

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #7



Copyright
Shattered Dreams
by
Angela White

Title: Shattered Dreams

Life After War Book 7

Edition: 2024

Length: 832 pages

Author: © Angela White

ISBN#: 978-1-945927-65-2

Copyright: Angela White. All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this publication may be replicated, redistributed, or given away in any form without the prior written consent of the author.

Table of Contents

[Madness And Misery](#)
[Deals With The Devil](#)
[All Souls](#)
[Let's Go To Market](#)
[Caged And Pre-staged](#)
[Toured And Lured](#)
[Baiting And Waiting](#)
[To Bluff Or Not](#)
[Keep It Down](#)
[Lying In Wait](#)
[Swinging Sack](#)
[Move Away From The Pen](#)
[Lessons](#)
[The Black Widow](#)
[Big Orders](#)
[The Human Condition](#)
[Not The Favorite](#)
[Blindsided](#)
[Reluctant Bonds](#)
[Walking A Tightrope](#)
[Would You Believe?](#)
[The Hard Way](#)
[Good And Bad](#)
[Insanity Runs Deep](#)
[Tough Love](#)
[Detained](#)
[Laughter](#)

Tears

Dirce's Way

Fate's Way

Giving Way

Which Way?

Close

Beware The Blades

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter One

Madness And Misery

The Georgia Mountains
September 27th

1

“**F**ire in the hole!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

"I need to talk to her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They’ll let you back in?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Missy grinned. “That’s easy.”

“What do you mean?”

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

Autumn and Kyle.

Missy beamed. “They feel the same way.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who is Adrian?” Missy asked innocently.

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

Missy stared blankly.

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

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

“Tara didn’t want to do it?”

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

“Go on,” Jennifer encouraged over the muttering.

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

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

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

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

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

Li received calls of approval and respect from the crowd.

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

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

Almost everyone immediately thought of or looked at Shawn.

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. I trust her with my life."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

“He said what?”

“No.” Green waited for the explosion.

“Why?”

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.

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

Angela stopped fighting.

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

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

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

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

Her big body slid to the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It made her cry harder.

“What’s going on here?!”

Eagles rushed into the medical bay, forcing the doctor to step back and explain what had happened.

Angela pretended she hadn’t woken at all.

Chapter Two

Deals With The Devil

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, you have."

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

"Yeah, like I'd cross her now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll leave before the mission team."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What happened? Is she okay?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian laughed. "Yeah, figures."

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

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

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

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

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

"But you have a plan, in case?"

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

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

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

"Yes." Adrian waited for more, bracing.

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

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

“No, she’s not.”

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

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

“She didn’t say that—any of it.”

“No.”

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

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

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

“She’s gone cold.”

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

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

Silence fell.

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

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

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

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

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

“Not exactly.”

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

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

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

“Doesn’t mean I’m training him.”

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

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

“Billy over Kyle?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian was speechless.

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

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

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

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

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

“I meant with Angela.”

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

“You’re hard to read.”

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

“I’ll do my best.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Checkmate."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

"He said what?"

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

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

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

Blankets flew off as hands rose eagerly to defend her.

Sonja settled them impatiently. "Not yet!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you want—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

All Souls

1

“This is Safe Haven. Go ahead with your message for the boss.”

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

“The Ghost.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you suggest?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, we can assist there.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop it! Right now!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Again?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hilda hurried off to do that.

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

Marc's arms went around her an instant later.

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

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

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

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

Jeff took a rear bunk.

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

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

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

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

“Let me by!” a female voice ordered.

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

“It’s really them?”

“Yes.”

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

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

Kevin never thought of that man at all.

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look out!"

"She's in a blind!"

"Get down!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you. Thank you! Thank you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sonja’s lack of response wasn’t comforting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6

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

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

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

Billy over to chaperone them, as Angela had demanded.

“You think this will work?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He's planning my murder again.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beyond all the other arguments? It doesn't feel right to me."

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

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

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

“This is different.”

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

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

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

“What?” came her muffled voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

Let's Go To Market

Near Americus, GA
September 28th

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conner braced for rudeness. “What?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Is Marc hoping for it?”

Kendle’s profile tightened in pain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pop!

“What was that?”

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

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

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

"Front right is flat."

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

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

Conner stiffened. "Someone's coming."

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

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

"Doesn't seem to be a problem." Conner wiped rain from his face.

Kendle turned from a stiff blast of wind. "I agree."

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

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

Kendle hurried forward. “Do you need help?”

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

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

Kendle frowned. “Excuse me?”

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

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

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

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

Kendle scanned his bruises and cuts.

“What happened to you?”

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

“Your turn for what?”

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

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

“The kind you have in those trucks.”

“You’ve been following us?”

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

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

“Who are you?”

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

“What did you mean about ten seconds?”

Baker turned away without answering.

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

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

“Are you okay?”

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

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

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

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

Kendle panicked. *Our team is gone!*

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

"Tommy!"

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

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

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

2

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

"You ready for this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They followed. We're good."

"Shut up."

A light moved toward them.

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

"How do you want to handle this?"

Kendle grunted. "We talk."

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

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

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

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

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

Kendle and Conner rushed forward at the same time.

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

"Don't!"

"Stop!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is Market Town.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kendle and Conner were baffled.

“You like being a slave?”

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

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

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

“Where?” Rice asked.

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

None of the men answered, providing one anyway.

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

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

“Flour.”

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

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

Kendle and Conner considered their vehicles with a sinking sensation.

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

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

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

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

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

Rice and Flour exchanged glances before shaking their heads.

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

The others fled without a backward glance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hotwired?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man obediently led, not bothering with his light.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“When is trading day?”

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

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

Kendle stored his nervous timbre. “Not here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Our family has that honor this month.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rice motioned the others to leave them alone.

Kendle waited nervously to discover why.

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

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

Rice nodded, shoveling another large spoonful in.

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

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

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

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

Kendle frowned. “And do what with it?”

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

“Do we deliver it to someone?”

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

“What is this precious item?”

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

“Can we see it first?”

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

“And if we’re caught with it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We can’t fight with anyone here?”

“No! You’ll get us all killed.”

“Your family and friends?”

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

“Everyone?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What else?”

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

“No. Next?”

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

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

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

“To who?” Kendle stood up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kendle sighed. "Can I give you some advice?"

"Yep."

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

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

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

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

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

"Like the people here?"

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

"You're not weak that way, are you?"

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

“Why don’t you stay with my dad?”

“He doesn’t want me.”

“He might, in time.”

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

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

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

“One more?”

“Fine.”

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

“You don’t want to know.”

“I do.”

“Millie.”

“What?”

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

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

having anything to do with him or his father.
“Would she?”

Kendle didn’t answer. She was asleep.

Chapter Five

Caged And Pre-staged

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re in a cell?”

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

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

“Lets the mess drain.” Dexter gagged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No one voiced theories on that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ugh! Make it quit.”

“Damn, that hurts.”

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

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

More light flooded them, bringing fresh groans.

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

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

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

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

“I am Renda. Your owner.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of the Eagles moved.

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

Tommy sighed in defeat and went to the shower.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Eat!” the guard growled again.

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

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

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

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

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

"See?" Renda flashed teeth at them. "Eat, rest on the cots. If fate wants you to be with your friends, it will be so."

Ben joined them at the table. "What keeps slaves from killing their new owners and coming back here to settle these scores?"

Renda's brows puckered, eyes going dangerously blank. "We keep track. If one of you causes trouble, all of you will be punished. If one of you escapes, one will be killed and sold to the health master." Clearly sensing the intentions of the men at the table, Renda retreated toward the guards with a hand on her whip. "It would cost me a lot to order all of you put down, but I would recoup my losses eventually. Please don't force that choice. Bullets are expensive, even for me."

Beside her, the sentries raised their guns in support, destroying any chance of an attack. They stayed that way as the rest of the team showered and came to the table.

When all eleven slaves were seated, picking at their food, Renda slid a paper onto the table. "Those are the rules. Tell buyers anything different and we will cut off a toe each time." She glided from the room with a cheerful grin.

"She loves her job." One of their rookies, Carl, glared after her.

Tommy snorted. “Yeah.”

“I’m still having trouble with my eyes.” Ben kept going before the guard could protest against talking. “Someone read me the rules.”

“I’ll do it.” Tyler picked up the paper. In their practice lessons, this was his role—the distraction. “The Masters set prices. Do not make deals for yourself...”

It gave cover for Josh and Scott to talk lowly. Their backs were to the guards.

Tommy joined the conversation with their hand code, but kept his eyes on the tray so their captors wouldn’t know they were communicating.

Try anyway?

No. Unarmed. No location.

Wait to be taken out of here.

The other two men gave curt nods in response.

Tommy understood. He wanted to try attacking the guards too, but he also wanted to get everyone out alive. Their captors weren’t bluffing.

“Eat!”

The team tried to dig into the cold food, knowing they needed to keep up their strength, but cramping stomachs made it hard. The sounds of their cell being hosed out didn’t help. They remained at the table for almost an hour, studying the room, before the bossy sentry ordered them to a row of cots along the opposite wall.

“Sleep!” Bossy ordered.

The eleven men went slowly, casting glares and glowers that were not returned. Other than fear of

their captive's health failing, the sentries didn't seem to have any emotions at all.

"Let's find out how far we can go." Scott flashed quick gestures. *Table goes up, blocks them. Half hold the table and the others grab guns.*

Tommy wanted to agree, but Bossy lifted his AK.

"We do get paid for the bodies if you try to escape. It isn't all about your wellbeing."

Frustrated, Tommy lay down on the first cot. That answer revealed intelligence, something he had been hoping their guards didn't have. From this point on, Tommy would assume they were being held by individuals with routines and schedules like the Eagles. It made the situation much worse.

"This is gonna get ugly." Josh took the cot by their team leader.

"What happens if someone actually buys us?" Dexter was worried about being split up.

"Meet here." Ben tried to get comfortable.

"And our...owners?" Tyler shut his eyes.

"Judge it based on the situation," Tommy was relieved the guards were cleaning up the table and not paying the conversation any attention. "If she wasn't bluffing about that tendon slicing, we'll have to react before that. Be ready for my signal."

Ryan asked a question that had occurred to him upon seeing the woman. "Was she Iranian?"

Tommy nodded. "I think so. Bossy isn't, though. His accent sounds eastern. But not *our* eastern, if you know what I mean."

“I couldn’t place it, either.”

Tommy didn’t tell Ryan that he was almost positive he had identified it. The answer was terrifying. He wanted to confirm it first.

The team continued to gather information instead of going to sleep, all glad when their stomachs settled and their fine motor skills returned. In another hour, they would be in full control of themselves again and then this place was going to learn who they were.

Tommy studied the features and the security, but he also listened to the noises. He could still hear voices in the room next to theirs, but the other side of the door held the most mystery. It sounded as if there was an entire town out there. He’d even heard laughter from children. It almost confirmed his theories. Only someone with organizational skills and brute force could accomplish this and keep it running.

“Think we’re close to where we were?” Ramer was thinking of their trucks and weapons.

“I was in the rear of our Tahoe.” Ryan grimaced. “I keep getting flashes of my kit rolling around against the tailgate. They have it all.”

“We have bigger trouble than missing wheels or rifles. I may have figured out who these people are.” Tommy gestured toward their captors. “That accent was Dutch. Hers was Iranian. The man on the end has a Russian flag tat on his palm. They’re foreign soldiers.”

“People who were visiting family or government workers who got trapped here after the war?” Ben frowned. “You know it’s very unlikely that they would all put aside their differences, even to survive.”

Tommy shook his head, glad when it only hurt a little instead of a lot. “No. See the blue helmet tattoos the guards have? The woman had one on her wrist. I saw it when she handed me a towel. That’s a UN logo.”

“UN!” Ryan made a face. “Does that mean a government made it through the war? I thought the rest of the world was as bad off as we are.”

“I don’t know.” Tommy lowered his voice. “But for right now, we have to assume that America has been invaded.”

“We have to tell the boss.” Josh concentrated. “Can anyone try it yet?”

“Maybe in a few hours.” Tommy was gathering his energy. “I’m the only one here with long range skills. She had me in private lessons.”

Instead of being jealous, the rest of the men were relieved. Angela’s classes had been hard, but useful. This team could use the mental connection over short distances, but they hadn’t had success in the longer tests they’d done on their own.

“I passed them all.” Tommy was reading them through the headache. “I wasn’t allowed to tell you. Now we know why.” That was a reminder not to let their captors know either.

The men all went quiet. They had a simple plan in place, most of them were together, and all of them were uninjured. They already held the advantage. Their captors just didn't know it yet.

2

"It's morning."

Kendle jerked awake, hand going to her knife.

Conner resumed his perch on the dresser while she got herself together. He gave her three full minutes of quiet.

Kendle tried to rush herself awake, but the haze of sleep in small chunks instead of a full night was already pulling on her. Once the adrenaline kicked in, she would be fine today, but tomorrow could get dicey if she didn't get them all out of here.

"The market opened. I heard the bell. And our host is on his way here now."

"Good." Kendle pushed to her feet. "Follow my lead. Don't let them use your emotions to add costs to the total."

"I'll try hard." Conner had already heard cries that forced him to hold himself in place. He was certain they'd been young. Only Kendle's pain-filled whimpers from the closet had kept him from insisting they do something.

Kendle placed a hand on his shoulder in sympathy, but she didn't offer platitudes. She didn't have any. They couldn't attack and risk their men, but more than that, Safe Haven didn't need another

war and they had no idea if these people were a serious threat yet. From all appearances they were, but Kendle couldn't challenge the leadership here without permission from the boss or Marc.

There was a tap on the door. "You ready in there?"

Kendle motioned Conner to follow as she opened it.

Rice smiled happily. "Food first, or the market and then lunch?"

Kendle knew Conner was hungry, but they still had a few supplies from the kit she'd taken out of their truck right before it had been stolen. "The market."

Rice didn't argue. He'd already eaten.

Kendle adjusted her jacket over her guns. "Where do I go when we get in there?"

"She'll come to you." Rice led the way. "This is a large load of slaves. She's very happy with me."

"A woman owns my team?"

"Renda is one of this town's masters. She's the nicest of them."

"When did the masters...collect this town?" Kendle nodded politely to the family members on crusty floors and grungy couches who watched her suspiciously from their plush blankets and thick sleeping bags. The mix of poverty and extravagance was odd.

"Six months or so." Rice took them down the creaking wooden steps. "Feels longer."

“Slavery usually does. Tell me how the market runs.”

Rice held the front door for her, glaring at the other occupants of the building who were craning their necks down the stairs and over banisters. One of them was the beaten decoy from their ambush. Before Conner could be rude, Rice shouted. “Get to your jobs! We have quotas or the others don’t eat!”

Kendle frowned, not shading her view against the dim dawn sky that had finally dried into grudging clouds of ugly gray. “What others?”

“You’ll see.” As they stepped out into stinking, damp air, Rice fastened the home with a padlock.

Kendle stopped Conner from asking why. She looked pointedly upward, where uniformed troops were visible in the cloudy light of dawn. There were large towers on every corner of the tall, thick, wooden wall that surrounded the town, each with four large men or women. In the street, there were small security posts with pairs of heavily armed men, spaced roughly every hundred feet.

“Wow.” Conner was surprised by the size. He couldn’t see the end of the wall for all the apartments crammed around a long, rectangular wall with more towers and guards. It was like the front of a fort, with thugs instead of soldiers. “How many people live here?”

“Hundreds. More will come after the next town is added.” Rice gave a friendly hello and good morning to a large man and woman coming from a bakery that had pastries in the frosted glass window.

The couple, carrying heavy baskets laden with sweets, gave Rice approving glances after scanning his company.

Conner's stomach growled.

"The next town?" Kendle watched other locals come and go through a main gate located not far from the residence where they'd spent the night.

"Rupert, Georgia was approached last month and given thirty days to decide. If they say no, the masters will set the troops loose there, which keeps them happy. If the town agrees, the masters will double their labor force and still gain some new slaves from those few who always refuse to conform."

"Sweet deal."

"It actually is." Rice ignored her sarcasm, leading them past the first security post with his warty chin up. "All these towns are starving. Here, they will work and they will be fed."

"What about those who don't have a skill?"

"And the elderly?"

Rice didn't answer either of them.

The town around them was haunting to both of the descendants, who could sense the misery. The trash fluttering on the wind swept against the bare feet of dozens of hollow-eyed men and women lingering in openings and alleys. They hadn't detected them last night in the dark and rain. Their sallow, bruised skin implied a terrible drug problem here.

There were other problems in view as well. Human and animal waste ran down the street, telling them there wasn't water or power for the slaves. Kendle doubted the masters were exposed to their own excrement.

Rice lowered his voice as they approached the market entrance, where a sign declared the hours as *Dawn to Dusk*. "Don't talk around the soldiers."

Kendle didn't plan to. The hulking thugs were everywhere, watching everything.

She and Conner walked behind Rice as he led them to the gate guards. One black and one white, both sentries appraised them warily.

Rice slowly held up his hand and pulled his sleeve aside to reveal a brand. "This gives me my quota for the month."

The short, white sentry wore crossed ammo belts and overalls that hadn't been washed in a long time. Dirt fell from the creases as he examined Rice's mark and then wrote something in a wrinkled book.

Kendle scanned the other troops in sight, comforted by their boredom and worries of low ammo. Both could work to her advantage.

"How are we playing this?" Conner admired the black sentry's attire. Even his tie was made from leather.

"Like any other trip into hostile territory," Kendle answered as they were waved through the opening gates. "Eagle rules."

Conner didn't know what that meant. He wasn't really an Eagle yet.

"You will be. She has plans for you."

They went quiet as the gates opened fully, revealing another small town.

Rice led them toward the center of the circular encampment, through town members and the guards around these better-built shacks. Kendle assumed the furniture in them would be above Rice's in quality. She also doubted these people would need sleeping bags. They could afford more blankets.

The two women at the open café to the right of the market gates were wearing enough jewelry to be visible from space if the sun ever hit them. The bodyguards hovering made it simple to conclude they were wealthy—not enough to be a trader or a master, but certainly enough to be supervisors or mates of traders and masters.

"Wow."

Kendle nodded at Conner's awe, but not for the same reason. The boy was impressed by the upbeat music and booths, by the flowers and the perfume. Kendle respected the brute force being used in an open display to those who came here to trade. She hadn't been exposed to such a display of guns since they'd fought Donner's men. Many of her plans were now useless. The only way they could fight this was with their power, but even if they won and escaped with their team, the townspeople, who were abundant, would be killed. They couldn't remove

this problem without Angela or Marc's permission. It was a no-win situation.

I feel it again, Conner sent.

Kendle used a subtle gesture to tell Conner not to use that form of communication. They hadn't asked Rice if the masters had any monitoring methods in place for magic users. Mental conversations might be recognized.

"You have to make an easy choice now." Rice turned to Kendle. "Normally, I would take you on a tour to encourage you to come and trade again. Some people demand to be taken straight to their missing items, but they almost never get them. They usually become slaves for their unwillingness to deal."

"We'll tour." Kendle spoke over the chatter of marketplace residents and shoppers. She looked at Conner. "Stay about five feet behind us and watch my back."

Conner did as he was told, trying to appear as intimidating as his dad.

"The item we discussed is in the same area your team will be, if you make a deal. They may be there already if someone made an early bid. That happens sometimes. Be careful not to draw attention. You're on camera in every section and it will drive up the prices."

Kendle wasn't concerned with that yet. She needed to examine the layout and verify her team was okay. As she did that, she was hoping to see something to trade with or at least a weakness to

exploit. If she didn't, she would offer up the next two locations on the map that Angela had given her. One was a stock of bottled water. The other was a DHS office that had been armed, but not used. Kendle hoped those would meet the cost of the trade. Once that was handled, she would need to see where this mystery descendant was being held so she could develop a plan for it. She assumed she would figure that out while going for the supplies. These market thieves were very organized. Kendle didn't expect to find something here to use as currency. Which meant she would be at least a week behind schedule, even if that all went smoothly. She would have to contact Angela soon. Kendle was dreading the call.

"Was this a school?" Conner recognized the basic design.

Rice took them up long, wide stairs toward another gate where doors had obviously been. "Yes. Now, it's our market. You can get anything here."

The musician with his top hat and keyboard on one side and the busy face painting booth on the other was almost too much for Conner and Kendle to accept. They didn't reply to Rice's comment.

"Ah," a female drawled from nearby. "I'm glad you have the patrons, Rice."

They all turned to face the short woman with scars on her cheeks and a long braid. She was sitting at one of the stools that lined the front of an outdoor bar. Her exposed skin, what little there was, boasted almost as many scars as Kendle's.

Rice bowed to the female. “This is our slave master, Renda. After the tour, she is the one you’ll ask to speak with.”

Renda nodded her approval at how Rice was handling things. “Carry on.”

Kendle lingered a moment to give the French-braided woman a hard stare. Trying to convey her evil nature, Kendle was careful not to reveal more.

Renda smirked. “I look forward to your bid.”

Kendle turned away, following Rice. “If they’re injured, you won’t get one. I’ll buy new stock and spread the word your slaves aren’t cared for.”

Renda jumped from the stool, arm rising. “My stock is the best in the state! They eat better than I do!”

Kendle shrugged, not repeating herself. She was only guessing about how to handle the short, muscle-bound woman. This could all blow up with little provocation.

Renda watched the scarred fighter disappear through the market gates, scowling. After a moment, she marched toward her private entrance, muttering under her breath. She wanted to check on her slaves, be certain the guards were obeying their instructions. A bad reputation would get her removed from the market and she didn’t feel like killing for the slot again. The first time had been tiring. Her sister hadn’t wanted to stay under the water.

Rice let out a deep breath as they got out of earshot. “Be careful! The female master has

protections here. If anything happens to her, other masters will take it out on everyone!”

“By burning down the market?” Conner stared at the well-stocked balloon stand and working Pac-Man arcade in wonder. He hadn’t seen those signs of civilization since before the war.

Rice pointed at the signs on one entry wall. “They take pictures. That’s the first stop on the tour.”

Kendle and Conner reluctantly approached the red brick wall, bracing for ugliness.

Conner turned away first, unable to stand the images of children being hurt and burned alive. It was demoralizing. He stared at the dingy white tiles on the floor to avoid Rice’s knowing smirk.

Kendle forced herself to view the entire set of pictures. Looking weak right now wasn’t an option. In fact, there was a chance they would be attacked and enslaved themselves when these so-called masters found out she didn’t have anything to trade. If Rice was wrong about their willingness to make a deal, they were in deep trouble. Magic would be their recourse.

Kendle turned to Rice without a change in her facade.

Rice gestured toward the opposite wall, where more signs waited. “All of them please.”

Rooms with red doors are forbidden.

Deliveries must follow the yellow lines outside to the loading dock. Have paperwork ready!

Tour first. Bother the brokers last.

Management is not responsible for any injuries, thefts, or deaths while you are in the market place or Market Town.

Hours 7am–7pm. Slaves are available every three days. Bidding starts at noon.

“Is the next stop a demonstration?”

“Yeah. Nice guess!” Rice beamed. “Most people don’t get it that quickly.”

Kendle and Conner both braced as they were led into a small section off the main entrance. Between the signs and Rice hurrying, they didn’t have much time to view the hallways.

“These slaves have committed crimes against the masters...”

Kendle got the impression that Rice hated this part of the tour. When he scanned the chained men and women in various stages of abuse, so did she. The urge to act was powerful.

Kendle put a hand on Conner’s arm, falling into a vague plan. “You wanted to come along and learn how to do this. Be still and learn it.”

Rice’s body language was approving as he led them toward the door at their end of the hall

entrance. “The next stop is last. Then we can tour until the time for slaving.”

“When they sell them?” Kendle ignored Conner’s confusion. He would catch on to what she wanted.

“Yes. There will be a crowd.”

“Is it an auction?”

“No.” Rice opened the door and held it. “The bids are private. Masters don’t like their wealth being announced, even to each other.”

Kendle wanted to reply, but the inhabitants crammed into the zone glanced up with so much fear and misery that her stomach clenched. “Collateral?”

“Yes. If you have to collect items to trade with, this is where your boy will stay.”

Kendle swept the cramped, filthy people and the portable setups for waste and washing. “Will he be safe?”

“Each day lessens the odds of it.” Rice shrugged. “He is young enough to train, as you clearly know. He would be worth the lives of at least three adult men.”

Kendle and Conner both frowned, for different reasons.

“What happens if their family doesn’t come or fails to deliver?”

“They become the property of the masters.”

Rice sounded angry for the first time. Kendle caught his fast glance toward the soldiers and then

another swift, longing peek at a small group huddled in a far corner.

Kendle waited until they were back in the hallway. “How many of them are yours?”

“Later.” Rice took them back past the signs and into the first floor. Aware of the need to gawk, Rice put them along a wall so they didn’t block the path between the stalls and security booths. The guards didn’t like it when they couldn’t view the next post down the hall.

After a moment, Kendle turned to Rice. “I want to see it all. Is there time before the bidding?”

Rice peered up at the familiar round clock. “Noon is the opening for slaves and livestock.” His features brightened. “They give out free popcorn on slave days. That’s nice, right?”

“Yep.” Kendle forced a smile instead of the angry tirade that came to mind. “Show me everything. Don’t skip a single area.”

Chapter Six

Toured And Lured

1

“Who has control over this floor?” Kendle scanned the nervous, depressed locals mentally and physically.

“The masters share control. Renda owns the slaves and the weapons wing. Iram owns the food and water, along with the health wing. Iram and Renda share control of everything else on this floor. Yuri is master of the upstairs level and everything there. Xavier owns the basement.” Rice led them down the hall, pointing out shops. “That’s the small café. It’s connected to the music lounge. You can get iPods full of old tunes and coffee with hot rolls. It’s a great place to relax after working all day or traveling.”

Rice sounded like he was giving a sales pitch.

The shops had been remodeled to have glass windows, like a mall. It felt much like that as Rice led them down the tiled halls. Kendle shook her head at Conner when he would have spoken. She didn’t know what he wanted to say, but until she had a firm plan in mind, he needed to be quiet.

“Next is the dance club. The girls take turns entertaining the market customers. In exchange, they get a discount on supplies.”

Kendle didn’t glance in the windows or open curtains where music and stench rolled out, but Conner gaped open-mouthed until they were by both shops.

Kendle raised her hand to slap him in the back of the head, but lowered it. Cast iron frying pans had been trying to correct that reaction to breasts in guys for a long time, but it hadn’t succeeded. It was biology. Nothing changed that. Determined to get deeper into her role, Kendle sighed. “We could probably find the time, if you make your own deal.”

Conner flushed. “No, thanks.”

Kendle chuckled. “Suit yourself.”

“Our girls are very clean.” Rice ignored the boy’s red cheeks. “We mostly cater to women now, but the girls are eager to please.”

Kendle was surprised to hear that. “Those shops are full of men?”

“Yes.”

Kendle swallowed and kept walking.

Rice steered them around groups of troops and townspeople exchanging paper and merchandise at an accounting table. Near it was another table with a tag that said *market broker*. “Normally you would make a deal with the broker, but only Renda deals for the slaves.”

“How does the checkout work?”

“Vendors on any floor will give you a ticket. You bring it to the broker and make a deal, except on slave trade days. The broker and the masters are all in the main section with the cashiers then.”

“Where did the masters come from?”

“They were part of a UN training group that got stranded at Souther Field. Once they unloaded their trucks and crates, they took control.”

“What happened to the airport?”

“Burnt down when they took the first town. The masters don’t want to be stretched too thin.” Rice pointed. “Do you mind if we start downstairs? I have wagers to collect. I need to get to them before they spend their winnings.”

Kendle shrugged. “We’re on your time until noon.”

Rice led them to steep stairs with thick, sturdy rails. “After you.”

Kendle and Conner took the steps down to the basement that had been remodeled to become one huge zone. It seemed endless from the bottom of the stairs.

Conner gaped. “Is this what the real Vegas was like?”

Kendle smiled a bit. “Yeah, but louder.”

“You went?”

“Regularly. My...sister, Dawn, had the bug. She liked roulette.”

Conner heard the deep sorrow and felt yet another connection with Kendle. He also knew loss.

Kendle went cold, eyes fixed on a far wall. Their two matching Tahoe trucks were behind a rope, labeled as prizes for a grand championship fight that hadn't been scheduled yet.

Kendle glowered at Rice. "How can I trade for my trucks if you've given them away?"

"Make a deal with the winner, I guess." Rice smiled cheerfully. "Or you could fight for them. Anyone can enter the championship."

"No, thanks." Kendle had read the fine print. The championship was a bracket matchup that lasted for three days. She wasn't going to be here that long.

"Probably for the best. These matches can be to the death. You act like a hardass, but you can't keep your end of the deal if you die."

Kendle was startled into a snicker at his ruthlessness. "Well, this will be a town to remember."

"Lady, you have no idea how right you are."

Left without a response, she and Conner followed Rice deep into the glittery basement of the Americus City High School.

