't have to feel bad!"

Marc winced. "If we were all normal, the war wouldn't have happened."

Angela felt his pain. "It's not your fault, Marc."

“Yes, it is!” He shuddered, making the kids pause. “You saw the visions! I did this!”

“I no longer believe that.” Angela was glad she could finally see past it. “The world was destined to end. We were just the tool. For whatever reason, we were chosen to fight for humanity and we’ve done the best we can. Stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. No one person can handle that.”

“I don’t know how. I feel so bad all the time!”

“Your kids will help you.”

“They’re not fighting in your war!”

Her voice hardened. “It’s *our* war, Marc. We have to win it. The kids are a big part of that. They can’t handle the emotions you’re feeling. We have to let them help fight for our future or they’ll go mad.”

Marc stilled. *Or they’ll go mad...* “That’s what’s happening to me.”

Angela confirmed it, heart hurting. “Your guilt is splitting your mind. The cracks weren’t healed fully. They can’t because you think you deserve the pain. Until you honestly forgive yourself, it’ll only get worse.”

“Then take it away! Lock me up!” Marc stared at her in desperation. “Help me!”

“I’m going to.” Angela motioned to Jennifer, who’d been observing from the employee hall.

Marc lowered his mental defenses and waited.

Jennifer ran a soothing hand over his brow, using a calming spell. “We assume the Creator had a plan, yes?”

Marc nodded.

“And we assume the Creator knows everything, yes?”

Marc nodded again.

“Then he knew what would happen. It was part of the plan for you to react as you did.”

Marc stiffened, mind fighting Jennifer’s logic. “That can’t be true.”

“It is. He meant for all of this to happen.”

“Why?!”

Jennifer didn’t flinch from his shout. She shrugged. “I can’t answer that. I just know he chose us to fight for him, Marc. You had to become what you are, or the battle will be lost and his beloved creation will vanish. In the final fight, you’re his greatest fighter, his most powerful weapon.” She motioned to the kids. “Take your dad to his cabin and help him get some rest. When he wakes, talk to him. Tell him about your time in the labs and what you’ve learned. He’ll be able to listen then.”

Cate and Cody each took a hand and led Marc from the hall.

Marc didn’t resist. He was struggling with Jennifer’s revelation. *That can’t be true! ...can it?*

Angela hated his misery. She’d already suffered through the same doubts, confusion, and rage. She didn’t understand why it had to happen like this

either, but she'd accepted her role in it. *The Creator chose us to kill his wife. How fucked up is that?!*

She shook it off and went toward the entertainment floor, body aching. "I need a drink."

5

"How's he doing?"

Jennifer smiled at Kyle. "Better." She was sitting outside Marc's cabin. Two hours had gone by. "They're talking now. The kids will help him understand."

"Wish I did." Kyle dropped into the chair next to her. "Why go through all this?" He lowered his voice. "Why wouldn't the Creator kill his ex himself? He obviously has the power to do it."

Jennifer rested her head against his shoulder. "Angela and I talked a lot about that since we figured out what was going on. We assume he still loves her."

Kyle paused. "I didn't know you helped Angela with something like this."

"We kept it quiet."

"When?"

"Right after Donner took her. You know that's when she became byzan, right?"

Kyle frowned. "I didn't. She's made so many death plans that I wasn't sure."

"That was the first one she did on her own. After she and Adrian made the call, she evolved and started to crack. We had a lot of nights where we

talked. She said it helped her to have someone like me.” Jennifer clasped his hand. “She said the same was true of you because of your guilt over being Adrian’s executioner.”

Kyle tensed. He forced himself to relax. “I still haven’t made peace with it.”

“Neither has she, or any of us, but we all know it has to happen and we refuse to pawn it off on the normals.”

“So it’s true, then? We really are here to protect them, even if it takes our lives?”

“Yes.” Jennifer refused to get drawn into that conversation right now. She changed the subject. “She’ll call us all into the large gym soon for a training session.”

Kyle rubbed her hand. “I’ll wait for Marc if you want.”

Jennifer smiled as sparks lit up her skin. “We’ll wait together.”

Running paws on hard floors echoed. They glanced up to find Dog flying down the hallway.

Kyle stood up. “What’s wrong?”

Dog ran by them. *Need Tonya!*

“Why? Is someone hurt?”

My cat! The cat is in pain!

Jennifer waved Kyle to go on when he hesitated. “It’s probably nothing, but check it out. I’ll be fine.”

Kyle kissed her cheek and hurried after the wolf. “Dog! Wait up!”

Jennifer resumed listening to Marc’s kids as they explained why they wanted to fight. She hated

how ugly their lives had been, but she also recognized the benefits. *If we turn them loose on the enemy, their hatred will guarantee a win. And they'll be fulfilling their duty to the dream.*

Jennifer now understood more about that than she wanted to. "Adrian wasn't building this camp so we could restart our country, or to save our way of life. It was always for the normals."

6

Dog pawed at Tonya's cabin door, whining.

"I'm coming!"

Dog pawed again. *Hurry!*

Kyle caught up with the wolf. "What's going on?"

Dog whimpered. *My cat needs her!*

Tonya opened the door, grin lighting up her face. "It's time?"

Dog grabbed the hem of her nightgown and tugged, whimpering. *You have to help! She is in pain!*

Tonya frowned, pulling her gown from his mouth. "Let me get dressed." She shut the door.

Dog paced the hall. *This is bad. So bad!*

Kyle didn't understand. He studied Dog, getting worried. He'd never seen the wolf act like this.

Dog whined again, ears laid back.

"I'm coming!" Tonya jerked on her jumper and sat on the bed to pull on her shoes.

Dog pawed at the door.

Tonya tied her shoes. “You’re worse than Neil was!” She went into the hall and shut the door.

Dog rubbed on her legs, golden eyes locked onto her. *Hurry!*

Tonya chuckled as she headed for the steps.

Dog cut her off, forcing her toward the elevator.

Kyle burst out laughing as he understood. “You’re not the father, Dog. Calm down.”

Dog growled at him.

Tonya pushed the button, frowning. “Do you need a sedative?”

Dog’s head bobbed. *Yes!*

Tonya went into the elevator, lifting a brow at Kyle. “Care to come and help?”

Kyle snorted. “I’ll have my own moment in a few months.”

Tonya sniggered as Dog whined again. “I’ll have a sedative ready.”

Tonya took the elevator to the infirmary deck and hurried down that hall, still chuckling.

Dog led her in wild circles, fur bushed up and tail down.

Tonya went into the lab.

Dog rushed in and stuck his nose into the box where the female cat liked to sleep now. The only time she came out was when she wanted him to take her for a walk.

The cat let out a pitiful yowl and shifted against the box.

Dog staggered and slid to his haunches. *She’s dying!*

Tonya realized Dog didn't know what was going on. She knelt by the box and rubbed the cat's back. "She's just having her babies now, Dog. She'll be fine."

Dog let out a low moan and fell over.

"Really?" Tonya frowned at the unconscious wolf. "You and Wade are a perfect match."

7

"I've matched each group with a shield. When the fight starts, do the best you can to stay together." Angela stood in front of the unhappy men and women in the gym. Everyone was here except for Marc and his twins. She'd chosen to go ahead without them and hope it would be enough. "We need them to get close enough for our spells to work so we don't waste energy. Each group will defend their side of the ship. I'll defend the ramp down into our ship. If they get by me, the rest of our people will defend the normals and weaker members."

"Are we too late?"

Angela smiled as everyone turned toward the doorway. "Not at all."

Marc came in with Cate and Cody. He went to stand in the line.

Angela's heart settled into a better rhythm. "I expect a fast, ugly fight. We'll remove this last sea threat, and be docking to go ashore a few hours later."

“We’re that close?” Quinn hoped she would give more information about that moment.

So did Tommy. He wanted to be in the first landing party.

“We will reach Pitcairn Island at noon tomorrow.” Angela raised her voice to be heard over the murmurs and mutters. “I need you to practice going dim right now, and then go to your cabins for a recharge.” Angela looked at Marc. “Would you like to lead the lesson?”

Marc slowly nodded. He wasn’t healed, but he’d accepted what had to happen. By doing this, he was making sure the cracks wouldn’t happen to his kids. He moved to the front of the group and faced their expectant looks. He brought up his shield and dimmed it all the way.

Angela and the others clapped.

Marc let their approval soothe his pain. “Get those shields up. I don’t want to see any of you.”

Angela let Marc direct the lesson, aware of burning anger and desire for vengeance growing as his mind accepted their true purpose. She understood completely. *After that final battle, we may not stop. The Creator has a lot to answer for.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Save My Camp

January 23rd

Noon

1

“Get up here!”

Kendle looked at Adrian as Toshi screamed for her again. “Can you fight?”

Adrian shook his head, hand going to the bandage. “You’ll have to kill them.”

Kendle pointed upward. “I don’t have enough energy to kill them all!”

Sadie glared at her. “You should have killed Toshi when you had the chance.”

“I was going to make a deal with him. How was I supposed to know he drugged the wine?” Kendle moved toward the door, still furious about it. She’d woken down here the next morning. Her only consolation was she hadn’t been hurt. Adrian and Sadie swore Toshi had been gentle as he laid her on the floor by the couch, but she didn’t trust either of them. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Yes, you do.” Adrian tried to sit up and fell against the couch. “Beg Angela for help.”

“Not on your life or mine!” Kendle marched up the steps, shielding her face from the bright noon sun.

Adrian locked eyes with Sadie. “Do you love me?”

She nodded, smiling.

Adrian used his magnetism, pushing hard. “If you love me, you’ll kill for me.”

Sadie tried to resist, but his gift was too strong. She stilled. “Who should I kill?”

“Kendle.”

Sadie got up and left the cabin.

Adrian pushed off the couch and grabbed the gun they’d hidden from Toshi. He limped to the door and slid into the shadows, going dim.

2

“Where are they?!” Toshi grabbed Kendle’s arm as soon as she reached the wheelhouse. “We are here! Where is Safe Haven?!”

Kendle studied the monitor, heart thumping. *Pitcairn! I’m home!*

Toshi grabbed her hair and tossed her against the wall, knife coming out. “You said they would be here! You have lied!”

“I didn’t lie! She must have stopped somewhere to pick up more sheep! She’s been doing that all along!” Kendle stilled as the knife went to her throat. *Only one thing I can do now.* Her eyes narrowed.

Toshi felt it coming, but it was too late to avoid the magic that flew over him and sank in deep. He was immune to most spells, but not love charms.

Kendle sucked in air, trying to think. Toshi had kept them all below for the last three days. His men were expecting a fight. She could feel them observing this moment. They were ready to cheer when he killed her.

Toshi lowered his arm, brain fighting her magic. “What...have you done?”

Kendle slipped under his arm and went to the monitor. “They should be here! Damn her bleeding heart!”

Sadie hurried up the steps. “Kill him!”

When Kendle shook her head, Sadie moved toward Toshi. “I’ll do it.”

“No!” Kendle stepped between them. “I need him to control his men.”

“You’re protecting him because you want to be his queen. He told us that when he brought you down.”

Kendle tried not to panic. “We don’t have time for this.”

“Make time!”

“Slam you!”

“Slam this!” Sadie fired.

Kendle ducked Sadie’s death spell.

It hit Toshi. He fell to his knees, gasping as blood ran from his mouth.

Kendle grabbed the knife he’d dropped and spun toward Sadie.

Beep! Beep!

Both women paused as the monitor began beeping loudly.

Kendle took a fast glance at the screen. “It’s them.”

Sadie moved forward.

Kendle threw the knife. “Wake up!”

The blade stuck in Sadie’s arm. She staggered backward as Adrian’s weak charm broke.

Sadie pulled the knife out and dropped it, barely noticing the blood that began to drip down her arm. “He tricked me!”

“Yeah, he’s good at that.” Kendle studied the ships around them and saw they were moving closer. On every deck, pirates were grabbing swords and ropes in preparation for boarding.

“Will they use the guns?” Kendle kicked Toshi’s leg. “Answer me!”

Toshi sucked in air through lungs that were dying. “Gas first. All ships ready to...gas them.”

“Why gas?”

Toshi felt death coming, but his desire for vengeance hadn’t faded. “Knocks them out. Guns...damage ships.”

Kendle understood from that. “And there’s no supplies or fun if they sink.” Kendle grabbed the mike and knelt by Toshi. “Safe Haven is here. Tell your men to attack.”

Toshi opened his mouth; blood ran down his chin. “The enemy comes!” He groaned, life fading. “Kill them all...”

Kendle let go of the mike as he slumped over. She scanned the monitor and then the pirate ships, heart pounding. “Come on! Go get them!”

Kendle didn’t have a plan for what would happen after the battle. She thought quickly. *I can swim to the island. Once there, I’ll go underground.*

Sadie held her bleeding arm, also waiting to see what happened.

Kendle gestured wildly. “Get Adrian up here! If they come to kill us instead, I’ll try to use him again.”

Sadie wrapped her bandana around the wound as she hurried below, angry that she’d been tricked.

She slammed the door open and stopped, staring in shock at the filthy couch. “He’s gone!”

3

One of the pirate ships slowed as it neared Adrian’s wooden vessel. In the bridge of that ship, Toshi’s XO, Krieger, steered as close as he could get. *I don’t see Toshi anymore, but the women are still alive. I know something’s wrong.*

“Why are you not following orders?” Omar was third in command and eager to gas all the magic users.

Krieger pointed at the wooden ship, where Kendle was staring into the distance. “We will pick up our captain.”

Omar motioned. “I’ll get a group to go over in case they try to hold Toshi hostage.”

“Good. If the women fight, kill them, but bring the Mitchel onboard. He has value.”

“Yes, sir.” Omar quickly left, waving to men he knew weren’t afraid of magic.

Krieger studied Kendle, able to view her expression as they neared her. *She’s scared.* He grinned widely. “As you should be. Your life is about to end.”

4

“What is that?” Adrian peered through the bright sunlight, trying to determine what was making the rough sprays in front of the cruise ship. As it got closer, he identified a massive line of animals. Huge tails and fins were churning up the waves as they fought.

Adrian stayed in the shadows of the stairwell as the pirate ships sailed by. The men on those ships were preparing ramps and grappling hooks; holes were opening in the sides and long hoses were emerging.

Here they come, Angela. I hope you’re ready. He still wasn’t picking up anything from the cruise ship. It made his heart hurt, but he refused to believe they were dead and the ship had just drifted here.

Adrian tensed as he realized not all the pirate ships were going by. One of them was slowing right next to where he was hiding.

Adrian slipped into the ship’s hallway and limped toward the deck stairs. He heard grappling

hooks hit the rail where he'd been standing and tried to hurry. *Kendle! Company!*

Kendle heard his mental shout; she knew they were about to be boarded, but she couldn't look away from the long line of massive animals coming straight toward them. "How does Angela do that?!"

The sharks and whales weren't stopping despite the pirate ships sailing directly into their path. The front pirate ship opened fire on the animals with their guns.

The sharks darted to the sides as the lead whale tried to go under, but it was too close. The whale rammed the ship, scraping off chunks of flesh on the bow. A huge crack splintered the front of the ship, immediately taking on water. Pirates were thrown around like dolls; men fell into the water where the sharks resurfaced. Blood rose on the water.

The whale let out an eerie cry as it turned belly up and began to sink to the bottom of the ocean. Sharks darted in, taking hungry bites. It triggered a frenzy that stunned the pirates on the other ships. They watched the first ship sink without trying to help the screaming men onboard.

Omar shouted into his radio. "Kill the animals or they'll sink us all!"

Guns fired into the mass of sharks and whales, splitting off a few of the animals.

The whales dove deep to avoid the guns, crying out in loss as three more of their pod were killed.

Kendle heard heavy steps coming behind her. She brought up a shield and hoped she could hold it as the pirates saw Toshi's body and advanced.

“She killed him!”

“Toshi!”

“Kill the magic user!”

Sadie ran to Adrian, who had just reached the top deck. She brought up her shield around both of them. “Stay back!”

Krieger knew they couldn't get through the shields. He motioned to his men. “Surround them. When their shields run out, kill them.”

Krieger turned to watch as the other two ships approached the cruise liner that appeared to be slowing down.

Sadie glowered at Adrian. “Now would be a good time to do something!”

Adrian sank to his knees, side aching and pinching. “The ship's empty. We're dead.”

Krieger heard that and laughed. “Safe Haven is gone and we didn't have to do anything!”

Adrian shut his eyes, breathing rough.