"Wait here." Rice pointed toward the corner with the row of slot machines. "I won't be long."

Kendle turned to her right and began to walk.

Conner stayed five feet behind and tried not to be distracted by the bells and clangs, the lights and flashy décor.

Kendle strolled by the row of wide oval tables where the middle class sat drinking and playing.

She suspected most of their winnings went to pay off current tabs for the expensive clothes and accessories. These tables reeked of desperation and thievery.

Next to the tables was a small rope partitioning off tournament booths where only half a dozen men remained. Kendle corrected her impression, seeing dusty places on the floor without footprints. *Or only that many had shown up.*

In the center, where bright banners draped the ceiling to floor, there were three divided areas. The first one she walked by held two tired cocks pecking at each other. There was a crowd around that ring, but most of them were guards trying to control a handler who wanted to jump in and beat his bird.

In the middle was a huge ring waiting for a later event. The mat was layered in dust. The far end held a plastic tub with two scrawny females scratching at each other while the referee sprayed them with water. Few people, male or female, were paying attention.

Kendle came to the end of the basement and the stairs that would take her back up to level one, and turned left to finish her circuit. The arcades along that short wall were tempting. She'd loved arcades. She didn't let the set of pool tables draw a reaction either. She'd also been good at that, as well as the variety of throwing games that had been nailed to the walls.

An empty oval counter with ropes was the single attraction along the opposite wall. Kendle

returned to the entrance in disappointment. *This is post-war entertainment?*

She found Rice at the broker table in front of the animal ring, arguing about the amount. She went up the stairs without telling him. She needed a few minutes away.

Conner swept the electronic dartboards in longing as they left, wondering if the empty popcorn machine next to them worked. If he had something to trade and their team was safe, he would come here and spend half a day playing. He missed being able to do things like that without worrying all the time.

Kendle understood, but it was yet another example of the wisdom of age. Youth would take the first flashy thing that came, feeling as though there might never be anything better. Age waited for the quality version because they'd been around enough to know which one was more satisfying over the long run. Conner would learn that lesson in time, if he survived. Kendle was suddenly positive that he would. The kid was smart and tough.

Wanting to avoid the masters as long as she could, Kendle kept going up the empty stairs, skipping the first floor. She didn't want to get in Renda's way again until she had a solid plan.

Signs and warnings were written on, and nailed to, all of the walls in the stairwell, including a large one at the top of the steps that told them not to steal or they would become slaves. Kendle didn't plan on it. Rice had given her a description of what was up

here. If she got lucky, this floor might be productive.

Conner was still reading the signs as Kendle went into the hall, lingering on the fading poster board that advertised happy hour and live entertainment. That spelled party for him.

The pair emerged into a dim hall on the top floor that reeked of sweet smells and soft music.

Conner sniffed the air like a dog. “Is that...pizza?”

Kendle motioned toward an adjacent section. The name of the café wasn’t discernible, but the words *Food, Drinks, Snacks* were flashing in neon lighting.

Kendle turned them away from the café, stomach now growling. She took the opposite hall to make the circuit, noting a plumbing stall and a gardening shop. As she neared the end of the first long side, she found a tool store and a communication stand, where radios and batteries were on display behind a small locked cage. She read signs that informed her those were only for the masters and guards.

The corners of this second floor held stacks of washers and dryers, with pipes and hoses stretched out like snakes. Kendle stepped carefully, as did everyone else who traveled the damp hall.

Along the shortest red wall was an actual tailoring shop and a hairdresser, both with fencing fastened over the entire front of the booths. She

assumed it was too early for those businesses to expect customers. Dawn's break was an hour gone.

Nearby, a security post was shoved into the corner. It was empty, surprising her. The basement and first floor had heavy protection. Why not up here?

Kendle refused to hurry as she hit the other long side and found the upstairs entertainment section. There were girls for rent, men on chains, and a theater with popcorn smells flowing from the open doors. Vague, hard-hitting music beats echoed through the closed spaces.

Conner gaped with longing and curiosity.

At the end of this hall was a red door. Kendle avoided it.

In the center of the upstairs were the living quarters and cubbies for rent. It appeared that all of them had been added or remodeled to provide the spaces without regard for comfort. Most of them were open, revealing emptiness.

"I need to go."

Kendle sighed. So did she.

"Do you suppose those are for the public?" Conner pointed to the restrooms next to the door that was off limits.

Kendle glanced around for someone to ask, but the second floor was deserted. She shrugged. "Let's find out. Stay together."

Bracing, Kendle took him into the men's john to spare him, but there was no one inside for her to embarrass. She hurried, hoping he did too.

After checking the few stalls, Kendle went to the exit. "I'm nearby."

"Okay."

Kendle found a fairly clean place along the wall to wait for him. Getting tissue from the roll, while under real lights, had been nice. The electricity downstairs had drawn the same emotions, just not as strongly. "Funny the things you miss."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Kendle jumped, moving away from the wall. She swept the hall but didn't see anyone. "Where are you?"

A short, squat man wearing pants and a shirt the exact shade of red as the bricks stepped forward with his hand out. "You need a room? I have rooms." His black boots and greasy black beard gleamed in the dimness.

Recognizing him from the description she'd been given, Kendle shook his hand. "You must be Yuri."

The furry male dimpled in happiness. "Yes!" He motioned at the nearest open cubicle for rent. "Come!"

Kendle stayed in the doorway so Conner would see her as soon as he came from the restroom, but it was also as far as she needed to go. It was a small square room with nice furniture and threadbare blankets and pillows.

"You can have this for cheap. You stay, huh?"

Kendle inspected the faded signs and dusty floors of the section around them. "You'll run a tab."

Yuri pouted. "People never pay them. No tabs."
"Okay."

Conner came over with a deep frown when he saw there was a man with her. "You all right?"

Kendle ignored the question, studying Yuri. His eyes had widened at spotting Conner. She could almost hear his wheels turning.

"The boy." Yuri pointed. "My best cubby, with food and care for your stay."

"For the duration?"

Conner glared at her in hurt surprise.

"Yes, yes. He is worth much to the slave master."

"Will you accept him as collateral on my tab?"

Yuri's face scrunched into concentration as he considered it. His hand came up to his brow, stroking... "You would pay it off or give me the boy?"

"Yes."

"Done."

Kendle put a hand out to shake as Conner spun toward the stairs.

"Grab him!" Yuri ordered.

Foreign soldiers in red clothes sprang from shadowy tables that Kendle and Conner hadn't noticed without using their descendant powers. The wood had been painted the same shade as the brick. It was perfect camouflage.

The door clicked ahead of him, locking.

Conner stopped.

Instead of the beating he'd expected, the sentries surrounded the boy and gently nudged him toward Yuri.

"Interesting." Kendle ignored Conner's mental threats to let his wrath loose on them all. "He won't be harmed?"

"No, no, no. Our slaves are the best in the state!"

"He'll be with the wretches we saw downstairs?"

Conner perked up, stomach calming. She wasn't trading him.

"Yes. Have him there by the time the market closes. I will have the best cubby ready for you."

Kendle was glad Conner now seemed to understand what she was doing. He would be in with Rice's family. He was also next to the slaves, to their team, and he would be safe. The masters couldn't kidnap him because he was already in their care.

Yuri left them, troops returning to their cleverly hidden posts.

Kendle went into the café before Conner could speak.

The cook, a tall man with a long white apron, smiled at them in delight. "You look hungry. Can I feed you breakfast or lunch?"

"Something beef and filling." Kendle settled onto one of the rotating stools that had been welded to the floor.

Conner took a place by the window to watch for problems. There wouldn't be any from inside, since there were no other patrons.

"Do you run tabs?"

"No credit!" The cook scowled. "Get out."

"I can help you make more sales every day." Kendle didn't move. "I can also get rid of your competition downstairs."

The cook, a tired man from Florida who had been trapped here after the war, studied her for a long moment. When he had made his mental choice, he came from behind the counter to pull down the shade over the front window, signaling that he was on a break. "What do I have to do?"

Kendle gestured toward the grill. "Food and care for the duration of my stay. By the time I leave, your business will have increased one hundred percent."

"Your collateral? I heard you talking with Yuri. You can't use the boy twice."

"Feed us now, as a sign of good faith. By the time you close tonight, the shop downstairs will be out of business and that will seal our deal."

"Who is your host?" The cook wanted to agree. He barely managed enough customers each month to pay the rent for his business. Being out of the main flow of traffic downstairs hurt him.

"Rice."

"Those are your guys downstairs?"

"Yes."

The cook stood up and moved toward the grill.

Kendle was glad the man pulled on gloves before preparing their food. She was even happier to see that his small freezer was stocked and labeled with huge strips of tape that all said beef or chicken.

“How do you plan to get your men if you can’t even afford a meal?” He began opening tubs and packages of seasonings.

“I have no idea.” Kendle decided on honesty. For some reason, the cook seemed like a good person. “But I’ve covered your bill and others. I’m making progress.”

The man nodded, slapping a pile of beef onto the grill that he mashed down flat and cut in half. “Somedays, that’s all life is.”

Kendle swept the small café again, seeing he had tried to recreate the experience of an old soda shop. There were even signs advertising milkshakes that could be shared. It was cute, quaint. And very out of place. Kendle found it comforting, exactly like she thought the owner had intended when he’d decorated it.

“I’m Curtis. Cutts to the masters.”

“Widow Maker.” She knew the name would get back to Renda. “He’s my lapdog, Butch.”

Conner and the cook both snickered.

Kendle smiled her thanks for the drinks Curtis put on the counter, motioning Conner to join her.

Following his training, Conner took his to a far end of the small counter so he could still watch the door.

“Were you traveling north or south when they got you?” Curtis dropped generous seasonings and dehydrated onions onto both the grill and the meat.

“South.”

“Something there? Other than what we have here?”

Kendle understood he was looking for hope, for a reason to run. “We were going to check it out. No one has heard from that area in a long time.”

“You on a mission for a group?”

Kendle’s lips clamped shut.

Conner covered for her. “We have a small camp up north. Getting too cold.”

“I thought these latest rainstorms felt like snow might be backing them up.” The cook deposited plastic silverware and cheap paper napkins in front of them, then got plates from a shelf. “Your group good?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Conner and Kendle answering simultaneously drew longing from the man. “Hang on to it for as long as you can. Never bring them through here.”

“No, we won’t,” Kendle lied, thinking about how ugly it would get when Angela found out about this place. The market’s days were numbered.

Kendle and Conner enjoyed the fresh bread and beef patties smothered in onions, but she didn’t linger, sure Rice was panicking at her absence. As

they finished and stood, Kendle held her hand out to the cook. “Good food.”

He beamed, shaking with her. “By close tonight?”

“My word on it.” Kendle heard a clamor on the stairs that announced the arrival of their host. “Tomorrow, I’ll start bringing in the customers. You keep the beef coming.”

Curtis began to clean up their mess. “You get rid of that bitch downstairs and I’ll split the daily profits that you drive in.”

“Deal.”

Kendle shut the door after waving Conner out. She immediately came face-to-face with Rice.

It was clear that they’d been fed, but he didn’t ask how she had paid. After being ignored and abandoned in the basement, it was clear she would make her own choices.

“Have you viewed everything up here?”

Kendle nodded to Yuri as she went by the door that was red. It was his personal apartment. It looked as though it had once been three classrooms. “I’m going to the first floor. You can tag along if you like.”

Pouting, Rice stayed by Conner and let Kendle explore the market at her leisure.

Behind them, Bossy slipped into the café and took a seat on the stool that Kendle had occupied. “Hello, Cutts!”

Curtis plastered his usual benign expression on as he turned from the grill. “She said her name is

Widow Maker. The boy is Butch. They came from the north. Said they're alone. Our deal is for new customers. She promised to increase my sales for a percentage of the profit. I agreed."

"You went for that without collateral?"

Curtis glanced around at the empty stools and full freezer. "Better a bird in the bush than nothing in the hand."

Bossy wrote it down and left without replying.

2

"Something's happening." Tyler didn't rise from his cot on the end. None of them had slept in the hours they'd been waiting. "It's getting louder in the next room."

Josh nodded. "Bossy's getting twitchy. Keeps checking his watch."

"Everyone clear?" Ben looked at the rookies first. They'd gone over it a couple of times, but he wanted to be positive.

"We forgot something." Scott sat up.

The door opened.

"What?" Tommy went to him as Bossy moved their way.

"The traitors."

Tommy realized Scott was right, but there wasn't time to discuss it as Bossy and the other guards herded them to the exit with prods from their rifles.

Tommy led them in, walking slowly to have time to adapt their plan based on where they were being taken. He saw fencing and realized they were being transferred to a different cell. He spotted the long cart with those intimidating metal poles and handcuffs, and balked. “We’re not going in th—”

Bossy slammed his C7 into Tommy’s knee, neatly catching him when he crumbled. He then swung the Eagle over one shoulder as if he weighed nothing.

The Eagles closest tried to help, but the narrow fencing and the troops between them prevented anyone from getting through.

Scott shoved against the Russian soldier, wishing he would swing, but the man stood pat with another sentry, absorbing the anger without reaction.

Scott drew back to brawl, but Ben grabbed his arm. “We’re separated. Get us up there!”

Seeing Ben had him under control, the Russian man moved to let the rest of the team through.

Ben hurried up the three stairs and into the new cell, ignoring the guards and gawkers to help Tommy stand up while he was handcuffed. “I got ya, man.”

Tommy tried to stop the ringing in his ears. “I tried not to hurt him.”

Ben snickered nervously, being pushed over to the set of cuffs next to Tommy. Ben let himself be cuffed with a churning stomach. In their lessons, he

hadn't been able to get out of his. Whatever partner he'd been assigned had always had to help him.

"I've got ya, man." Tommy pulled on his cuffs and was eased a bit to discover they were attached to a chain that allowed him to step out of reach of the dozens of potential buyers now surrounding the cell.

Ben forced his heart rate down. They were Eagles. This wasn't practice. It was time to do what they'd been trained for. *Step one: observe. Step two: compare and plan. Step three: execute.*

Hoping the team around him was doing the same, Ben studied everything he could see. The first observation was the worst. With all the security in sight, only a couple of exits in the gymnasium, and more than four dozen customers crowded around to glimpse the wares, they weren't getting out of here just by fighting. Not even if they grabbed a gun or two. They would be mowed down by uniformed troops carrying everything from AKs to G3s.

Scott was coming to the same conclusion as he examined the walls and found no windows, no weak points, and cameras that stopped and started in ways that suggested a human operator. They were live.

"Two minutes!" Bossy shouted. "Two minutes until the viewing is over."

Guards on the outside of the cage began pulling ropes to bring down what appeared to be red velvet curtains.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Josh glared. “It’s only been ten months. Where is your humanity?!”

The sentry behind him, the Russian he had dubbed Demetri, kicked his left ankle hard enough to bring Josh to his knees.

Josh stayed there while he recovered. “You’ll pay for that and for Tommy. Keep count!”

The soldier leaned down. “Put this on my tab.”

Josh braced for another body hit just as his chin slammed into the bars.

“That’s enough!” Renda shoved the sentry over to kneel by Josh. She grabbed his chin roughly to examine the damage.

Josh tried to pull away, but she used both hands to hold him still. Her strength was surprising.

“You have drawn blood.” Renda glowered at the guard. “What is rule three of your training?”

“Never draw blood.” The Russian backed up. “Use methods that don’t leave visible marks to control slaves.”

“You are relieved of slave duty. Go to a broker for reassignment.”

The man stormed from the cage, casting glares at Josh and Renda.

Renda used her soft jacket sleeve to wipe the thin trickle of blood from Josh’s nose. She wasn’t gentle. “There. Good as new.” She helped him stand, ignoring the way he favored the leg that wasn’t throbbing.

“Drop it.” Renda stepped from the cage. She locked it as the curtains slid into place.

The Eagles immediately tried to use their hand code to communicate, but the clinking chains said it wasn’t wise. Tommy shut it down. “Whisper. Do the best you can. Tell me what you saw.” It was the Eagle way of comparing notes to come up with a complete picture of the situation.

“I saw a long row of booths and tables. I could read two of them. One was a rental broker. The other was accounting.” Josh began working on his cuffs. “I had the floor view.”

“All of them were like that.” Dexter also started working on his cuffs. “I think they were taking yellow tickets from people in the lines. I didn’t see where they went when they finished.”

“There were a couple of doors and no windows.” Ben scanned Josh’s injuries, very angry. “Everyone around us is armed, even the buyers. They’re carrying heavy equipment.”

“There’s a huge row of shelves on a wall by three big booths that have more security than we do.” Ryan grunted. “The shelves have all sorts of gear and crap. Too much to name. The booths have signs, but I couldn’t read any of them.”

“Cameras in all corners.”

“I think we’re in an old carnival cage. Might be on wheels. I couldn’t tell when we came in. They have lace or something draped over the bottom.”

“These cuffs were welded. Might be a weak place if they did a shoddy job.”

The team continued with their observational meeting, trying to ignore the cruel strangers outside the cage who were now vying for the chance to bid on them.

“I’ll take two!”

“I want one!”

“Three, if the price is good!”

“I want them all!” a familiar voice rang out above the din.

The men in the cage stilled at the offer, straining to hear the response.

“Take a form and fill in your bid,” Renda answered. “Everyone gets a form. Fill them out and give them to me. If you need help, step over to the accounting table.”

The team in the cage waited to hear that powerful pitch again, but there was only the excited chatter of patrons, gawkers, and troops for a long minute.

Tyler frowned. “Maybe it wasn’t her.”

“Wait for it...” The relief in Tommy’s heart was overwhelming. He’d just been thinking that without descendant help, they might not get out of this one.

“If I can’t examine the merchandise, I’m not bidding.” Kendle’s words echoed loudly, bringing all activity in the gym to a halt. “What are you hiding? Are they sick? Hurt?”

“Let her in there,” a man’s hard, clipped timbre ordered. “Unless you *are* hiding something?”

“There was an incident with one of the guards,” Renda confided grudgingly. “There was almost no blood and no mark at all.”

“The rest of my team hasn’t been harmed?”

From her pointed tone, Tommy assumed Kendle knew better.

“Another male hit himself on the bars as he woke in the dark. The troops forgot to stay with them.”

“So there was an entire group of slaves in an unlocked cell, without security?” that first man’s ruthless voice questioned.

“Yes, but I’ve handled it,” Renda stated defensively. “The soldiers responsible have been removed from that duty and now owe all the masters a share of their fight winnings for the next month.”

“That is satisfactory. Proceed with the examination.”

“I’ve got it,” another man spoke up. The Russian accent was thick. “I have rented her a cubby for the duration of her stay.”

“What did she pay you with?” Renda demanded angrily. “We took everything she had!”

Yuri chuckled. “You did not take her boy, who is more valuable than half a load of adults.”

The team strained to hear more as they realized Kendle had bargained using Conner’s freedom.

“What’s the catch?” Renda asked, sounding closer.

“We have a wager.” Yuri grinned widely. “I will not tell you the terms until after it is settled.”

Renda jerked the rope to pull up the curtain over the gate to the cage. "You have one minute."

Kendle stepped inside, wearing her guns and a smirk the Eagles usually only witnessed under someone's blood. The team broke into relieved sighs, but didn't speak.

Kendle swept each of them, easily getting their judgments and fears without having to pry. Tommy's mind was the most open. Kendle went to him.

"You didn't say they'd been beaten." Kendle picked out the various bruises. "That came from a gun butt or a kick. Maybe both."

Yuri motioned a sentry to write it down. "That lowers the price. Keep going."

Kendle sniffed deeply. "They've been sick. I can smell vomit. Over-drugging or illness?"

Both Yuri and his personal guard turned to Renda in surprise, waiting for her answer.

Renda scowled, reddening in anger. "Do not question how my slaves are handled!"

"Malia never would have allowed this." Yuri's eyes misted under thick brows. "Your sister cared for the slaves. You only care for the power. That is why she was loved and you are not."

Renda chuckled, surprising Kendle and the team.

"But she did not return your sentiments, did she, my sad Yuri?" Renda moved away from the cage. "Pick out flaws if it pleases you. They belong to me;

the other masters are not allowed to interfere. The prices will not change.”

Yuri waited for Renda to be out of earshot before turning to Kendle. “Continue.”

“That was enough.” Kendle gave each of her men a quick look of comfort before leaving the cage. “Don’t forget who you are.”

The curtain fell a moment later, leaving the team in dim privacy.

“Any idea what she has planned?” Ben was hoping Tommy had picked something up from her mentally.

“She only sent one thing.” Tommy’s voice was a gruff whisper. “No magic, at all, in any form.”

“There must be a good reason for it.” Ryan chose to have faith. Kendle hadn’t run. That was enough for him.

Now glad they’d been careful about it, the team fell into silent contemplation of what it could mean.

Outside the cage, Bossy wrote down everything he heard, including Yuri’s words of a private wager and Renda not taking proper care of the slaves. His boss paid well for information like that.

“What happens next?” Kendle asked as they left the crowded gym and all the surprised stares. These people clearly weren’t used to anyone challenging the masters.

“They’re meeting to discuss bids right now.” Rice scanned the hall nervously. “Normally, it would be Renda sorting them, but the offer you

made will involve the entire market, so she'll have to include them in the decision. We should have action soon."

Kendle settled in to wait. If this didn't succeed, she would get mean. *I'm not leaving without my team. They'll have to kill me first.*

Chapter Seven

Baiting And Waiting

1

Kendle leaned against the wall, hoping Conner was settling in without trouble. She hadn't wanted to abandon him to Renda's care, but Yuri was the best shot at having a master sponsor her. The Russian proprietor hadn't agreed to that yet, but he would after the first fight. It had been even harder to walk away and leave her team in that carnival freak show. She would get them back and finish her mission. Then, Angela would make these individuals sorry they'd ever targeted her team.

"No!" Renda shouted from the meeting room near them. "No! No! No!"

Rice moved away from the red door.

Kendle didn't. She wasn't going to show weakness in any way, but Renda was about to reveal hers for everyone to see.

The door was flung open, slamming against the wall. The constant chatter of patrons was replaced with quiet observation and subtle smirks.

Renda saw Kendle; rage swept over her features. She stormed toward the scarred woman, oblivious to their audience.

Kendle smirked a little. "Master Renda."

Renda's profile twisted into insanity...and then snapped into the same blank expression Kendle had witnessed earlier.

"It's been a long time since I actually enjoyed killing someone." Renda motioned toward the adjacent stairs that led to the basement. "We could do it now."

"Well, you're easy." Kendle laughed. "New bid—I kill you and take your place as slave master."

Her worst fear revealed, Renda grabbed for the whip on her belt.

Ready for it, Kendle used a neat move to shove the woman and then trip her with a well-placed boot.

Renda slammed into the tile floor with her ass and back, air knocked out of her.

Kendle put a hand on her gun. "Follow the ways of the market."

Having the rules she'd helped to make used against her was infuriating, but Renda had no choice. The swift move had knocked awareness back into her. There were witnesses all around them. Renda rose, straightening her jacket. She glowered toward Rice, who had stopped to gape, open-mouthed at Kendle's actions. "This trick will not succeed. The slaves are mine!"

Renda stormed down the hall toward the gymnasium, no longer glaring at Kendle. She didn't think she could without attacking.

Kendle didn't push any harder. It wasn't time for that yet.

“That was impressive.” Yuri came from the master meeting room to join her. “Also reckless. She will not forget it.”

Kendle shrugged. “Do the masters know how crazy she is?”

“Yes.” Yuri led her away from the meeting. “It is profitable.”

Around them, locals and visitors to the market stared and pointed at her, already retelling what had happened.

Yuri bowed to Kendle, flashing a charming smile. “Until later.”

Kendle blushed at the timbre. She wasn’t used to being accepted for what she was. It felt odd.

“Yuri is a good man.” Rice smiled pointedly as the second floor master left them.

You wouldn’t know one of those if he spit in your soup. Kendle let Rice guide her toward the basement, where she’d told him she wanted to spend most of her time. She needed to observe the day-to-day operations. Now that she had gotten the ball rolling, she didn’t want to be run over by it.

“Stop!”

Kendle paused at the shout. *Too late.*

“You there! The masters want you, woman. Now!”

Kendle followed the guard. She’d expected this, but not so soon. Hoping she could pull it off, Kendle motioned Rice to get lost when he would have followed. She didn’t want him to know the exact details of her bid. She hadn’t forgotten that he was

the reason she was in this mess in the first place. If he and his family had chosen to do the right thing, the masters would never have been able to build this atrocity.

They cleared the room, was Kendle's first thought as the gymnasium doors slammed shut behind her. When three big troops blocked it with their arms over their chests, her second was, *I wonder if they'll shove me in the same cage or put me somewhere else.*

Kendle felt the basic survival instinct rise, quickly threatening to bubble up and drown her. *Easy. I found an outlet. Now wait for it.*

Yes, I will, her demon promised.

Good. Kendle straightened her shoulders and walked up the short steps to the master's table, which was half a rectangle with the center space facing outward. A sentry with a blue helmet tattoo directed her to stand in the center, in front of the seated rulers who were studying her with varying degrees of interest and hostility.

Kendle studied them right back while waiting for the interrogation to begin. She wasn't worried over Yuri. He now had a lot riding on her being able to do what she'd promised. Renda wouldn't have a choice if she was outvoted. The other two, Kendle hadn't met before. One was a tall, blond man with huge white teeth that gleamed as he smiled at her.

Kendle nodded politely, taking note of his pleasant attitude.

The last master was American. Kendle wasn't surprised, only angry with the white man and his tailor-made suit. She'd been on enough yachts to recognize quality clothing. His colors were the same as the other masters—tan and black—but he was the one making the most profit or spending the most. She watched him lean over to peer at a paper.

The blond master immediately handed him the bid to view.

Leader. The American is the boss. Figures. She swept the room as she had earlier, this time lingering on empty stalls for renting slaves and buying gear and ammo. She and the guards were the only people in here with the masters.

A vague chain clink reminded Kendle that her team was also near, stuffed into a carnival cage like exotic animals. It was unbelievable how fast things had gone bad; Conner was right about that.

"This is very interesting!" The American glanced up at Kendle with eager green eyes.

"It is ridiculous!" Renda gestured angrily. "She cannot make these deals!"

"She can if we authorize it." Iram was still smiling happily. "If she has collateral, I will."

Kendle placed his accent in surprise, though she'd been told these were UN people. She'd rarely heard Dutch in person, even before the war.

Renda slammed herself into the chair, arms folding over her chest. "She has nothing! We took it all."

The American set the paper down and put his gold-plated glasses back into his pocket. He studied Yuri, then Kendle. “Let’s discuss each section, shall we?”

“I’m all yours until you’re satisfied,” Kendle joked carefully, feeling them out for soft spots.

Iram snickered, while Renda and the American frowned. Kendle couldn’t remember if Rice had given her the man’s name or not, but if so, she couldn’t remember it.

“That may well be.” Renda flashed sharp teeth. “I will own you and I’m impossible to sate.”

The American waved a distracted hand at Renda, causing her to bristle further. “Be quiet now, dear.”

Kendle slowly took the copy of the bid she’d written earlier from her pocket. “I believe issue #1 is my collateral.”

“Yes. It says information. What type?”

“Financial and security, mostly, but a few profit items as well. I’d like to start with security, if that’s okay?”

“I told you she has nothing!” Renda again interjected. “The market is as safe as any compound we’ve ever been in.”

“I’ll give you two items now as proof,” Kendle countered coldly. “No more until after we have a deal in place.”

The American waved. “Go ahead.”

“Xavier!”

The American focused on Renda with an anger that Kendle thought she might cower from while begging to be spared. It reminded her of Ethan.

“Shut up or get out.”

Renda glowered in defiant anger.

Xavier let out a weary sound. “Please rest assured that we will not permit you to be taken advantage of, Renda. Your happiness as a master of this market is important to us.”

Kendle heard the note of condescension. So did Renda. Her face glazed over with fresh anger.

“She has nothing!”

“You have holes in the wall.” Kendle took the conversation to where she needed it. “I saw two dogs in town this morning that are in the market right now. The cook in your first floor café is feeding them scraps. Either the guards let them in, daily I would imagine, or you have at least one hole in or under the wall.” She surveyed Iram, the food master, hoping she’d gotten that right. “I’ve been told that scraps are supposed to be given to the locals or market slaves, not wild dogs who don’t work.”

Iram wasn’t smiling now. He was glaring. “Dog soup this week as the regular fare or would everyone prefer actual hot dogs?”

“I don’t eat dog.” Kendle shrugged. “I do train them sometimes.”

“We’ve wanted protection animals.” Xavier gave her a gleam and a beam. “But we have no one

with that skill. Perhaps when this is all over, you will have your own shop here, eh?"

Kendle didn't glance at Renda like she wanted to. "Maybe."

"You said two items!" Renda didn't think information on the dogs was important.

Xavier held up a hand. "I want someone sent to inspect the wall and talk to the gate guards. Replace if guilty, with harsh punishments for not following market profit laws. The only animals allowed in these walls are for food production or clothing. Anything else roaming and squatting will cause diseases." He looked at Renda pointedly.