Sadie knew he was faking. “You have to get up and help us!”

Adrian stayed down, waiting and watching as three pirate ships surrounded the cruise liner.

5

“Put the ramps down! We will clear this ship!”

Pirates hurried to obey. Long ramps fell onto the rails. Men ran across, grinning at the sight of an empty cruise ship.

“Now!” Angela let go of the shield over the cruise ship that she’d been holding for the last ten minutes. She slid to her knees, gasping in air as the groups around her opened fire on the pirates boarding their boat from two sides.

Gus sent energy into Angela.

Spells flew across the deck, hitting the stunned pirates. Eyes exploded; bodies fell over.

Marc kept a tight shield over his kids as they ran toward a boarding ramp with Joey, Pam, Ray, and Morgan. He cringed as pirates ran forward, shooting. “Watch out!”

Cate fired her death charm to clear the path. Cody stayed on her heels as she broke away from their group and ran up the pirate deck toward the wheelhouse.

Marc couldn’t keep his shield over the kids as they got out of his range. He shoved men out of his way, firing his sonic gift in short blasts to avoid hitting any of their group. He punched, stabbed, and fired as he raced to reach them.

Pam, Morgan, and Ray stayed at the ramp to block the swarm of pirates rushing toward them.

On the other side of the cruise ship, the second group stayed together, fighting their way to the ramp as bullets hit their double shield and stuck. Kimmie, Zack, and Jeff took the lead, firing together. Wind and ice flew against the pirates.

Behind them, Brittani, Wade, and Debra brought up shields and held the ramp against the next swarm.

In the center of the ship, Angela concentrated, using the energy Gus had given her to search for the pirate leader. She felt Adrian's joy and Kendle's rage, but there was no sign of the pirate captain. She settled for the man handling the wheel of the ship that hadn't come to board them.

Omar cried out as pain slammed into his spine. He fell to his knees at the wheel, aware of men dropping all around him. He understood they had already lost this battle, but there was nothing he could do as his heart gave out.

6

Conner and Charlie aimed at the ship next to Adrian's wooden vessel, firing their strongest spells. They hit the wheelhouse and covered it in ice. Sparks shot into the air.

Krieger watched as his men were killed, stunned by the fast destruction. *My ship!*

Kendle saw it all. She also understood the pirates were going to lose.

So did Krieger. He punched Kendle's shield. "You swore to fight for us! Kill their leader and I will spare you!"

Kendle was running out of energy. She slowly nodded.

Krieger motioned his men to stop attacking her shield. "Give her room!"

Kendle lowered her shield, gathering energy. She turned toward Angela, narrowing in on the woman she loathed.

“Yes! Kill her!” Krieger hoped the loss of their leader would fracture their fighting groups and give his men a chance.

Kendle shut her eyes and fired.

Krieger screamed at the pain in his body. The men around him all stiffened, crying out. *She hit us!*

Kendle fired again.

The men around her shield shrieked as their bones began breaking.

Kendle brought her shield back up, gasping as the surviving pirates stabbed and punched it.

Krieger fought the agony to lift his gun as Kendle’s shield collapsed.

Bang!

Kendle dropped to her knees, blood blooming on her shirt.

Krieger stumbled to Adrian’s wheelhouse and grabbed the mike. He screamed as a rib broke. “Release the gas!”

Adrian could feel Sadie’s energy running out as she held her shield over them. Pirates who hadn’t been hit by Kendle’s spell renewed their stabs and punches, shouting ugly threats.

Adrian put a hand around her ankle.

“Kill them all; help save my camp.”

Sadie shook her head. “No!”

Adrian tried to smile. “You have to do what’s right. I believe in you. Do it now!”

Sadie let go of the shield and fired.

Flames spewed out and enveloped half of the furious pirates, sending up smoke and the awful stench of burning flesh.

Adrian rolled toward the rail.

Sadie knew he wasn't going to make it. She grabbed his arm and dragged him to the side, ducking and shoving through the remaining pirates.

Adrian held his breath as she lifted him up and tossed him over the side.

Sadie dropped to the deck below to avoid the gunshots and swords. She immediately stood up and fired a mental charm. "Attack each other!"

All over the ships, the same charm flew out, striking the doomed pirates.

"Attack each other!"

Screams echoed into the air.

Sadie ran back up the stairs as the pirates turned on each other. She grabbed Kendle's body and dragged her toward the rail.

"Leave me." Kendle groaned as pain slashed through her chest. "Let me die..."

Sadie threw her over the side.

Kendle hit the water with a splash and sank.

Sadie turned to face the few pirates still brave enough to challenge her. Flames shot from her hands.

The wooden ship began to burn.

Marc smelled smoke, but he didn't have time to figure out where it was coming from. He followed Cate and Cody as they slaughtered everyone in their path. Reluctant pride filled his mind. *They're definitely mine.*

Cate hit the man lifting his gun to fire from the shadows near the wheelhouse.

He screamed, falling to his knees.

Cate felt her energy running low. She clutched Cody's hand and fired again, sending ice through the wheelhouse. It spread over the console and the ceiling in thick layers that crackled and popped. Electrical equipment sparked, frying.

Cate fired a last blast and sagged against her brother. Her layer of ice shorted out the entire electrical system; flames rose from the console and were quickly extinguished by the melting ice.

Marc lifted her over his shoulder and turned as heavy steps ran toward them.

Cody lifted his hand; thunder boomed inside the ship, rattling the boat.

Marc leaned against the wall to stay on his feet as the vibrations shook the coming men to their knees.

Cody fired again, orbs glowing bright red.

"Look out!"

"The kid is one of them!"

The pirates tried to go back down the hall, panicking. Cody's sonic blast hit them in full force.

Marc watched in proud shock as the half dozen men died.

Cody stood in the doorway, little fists clenched. “This is my ship now! Get off!”

“Cody.” Marc forced out the words. “No survivors.” *Shields up!*

Descendant fighters brought up shields and held them.

Cody lifted both hands and sent a blast of sonic power that traveled each deck of the ship, dropping everyone in its path.

Marc scanned for survivors and found only their people on his grid. *We’re clear here!*

He waited for the other groups to call the same as Cody leaned against the wall next to him.

Cody looked up in tired satisfaction. “Did I do good?”

“Killing is never good.” Marc tugged the boy closer with his free hand. “But you carried out your job perfectly. The alpha will be happy.”

“Are you?”

Marc nodded. After witnessing what his kids could do, he wasn’t as scared for them anymore. “I’m proud of you in every way.”

Cody grinned at Cate. “Daddy’s proud of us.”

Cate hugged Marc’s shoulder. She didn’t say she loved him, but Marc felt it.

“I love you too.” It didn’t feel odd to Marc to have this bonding moment with so much death surrounding them. *It’s just who we are now.*

On the second ship, Zack blocked the hallway with his big body, shield glowing brightly as bullets slammed into the wall by him. “Get to the wheelhouse! Turn off that gas!”

Jeff kept his shield over Kimmie as they ran toward the bridge, impressed with the girl’s aim. She was using her fire skills now, but only hitting pirates and not catching anything else on fire.

Kimmie sent another strong blast of flames, blowing pirates off the side of the ship. She ran faster as green gas floated over the deck, thickening.

Jeff sent out a blast of wind while keeping the shield around Kimmie, grinning at being able to do both at the same time.

Kimmie used a stronger blast of fire on the wind-blown men who were now trying to run away. Flames began to melt them.

Jeff shoved two of them over the rail as they ran by, conserving his remaining energy. Most of the pirates were dead, but gas was still flowing from vents and it was getting thicker.

Kimmie ran into the wheelhouse; Jeff blocked the doorway.

“Which button?!” Kimmie began hitting them all.

Jeff pointed at the one he thought most likely.

Kimmie hit it, but the gas kept flowing.

Jeff scanned, not sure why it wasn’t working.

Kimmie slapped the console. “The control’s not here!”

Jeff realized she was right. “Fry it all!” He grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall holder as Kimmie shot flames at all the panels.

Equipment popped and sparked; the lights dimmed and then went out. Flames shot up.

Jeff quickly extinguished them.

“Did I get it?” Kimmie gasped in air, out of energy unless she used her reserves.

Jeff was also getting tired. “I think so.” He moved to the doorway, shield flickering. “Zack!”

Zack ran toward the bridge at Jeff’s call. He followed the trail of bodies.

“I can’t hold it!” Jeff let go of his shield. He and Kimmie immediately began to cough.

Zack widened his shield to include both of them.

“Thanks.” Jeff studied Kimmie.

“I’m okay.” She scanned him in return.

Jeff grinned at her. “I’m good.”

Zack turned toward them, face pale. “I’m in trouble.” Blood dripped down his pant leg.

“Alpha!” Kimmie didn’t have any energy left to help. “Alpha!”

Zack slid to his knees, hands over the bullet wound in his stomach. He shut his eyes and concentrated on holding the shield.

9

Angela waved at the group guarding the ramp to the left. “Go help Zack!”

Morgan, Pam, and little Joey took off across the bloody ramp.

Joey kept his doubled shield around them, happy to be part of the fight. He didn't have a gift to use yet, but he still kicked a dying pirate in the face as he went by.

Ray and the others added their shields to Angela's to stop the bullets and prevent the gas from being sucked down into their ship. All of them snatched longing glances at the beautiful island that was so close and yet out of reach as the gas continued to flow over the deck.

Angela moved to cover that ramp, energy running out as she struggled to hold her shield against the gas. It was dissipating, but not fast enough.

Angela swept the pirate ships, gratified to find all but one of them were disabled and the few remaining pirates were panicked. They were afraid to jump in the water because of the sharks, but the gas was killing them as fast as the descendants clearing those ships.

She stared at Adrian's burning boat, spotting a lone female fighting for her life.

Angela reluctantly unslung her rifle and aimed.
Bang!

Sadie stared in shock as the pirate about to impale her fell over with a hole in his chest. She looked toward the cruise liner and found Angela lowering her rifle. Sadie frowned as she ran toward

the side of the ship. She dove overboard, holding her breath.

“We have to get that last ship!” Angela gestured at Kenn. “It’s all on you now.”

“We’ll go with him!”

“We can help!”

Kenn frowned at Tommy and Quinn, but he didn’t refuse. He pointed at the two surprised teenagers behind Angela. “Let’s go.”

Charlie and Conner grinned as they followed Kenn down the ramp.

Tommy and Quinn exchanged dangerous looks as they did the same.

Angela swallowed her fear and held her shield. Like Marc, she didn’t want her son to fight. She wanted him to be below and protected. Instead, she was once again depending on Kenn to protect him.

Kenn knew. He hurried the boys down to the cargo area while giving instructions. “We stay together. If you run off without me, I’ll beat your ass when I catch up.” He grabbed the three kits that were packed and waiting by the lockers, tossing two of them to the excited teens. “Remember not to set the ship on fire. We need it.”

Tommy and Quinn already had their kits on. They got into the raft, sweeping the water as the cargo doors started to lift.

Both boys donned their kits as Kenn got into their last raft. It had been ready for hours. They climbed in and grabbed the handles, grinning at each other. They were thrilled to be going on a run

at all. Knowing it was the most important one sent their adrenaline through the roof.

“Lock it down!” Kenn glared at them as the raft began to slide toward the water. “Don’t let the emotions control your actions. You control them.”

“Yes, sir!” Charlie automatically fell back into their days in the military.

Conner hung his head, flashed to his time in the labs.

Confident he’d reminded them of their duty, Kenn finished the instructions in a quick burst. “I’ll follow. Stay together and remove everyone on that ship. Start at the top and we’ll work our way down from there.”

They all held on as the raft slid into the rough waves and bounced.

Debris and bodies littered the water around them as Kenn fired up the engine. He steered them out of that chaos and circled around their ship. He scanned for familiar bodies, but it was impossible to tell who was in the waves as the sharks grabbed bodies and ripped out chunks. The whales had moved on, but the sharks knew this was a good meal.

Kenn’s cool shield of battle fell down as the final pirate ship came into view. It was covered in furious men who were shooting at Angela’s shield and not getting through. *Keep using that ammo, gentlemen. It’s going to cost your lives.*

Kenn hurried them to the rear of that ship, hoping the smoke from Adrian's burning boat would cover their arrival.

Tommy swept the bloody, debris-littered water where Kendle had gone over. "Do you see her?!"

"No. Keep searching!" Quinn held on as the raft bumped into the rear of the pirate ship.

Kenn pointed at the ladder. "Get up there!"

Charlie and Conner went first. They hurried up and out of the way so the rest of the team could come up.

Kenn went next, not stopping to tie the raft. There wasn't time. The green gas was thickening as it shot from hoses in the side of this boat.

"Now!" Tommy grabbed the controls and steered the raft away; Quinn shoved Kenn off the boat.

Kenn managed to grab the bottom rung of the ladder, heart pounding as the two men stole the raft. "You fucking traitors!"

Charlie and Conner prepared to fire on them.

"Save it." Kenn pulled himself up the ladder, furious. "We'll handle them later. Mission first."

Kenn heard steps and shouts coming. He brought up his strongest double shield. "They know we're here. No mercy!"

The trio ran toward the steps that would take them to the top deck. Charlie opened mental doors, gathering energy for his first blast. "Ice!"

Conner chose a spell. "Blindness!"

Pirates rushing toward them fell, screaming.

“It’s cold! Stop the cold!”

“I can’t see!”

The boys ran by, drawing energy for their next spells.

Kenn drew both long knives from his belt and stabbed the wounded men as he followed. Blood began dripping onto the deck.

Charlie used ice again, mindful of the warning not to destroy the ship. A dozen pirates rushed him, lifting guns that were now out of ammunition.

Charlie opened another mental door as Kenn’s shield held the men back. Rage blasted out, hitting the group around the shield and many of the pirates running to join them.

Conner looked away as eyes exploded, spraying Kenn’s shield in gore. He fired the same spell as Charlie, not watching as it hit more of the men who were now getting scared. Several of them dove overboard to avoid the descendants.

Sharks rushed toward the new vibrations.

Charlie moved forward, jumping over the bodies.

Kenn stabbed as they went by, just to be sure the men were down.

Conner tried to keep up with Charlie, but odd screams drew his attention. He paused, head tilting.

Kenn turned and threw one of his knives. It stuck in the chest of a pirate sneaking up on Conner. “Keep up!”

Conner hurried to Kenn’s side. “Thanks!”

Kenn grabbed the teen's arm and pulled him along as he tried to keep his shield over Charlie.

Charlie was zeroed in on the wheelhouse like a magnet. He ran faster, firing rage with every step. It came from his hands, legs, chest. He let it all out. The frustration he'd been controlling for months spewed in repeated blasts that melted the pirates down to bones.

Kenn kept his shield around the angry boy, a bit stunned. *He could have killed me anytime he wanted to.*

Conner didn't fire again as they ran. He listened to that odd voice. *I think that's my dad.*

Kenn stumbled and recovered, now struggling to keep up. "Charlie! Wait!"

Charlie burst into the wheelhouse and kept firing.

Kenn stopped in the doorway as blood flew across the room, coating walls, panels, and the floor.

Conner peered in and threw up.

Charlie kept firing.

Kenn studied the consoles, but even without the blood, he couldn't read the language on any of the buttons.

Charlie used a wind spell to shove the green gas down into the ship where it began to knock out the few pirates who'd gone below to hide. He gasped in air, energy almost gone.

Kenn felt his energy running low as well. He pushed Conner into the gory room. "Your turn!"

Conner slipped and slid his way to the console, trying to pretend it was paint. *But paint doesn't smell like this!*

Conner swallowed more bile and leaned over the panel. He put both hands on it and concentrated.

The monitors lit up. Information began scrolling faster than Kenn could read. It sped up so much that he had to look away.

Sparks flew from the control panel; Conner retreated as small flames began to grow. "I fried it."

Kenn put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Use your ice or we'll lose this ship."

Charlie drew energy from Kenn as he fired a last spell.

Ice crawled up the walls and consoles, smothering the flames.

Kenn heard a faint scream and recognized it. He used the last of his energy to make his shield solid so Conner didn't have to listen to his father dying.

Conner turned, fury covering his face. "Let me out. I have to help him!"

Kenn pointed at the green gas covering the top deck of the ship. "We can't go until the gas dissipates."

Conner slammed his bloody fists against the shield.

Kenn held it, struggling.

Conner blasted Kenn's shield with his ice, trying to crack it. When that didn't work, he turned toward Kenn.

Thud!

Charlie lowered the gun as Conner fell forward. Kenn nodded at Charlie. “Good call.”

“He won’t be out long.” Charlie slid to the floor and leaned against the filthy wall. “I didn’t want to do it.”

“I know.” *Just like I don’t want to let Adrian die.* Kenn held the shield and hoped Angela still cared enough to save the man who’d started all of this.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
American Spirit

1

“**S**he’s almost out of energy.” Ivan could feel Angela’s edge of panic. “We have to go help her hold the shield!”

People looked at him in concern, but no one moved.

Neil and Kyle stood in front of the infirmary, listening to the gunshots, screams, and fighting above them. They were ready to fire their ugliest spells if any of the pirates made it down here.

Behind them, Samantha was standing in front of her twins, also ready to fire despite only being days out of giving birth. She doubted the pirates would reach them. Angela was guarding the ramp. *No one will get by her.*

In the hall outside the infirmary, everyone else was huddled on the seats and benches, including the normals. Ralph walked among them, offering comfort, as did Tim. At each end of the hallway, a line of Eagles were also waiting.

Dog paced in front of the lab, fur bushed up in preparation to defend the five cats behind the glass.

“She needs help.” Ivan scowled at everyone. “We all feel it.”

Kyle shook his head. “She ordered all of us to stay here.”

“She needs help!” Ivan’s anger flowed through the crowded hall. “She’ll die for them if we don’t go help her!”

Normals stared at him in dismay. The charm on them rattled, letting small bits of memory through.

Ivan glared back. “She’s doing all this for them!”

“It’s for us too.” Kyle wanted to go help, but Angela had told them all not to leave these posts or the fight would be lost.

Ralph knew what had to happen now. He faced the normal men and women with compassion and love. “It’s time to do our duty. We’ll go up and help her.”

“You want us to fight?!”

“We can’t fight pirates!”

Ralph kept his cool. “She needs your love. It fuels her. Without it, she’ll die, and we’ll all be lost.”

Fear snapped the charm Angela had used.

“It’s a trap!”

“They’re sending us up to die!”

The normal camp members began shouting and shoving, trying to run.

The Eagles blocked them, but it was clear that the one hundred and fifty-three normals weren’t going to be contained.

Ralph blew his whistle. “Listen to me!” He blew it again as terrified people turned his way. “They

need energy on the top deck or we're all going to die. They can't do it without us!"

People glowered at him in surprise and revulsion.

"She died for us once! She's not going to do it again!" Ralph walked toward the steps, furious. "Stop being sheep and help fight for your lives!"

"No! Don't go up there!"

"Ralph! Stop!"

Ralph blew his whistle again. "We're Americans! We don't run from a fight! Remember who we are!"

A few people reluctantly followed him.

The rest of the crowd muttered, embarrassed.

"It's time to repay the debt we owe to all the descendants who've died for us!" Ralph's anger hit them with the full truth. "We've let a few cowards convince us that she's evil. Deep down, you all know that's a lie."

A couple more brave souls stepped out of the line.

"I'm scared too, but I will still do what's right!" Ralph blew the whistle again as he reached the Eagles blocking the steps. "Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light..." The American national anthem began echoing through the corridor as Ralph went by the line of Eagles. "What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming..."

More normal camp members fell into the line.

The descendants protecting the kids and patients took up the song as well, heart filling with love for

their normal people. “Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight...”

The song swelled to a shouting crescendo as they all went up the steps to the top deck.

Ralph led them toward Angela and her circle of exhausted fighters, sending energy and hope. “O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming...”

Angela cried out as their energy hit her and strengthened the shield into a solid rock that let nothing through. She joined their singing as Panaji and Theo hoisted their flag. “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there...”

All over the ship, people finished the first part of the anthem together as the fight ended in their victory. “Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave... O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

The normals and descendants clapped and hugged as calls of all clear came from all of their groups on the other ships.

“It’s over.” Angela smiled as the wind shifted and began blowing the remaining gas out toward the open ocean. “We did it—together.”

2

“All clear!”

Angela’s call over their radios brought relief to most of the groups now controlling the wheelhouses

of the pirate ships. They moved onto the open decks, searching for any survivors they might have missed.

Marc didn't find any on their ship, but he still stayed close to his happy twins in case his scan wasn't picking up the threats. He was exhausted. He'd never thought holding a shield would drain his energy that fast. He now understood why Angela had made him a shield instead of a fighter. The kids never would have been able to do it and the gas would have knocked them all out without the shields.

Marc caught movement and narrowed in on a small raft reaching the tiny cove of the island. He identified Tommy and Quinn. There were at least two bodies in the center of the raft as well, but they weren't moving. Marc couldn't tell who they were.

“Drop all anchors!”

Angela's call brought the heavy sound of metal falling. It echoed across the pirate ships.

Marc went into the wheelhouse to do the same, motioning to the kids. “Stay right here. If you sense someone, come get me first.”

Cate spoke up when Cody continued to study the devastation they'd wrought on the pirates. “We will.”

Marc hoped the controls weren't so damaged that he couldn't drop the anchor. The strong ocean current was already pulling on the big ship.

He found the right button under the mess and was relieved when it worked. The huge anchor and

chain began to drop from the rear of the ship, banging and clanging.

Marc stared through the filthy window, eyeing the island they would be calling home for the next three years. *We're really here.*

He'd been worried about them making it so many times that he hadn't been sure this moment would come. Only Angela's strength and determination had held them together. *We owe her everything.*

Marc went back to the deck and put his arms around the kids, feeling a lot better now. They'd convinced him of the truth. *I didn't do anything wrong. This was all meant to be.*

Cate looked up at him. "Cody wants something from you."

Marc smiled down at the bloody boy. "What do you want?"

Cody grinned. "A mom."

Marc laughed, glancing toward the cruise ship where Angela was on the front deck, surrounded by camp members. "I may need some help with that."

3

Angela recovered quickly with so much energy being shoved at her. She used it to scan the water first. The sharks were still enjoying the meal, but the Ocean King wasn't missing out either. Angry waves were claiming pirate survivors before they could swim to safety.

The water was also claiming the two damaged ships. The one with the whale hole was already underwater except for the tall mast. Adrian's ship was still floating, but it was burning down. It didn't have long before it too would sink to the bottom of the ocean. The rest of the ships were still usable. They would have to be cleaned, and Theo's team would be busy for weeks repairing fried electrical systems, but they would be able to drain the fuel for their own ship, or even use the pirate vessels for the return to America. Everything had worked out almost exactly the way they'd needed it to.

She dug deeper, searching for injured fighters. She only found one, but it was bad.

Morgan felt her scanning them, but he didn't have time to answer as he dug in Zack's stomach for the bullet. He couldn't heal the wound until the slug was out. Morgan got the tip again and slipped off. "Damn it!"

Pam quickly wiped away the blood so he could see into the ugly hole.

Joey watched with the others, young mind flying on his success. He'd provided a shield for the team. He finally felt like he belonged with them.

Morgan got a hold of the bullet this time and gently tugged it out. Blood squirted from the hole. He dropped the slug and placed his hand over the wound, sending fire.

Zack screamed as the pain increased. Hot flames sank into his stomach.

Morgan drew back, wiping away sweat with his forearm. "I think I got it all."

Pam wiped around the burnt flesh. "You did." She smiled. "Good work!"

Morgan filled a syringe and gave Zack another light injection of morphine. "Find us a stretcher and a way back to our ship."

Pam and the others hurried to cover that while Morgan checked Zack's vitals again.

Zack drew in ragged breaths, fighting the pain.

Morgan gently smeared antibiotic ointment over the burn, then wiped his bloody hands. "We'll get you to the boss and she'll finish you off. I'm just too tired to do more."

Zack had been in this situation before and he'd seen teammates die. He knew there were no guarantees. He reached out a hand. "Please! Take care of my boys!"

Morgan flashed a fake smile. He didn't like how pale Zack was. He'd lost a lot of blood. "I will, but you'll be there, man. Just rest."

Zack shuddered, face going paler. "Promise!"

Morgan used the last of his energy to send healing orbs into Zack's weak body. "My word on it."

Zack relaxed as the pain faded. His eyes rolled back in his head. Clouds appeared.

Morgan screamed for Angela.

Angela ran up to the bridge. “Get me over there!”

Grant saw where she was pointing and began firing up the engines. He’d let them drift for the last ten miles to give them the element of surprise.

Angela couldn’t do anything from this far away. Morgan’s panic wasn’t good. It meant his gifts couldn’t handle Zack’s injury. Angela was worried that hers wouldn’t be enough either. She and Morgan had the same skills set when it came to healing, though he was now more practiced than she was.

On the deck, normals and descendants were still together, talking and pointing. Angela didn’t see any fear in those interactions, and only a little leeriness. It was encouraging. She hoped it was enough to prevent that war.

The ship started to inch forward through the debris littered waves. Pirate ramps teetered and fell off, making people jump and shout.

Angela waited at the top of the bridge steps for the right moment, hating the panic in Morgan’s mental shouts. As Grant began to swing them alongside the pirate vessel, she took off running as fast as she could.

People gasped and moved aside as Angela flew across the deck and leapt through the open spot where the stairs would have been connected.

Angela landed on the other deck and took off running again. She slid through the gore and quickly reached their only injured person.

Morgan looked up from Zack's side with withering skin. "I'm out."

Angela put a hand on Morgan and the other on Zack's still leg. She blasted them with all the energy she'd collected from the love of her people. Then she brought up a lifeforce and split it between them. It was her last one.

Zack and Morgan arched, both crying out at the pain as she healed them.

Ivan and Greg joined them a few seconds later. They'd seen her leap and followed without being told.

Ivan examined the exhausted, bloody team and waved. "Grant's got them lowering our ramps. Get down to the infirmary for a checkup and a shower."

Wade, Debra, and Brittani walked together. Pam and Ray waited for Morgan and Angela.

Ivan and Greg each took an end of the stretcher that was marked with a UN logo. It was clear where the pirates had been getting their supplies. The two men lowered it and helped Morgan lift Zack onto it.

Angela followed as they hefted up the stretcher and walked toward the ramp.

Morgan was flying high on energy now. He slid Joey onto his back, grinning at Pam.

Pam read his thought. "He's a sweet kid. He'll fit right in with us."

Joey wrapped his arms around Morgan's neck and hugged him tightly. *I'm happy now.*

Pam took Morgan's hand, ignoring the mess and bodies as they returned to their ship.

Ivan and Greg hurried Zack toward the ramp.

“Why didn’t they use their big guns on us?” Ivan had been worried about that for days. “They would have sunk us and maybe won the fight.”

Greg shrugged. “I assume they needed our ship or our supplies.”

“They needed our people.” Angela moved over the slick, bloody, bullet-ridden ramp back to their ship. “The pirates were scared of us after the detention center fight. The leader promised them women to rape, men to torture, and power to exploit. Sinking us would have cost them everything they were fighting for.” Angela moved toward the crowd on the deck, smiling and sending out waves of gratitude to the happy normals, and to Ralph.

That crowd cheered and clapped, surrounding Angela without fear.

Ivan was glad, but he was confused. “I don’t get it.”

“Ralph fixed our problem.” Greg was careful on the steps as they went down into the cruise ship. “They love her.”

Ivan frowned at the deadpan tone. “So do you.”

Greg looked him in the eye. “I don’t love Angela. I’ve never loved Angela.”

Ivan read Greg’s thoughts and realized he was serious. He snapped his mouth shut as he understood someone had charmed Greg. *That’s for the best.*

They moved the stretcher carefully around the corner and took Zack into the medical bay.

The people down here also clapped and cheered, but it was all for Zack. As their only injured member, his sacrifice was being honored.

Harry and Terry hurried over to help get Zack on a bed.

Samantha searched for Wade, frowning when she didn't find him. She moved toward the exit.

Neil stepped in front of her.

Samantha sighed. "Go find him. Ivan will stay with me."

Ivan nodded, a bit surprised she trusted him to be her guard.

So was Neil. He scowled at the man as he left.

Ivan chuckled. He moved next to Samantha and leaned closer. "Wade's fine. I saw him as we came down."

Samantha couldn't help the edge of panic in her voice. "Then why can't I get him on my grid?"

Ivan smiled at her. "Evolutions block the gift they're improving."

Samantha's eyes widened. Relief came into her face. "I forgot!"

"Well, you did have a lot on your mind." Ivan saw the hall was slowly emptying.

Greg went out and joined the crowd without being told. He was running on instinct these days. *It's great to have a break from those emotions.*

Next to him, Kyle glanced over in surprise. "You know."

Greg nodded. "I'm earning my demon."

Kyle didn't ask how that was possible. "What happens if those emotions come back?"

Greg didn't answer.

5

"This is Safe Haven Refugee camp. Come in, Pitcairn Island."

There was no answer.

Grant repeated the call, but he doubted anyone would answer even if they were listening to his calls. After seeing them decimate so many pirates, any people on the island would be terrified.

"I can't dock us here." Grant motioned to Shawn, who was in the XO seat. "Call the boss."

"I'm here." Angela jogged up the steps and joined them. "There was never a dock for big ships here. That's part of the reason why it's so perfect." Angela concentrated, bringing up her plans for this moment. "Get as close as you can and drop anchor. We'll spend the night there to organize a landing party. Once we set up a base camp, we'll take people over in small groups."

Grant used gentle hands on the wheel. "Sounds good. Do you think the camp members will go for it?"

Angela smiled brightly. "Of course. They'll be enjoying our celebration party tonight and then sleeping it off."

Grant chuckled. "Smart."

Shawn agreed, but he didn't join their amusement. He doubted all of their troublemakers would get drunk enough to forget they were so close to land.

Angela knew what he was thinking without reading his mind. "We'll spread the word that the island isn't safe yet."

Shawn frowned. "Is it?"

Angela sighed. "We won't know until we go in to set up a base camp."

"Kendle said it was empty..." Shawn grunted. "I should have known better."

"Me too, but I believed her." Angela shrugged. "It probably is empty, but I refuse to take the chance. She betrayed us too many times to take her word on it."

"Do you think she survived?"

Angela waved at the radio. "Tell them we're having a party tonight as soon as the ship is searched for stowaways and all the guard posts are at full capacity."

Grant picked up the mike.

Shawn scowled, but he didn't ask again. *I guess we'll find out together.*

Theo came to the steps as Angela walked down. "Can I go over and get started on an evaluation of the other ships?" He waved at the dozen volunteers he'd gathered. "I have help."

Angela nodded. "As soon as Grant drops the anchor, you can lower a lifeboat."

"Is there anything you want us to bring back?"

“We’re low on medical supplies, but don’t overload yourselves. We’ll be sending crews to strip everything over the next few days.”

“You got it, Boss.” Theo started to ask something, then thought better of it. He motioned to the volunteers and led them toward the lifeboats.

Angela listened to him give basic instructions, but she scanned the ships that were falling behind them now. Both sunken vessels were fully submerged. She doubted they would dive to salvage anything from either of those, but the other three ships were bobbing peacefully in the calm waves. The sharks were still snapping off pieces of bodies, but the whales were out of sight. Birds were even coming from the island to pick over the carnage. Angela found it peaceful. *Man, I’ve changed.*

She saw Panaji coming her way and squared her shoulders. *Time to get back to work.* “Do you feel like fishing for some new samples?”

Panaji grinned. “Was coming to ask that. I think you’re a mind reader.”

Angela laughed with him. Panaji was always good for a laugh or a kind comment. His attitude was great.

Tim joined her as Panaji left to gather help and equipment. “Got a minute?”

“Yes, but the speech you’ve practiced isn’t needed. I have no problem with you blessing our landing.”

Tim smiled in relief. “Good. No one has to know.”

Angela shrugged. “I don’t think anyone will mind, but do it quietly if you’re worried about that. We don’t need new drama right now.”

Tim opened his mouth to ask something else, then shut it. *I don’t need to know.*

Angela sighed as he walked away. None of her people were stupid. Many of them suspected she’d set this all up so they would have the extra ships. *And I did, but that’s not even close to all of it, my friends. I hope you never find out how much I really knew or how long I’ve known it.*

Angela smiled again as another group approached her. “I have work for all of you. Thank you for volunteering.”

6

“We want to go to the party.” Cody slid into the bed, yawning.

“Yeah!” Cate crawled in next to him, eyes drooping. “It’s our party.”

Marc pulled the blanket up over the kids who’d just showered. “You’ll get to go after you rest. You used a lot of energy.”

“Are you giving us a recharge?” Cody pried an eye open, ready to be scared again.

Marc shook his head. “Not me, and not tonight. We’re using people of matched levels now.”