Renda had no choice but to personally deliver the orders to a sentry. She shoved to her feet.

Xavier waved at Kendle. "Proceed."

"The slaves aren't secure." Kendle watched Renda's shoulders stiffen as she heard the accusation. "The welds are weak."

"That is a lie! I would bet on those welds!" Renda's shout brought all other activity to a halt.

Kendle pointed. "Raise the curtain. I bet one of their lives against all of them being loose in that cage."

Before Renda could argue, Xavier stood up. "I will match that bet. Raise the curtain."

Meaning if Kendle was wrong, Xavier would owe Renda a slave. Kendle had no doubts about who it would be. *Come on, guys. Come through for me.*

The sound of chains clinking echoed from the cage.

Guards hurried over to lift the curtains.

“How did they do that?!”

“That’s incredible.”

“Two of them are not free!” Renda shouted over the mutters and murmurs. “She loses.”

“They were trained to do it in one minute.” Kendle looked at Xavier. “They’ve had about...twenty-five seconds.”

Xavier, who wasn’t positive he could do it at all, motioned the troops back as he strolled over to the cage to observe the two remaining slaves cuffed near the cage gate.

“Like this.” Tommy held up his chain. “Bring your knee into the chain and the chain into your knee, right there at the weld.” Tommy snapped the chains and lifted his hands. The coil fell to the cage floor in loud thumps and clanks.

Ben took a deep breath and repeated the movement, using all of his strength. The weld broke easily, causing him to stumble.

Tommy caught him. “Nice.”

The moment was teamwork, amazing feats, and the sense of something else coming. Tommy turned toward Kendle, who had stayed where the sentry placed her. “We’ve all got it now, Boss.”

“And that’s why I didn’t leave you after you were caught so easily.” Kendle kept playing the role. She raised a brow at Xavier.

Renda was livid, but there was little she could say when Xavier conceded.

“You’ve won the bet. Renda will pick the man.”

“Agreed.” Kendle gestured. “But I don’t want him yet. Please keep him as a part of my collateral.”

The entire team stiffened anxiously.

Xavier brightened. “Yes! What is the next thing your bid promised?”

Kendle didn’t need to skim the paper. “Profit increases. I have no less than ten ways to do that, with one big hit on top of those. I’ll give you three of the small ones now as further evidence of my honesty.”

“Go on.” Xavier was still admiring her team as they finished freeing themselves from the cuffs. With the chains off, the wrist connections were easy to remove.

“None of your sections or shops are full. They weren’t when you opened and they still aren’t, five hours later. You aren’t advertising, but you’ve already sucked all of the profits out of your laborers. You need word of mouth. That comes from special events, big prizes, and happy patrons.”

“You do not think our patrons are happy?” Iram was a bit shocked at the display from her team. Their troops couldn’t do that.

“Everyone is bored. Soon, folks will slip away to other parts of the country that the market doesn’t reach.”

“And what would solve this problem?” As a potential sponsor, Yuri already agreed with her, but

the demonstration from her team had convinced him it was the winning choice. She was going to get her bid demands and then things would get interesting.

“I have to ask you a question to be able to answer that correctly. May I? It’s sensitive.”

Xavier came within a few feet of Kendle, surrounded by soldiers when Renda waved them over. “Yes?”

“Do you allow the patrons the same entertainments that you enjoy?”

“Such as?” he drawled dangerously, not answering the question.

“Executions.” Kendle smiled. “I assume your men do it, but you can charge for that. Also animal control events. Many people do eat wild dog now. You can make a profit from both ends.” She looked at Iram. “Your joke was true. Made it funnier for me.”

Charmed, Iram smiled.

“What else?” Xavier returned to his seat.

“You have no barker to announce the fun going on downstairs or the cubbies for rent upstairs. Advertising solves low traffic problems.”

“That’s not enough.” Renda lingered by the cage. Her attitude was subdued now.

“I concur.” Xavier pointed. “But there are two more items here. To get all of your possessions, you have proposed a series of matches, where a portion of everything will be returned to you.”

“Yes, but I’d like it to be kept each time that I win, as more collateral and proof.”

“You just don’t want to feed and house your men while here!” Yuri exclaimed. “I knew you were sucking me!”

Kendle chuckled at his misuse of American slang. She was sure he’d meant to say suckering. “You’ve seen them. You can imagine the food bills.”

The masters shared laughs of understanding, except for Renda. She glowered at Kendle in growing hatred.

“This series of matches would take place in the evenings, as special events to drive up your profits. Citizens will spend all day or even the week blowing their fortunes in the market until each match. Also, I would not request a share of the market revenue until the balance I owe for my possessions is met.”

Xavier stared thoughtfully, mind spinning with ways they could use such an event to their advantage. “And the last item?”

“When I win it all, I have safe passage to travel these roads without being attacked again.”

“You would have to be branded for that.” Renda would love to be the one holding a branding iron to the woman’s already scarred skin.

Kendle glanced down at her body and back to Renda. “What’s one more?”

Renda slammed herself against the cage, shaking the men inside who were listening intently. Most buyers were too scared to be branded and refused.

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?” Xavier was very aware of the animosity between the new female and his lover.

Kendle slid the paper into her pocket. “Yes. When this is all over, I’m going to kill the slave master for the suffering we’ve gone through during our time here. If you’re sleeping with her, I suggest you start searching for a replacement.” Kendle left the gymnasium before Renda could shove through her guards to meet her challenge.

The other masters stared after her in surprise and greed. If the woman could revitalize their failing market, the secret goals they had might still be possible. They’d chosen to wait until they were established, but when the market had begun to slow down in trade and travelers, they hadn’t been able to move forward. Now, that might change. In a few months, the sign might not say *Market* anymore. It might say *UN Peacekeeping Force* and have glittery signs encouraging inhabitants to do their duty, to help save their country by joining. In a few years they would rule it all, as it should have been all along.

Iram smiled at the thought, ignoring the other masters. Conquering the United States had long been a dream of his. The arrival of this woman was fate telling him it was time to build that future. Satisfied he knew what was happening, Iram turned to Xavier. “I move that we adjourn to the meeting room for a discussion.”

“It’s been hours,” Rice complained again from his seat along the waiting wall with Kendle and the other bidders. “Come on, already.”

Kendle ignored him. She’d listened to the shouts and the sounds of items breaking in the master meeting room, but she was really working on the rest of her plan. If they said no, she would try to break her team out using power. If they said yes, she was about to spill blood in front of a crowd. Both were unnerving, but she couldn’t let them know. She was trying to remain emotionless to everyone watching her for weaknesses in case they got to bet on her later.

“Hours!”

Kendle gave Rice a curt glare, silencing him.

“Attention, slave bidders,” Iram called loudly through the speakers above them. “A bid has been accepted for the entire lot. Thank you for your offers. Slaves are brought in every three days. Please try again.”

“That’s you!” Rice beamed. “No one else could afford them all. You did it!”

Kendle turned away from his excitement. She couldn’t stand him right now; he was in danger. The jump her nerves had just taken was astounding. She was risking all their lives on her fighting skills, and while she’d had various lessons and some prewar training before assignments, she didn’t feel like a killer now. She didn’t feel like the mad woman who

had hunted with the Ghost and his riders. She felt lost.

Kendle left the market, positive Rice would find her later with all the details. Right now, she needed to be somewhere quiet to get her plan straight.

Why? her demon inquired. What worries you?

How did they get Renda to consent? What did they give her?

Your life, I would guess.

Yeah, but when? Will she stick me right before the last match or get me after the first? I have to anticipate her attack or we'll be in chains. I didn't like them when Ethan did it. I doubt it would be more fun with Renda.

The demon immediately began working on the problem. Neither of them had thought they would survive Ethan Kraft. They couldn't be caged or chained again, bitten and bled. They would die first.

Kendle ignored the soothing mood of her demon's protective rage. She didn't need to relax. She needed to figure out a way to contact Angela without anyone knowing. That was infinitely harder than winning a few fights. Everywhere she'd gone today, she'd examined threatening signs warning about magic and magic users. This populace was aware that descendants walked among them, even if they didn't know where the power came from, and they recognized the threat. Kendle was grateful it had only gone that far. When they could recognize the magic users on sight, this land would be scoured for them. Safe Haven had to step in, but Kendle

couldn't wait until this was over. If she lost, she and the team would be sold and this market from hell would continue to spread. That couldn't be allowed to happen.

Kendle strode confidently toward Rice's residence, thinking about his brother, Baker, who'd been the decoy for the ambush. *You owe me, Doughboy. Time to pay up.*

Behind her, Bossy made a note in his book and followed.

3

"They made a final choice," Rice informed her as he entered the home. The market sentry outside had told him where to find her. "You'll get details in the morning."

"Good." Kendle stayed sitting in Rice's spot at the table.

His brother, face swelled and painful to look at, rose and exited through another door that connected them to the upstairs hallway.

"What was that?" Rice pouted when she didn't give him his seat.

"He didn't think I should be fed," Kendle lied, using her last chunk of bread to sop up the chili juice and remaining chunks of beef. "Also doesn't want me to sleep here. Didn't care for our deal."

Rice frowned. "I'll talk to him."

Kendle shrugged, swallowing. She let out a loud belch. “You can stand watch over me until an hour before the market gates shut for the night.”

“You could get protection now.” He didn’t want the duty. “The masters will protect their investment.”

“No.” Kendle stood up. “Your presence while I sleep is already too much.” She went toward the closet where she’d slept before. “Don’t wake me late, but don’t come in here at all or you won’t make it out.” She slammed the door before he could form a response.

Kendle collapsed as soon as she hit the thinly carpeted floor, falling into a deep sleep. It was dreamless this time as her body prepared for the challenge she’d set.

4

Knock-knock-knock!

It felt like she had just gotten comfortable, but Kendle forced herself up as the knocking sounded again. “I’ve got it!”

The footsteps faded.

Kendle checked her watch to verify she had an hour. She glanced around and found nothing in the filthy, cluttered bedroom that she could use. Her supplies were almost gone, but she had more deals to make if the merchants were willing. It would depend on how the word was spreading. If citizens were getting excited, she might have good odds that

would increase her value and her dealing power. If folks were still as bored as they'd been on her tour, she might have to steal what she needed. Around here, it was expected and that would make it harder.

Kendle began doing jumping jacks. She would do a warmup here and then run around the main grounds of the market until it closed. The demonstration and exercise would help clear her mind and help her with the matches.

"Ms. Roberts?"

Kendle froze in pain and surprise. *They recognized me. Does that change anything?* "Yes?"

"I have food and some basic supplies for you. Iram sent them as a good faith gesture."

"To increase the final bill, you mean." Kendle opened the door and stepped back for Rice to carry the two small totes in.

He set them on the dresser and quickly left, not getting any closer to her than he had to.

"Can I donate things to slaves or individuals in collateral rooms?"

"Yes." Rice stopped in surprise. "That way the bill doesn't grow larger. My family and I send half our daily rations."

"Who is it? Friends? In-laws?"

Rice winced, telling her she'd guessed correctly.

"It's good of you to care for them anyway." She tried to show him she respected people who did the right thing when it was hard.

“It was my wife’s family. They were visiting for the holiday.”

“Your wife?”

“She died. I had to bury her. They’ll do it for free if you burn or donate the body, but I couldn’t do that.”

“Sounds like an expensive burial.” Kendle put aside her plans of a workout in favor of a crazy scheme.

“I could have afforded it, but her father blames me for her death. He made a deal with the masters that I can’t match.”

“Who are they waiting on?” Kendle picked up the totes.

“My wife’s youngest brother. He was a soldier.”

“What was the deal for?”

“The bids are sealed. They aren’t allowed to tell me until the boy returns or their time runs out, but I believe it’s a weapon or a load of them.”

“How much time do they have?”

“Ten days, as of dawn.”

“Will you try to buy them?”

“Of course. It’s why I was happy our family was chosen this month. I almost have enough to make an offer.”

“Will it be enough to save all of them?”

Rice sighed, “I may have to choose some of them. I’m going to take the kids. They can work longer hours than the elderly adults.”

Kendle almost choked on her rage. She paused in the doorway, aware of his remaining family

watching them from the stairs. “Do I owe you anything beyond our deal?”

“No...”

“Then stay away from me unless it’s important or I’ll break your neck.” Kendle left him standing there in humiliation. She gestured cheerfully to the guard who wasn’t trying to hide himself or his amusement. “Let’s go.”

Kendle strolled toward the market, admiring the lanterns hung on old telephone poles and street posts. “Do you protect the slaves too?”

The sentry didn’t answer.

Kendle didn’t try again. She went to the gate.

It opened before she got there; the troops on it appeared relieved.

Kendle assumed the masters were worried she might skip town now that a deal had been made. “Tell them I’m back. Especially Renda.”

“Give ‘em hell, Ms. Roberts,” the black sentry muttered so that only she and his partner heard.

Kendle didn’t respond in case they weren’t allowed to show support. She didn’t know the rules on that yet. In fact, she was making most of this up as she went along. She thought Angela would applaud the effort, if not the plans themselves, and not be pissed enough to fry her on the spot. She was walking a thin line there. Screwing up this easy run might be enough to get her removed.

Do you really feel that way about Safe Haven after being here? the demon asked in surprise.

Kendle sighed. *No. Be quiet.*

The demon settled into a dark corner.

Kendle decided to use every advantage that she had. *What else should I do?*

I can help? The demon perked up eagerly. *I can, you know.*

Kendle said hello to the people passing her who stopped to stare and murmur. *Get it organized and lay it out for me when I settle in for the night. Too much attention right now.*

Pleased, the demon got to work.

Kendle went through the checkpoint in front of the market with the same ease as the first gate. As it clanged behind her, she couldn't help feeling like a prisoner. She was free to roam inside the walls, as far as she knew, but that wasn't freedom.

The market stalls were shutting down and closing shades, blocking windows with boards and thick locks as Kendle entered. Lights were going off and voices were fading. Hoping she didn't run into Renda, Kendle went to the slave wing first.

She stopped at the common section Rice had shown her earlier, holding out the totes. "I brought supplies for my collateral."

An Iranian guard waved her in, flashing thumbs up.

Storing it, Kendle still didn't respond to the unexpected support of the troops.

The table in the center of the common zone held Conner and an older man Kendle instantly knew was the father-in-law who hated Rice. It was in his glare as he spotted Kendle.

“I don’t want any more food from him!”

Kendle slammed the totes onto the rickety table between him and Conner. “Then take it from my boy, ‘cause I brought it for him.” She looked at Conner, seeing he was relaxed enough to be sleepy. “Watch your six.”

The teenager nodded, no longer unhappy about being put in here. He was gathering information, something Kendle needed. “Word spread about you getting the best of Renda. The soldiers are watching my six for you.”

“Why?”

“They hate her, I assume.” Conner yawned.

“Get some sleep.” Kendle ignored the hopeful glances from the bunks. The three women and two children were filthy and thin. “But feed them before you crash.”

“I will.” Conner took the totes to the kids. “Here. Smells like fresh bread.”

Kendle exited the zone, this time giving the sentry a short smile of gratitude.

Fighting the urge to check on her team, Kendle took the stairs at the corner, climbing to the top floor. She wasn’t surprised that Yuri was pacing the hall outside the room he’d given her.

“Thank goodness!” He rushed toward her.

Kendle tolerated his patting and groveling warnings not to be caught around the slaves. She went in, seeing he had replaced the blanket with a thicker quilt that didn’t have holes.

“We can’t have you falling ill, now can we?” He chuckled.

Another addition to the tab, Kendle was still glad of it. She’d left her kit with Conner. It held her spare weapon and some ammo, but not much else. This blanket would allow her a good night’s sleep, providing she blocked the door.

Yuri waved toward the small square. “You have no partner. All yours!”

Kendle noted the book on the table. “Thanks.” She would check out the title once he was gone.

“I have also brought you food and water.” Yuri pointed. “It is in a box under the bed. Do not leave it out or the mice will be into it.”

“Thanks.” Kendle tried not to think about how big the bill would be by the time she left. “Anything else?”

Understanding she wanted to be alone, Yuri went toward the door. “They may ask for a demonstration. Eat, sleep, drink. Be ready.”

Kendle turned a hard stare on the short Russian. “I’ve got it covered.”

Yuri bobbed his head obediently. “Good, good. I will leave you now. Notify a guard if you need me and I will be at your—”

Kendle kicked the door shut in his face. “I almost like him.”

Kendle woke to the sound of a market in full swing. She glanced at her watch to discover it was nearly noon. She had forgotten to set her alarm and no one had woken her.

She leapt from the soft bed, grabbing clothes and boots. It only took a couple of minutes to dress and gather her things, but she felt the time crunch as if it were hours. Why hadn't they sent for her? Was her plan already toast?

Kendle calmed herself before going out, not sure what to expect. It certainly wasn't to see Yuri perched at a new camouflage security post right across from her. The smell of paint was thick.

"What happened?"

Yuri held out a paper, grinning hugely. "We made the choice. There was no need to contact you for further details. The sleep was more beneficial."

"My team and my boy?" She saw there was a place at the bottom of the paper for her signature.

"All being cared for. I believe Renda ordered pizza for lunch."

"The most expensive item on the downstairs menu?"

"Yes."

Remembering that it was standard procedure here, Kendle kept reading. "Series of fights...help with advertising...share of profits once the bill for my team and gear is paid..." Kendle choked on the next line. "A week from now?"

"There must be time for citizens to come and for the market to prepare. It will not be sooner."

Kendle swallowed the bile in her throat. She'd estimated a day or two of bills. Instead, she would have more than a week, counting the time she'd already spent. Then there was the time the fights took. Kendle skimmed for details. "One fight each night equals two slaves if the tickets sell out. If they sell over half, it's worth one man. Under half gains only gear." Kendle went back into her den, once again kicking the door shut. She needed to study this and she needed to do it now.

When Kendle emerged again an hour later, Yuri was still at the table. She slid the paper in front of him, where her signature glared in bold print. "I agree. To all of it, but I don't know if I can wait a full week before I kill her. Tell them to schedule her as my first match."

Yuri chuckled. "The masters set the schedule, my brave new friend. Renda will be the last one you battle. She is the best fighter here."

"Not anymore." Kendle grinned, letting her lust for blood come through. "Bet hard, Yuri. You'll be rich when this is done."

Yuri patted her hand. "I already am, my friend. I already am."

"Then why live here?" Kendle stopped, hoping he would tell her.

"Why not?" He turned toward the stairs to deliver her signed paper to the masters. "It's not like I have better places to be now."

Kendle could have argued, but didn't. She returned to her cubby to contemplate the deal that would either save her team or cost all their lives. She had to figure out how she was going to win every fight without using her gifts, when even the Indians had given up on teaching her proper techniques. She'd been unable to control her rage long enough to learn.

Kendle sighed, sinking down on the squeaky mattress. "I can't fight. Other plans will have to be made."

Chapter Eight
To Bluff Or Not
October 1st

1

Marc watched the convoy of Army jeeps and trucks roll toward them, pretending he still needed the binoculars to keep his guys from knowing how strong his gifts were. He had everyone in his mental grid, detecting with crystal clarity—right down to the power that some of the enemy had. It was amazing. It was also isolating. He now had a better idea of how Angie had spent her life.

Marc narrowed in on the three jeeps in the lead, noting the cold postures of the riders and drivers. They hadn't come dressed for the hard, packed snowbanks that their jeeps were crunching through to reach the isolated road that would bring them to the meeting place. Winter was in full force. Shouldn't people from the north be better prepared for the cold?

What about weapons? Marc narrowed his grid further, spotting rifles and machine guns, along with two grenade launchers. It was much the same firepower that he had brought. Physically, they were about evenly matched with guns and men. They'd both brought three dozen of their best fighters, but

their gifts were bright bulbs on his grid as they rolled closer. It seemed as if they planned to rely on that magic, because the rest of their gear was light. If they had brought more, it was still on the train.

We did not think it was needed.

The woman's cultured voice in Marc's mind was a violation that freed his rage for an instant. Barriers slammed down with his fury, forcing the leader out. *How dare you!*

Marc angrily motioned his team to fall in and led them down the hill to meet the strangers. As he walked, Marc brought up his strongest mental wall. So far, only Angie and Jennifer had been able to get—

May I apologize?

Marc swallowed annoyed concern as the woman broke through with no effort. *No.*

He stepped into view, not expecting the movie star type who stood in front of her vehicle. The female was tall, red, and beautiful, dressed in a white gown that proclaimed she was attending a party. Under the elegance, evil flowed from her as strong as power. *She's too much for me. She'll figure out where I've hidden—*

“I felt her already.” Sonja scanned the powerless humans on Marc's team first. “It would be a small matter to sniff out her hiding place.”

“Why haven't you?” He wondered if the woman had sent out another group to grab Angela during this meeting.

“I have no reason to betray or use deceit.” Sonja turned hard eyes on him. “I have more power than you. I can force you to bring her in or hold you until she comes in on her own.”

Eagles stepped closer to Marc as the cloudy sky darkened further.

Needing to regain control, Marc grunted. “Let’s start with introductions.”

“I am Sonja. You are Marcus Brady.”

The female was quickly surrounded by her powerful defenders as Marc and the Eagles stopped in front of her, causing more concern. Marc had been right to put Angie with Adrian. Big Jack hadn’t been able to locate Adrian at first, either. It would buy them time.

“He was nothing compared to me,” the coiffed woman explained smugly.

Marc was positive that was true. He locked down on his thoughts as if he were going into battle. In a way, he was. This would be a fight for Angie’s life.

“Yes.” Sonja stared intently, digging into him. “But not just *her* future. We will consume Safe Haven if she is found guilty. An evil ruler begets evil peasants.”

Directly threatened, Marc’s team drew weapons.

“Stop!” Marc gestured when Kyle went forward to try disarming the strangers.

“It’ll take more than you, killer,” Sonja taunted.

That brought Jennifer forward. The teenager moved between them, orbs glowing a crimson warning. “Will I do?”

Much as Adrian often had, Marc waited to see where it would go. He was glad of the choice when doubt crossed Sonja’s painted features.

“Chauncey failed to mention that you have an Enforcer.”

Jennifer didn’t reply. She was instinctively burrowing through the woman’s darkness for a way to kill her.

Sonja fought to keep those secrets, suddenly scared. It had been a long time since she’d felt that upon a mental battle. What would this child be like if she were told to dive all the way to the bottom? *I’m not sure I can keep her out.*

You can’t. Jennifer smiled cheerfully. *There’s no way to stop me.*

Desperate now, Sonja drew her gun and pointed it at Kyle.

Jennifer reluctantly stopped as Marc and the Eagles lifted their guns in response. She’d detected enough to know these people were worse than bad news. “He won’t always be in the crossfire!”

Sonja revealed her frustration at Jennifer’s strength, glowering resentfully. “But you will.”

Jennifer was fine with having that target on her shoulders. She flashed a challenging sneer. “Just remember to ambush me, lady. You slow down with age.”

Marc laughed as Sonja flushed an ugly red that made her seem like an overdressed clown.

“You little bitch!”

Jennifer leaned against Kyle’s tense body, letting the Donner adventures be read by Sonja’s shields. “I’m much more than that. Welcome to the end of your leadership. This is where you lost control, when you have that moment later of wondering how it happened.”

Sonja recovered, chuckling as she holstered. “You are all alone, Enforcer. The only one who may have helped you has two gunshot wounds and no will to fight. Be careful of the threats.”

Jennifer didn’t reply.

When Jennifer shut her mind off with an impenetrable barrier, Sonja began to suspect there might be others like her, other power they hadn’t been warned about and could be surprised by in battle. She would have to find out. There hadn’t been an Enforcer in generations. It had to mean something.

Marc motioned to the small strip mall they had cleared and secured. He and the Eagles had spent the last three days in the upstairs levels when they weren’t working outside, getting it ready. Marc prayed they didn’t have to use it. The few traps there would never be enough. “We have tables set up in the library. After you.”

Sonja and half her group went toward the small library in front of the mall while the rest remained around their vehicles. Those closest to Sonja were

females who continuously scanned everyone, including their own, for trouble. Marc could feel their mental sweeps as the group went in.

Jennifer stayed on Marc's heels without being given orders. He might need her.

Marc didn't protest, despite assigning her to vehicle duty earlier. She was right, he might.

Kyle also didn't argue, though it was hard. He was clearly a weakness in this situation. The feeling sucked.

2

"Get up!" Angela slapped at Adrian's arm. "We have to go."

Adrian snapped awake, automatically glancing at his alarms and then the monitor. "What happened?" He realized the threat wasn't here. "Is it Safe Haven?"

Angela limped by him, tossing her kit over her arm. There was no way she could sling it over a shoulder and not fall down.

Adrian felt her waves of pain as he hurried to place himself between her and the door.

Angela allowed it because she needed a minute to breathe through the agony. Adrian's energy had helped her a great deal, but the witch had only used some of it to heal her. The rest had been stored for this moment.

"Tell me what happened."

Angela linked their minds, letting Adrian share the vision she'd had.

"Damn." Adrian gently brushed by her. "You're right. We have to go."

Angela waited for him to bring the bike around, inwardly wincing at the doctor's reaction when he discovered her adventures.

Adrian was aware of the problem. He used the plan he'd developed for a quick escape. He shot a bolt of blue light at her, enjoying her gasp of pleasure. It was all the energy he had left.

"I detest you."

"Yeah, yeah." Adrian sighed. "Get on."

Already shivering from the wind and cold, Angela centered herself carefully behind Adrian, both loving and hating the feel of his comforting body against hers.

"Deal with it! If she bluffs him, none of our plans will succeed."

Angela molded herself to his big body, arms coming up to hold his chest instead of his waist. It allowed her to get closer, to give him more balance on the bike, and to put his heart under her hands.

Adrian kicked the bike to life and took off toward the meeting place. As he rolled them along at ugly speeds, he gave terse instructions. *I'm your protection. Do not get out of my reach.*

Then stay on my heels, like a dog.

I will, so be prepared for it. Adrian was aware of her attempts to push him away with hostility, but it wouldn't work.

Angela let Adrian ramble, only occasionally responding. It amazed her to be underestimated. Adrian thought this was a surprise, that she didn't know how to handle someone threatening Marc or the herd by now. They should all know better. When either of those cherished things were in danger, she had no limits, something these new people were about to discover. Mercy was for the weak and the dead.

The witch, a bit intimidated, subtly retreated into her cell and got comfortable, eager for the show. It was a sign of life—a rarity in her host's mind now. Adrian and Marc would both be horrified if they knew how deep Angela had gone, but the witch was pleased. She and her host were now bonded in ways that she and the males running through her life would never be. The witch was irreplaceable and content in that knowledge.

3

“Where do you wish to begin?” Sonja settled into the chair across the wide desk from Marc. “Shall we discuss Tara or Donner?”

Marc motioned Jennifer forward. “She was there with Donner.”

Sonja frowned. “I can't scan her. Convenient.”

“You can if she lets you in.” Marc's words drew scowls from Jennifer and the new people. “What?”

“That requires trust, as it allows too much free roaming.” Sonja motioned to a female near her. “Evie will view the scene and pass it to me.”

Marc and everyone else understood that Sonja had secrets to keep. The seats around the square that Marc had put the tables in were filled with descendants from the train. Marc had placed the Eagles in the rear of the library, near the exits as a precaution. He wanted them to be able to get out since they were defenseless against this threat. To counter it, Sonja had placed her remaining defenders along the doors and walls also, daring Marc to deny them that right. Marc hadn’t bothered. He wasn’t trying to trap them.

Jennifer and Evie stared at each other for long moments where the rest of the strange group held perfectly still, as if listening. Marc was aware of fidgeting Eagles, but he didn’t scold them for it. He was assuming the strangers were probing their minds for details and evidence, but they would discover what he’d been saying all along. Safe Haven had defended itself and others. They were in the right.

“That remains to be seen,” Sonja argued without malice.

Evie turned to her mistress and the waiting began again.

Jennifer flashed Marc a hand gesture. *Unstable.*

Marc wasn’t sure exactly what she meant, but if it was this situation, he agreed. All these mind readers being here would stop plots from being a

surprise, however. Marc was almost grateful for it. No one could trigger an ambush or attack without everyone knowing. It might make this talk easier.

“I had hoped so.” Sonja was now finished viewing the moment of Donner’s death and then Tara’s. Jennifer had sent the images she’d picked from Angela’s mind after she had been brought down the mountain.

“However, the question remains. Why were they killed? Because of our plans to enslave humans? Who is Safe Haven to command and expect us to obey?”

“Then you agree that humans should be slaves?” Marc clarified coldly, bringing down his shield again in preparation. They would lose, but Sonja would die in the fight.

“Of course.” Sonja didn’t react to Marc’s sudden withdrawal. He’d been allowing her brief sweeps since they sat down, trying to show her Jayson’s betrayal. “The natural order puts us above them. Human populations must be regulated, much like we did before the war with the animals.”

Marc leaned forward. “This is America. Slavery will never be allowed here! I suggest you pick another country if you want your settlement to be that way.”