Cody yawned again, body relaxing. “Good night, Daddy.”

Cate reached out. “Stay, Daddy?”

Marc settled in the chair next to the bed and took her hand. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

"Will you tell us a story?"

Marc smiled at Cody. "What would you like to hear?"

"Something nice."

Marc smothered a snort. *I may not know anything like that.* He ran through his memories and settled on something simple. "Once upon a time, there lived a widow woman and her son, Jack..."

Monica paused outside the door to listen. She'd come to give Marc a break, but he clearly didn't need it. She enjoyed the sound of his voice telling the fairy tale. Her mind drifted to childhood and listening to her father read that story to her at bedtime.

Molly saw her and came over. "You okay?"

Monica nodded. "Better now that we're here."

"Feel like going to the party?"

"Honestly, I'd rather get something to eat and take a nap. I'm beat."

"That sounds good." Molly led her toward the camp hall. "Want some company for your nap?"

Monica giggled. "I've been a bad influence on you."

Molly laughed. "Yep. I'm gonna spend a lot of time making you pay for it."

"Excellent."

People smiled at the women as they went by, moving aside to let them through. The halls were

crowded with celebrating people and those getting loved ones settled for a nap before the party.

The hall guards swept everyone tiredly, eager for their own break. Gabe and Peter had volunteered for this duty as soon as the fight ended. They hadn't been needed during the battle. It bothered them, so they'd come up here to cover a shift so they didn't feel guilty. Neither of them expected problems. Everyone was happy right now. Even Zack was in high spirits. Conner and Trinity had helped him so the boss didn't have to. The medics had insisted he stay overnight, but he was expected to make a full recovery.

Neither man spoke about guarding Tonya or the fact that Kenn knew they wanted her. Speaking it would only cause drama. Thinking about it had already given them away.

Peter hoped Kenn would understand that even though he had sparks with her, he would never make a move.

Gabe hoped he could resist trying. He wanted to have honor, but it was hard when he was so attracted to the fiery redhead.

Both guards saw Ian coming down the hall with a determined stride.

Gabe motioned. "You can get this one."

Peter laughed, stepping out of the guard booth. He stopped in front of Ian. "Shouldn't you be on duty right now?"

Ian frowned, glancing at his watch. "I have five minutes until mess duty."

“Early is always better.”

Ian stepped around him. “I’ll be on time.”

Peter’s hand settled onto Ian’s shoulder and clenched. “You should go now. Bernice is busy.”

Ian thought about fighting, but it wasn’t a good idea right now. There were too many people here. Someone would get hurt and then he would be in trouble.

Ian jerked away and stomped back through the hall to the steps.

Peter returned to his post, grinning. *That was fun.*

Gabe chuckled as he swept the hall again.

Bernice poked her head out of the cabin across from them. She blasted both men with a beautiful smile.

Peter smiled back, but he didn’t react to her natural charm.

Gabe stared in shock as thick sparks lit up his skin.

Bernice felt it too. She went in the cabin, slamming the door.

Gabe sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t need the drama.”

Peter sympathized. “I feel the same. I’ve chosen to be a relief source and forget about a relationship. It just causes trouble.”

Gabe snickered. “I hear Wade’s been giving pointers.”

“I was there. He gave us homework.”

Gabe moved closer to the soldier, voice lowering. “Care to share?”

Peter laughed. “Nope. You’ll have to attend the lessons like the rest of us.”

“When?!”

The laughter of the guards told the people in the hall that the trouble was over again for a while. Everyone was relieved. Safe Haven had been through enough problems to last several lifetimes. Even those who wanted adventure didn’t want it to reach previous levels. It was time for a long, peaceful break.

7

“How long until the party? I could really use a break.”

Jennifer checked her watch as she and Trinity moved through the lower deck. “About an hour. Boss said when the sun sets.”

“Cool.” Trinity took the opposite steps. “Catch you later.”

Jennifer nodded. All of them were tired. She wanted a nap too, but there was still too much to do. All the guard posts were covered and they’d gotten updates from everyone, but she still needed to check on the kids before she handed her shift over to Debra and Jayda. Angela was letting the Eagles pick their teammates for tonight from volunteers because so many of the descendants had worn themselves out during the fight and needed a recharge. She also

wanted those people to be able to spend time at the party.

Jennifer didn't plan to join in the celebration. She would crash hard as soon as her head hit the pillow. *I just want to stay awake long enough for Kyle to finish his shift and join me.*

"I can't." Kyle came from the employee hall, smiling tiredly. "Marc asked for my help later. You'll have to sleep with the kids this time."

Jennifer yawned. "Okay. What are you guys doing?"

"I think he wants to go collect the rest of the medical supplies that Theo and his team couldn't fit in the lifeboat. We're low."

"Be careful."

"I will." Kyle kissed her cheek and went back into the employee hall to finish his check of those dim passages.

Jennifer went to the play area and checked in with the guards there. The sunset through the windows was amazing. She stared at it in longing. *This time tomorrow, I might be watching a sunset from land.*

Brittani handed her the update sheet. "I can't wait. Hope I remember how to walk."

Jennifer chuckled. Land sickness was the least of her worries. "I don't care if I fall down every five feet. It will be worth it." She studied the woman. "I'd have thought you'd be helping your parents in the mess. I hear your mom's making cherry tarts again."

Brittani shrugged. After the fight, she'd come here to help. "I'll be up there later."

Jennifer saw the woman's eyes go over the happily playing kids. Jennifer scanned again and found a ring on Brittani's finger that hadn't been there before.

Brittani put a finger to her lips.

Jennifer grinned. *Congratulations.*

Thank you.

Are you happy?

Brittani blushed.

Jennifer laughed. "Awesome." She walked toward the exit, eager to get her shift done. "Call me if you need me."

"You know it." Brittani swept the happy kids again, mind at peace. The short wedding and honeymoon had been perfect. She and Daryl planned to announce their marriage later. Right now, they were enjoying their secret. They both knew it wouldn't last long, but they weren't hiding it because they were ashamed. It was a small part of their new life together that they weren't willing to share yet. *Until we're ready, our marriage just belongs to us.*

Chapter Thirty

Stay Away From Me

1

“**W**e’re making a lot of noise.”

Trent shrugged. “The island belongs to us now. It’s okay to make noise.”

“If it’s clear.” Ian didn’t trust Kendle’s stories.

Trent grunted. “If it’s not, we’ll handle it.”

“We can’t go in and take over. It’s not the 1400s anymore.”

“I’m sure the boss has it covered.”

Ian wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t protest further.

Trent sighed. “There are three more islands close to here. It’s unlikely that all of them are occupied.”

“Yeah! I forgot.” Ian smiled. “We’re all good then.”

“Yep. We can finally relax and live.”

“Until we have to go back for the final fight.”

Trent scowled. “Why do you have to be such a downer?”

Ian laughed. “Just keeping it real.”

“Well, stop it for now. We’ve earned three years of peace and I want it. So does everyone else.”

Ian studied the partying people. It was great to see everyone happy and not fighting. Those who

had grudges were putting them aside for tonight. Even the cooks were all here now, enjoying themselves. Thelma and Dwight were dancing and laughing like a young couple in love. Ian looked over and found Trent staring at them in longing. He smiled. “Your turn will come. Have faith.”

Trent chuckled. “It’s all good. I’m joining the relief source lessons.”

“Me too!”

Across the room, Wade rolled his eyes. “I’m gonna be sorry for agreeing.”

Neil snickered. “Yep. You’ve given up strange for telling stories about your time of getting strange.”

Wade’s voice softened. “It’s worth it.”

Both men turned in tandem, sensing Samantha’s approach.

Samantha grinned at them. “Who wants to very gently dance with me?”

Neil moved forward.

Wade observed them for a minute. The babies were with the den mothers so Samantha could join the celebration. He knew she wouldn’t stay long, but... Wade left the ballroom to check on the newborns.

Samantha rested her head on Neil’s shoulder. “He’s twitchy.”

Neil nodded. “I like it.”

“So do I.”

Neil decided now was a good time for the next step. “I requisitioned us a bigger bed.”

Samantha blushed. “Okay.” It would be a while yet before she could have sex, but the thought of sleeping between the two men in her life lit her up like a torch.

Neil kissed her neck, then stopped. He had tight control over himself. *Killing people will do that.*

Samantha squeezed his hip. “Stop it.”

Neil sighed. “Sorry.”

“Let it go. I have.”

Neil knew she was lying. It made him love her even more. “Are you getting tired?”

“Yes.”

Neil led her to the row of chairs, where several people were resting. He got her settled. “Would you like a drink? You can have milk, water, juice, or a Shirley Temple.”

Samantha made a face. “Just water.”

Neil went to get a bottle from the cooler that the cooks had brought in.

Samantha smiled at the happy people, almost unable to believe the trip and her pregnancy were over. *Soon, I’ll feel like myself again.*

Courtney was sitting next to Samantha. “Congratulations on the little sweeties.” Courtney grinned. “Don’t ask me to babysit.”

Samantha laughed. “I heard the baby class didn’t go so well.”

“Not at all. Monica was hiding under the table most of the time. We did learn a few things, though.”

“Like how to duck?”

“Yep.” Courtney stiffened as Kenn and Tonya came into the ballroom. She forced herself to ignore them, heart still hurting. Tonya had convinced her the descendants would try to help the baby, but she didn’t have faith in them.

Samantha took her hand. “It’ll be okay. Angela wants all the babies. She’ll help you.”

“Thanks.” Courtney saw Kenn lead Tonya onto the dance floor. She stood up, forcing a weak smile. “I’m going to go get a shower. Have fun.”

Samantha watched her leave, frowning.

Tonya also caught Courtney’s exit. She sighed. “You should go make sure she’s okay.”

Kenn frowned. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Tonya stepped out of his arms. “Go on. She needs you.” Tonya waved at Peter. “Dance with me?”

Peter shook his head. “Hell, no!”

Tonya chuckled as she walked over and joined Samantha on the chairs. “My feet hurt too much anyway.”

Kenn reluctantly left the hall. He tracked Courtney by her misery. *She’s crying. I hate it when she does that.*

Courtney looked up as the office door opened. She stared at Kenn, not hiding anything.

Kenn went in and shut the door. “We need to talk about the future.”

“I want to keep the baby.”

Kenn sat across from her, sighing. “I don’t.”

“You don’t get a choice!”

Kenn refused to argue with her. “Angela will try to heal it—before it’s born. So will Morgan and the others.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

Kenn rested his arms on the table. “The medics will recommend abortion so the baby doesn’t have a bad life.”

“It’s just a little baby!” Courtney burst into harder tears.

Kenn let her cry, not sure what to say. He wanted to help her, but he also wanted the proof of his indiscretion gone.

“Help me!”

Kenn slowly nodded. “I’ll try. But I can’t support you keeping it if the baby will be sick all its life. That’s not fair.”

“You just want it gone!”

Kenn grimaced. “I’m sorry. I’m trying not to feel that way.”

“Bastard!”

Kenn reached across the table. He blasted her with a calming spell.

Courtney wiped her face, calming, but her mind raced. “I need you on my side.”

Kenn decided it was time for complete honesty. “Tonya told me why you want the baby. I’m flattered you want to protect me, but I don’t need it. Angela has the normals in line now.”

Courtney rose, coming over to him. She knelt by his chair and took his stiff hand. “I love you.”

Kenn felt that unwanted spark with her again. It was the same as in the mountain. *I still want her.*

Courtney felt it. She placed a hand on his tense knee. "I know you feel it too."

Kenn froze. *Come on, brain!*

Courtney leaned in. "I need you. Not the Eagle or the fighter who defends the light. I need the evil bastard who was willing to kill to keep his family together." She kissed him before he could answer.

Kenn growled, jerking her against his chest as he ravaged her mouth.

Courtney moaned against his rough lips. *Yes!*

Kenn tried to fight the lust and the feeling of being accepted for who he really was. *If I'd met you first!*

Kenn stilled. *But I didn't.* He let go and pushed her away. "I'm not that man anymore."

He stood up and moved toward the exit. "Stay away from me."

Courtney sobbed as he left, slamming the door.

Kenn went straight back to the ballroom. He scanned for Tonya, mind open for everyone to read.

Tonya caught it all. She smiled softly.

Kenn went to her, not sure what would happen now.

Tonya stood up and took his arm. "Dance with me."

Kenn let her lead him onto the dance floor, heart thumping.

Tonya held him tightly. "I had to know."

Kenn held her gently, moving them through the steps without thinking. “Now we both do.”

Tonya kissed his tense neck. “It’s okay. We’re okay.”

Kenn buried his face in her soft hair, emotions overflowing. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“I always will.”

Kenn let his heart have control. “I want to marry you.”

Tonya smiled. “I want that too.”

Kenn stared over her shoulder at the couple coming into the ball room.

Angela locked eyes with him.

Kenn shuddered. *I’m sorry!*

Tonya knew. “I can’t compete with that one.”

Kenn forced his eyes back to Tonya. “You don’t have to.”

“Good. She’s set the bar too high for any woman to reach.”

Marc caught it all. He wrapped Angela up when she turned to him, feet moving through the motions while his mind flew over what he’d just witnessed. *I thought our drama was over!*

Angela snorted, plastering on a fake smile as Marc twirled her and brought her back into his arms. *Some things don’t end until you die.*

Marc chuckled. “And then they haunt someone else, right?”

Angela nodded, aware of happy people clapping and surrounding the day’s hero—Ralph. “And sometimes you have to live with it forever.”

Marc heard the tone, but he didn't comment on it. "A few of us are going out tonight."

"Happy hunting."

Marc frowned. "Don't you want to know where and why?"

"Nope." She smiled brightly. "I trust you to make the right choice."

Marc flashed to their dream walking and their missing demons. His lips thinned. "What if I don't?"

Angela kissed his cheek as the music ended. "Then we'll try to live with those ghosts." She went to join the women chatting on the chairs.

Marc left the ballroom, subtly motioning his chosen few to follow. *It's time we ended this once and for all.*

Everyone turned as Daisey and a group of normal camp women came in with balloons, a banner, and a cake. Clapping echoed through the room.

Samantha blinked in surprise. "For us?"

Daisey came over and tied two blue balloons around her wrist. "Of course." She hugged Samantha. "Congratulations!"

Samantha held onto the chair arm, trying not to cry. *I didn't think they cared.* "Thank you!"

Neil was also surprised. After what he'd done, he'd assumed the normals would never forgive him. Many of the descendants certainly hadn't.

Ralph blew on his whistle.

Two hundred people turned toward him, quieting.

Ralph waved. “Get everyone a glass. We have some toasts to make!”

People laughed and clapped as they understood it was a happy whistle this time.

Angela casually moved to the rear of the group, glad everyone was having a good time. She inched toward the door.

Ivan saw it. He fought the urge to stop her. He turned back to Ralph and listened to the first toast.

“Here’s to the new twins in Safe Haven!”

Angela slipped out while people were distracted.

Jennifer came in through the opposite door, searching for her target. She spotted Cathy and Timmy at a small table. They were gazing at each other and ignoring the dirty looks some people were giving them.

Jennifer stopped by their table. “Please follow me.”

Cathy immediately cleared her mind.

Timmy frowned. “Why?”

“It’s time for our evaluations.” Cathy slowly stood up.

Jennifer led them from the ballroom, digging into their minds.

Jeff met them in the hallway, eyes glowing bright red.

Cathy froze.

Timmy looked between them, confused. “What’s going on?”

Jennifer fired a powerful spell that took Cathy to her knees. She fired a second time, locking Timmy down. Both targets tried to shout for help, but Jennifer’s new enforcer snare was absolute. They could see and hear, but they couldn’t move or even mentally call for help.

Jeff came over and hefted Cathy up. He lifted her over his shoulder and vanished into the employee hall.

Jennifer knelt in front of Timmy, aware of his growing rage. “I’m going to tell you the truth.” She shoved into his mind and showed him what Cathy had planned.

Timmy stiffened. *She was going to leave me behind!*

“After getting what she wanted, she was going to take off and join Kendle.” Jennifer didn’t let go of the boy yet. “She’s a predator.”

She loves me!

“Maybe. But she already packed her bags. She was leaving tonight.”

Timmy thought of Cathy’s soft words asking him to come back to her room.

Jennifer nodded. “After, she planned to jump ship and swim to shore. She never had any intention of marrying you.”