Marc’s menacing behavior was met with calm consideration, another bad sign. He’d been hoping for rash behavior.

“Perhaps Safe Haven should stop trying to police the world. Beating the government was

indeed a feat, but you've met your match in us, my young friend. Don't spill all that blood for a myth. It isn't worth it."

"You don't belong here." Marc was getting angry. "America meant freedom at one time and it will again, when people like you are gone. We won't have to remove your town, just you. The rest of them will be glad you're dead. No one wants slavery."

"My subjects are adapting to all the changes, the same as yours are," Sonja corrected. "They don't like these fights, but when we settle in for the winter with help, they'll be grateful that I insisted." She smiled at Marc, sending a wave of obedience toward him. "Besides, if they didn't like it, I wouldn't be their ruler and we wouldn't have slaves."

"With every word, you mock what we stand for." Marc needed time to regroup and form another plan. He hadn't expected a confession. "You have three days to get on your trains and get gone. If you don't, the council will meet to determine if action is to be taken against you."

Sonja laughed, to everyone's surprise. "Good! Now you are where I am over my sister. You know just enough to be certain that you don't like these strange new people, with their strange, obscene ways, but justice must be served."

"You have three days." Marc stood up and moved toward the exit.

"I demand to know what happened!"

“She tried to kill me.” Angela limped into the meeting. Adrian’s hand on her arm brought frowns from the Eagles and delight into the faces of Sonja’s subjects.

Before Sonja could say anything, Angela lifted a bandaged arm; every door and window in the library slammed shut. Flames shot up to block the exits, making descendants scream in panic. Descendants hated fire more than anything else. Angela knew that for a fact as she let the flames walk along both palms.

Pillars caught the flames, sending the heat upward to a ceiling that immediately absorbed the warmth and spread it across the room like a plague. Wreaths on the wall burst, popping. Hot plastic shrapnel pelted the descendants and humans.

Supporting her now with both arms, Adrian was impressed and proud, knowing he’d helped her conquer her fear of fire. The flames were a shield that she could now use to deflect almost anything.

“*Stand and be judged,*” Angela’s witch intoned, glowing red orbs pinning Evie in place. “*Tell the truth and set Safe Haven free.*”

Evie turned to her boss, cheeks devoid of color. She wet her lips, knowing if she didn’t say it, Angela would. “I gave Tara the idea. I’m able to hide it from you and everyone...almost everyone, because I take drugs to keep my mind foggy.”

“You appear stupid and I take you at face value.” Sonja wasn’t scared of the flames in the same way that her fighters were.

Angela clapped her hands, grinning, but it was the centuries old witch who glared out insanely through her eyes. *“You have traitors and thieves among you. Malicious betrayals have been planned. You are warned.”*

Sonja waved at her subjects to settle down. Now that she was getting a glimpse of Angela’s powers, Sonja wouldn’t be fighting today. She couldn’t hope to win.

Soothed, Angela slowly brought the fire back in.

As the flames vanished, Marc was able to see how pale she was and how much Adrian was supporting her. How could she do that just days after losing their baby? *What is she?*

“I have the same query,” Sonja confided in a low murmur as Angela moved toward them.

Everyone fled her path, including a few of her own men. Marc marked the rookie men not to be brought along again for moments that involved descendants or magic.

“Why do you hide these things from your...herd?” Sonja tried not to show her nervousness as Angela neared the table.

“Because we’re the abominations, not them.” Angela took the seat by Marc. She leaned against his shoulder in search of comfort. She was exhausted again, but there was enough healthy energy in here to resupply her a few times over if things went sour.

“You’re corrupt!” Sonja’s eyes widened. “You’ve taken lifeforces!”

“I also have a list of those who need to be consumed next.” Angela glared. “If you insist on keeping slaves in America, you’ll rise to the top for me and frankly, Sonja, I’d rather do it now if it’s going to happen.”

Weapons came out; shields flashed into view as Sonja tensed.

Marc’s hand dropped to the table to lift it up as a shield for Angela.

“Easy...” Angela straightened as Adrian came to place a hand on her shoulder to drag her down when Marc lifted the table. “You were given three days to leave our area. Not only will I honor that, I’ll agree to a bartering meeting twice a year if you like. In return, all slaves will be freed and no new slaves will be taken.”

Marc sneered at Sonja’s sullen expression. *Not so disrespectful now, are you?*

Sonja nearly growled at him, but she didn’t with Angela just waiting for a reason to engulf the place in flames. Sonja wanted to believe Angela wouldn’t fry her own people that way, but she wasn’t positive. The open corruption flashing in Angela’s mind said she had little conscience left. It was a lot like peering into Tara, who had also been fearless and merciless. Combine it with powers that Sonja couldn’t identify behind their oddly marked doors and it meant she had no choice but to consent.

“It’s the follow through that I’m concerned with.” Angela sighed tiredly. “It’s easy to say you will or won’t do it, but how will I know?”

“We’ll leave!” Sonja blurted angrily. “We’ll go north again.”

Angela nodded, shoulders relaxing, a polite smile coming over her pale face. “Exactly what I wanted to hear. Take a month; move slowly and carefully so you don’t endanger those slaves. Rumors of mistreatment will earn you a hunting party.”

Sonja tried to shrug it off, but the threat had been felt. Angela didn’t like her at all. The feeling was mutual.

“Good.” Angela gestured. “I’m hungry. Someone feed me.”

Angela acting like a dictator was perfect for the train populace, but Marc realized her power demonstration had caused fear among almost all of their new men. It was in their strained expressions and jerky movements.

“I’m sorry for that.” Angela let Marc gently help her to her feet as Adrian cleared a path to the door and vanished. “I’ll try to make it up to them on the way home. I found a chocolate factory. Candy bars mean sex now. We all know that.”

Marc led her outside, where Eagles were already setting up the grill. “What about them?”

Angela sighed tiredly. “Feed ‘em, send ‘em on. I don’t care.”

“Do we have enough?” Marc didn’t want to waste their supplies on bad people.

“Their slaves are starving, Marc. I can sense it from here. Give them food so I don’t have to send the witch out. She already hates these people.”

Marc knew she wasn’t bluffing. He quickly got her settled in the front of his truck with a drink and a plate. Billy and Kyle took up guard places around the vehicle.

Sonja watched all of this in jealous concern as she and her group now waited nervously by their vehicles for permission to leave. It was a huge change from the arrogance they’d rolled in wearing. The jealousy wasn’t over Angela’s powers and her threats, or the promise she’d extracted with so little effort. It was in how Angela’s subjects cared for her, even when scared. They didn’t fear for their lives. They feared for *hers*. It was humbling and infuriating to witness the treatment Sonja had always longed for.

Marc steeled himself, trying to act like a leader and not gloat. “We have herds and gardens. We give to the refugees. We drop supplies in old campsites for those who come after us. We share. We compromise. And we get along.”

“Or your mate kills everyone?”

“Yes.”

Sonja waited for the offer, certain she had to accept it. The risk of offending Angela was too great.

“She actually prefers that you leave.” Jennifer was still hovering near Marc. She wasn’t above gloating. “So do I.”

Sonja bristled, but she did want the food. Angela’s soldiers were firing up grills and taking chunks of meat from coolers. Her own people were always on rations. A full hamburger or steak hadn’t happened since the war.

Marc motioned toward the small picnic site by the library. “We’re taking over that area to get our people fed. I’d like you to keep your people in line, but they can mingle without worry. We have nothing to hide.”

Sonja already knew that. “No need with a ruler that powerful.”

“Exactly.” Marc swallowed his anger at their odd ways, settling into the leader his old fire team would have recognized. “Two rules. You stop any fights. You don’t plot. Those two things will draw Angie’s wrath.” Marc leaned forward a bit. “She won’t stop this time. We’ll all die.”

Not sure if Marc was bluffing, Sonja said nothing.

Marc shrugged. “Just a friendly warning. She’s ill. She’s hurting. She lost something very precious to both of us. Don’t screw up here. She won’t give you another warning.”

“We will eat with you and discuss things.” Sonja had realized her mistake as soon as Angela touched the Ghost. She had threatened Angela’s mate. Sonja wouldn’t risk offending the male again

by refusing the meal, even if she weren't secretly drooling over the smell of cooking meat.

Marc motioned toward the picnic area. "Consider yourselves our honored guests."

Sonja went that way, not digging into Angela's thoughts. She also wasn't scanning anyone else around here, but the other new descendants were doing both.

Angela wasn't concerned. None of these here were strong enough to pry into her crypt, and even if they were, they wouldn't detect much beyond rancid meat. That's all she was now, deep inside—a wild dog that needed to be put down.

4

A short time later, Adrian settled into his chair in the cave, annoyed with the distance. He couldn't stay with Angela and risk her plan being revealed through his weak mental shield. They had to hope no one would notice that he had disappeared. If someone commented on it, the instant hostile responses from the Eagles over his banishment should cover things.

Adrian switched on the monitor and adjusted the channel to pick up the new camera he'd just placed. Angela hadn't told him to, but he couldn't be away and wait patiently like a good dog. If things went crazy, he would return for her. Two miles on his bike went by fast.

Adrian was relieved to find both groups enjoying a meal together without obvious trouble when the static cleared, though Billy and Jax did seem to be exchanging glares. Everyone was still tense, but there were conversations taking place, so that was encouraging. Adrian peered at the background, where Eagles were helping Sonja's men load coolers of meat and boxes of supplies. They were almost finished.

Adrian searched for Jennifer and found the teenager still haunting Sonja's every move. Adrian grinned. When Jennifer took over Safe Haven, peace would rule with her. Citizens would be as scared to act up under her as they were under Angela. Grief would drive Jennifer into being a strong leader.

On the screen, Marc stood up, causing people to turn his way. Adrian could almost imagine the silence, the expectation and suspicion in equal amounts. Marc had to be nervous.

Whatever he said was met with laughter and cheers, judging from reactions. Adrian moved toward the fire he'd left burning, not needing to witness Marc's good moment. The man would have a lot of those, hopefully. His time leading Safe Haven would only be short because Marc didn't want the job. To be good in that position, the person had to be slightly obsessed with it, but the only thing Marc felt that way over was currently snoozing in his truck under a heavy guard. The let down from using that much energy was like the crash of a drug.

She would need food and sleep when Marc brought her in.

Adrian spent a few minutes considering what he wanted to do, then he got up and got busy. Watching the screen without being able to hear the conversations was maddening anyway. The next run like this would include a microphone.

5

“Angie?” Marc tapped lightly on the window. “We’re ready to roll.”

Angela groggily fumbled for the lock button to let him in. She’d followed his instructions.

Marc tried to smile at her. She looked rough. “You did well.”

Angela leaned against the seat, not feeling much physically or emotionally. Everything was blurry.

Marc climbed into the driver’s seat as her guards went to their vehicles. After Angela’s show of force, the meal had been peaceful. The new descendants had eaten three times as much as the Eagles.

“Good,” Angela murmured.

There’s a flash of soul, Marc judged. She’s glad they’re getting a great meal, and that their people won’t starve this week.

Angela turned away. She had a few more miles before they would be out of Sonja’s range. Not that the train boss was scanning them. Sonja and her

convoy were hightailing it back to their train as fast as they could. Sonja was scared for her life.

She should be, Jennifer sent. *I want to go after her.*

Angela pretended to consider it, aware of Sonja's stronger defenders still trying to listen. *We made a deal. How would you justify that?*

She is a dangerous threat. She needs to be removed.

I agree, but we cannot kill them all. Let her be. If she sticks to her word, so will I. Unable to take more of this farce, Angela dropped her shields and let the grayness claim her again. In here, her mind was protected by the fog.

Marc approved the choice. Sonja might not be scanning Angela, but he was. Sonja didn't know her the way that he did.

Let her be! Jennifer snapped, causing Marc to flinch at the accompanying sting. *She needs peace. Another argument about your lost child will NOT help.*

Marc locked down on a nasty reply. Jennifer was right. It was done. There was no going back, and accusations would make things worse.

Angela sighed in relief, glad for the comfort of the fog, but even more grateful for Jennifer's loyalty. She didn't know if the teen was playing a perfect role or if her timing was just great, but it allowed Angela to sink the rest of the way into the darkness to sleep.

Marc slowly shifted so that her head lolled against his shoulder and stayed there, supported. "I've got you. I always will, even when I don't agree with you."

Marc turned on the heat and drove toward the cave. A few hours with Adrian had already healed more of her physical injuries and brought part of her back mentally. A day or two more should do a lot and then he could hand this heavy burden back over to the one who was meant to carry it.

6

"You can't go to Safe Haven yet."

Marc put the truck in park, frowning at Angie's words. He'd thought she was still asleep as they approached the town at the bottom of Safe Haven Mountain.

Angela didn't move. "I had these plans running before everything happened, Marc. Please keep that in mind."

Before he could question, Adrian came out of the cave, gesturing.

Seeing Angela wasn't paying attention, Marc translated. "They went straight to the train. The coolers are being unloaded. It won't be long."

Marc turned to Angie, angry. "What did you do?"

"I handled the problem." She opened the door of the truck herself instead of waiting for someone to do it for her.

Adrian was there to catch her when she stumbled in pain. “Sorry.” Adrian scooped her up and took her inside under angry mutters and glowers. Some of those men would never forgive him. His disapproval rating would always be double digits.

Adrian settled her on the sleeping bag he’d placed on a stack of cushions and pillows from nearby homes. It would hold her for a day or two. He quickly retreated to the ledge with his mess kit as Marc and three Eagles came into the cave.

Angela pushed herself into a sitting position, unable to conceal the pain as she moved. Her body would take a long time to finish healing.

Adrian dipped out a bowl of hot stew, shoving a spoon into it. He completed the meal with a tumbler of powdered milk and hurried to serve her.

Marc watched without comment. He assumed the urgency was due to the energy Angela had used to produce and control the fire.

“Some of it.” Adrian was careful not to touch her again. “The crash hasn’t really come yet. She’ll sleep for most of a day after this. We have to get a meal into her first.”

Angela forced herself to pick at the stew. She had one more secret to get rid of, one more horror to reveal, and then she could sleep all she wanted.

Jennifer entered the cave, going straight to Angela in support. She sent a clear glower around the cave, implying she wouldn’t tolerate Angela getting upset.

Adrian was grateful. When Marc found out this last mission, he would want to scream, but Angie didn't need that right now.

"Tell me." Marc sank down in the chair that still held a blanket with Angela's loose hair on it.

Angela sighed. "Are we clear?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes. I can barely reach them from here. They aren't on us now."

"I lied to Sonja." Angela gestured. "Show him."

Adrian switched the channel on the monitor.

Marc stared at the trains in surprise. "We have a camera up?"

"She had me do it first." Adrian adjusted again, trying for a slightly less fuzzy image. On the screen, dozens of people were cooking, eating, cleaning themselves, and walking around. It seemed like a grateful group of survivors enjoying a moment without chaos.

Angela set her bowl down. She couldn't eat while they watched this or she would toss it right back up. Bracing, she waited for the ugliness with another part of her soul dying.

Marc studied the images. "How do you know she's going to attack?"

"She didn't ask for those tradeoff lessons, did she?"

"What?"

"The camping and solar knowledge she schmoozed you with upon first contact." Angela sighed tiredly. "She never brought it up."

Marc frowned. “We didn’t ask for the rail information either.”

Adrian nodded. Both sides had known that the other was lying. The ending could have been much worse.

“What are we waiting for?” Marc asked a bit later. Most of the people on the screen had finished eating and walking, and were now in the train, out of view.

“Five more minutes,” Angela predicted gravely.

Marc heard the awful pain in her words and tried to get ready for it. Whatever this was, Adrian and Jennifer were both refusing to even think about it to give him a clue. Apparently, Angela wanted him blindsided.

“If you had known, you would have talked me out of it.” Angela started crying again. “But it had no good endings for Safe Haven. I hope you’ll believe that.”

“I already know that’s true...” Marc suddenly guessed what she’d done as the clues came together. When he got over the surprise and then the revulsion, Marc asked the biggest question on his list. “Will it get them all?”

Adrian answered for her, tone grim “Three full trains have now eaten. It cuts them by more than two thirds.”

Marc couldn’t find an error with those numbers, or the secrecy. After witnessing Sonja’s amazing ability to read him over so much distance, Marc

understood the need to keep this from him. What he hated was the deaths. Again, not all of those people were bad.

“No.” Angela wiped away fresh tears. “And many of the slaves will clean up the scraps from their owners and also perish.”

“Wow.” Marc had been through this too many times to get enraged. “I thought you were wishing them well.”

“I was.” Angela met his sarcasm with ugly bitterness. “I fed them a last meal, didn’t I?”

Everyone winced, including Adrian.

Marc turned to shout at the former leader, but he was drawn to the screen, where the poisoned meat was finally taking effect. The scene was gruesome. *She’s never coming back. No one could come back after doing this.*

Behind him, Angela’s last hope went out.

Chapter Nine

Keep It Down

1

“**W**hat happens now?” Marc was still watching bodies fall. “If they attack, will we win?”

“We aren’t going to give them time,” Jennifer answered, proving to Angela that the teen had known the full plan.

“They’ll dump the train of bodies for those jeeps and trucks.” Adrian drew his attention when Marc glowered at the girl. “Sonja’s town will fall without her using her ability to hold them there. No more threat of descendants, no chances of American slavery.”

“Sounds easy,” Marc stated with only a little rancor. He hated the choice, but Angela had made this plan before he had been passed leadership. She was following through.

“Yes.” She shuddered. “I’m in no shape to do anything more.”

“We’ll take care of it.” Marc heard the exhaustion, the unbearable guilt that she was adding to her shoulders for this. As much as Marc wanted to say she was right to feel that way, he couldn’t. Sonja had been dangerous.

“Thank you for understanding.” Angela’s energy was fading fast. “Need to sleep. Make the call.”

“I’ve got it covered, Baby.” Ignoring the anger at his endearment, Adrian motioned toward the bedroll. “Get her to eat. If she doesn’t, she’ll wake up throwing up.”

Marc glared. “She ate at the library.”

“She ditched it as soon as you turned your back.” Adrian tuned in the radio. “She was afraid it would make her think about what was in the coolers.”

“Asshole,” Angela muttered.

“Get her to eat,” Adrian repeated.

Jennifer and Marc both went that way.

Adrian hit the mike. “I have a message for Sonja. Did she survive?”

The cave of Eagles waited for a reply, all watching the monitors except for Marc, who was determinedly spooning small bites of the stew into Angie’s mouth. Jennifer was alternating drinks of milk and encouraging words when Angela’s hands went to her stomach in pain.

“This is Adrian Mitchel, contacting whatever snake is now leading those trains of dead. Someone had better answer!” Adrian was following Angela’s mental script. She was using the last of her energy for this.

“We are here, you evil bastards!” the radio spat. “We will make you pay for this treachery!”

Angela clasped Marc's wrist and sent out a final wave of angry heat that flared over everyone in burning waves of warning.

"Stop! Don't send the fire! We will go!"

Angela only let up when that surrender came, much to the discomfort of her own populace. Unfortunately, to capture all of the survivors, she'd had to send out a huge net that couldn't exclude her group. That heat had also been felt in Safe Haven.

"You have two hours to be gone. One day to be out of this state. One week to be out of this country. We're watching. Go now and go fast."

Silence came for a moment, and then, "Should we leave our slaves?"

"Only if you want to get out alive." Adrian let his own hatred bleed through in his tones. "Don't be late. Two hours, one day, and one week."

"Copy."

Adrian cut the radio to conserve the battery, glancing toward Angela for approval. Adrian's brows came together. She was already out, with the bowl still half full. He stood up. "Switch with me."

Jennifer started to get up.

Marc waved her off. He took Adrian's seat at the monitor with a glower that spoke volumes. He hated all of this.

Adrian settled down next to Angela and took her hand.

The instant he touched her, Angela's eyes snapped open. "I told you to never touch me!"

Adrian grinned, scooping up a large bite. “Just have to motivate her.”

Marc snickered against his will, soothed by her response. The jealousy was a part of him, a part of their upbringing where he’d been the only one looking out for her, but he was trying to crush it. Where they were all going from here, the drama couldn’t tag along. Pitcairn Island didn’t have room for it.

“Coming in,” a familiar voice notified them from outside the cave. The veterinarian ducked through the blind. Surprise rolled over the Eagles.

Kyle moved forward. “How did you know we were here?!”

“Who do you think added the special coolers?” Chris went to Angela. He gazed at her with a clear adoration that drew notice from every male in the cave.

Finally! Jennifer had always known the vet was hinky. It was about time the others felt it too.

“You did well,” Angela praised between bites. Angela ignored the others to finish her last part in this mess. “We’re all set?”

The vet handed her a photo. It was of a minefield.

“Channel fifteen.” Chris gestured at Marc, a bit surprised the boy scout was here for this.

Marc switched to the new angle in pleasant surprise as he realized it was atop a tree that gave them a clear view of the road the surviving train people would have to take to travel north. His

elation faded as he realized the photo the vet handed around at Angela's direction wasn't far into the distance from the trains. "How did you get close enough to do this without them knowing?"

Chris beamed proudly. "I did it before they got here. It's been in place for two weeks. I took this picture right before I shoveled dirt over it."

"It's now had fourteen days to sit and re-blend with the rest of the road." Angela pushed away the last bite. "I'm done. Get off me."

Adrian ignored her request and adeptly shoved the last bite into her mouth. He scowled as she gagged. "Keep it down!"

Angela struggled to obey. It was hard.

Marc watched the tears stream down her cheeks, watched her recover herself and actually swallow the food. *I wouldn't have been able to do that to her*, he thought, remembering his weak gut moments. It had gotten better over the years, but not that much. He also wouldn't have been able to treat her that way.

"Good girl," Adrian praised as Jennifer handed her the milk to finish. "You can sleep now. We'll handle things."

Angela held up a very sore arm. "I want to be awake for it. I did it. I have to watch."

"I don't think you need to carry this one." Adrian refused to touch her for the energy blast she needed. "If you want it, you'll have to take it."

Angela inhaled with a brutal tug and then used some of the energy to blast Adrian against a wall of the cave. He crumbled at her feet, barely conscious.

“He won’t say that again.” Marc chuckled. He went back to studying the monitor.

Angela used the stolen energy to push herself up and join her mate at the radio. The food was trying to settle, but the stomach cramps were making it hard.

Feeling her discomfort, Marc reached out for her hand. As angry as he could be with her, as angry as he was right now, he still cared. That would never change.

“Same here.” Angela clasped his hand. They waited together to witness her latest atrocity.

Adrian slowly stood up, glad Marc was ready to offer comfort. She didn’t need to witness this.

I agree. Marc hoped to surprise Angela with their open line. *But I don’t want to be knocked out. You want to try again?*

Adrian smirked. “No.”

Angela ignored them. The fleeing train survivors weren’t staying together as she’d hoped they would. If too many of them reached the trap ahead of the others, there might still be survivors.

“Shh. It’s okay.” Chris was still gazing at Angela. He hadn’t glanced away from her once. “I placed a second area in case that happened.”

Right on time, Angela tracked as the vet’s mental walls collapsed under Marc’s scrutiny.

“You’re a descendant!”

“Not now.” Angela pulled his attention away from the vet. “Be ready.”

Marc saw the box next to the radio and realized he would be the one to spring the trap.

“Let the traitor do it.”

Marc stood up, wrapping an arm around Angela’s shoulders.

Shaking off the daze, Adrian ignored the lump on his skull to take over the controls. He fought not to smile.

Spotting his eagerness, Marc glared. “You’re loving this!”

The former leader picked up the box. “Eliminating our enemies? Yes. Why aren’t you?”

“Because I have a soul! Why don’t you?!”

“Because I wasn’t put here to be a saint or a boy scout,” Adrian stated calmly. “I’m here to ensure the survival of our people. There isn’t anything I won’t do for that goal. Let us know when you finally understand how that feels.”

Before Marc could send a scathing retort, Adrian hit the button and blew up the road.

Watching the carnage on the monitor was hard on all of them, even Adrian. Despite his bravado, he didn’t like doing this. Killing wasn’t the goal of a descendant; every time he did it or helped do it, he felt more alien to this world.

A small group from the train made it through the first explosions, only to be hit with the second barrage Adrian triggered as they watched the monitors. Nothing moved after that.

Angela slowly turned toward the warm cocoon of her chair and blanket. As she pulled the quilt up to hide the sobs, Adrian turned off the screen. “As far as I’ve seen, we never have to do that again. This is the one and only time that Safe Haven will ever have to condone mass murder.”

Unable to take that lie, Marc suddenly wanted to be back with the camp. “What else do we need to do?”

“Jeff’s new friend needs to be handled.” Jennifer reminded them of other issues that were waiting. “He said Sally can’t come in our gates, and I believe him.”

“What does she want?”

Jennifer shrugged. “To be alone with her animals. Jeff wants to hook her up with gear and supplies and send her on her way.”

Marc caught the tone. “What about you?”

“She should be eliminated.” The teenager sighed. “But Jeff said she saved their lives and they have to return the favor.”

“Angie will make the decision,” Marc passed the choice automatically. “Tell him she’ll—”

“No.”

Marc quickly rotated to confront Adrian. “You don’t get a say!”

Adrian glared back. “Angie is not in charge anymore. These are *your* choices. Handle them and let her heal.”

Feeling the scold, Marc scowled. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Adrian didn't answer. She needed a break and he was going to make sure that she got one. Without a respite, she wouldn't be able to get them across the ocean.

Marc relented, reading the thought. "Fine! When Dog's ready to be brought in, we'll swap out the gear and supplies, and send her on her way," Marc chose, talking to Jennifer. "But if you get a real sign of a problem, tell me and I'll handle it then."

"You got it."

Marc realized he was fully in Angela's place now. "What else?"

"The bodies. Poison meat isn't good for nature."

Marc sighed. Cleanup had to happen. "Okay... We'll burn it on our way to camp. What else?"

Adrian gave Kyle a pointed look.

Kyle, still furious with the man, flipped him the finger, but did as directed. "What we tell the camp, what loot we take, level of discussion among the ranks, and then notifying their town that Sonja and her army are gone."

Marc hadn't realized there were so many issues still waiting, but it was embarrassing that he'd forgotten about the town. "Do that one now. Does she have something scripted?"

Adrian held up a finger. "I've got it covered when you say the word."

"Word."

Amused, Adrian found the right channel on the radio that Kenn had made as powerful as anything

in camp. "This is Safe Haven refugee camp. Come in, Altoona, Pennsylvania."

The response came quickly.

"This is Altoona. Where is Sonja?"

"Sonja is dead. I repeat: your tyrannical ruler is dead. Safe Haven has handled her and liberated your town. You are all free to go."

"Is this some kind of bad joke?" the man on the other end asked suspiciously.

"I repeat, Sonja is dead. Everyone on the train is dead. We consider all the subjects of Pennsylvania to be innocent victims of her tyranny, including those in her hometown. Safe Haven is open to trade and regular communications if you so desire."

"We're going to confirm this before we do anything," the voice replied stiffly. "Altoona, out."

Adrian turned off the radio. "Have a wonderful evening, asshole."

Marc sniggered. "Nice. She write that little freedom speech and warning combined?"

"I did," Jennifer grunted. "She approved it, of course."

"So did I." Adrian avoided Marc's quick glare. "She wasn't sure it conveyed enough of a threat. Judging from the response, I'd say it was perfect."

Jennifer didn't want to feel good about receiving praise from Adrian. To hide what she couldn't avoid, Jennifer stomped over and sank down by Angela. "I'm staying here."

Adrian shrugged. He had nothing to hide now. The feeling was amazing.

Loathing that, Marc motioned the Eagles toward the exit. "I'll figure out the rest of it as we go. Let's roll."

Jennifer didn't stand up until Marc gave her the specific glower that said he would pick her up and carry her out if he had to. Aware that he was on the edge of his patience, the teen reluctantly stood, but she couldn't keep from protesting. "It's not right."

"Get in the truck." Kyle took Jennifer's arm. "He knows what he's doing."

"Giving her up? Because Adrian will use this to bond with her! You know that."

"Yes, I do," Kyle conceded angrily. "Now, come on."

Marc waited to be alone with Adrian and Angela. He had to let go of something.

Angela struggled to stay awake; her energy was gone. "I'm listening."

"I've always known that you belong with someone else. Even when we were kids."

Angela would have denied that, but Marc didn't let her. "I'm not giving you up or giving you permission to love him. I don't have that kind of control over you." Marc sighed. "I wouldn't want that kind of control over anyone, but I mean it. I always knew we weren't supposed to end up together."

That old wound began to bleed in her heart. "That's why you made the choice?"

"Yes. I wanted the Marines. You were meant for better than me. That's why I let you go. Every

moment since then was spent in regret, but it was honest regret.”

“Because you still believe it was right?”

“Yes.”

Adrian stayed silent as they tried to remove one of the walls that had always stood between them.

“I was scared of you.”

“Why?” Marc couldn’t stop his annoyance at the revelation. “I never put a hand on you that you didn’t beg me for.”

Angela couldn’t say it, forcing Adrian to supply the answer. “She’s terrified of males. Always has been, I would guess.”

Marc was floored by that. “I never knew.”

“I hid so many things as a kid.” Angela refused to cry again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you.”

“I wouldn’t have known how to handle it then.” Marc came over to her. “I guess the past never lets go, does it?”

Angela held up a hand to him. “I love you.”

Adrian winced even as he silently applauded the start of their reconciliation. He needed her to be happy. After all that she’d sacrificed for the dream, she deserved peace.

“Without change, there can be no peace,” Angela muttered chillingly. “Only survivors.”

Marc stiffened. “And we haven’t changed, have we?”

“Not enough and it’s cost me everything that I needed.”

Adrian tried to comfort her. “You couldn’t have pushed them any faster.”

Marc flashed an ugly glare. “Stop lying to her. That’s an order.”

Adrian winced again.

Marc knelt down, finally ready to say what he’d been holding onto for a while now. “I can’t be with you like this. I love you too, but as long as you lead Safe Haven, I can’t be your mate. You’re too...”

“Evil?” she supplied tiredly.

“Yes.”

Adrian clamped down on a violent response.

“What about while *you’re* in charge?” she questioned, lids closing.

Adrian abruptly got up and left the lukewarm cave.

Marc gloated, missing Angela’s relieved flinch. “I’m making all those choices, with you doing nothing that I don’t approve?”

“Yes, please.” Angela instantly claimed the freedom. “I’m tired, Marc. I... I can’t do it.”

Marc stewed over it as if that didn’t fall right into his own plans. “I need to think on it.”

Angela didn’t speak as he kissed her cheek and left. She let the blackness come forward to remove the pain.

Marc didn’t acknowledge Adrian as he came from the cave to get into the waiting truck. He still didn’t as they drove off. He was afraid to talk to the former leader and reveal his plans before things were in place.

Adrian knew the sentiment. He was currently doing the same.

2

Jennifer began as soon as Marc was out of sight of the cave. “You shouldn’t leave her alone with him.”

“Yeah, about that. You and I need to talk.”

Jennifer felt the unhappiness, but didn’t back down even though it was a man. She didn’t have very much of that old fear anymore. It was liberating, but also scary. “She isn’t safe.”

“Is there something you’ve seen that she missed?”

“No,” Jennifer responded sullenly. “If I’ve caught it, I know she has.”

“Then butt out.”

“But she—”

“I said, butt out.” Marc drove on, glowering a bit. “Angie stayed out of your personal shit, right?”

Jennifer grunted.

Marc motioned toward their home. “I need you keeping the peace without the camp sensing your sting. Work on that now.”

Jennifer hadn’t realized she would have to continue enforcement duties in their camp.

“Of course, you will. We have hundreds of new members and some are descendants who haven’t had our rules to follow. You and the other scanners will form a group to control the magic users in Safe

Haven. Monitor and enforce—by Eagle rules, not descendant.”

“Openly?”

Marc nodded, timbre settling into stone. “We will not restart Adrian’s lies to the camp. If they ask, tell them.”

Before she could protest, Marc held up a hand. “That’s not all. As of this moment forward, all open use of magic or gifts without permission is expressly forbidden.”

“What?” Jennifer was shocked. “That’s not what Adrian and Angela wanted. They said we need the camp to accept us for what we are.”

Marc glanced over at Kyle. “You understand why.”

Kyle nodded. “Yes, and I agree. People are jealous.”

Jennifer thought of the ugly bruises on Angela’s neck and swallowed her instinct to refuse. Maybe it would be better if they weren’t so open for a while.

“What about the train?” Kyle was glad Marc had redirected Jenny’s focus away from Adrian.

“The same. We don’t hide it anymore.” Marc steered the truck toward that carnage. “We also don’t take photos. Set up a patrol when we get there. I don’t want a lot of witnesses.”

“Too late for that.” Kyle sighed, using his binoculars to explore their surroundings. “Big group of refugees ahead.”

“Heard the radio, probably.” Marc started to message Angela to ask how she wanted this

handled, but the thought of facing Adrian's scorn slapped him. *He* was in charge now. *He* had to make these choices.

"We'll go around." Marc steered them toward a different road, quickly getting their convoy out of sight. He was doing what Angela would to clean up the loose ends, but after this, things would be done *his* way.

She's right to get rid of the threats, his demon argued hesitantly. *We've detected ugliness in their futures.*

Marc wasn't comforted. He, more than most, understood they had to remove some individuals, but not like this.

Do you believe that group would treat you better? Perhaps you should go lead them! His demon left, not wanting to trigger an argument.

Marc knew it to be the truth. Scanning, he was able to read their lawlessness, the contempt for authority that kept shrinking their members.

She knew I would have to do this. Angie knew this would happen. That's why she didn't have instructions for the cleanup.

I think so too, Jennifer admitted, *but I wasn't a part of this plan at all. I was a tag-a-long.*

Marc almost smirked, contemplating an old joke about loose women and a truck stop tag-a-long. Marc snickered. *We called them lot lizards in my day.*

Bite me, Jennifer retorted easily, glad Marc wasn't mad. She cared too much to ignore their problems.

"I appreciate that, I do." Marc waited for any last chance that Angie would contact him. When it was clear no reprieve was coming, Marc turned the truck toward home. "Come out tomorrow and verify the totals. Then burn it."

"Yes, sir." Kyle wasn't ready to clear that site yet. He was still occasionally haunted by the rest area. That ghost didn't need company.

Jennifer saw the Indians emerge from a long line of trees to their left. "Our escort just fell in."

Marc didn't respond. Natoli and his warriors were still running under Angela's orders. Since they were following him everywhere he went, Marc assumed they were there to keep him alive. He was just grateful Sonja hadn't sensed them and thought it was a betrayal of their deal. Not that it mattered now.

"There's Seth." Kyle pointed.

Marc pulled alongside a truck that looked like it had gone the distance, rolling the window down. "All done?"

Seth hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "We removed all street signs within two miles of the base. No easy markers to get in."

"Excellent. We're going up now. Everyone goes in the QZ."

“You got it.” Seth took his vehicle to the rear of Marc’s convoy. Natoli’s warriors, still looking regal despite being in trucks, took drag.

Marc led them to the alternate loading location, not looking forward to the climb after the meal and the drama. Much like Angie, he just wanted to sleep.

Jennifer subtly placed a finger on Marc’s shoulder and sent a bolt of pale light into him.

Marc, not realizing what had happened, felt his spirits lift. He would be better once he was back inside Safe Haven’s light. “The sooner the better.”

Jennifer rested while he parked. Now *she* wasn’t looking forward to the climb.

Kyle secured the area while the other Eagles loaded up the empty boxes and coolers, none of them talking. It had been an incredibly successful mission, but they didn’t feel like bragging.

Marc took his team into the tunnels Adrian had come through, refusing to think about being without Angie. They both needed this break.

Jennifer trudged behind Marc, wanting to be close enough to protect him if they were ambushed. Being Angela’s XO was hard. Tired, she quickly allowed a gap to come between them.

Kyle scooped her up. They both tensed at the contact, guiltily enjoying it.

“You did real good.” Kyle patted her shoulder. “I’ve got it from here.”

“You sure? ‘Cause I could—”

Kyle quickly kissed her. It was a fast peck followed by a confident grin. “I’ve got this shit.”

Jennifer giggled, sending warmth through the entire group. “Okay.” She snuggled into his thick arms, resting her cheek against his neck. “You smell good.”

Kyle retained his grin for the rest of the trek.

3

“You left her where?!”

Marc sank down in the chair the doctor waved him to, eager to have his blood work done. “With Adrian.”

“Why would you do that? He is the devil!”

Marc chuckled at the shouts, trying not to let the remaining bruise on Hilda’s head sway him. “Yeah.”

Peggy scowled. “What’s funny about this?”

“You two.” Marc blasted them with cool contempt. “Do you think the guys here don’t understand what’s going on?”

Hilda and Peggy both shut up, going still and watchful.

Confirmed, Marc chuckled again. “Don’t pick a fight you can’t win, ladies. Angie won’t ever support you on that.”

“She already has.” Peggy regained her balance as she realized Marc knew of their plans. “Ask her.”

“She gave me a message.” Marc wasn’t above using that tactic. “She said if there’s trouble while I’m in charge, she’ll hunt down every one of your plants—including Marsha.”

“Trouble with who?” Hilda knew she needed to be worried about Marc having that information.

“She didn’t say. I’d be careful.” Marc’s eyes narrowed. “She isn’t in a forgiving mood.”

Hilda turned and walked out, furious at the perceived betrayal.

Peggy wasn’t fooled as easily. She stared at Marc in intense concentration, trying to figure out where she’d been tricked. “She didn’t say that.”

“Would you like to ask her?” Marc countered. “She has a son here, one of those men that you hate. If Charlie was threatened, after the loss we’ve suffered, I won’t even try to hold her back. You’ll burn in front of the entire camp. Should I plan for that?”

Peggy knew that to be true and also a lie. She slowly gave in. “Okay for now, Mr. Ruler. But you be careful too, huh? You’re *not* her.”

“No, I’m not,” Marc concurred icily. “I’ll charge you and have a trial, then *hang* you in front of the camp. Same result, though.”

Enraged, Peggy marched from the medical bay.

Drawing blood, the doctor smothered a smirk. Peggy and Hilda were getting too open about their desires. Now they would stop for a little while at least.

“I hope so. I understand and all, but enough is enough.”

The doctor patted him once on the shoulder and went to draw blood from Jennifer.

Marc scanned the medical bay, estimating there was room for all of them unless real patients came in. “We’ll crash right here until we’re cleared.”

Happy to not have to lug themselves up or down any more mountainsides or tunnels at the moment, the Eagles began to get comfortable, claiming cots and corners.

“Make a short list of anything you’d like to have and I’ll send for a gopher,” Marc took out his notebook. He pushed the button on the radio. “We’re home, base. All accounted for. Doing our time in the QZ like everyone else has to.” It was a good reminder for their new inhabitants that even the boss of this refugee camp went through these procedures.

“Copy that. Welcome home,” Kenn replied. “I’ll send someone by.”

“Copy.” Marc assumed Kenn had anticipated the need for a gopher. He was pleased the Marine remembered it from their days of fighting together. Grunts always wanted access to comforts after a fight. It just hadn’t always been possible then.

“Medical showers are open for us.” Marc waved toward the rear of the bay that was usually only for the medical staff. “Ladies first.”

Kyle gently tugged Jennifer that way, not letting her protest. “Yes. You’re getting a shower, a hot meal, and eight to ten hours of sleep.”

Jennifer sighed. “After you check on Autumn.”

“I’ll do it while you shower.”

Marc waited for Jennifer to get out of sight and then stripped off his dirty clothes for the clean set in his kit. He did it quickly, not looking at anyone, and wasn't surprised when a few of the men followed suit while they had privacy. Marc thought of the M.A.S.H. line and grinned. Nudity still made some folks breathe funny. That was life.

The doctor and two nurses drew blood, and then went about their routines as if it were normal to have three dozen Eagles camping with them for the night. Marc was pleased. People were adapting to life after war better than he'd judged they would back before the shit had hit the fan. It was a comfort to know humans could still adapt.

Kyle looked around. "Hey, where did the vet go?"

Billy frowned. "He didn't come in our trucks. Probably didn't leave that way, either."

"I want him quarantined when he shows up." Marc wrote it down.

"Maybe she had other work for him." Barry had been silent the entire trip, watching and learning, as Angela had instructed. He had many things to replay when this run was over, but he wasn't going to go blabbing about being taken along or saving Marc's life. It would anger people like Cynthia, who Angela had vetoed from the trip despite Marc saying the reporter could come; but it also didn't fit in with his plans. Barry knew he had to be more cautious if he wanted to achieve his goals.

Marc glared at him. “And what would those be?”

“To make it onto your personal team.”

“To kill me?”

Barry smiled a bit. “Angela’s already got that covered with you and Adrian.”

Marc was surprised into a harsh laugh of respect for the honesty and courage to say that so openly. “What’s your name?”

“Barry, sir. From New York.”

“What did you do there?”

“Stockbroker.”

“No shit? Never met one.”

Barry held out a hand. “Now you have.”

Marc chuckled, shaking. He didn’t pick up anything hinky about the man and that was good. “Get some sleep, rookie. Your patrol starts at midnight.”

Barry snapped a salute, grinning. “Yes, sir.”

Marc rolled his eyes, trying not to enjoy it too much. He’d witnessed Adrian and Angela brought down through pride and obsession. He wasn’t about to make those mistakes.

You’ll make all new ones, his demon predicted bluntly. Try to account for that while you’re busy congratulating yourself.

Marc hadn’t felt the demon return, but he didn’t respond. He understood going against his descendant power wasn’t recommended, but he’d already witnessed firsthand what happened when a person let that side of them have control. No, he

wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of previous leaders and if he did make all new ones, then so be it. At least they would be his and not some inhuman form of life that had to have a host.

Feeling the insult deeply, the demon finally spoke his full thought on the matter. *I believe you're searching for an excuse to ditch that decades old commitment because you're scared of not being man enough for her now that you've witnessed what she's capable of in every way. Coward.*

The demon slammed mental doors on his way out, leaving Marc angry and without a target. It was hours before the fury faded.

Chapter Ten

Lying In Wait

1

Adrian secured the outside of the cave, then quickly stoked up the fire he had going in the far corner. The vent hole he'd made was sucking the smoke out nicely, but it was a giveaway on their location. He was going to burn it hard and hot for about half an hour, and then they would resume a cold camp. The chill in the air felt like they might wake to a fresh layer of snow.

Adrian added two more thick rocks as weight to seal the bottom edges of the flap. There hadn't been time to construct a real door or gather gear.

After shifting the monitor to where he could see it from the bedroll, Adrian went to Angela's sleeping form. He didn't want to wake her, but there wasn't a choice since she was still sitting up.

"Lay down, Angie." Adrian rubbed her arm. "It's okay to sleep now. Lay down."

To his surprise, she did, burrowing deep into the thick sleeping bag.

Adrian hurriedly joined her and zipped them up. It took a minute to find a comfortable position on the cushions that were under the bedroll, but it was

still wonderful to be enclosed with her warmth, her smell.

Adrian concentrated, using his dimming gift to hide them in layers of darkness that very few descendants would be able to penetrate. Satisfied of their safety, Adrian's lids shut. It had been a long day.

Outside the cave, the vet felt the couple behind him go dim. Glad that he'd been overlooked, Chris peddled toward Safe Haven on the ten-speed he'd chosen, fighting light jealousy. One day, he would hold her while she slept. Until then, Adrian would keep her warm.

Upon reaching camp a short time later, Chris began patrolling the cold, snowy sector around Safe Haven's open entrance, not minding the miserable labor. Angela had known that he wouldn't. He was honored to shield her son and clean up loose ends. In time, he would do more.

2

"Angie didn't come back with you?"

"No." Marc motioned Morgan into the cubby so their voices wouldn't carry as far. "She's not safe here."

"We have more assassins?!" Morgan was angry there had been another attempt on Angela's life, but it scared him that the person had been trying to steal her power. He hadn't even considered that motive.

“We don’t know. It could be something Tara set up or someone else is still pulling strings.”

“Other than the train gang?”

Marc sighed. “Yes.”

“What about the possible meltdown somewhere upstate?”

“Ongoing, so far as we know. We have a lot to do before we even lift a finger. You know what I mean?”

“Yes. Who do you want in on it?”

“All team leaders and XOs, plus Kenn and a few others I’ll bring in.”

Morgan sat down at the narrow cafeteria table they’d drafted for the security chamber. “Which crisis will hit us first?”

“According to the notebook, all of it in the next two weeks. We have two choices, like before. We tough it out or we run. Last time, we all had hopes that we’d be safe here and the vote was easy. Now, they might actually vote to run. We’ll need to be prepared for either outcome.”

Morgan retrieved his notebook from his jacket and began to make notes.

Marc let him go for a minute, reading the neat script upside down across the table. Morgan was handy.

“Do you want this done openly?”

“As much as you can, yes. I’ll note the things that are to be kept quiet.”

“Do you anticipate many of those?” It was his way of asking if Marc would be hiding things from

the camp and running behind-the-scenes plots like his predecessors had.

Marc grunted. “Not if I can help it. I will be open, but we have to have their reactions covered.”

“Sounds like secrets to me.”

Marc frowned. He hadn’t looked at it that way. “I can’t be open with them?”

“Not on some things,” Morgan revealed the teaching moment for what it was. “We’ll help you through it. The senior guys have done this a couple of times now.”

Marc was surprised into a smile. “Smell that green, do I?”

Morgan chuckled. “So did your woman. Adrian whispered in her ear. I’d be honored to do that for you.”

Marc held out a hand, grateful he didn’t have to make a choice on that. “Thanks.”

Outside, Jax smothered his desire for that position as he tapped and pushed the door open. “You wanted me?”

Marc waved him in, giving Morgan a nod of dismissal.

Jax took Morgan’s seat with a reserved look at the Special Forces man. Jax hadn’t been able to bond with Neil’s men at all.

“I have a job for you.”

“Cool.” Jax brightened, leaning forward eagerly. “Sure!”

Outside, Morgan cracked a grin. That had sounded exactly like Adrian. Marc was about to

learn that their former administrator's methods had been necessary in many ways. *It should be fun to watch.*

3

“Things good in here? Boss wants a check in.”

Kenn frowned, but didn't say what he thought. “No trouble and no contacts for a few hours.”

Tonya closed the thin door and leaned against the radio counter to write down the details. She was trying to be careful in her new duties of information officer.

Kenn rattled off the few things their newest boss needed to know, saving the unimportant items for later. From the sound of Marc's short radio message, the train run had been rough. He wouldn't have the patience to wade through stupidity for a few hours.

Tonya copied it all down and then stuffed the notebook into her pocket. She still had fifteen minutes before she had to report in. She wanted to spend it here.

Kenn felt her leg slide against his and grinned at the heat, but he didn't encourage it. Tonya's medical checkup was coming soon. He wanted to wait until she had been cleared to get physical. It was another big change for him—wanting the baby.

Tonya wanted sex. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt so horny. She tried to be casual as she stretched, shoving out her chest.

Kenn's eyes snapped to her. He swallowed. "No."

Tonya stared, hands going to her hips. "Excuse me?"

Kenn snorted, forcing his concentration to the new monitors that had been put up. "No."

Tonya took it as a personal challenge. "Okay." Shrugging, she unsnapped the top button on her jeans and slid a hand inside her pants.

Kenn struggled not to respond, to hold firm to his resolve. It lasted all of two minutes before he caved. "Come here."

Tonya grinned, eagerly moving into his embrace. "We'll be careful."

Kenn grunted, replacing her hand with his own. "I just have to get you sloppy wet. Hold onto my shoulders."

Tonya groaned as his big fingers rubbed her slick skin. "Thank you."

Kenn hardened the rest of the way. "I aim to please."

4

"You doing okay in here?"

Samantha kept her attention on the security monitors. "No big problems so far. The Eagles are supervising things."

"Marc wants a—"

Samantha handed Neil a clipboard with a dozen papers. "Those are copies of the two arrests we

made, the report on the missing rookie gun that we're all positive was set down somewhere and forgotten, and a few other small issues. Pretty quiet while they were gone."

Neil dropped a kiss to the top of her head, positive she was tired. "I'll be by to get you as soon as your shift is over."

Samantha was still studying the screens. "Looking forward to your back, sir."

Neil laughed. "And I, yours."

Neil quietly shut the door to the security compartment that had been shoved into a deep impression near the brig. He liked Samantha being down here, away from the chaos of new citizens. In a few weeks, when Safe Haven had infected them with light, he would relax about it. Until then, having Samantha stashed out of the way was perfect.

Neil walked to the next location on rounds, enjoying running security on the cave. He and the other senior men were supervising all the floors. Since the mountain blew up, there hadn't been big trouble inside their stone walls. Neil understood most people were scared to cross Angela. Her power was intimidating. However, Neil found himself comforted instead of concerned. Angela wouldn't let anything happen to their future. Bad people would be exposed for years and dealt with, but in the end, they would have peace. "Can't have one without the other." If being scared of Angie kept people under control, Neil was all for it.

He stopped at the radio room. “Coming in.”

“Shit!” Tonya scrambled for clothes.

Kenn leaned back to button his jeans. “Nice timing, Numbnuts.”

Neil knew he should be mad, and he would tell Marc, but all he could do was laugh at this moment.

Kenn flushed, realizing who he was talking to. He’d thought it was a rookie. Neil would rat them out. “We would have heard the radio if someone called.”

Neil shrugged. “Tell it to whoever he sends to reprimand you over it. I’m just here for your sheet.”

Kenn tossed it, making the former state trooper grab for it awkwardly.

Neil, now frowning, nodded politely to Tonya, noting her small smirk. Feeling the need to set them both straight, Neil left instead.

Tonya’s giggles floated out, followed by Kenn’s groan. “That’s why I said no. We can’t do this shit on duty.”

“Don’t be mad. I’m sorry.”

Kenn sighed. “Come here. I like holding you afterwards.”

Melting, Neil chose not to rat them out. That was more caring about a female and the camp rules than Kenn had ever shown unless there was a crisis. It was clear progress.

Neil went to the final stop on this floor, enjoying the beautiful heat rushing through the passages. Theo’s crew was still working on the cave, those who could anyway. Most of the damage from the

blast had been removed so they could do repairs. Topside wasn't as good. Thanks to the cold, the avalanche and bodies were still there. The remaining ants were using them as a food source, but Neil assumed orders would come down soon for a cleanup crew.

He'd heard the rumors that leaving the mess was an intimidation technique, but he didn't believe it was needed. Samantha was saying they would have two weeks of clear weather before the next blizzard. In that time, the current mounds of snow would melt and the bodies would begin to stink. Angela wouldn't leave that to nature; the Eagles who expected to get the duty were mentally preparing for it.

Neil tapped on the pulled down shade to the medical bay and stepped into the dimness. He liked Angela in charge. Marc would do fine while she recovered, but then she would have to be put back in place, where she belonged. It wasn't a haven anymore if their seer wasn't guiding them.

5

"You okay over there?"

Jeff grunted.

Kevin joined him on the wide sofa, glad the doctor had been able to get them cleared so quickly. Now that Safe Haven had nurses and assistants, the quarantine waiting time had been cut by half. Kevin

wondered why Jeff had chosen to stay in the reading room that was closed for the night.

“I don’t have memories of *her* here,” Jeff’s voice broke a little. “I loved that stubborn bitch, you know?”

Kevin was shocked by Jeff’s tears. He put a hand on the man’s shoulder, not sure what to say that would help.

Jeff recovered quickly, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Kevin shrugged, settling onto the sofa. “Don’t be.”

Jeff glanced over, noting the bottle in Kevin’s hand and the haunted expression. “What about you?”

Kevin sighed deeply. “About the same, I guess, just without the other half of your pain.”

Jeff understood. “Yeah.”

The two rebels stayed quiet for a long time. When the lights went out on the automatic timer, neither of them rose to reactivate it. The darkness was a comfort.

Seth headed for the general sleeping space, doing a last check of all the rooms that were off limits during the evening on his way. He shined his light around the reading chamber... *Faces! People!* Seth let out a cry, hand sliding toward his weapon.

Recognition came as the laughter spilled out. “Damn!”

Kevin chuckled while Jeff snickered.

“What the hell, guys?”

Kevin yawned. “Just closing our night like we did while on the road.”

And they were, Jeff realized. The only thing missing was his cigar.

Kevin handed him one. “I hit the supply area.”

Jeff’s mood brightened a little. He had missed hanging out with his team. He, Tommy, and Seth were all that remained now. “Come join us?”

Seth started to kick them out and then shrugged. “Yeah, if the boss clears it. Give me an hour.”

“We’ll be here.”

Seth disappeared, suddenly eager to hear their tales of living without Safe Haven. Many citizens were comparing Pitcairn to being here on their own. Jeff and Kevin had details they would all want to hear.

Seth made a short pause by the security booth, getting approval for the few hours they would be in the reading room. After promising Marc it would be cleaned and ready for the camp in the morning, Seth went to check on Becky. She had first shift and should be sleeping.

Seth quietly eased around cots and blanket forts, trying hard not to disturb anyone. This open set up and bunkbed maze fit many people into one area, but there was no privacy. Everyone heard everything.

Becky didn’t wake up as he pulled the blanket to her shoulders and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. Neither of them had mentioned their conversation

in the truck after coming home. He still hoped to make her happier so those desires would go away.

Seth finished his rounds and made a last stop by the eating carts. He wrote a note for what he took, then returned to the reading room to enjoy some male bonding. He didn't realize other dwellers had discovered the location until he walked back into the darkness and half a dozen lights shined in his direction.

"Down, boys!" He shielded himself from the glare. "I brought snacks."

Low cheers came as Seth passed the small bags around. He'd also managed to quietly juggle a few beers. "We'll have to share. Everything's closed."

"I've got a bottle for you if it stays quiet here," Marc offered from the doorway. He set it on the nearest end table. "I'll be listening."

The seven Eagles shared chuckles as Marc left them alone.

Glad the guys would have a good time, Marc told Billy to increase the heat a little more and handle a few other items that they would need overnight. He would also have Kenn put some soft music on to keep the camp happy. Other than that, all he had to do was keep from dwelling on too many plans and plots at one time. He was too tired to keep it all straight right now. Tomorrow, he'd be plotting and planning all day, and doing anything to make him tired enough to sleep without his mate. The last week had sucked, but there wasn't an end to his empty bed in sight.

“I want my friend, Angie!”

Coming down the corridor, Marc followed the sullen demands to Missy and Shawn, who were staying in the small family area that hadn’t been opened until yesterday. Children who were having trouble adjusting could now be brought here at night to finish settling down. Missy was the first one who had refused to sleep in the common space.

“I want Angie!”

Shawn sighed. “She can’t come back yet. I told you that. She isn’t safe.”

“I want to help catch the bad guy.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Hello.”

They both twisted to find Marc in the doorway.

“How can you help? Searching for us?”

Missy nodded, becoming shy around Marc. He scared her a little.

“No need to be scared.” Marc smiled. “If you can help, then do it.”

Missy immediately shut her eyes, sending waves of descendant power through the cave. It woke people from dozes and dreams, causing them to shift and glance around in confusion.

“Damn. Stop.” Marc’s grid was lighting up. “My mistake.”

Missy regarded him resentfully. "You're new here, right?"

Marc chortled. "Yeah, and so are you." Marc motioned toward the handheld video games. "Introduce her to the muted version of Mario. We'll do this in the morning."

Unhappy, Shawn nodded. He felt like her father since Tara's death and it was confusing. He didn't even like this kid.

Missy began to cry.

Shawn felt his own heart break and relented. *Yet, Baby, but we've got years if you're right.*

Missy sniffed, looking up. *You mean that?*

Sure, why not? Shawn conceded. "And to be fair, you don't like me yet, either right?"

"No." Missy made a face. "Boys are gross."

"Perfect. Let's be good friends. I can help you, be there when you need someone."

"You won't use me like the others all have?"

"Never. If you agree to be my ward, I'll protect you like a daughter or a...wife," he forced out, unable to feel that way with her childish profile and body in front of him. "But I ask that you spend time with guys your own age you actually like. I don't think the whole descendant thing is foolproof."

"But it is." Missy yawned as the anger faded. "You'll be so in love with me that you give me up."

Shawn winced. He gently wiped away her tears. "That doesn't sound good."

"Yeah." Missy shrugged. "But after that, we get to live happily ever after, so I'm okay with it."

Shawn smiled at her phrasing. He didn't know what to make of this little girl, but he would protect her until he knew who she was supposed to be matched with. He didn't believe for a moment that she was right about it being him. She deserved better. Like with Angela and Adrian. Their former leader was too evil to be matched with Angie, too selfish. Shawn had faith that Marc's love would pull her through. All they had to do was make it safe for her to come home.

7

During the night, Angela began to shiver.

Adrian had them swaddled in layers of blankets, but without a heat source, the cave was cold. Wishing he'd had more time to gather items, Adrian left the warmth of the blankets to dig through the kit Angela had struggled to bring in without letting the Eagles see how weak she was. It hadn't succeeded.

Adrian pulled out the bags and pouches happily, glad Marc had covered it. "Nice."

"What's wrong?" Angela asked groggily.

"Nothing. I'll have us warmed up in a few minutes. Sleep if you can."

Angela did as she was instructed. Exhaustion was heavy.

Adrian set up the spirit burner and the pot, dumping his canteen into it. The small stove wouldn't put off enough smoke to be noticed, but it would work quickly. The hot water bottles would

keep her warm until daylight, when he would build up the fire for their breakfast.

As soon as the bottles were filled, Adrian placed them under the sleeping bag, wrapping the ends of the blankets around them to hold in the warmth.