Timmy struggled. *It can’t be true. She loves me!*

Jennifer sighed. “We’re putting her in the brig for this reason. You can talk to her and then the boss

will pass sentence on her.” Jennifer helped him up. “I’ll let go of you as long as you don’t scream. There’s no reason to interrupt the party.”

Timmy slowly nodded. *I need to know the truth.*

“Good.” Jennifer unlocked him and took his arm. “We’ll go by her cabin first so you can see her packed bags for yourself.”

Timmy went without fighting.

Jennifer monitored his thoughts as they walked, but she didn’t keep trying to convince him. She opened Cathy’s cabin door and stepped back.

Timmy went to the closet and opened it. Two full bags and a bulging kit sat at his feet.

Timmy knelt and unfastened the kit. An envelope sat on top of ration bags and magazines. It was addressed to him.

“Go ahead.” Jennifer stood in the doorway, sorry for his pain.

Timmy opened the letter.

Dear Timmy,

I’m sorry it had to happen this way. I’m just not the marrying kind. Please don’t hate me. You were the best hunt I ever had. I’ll think of you often.

Cathy

“Hunt?”

Jennifer sighed. “She’s done this a lot, I think. She finds a young man like yourself and convinces them she’s in love. After she has some fun, she ends things and moves on to the next one.”

Timmy stood up, letter clutched in his tight grip. “She lied.”

“Yes.” Jennifer tried to find a good spot for him. “At least you didn’t give yourself to her. Now, you can find someone...” Jennifer stopped, heart dropping at his blast of fury. “We’re too late.”

“Last night.” He stared at the messed bed where he’d lost his virginity to a woman he’d thought he would be with forever. Tears rolled over his cheeks and dripped to the floor. “She used me.”

Jennifer felt his anger coming. “Let’s go to the brig.”

Timmy marched from the cabin with the letter still in his grip.

Jennifer followed, waving to Francesca as she went by. “Clean out that cabin. She won’t be needing it anymore.”

Timmy increased his pace until he was flying through the hall. *She used me!*

Jennifer hurried to catch up. She finally did as he entered the brig.

Cathy looked up from inside the cell. She paled as she saw the letter in his hand.

Timmy threw it through the bars. “The best hunt?!” He slapped the cell door. “You used me!”

Cathy didn’t answer, aware of Jennifer now whispering in Jeff’s ear.

Jeff turned to glower at Cathy with the fury of hell burning in his eyes.

Cathy shivered. *My life is over.*

Timmy slapped the bars again. “Say something!”

Cathy grinned at him without hiding anything. There wasn’t a need to lie anymore. “Thank you for the great fuck.”

“You evil bitch!”

Jennifer pulled on Timmy’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go to the medic.”

“Why? I’m not hurt physically.” He glared at Cathy. “I hope they execute you.”

Jennifer got him to the door. “We have to make sure she didn’t infect you with anything.”

Timmy’s rage hit a new level. He lunged toward Jeff, grabbing at his gun.

Jeff put a strong hand over Timmy’s, shaking his head. “That’s not your job, son.”

Timmy let go as Jennifer hit him with another lock. *Let me go! I want her dead!*

Jeff shook his head again. “I won’t let you carry that weight. Go to the medical bay now.”

Timmy had to obey.

Jeff turned toward Cathy, orbs lighting up bright red as he moved toward her cell. *I’ll carry that weight for you.*

“Help! Help me!”

Jennifer waited for Timmy to react, expecting his emotions to insist that he go save her.

Timmy lifted his chin and kept walking.

There was no one else to hear Cathy’s shouts. They were all at the party.

“She’s dying.” Tommy rose from Kendle’s body, weary and depressed. “There’s nothing I can do.”

Quinn studied the small cabin that was layered in dust and bad vibes. “We need Morgan.”

Tommy snorted, wiping his hands. He’d gotten the bullet out and stopped the bleeding, but Kendle’s pale face said it wasn’t enough. “We’re on our own now.”

Tommy went to the front door, staring at the small campfire where Adrian and Sadie were sitting. “Until Marc lands tomorrow and then we’re screwed.”

Quinn patted his wet gun. “We’ll handle him.”

Tommy snorted. “You’re an idiot.”

Quinn followed him out onto the small, dark porch. “This was your bright idea.”

“Yeah. I’m an idiot too.”

Both men turned toward the shore. They couldn’t view the cruise ship for all the trees, but they could hear the music.

Sadie motioned toward the fire. “I made coffee.” She was glad to have the two able-bodied men, but she hoped Kendle died. *It’s what he wants.* She looked over at Adrian.

Adrian didn’t respond. He was leaning against a fallen log, not moving or talking.

Sadie frowned. “What are you waiting for?”

Footsteps sounded through the trees, cracking brittle branches.

“That.”

Quinn drew his gun.

Tommy leaned against the porch rail. *This is what we get for betraying Angela. The pirates here will kill us all.*

“It’s not pirates.” Adrian sighed deeply, exhausted from his brush with death. Sadie had pulled him from the water, but staying afloat until she found him had been hard. Sharks had ripped apart bodies all around him. If not for the debris he’d found to cling to, he would have drowned.

“That would have gone against our deal with the ocean.” Marc stepped into the firelight. “That’s why none of you are dead even though you all should be.”

Sadie scrambled to her feet, gathering her remaining energy to fight.

Marc stopped and glared.

Kyle and his chosen escorts came from the trees and lined up on either side.

Adrian stared back in resignation. *It always comes down to this.*

Marc nodded. “It always will.”

Quinn waited for the fight to start, already aiming at Marc.

Tommy didn’t move or meet the eyes of the former teammates who were glowering at him.

Sadie frowned. “What are you waiting for?!”

“Sit down.” Adrian’s voice hardened. “Now.”

Sadie reluctantly sat next to him, but she stayed ready to fire her strongest spell.

Marc looked at Quinn.

Quinn flushed. “Fuck you. You’re not the boss anymore!”

Marc lifted a brow at Tommy.

Tommy sighed, feeling a moment of hard truth approaching. “I’m sorry. Love screwed my mind.”

Marc nodded. “I get that. And I can almost forgive it, except you’re here with the traitor.”

“It was the closest place...” Tommy let the truth out. “And I’d rather be with the traitor than you.”

Marc’s face iced over, but he didn’t respond to the betrayal. He looked at Sadie next.

Sadie tensed. “I’d never flip on him. Don’t even try.”

“I had to be sure.” Marc turned toward the cabin, able to feel Kendle fighting for her life.

Quinn and Tommy advanced together while Marc’s escorts stayed where they were.

Marc didn’t stop. He caught Quinn’s gun and snapped his wrist with one hand while he swung on Tommy with the other.

Both men went down, with one of them screaming.

Marc kicked Quinn in the face, silencing him.

Tommy didn’t try to get up. He waited for death.

Marc went up the steps and into the cabin.

Adrian put a hand on Sadie’s wrist when she would have tried to help the two fallen men. “Just wait.”

“Because he’s not done?”

Adrian nodded, voice tired. “Everything rests on this moment.”

All the witnesses waited, listening.

Marc pulled a chair over to the bed and sat in it, studying her. The bullet wound was bad. Without healing or a real medic, she wouldn’t last until daylight. “Kendle.”

Kendle’s lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes. “Marc?”

Marc watched her face light up, hating the old feelings when she stared at him in adoration and his heart thumped. He couldn’t deny the emotions at that moment, but it wasn’t as strong as it had been. Her constant betrayals were killing the love he had for her.

Kendle groaned as pain shot through her gut. She refused to ask him for mercy even though she knew death was coming. She wished things could have been different.

Marc swept the cabin. “This is where you lived.”

“With Luke. Luke’s cabin.”

“He was your first love.”

“Yes.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “...was a good man.”

Marc watched her face cramp up from the pain. He slowly leaned forward and put his hand over her nose and mouth.

Kendle didn’t fight. She stared into his eyes as her air quickly ran out. *I’m glad it was you.*

Love hit Marc in ugly ways, showing him their fights, their bonding moments, and how she'd always tried to be whatever he needed.

Marc took a seat on one of the dusty benches and let out a hard sigh. "We have to talk."

Kendle perched on the bench across from him, trying to brace to be told to stay away once they reached his camp.

"The opposite, actually."

Kendle stared in surprise. "I don't understand. You love her. Why have me?"

Marc couldn't refuse to answer, though it hurt. "She cares for someone else too. And someday, she'll leave me for him."

Kendle took that in with a burning gut and a sickened heart. But she didn't protest. Marc was her lifeline right now. She needed him.

"And I've needed you, as well. It will depend on her, when we get there."

Kendle understood in one quick blast of insight. "You want me in case she's with him now."

Marc dropped his head to his hands. "Yes."

His pain crushed Kendle. "She won't."

"You don't know them."

"I know you. She feels the same. You wouldn't need someone who would betray you that way. She'll be waiting." Kendle went to the door, more upset than he knew.

"And if not?"

"Then I will be."

Marc sat up and gave Kendle a gentle nudge. She shot up as if he'd slapped her.

Marc grabbed her, putting his hand over her mouth. Just me.

Kendle calmed.

Marc took his hand away, but he didn't shift her off his lap. The need to be close to someone right now was on him in thick waves. "May I?"

Kendle felt the shaking start. She wasn't scared of Marc, but she was terrified of herself. What if she reacted badly?

"Shhh..." Marc leaned forward, eyes closing. "Angie."

Kendle stiffened, but the feel of his kiss wasn't one to refuse. Her lids fluttered closed and her arms came up to hold him. Luke!

Marc didn't feel any sting. It wasn't Kendle in his arms, it was Angie and in that one kiss, he gave her his goodbye.

Kendle was crying when he pulled back. She swiped at the tears. "Can we go kill something now?"

Marc slowly removed his hand.

Kendle drew in a ragged breath and coughed. She groaned again as the pain increased. "Do it. I deserve it!"

Marc nodded. "But I can't. I love you enough to forgive you your weaknesses." Bright blue light flew from his chest and surrounded her.

Outside the cabin, Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. “He made the right choice.”

“I don’t understand.” Sadie studied the light shining through the dirty windows of the cabin. “I thought he would kill her, not help her.”

Adrian let go of Sadie’s wrist. “He faced the truth; he needs her, and she’s not completely lost or she wouldn’t have helped them kill the pirates.”

Sadie still didn’t understand, but she was glad the mood was better. “It’s over now, right?”

“No.” Adrian was grateful for the painkillers they’d collected from the debris. *Maybe I won’t feel it when Marc snaps my neck.* “It’s my turn now.”

Sadie panicked. She shoved him down and leaned over him in defense.

Adrian chuckled through the uncomfortable position. “You’re a good girl.”

“I love you. I have to protect you.”

“I’m a bad man who will use you in place of who he really wants.”

Sadie didn’t move, but her face twisted. “I should have let you drown.”

“Yes, but Marc will rectify that.” Adrian forced her to move so he could sit up. “Don’t interfere. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Like hell!”

“Sadie.”

“No! I won’t let him kill you!”

Adrian grabbed her arm and pulled her close. He pressed a light kiss to her lips. “Go get Quinn into the cabin and stay there.”

Sadie teared up. “Don’t do this.”

Adrian used a weak blast of sleep on her.

Sadie tried to fight it, but she was too tired from the fighting and the water rescues. She slumped over on the soft dirt.

Adrian scooted away from her so she wouldn’t be hit in the crossfire.

Marc appeared on the porch. He glared at Adrian with open hatred.

Adrian leaned against the log. “Just get it over with.”

Marc still wanted Adrian dead as much as he ever had. He moved toward the fire.

Kyle and the others braced for it, all sure Adrian was finally going to die at Marc’s hands.

Marc stopped a few feet away, not digging into Adrian’s thoughts. None of it mattered now. “You don’t deserve Angela’s love.”

“I know.” Adrian smiled as his mind filled with images of their moments, their bond. “Tell her it was my honor.”

“Tell her yourself.” Marc turned and walked away.

Everyone gaped in shock.

Marc kept walking, no longer fighting with himself over it. He signaled for his escorts to follow. “Adrian owes us everything. We’ll make sure he pays that debt in full.”

Marc arched as his demon returned, filling his mind and heart with fresh power and with peace.

You made the right choice!

Marc chuckled as pleasure lit him up. “Welcome back.”

Kyle and the others followed, confused but relieved. None of them wanted Adrian dead anymore. They would never trust him again, but without his dream, they wouldn’t have their current lives and families.

Adrian watched them go, stunned. “I didn’t think he was capable of putting the greater good over his hatred and jealousy.”

“I did.” Angela stepped from the darkness behind the cabin.

Adrian lit up, heart pounding. “Angie!”

Angela joined him at the fire, sinking down within touching distance. She scanned Sadie. “I see you have a new skank.”

Adrian laughed through his physical pain.

Angela soaked up the sound, heart finally easing from the dread she’d been feeling since they were split up. She reached over and took his hand.

Sparks flew up his arm and sank into his body, healing and hurting.

Adrian suffered it with a smile, unable to look away from her. “Will you stay?”

She nodded. “For a bit.”

“Good.” Adrian leaned forward without pain and retrieved the cup Sadie had put out for him. He held it out to her.

Angela took the coffee and leaned against the log. She listened to the crackle of the fire and the happy noise of the people on her ship. “We did it.”

Adrian tensed as she leaned against his shoulder. He slowly put an arm around her, stifling a groan when she cuddled into his embrace. “You did it. They’re safe for years now because you were strong enough to pull them through hell.”

Angela didn’t correct him. She inhaled deeply of the scent that was uniquely Adrian. “You told me getting them here would be the hardest thing I’d ever do. It was.”

“What was the worst?”

She shuddered, voice cracking. “Not being able to tell Marc the truth.”

“That you knew all of it would happen, even up to this point?”

“Yes.” She shuddered. “Not changing those moments was the hell.”

Adrian kissed the top of her head; sweet vanilla filled his nose. “I’m proud of you.”

Angela smiled at that old feeling she was so addicted to. “Say it again.”

Adrian chuckled. “I’m proud of you. And I love you.”

“I love you too.” Angela sat the cup down and let him hold her close.

Adrian felt her relax. He refused to think about anything. *I just hope this moment never ends.*

Chapter Thirty-One
It's Not Just You

1

Kyle paused as they neared the tied up lifeboat. He scanned again to be sure. “We’re one short.”

Marc shook his head. “No, we’re not.” He grinned at Kyle. “She was with us the entire time. You missed it?”

Kyle groaned. “I saw six Eagles in black and assumed they were all men you’d picked.”

Marc shrugged. “I picked five of you.”

Kyle watched as Marc kept walking toward the boat. “Are we leaving her here? With him?”

“Yes.”

“Why? He can’t be trusted.”

“No, but she can. I know that now.” Marc gestured toward the cruise ship where the party was now in full swing. “She sacrificed everything to get us here. She deserves this.”

The men were proud of Marc, but they didn’t want to leave the boss alone on an uncleared island with a group of traitors.

Marc knew. “I’m staying too. Go on. Make sure people are ready for tomorrow. It will be a busy day.”

Kyle got the other men into the boat and joined them, relieved. “Any messages for the camp?”

“Our enforcer already has it covered.”

Kyle grinned as he realized Marc had known Angela was abandoning them for the night.

“You keep underestimating the boss. Angela covered it before she left. I didn’t know until we reached this shore line and one of us disappeared.” Marc turned away before Kyle could apologize. *At some point, they’ll all understand what I now know in my heart. Angela can always be trusted to put them first. She’s the alpha.*

Marc’s demon approved. *Our time apart has been good for you.*

Marc moved into the jungle, not minding the few bugs or the darkness. *Just don’t ever leave again, okay?*

The demon chuckled. *Yes, Master!*

Marc heard a splash and stopped. It was followed by the shouts of startled men, and then laughs.

Marc turned to find Dog running toward him. Water dripped from his fur. “Did you swim all the way from the boat?”

Dog shook wildly, spraying Marc with salty water.

Marc laughed. “I guess so.”

Dog heeled as Marc resumed walking. The ground under his paws felt amazing.

Marc agreed. With his demon ready to do battle and his friend at his side, it almost seemed like the

world was right again. He moved toward the main town he'd pulled from Kendle's thoughts, eager to explore their new home.

Dog looked up. *You are not joining Angela?*

"Not right now." Marc rubbed the wolf's ears, being careful of the injury that hadn't fully healed yet. "Are you okay for a little run?"

Dog chuffed and took off.

2

Kendle staggered from the bunk and took Quinn's hand as Tommy carried him in.

Weak blue light healed his broken nose. He opened his eyes, groaning. "Shoot him!"

Tommy got Quinn into the chair at the small table. "It's all over. You lost."

Tommy stayed back so she wouldn't use the last of her energy to help him. The swelling jaw wasn't a big deal; Marc letting him live was.

Quinn looked around and spotted Kendle. He assumed she'd healed him. "Thank you."

Kendle nodded at Quinn, glad she'd been able to help him. She had very little energy, but Marc's healing light had brought her back. She was happy to share.

Quinn ogled her in open need.

Tommy sighed in annoyance as he sat down next to Quinn. "Let her breathe, man. She's still wearing a bloody shirt with a bullet hole in it!"

Kendle smiled at both of them. “Would you like to stay with me?”

Quinn nodded right away.

Kendle lifted a brow at Tommy when he didn’t answer. “Can’t share?”

Tommy snorted. “You know I can. I just don’t want an invite if it’s forced.”

“It’s not. I need both of you.” Her smile faded. “But not here. I have to be as far from Marc and Angela as I can get.”

Tommy thought about it. “We could go to the other side of the island.”

She nodded. “In the morning.” Kendle grinned. “It feels amazing to be back on land.” *And to be alive.*

Quinn hopped up to get his kit. “I’ll cook a meal.”

Tommy went to the rear door. “I’ll get the power on.”

Neither man needed her to tell them how to do those things. That pleased Kendle. It also made her sad. She looked forward to learning from them, but each teaching moment on this island would remind her of Luke and their time together.

Kendle went to his rocking chair and sat. When the tears came, she let it happen.

Quinn came back in and started preparing the ingredients for a large meal. He wanted to comfort her, but he knew Kendle needed to mourn the life she’d had here. He kept his distance and hoped she was able to let Luke go this time.

Tommy went to retrieve his kit from the porch, not glancing at the three forms by the fire. His aching jaw from Marc's single hit was also a reminder that he was an outcast now. Tommy went around the rear of the cabin and got to work on the generator that was covered in natural debris.

Sadie groaned as she woke up. She spotted Tommy walking into the tall weeds.

She turned her head and saw Angela in Adrian's arms. Fury filled her mind.

Angela didn't move. "Go help them inside."

Sadie reached for her knife.

Adrian scowled at her. "Do what your alpha said!"

Sadie threw the knife into the dirt by Adrian's boots and stomped toward the cabin. "You don't own me! And she's not my alpha!" She went inside and slammed the door.

Angela chuckled. "I assume you're happy with my gift?"

Adrian was stunned. He hadn't known.

Angela drew back so she could view his face. "I'll send you someone else if she won't be enough for you."

"Why would you do that?"

She ran a soft hand along his rough beard. "I could never leave you alone after all you've done for me, all you've given me."

Adrian kissed her hand. "She's fine. Thank you."

Angela tugged on a whisker. “Have her give you a shave.”

“I will.” Adrian let out a contented breath. “What can I give you?”

“Your brain. I have a lot of people who need to be trained.”

“I’m all yours.”

Angela smiled. She sat up. “I’m going to work for a little bit now.”

“Okay. New plans?”

Angela opened her kit and drew out a thick, pristine notebook and a pack of pens. “The history of Safe Haven.”

Adrian immediately approved. “Do you have a title yet?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She uncapped a pen.

Adrian laughed. “Well?”

“Life After War.”

3

“Who does she think she is?!” Sadie moved away from the window. “She’s not my boss!”

Kendle snickered. “That sounds so familiar.”

Sadie turned on her. “Why aren’t you pissed? Now’s our chance!”

“Not after the gift Marc gave me tonight. I’d never betray him that way.” Kendle smiled happily. “He forgave me. You’re on your own.”

Quinn was still eager for that fight. He gestured at Sadie. “You might be able to do it.”

Tommy scowled. “You’ll get her killed.” He motioned at the cooking food. “Keep that stirred and we’ll explain why you can’t go out there and do something stupid.”

Sadie pouted. “She’d kill me, right?”

“No,” came from all three of them.

“Then why?”

“Adrian will kill you.” Kendle carefully poured hot water into seven mugs.

“I don’t believe you!”

“Yes, you do or you wouldn’t have obeyed his order to come in here.” Kendle dumped stale chocolate powder into each mug, being generous. “In a little while, you’ll help us serve the food and keep your mouth shut or she’ll remove you.”

“Why are you on her side now?” Sadie went over and snatched up the wooden spoon next to the large pot. “You hate her. I know you do.”

Kendle shrugged. “I also love her. She’s the alpha, whether I want one or not.”

“That’s why you needed me!”

Kendle grunted. “I was going to sacrifice your life and move in while she was distracted.” Kendle glowered at the wild UN fighter. “I can still do half of that.”

Sadie’s eyes narrowed. “And I can slit your throat while you sleep. He wanted me to.”

“I know Adrian told you to kill me. Have you figured out why yet?”

Sadie shook her head.

“Well, you’re young. Brains will come to you in time.” Kendle began stirring the mugs. “If you killed me, Angela would love him more. He tried to sacrifice you too. Now, he’ll keep you around as a replacement for when he’s lonely.”

Sadie brightened. “She’ll leave?”

“Of course. That camp needs her more than Adrian does.”

Sadie settled down. “I can live with that.”

So can I. Kendle smiled at Quinn. *I have my own substitutes.*

Sadie took a small sip of the soup. “I think this is done.”

“Good.” Kendle motioned. “Bowls are in the cabinet. Dust them off.”

Sadie got the bowls down.

Quinn came over to start delivering the mugs.

Kendle opened the door for him, but she didn’t go outside yet. She went over to help Sadie ladle the soup into the bowls.

Ceiling lights flickered and then brightened.

Kendle shut off the spirit stove and the lantern, feeling sad. She and Luke had never used them. When she’d asked why he’d installed them, he’d just laughed and told her it was in case he had company.

Tommy paused by the door. “Does the water for the shower come from a well?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.” Tommy took his kit and went out.

Kendle got the spoons from a drawer and wiped them off. It pleased her to have people around who weren't fighting or thinking bad thoughts.

Angela didn't look up as Quinn sat a mug next to her.

Adrian immediately picked it up and took a drink. When nothing happened, he sat it by her knee.

Quinn frowned. "Kendle wouldn't do that now."

Adrian took the next mug. "As long as the boss is here, it's my duty to protect her."

"She's not your boss anymore." Quinn glared. "Or mine."

Angela stopped writing. She peered up with bright red eyes. "I could be your executioner if you'd prefer."

Quinn hurried back into the cabin.

Angela stared at the open door.

Kendle appeared. "Yes, Boss?"

Soothed, Angela dropped her attention back to her book. "Keep him in line or Marc will finish the job."

"I will." Kendle waved Sadie off as she came forward with two bowls. "I've got it."

Sadie shrugged. "Maybe she'll fry you."

"If she does, I deserve it." Kendle walked carefully down the steps and took the bowls to Adrian.

Adrian took a fast bite and then passed one to Angela.

Angela dug in, stomach growling. She swallowed. “That’s good. Who made it?”

“Quinn.”

“I didn’t know he could cook.” Angela scooped up another bite. “If you get tired of him, he can earn FND credits on mess duty.”

“I’ll let him know.” Kendle lingered, sensing Angela had more to say to her.

“So can Tommy. Neither of them are banned from my camp.”

“That’s...generous of you.”

Angela swallowed another bite, shrugging. “They left for love. It wasn’t treason, and no one was injured.” Her lips twitched. “They’ll both have to face Kenn, though. He won’t be so...generous.”

Kendle snickered, starting to relax now that she understood Angela wasn’t going to kill all of them. “I’d like to see that.”

Tension flared as Angela glanced up. “If you set foot in my camp, I’ll drive my knife into your stomach and spill your guts on the ground.”

Kendle took a startled step back. “I won’t.”

“Good.” Angela resumed eating.

Adrian grinned. “Marc feels the same way about me. It’s not just you.”

Kendle hurried into the cabin.

“I thought you had balls.” Sadie gazed at Kendle in bitter disappointment. “I thought I could count on you to follow through.”

Kendle sat down, knees shaking. “I would have, but Marc healed me. He even removed the curse someone put on me.”

“I don’t get it.”

Quinn belched. “He bonded with her. She can’t hurt Angela now. He marked her, without the pain.”

Sadie scowled. “This bonding shit sucks.”

Kendle grunted. “She got you too. You just haven’t felt it yet.”

“I’m not bonded to that bitch!”

“She saved your life.” Quinn scooped up another bite. “I saw it.”

Sadie’s bottom lip came out. “So?”

Quinn swallowed. “So, she made sure you were bonded. Adrian’s the only one who got off scot-free.”

Kendle sighed. “Marc knows she’s here. He’s letting Adrian have this time with her. You can’t help but love someone who gives you your heart’s desire.” She sighed again. “Angela said you and Tommy can do FND when you’re tired of being with me.”

Quinn paused, relieved. “Really?”

Kendle didn’t look at him. “You can go right now, I think.”

Quinn sat the empty bowl on the table and reached for the mug. “Not gonna happen, but it’s good to know. After Marc breaking my wrist, I thought I’d be shot on sight.”

“She did say you’d have to face Kenn.”

Quinn paled.

Kendle lifted a brow. “What did you do to him?”

“Well, there was only one raft and he needed it to get to one of the pirate ships... We might have stolen it.”

“Damn.” Kendle shrugged. “I’ll heal you after he beats your ass.”

“Every time?”

Kendle snickered. “As much as you need.”

Angela and Adrian listened to the laughter now coming from the cabin. They didn’t read thoughts to find out what was so amusing. They just enjoyed the good vibes.

Adrian scanned her, seeing new worry lines and streaks of gray lining her dark hair. The glint of her engagement ring in the firelight caught his attention. “Why aren’t you married yet?”

“I was waiting.”

Adrian felt a bad moment coming, but he had to ask. “Waiting for what?”

Angela met his eye. “This moment. I needed him to make the right choice.”

“On me?”

“No.” Angela smiled toward the dark jungle. “I had to know he trusts me.”

Marc stepped out of the trees, smiling at her. He went to the cabin and entered without knocking.

Kendle forgot to breathe as he sat across from her at the table.

Sadie snorted at the thick tension. “Get the man fed, Quinn. I can hear his stomach growling.”

Quinn got up right away. He spotted the extra mug and frowned. "You knew he wasn't gone."

Kendle was focused on Marc. "I just thought he would stay outside with them."

Marc inhaled deeply, mind clear. "Dog and I went for a run. He's still out exploring. I smelled food."

Quinn put Marc's bowl near his arm and retreated.

Sadie got his mug.

Marc dug in, not worried about it being poisoned. "Mmm."

Quinn tried to relax, hoping Marc wasn't in the mood to hurt him again. He thought about apologizing, but he chose to be quiet instead.

Tommy came in through the rear exit. He spotted Marc at the table, eating. "Well, this is...different."

Kendle gestured at the food.

Tommy got his bowl and mug, and joined them at the table. He dug in, but he kept an eye on Marc.

So did everyone else.

Marc finished the bowl in minutes. He pushed it away, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

"More?"

Marc shook his head at Quinn. "Thanks."

Quinn's mouth opened before he could control it. "I'm glad you're not pissed anymore, and I'm sorry man, I—"

Marc spun as he rose, driving his fist into Quinn's mouth.

Quinn hit the floor, knocked out again.

Tommy grunted. “Rookies.”

Marc headed for the rear exit. “Good job getting the shower working.”

Tommy knew better than to start babbling. He watched Marc go outside, breathing a sigh of relief.

Sadie stared at Quinn. “Is he dead?”

Kendle chuckled. “He may feel like it when he wakes up.”

Tommy nodded. Marc had used an average hit on him and he felt like he’d kissed a wall with his face.

Kendle reached over and put her hand over Tommy’s.

Bright light filled the room.

Tommy smiled at her.

Marc paused in the doorway.

Kendle grinned, once again thrilled that Tommy and Quinn had chosen her over being with Safe Haven. “Thank you.”

Tommy shrugged. “There wasn’t a choice for me.”

“Will you be okay with this setup?”

Tommy nodded. “It’s Quinn you’ll have to keep under control.”

Kendle shivered at the reminder of her moment with Angela. “I’ll need help.”

“No worries. Thanks to Marc, I know just where to hit him.”

“This is ridiculous!” Sadie marched toward the door. “I’m ending this right now!”

Marc shook his head when Kendle would have stopped the reckless girl. “She has to learn on her own.”

Kendle and Tommy observed from the windows as Sadie stomped down the steps toward Angela.

Adrian read the intent. “Go back inside!”

Sadie kept coming.

Angela sat her mug down.

Adrian jumped up to get between them. “Don’t do this!”

Sadie didn’t stop.

Angela put her book and pen down.

Sadie grabbed her knife from the dirt.

Adrian’s heart hardened. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Sadie stopped, face twisting into ugliness. *They were right.* “Move!”

Adrian tensed to grab her and break her neck.

“Let her through.”

Adrian froze at Angela’s command.

So did the witnesses.

Sadie marched forward eagerly, grip tightening on the knife.

Angela moved away from the log so she had room to maneuver.

Sadie rushed her.

Angela grabbed Sadie’s wrist and used her leg at the same time to trip the wild girl. The knife fell to the dirt as Sadie screamed, using her strength to fight the attempted throw. She butted her head into Angela’s and then did it again.

Angela chuckled, not feeling it as her witch provided protection. She shoved the girl back and then waved. “Again.”

Infuriated, Sadie rushed her.

Angela twisted to the side and let the girl fly by.

Sadie tripped and smacked into the dirt.

“Again.”

Angela’s calm orders pissed Sadie off. She fired a strong spell, draining herself.

Angela caught it and swallowed, barely feeling the pain of different level power merging with her own.

Sadie struggled to her feet and lunged again, trying to get her strong hands around Angela’s neck.

Angela drew back, stance perfect.

Adrian and the others winced at the crack of a fist against a nose.

Sadie screamed as the bone broke; blood gushed down her chin.

Angela wiped her hand down her jeans and waved. “Again.”

Sadie cupped her nose, swallowing the screams. She knew she was beaten, but that didn’t stop her from rushing again with her head down.

Angela twisted to the side as she lifted her knee.

Sadie’s head snapped back at the chin hit. She slid to the ground, grayness clouding her brain.

“Again!” Angela leaned down. “I’m right here. Get up!”

Sadie wanted to, but her body wouldn't obey. She rolled onto her back and glared at Angela through the blood and stars. "Fuck you!"

Angela laughed.

Sadie's fury gave her strength. She grabbed Angela's ankle and yanked as hard as she could.

Angela let the girl pull her down. She didn't resist as Sadie rolled over and went for her throat.

Sadie squeezed, grunting.

Kendle and Tommy flew from the cabin to help.

Adrian blocked them. "Stay out of it!"

"She'll kill her!"

"No, she won't." Marc was in the front doorway now. "Just watch."

Sadie didn't care about any of them. She squeezed harder, blood dripping over Angela's calm face. "Die!"

Angela's skin began to glow. Bright blue light ran over her and connected to Sadie's hands.

Sadie struggled. "Stop it!" She leaned into her grip, but it was hard to squeeze. Her fingers didn't want to obey.

The light traveled up Sadie's bulging arms and ran over her neck. It sank into her chest and vanished.

Sadie stilled. Her hands slowly loosened. "What did you do to me?"

She staggered back, hands coming up to her ears. "Stop it! It's too loud!"

Angela sucked in a ragged breath.

Her witch healed the damage in seconds.

Sadie stumbled and fell. She began to cry. “Make it stop. Please!”

“Why does she do that?” Kendle turned away as flashes from her own bonding moment on the beach filled her mind.

“Do what?”

Kendle looked at Tommy. “Let us almost kill her before she connects us to the hive.”

Tommy thought back to hearing Ray say something about that. “I still don’t understand.”

“Descendants can be born around the world. An alpha feels them, but they can’t be reached until they’re connected mentally to the rest of us.” Marc moved toward the fire. “Some people are harder to connect than others. It takes something extreme.”

Kendle flushed.

Marc sank down by the fire and leaned against the log, studying Sadie. Her reaction now would determine her future.

Angela stood up and waited.

Sadie stared at her as the voices faded. “You should have killed me.”

Angela waved. “Again.”

Sadie rose. She rushed Angela, hands out to resume the strangling.

Angela held still.

Sadie couldn’t do it. Her hands stopped inches away from Angela’s neck.

Angela gave the girl a cool smile. “Welcome to my army.”