Adrian settled into the cold chair by the radio, tugging his jacket closer. He needed to scavenge more gear. The waves of refugees had cleaned out almost everything on a straight line from Yellowstone. It was occurring to him that Safe Haven was also low on those items too, since Marc had sent the small stove. Adrian had been expecting something larger. He would have to branch out for real equipment, but it would have to happen later. He wouldn't trade his current duty for anything.

Adrian opened the notebook, sure Marc had recognized it. He began to read, immediately enrapt. Angela's predictions were complex, in-depth monsters that required full concentration and even then, he still felt like he was missing things. When his mother had told him there would be an alpha descendant whose powers eclipsed all others, Adrian had honestly believed it was him. He'd been young then and still growing mentally. Now that the real alpha was before him, Adrian could see how blinded he'd been in his youth, how devoted to his mother's every word he'd become over the years. Had that been intentional? How had his mother known so much? Adrian's subconscious began to nag that loose thread as he consumed Angela's visions of the next wave of effects from the war.

In the bed, Angela gradually quit shivering, but she didn't fall into a restful sleep. The witch was trying to show her something through the fog. Having trouble keeping up, Angela tried to force herself into alertness so she could receive the warning. Weariness was a constant shadow since she'd taken over leadership... Wait. She was with Adrian. Marc was in charge of the camp. *I don't have to do this anymore!*

Angela lurched into a sitting position, gasping in pain and shocked alertness.

Wait! The witch tried to pull her back.

Tell Marc. Leave me be.

Adrian came to her, but didn't touch. He waited to see if it was her or the witch.

"It's me."

Adrian sank down next to her. "Even better." He was happy to feel a steady stream of warmth coming from between the cushions now. It was warming nicely.

"Thank you."

Adrian handed her a pack of stale, generic smokes and a lighter. "All I've got."

"Marc sent my brand, but this is fine." Angela enjoyed the harsh draw. Safe Haven's doctors had loudly complained each time she'd tried to have a smoke and locate her center.

Adrian studied her as he always had before. She needed something and he wanted to give it to her. That need to please her had always been between them.

“Along with this attraction.” She glared coldly.
“I didn’t ask for either.”

“We change, we adapt. And many times, we fall short. Makes it easy to screw up an entire world.”

Angela sighed, misery bleeding through again.
“I don’t know how to go on from this. As soon as he...” Her voice broke, but tears didn’t come.

“How much have you planned out?”

“All of it. The same as you did, I would imagine.”

Telling him she knew it could pass with time, that she didn’t have to be suicidal.

“Why didn’t you fight back with Tara at the end?” He and Marc desperately needed to know that.

Angela forced it out through the rage and regret.
“When he hit me, I realized what I had just lost. I decided my life no longer mattered.”

“That’s what we were afraid of,” Adrian’s breath steamed out in front of him. “That’s why they had you under watch.”

“They still do,” she grumbled, meaning him.

“Do you blame us?”

Angela didn’t reply.

“What about Charlie?”

“Better off with Marc.”

“Because he’s a boy scout and you’re corrupt?”

“Because Charlie will follow me. He’ll end up hurting people too.”

“Have you seen that?”

“I don’t need to. I’ve watched generations repeat the mistakes of the past, even after a nuclear war. Some things cannot be changed.”

It’s too soon for this discussion. Adrian switched topics. “What about Marc, after you’ve gone? Kendle gets him?”

“Please!” Angela barked a laugh. “He won’t touch another woman for the rest of his life after me. Marc is more loyal than I’ve ever deserved.”

Adrian switched again, searching for a target. “What about my camp?”

“Stop. You’re getting it through the deal with Marc. You don’t need me in any way except as a prize box to catch what you squirt.” Angela laid down, tired of the conversation. She couldn’t explain her bitterness, her agony. He mistakenly believed he knew how she felt. He was positive he could bring her back to herself before she took her life, but he didn’t understand she was already more than halfdead. She’d lost two children now. She was bleeding out.

Adrian knew more than she believed, but until he found a way to breathe life back into her, it wouldn’t succeed. There was no way he could push and be bluffing. When he unearthed something else that might succeed, he would test the waters again. At some point, he would strike a nerve and she would snap back into the Angie they all needed so much.

Adrian waited until she had fallen asleep, then rejoined her under the blankets. He placed his spine

to hers, but slid up against her to keep the body heat going. There was nothing sexual or bonding in the moment. It was survival.

As she drifted off, Angela felt the witch return to glower at the man next to them. Angela faded into the darkness knowing her magic would protect her. That ancient spirit inside was really the only one she could trust with her life. *Or what remains of it. If I can be saved, if I'm worth saving, then the witch will do it. I'll never again trust a human to react the way I need them to, not even Marc.*

Adrian caught that last thought and added up the clues. She felt betrayed. Not by Marc or the camp, or even by himself. She'd been betrayed by her visions, by her shortsightedness and arrogance. She'd relied on the logical part when she'd needed to embrace the demon within.

Adrian tried to send good vibes. He'd made that mistake so many times over his life that he couldn't remember all of the situations. It's not as if life came with instructions, and his beginnings had been odder than most anyway. It was a wonder that he'd survived at all, let alone to have gathered so much power in one place. It was only a little short of amazing.

"Fate." The good and the bad were meant to happen. He assumed it was so they would all come together to knock out a final evil at the end, but he was afraid to look that far on his own. With that disturbing reflection, Adrian fell asleep.

On the ledge by the radio, the open notebook page glared in bright warning.

I have become the sum of all descendants. My gifts were mostly dormant for that decade with Kenny, growing in ways I never imagined possible. All I have to do is scan a descendant now and I can copy their power. I can do all that they can and then more. I've never felt so odd and there is unrest because of it. The camp is scared of me. How I hate that! I would never hurt my people. I have this power because they're too weak to defend themselves yet. How dare they blame me for their own failings! But I know how to fix it. When Adrian returns, the camp will understand I'm their defender, but he's their leader. All I have to do is handle this threat from Tara and then I can work on getting him forgiven. I've already started. Many in camp want him dead or at least gone forever, but they don't understand.

Without Adrian's light, we are doomed. It's the one gift I haven't been able to replicate. Only he can bring us together, keep us together. All of our personal drama means nothing compared to the survival of our country and I can't tell you how much that hurts me. I barely recognize myself anymore, but when the next enemy comes, I will kill them all without a second thought. I crossed the line in Little Rock. I can only go forward from that because Safe Haven is a place of safety and of light, of duty and honor. It is a refuge for survivors. It is

also a place of death and darkness, where murder and madness walk hand-in-hand.

8

“We’re gonna get caught.”

“Shut up!”

The four brothers hurried through the tunnel, trying not to make noises that would echo. They were supposed to be on duty in the bottom levels as fresh rookies who needed to work their way up. With so many new people in Safe Haven, it was easy for them to go unnoticed for hours at a time.

“This way.” Joshua entered the passage that would take them out the same way Marc had reentered. They’d followed his group to discover where Angela was being stashed, then returned to gear up. When she’d told everyone that she wasn’t safe in camp, she’d been right, but she also wasn’t safe in a dinky cave with one disgraced old Marine either.

All four men had been among the first refugees Safe Haven had taken in upon reaching Georgia. Joshua and his brothers had already been waiting almost two months for their shot before Vlad’s attack. They’d assumed it would be easy to finish Angela off while she was in the medical bay, but the doctor and nurses hadn’t left her alone. They had been resigned to waiting it out another month when they’d heard Marc was taking Angie out of the mountain. Their chance had finally come. The

bunker was gone, but the brothers had been paid for this and they intended to follow through. You couldn't be the best mercenary family in the country until you captured one of the descendants on a government list. After this, all refugee camps would want to hire them to kidnap or kill a descendant.

Bran, bringing up the rear, wasn't as eager as his older brothers were. He had respect for the people who had taken them in. They hadn't been the desperate family trying to survive that they'd portrayed, but the Eagles hadn't known it. They had been welcomed, fed, and clothed, and now they were being trained. If they made it through the rookie level, they would get more benefits. Bran didn't want to throw that away for a reputation they wouldn't need if they stayed here. He'd brought it up, but he'd been outvoted by brothers who had always liked living on the edge. Reluctant, Bran followed them through the cold, drafty tunnel to the bottom of the mountain, shivering at the chill of fate sweeping down the cliffs. They were about to betray an entire camp of descendants. They would be lucky to get through this alive.

"You're not going to."

The traitors shined lights around to find the vet in the icy entrance of the cave.

"I know what you are."

Panicking, the would-be killers grabbed for weapons, but it was too late to avoid the justice of the veterinarian who was spending most of his time off the radar of Safe Haven's people. Angela had

told him to eliminate threats first and ask for permission second. He was doing it with gusto.

Chris kept firing his suppressed Glock even after the killers were down, not leaving loose ends to unravel later. When the mag was empty, he calmly stowed the hot weapon and exited the tunnel to resume his patrolling. Wanting everyone to be clear on why they were eliminated, the vet left the scene untouched. When Eagles came across the bodies and checked their gear, they would find duct tape, knockout darts, and pictures of Angela from before the war. These four had been sent out to kill her months ago, lying in wait for the opportune moment. It was a wonder they hadn't tried sooner.

Not minding the cold, the vet strode confidently through the darkness, easily avoiding the holes and crags others were always stressing over when sent out. Chris had an instinct for places to tread lightly or step over. It was how he'd lived his entire life, from orphanage to now. His true self had to be controlled, hidden. He'd existed in a myriad of costumes over the years, but that was all over now. As Angela's killer, he had free rein to do what he loved the most. Chris began to whistle a merry tune as he walked. *Life is good.*

Chapter Eleven

Swinging Sack

1

“They got caught. That’s why we haven’t heard anything since last night. It keeps the camp calm and doesn’t spook other suspected plants.”

Robert nodded at his partner’s comments, but didn’t add anything. Joshua and his brothers had gone about things the wrong way. Dozens of assassins had been sent, all with orders to blend in and get close to leadership in Safe Haven. Some of them had already been here when Marc and Angela came, like Alex. Others, like Joshua and Bran, had come in once they realized how many of their rivals for the target were living with them, eating next to them. Joshua had gotten in, learned the routines and thought he had it covered. He and his brothers had gone off to take down the boss while she only had Adrian to protect her, like that would be a piece of cake.

Howard rolled his eyes. “Idiots.”

Robert bobbed again. He and his small group had chosen to go all the way to top level Eagles on the protection detail of the council before revealing themselves. They’d had small chances to grab members already, but Bobby wanted the entire

prize. The government had five of these dwellers on the list, and just because the big US bunker was gone, that didn't mean other big buyers weren't still around. These descendants could also be sold to any number of people, not the least of which would be slave traders. Life now depended on supplies. Who better to sniff them out than your very own magic user? Bobby planned to keep the least destructive one and sell the others.

With the gear and supplies they were given, and the new rep of being the badasses of the new world, they could go anywhere and do anything without rules. Compared to that, being level three on Marc's former team was nothing. Hell, to get here, they'd already killed several of their own during the fight with Donner. That hadn't been in their orders, but Bobby wasn't going to lose this payday—not to rules or rivals. If Joshua hadn't been caught soon, Bobby had planned to reveal overhearing an incriminating conversation. Marc would shoot first and demand details later.

Used to using their positions to arrange things, this group of traitors was patient and calculating. Right now, it made no sense to attempt multiple abductions. Once the Mexicans came, it might be possible in the chaos, but Bobby didn't believe that would succeed either. What they needed was for Angela to come home and say it was time to bugout. That would be a good moment for familiar faces to go missing. It would be expected, and lies could be told to cover in places where it wasn't. Bobby and

his team, all five of them, would each grab their chosen target and flee in different directions. Snatch and run, while keeping their victims drugged, was only part of the scheme. They also needed to keep from being followed. That would mean enlisting help or finding a way to kill every man, woman, and child in Safe Haven.

Bobby preferred the latter. Time as an Eagle and on Marc's team had taught him that leaving threats alive was a mistake. If things went badly during the kidnappings, each of his men had instructions to kill their target to at least secure that noteworthy goal. He wasn't taking any chances on losing the game he'd been playing. It was all or nothing.

2

"Here they come."

"Who?"

"The new men," Donald sneered. He and Rusty were in the shower stalls on the other side of Jeremy.

Jeremy slid further down into the stall, trying to be quiet. He didn't want to be a part of another fight between the old and new Eagles. Angela's insistence upon adding in Tonya's soldiers, Samantha's soldiers and Adrian's soldiers had caused a lot of friction. The new citizens were rookies in the Eagles, but the level six men who hadn't been quite good enough to make one of the Special Forces teams were bitter about it. Jeremy

was just happy to have 20 new hard bodies in the Eagles. He especially liked the fact that these guys were already trained to follow orders and live by a different set of rules than civilians did. That was pretty much Eagle life. The herd still didn't know some of the things the Eagles were responsible for. The camp had one life, and the Eagles had a different version that allowed the first to exist.

Peter stopped a few feet into the room. "Is it okay to take showers now or do we have to wait until you senior men are done?"

Jeremy thought the rookie sounded very respectful considering how nasty some of the senior members were being to the new guys.

Rusty puffed out his bare chest. "Wait your turn!"

Jeremy contemplated standing up and setting them straight, but the shaking fingers clutched around the bottle in his hand said he wasn't in any condition to use his authority right now. He sat down on the bench and waited for it to be over.

Everyone paused as the lights flickered. Safe Haven had been experiencing small blips in the power since they moved into the cave, but this one continued for so long that camp members in the rear of the showers began flipping off water and looking at the Eagles in concern.

The guards had activated their lamps and lanterns by the time the power came back on in full.

"Everyone okay?" Ray was glad no one had panicked, unlike other areas in camp where he was

certain that wasn't the case. Ray swept the showers and benches. Many of the camp's females and older inhabitants weren't comfortable with the coed shower set up yet. They preferred to take their morning showers at the same time as the Eagles who always stood with their backs to them. Ray didn't imagine that was going to change much over time, mostly because people like the level Eagles glaring his way, daring him to overrule their choice, were always ogling the women walking by.

Rusty and Donald were respectful of the camp members, but let an Eagle female come in with a towel over her shoulder and heads swiveled. The female Eagles hadn't noticed yet, but Ray was positive they would. When they did, it would cause a completely new level of trouble between the sexes that Safe Haven didn't have time for. Ray had added it to his notes for leadership, hoping Angela would eventually be made aware of it, but he didn't expect her to change the decision. People would get used to viewing each other half clothed and be able to control their behavior.

It was something the old world couldn't have conquered because there had been too many citizens to monitor in the beginning of such a risky experiment. Here, there were enough guards to be able to protect the girls while they showered and still give the guys time to adjust to seeing so much bare skin without being allowed to touch it. Ray was curious as to whether or not this was happening in

other showers where it was mostly women and the occasional male hunk came through.

As if drawn by his reflections, the object of Ray's affection appeared in the entrance. He went cold when he saw that Dale once again had one of the new men, Dennis, standing next to him with a silly grin. Dale liked Dennis. So did the vet and the other people in their circle. Ray wasn't sure why, but he didn't.

"I'm going to have lunch with Dennis, so I won't be able to go with you to the dog training class later." Dale smiled at his partner. "Is that okay?"

Ray shrugged. "You're free to do whatever you want, Dale. We both are." Without waiting for a response, Ray marched to the rear of the showers, motioning his Eagle duty mate, Green, to take his place in front. Unless showering, citizens weren't allowed in here. Ray was hoping Dale would take the hint and leave. This was the wrong time and the wrong place for their personal issues.

Dale stared at Ray in hurt surprise. "He must be having a bad day." Dale turned toward the corridor, missing Dennis's smirk.

Ray slid into the rear security booth and did a fast scan of the people around him. He scanned the rear of the chamber and swung around to sweep the closest stalls. "Damn!"

Kenn was standing there, hair full of soap.

"So what's up with Dale and Hotrod?" Kenn didn't care for the way Ray's eyes had just lit up.

Nor did he care for the way his own ego had risen to the attention. Tonya wasn't in the mood to talk or plot as much as they used to. Kenn was lonely.

Ray frowned at the insensitive wording, but he didn't scold Kenn for it. Not only had the man saved his life, he was right. Dennis was a hot ride. He flirted with both men and women and didn't care whether those people already had a partner. Ray was almost positive the story Dennis had told to be allowed into Safe Haven was a complete lie. "You get anything on him yet?"

Kenn increased the hot water. "No. People aren't really concerned about camp members right now, you know?"

"Yes." Because of all of the fights between the soldiers and senior men, most citizens and rookies were being overlooked.

Ray turned his back to Kenn, studying the front where he was able to observe his replacement, Craig Green, arguing with Rusty, who was still insisting he wouldn't shower with the soldiers. The words were echoing across the room.

"We don't want you here!" Rusty now had jeans on, but there was still soap in his hair. He was ready to fight.

Peter held up a hand. "We didn't come for trouble. We just need to shower before we go to our next lesson. We'll wait."

"No, you won't!" Green glared at Rusty. "Don't make me call Marc."

Instead of calming things down, as it might have if it had been Adrian or Angela's name invoked, Rusty became infuriated.

"Fuck you! Cry to the boss like a bitch! These guys are the enemy! You should know the difference!"

No one was surprised to hear the sound of flesh meeting flesh after that.

Kenn kept washing. "Are you going to help your partner?"

"Craig Green, light weight boxing champion, can handle it." Ray was still watching the massive fight. Eagles were coming out of their stalls and soldiers coming from down the hall, drawn by Peter's shouts. Craig was in the middle, doing damage to both sides.

Kenn chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so. He almost beat Neil in the last kai class. He picks up shit fast."

Kenn finished showering as Ray kept track of the fight, both aware that camp members were observing nervously from behind them. It was a protection issue. Some of these fights had spilled into living and dining spaces, injuring citizens when things were knocked over or broken. With Kenn and Ray both between the camp members and the fight, everyone felt safer.

"Don't they know Marc's in a bad mood?"

"I don't think it would matter." Kenn began drying off. "Some of these guys are very unhappy about having to eat and sleep with the enemy. Asking us to shower together is a little too much."

Ray nodded, but didn't answer. He knew what it was like to be on both sides of that coin, where you were colored as bad while you were trying to do good. He didn't blame the soldiers for following orders. Safe Haven gave people a second chance. The soldiers deserved one too.

"That's a load of shit and you know it." Kenn wrapped the towel around his waist and came over to the booth. "They could have chosen us at any point during that fight."

"How did..."

Both men stared in shock as they realized Kenn had read his mind.

"She was right." Kenn was a bit stunned to have what he'd always wanted, now, when it didn't even matter.

"She always is. This is good, right? You'll be more helpful."

Remembering they weren't alone, Kenn frowned. "Later."

Ray didn't push the issue, but he didn't think there was a reason for Kenn to be so cautious. There were many descendants here. Some, like Kenn, didn't have a power that had manifested yet. Others had enjoyed gifts their entire lives. It wasn't up to the individual person as to what gift appeared, if any, ever. Ray didn't understand much of how it worked, but that part was clear. Any of the descendants may or may not have gifts at any given point. It was part of why the government had always hunted them. Even innate descendants might

become active in time and in the proper environment.

Kenn slid his jeans on. "How do you know that?"

Ray swallowed, attention snared by the sound of Kenn dressing. "Angela isn't afraid to talk around me. She knows I can be trusted."

"She say more?"

"A lot. She was gathering information for a book about us. She wanted to make copies for the descendants to carry so they'd know how to educate people so they wouldn't be so scared."

Kenn doubted that would happen now. Angela wasn't the same person she'd been a few weeks ago. Not even all his years with her had added up to this much pain and abuse. He was stunned that she had survived.

How do you feel about that? the new voice inside asked slyly. Does it make you happy to see her pay for betraying you with Marc?

Kenn sighed unhappily. A small part of it was gratifying, but he was trying not to enjoy it. He'd changed enough to recognize that as wrong. He was also able to guess that most of it was still his shame hoping for an excuse so he didn't have to carry this guilt, but life didn't happen that way. Even Adrian had to take his lumps.

"So, is he trying to take your man or what?" Kenn brought the conversation back to where it had been, trying to decide how much he now had to ask

Ray to hide for him. Angela and Marc couldn't find out about his gift yet.

Ray thought on it again. "That's sure what it looks like."

Kenn stared. "And you're gonna put up with that?"

Ray didn't answer.

Kenn knew what the silence meant. Just because Ray was gay, that didn't mean he didn't have the exact same reactions as any other man to a romantic relationship. "Are you ready for it to end?"

Ray shrugged again, telling Kenn it was on his mind. The only time a man didn't answer another man on that question was when he was evaluating his options.

Kenn let it go, understanding that was a sensitive topic, but also aware that they weren't alone, so Ray was unable to speak freely. Many of the camp members behind them, with an ear now turned toward this conversation, would be more than happy to run to Dale and let him know that Ray was discussing their personal life. In Kenn's experience, the woman was never happy about that. He didn't believe a gay relationship was any different. People didn't like it when you talked about them behind their back, no matter the intent.

"Beer after duty?" They were both scheduled in the entertainment areas until dinner.

"Sure." Kenn would have anyway because Ray had dangerous information, but Kenn was also eager to spend a couple hours hanging out and

enjoying being alive. There hadn't been much of that during Adrian or Angela's rule.

3

"What do you mean they don't care?"

Neil closed the thin door to Marc's security cavity. Most of the camp was in the showers or the mess to start their morning, but he didn't want to take a chance on being overheard.

"They don't care if she slaughtered the train people. They want her to come home right now. About half of them asked if she left because she thinks they won't understand."

Marc stared, unable to believe that reaction from a camp founded on strict morals. *How did this happen?*

Not sure if Marc wanted anything from him, Neil waited restlessly. The news should be a relief for the new boss. If the camp wanted her here and Marc wanted her here, which Neil knew he did, then there was nothing preventing her from resuming leadership.

"Except her pain," Marc reminded tonelessly. "Don't forget that we lost a baby."

Neil grimaced at his own thoughtlessness. "I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't be in your head anyway." Marc sighed tiredly. He hadn't slept long before the camp had risen. "I know you're loyal to her."

Neil joined Marc at the small wooden table. Angela had insisted all their furniture be flammable. When questioned about the danger, she'd said freezing to death was much slower than a fast fire. No one had argued with her logic. If all of their power sources failed, they could still burn the furniture as a last ditch effort to survive. The lengths she'd gone to and the details she'd covered during each stage were amazing.

"Yeah. But she can't come home until we find the other threat."

"Is it just one?" Neil asked hopefully.

Marc scowled. "We don't know. She can't see it. There's a blind spot. That means someone is having second thoughts, but I don't want to count on it going our way. All traitors have to be dug up." He slid his notebook around. "I'm working on a rotation where the descendants can scan all members of the camp and clear them."

Neil both hated and loved the idea. Before the war, it would have been an unforgivable invasion of privacy. Now, this was necessary to ferret out their weasels.

"It's still an invasion. It was a hard choice."

"I can imagine." Neil sympathized. Marc's moral line was thick. Crossing it would cause him pain—much like Safe Haven's other leaders. Each of them had been tormented. Marc would be no different. Neil saw Jennifer was the sole person assigned to scan so far. "How long will this take?"

“Weeks, at best.” Marc grunted. “I may call a camp meeting to knock out a big batch. We can work the rest in after that.”

Neil considered what the camp might need or want that would entertain a large gathering. “Do we have a telescope?”

Marc smiled a bit at the images in Neil’s mind. “I’d spend time there. Sounds nice.”

Neil began to make notes; already falling into the zone where doing his job came naturally.

Marc let him work, glad to have that solved for the moment. Neil would set up a viewing area and Jennifer would be the steady guard on it, giving her an excuse to observe that crowd and converse with them. Small holes in the roof could be opened for viewing times.

“The camp will like this. It’ll earn you points.”

“Good.” Marc was determined to leave with the same stellar reputation he’d brought in.

Now bunkered in a small alcove nearby, Chauncey laughed, letting it carry.

“You don’t know the future, Marcus Brady.” Chauncey stared at the pictures of islands he’d pasted over the hard stone with spit and floor dirt. “But you will. Angela and Adrian have learned it. *Your* turn has arrived.”

Chauncey nervously stood up as steps approached.

So did the sentry, though he was hoping it was Marc coming to smack the traitor around a bit.

“Come with me.” Kyle unlocked the gate, not certain he approved of the man being allowed to shower and eat with them. After helping the government, Chauncey deserved to die. However, that standard would remove many of the new people Kyle did approve of getting a second chance. He was able to recognize his own bias. This man had endangered Jennifer. That was why he didn’t like him.

“I am sorry, you know.” Chauncey limped slowly out. After a month in the cell, his body had stiffened and weakened.

“I don’t believe that.” Kyle pointed toward the correct tunnel for the cafeteria.

“I like to wash before breakfast.”

Kyle lifted a brow, but grudgingly took the man to the nearest wash area. As they entered the steamy stone impression, Chauncey’s delight overflowed.

“Hot water! Can I have a shower? Please, oh, please?!”

Kyle couldn’t stop the reluctant grin. He’d felt the same way when Adrian had first hooked up showers for the camp, months after the war. More of Kyle’s bitterness over Adrian faded at that thought. The man really had done a lot for them. He’d given everyone moments of joy like this repeatedly during his time as leader. Now experiencing guilt, Kyle pointed Chauncey toward a shelf with towels and hygiene products. “You have ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes with the water running?” Chauncey gawked incredulously. “Are you crazy? You can’t waste that much water.”

The two Eagles on duty chuckled, as did the few men who were using the showers.

“We have plenty of water,” Kyle explained, thinking about the row of gigantic water heaters Theo’s team had assembled in place. “We recycle about 85% of what the camp uses. You can have ten minutes, like everyone else.”

Overjoyed, Chauncey immediately began to strip the grimy clothes from his crusty body.

Kyle and the others didn’t avoid looking at him even though they wanted to. Security took precedence over nudity; the guards scanned continuously for problems. Most dwellers waited until they got behind a stall to take off their clothes, but Chauncey pranced across the damp, warm floor with his man parts dangling. It was embarrassing and heartwarming at the same time. In that moment, he was an innocent child discovering the joys of a bath with toys.

“You have toys?!” Chauncey squealed in delight.

Kyle pointed him toward the box of scrubbers, ducks, and balls. It was usually the kids who played with them, but the Eagles occasionally came in after lessons and tossed the balls around while cleaning. Angela had foreseen the harmless entertainment going over well. She’d been right.

“What can you tell us about the history of the descendants?” Barry had sentry duty until Kyle’s crew was ready to leave for the train station, but this chance alone with Chauncey wasn’t likely to come again.

Also interested in that answer, Kyle took up a position near the exit, where he would be able to hear this conversation and any problems coming from the camp.

“Lots.” Chauncey shifted around with an armful of colored plastic balls and his own swinging sack. “What do you want to know?”

Kyle was laughing, unlike the guards who were still fighting the urge. He now understood how someone could force this man to do whatever they wanted. Chauncey wasn’t stable, in several ways.

“Have they always been around?” Barry forced out through the amusement.

“Are they really descendants of God?” Zack didn’t care about the man’s giant, snake-like, curled up... *How can it stay curled when hanging? My dick doesn’t defy gravity.*

The questions flew hard and fast for a few minutes where Chauncey stood in front of them and answered patiently. Barry finally waved him into the shower, even though he still had queries. He couldn’t look at the man’s balls anymore. As it was, all the toys in here would now have to be replaced or he would never get the image out of his mind. That was the longest schlong he’d ever seen. The thought of it hardening was enough to make Barry

ashamed. He couldn't match that even with a generous extension.

As Chauncey vanished under the water, filling the steamy stall with squeals of delight and squeaking balls, Barry and Zack exchanged raised brows of intimidated awe.

"Can you imagine the wife?"

Barry burst into laughter that he tried to smother. "Not after he had it. You can't Kegel that back into shape!"

Kyle held onto the wall through his mirth. He still wasn't sure why Angela had insisted that Barry be bumped up after so short a training period. Despite saving Marc, the new man hadn't actually earned his slot on Special Forces yet, but he was definitely a good duty partner.

"This is so nice!" Chauncey blew water against the stall.

Kyle deliberated on how Chauncey could be so cruel as to betray his own kind, while being a child the rest of the time. It was how Jennifer could be a killer, but also still be afraid of some men, he assumed. Humans were complex creatures with deep layers of filters that protected their every thought, cushioned their every moment of reality, but even the war hadn't been able to strip their passions. Light would fill the world again. The apocalypse wouldn't be the end of humanity. Safe Haven was proof of that, but Kyle was positive people across the world were the same. With or without magic, humans were special.

Kyle thought of the baby waiting for him, able to feel her looking forward to their bedtime routine even though the day had just begun. When his shift ended at night, he'd been going to Autumn's crib for an hour of father time. They both loved it, though sometimes it was hard on him. The baby had begun to sense things about her birth that neither he nor her mother were ready to handle yet.

Kyle frowned as a cold chill floated through the tunnel. Following his instincts, he hit his radio. "Time for a check in."