Sadie struggled, trying harder. “You have to die!” Pain lashed over her neck and back, taking her to her knees. Sadie stared up with tears starting to fill her vision. “I can’t hurt you now!”

“Only through other people. Like Kendle tried to do with you.”

Kendle felt Angela’s hard glower come to rest on her. She shuddered. “I’m sorry!”

“So am I.” Angela sent a vicious blast.

A long claw raked down Kendle’s arm, marking her for life as an outcast.

Kendle’s harsh scream echoed through the darkness.

“All of our kind will know you for what you are the instant they see that.” Angela delivered the next punishment without mercy. “I forbid you to hide it. If you try, fire will burn away the covering no matter where you are or what you’re doing.”

Kendle refused to scream again. She hung her head. “Thank you, Alpha.”

“It’s the least I can do.” Angela swallowed her bitterness. She extended a hand to Sadie. “You’ve been given a second chance. Do you accept it or should I just mark you now?”

Sadie couldn’t lie. “I hate you. That hasn’t changed.”

“And it won’t. You’ll have to fight those feelings to do the right thing.” Angela smiled at her. “I know you’re capable of it.”

Sadie slowly extended her hand and let Angela pull her to her feet. She stared at Angela. "I'm not sure I can put it aside."

"I respect your honesty."

Sadie braced to be marked.

Angela went to the fire and sat down by her notebook.

Sadie frowned. "Aren't you going to mark me?"

Angela sipped on her mug, then picked up her book.

Sadie hesitantly came over. "What are you writing?"

Angela tilted the book so Sadie could see the title.

Sadie knelt to read it.

Angela grabbed her wrist and sent healing orbs that quickly repaired all the damage.

Sadie sighed in relief. Then she stiffened. "I owe you a big debt."

Angela let go. "Take care of Adrian and we're even. He needs you."

Sadie considered it for a minute, then nodded. "I will." She let go of her confusion and hatred in that moment. *I'm getting Adrian. It's enough.* "Will you teach me to shoot?"

Angela picked up her pen. "Adrian will."

Sadie frowned. "I want to learn from you."

Marc chuckled. "You already have been." He stepped around Adrian and joined Angela at the fire.

She smiled softly at him.

Marc leaned against the log, smiling back. “You’re in a good mood. It’s nice.”

“It’s because of you. Having your trust means everything.”

Marc grinned. “And here I thought my charming personality was enough.”

Angela’s laughter rang out and faded into the night.

Marc shut his eyes. “Wake me if you need me.”

“I always need you.” Angela scooted over so they were touching, then resumed writing.

Adrian and Kendle observed in misery and happiness. They each wanted to be sitting there, but they were also able to feel how content the couple was.

Still on the floor, Quinn groaned as he woke. Pain lanced through his brain and mouth in thick waves as he sat up. Blood trickled from one ear. He looked around at the empty cabin. “What happened?”

Tommy snickered from the porch. “You learned a valuable lesson about assuming and running off at the mouth.”

Quinn tried to get up. His legs buckled, sending him back to the floor. He groaned, fighting the nausea and pain. “I’ll sleep here.”

Marc’s chuckle echoed, spreading good vibes.

Adrian fought the need to challenge the man that always rose. He went into the cabin and sat in the rocker. He was asleep a few minutes later.

Tommy lifted a brow at Kendle.

Kendle nodded. “Yes, please.”

Tommy led her to the bottom bunk and crawled in. When she joined him, settling onto his chest like she belonged there, he held her tight and let peace fill his heart.

Dog walked from the trees with cobwebs over one ear and debris from the jungle in his fur.

“A wolf!” Sadie jumped up and stood in front of Angela without hesitating.

Angela smiled at the evidence of their new bond. “It’s okay. He’s one of us.”

Sadie held still as the wolf came over to her.

Dog sniffed the new woman and looked up, eyes glinting in the firelight. *She’s dangerous.*

Angela nodded over Sadie’s gasp. “We all are. That’s how we’ve survived.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Close

January 24th

1

Dawn light streamed through the cabin windows, hitting Adrian in the face. He blinked, arm coming up to shield his eyes. He looked around.

Sadie was snoring on the top bunk. Kendle and Tommy were in the bottom bunk. He didn't see Quinn, but he spotted a kit by the rear door.

Adrian slowly stood up from the rocker, wincing at the stiffness in his spine. He stretched and yawned, trying to be quiet.

Adrian walked to the counter and poured the last of the cold coffee into a dusty cup. He drank it down, listening. He didn't hear anything from outside yet, except the low roar of a calm ocean. And wildlife. *That's a bird!* Adrian was thrilled to be on land, no matter where it was, but his heart still ached. *I miss my country.*

Adrian went outside, taking the kit with him. He wasn't sure who it belonged to, but it didn't matter. He shed his clothes and stepped into the shower.

Adrian stifled a shout as cold water sprayed him. He adjusted quickly, reaching for the bar of soap that Tommy had left on the wooden shelf. He

washed from head to toe and then did it again. Their little shower setup on his boat had been small and low on water pressure.

Adrian knelt down to dig in the kit. He came back up with a familiar knife, grinning at the feel of Marc's K-Bar. He began using it to shave off his beard.

"Make sure you clean that when you're done."

Adrian kept shaving. He heard Marc come closer.

Marc leaned against a tree next to the shower. He studied Adrian, aware of leaves rustling and insects flying around. He enjoyed those things, but he concentrated on his rival.

Adrian finished his chin and pulled his nose up to shave over his lip. He didn't resist Marc's deep scans.

Marc filled in the blanks as he explored Adrian's thoughts. He saw Angela had known about everything, including his twins being held in captivity. *She knew and hid it from me.*

"She couldn't tell you or anyone else. You know that now. If she had, we'd never have gotten here." Adrian rinsed his face, and then cleaned the knife. He stuck it in the wooden wall of the shower and used the soap again.

Marc kept digging while Adrian washed a third time. He found a door that wouldn't open no matter how hard he pushed. "What are you hiding?"

"It won't open for me either. I think it's an evolution."

“Are any of your gifts blocked?”

Adrian shrugged. “Not that I know of, but I haven’t used many of them.”

“Why?” Marc frowned. “Angela implied you have special talents. I’ve never seen them.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Tell me again anyway.”

“No.” Adrian didn’t look at him. “We’re not going to restart the old fighting. As soon as the door unlocks, I’ll call you and tell you what it is.”

“Fair enough.” Marc withdrew from Adrian’s mind. “Dog told me he gave you forbidden information.”

Adrian wiped his face. “He did. I think that’s why he was hurt.”

“And it blew my cover.”

“Your lie.”

Marc sighed. “I thought we weren’t restarting the old fighting.”

“And I thought you didn’t lie.”

Marc chuckled bitterly. “Of course, I do. I just make sure it matters.”

“How did lying to her about who you really were matter to anyone but you?”

Marc scowled. “Old fighting.”

Adrian sighed. He shut off the water and wiped himself on Tommy’s towel. It had already dried in the warm breeze. He knelt to dig in the kit.

Marc didn’t protest as Adrian pulled on his spare clothes. He studied the blond man. Adrian wasn’t in good health anymore. Months of being an

outcast had weakened him and shrank that body until he barely resembled their former leader. The red scar from the sword wound glared at Marc.

Adrian pulled on the spare boots, glad they weren't too big or too tight. He quickly laced them up, starting to feel normal again. "Thanks for the gear."

"Yep."

Adrian yanked the knife from the wall and held it out.

"Keep it."

Adrian paused. "You sure? I know it's your favorite blade."

Marc shrugged. "I've let go of favorite things before."

Adrian slid it into the sheath that had already been attached to the pants.

"If anything happens to her during one of your visits, it'll be good to have a blade I'm familiar with."

Adrian turned to face him. "Old fighting."

"I mean it. Don't let your guard down when she comes to you. I won't be forgiving."

Adrian didn't respond to the threat. He held the kit out.

Marc shook his head. "You'll need it."

Adrian stared. "You packed it."

"Yes. In the bottom, you'll find a candy bar. Don't eat it unless you want to die."

Adrian understood it was poisoned. "For Kendle?"

“If she flips again, make sure she finds it.”

“I will.” Adrian waited, sure there was more.

“She’s going to mark you before we leave.”

“I expected it last night.”

“So did I. You looked so bad, she couldn’t do it.”

“That’s not why. Tell the truth.”

Marc grunted. “She rewarded you with a night here as a member of her camp.”

“Yes. She honored me.” Adrian smiled as he turned toward the front of the cabin. “She’s amazing.”

“On that, we agree.” Marc motioned. “Go sit with her. She’s waking up.”

Adrian didn’t ask why or thank Marc. He hurried toward the dead fire.

Marc went into the cabin through the rear and took Adrian’s spot in the rocking chair. He shut his eyes, smiling. *I could get used to this.*

2

Angela snapped awake. She looked up to find Adrian walking toward her.

Adrian grinned. “Good morning.”

Angela forgot to breathe at the sight of him cleaned up and wearing Marc’s clothes. He appeared so much like the old Adrian that tears came to her eyes and burned her lids.

Adrian stumbled under her emotions. He caught his balance and stopped, not sure what to say. *I wish*

I'd been strong enough to withstand her pull. I wish I hadn't disappointed her.

Angela shrugged. "It was meant to be this way."

"But every lifetime!" He fought not to groan and moan, but he couldn't stop a final protest. "It's not fair."

"No." Angela sat up, still staring at him. "But we go on anyway. It's what survivors do."

Adrian smothered his thoughts and joined her next to the burnt out fire. "The future hasn't changed. No matter what you tried, it didn't change."

"I know."

"You replaced me, with Ivan."

"Yes."

"What if he fails?"

"He won't. He's stronger than you."

It hurt Adrian to hear that, but he didn't argue. *There's no chance now at all. She'll never be mine.*

"No. It wasn't meant to be." Angela let him see how much hatred was in her heart. "You used me and hurt me. Marc is the only one who could ever be forgiven for those betrayals."

"Even though you knew I was going to do it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You didn't try to change the future. You still want to kill him and you don't care if it's honorable. You've crushed me with that. I'll never recover." Angela reached out and cupped his wrist. "Thank you. Your dishonor allowed me to keep my own."

Adrian braced.

Angela raked her witch's claws down his arm, marking him.

Adrian screamed at the fiery pain.

It woke everyone.

Quinn peered at them from the nearby cover of a pile of leaves and brush. "That's a terrible alarm clock."

Adrian joined Angela's laughter, fighting the pain as his skin burned into deep red scars that would forever prevent him from being part of a descendant camp again.

Angela let go of his wrist and stood up. "Take a day or two here, then get as far from my camp as you can. When I feel the time is right, I'll send people to you for training."

Marc came to the doorway of the cabin. "Ready?"

Angela smiled. "Yes. I'll call Jennifer shortly and we'll get started."

"Hey!" Sadie scooted by Marc and came down the steps. "What about me?"

Angela studied the girl, feeling her fear and her excitement. "Adrian will train you to be like me. When he disappoints you enough, you'll join us and try to forget the awful, amazing scars he'll leave on your heart." Angela whistled.

Dog came from the jungle, once again covered in foliage and debris. He fell in at her heels.

Marc followed, automatically assuming the protection spot. He didn't look over his shoulder at

Kendle as she and Tommy stood in the doorway. He only had eyes for the woman in front of him.

Kendle leaned against Tommy's warm body and tried not to cry.

3

Debra stretched against Theo's warm body, smiling as she replayed their night together. *He's got the touch.*

Theo woke as she moved. He rolled over to stare at her. "You're beautiful."

Debra blushed. She kissed him gently, enjoying the thick sparks flying between them.

Theo returned her kiss, body lighting up.

Debra slowly drew back, hand running over his naked shoulder. She wanted to enjoy his embrace again, but she had a shift shortly. She rolled from the bed and began picking up her clothes.

Theo watched her, admiring the view. *She's well built.*

Debra grinned. *Right back at ya!*

Theo laughed, sitting up. His smile faded as she gathered her things. "You have to work?"

She nodded. *I'm on duty over the kids today.*

He stood up and pulled on his boxers. "Maybe we can have dinner later."

Debra pulled up her pants, shaking her head. *I'll be too tired tonight. I can't enjoy a relief session if I'm asleep.* She went into the bathroom to get her bra and shirt.

Theo froze. *Relief session.* His happiness vanished, leaving a bad taste in his mouth. *I'm just her relief source. We're not back together.*

Theo got the rest of his clothes and left the cabin.

On duty in the hall, Ian saw Theo exit with his boots in hand, but he didn't comment. He assumed the couple had spent a wild night and didn't want anyone to know yet.

Ian saw Jeff coming down the hall and stiffened. Jeff's body language said he was upset.

Jeff shook his head as he joined Ian at the guard booth. "Just tired. Here are my updates and notes."

Ian stored them in his book. "You're off duty now?"

"Yep. Going to the shower and then bed."

Jeff walked away before Ian could ask anything else. He wasn't in the mood for male bonding. *I'd really like a cup of coffee with someone I can stand.*

Jeff missed the cleaning crew coming from a nearby cabin. He bumped into one of them, knocking them down.

"Damn." He turned, hand out to help them up. "Sorry."

Francesca sucked in a tight breath as Jeff's hand closed over hers.

Jeff pulled her to her feet, heart skipping a beat. "You okay?"

She nodded, not pulling away. "Sore spot on my hip. I'll live."

Jeff grinned. “I might be willing to rub that for you.”

Francesca giggled. “Okay.”

Jeff finally gave in to the attraction. “Cup of coffee sound good for a start?”

Francesca moaned. “It sounds great! I’ve been longing for that since dawn.”

The rest of the cleaning crew moved down the hall to store the equipment.

Jeff held out an arm, not offended by her sweaty, wrinkled state. He was dirty too.

Francesca put her arm through his and let him lead her toward the mess. The smile on her face could have powered entire cities.

Coming down to meet Jeff at the end of his shift, Kimmie froze. Her eyes lit up bright red.

After a minute, she turned toward the steps, little mind racing.

4

“Do you mind checking my names?” Jayda handed her book to Jennifer. “I don’t have everyone.”

Jennifer began comparing her list to Jayda’s. “I just saw Brittani and Daryl. We can mark them off.” Jennifer didn’t say the newlyweds were enjoying more time alone in a small cabin near the chapel. “Shawn and Gus are on the bridge.” Jennifer handed the book back. “All those other people are with the den mothers or in their cabins for alone time.”

Jennifer frowned. “Except for Courtney. I haven’t seen her at all.”

“Okay.” Jayda wrote it down. “I’ll check in with the other guards.”

Jennifer felt a call coming and lifted her mike.

“Please send over the first landing party.”

Cheers sounded all over the ship at Angela’s call.

Jennifer doubted many of them realized Angela was already on the island. Jennifer keyed her mike. “The following people need to get their kits and report to the top deck: Grant, Cate, Cody, Ivan, Greg, Trinity, Tobias, Charlie, Conner.”

Groans echoed from those who’d hoped to go over in the first group, but no one really protested. They knew Angela needed to get their base camp set up. A few people wondered about some of the names on that list, but they assumed Angela had reasons they hadn’t considered.

Jennifer smiled as Cate and Cody flew down the hallway toward the stairs. Marc’s kids were wild and happy. She hoped her own babies would be just like them. *But without all the misery they had to go through to get here.* Jennifer rubbed her stomach where a small bump was now noticeable. She thought of Samantha. That happy family was in their large cabin, trying to enjoy time together. Ralph, Daisey, and the normals were providing a constant supply of items, food, and interruptions. It was sweet.

Almost everyone else was keeping the kids occupied at the two play areas so they didn't get into trouble while the landing parties got a base camp set up. Little Roy and Autumn were there too, under Pam's protection. Jennifer hoped Pam knew what she was doing by adopting Joey. The boy had done well during the fight, but Jennifer doubted he was as calm as he appeared. After living through labs, the UN, and then Joel, the child had to have a wild streak in there somewhere.

Jennifer moved down the steps to the medical bay for her next check in. She saw Tonya in the lab and waved.

Tonya came out carrying a light box. The female cat followed her, yowling.

"Can you take them somewhere safe? I can't get anything done with all the noise."

Jennifer stroked the three adorable gray kittens. "I'll have Leeann take them to the animal area."

"Perfect. Thanks!"

Jennifer keyed her mike with her free hand. "Leeann to the medical bay."

"She's on the way."

Jennifer smiled at Mike's quick answer as she went to the end of the hall to wait for Leeann. Those two were becoming an item. Everyone approved. It was great that she was recovering from Billy's abandonment.