Chapter Twelve

Move Away From The Pen

1

Samantha fought to concentrate. She'd had duty over the air quality cubby for the last week, sleeping when someone could be spared to watch the dials. They were keeping the sensor numbers quiet for now, hoping they didn't need to reveal the charts at all. To do that, they had to limit who had access to this small compartment. As a result, only she, Neil, Jeremy, and Jennifer were taking shifts.

Samantha jumped as the small timer went off, sending loud buzzing through her foggy brain. She hurriedly slapped her hand on it, sighing. "Time to check on the donuts."

Samantha got her pen and notebook out, scanning her neat script. She checked the gauges and found the numbers the same. Samantha dutifully recorded them and then leaned back in the chair. She would give someone another hour to relieve her.

The monitor behind Samantha showed the proof of the second snowstorm she'd predicted; thick clouds were roiling toward them from the west. It would carry cold and precipitation, but also the contamination from Yellowstone and any fallout

from meltdowns near there or along the way. Angela had been right to bury them in this mountain.

The thin door opened a few minutes later, letting Jeremy in. His shift was finished, but he wasn't pulling the hours that Samantha and Neil were. He wanted her to go to the couples' area and sleep.

His heart settled into a contented rhythm as he spotted her sleeping features. *I love you. You'll never know how much.*

Samantha didn't wake up, busy fighting the pull of the dreams that wanted her to fly away in them again. She'd been having those more and more often, dreaming of the island and the boat ride to get there. Terrible storms were already preparing for their passage.

Jeremy knelt down next to the chair, placing a gentle hand over her slight stomach bulge.

Sam slowly woke. She slid her hand over his. "They're sleeping."

Jeremy laid his ear against her belly, fascinated. *I'm having a son!*

Samantha stroked his clean hair. *I'm sorry I can't pick one of them. They both deserve a full life with a real wife.*

Pain lanced through her heart, but Samantha controlled it, not letting the babies feel it and respond. She'd tricked the cancer, but the clock hadn't stopped ticking. It had taken her a month to figure out why she wasn't happy, despite being

spared. Because she hadn't been. Death was still over her shoulder, over all their shoulders. The dreams were warnings that time was getting short. Angela had to call the bugout soon.

Jeremy slowly helped her to her feet. "Get some sleep."

Enjoying the fresh scent of his cologne, Sam kissed his cheek and staggered toward their bed. Once Jeremy had chosen to fight his fear of being in the mountain, he'd easily conquered it. She was proud of him.

Jeremy settled into the chair, doing a quick sweep of all the gauges and monitors. The levels outside were the same as they had been the entire time that Safe Haven had been watching them—roughly three months—but the numbers down here in the mountain were lower. The personal badges stuck to the stone above the monitors and below the air vent were well under former safety levels for employees in power plants. If the numbers began to climb down here, then Safe Haven would have a completely new set of problems.

Enjoying the swimming head he'd brought with him from the shower, Jeremy switched his radio on. He wanted to be aware of anything that might happen in their caves. It had been quiet so far, other than the train people. Jeremy wasn't sure how he felt about Angela's methods to rid them of that issue, but there was no denying that he felt safer for it. None of those people would return to hurt them later. The camp was almost proud of it, as if they'd

sent out an army to fight and won. Jeremy didn't find any honor in poisoning, but that was the least of his worries where survival was concerned. Except...he didn't want to serve a boss who was capable of that. *I want Adrian back. I really do. What the hell is wrong with me?*

Passing the room, Marc felt his good mood vanish. More than a few members were wishing the same thing. They'd had time to weigh all that had happened. Adrian had refused to give Safe Haven to the government, at great risk to his own life. He'd left them in great hands with Angela. Time was passing and anger was fading.

"Not mine." Marc didn't want to revive their open rivalry, but it rankled to know Adrian was being forgiven when he deserved to be hanged. Marc envisioned the hands-on method he'd chosen for the Jody's final moment. A dry grin stretched his lips, good mood returning. Three hundred days from now, he would wrap his eager, strengthened arms around Adrian's neck from behind and snap it. Not even a descendant would be able to resurrect him from that.

"Three hundred and counting!" Marc strolled toward the cafeteria for a mug of Li Sing's hair-growing coffee. "Three hundred and counting."

On his way, Marc slowed for the footsteps coming from the lower passages. They sounded urgent.

He twisted around in time to be hit with the butt of a rifle, flashing him to the mistakes of his youth.

Glad the hit hadn't been hard enough to knock him unconscious, Marc kicked out harshly as he fell. Screams echoed through the cave as the man's knee shattered.

Marc hit his button, sweeping for more trouble through blurry vision. "Minor accident, no worries. Anyone need a hand?"

No reports of attacks came, telling Marc he was the only target.

Shane, the guard on the area, skidded to a halt in surprise as he rounded the corner. "Not another one!"

"Yeah." Marc grunted his frustration. "Get the doctor to knock him out, then pick a cell."

Three more Eagles joined him with guns drawn.

"He fell off the ladder and broke his leg. Tell people to be careful."

Morgan motioned the others to carry the screaming man to the medical bay, not challenging Marc on the lie. The nearest ladder was ten yards away.

Marc followed, recognizing the injured assassin as one of their newest arrivals. This one, and a few others, had come in together right before the avalanche, seeming like decent folks who just needed a little help. It added a fresh layer of danger for Marc, who had cleared the man himself. It already felt like they were being betrayed daily and they had no way of knowing how many more assassins were in here with them. He had to find a way to scan everyone in Safe Haven, but they

desperately needed a foolproof method for the descendants, who knew how to shield their thoughts under multiple layers. He and Jennifer had been in a hurry, but they also weren't as strong as Angela was, so they'd skipped layers and made mistakes. Marc assumed Angie had done that as well as her gifts grew or they wouldn't still have long-time assassins in here with them. Until he had a way to bust through all the layers at once, it would continue under his watch.

Shane had the medical bay cleared and the doctor filled in by the time the Eagles arrived. They dumped the crying man on the waiting cot, but didn't leave in case the assassin tried to get to Marc again.

"Did you have to shatter it?" The doctor examined the bones with no regard for the man's renewed screaming. He spotted Marc's new bruises, lips disappearing into his puffy profile.

The Eagles holding him looked to Marc in surprise.

"He fell from a ladder." Marc cursed his oversight and the ache in his jaw. He should have told Shane what to say. "Can you shut him up?"

The doctor quickly shot a sedative into the struggling man's hip. He didn't care about Marc covering with the camp. He didn't want to hear any more screaming either. "He'll need surgery. I don't know how to do it."

"No need." Marc watched the assassin slumped over. "How long will he be out?"

“Two or three hours. Why?”

“Just scheduling a conversation about the dangers of ladders.” Marc smiled cheerfully. “Take him to the brig.”

The Eagles took the unconscious man to the cells down the corridor from the medical bay, casting curious glances at Marc.

The doctor glared at Marc as soon as they were alone. “Angie can’t come back yet. You tell her we all agree on that.”

Marc was tired of hearing it. He also felt she was safer where she was. When it came to keeping people alive, Adrian was a pro. Marc started to go to the brig, but the radio on his belt crackled, making the doctor jump. Everyone was twitchy.

“Marc, you got a minute?” Jeremy’s voice was perfectly controlled. “No hurry.”

Marc caught the code and the secret that Jeremy didn’t want anyone to know. *Great. That’s just what we need.* “Sure. Are those new screens going fuzzy again?”

“Yes. Do you have time to take a look?”

“Yep. Things are 5-by here.” Marc swung toward the monitoring cubby, donning a calm facade to hide his frustration. The next wave of chaos was about to hit, early, and Angie wasn’t here to handle it. He was on his own.

Jeremy shoved the mouth spray into his pocket as the door opened, getting straight to business. “Kyle’s crew contacted me through the cameras. They don’t want to leave the site until they’re done. It might take all day.”

Marc waved his approval, settling into the other chair. He scanned the monitors while Jeremy filled him in.

“They sent two messages. The first is there was no body for Sonja. The second is elevated levels on the personal patches. They put those dosimeters on their jackets this morning, new. Four hours outside now results in measurable radiation exposure.”

Marc studied the view of the train station, unable to see any space that the men had failed to search. There were small fires scattered all over the tracks and ground, with hundreds of bodies burning. The Eagles appeared to be roughly half through cleaning up the mess. “How elevated?”

“Still under the old limits. It’s the first jump. Angela told us to make certain you knew the moment it happened, that it would matter in your calculations.”

“It will. They’re positive on her body?”

“Yes, but Kyle saw drag marks all around the area. The crew agrees that Sonja was probably among those picked off by wildlife or scavengers who wanted her clothes or gear. We also can’t identify everyone from the two sites that were mined. She could have been there.”

“It’ll be good enough.” Marc wasn’t going to waste men on the hunt. Sonja had eaten lightly at the picnic tables, which implied she would have gorged herself upon returning to the privacy of her train car. He had assumed she didn’t like the way they were preparing the meal. He still thought that and her being dragged off after death to be eaten by a wolf was fitting. He almost hoped it was Dog. “Tell them to hurry and get home.”

Jeremy activated the mike on the camera as Kyle walked by it on the screen. “Finish up. No hunting.”

Kyle snapped a salute to the camera, then continued pouring gasoline over the bodies. Marc had assigned twenty gallons for this chore. It wouldn’t burn everything down to ashes, but it would get most of the poison and send a powerful message to anyone who found it. Especially when they read the message Kyle had been instructed to paint on the walls of the station. *Slavery is illegal. – Safe Haven.*

Marc headed for the tunnel, picking up the impatience of his next appointment. “Jeremy?”

The Eagle tensed, instantly nervous at Marc’s tone. “Yes?”

“Don’t ever do it again. I like you and we all need you, but I’ll bust your ass down to a rookie and then run you out if you ever do a shift while drunk again.”

Jeremy didn’t have a chance to respond as Marc slammed the thin door on his way out. Alone with

his shame, Jeremy lowered his cheek to his arm and tried not to puke. That last drink had been the one too many he was supposed to avoid. Hiding his problem hadn't been easy in this hellhole. He hoped Marc didn't tell Samantha he wasn't adjusting as well as she'd thought.

"I hate it down here. Please, God. Get me topside before I ruin everything."

3

"Where have you been?"

Marc tried not to laugh at the little girl with her hand on her hip. "Working. You ready?"

Missy moved over so he could sit next to her. "I already have been. Shawn helped."

Marc didn't look at the man lurking in the corner with his arms over his chest. "Good. Show me what you've got."

Missy slid the wide paper over. "It's good, right?"

Marc frowned at the bright colors. "Crayon?"

Missy shrugged. "I'm not allowed to have a pen."

Marc glanced at Shawn. "Why?"

"She makes a mess." Shawn shrugged. "I got tired of cleaning it up."

"That's not her fault." Marc handed her his Bic. "You have to teach her."

"No, you don't understand. She knows how to use it. She can't control it."

“Sure.” Marc rolled his eyes. “Missy, honey, circle the ones that are the most dangerous.”

“I already did.” She uncapped the pen.

Marc peered at the orange and yellow lines. It was a dozen stick figures in seven different areas. He had hoped there wasn’t that many.

“Oh, there’s more.” Missy shook the pen to get the ink flowing. “That’s the ones I membered. I haven’t been to all the rooms yet. Shawn won’t take me into some of them and I’m not allowed to go on my own.”

“That’s about to change.” Marc tried to figure out how he would determine who each of the stick figures were. “What’s this?”

“A red scarf.” Missy frowned when the ink wouldn’t come down the tube. “She had red hair.”

Marc knew who it was from that. He made a note on the paper, adding the name. “Where is this?”

“The kitchen. That boy helps bring stock to Li Sing.”

Shawn reluctantly interrupted. “Uh, Marc?”

“Hang on.” Marc pointed to the drawing. “Is that a training room?”

“Yeah. The one by the reading chamber. I can hear the bad thoughts, but I never get to see the people, so I don’t know which one it is.”

Marc leaned in. “Is that...”

“Marc, listen, I think you—”

“She’s not upset at all! Let us work.”

Shawn pulled a face. “You got it, *Boss*.”

Missy, aggravated with the pen, jerked it up and down furiously. "Come on!"

Realizing his mistake too late, Marc grimaced as the ink splattered across his chest, face, shirt, arms, and jacket. "Let me guess. I should move away from the pen?"

"Yeah." Shawn laughed as he took the leaking pen from Missy's hand and began to wipe her off. "Ink, paint, Kool Aid. If it stains, she can't be near it or the closest person wears it."

Marc tried not to rub his skin, knowing the ink would spread and stain worse. "I've never seen a Bic do that."

"I'm special," Missy declared promptly.

"Yes, you are," the two men answered in unison, causing more chuckles.

Marc stood up. "Keep going over it with her like I was. I need a shower."

Shawn, still laughing, gestured his acceptance of the order.

Missy was happy to have made her future mate happy instead of annoyed or depressed. She beamed at him.

Shawn's smile slowly faded as the glow of bonding settled onto his shoulders. It had only been a week of caring for the little girl, but it already felt longer. He'd been trudging through so far, determined to reclaim his honor, but this moment was different. He liked her.

Missy's joy was obvious. Her friend Angie was right. If she didn't ever push him, Shawn would end

up being hers. She just had to teach him to love her along the way. *I'm cute. Who wouldn't love me?*

Marc snickered. He'd paused to wipe his hands so he didn't streak ink all through his clean gear while he dug out clothes. He was still smiling when Morgan came from the lower level ladder to join him.

"He's secured. What are you going to do with him after your discussion on the dangers of ladders?" Morgan didn't comment on the ink stains. He'd observed Missy and Shawn entering the room a while ago to wait. He could guess what had happened.

"First, you and Kenn will check out his friends."

"Why Kenn?" Morgan still didn't like the loudmouth Marine.

"Because he'll know what to say to set them up." Marc liked being honest. "These guys are rookies. So is Kenn. He bunks with them."

"They'll know he's too loyal to the chain of command to tell him anything."

"Agreed. But he'll know who they do trust. Get a man inside to find the proof."

"Why not have a des..." Morgan stopped at the instant anger that came over Marc's ink-dotted face.

"We can't solve all the problems here using magic! We don't have enough descendants or the time to sort through every person. We're going to have to rely on standard police methods."

"A narc?"

“Yes. You and Kenn have to pick a narc to roam among the rookies. Good luck.”

Morgan drifted toward the radio cubby, not pleased with the job he’d been given. Marc was going to hide magic from the camp, which was against what Adrian and Angela had been doing. It would cause problems. Morgan hoped Marc would be the only one to learn the lesson from it this time, not Angela or the Eagles. They’d all suffered enough.

4

Adrian tapped the spoon against the small pot. “Time for a lesson.” He was making a meal and trying not to look at her at all until she’d had a chance to fully wake up.

Angela glanced at the target on the pegboard; pain lanced through her heart. She’d only been awake for half an hour, despite it being late afternoon.

“Was it restful?”

Angela didn’t answer his distracted question, refusing to admit even mentally that she’d been delighted to wake up next to him.

Adrian knew. He gestured at the dartboard. “Go on. The doctor said to get you using those arms as much as you can stand. Do underhand until you can do over.”

When she didn’t, Adrian came over to take the darts from the board and hold them out to her. He

noted the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes lined with purple skin. *How could Marc have ever believed you would make the trade willingly?*

“Don’t.”

“Time for a lesson.” Adrian backed up as she took the darts and grudgingly staggered to the line of yellow tape he’d placed for her to stand on.

Angela tossed the first one underhand. It immediately felt like she was taking the coward’s way out. She began throwing normally with her left hand, reading his goals and his hopes to distract her from the pain. There was a chance her aim would improve. Her heart, he couldn’t fix.

“I love you.”

Angela winced. “I don’t deserve that from either of you. Stick with Kendle.”

“Marc will share your time now. It’ll be better.”

“It will never be better.”

Adrian worried even more. Her tone was emotionless. Where was the fire? He thought of repeating all of the things Marc and the others had obviously tried, and chose to skip them. If Marc hadn’t broken her this way, then only one thing might succeed.

“It won’t. I wish you wouldn’t even try.”

“Because it hurts?”

“I can’t accept it now.”

“Without empathy and love, you can’t lead.”

“I expected them to call the vote right after I killed all the train descendants and their innocent slaves.”

Her calm words confirmed one of his suspicions. *She's abdicating my throne.* "To Marc?"

Angela nodded, but didn't say more. She sank down in the chair and drew the blanket tight around her shoulders. The remaining darts fell to the ground. The doctors wanted her to use the arms, but they didn't have to experience the pain and be constantly reminded of why it was there.

Adrian studied the old plan again. In the past, he'd thought about gifting the ugly job of permanent leadership to Marc once the man toughened up enough to do whatever it took to keep their people alive, but it hadn't ever felt right. It still didn't. Angela was meant to lead them south. If anyone else tried, it would get them killed.

"It's already getting us killed. You've seen what we're about to face?"

"Yes."

Angela dropped her head. "I can't take anymore death—theirs or mine, it doesn't matter. It kills me with every one of them."

Adrian now understood exactly what she was suffering. It wasn't just the baby. How many times had he sat in his tent with a blanket and a drink, mourning alone for one of his beloved herd? She had instinctively copied his coping mechanisms.

"They don't work."

Adrian chuckled in bitter agreement. "No."

"Making sure it wasn't in vain isn't enough now," she confided in horror that was still too dazed and faraway for his liking.

“That’s when I knew I’d had enough.” Adrian took the chair across from her. He had the screen in his view from here. Nothing was moving out there except the wind.

“Were you already training me then?”

Adrian got a flash of Joe. “You hadn’t arrived yet.”

“And you went on for months this way?”

Adrian locked their eyes. “When you came, it got easier.”

Angela wanted to feel something for him at that moment just to replace the cold chill she couldn’t shake, but there was nothing. She stared back impassively. Then she began to cry.

Adrian watched the tears glisten in the dim glow of the lowly lit lantern in the corner, frustration growing. If he was her match, he would know how to help her, but he was as clueless as Marc was...

Adrian stilled as a new idea occurred. It was ugly, awful to do to her, and yet, it felt like it might break through a layer or two of the ice around her heart. The problem was, he didn’t want it all to melt. The flood of tears she was already shedding didn’t need to be increased with full awareness of her pain. She needed to be in the middle for a while and deal with as much as she could at one time. When she conquered each brick, she could continue to the next one without being drowned.

He suspected she was trying to do that herself, but her walls were too thick to allow a connection. He had no link into her mind at all, something that

had never happened with them unless the bubble was interfering. "Are you mad that I chose you?"

"I'm still honored." She shuddered tiredly, not bothering to wipe away the tears that would only be replaced. Each time she sank back into her mental hell, Adrian pulled her into the real one. "And ashamed that I haven't done better."

"You've done great through the chaos you've had to supervise since taking my place."

"No one can take your place," she stated automatically.

If only more people felt that way! Adrian gushed silently, unable to help it. He missed being in control, being the one everyone went to for help and answers.

"Well, whose fault is that?!" Angela thumped her head against the chair. "Quit whining. We've all suffered losses."

Pleased at her anger, Adrian was disappointed when fresh tears began flooding down her cheeks. The anger wasn't real. It was the pain taking any available vent.

He watched as she sank down into her quilt of silence. *Back to the drawing board. For the first time in my life, I may not be able to reach a hurting female with my light. The fact that I love this one just makes it cruel.*

"At least you're getting some of what you deserve." Angela pulled the blanket up to her chin, shivering. "I want you out of the bed before I wake up from now on. It puts me in a bad mood."

Adrian bowed lowly in sarcasm, but the demand hurt him. He'd never been happier than watching her eyes light up when she saw he'd taken her into his arms for more warmth during the night. She'd hidden it as soon as she realized what was happening, but Adrian would never forget it. She liked being with him. She still felt something for him. It was great for his ego, but it was even better for her recovery. Other than sadness or anger, it was the first emotion she'd shown since Marc had brought her here. If not for two brief seconds, he wouldn't have any hope at all for her recovery.

Chapter Thirteen

Lessons

1

Marc settled onto the stool outside the cell, observing the would-be assassin's waking thoughts.

What happened? Oh... My leg!

The groaning started before the man's eyes opened. Marc realized he'd done too much damage for coherent thinking. He quickly shoved through the man's layers to gain access to any plans he and his friends had made, but there was only the bright glows of pain and addiction.

Marc narrowed in on the sallow skin and twitchy muscles as he became aware of not being alone in the brig anymore. Without prisoners, there hadn't been any need to waste workers to patrol it. Chauncey's little cubby was right next to a guard post now.

Marc glanced over at Morgan.

Morgan held up a small syringe of clear liquid.

Both men braced as the prisoner's eyes flew open.

"My leg!"

Morgan shut the door as the shouting resumed. Then he joined Marc in front of the cell. "I'll do it."

That snagged Marc's attention. "You have Kyle's old job?"

Morgan shrugged. "It's *your* old job too."

Marc understood he wasn't allowed to pretend he was above this after doing it for most of his life. "Yeah. Stand down."

Morgan's respect for Marc went up. Adrian had preferred to let his flunkies handle the wet work and the cleanup. Morgan didn't mind the latter, but a leader had to be willing to do the former alongside their men. It came with the job.

Marc rushed into the cell and slapped the syringe into the easiest place to reach—the killer's neck.

The assassin groaned loudly, still holding his shattered knee. "Please..."

Marc pushed the plunger without guilt or sympathy. He stood over the man as the drugs began to take effect. The shouts and moans fell to muttering; a thick stream of drool presented within a minute. Marc didn't know what drug it was, but it worked quickly. Two minutes after injecting his assassin, the man had quit moving. His breathing stopped next. Marc left the cell.

Morgan wondered at Marc's thoughts as he filled out a death report from the cabinet. Adrian had always shown signs of unhappiness and guilt after moments like this.

"I'm not him."

Morgan was glad that Marc didn't sound angry. He shrugged. "Still, if you ever need to talk about the things we do, that's also part of my job."

"Thanks."

Morgan watched him, assuming Marc was going to get a small crew for body disposal. Morgan clicked his mic. This was their first death in Safe Haven. He wasn't sure what would be done with the body. Burning it would produce a harsh smell many of their members would recognize. Kyle would handle it if Marc didn't know how.

Kyle met Marc as he came from the brig. "We had some trouble in the bottom passage." Kyle handed him the images he'd snapped with the new camera all Eagles were now required to carry.

"Do we have someone patrolling entrances that I don't know about?"

Marc studied the Polaroid images, then handed them back. He strode toward the supply compartment. "I don't, but we both know I'm still not in the loop on a lot of things."

"Yeah, about that. The Eagles want to call a meeting about Angie. I put them off a bit with the usual story of her not being safe, but it isn't going to hold them."

"What's the biggest beef?" Marc knelt down to grab duct tape and a garbage bag from the supply shelf. "Her being alone with the traitor or her not being here to protect them if something happens?"

“Neither of those.” Kyle following, curious now. There had obviously been trouble while he and the crew were burning the mess at the train station. “No one likes how it’s affecting you.”

Marc paused. “Me?”

Kyle took the bag and tape from Marc’s hand. “Yes, and that reminds me. Leaders don’t do cleanup, even if they made the mess. I told Adrian that. Kevin told it to Angela. That’s how this setup rolls best. Now get back to business. We want her home.”

Kyle went into the brig, assuming the problem had occurred there since that’s where Marc had been coming from. The guard would tell him.

Marc stared in surprise. He’d always assumed Adrian hadn’t handled things himself because he was a giant douche. With Angela, Marc had witnessed her guilt and her exhaustion while trying to keep up and he’d been forgiving. He had never once considered that the Eagles insisted on the leader’s hands looking clean.

Why would they do that? He went toward the bottom tunnel to examine the scene. He had a suspicion about who was responsible for it. *Why are they hiding our danger moments?*

Marc’s demon was still angry and didn’t answer.

Quit acting like a bitch! Marc spewed it furiously. *Help me or go away!*

That negative presence resentfully vanished.

Marc took a deep breath as a small group of camp members came through the level to get to the ladder for the top floor. He plastered boredom on his profile and slowed his steps. There was no need to panic everyone with his possible schizophrenia.

Marc zipped up his jacket as he reached the lower level, suddenly hoping Angela was warm enough. He hadn't sent much gear with her to keep the kit light, but also so that Adrian wouldn't have much afterwards. He hadn't wanted to outfit his enemy, but now he was feeling guilty because Angie might be suffering.

Fighting the urge to call out to them when he reached the very bottom, Marc flipped on his belt light and jogged through the darkness for his daily workout while on the way to play detective. Later, he could think about what he wanted from his time as a boss of this refugee camp and make some changes.

He wasn't like Angela and Adrian, who felt they needed to save each and every life. Marc still disliked many of the inhabitants here. The thought of taking all of them on a boat to a deserted island had never set well with him. Now that he was in charge, he could do something about that. A lot of the camp wouldn't like it. They preferred Angela making those choices, but the way things felt, she wasn't coming back any time soon. They would all have to adjust to his methods and values, or stay here and rot. There wasn't a choice beyond those

two. The crimes of our previous leaders won't be mine. Not now, not ever.

2

“I want to be an Eagle.”

Joseph stiffened at the adamant tone. “I told you the Eagles were closed to new members over a month ago, when all the refugees flooded our gate. When Marc’s ready, it will be reopened and then you’ll get your chance.”

Gus stared back suspiciously. “You sure it ain’t cause we’re...”

Joseph punched the man in his giant throat, doing absolutely no damage. It didn’t stop his warning. “We don’t do things like that! We’re the good guys.” Joseph stomped from the training room, subtly rubbing his hand. “Someone else will be by to guide you on your tour. With that attitude, it won’t be me.”

Marc, listening from the shadows, stepped in front of Joseph as he came through the beaded curtains of the small training compartment. “Problem?”

Joseph jumped, nearly shouting in surprise.

Marc grinned, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Joseph immediately felt the need to defend his actions. “I handled it like you would have.”

“You handled it like Adrian would have. I do wonder if violence is the right solution to get your point across.” Marc left the confused man standing

in the drafty corridor, now unsure if he'd done things right.

Is there a better way than Adrian's?

Marc was glad the man was weighing that and tossed a bit of advice over his shoulder. "Missa would probably like to help you with your goals. Ask her to join."

Joseph stared after Marc, stomach a ball of fire. He and Missa were getting close, but it wasn't romantic. They had too many obstacles in the way. Missa was terrified of most men and her white skin next to his black shade already drew snide comments when they went on walks together or ate at the same table. Safe Haven boasted being equal to the masses, but Joseph knew better. As soon as he started to date Missa openly, there would be trouble for both of them. Equality was for whites, as usual.

"I wish you wouldn't think that way."

Joseph spun around to find Jennifer coming up the hall. She was obviously trailing Marc, providing protection while Angela couldn't.

Jennifer halted in front of the black man, admiring his neat appearance. Few of the males here cared about things like that when there was so much work to be done.

Joseph stayed silent, certain he was about to be scolded. He didn't think this would get him banished, but he was nervous as he waited.

Jennifer realized normal conversation wasn't going to break through his layers of icy denial and

past prejudices. She sighed, trying anyway. “We’re all adapting as best we can. Surviving the apocalypse was hard—for every race. Isn’t it time to put those awful tragedies aside so that we can have a future now?” Before he could answer, Jennifer grabbed his wrist and connected their minds. “This is what I see for *our* citizens.”

Joseph controlled his fear and churning guts to watch the vision. It was amazingly detailed, allowing no disbelief as he saw the people he’d just yelled at, punched. They were full Eagles in the future, with heavy jobs and all the respect they could carry.

“Now see what happens without you leading this moment in our new history,” she intoned eerily.

The vision changed to not a single dark profile in the camp. It appeared as though *all* other races had been removed. Even the cook was different.

“Segregation now is possible if that is what people truly want. But this time, it will never revert.” She stepped around the shocked man. “You are a leader, Joseph. It’s time to act like one. Do your duty.”

Jennifer believed Joseph was a good man. He would come around and help ease the occasional racial issue that came up. Once those people had been here a while, they would understand race meant nothing to Safe Haven’s administrators. Hard work and loyalty, on the other hand, were omnipotent and could lead to anywhere, even the main council seats. All Joseph had to do was work

and sweat harder than he ever had. Jennifer was positive he would. She was also furious with the few assholes they had here.

They want everyone to be the same, her demon volunteered. Differences are shunned in society.

After a while, Safe Haven will fix that ugliness in the population. The atrocities of the past will not be repeated anymore. We're the new future and it is made up of all races.

Her demon didn't answer.

Marc and Jennifer found Cynthia waiting at the security cubby. Jennifer immediately turned in the opposite direction.

Marc dropped the papers on the desk and faced the reporter. "What can I do for you on this fine—"

"Why didn't she take me as her XO?" Cynthia closed the door to Marc's security cubby. "Is it because she wants my child?"

Marc tried to scoff, but he was aware of being mentally probed by the baby. "No." He slammed his walls down, glaring a bit. "What's your problem?"

Cynthia felt the anger of her child as Marc's threatening vibes surrounded her, but she had to know the truth. "Why are you lying to me?"

Marc perched on the edge of the table, sighing. "I don't know why she vetoed you from the trip. I haven't asked her. I'm certain you can understand that your friendship with her wasn't top on my list."