Tonya caught the thought. She didn't tell Jennifer their charms only held so long. Their enforcer already knew. Tonya went to Morgan.

“I’m finally caught up on blood tests. Do you need me for anything before I crash?”

Morgan looked up from the books they were studying. “I’m all good.” He scanned her large stomach, frowning slightly. “Have you started training a replacement yet?”

Tonya sighed. “Sort of. I’m not sure if the boss will like who I picked.”

“She will if you believe they’re the best person for the job.”

Tonya lingered, scanning the wide table of old, thick books. She recognized some of them. “You’re working on genetics?”

“Yes. Courtney decided to keep the baby, but she agreed to more tests. We’re trying to figure out how to do them.” He turned the book toward her. “We need fluid from there.”

Tonya winced. “Won’t that cause a miscarriage?”

“It might. We have to be very careful.” Morgan turned the book back around. “I promised her that we won’t try until we feel more confident about doing it.”

“Good.” Tonya kept her true thoughts to herself as Allison came in.

Harry went to meet her. “They’re all ready to go.”

Eric perked up as Zack stood. “I’m allowed to leave now?”

Allison smiled. “We put you in a cabin with us. Is that okay?”

Eric frowned. “You and dad are sharing a cabin now?”

Allison nodded as Zack tensed.

Eric made a face. “Put me in with Timmy and Mike. I don’t need to see that.”

Allison laughed. “You got it.”

Zack helped Eric stand up, scanning his mind.

Eric looked right at him. “I’m better now.”

Zack hugged the boy, heart settling into an even rhythm.

Eric patted Zack’s back and then let go. “Come on. You’re embarrassing me.”

Zack chuckled. He took the paperwork that Harry held out. “Let’s go.”

Allison held the door.

Eric grinned at her as he went out. “Does this mean I should call you mom?”

Their laughter echoed down the hall.

No one saw Courtney slip into the lab and duck behind the counter.

She deposited a small package onto the floor and left.

5

“It’s here, behind the watermelon plant.” Mike led Kenn to the stashed radio. “When Marc left last night, he told me to come get you if I heard anything important.”

Kenn slid inside the booth and sat on the stool.

Mike handed him the headphones and fastened the cloth door to the booth. He stood guard, glad no one was in here right now.

Kenn tuned in the radio and replayed the call, stomach dropping as he realized who it was.

“What is the last known location?”

“Port Stanley.”

“They are going to Pitcairn.”

“Yes. We gathered a special crew.”

“How long for your arrival?”

“Less than a month, if we have no more trouble with these locals.”

“How goes the conversion?”

“We are at 88%.”

“Excellent. Keep me informed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kenn kept listening as other calls followed that one. He didn’t like any of what he heard. He made notes and checked the other channels. When he had enough information, he left the booth and went up to the bridge. He needed to make sure their substitute captain wasn’t listening too. *Safe Haven doesn’t need to know the UN is coming for us. Let them have a few days to enjoy just getting here. They’ve all earned it.*

Kenn tried to smother the feeling that it wouldn’t happen, but it refused to fade. He sighed. “Without change, there can be no peace—only survivors.”

“I can’t believe we’re here!” Charlie rowed harder to get them to shore faster.

Conner grinned. “I can’t wait to run on that beach.” He leaned into the strokes.

Greg and Ivan let the boys use their energy on rowing the lifeboat. Both men swept the sandy beach and made sure Marc’s kids didn’t fall out of the boat. Cody and Cate were trailing hands in the water that was now free of bodies and debris. The ocean had cleaned up their mess.

Trinity kept an eye on the happy man next to her. She was surprised to have been called in the first group, but she was even more surprised to find Tobias here.

Grant ignored all of them to stare at the cruise ship. *I hope Shawn doesn’t have trouble while I’m gone.*

The lifeboat bumped the ocean bottom and slid roughly toward the shore.

Ivan and Greg jumped out, as did Charlie and Conner. The four men dragged it onto the beach, muscles straining.

Marc walked from the trees with a smile. “Welcome to Pitcairn Island.”

“Daddy!”

Cate and Cody ran to Marc, nearly knocking him over.

Marc put an arm around each of them. He nodded to Grant. "Let's take a short walk on a small beach."

Grant chuckled, joining them.

Angela came from the same path. She caught Conner's attention and then pointed.

Adrian stayed in the trees so people observing from the ship couldn't see him.

"Dad!" Conner ran that way.

Adrian hugged the teenager tightly, thrilled with what he read in Conner's mind. "You've done well. I'm proud of you."

"I thought you were dead!" Conner held on. "Why aren't you dead?"

Adrian laughed. "I got lucky." Adrian stared at Angela over Conner's shoulder. "And I chose wisely."

Conner laughed at the old movie quote. His happiness faded as he realized Adrian was in the shadows. "You're not joining us, are you?"

Adrian sighed. "I can't, son. But we'll visit now. It'll be good."

Conner was happy knowing they would have time together.

Adrian watched Marc, seeing him talking in low tones with Grant and his kids. Adrian narrowed in on Cate, who he hadn't met yet.

Cate felt it. She glared, eyes turning bright red.

"Like father, like daughter." Adrian looked away so he didn't provoke her.

Marc laughed. "That's my girl."

Cate looked up at Marc, eyes fading to normal. “Now?”

Marc nodded. “Give it a shot. Just don’t get upset if she doesn’t go for it.”

Both kids ran toward Angela.

Angela turned to meet them, arms opening. She hugged the kids, heart warming. “Are you guys okay?”

Cody nodded, holding onto her. *I like how she smells.*

Cate gazed up with a tear rolling down her cheek.

Angela immediately knelt in front of the little girl. “What’s wrong?”

Cate forced out a broken tone. “We don’t have a mommy anymore!”

Cody tugged on Angela’s sleeve. “Can you be our mommy now?”

Angela frowned at Marc.

Marc lifted a brow, tone innocent. “Is everything okay?”

Angela laughed. “You’re sneaky.”

Cate giggled.

The sound sank into Angela’s heart and took up a permanent home. “I’d be honored.” She smiled at Marc, letting him in on her plans. “That’s why Grant is here.”

Marc came over to Angela as the kids stepped back. He dropped to one knee and held up a box. “Will you marry me?”

Angela took the beautiful ring from the box, beaming. “Yes.”

Marc rose and gently put the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly next to the engagement ring. He kissed her.

Adrian and Ivan suffered, but they were happy at the same time. Their jealousy wasn’t strong enough to smother the bond. They could feel her delight with the way things had worked out. They were happy for her.

Grant joined them. “Now?”

Angela nodded, beaming.

Grant cleared his throat. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Marcus Brady and...” Grant paused, attention drawn to their boat. “Is that smoke?”

Everyone turned to scan the ship.

“Trinity and Grant! Stay with the kids!” Angela took off running toward the lifeboat as the sound of an explosion filled the air. Heavier smoke rolled up the stairwells of the ship.

Grant moved forward, mouth opening to protest.

Trinity put a hand on his arm. “You don’t want to argue with her right now.”

Angela pushed on the heavy lifeboat. “You bitch! I’m going to kill you slowly!”

“What happened?” Marc and the other males joined her in launching the lifeboat.

“Courtney blew up the lab!”

“How do you know?”

“Because she just told me and then jumped overboard!”

“How much damage?” Grant was horrified. *I shouldn't have left!*

“I don't know. Jennifer isn't answering me!” Angela jumped into the boat as they pushed it out, cursing herself for giving Courtney a chance to do the right thing. She grabbed an oar and began rowing.

Adrian came onto the beach and stood with the kids, heart breaking as the smoke thickened. *We only looked ahead to our arrival. Those years of peace were an assumption.*

Cody stared up at Adrian. “My daddy searched a lot farther than this, but we didn't see it either.”

Adrian frowned, aware of little Cate scanning the vivid claw marks on his arm. “Why did you miss it?” He assumed the boy had helped Marc.

Cody turned toward the cliff above them. “People change their minds. Sometimes, they don't really want peace.” He shivered. “And sometimes, their minds snap. It's impossible to predict.”

Adrian understood that even as he hated it. “Let's pick a spot on the beach for a campfire. Your sister can light it for us.”

Cody pulled away. “We'll do it. You have to go now or Cate will kill you. She hates traitors.”

Cate's eyes lit up eagerly. “My daddy doesn't like you...”

Adrian sighed. He turned back toward the path as Trinity motioned to the kids to join her. “The feeling’s mutual, kid.”

He vanished into the jungle as the kids ran to Trinity.

In the trees high above the beach, glowing green eyes watched them all.

The End of Book 14

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“I’ll finish this later.” Angela stored her book. “I need thirty seconds before we go in.” Angela detoured to the room next to the playground.

Angela tugged him into the shadows and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Marc chuckled as he realized she wanted to neck for that half minute. He rubbed his lips over hers, sending a wave of need.

Angela slid against him, lips urgent.

Marc wanted to take her right there, but he held himself in check.

Angela groaned. “For twenty seconds of your damn life, just let go!”

Marc’s control snapped. He swept her up against his chest. One hand went to her hip, crushing her close. The other cupped her ass and lifted her up so she could feel how hard he already was.

“My Brady!” Angela leaned back as he kissed her neck and down her chest.

Marc leaned against the wall and began thrusting, wondering if he could bring her to a climax this way. When they were younger, it had been easy, but now... Marc understood in that moment. *I don’t know. I’ve stayed back from her physically. It’s time that changed.*

Angela kissed him harder.

Marc tugged on her arms, stopping the torrid embrace.

Angela gazed up at him with dazed eyes and swollen lips. “More!”

Marc smiled. “Save it for later. I’ll set up something nice for us.”

Angela nodded, desire fading. She had work to do first, like anyone else who wanted downtime. She straightened her hair and clothes, then went to the door of the playground.

Marc followed, glad his shirt was long enough to cover his hard-on. He stayed just inside the door until the blood was all back where it belonged.

Deleted Scene #2

Explicit

Marc gently spread the folds with his thumbs and leaned in to lick.

Angela groaned, holding his shoulders to keep from falling. Wetness gushed down her leg. She shuddered as the point of no return neared.

Marc licked again, body throbbing. “Here we go.” He sucked.

Angela arched. Power flew from her chest and sank into Marc, lighting him up. He rubbed, extending her pleasure as he stood.

Angela put her leg on the side of the tub, groaning.

Marc slid into her, mind linking automatically. He pushed in deep and stopped, trying to get himself under control as pleasure lit up every inch of his skin.

Angela wrapped him up tight, stunned by the feel of his pleasure. She was getting all of it as if she were the one now thrusting. “Amazing.”

Marc sucked on her neck and let go, hips pounding.

Angela opened her legs further, able to feel his need to get deeper. Pleasure seared them both as he climaxed.

Angela felt her body clench around him as she came again. “Oh, Marc!”

Marc shuddered again, feeling her pleasure like it was his own. He jerked forward, cumming harder.

They stayed locked together until the vibrations subsided, both gasping for air.

Angela looked down as he finally stepped back, drawn by something she’d missed before in her nervousness. “There?”

Marc laughed, leaning back to show off the thin tattooed band around the base of his penis. “Never mix whiskey and a squad who likes to bet.”

Angela snickered, hand going out to trace the dark band. “I like it.”

Marc groaned as her hand began to stroke him. He held onto the shower rail and tried to remember how to breathe.

Note From The Author

Hi! I hope you enjoyed this addition to the series. Sorry to leave you there, but book 15 will pick up right where this one left off. As you may know by now, there is a page limit for the printed book and I've hit it again. I refuse to split one eBook into 2 paperbacks and make people pay twice as much for the printed version of the story. I don't like cliffhangers. However, this story has so much action that there's almost always a cliffhanger waiting. The book 15 sample in this file will give you some answers.

Landing on the island was a big deal for me as a writer. I've invested 10 years of my life to get Safe Haven to that tiny speck of land. I'm honored that you've joined me for so much of that time. I can't wait to explore them setting up a long-term camp. Watching them learn how to survive on Pitcairn will be great, as will the moment when Alexa and her crew finally reaches them. I'm only dreading that final battle when they go home because that will probably be the end of this story. I have no idea how to handle it. I hope we'll go through it together. Endings are always easier when you have good friends by your side.

Thank you for gifting me with your time. And thank you to the wonderful beta readers listed below who helped me find errors. You're all amazing.

Watch your six!

-Angie

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

Place a Review

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.

The Change

You are about to go on a dystopian quest where desperate, dangerous women rule the world, a revolution is brewing, and men are going extinct.

In this future, everything has changed.

The Change

Book 15



Hard Ground

1

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

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

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

"He's out of the Eagles!"

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

"She has to die, Angie."

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

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

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

"That's Courtney!"

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

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

"Anchor me!" Angela lunged over the side.

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

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

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

Courtney coughed up water, rolling over.

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

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

Angela stopped as Courtney sagged. She didn't care about the blood or the baby now. She leaned back and began gathering energy so she would be able to help their injured people. She regarded Greg with smoldering eyes. "Take her to the beach; look after the kids and our captain."

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

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

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

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

Marc hurried to the bridge.

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

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

A crush of bodies fought against Angela and the others as they tried to get below. "Go to the top deck and wait for orders!" Angela shoved her way through, not answering their cries or shouts. Many of the people were soaked, telling her the sprinkler system had activated.

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

"Can we get the windows open?" Ivan's throat was already itching from the smoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Angela went to Leeann, who was lying near the stairs. She shot a thin stream of healing energy at the girl, aware of the mother cat howling. She didn’t spare energy on the two motionless kittens. Nothing would bring them back now.

Leeann opened her eyes and began to cry.

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

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

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

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

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

The two men hurried off.

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

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

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

Charlie shook his head. “Me either.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Give her another one!”

“It won’t help!”

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

“What happened?” Jennifer coughed out more smoke.

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

Jennifer stiffened. “Tonya was in front of me!”

Kyle nodded angrily. “She’s in trouble.”

In the hallway, Angela and Conner strained to heal Tonya, but blood kept pouring from the lacerations. Glass from the lab had impaled her in the neck, stomach, and chest. Angela understood they weren’t going to be able to stop her labor. “Concentrate on the wounds!” Most of Tonya’s body was cut or burnt. “Jayda! We need a stretcher! And an incubator!”

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

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

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

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

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

Marc hurried toward Angela, anger growing at the sight of their injured people and the damage. The lab was a total loss, and most of the infirmary was destroyed. Marc joined Angela and Conner. “Shawn says it’s just this part of the ship. None of

the monitors are showing any other damage, but he wants Grant to verify things are okay.”

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

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

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

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

Angela didn’t hide her thoughts. She was too angry and already getting tired. “Courtney.”

Mutters and gasps went through the witnesses.

Kenn punched a charred wall. “Damn her!”

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

Kyle came to the employee door. He gestured to the gawking Eagles. “Do a complete walk through.”

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

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

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

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

Kenn held Tonya’s hand, fury growing. “I want Courtney executed when she’s captured.”

Marc agreed. “She was already caught. We’ll handle it.”

Kenn glared at Angela. “Fry her.”

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

Tonya screamed as she woke, pushing.

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

Ed handed her the nasal aspirator.

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

The baby twitched.

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

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

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

Tonya instinctively nuzzled the baby. “Momma’s here. Talk to me!”

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

People cheered and clapped.

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

The baby gave another weak cry, fists clenching.

Tonya smiled through the tears. “That’s my boy.”

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

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

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

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

Angela worked on Tonya. “She’s bleeding too much.”

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

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

Bright streams of energy flew into Tonya.

Angela sighed in relief. “It’s slowing. Keep going.”

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

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

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

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

Tonya's lashes fluttered and shut.

Kenn leaned down. "Tonya! Wake up right now!"

Tonya's lids flew open. "Hate it...when you yell at me."

Kenn grinned through his fear. "Stay awake. Keep fighting."

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

Conner knelt so Angela could stick him.

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

"He's breathing and his color is starting to look good." Jayda was staying by the incubator.

Tonya shivered harder.

Angela shoved the needle into Tonya's arm. "Clench your fists, Conner. The blood will flow faster."

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

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

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

“Kenneth Adrian Harrison.”

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

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

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

Save her!

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

Do it now!

Blinding light filled the room.

Angela stumbled out into the hall, proud of Kenn.

Charlie pushed by her and went to help.

People came to Angela, offering energy and anger.

“Who did this?!”

“Why did this happen?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Courtney's shrieks filled every mind.

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

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

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

Kenn drew his gun and shot Peter in the head.



[Hard Ground](#)
Book 15