Cynthia didn't even blink at the sarcasm. "She's punishing me and I don't know why. I've done my duty and then some."

“Yes, you have. But you’re blowing it now with wild accusations and a bad attitude.” Marc studied her, tone softening. “I haven’t forgotten that you saved her life. I have work for you. Just give me time to get my feet set in this job, okay?”

Soothed a bit, she sighed. “Can I interview the teams for the next edition of the Quest Chronicles? I’ve heard about fights between the old Eagles and the rookie soldiers.”

Marc felt a flicker of concern, but he couldn’t detect a reason for it. “Yes. Leave Jennifer alone.”

“Why? Protecting Angie’s pet?”

“Nope.” Marc slid by her to reach the exit. “Protecting you. Attack Jennifer the way you are me and one of you will end up in the medical bay. We both know who it will be.” Marc continued down the hall to do rounds, snickering mentally at the image.

“But the other will be dead.” Cynthia went in the opposite direction Marc had taken. She rubbed her upset stomach, breathing deeply. She didn’t doubt the warnings the baby was sending. She also didn’t think she and Daryl had been placed on duty in the bottom levels by accident. Daryl got to escape with his Special Forces team, granting him a reprieve, but Cynthia was only on the top levels now when she went for a walk. She had no interest in the reading or television rooms.

“Something’s going on.” She shoved by a group of new people who were being given a tour of this

level by Joseph. “When I find out what it is, I’ll blow this place wide open with the truth.”

Standing by the security booth, Kevin and Jeff both frowned. They’d been put on duty down here by Marc, both happy to feel like Eagles again, but it had been boring. Until now.

Kevin sighed. “Put it in the book.”

Jeff did it without commenting, respect for Kevin increasing. The reporter hadn’t even glanced at Kevin, despite the various meals and moments that had already put the pair in the same area together. She didn’t look well, and now she sounded like there was a problem. Fresh from the wastelands, Jeff and Kevin knew danger when they spotted it. Cynthia was trouble again and they had no idea how it had happened. When they’d left, she had been a hero.

Kevin considered sorting through people to locate someone he could trust to fill him in, and chose not to. He honestly didn’t want to be a part of the drama anymore. He still wanted to be with Cynthia, and maybe he could have adjusted to being a stepfather if he hadn’t been gone for a month. Now that he’d returned, it was clear that he didn’t belong here now. He wanted more from his future than to help raise a descendant’s offspring or to become a top Eagle. “I’m not staying.”

Jeff wasn’t surprised. He and Kevin had gravitated together out of pain and boredom.

Neither of those emotions was tolerable inside Safe Haven's harsh walls. The reminders were constant.

"You?"

"No." Jeff grunted. "Even the crazy lady is better than this."

Kevin chuckled, but he concurred. Sally was nuts. The people here were fanatics.

"You think so?" Jeff questioned in surprise. He hadn't ever felt that way.

"I don't know." Kevin shrugged. "Just feels wrong somehow. I'm still trying to figure out why."

"Same here. Beer after duty? We'll talk."

"You know it."

3

I wonder if Conner misses me.

Candy looked around guiltily to see if there was anyone nearby who might have caught the thought. When she spotted no one, she relaxed and continued to contemplate it as she shucked corn with the other camp members. This was the final harvest of warm weather food from the gardens. There was a small group of men and women here, but none of them were descendants.

Candy pictured Conner out questing with Kendle for a boat. He was too busy to miss her, like Theo was too busy with the deaf chick to have time for her now. Lee was gone, Angela wasn't here, and Candy had never felt close to Marc. Despite being surrounded by people, she was alone.

Spine aching, Candy leaned against the stone wall and shut her eyes for a short break. She had volunteered for this evening shift and she could leave when she wanted, but she had nowhere else to go, nowhere to be. Eagle training hadn't resumed, but Candy wasn't sure if that would satisfy her either. She wanted to talk to Conner. When she asked herself why, the answer wasn't comforting.

Because he needs me, and I need that.

Candy resumed working, not joining in with the jokes or conversation. She didn't have much in common with these happy camp members. And Safe Haven was happy right now. Angela's sacrifice had removed the threats and returned the calm they had all come to expect from this refugee camp. It was great.

Jennifer walked by. She'd just been joined by her infant and her man; all of them were smiling and chattering happily. Candy's heart clenched. It was also lonely. *I don't know how much more peace and joy I can stand.*

4

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm cool." Jeremy forced a sickly grin. "Frosty, like a cone."

He'd spent the night here, sobering up and doing his duty. He could only hope Marc hadn't told anyone. Samantha wasn't acting like she knew.

Samantha scanned the gauges and monitors. “Some people are being sedated. You’re doing great.” She hoped it helped Jeremy and the others to know they weren’t alone in their fears about the mountain. Everyone knew they could all be buried and crushed at any time, but most of them also knew these tunnels had been here for thousands of years and were actually very safe. The mind liked to play tricks. For Jeremy, his past was an added weight, an extra demon to be battled.

“You need anything before I crash?” He was jumpy without the alcohol buzz to drown his concerns. He had to actively fight the urge to claw his way up the nearest corridor.

Samantha scanned the numbers and screens, and then nodded. “Yes. Come here for a minute, will you?”

Jeremy was distracted the minute she kissed him. Samantha in his arms was enough to block out all of the old terrors and then some.

When the security compartment door opened and closed, the couple barely noticed.

Neil stayed back, letting them have this moment. It was impossible not to harden with desire though, despite the 20-hour shift he’d just pulled. He’d never have believed he would be the type to share a woman. Their relationship had awkward moments where he wasn’t sure how to react, but in this area, he had no complaints at all. In fact, it was better than good. There was no more rushing

through his own pleasure because he didn't want his partner to lose interest, or guessing what was right and wrong to the detriment of his own arousal. Between the two of them, he and Jeremy could now bring Samantha to a shuddering climax in mere minutes, leaving them both time to fully enjoy the slick, welcoming heat of her body. It was perfect.

The door started to open again, but Neil neatly kicked it shut with the heel of his boot, snickering at the thud of contact. "All full here."

Samantha and Jeremy snickered against each other's lips, bodies now connected.

Tired, Neil allowed his mind to wander as he watched, hand occasionally stroking. He wasn't waiting for his turn. He was absorbing the good moment to combat the next wave of bad. That's all life really was anyway—a few vivid, amazing seconds, surrounded by dull, sometimes intolerable minutes. It made the precious seconds more valuable. Without them, no one would continue to fight for survival. There wouldn't be any point.

5

Do I have your permission to try anything?

Yes.

Marc's quick, curt answer implied he knew Adrian hadn't had any luck and he didn't expect the man to succeed, no matter what he tried. Adrian wanted to be cocky and say he would accomplish it where Marc couldn't, but he was too worried. He

didn't have much faith in his remaining ideas.
"Angie?"

"What?"

"You'll get Charlie tossed out. They'll banish him."

Angela's head slowly swiveled to find him by the small monitor. "Don't you think Marc tried that?"

"I assumed the boy scout wouldn't stoop to lying."

Angela snorted bitterly. "Thanks to me, he's being corrupted. He'll lie now. He'll also kill you. He's at a limit with this drama."

"You have a plan for that?"

Angela shrugged, still not touching the food or water he'd put near her chair. "I have plans; I haven't started them yet."

"Why not?" He knew her avoiding that was probably a bad sign. It meant the plans were ugly.

"I'm staying here." Angela had expected the same immediate denial she'd gotten from Marc, but Adrian only stared at her in concern.

"I've had enough. I can't do the job now and I don't want to. Let them all survive on their own. I don't care anymore."

The fresh tears proved her a liar, but Adrian was busy exploring the new options that had popped up in his mind. "If there's someplace you need to go, I'd take you."

"Yes, you will." Angela's voice grew cold.
"You owe me."

Adrian nodded without argument. He did. If not for her, he would be dead several times over, but more importantly, without her, there wouldn't be a Safe Haven.

"And they mean more to you than anything else, right?" She dug into him as deeply as he'd ever scanned her. "Even over Conner and me."

Adrian didn't glance away. "Safe Haven is the reason I insist on breathing. I've carried this goal for so long that it consumes my every thought, even when I'm alone. I want you and I need you. I love you as much as I can love, but I'd give everything up for my country. I already have."

"They're realizing that. You've done everything right since being banished."

"Except for predicting your moves and being there to help," Adrian muttered in half regret, half anger. "I'm sorry I wasn't faster."

"I'd be dead if you hadn't come. Thank you."

"Do you mean that?" He demanded an honest answer with his forceful tone. "Are you grateful to be alive?"

"No." Fresh tears coursed over her raw, pale cheeks. "There was no reason to let me live, except fate is punishing me."

"They were bad people, Angie."

"That wasn't for me to decide. I'm not God!"

Adrian was encouraged by the small shout and responded in kind. "Well, God wasn't doing his job, was he? Someone had to!"

Angela shuddered at the blasphemy. “I don’t feel that way.”

Adrian heard the doubt and pressed the issue. “Don’t you? Haven’t you asked why the baby was taken after all the good you’ve done? She was innocent. Why did God take your baby?”

Angela felt the rage building, but she was helpless to control it. “He didn’t. I did, with my actions.”

“You know better. The Creator could have protected you while you battled the monsters, but he didn’t. You were betrayed by God.”

“That isn’t true! I was betrayed by my arrogance!”

“Bullshit. You felt forsaken the second Chauncey showed up and put thoughts of damnation in your mind.”

Her anger fled. “They were already there...” Angela recalled the many times she’d questioned herself on the choices to kill. “I was willing to do anything to keep the herd safe and then to keep my baby. I did this.”

Her voice had fallen into misery. Adrian found a needle in the haystack at that moment. “You hate the Creator!”

Angela’s chin snapped up to pin him with crimson orbs. “Yes. Don’t you?”

“Yes.” Adrian shrugged it off. “But it took me forty years to get there and I’m not positive it’s Just. You are.”

“Of course the hatred is Just!” Saliva flew from her mouth. “He abandoned all of us! We’ve been on our own since we were set in the garden, guided with whispers we were never sure were real or in our minds. He created us and then left!”

Adrian didn’t refute the accusation. He couldn’t.

“How could he do that?! I care more for my herd than he ever did his!”

That was where Adrian had been since Joe’s death. He’d never felt closer to her or anyone else, including his mother. “Welcome back.”

Angela felt the full weight then of what she’d done, but the anger over the situation was stronger at this second. She stared at Adrian as heat surged through her limbs. “How do you keep faith that it’s our duty with this kind of hatred always coloring it?”

Adrian stood up. “Sometimes I don’t. That’s when I hide and one of my loyal minions comes to pull my head out of my ass.”

Angela snorted at the joke, surprised at the amusement or any other good emotion. She deserved to feel empty and useless. The cell was still wide open; she could dive through it at any point. That helped.

“Does it?” Adrian came to where she sat near the cave wall. “Or is it a weakness you have to conquer?”

“Both.” Angela sensed his intent, his need to be certain she was here to stay. “Don’t touch me.”

Adrian stopped, struck by her coldness. He'd only wanted a hug and to shove some more light into her dark soul.

"I don't want your light. I want your loyalty."

Adrian winced. "I couldn't kill Darian. He went dim and blended in with a group of refugees. He used a spell I haven't seen in decades and then he was gone."

"He tried to do the same thing on the mountain." Angela's rage was growing. "But he forgot there has to be innocent souls nearby for that to succeed. I got him right as he realized he'd evaded a quick death with you. He screamed louder than the other one while he burned."

Her expression spoke volumes that Adrian quickly added together. What he came up with was horrifying. And perfect.

"You'll have to stay with me now, to keep them from reading your thoughts until it's too late. Like with Sonja."

Her calm tone implied that was what she'd wanted all along. "All you had to do was ask."

Angela flashed a scornful glance his way and spared them both the reminder that he couldn't be trusted. Just because she understood the choices he'd made, that didn't mean she agreed.

"Would you have done it differently?"

Angela shrugged, shifting toward the target and forgotten darts. "Maybe in places."

She sent him the image of his attempts to be physical while Marc was gone.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t offer any excuses this time and that helped. She understood that like his son, he had an obsession he had to fight daily. Now, however, she also knew where that obsession ranked and it was a relief to find out that it was under the camp. Adrian was indeed what she’d needed to believe—a patriot who loved his country enough to give up everything.

“Thank you for seeing that.”

Angela sighed, anger fading to leave a stain of bitterness and weary peace. “Am I wrong for the newest abomination to come?”

“No. It’s also not right, but you know there is no clear black and white anymore...if there ever was. There are always exceptions to the rules.”

“Is there another way to handle it?”

“Yes. There are many.”

“Is there a *better* way to handle it?”

“Based on the goals we’ve put to paper, no. This ends it faster than any of the others, with a minimum loss of our lives.”

Angela was quiet for a moment, pushing the agony away this time instead of wallowing in it.

“You’ll stay with me afterwards?”

“I won’t ruin your leadership.”

“Only I get to do that.”

“You haven’t, you know. They’re worried about you, but nothing else. The refugee threat is gone for the moment, you’re handling the loose ends from our battle with Donner and the government, and

they're safe. They have food, and no illnesses like the others who've come here, and they aren't being abused. You got them to see enough of the differences." Adrian hesitated. "I'd bet that 17% is lower now."

Angela's eyes closed. She hadn't wanted him to discover her margin of camp dissatisfaction. She'd been worried he would put his faith in someone else. Even in her misery, she hadn't wanted to give it up.

Adrian chuckled, relieved to find that out. It meant she could continue. "Did 83% of Safe Haven approve of my leadership?"

Angela nodded quickly. "Yes, but higher. When I joined, everyone loved you."

"Because I hid things from them. Do you do that?"

Angela sighed. "I try not to. It makes it harder."

"Exactly. If the herd had witnessed the things I did, do you think 17% would have disagreed?"

Angela's mind went to his treatment of Tonya, and how he'd known that Becky might be hurt by Rick. "No. It would be higher, maybe."

"Definitely. You have their respect, something I was afraid to earn openly."

She automatically defended him. "You couldn't then."

"We both know that's not true. I hid my actions because I wanted complete control without their interference at first."

"To build the Eagles."

“Yes. Our army has made all the difference, in every situation we’ve been in.” His eyes glowed in the dimness of the chilly cave. “Them, and you. I’m sorry that I came between you and Marc.”

Angela held in a sob. “So am I. It ruined so many things.”

“It also made some things better.” He smiled softly. “I told you once that I could walk away if you told me to. I knew it for a lie when I spoke it, but things have changed now.” He drew in a tight breath. “Do you want me to go? There’s nothing to conquer that you can’t already handle.”

Hearing that took a huge weight from Angela’s shoulders. She was assuming she would have to keep killing to keep her people safe and she couldn’t do it. “You mean that? It’s the ocean and the island?”

“Once you clear that island, they’re safe for years, Angie. I can’t promise what’ll happen to any of her chain of command, but Safe Haven’s citizens will flourish on Pitcairn.”

Tears of relief threatened. Angela wiped at them as he waited for her choice. “If I say yes, what happens?”

Adrian swallowed the crushing pain. He did owe her. “I’ll ask how soon. You’ll give me a date, and by then, I’ll vanish.”

“Will you stay here?”

“I won’t ever come to the island.” He gave her what she was fishing for. “I’d also shut down the

links so I can't get messages or details. Those things would tempt me to go."

"Have you looked at that future?"

"No."

"I have. It's not bad. For either of us."

"But it's not good enough, is it?"

"No." She sighed. "After all I've given up, I have to be more than content."

Adrian waited, sure he shouldn't speak. Anything he might say now would influence her choice and he couldn't have that this time. If they had any sort of future together, it had to come from her.

"Do you know how to sail the boat?"

Her quick topic change without an answer threw Adrian off. He grunted. "No."

"We don't have a captain yet. Find me one."

Adrian beamed at the order, the choice. "Yes, ma'am."

Angela began throwing the darts. Neither of them were encouraged by the bad aim.

"You hadn't been practicing before."

"No." She didn't tell him she'd been too busy trying to keep it all together alone. He knew what that was like.

"Maybe you should teach that lesson to Marc." He retrieved the darts. Most of them had bounced to the ground.

"I've been trying not to corrupt him like we are, but there's no choice, right?"

“Not really.” Adrian dropped the darts into her open palm without touching her. “Time will do it anyway. Right now, he doesn’t understand what it’s like to have two awful choices and both of them could cost thousands of lives, maybe even our future. If he knew what that felt like, you two might be able to bridge the gap and have a real conversation.”

Angela didn’t ask if he’d gotten that from her. It had come from Marc, who was desperate to have her recovered and back in charge so he could revert to his sullen attitude of accusations and scolding.

“I haven’t told him anything.” Adrian retreated from her line of fire so she could throw again. “He’ll ask for an update on you soon.”

Angela’s mind was already overcrowded with the thoughts and plans she’d refused to allow in until now. She shoved it all out in one mental scream. Her shoulders drooped. “I’m not ready yet.”

“No. Let him cover things for a while.”

“What will I be doing?”

“Healing, I assume. Doing things that don’t remind you of your pain, like practicing that aim. You could also spend some time with me. I could resume your private lessons. With a chaperone, of course.”

“You could teach a class...” It would be nice to go back to being just a rookie in training. The pressure then hadn’t been staggering.

“Be happy to.” He was unable to keep the smile hidden this time. He also liked the idea of just being

a trainer for a class. Let someone else handle the stress and harsh choices, the constant fear of not being good enough, of missing something. Marc would be in charge of it all, and then they would see if he was still smug and superior afterwards.

“It hurts me to be around you.” Angela was suddenly exhausted again. “Don’t talk for a little while, okay?”

Adrian watched her curl into the chair and blanket as if she wasn’t ever coming back out, burrowing in until he couldn’t see any skin. Her recovery would truly take a while. It wouldn’t be an act for Marc or the camp. She needed a real break, but not a long one. He hadn’t exactly told her the truth about the final issues coming for Safe Haven. Crossing that ocean wouldn’t be quite as easy as he’d implied, but her final layer of thick skin would come in the next six weeks. By the time they hit the ocean, nothing would rattle her.

Chapter Fourteen

The Black Widow

October 7th

1

“This can’t be legal!” Rice’s protest echoed loudly in the crowded gymnasium.

Kendle pinned him with a nasty glare. “Perhaps you’d like to explain to them how I earned my ticket into the market?”

Rice quickly shook his head, reminded of their deal. If the masters discovered he’d been hiding magic, he would be killed.

Kendle held her hand out to Yuri, who had been observing without comment. “My weapon?”

Yuri placed the modified sheath into her hand. The knife was already inside.

Kendle was certain he knew what would happen next, but their deal included his support for the fights. He had no choice but to provide what she asked for.

Kendle strapped the weapon around her hips, aware of the noise in the gymnasium as the spectators shopped, chatted, and watched her prepare for the first fight. It had been a long week of waiting, but she’d made plans and figured out a strategy. Now, she just had to follow through.

“Five minutes until the bell!” The speakers blared with a bored, almost angry voice. “The betting boxes are closing soon.”

Kendle scanned the slave cart, where her team was also observing without comment. She didn’t try to communicate with them. There were too many people around. The gymnasium was almost too packed for movement as the gamblers came to get a peek at her before going to the booths to make a bet. Now that the call had come, the crowd was slowly exiting, but the warmth from all the bodies was stifling.

“We can go now, as well.” Yuri leaned against the wall. “You may also wait until they call you.”

Kendle placed her kit by Yuri’s boots. “I do like to make an entrance.”

The Russian grinned, clearly looking forward to having her kit to himself while she battled. Kendle didn’t tell him she’d scrubbed it for anything she didn’t want the masters to know. Yuri was supporting her, but he wasn’t loyal to anyone except himself. She wouldn’t make the mistake of thinking otherwise.

Kendle strolled toward the small kiosks that were getting more shoppers than they usually did. She could tell by the eager delight on the faces of the shopkeepers. The glances they kept tossing to her were filled with gratitude. Kendle walked among them, feeling a bit safer.

Yuri stayed by the stairs, waiting to guide her into the fight, leaving Rice to hover like an annoying insect.

“Get lost.”

Rice didn’t wait for her to get mean. He vanished through the main exit, presumably on his way to visit with his captive family or maybe even to tell on her for the poison on her blade. Either way, Kendle wasn’t more worried than she already had been upon waking this morning to Yuri’s cheerful knock and call. Full alert was as high as her emotions went. If things progressed beyond that, blood would spill. She expected to hit that point somewhere in these matches, but not for the first one. She needed to do this cool and calm, like Marc would have.

Kendle lingered at the medical booth until the other customers had left. The owner, a thin man with a kind profile and weathered brown skin, gestured toward a box on the lowest shelf. “Discount bin.”

She knelt down. “Will you offer suggestions?”

Stan joined her, tugging the box onto the floor. He held out a package of bandages that was half used. “What can I do for you?”

“I need something absorbent.”

He dug deeper into the box. “Purpose?”

“Death.”

“How soon?” He kept digging, not showing a reaction to the words.

“Before the final match.”

Stan handed her a bottle of alcohol with a few inches of murky liquid remaining. “Take that. If you survive until the final match, come collect it.”

Kendle pretended to read the label and smell the used alcohol. “How much?”

“Same deal you made with my friend who runs the café upstairs.”

“Deal.” Kendle stood up. “I can’t believe you have this!” She strode toward the exit with a huge grin and big mouth. “Bet heavy.”

The few customers who remained in the gym immediately went toward the booth to discover what she had purchased. While there, they would peruse his stock and Stan would make a profit.

Happy that she now had a medical supplier other than the masters or Rice, Kendle moved with the heavier flow of traffic in the halls. Not positive if an attack was allowed out of the ring, Kendle kept her attention on the crowd and not the speaker who was profiling her and the first sucker the masters had found to die for their audience—while bleeding them dry of every dime and metal they had.

Kendle wasn’t bothered as she walked to the basement. Most of the citizens around her didn’t know who she was yet. It might be the last time that happened. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Kendle listened to the thoughts of those around her, as well as their words. By the time she hit the bottom floor, she had confirmed her impression of this being something big for them. The horrified boredom from this type of slavery, after surviving

an apocalypse, had made them vulnerable to the same weaknesses that had allowed the world to be blown up. They were still passive sheep, waiting to be fed or slaughtered. Her visit would wake them a bit, give them a reprieve from what was coming; they would be grateful to her for the distraction if she won. If she lost, the locals might also kill her for the disappointment.

Yuri waved from the other side of the basement. “Over here.”

Kendle followed him to the center ring, now drawing attention. A small cheer echoed.

Tan and black uniforms were dotted through the crowd, blue tattoos flashing as they growled at people, but there wasn’t trouble here despite all the drinking and betting. Kendle assumed they were still scared enough to keep their wits about them. This place was dangerous. That was clear.

Yuri held up one creaking rope so she could climb into the ring.

Kendle hadn’t seen her opponent, wanting to be sure she had herself under control first. The masters had picked knives for the battle, but they hadn’t said if it was to the death. She’d chosen not to take the chance.

Kendle lifted her chin to see who she had to kill...and struggled not to show the shock as she stared at the huge man. He was easily a foot taller, with arms flexed into big boulders that waited to pound her senseless.

Kendle stayed still as the referee, dressed in the old style of black and white stripes, stepped between them.

The crowd pushed closer, almost tipping over the betting booth at the corner.

“Betting is done!” the speaker announced loudly. “Betting is finished. The fight starts in one minute.”

Kendle couldn’t help a shudder of apprehension that made some of the crowd groan. They’d bet on her.

The man now doing arm crunches for the audience that Kendle estimated to be around fifty, grinned at her with missing teeth and no sympathy.

Instead of replying in kind, Kendle scanned the organized chaos of the basement. The games and kiosks were all empty except for this one. She had the full crowd, but it wasn’t nearly enough to meet her expenses.

“This fight is not to the death.” The referee waved them forward. “Shake hands and come out fighting at the bell.”

Kendle braced for pain, but the giant barely touched her hand before recoiling.

The crowd quieted, instantly suspicious.

Kendle tried not to react, but it was impossible not to feel the fear. Fifty was enough to overwhelm her. She’d forgotten how defensive her demon was.

Ding! The bell rang before the giant recovered.

Kendle snatched her knife from her belt and threw it as hard as she could.

She nearly missed. The blade sliced through the man's arm at an inch depth, and flew into the crowd. Someone there screamed.

The giant laughed, taking a step forward as the crowd chanted.

“Kill her! Kill her!”

Kendle didn't move. She waited for him to pause, to peer down...

“What is this?” The giant groaned in painful fear. “What is it?”

Kendle knew not to gloat yet. The pause where he'd sensed her magic was still too fresh and the poison needed time to work. Paralyzing muscles and organs came first, then death. She'd chosen wisely.

The giant slid to his knees, strangling noises echoing across the room that had gone quiet.

Sticking to her plan, Kendle pointed toward the stairs. “The medical booth sells some great things. One of them was Batrachotoxin.”

“What is that?” The giant could barely breathe. His chest felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, making it impossible to take in enough oxygen.

“Poison.”

The audience cheered as the giant fell over, no longer able to use his muscles to control his big body. The thought of magic was banished for the obvious as the bell rang to declare it a win.

Now Kendle grinned, ignoring the guilt to reclaim her blade from the grinning, twitchy

spectator who'd recovered it. Another body lay on the ground outside the ring.

Kendle sheathed it carefully, taking advantage of the shock. "The medical booth is probably out of this now, but it's got other things. Get them before I do."

The crowd chuckled, finally moving toward the betting kiosks.

The speaker blared. "The Widow won! Collection booths are open."

Kendle climbed out of the ring, but she stayed close in case the masters decided poisoning wasn't allowed. When no call came, she chanced a glance toward the huge table and plush chairs that had been placed along a wall for their comfort.

Yuri raised his glass to her, as did Iram. Renda and Xavier glowered.

"Let's celebrate!" Rice appeared at her elbow. "On me!"

Kendle allowed Rice to lead her from the gym, but she refused to visit the first floor café that was now being run by one of the angry relatives of the first café owner that she had ratted on to make her deal. "Upstairs is better. Real beef. No rat filler."

Kendle hid a smirk as nearly half the crowd followed her and Rice upstairs. These market sheep were easy to herd.

“Come in.” Kendle had ditched Rice and the other happy gamblers at the crowded café for the quiet of her cubicle after only a short time.

Yuri opened the door, eyes roaming her bare skin. “Your winnings have been seen to.”

Kendle rolled onto her stomach and gestured at the bottle of oil on the end table. “I need to be rubbed. Tell me while you work.”

Yuri swallowed a lump and entered the room. He began to pull the door shut.

“Leave it open,” Kendle pushed off her new slippers. The café owner had insisted on giving her his. She left her socks on.

Yuri climbed onto the narrow bed with her, breathing already increasing to shallow rasps as her mostly naked skin waited for his fingertips.

No, he definitely doesn't mind my scars. She didn't react to the cool baby oil on her skin. She was in her bra and underwear, but not scared or even worried. She had figured out what drove Yuri, what he wanted from all of this. “I'm going to kill her.”

Yuri rubbed her harder, spreading the slippery oil over her bare thighs and the edges of her ass cheeks. He didn't speak.

Kendle felt his hardness rub against her thigh and allowed it. “Will you tell me about Xavier and about the UN being here?”

Yuri thrust forward, clenching her hip. “For the right price, I might tell you anything!”

Kendle wiggled her hips, sliding his hand from her slick skin. “Now you can close the door.”

3

Kendle woke to the same sounds that had greeted her for the last week—people. She didn't like it anymore today than usual, but the hot breath on her neck didn't help.

"I will bring you breakfast."

Kendle grunted, eager for him to be gone. Yuri was surprisingly gentle, but she didn't want to waste the time. She had a lot to do today.

Yuri sensed what she wanted and quickly dressed. He left with only a quick brush of his hand down her arm, but Kendle was warmed. Yuri wasn't a good man, but he also wasn't evil. She'd certainly made worse alliances, namely Adrian.

Kendle took her time getting ready, going over plans as she prepared to face the public. She expected a busy afternoon.

Kendle stepped from her cubby to a low cheer from the small crowd that had clearly been waiting for her to make an appearance. She grinned as she read the sign of a local in the front. *Black Widow*.

"I like that." Kendle pointed to the raggedy woman, laughing. "Have them change my name."

Kendle was still chuckling as she entered the café, where a seat quickly cleared for her among the dozen customers.

"Good day." Cutts was brimming with cheer. "The usual?"

Kendle took the cup of coffee he held out to her. "Surprise me."

"Can do." He shifted toward the grill where other orders were already cooking. The smells were wonderful.

Kendle tried not to look at any of the other patrons, not wanting to suffer through their fumbling attempts at small talk. She didn't have a headache or gut ache yet, but she could feel her woman's time coming and it was already making her grouchy.

Cutts set a plate of fruit by her hand and went to the grill to flip the sizzling meats and vegetables.

Kendle munched on fruit and sipped the coffee, wondering how well this booth was doing compared to the medical shops she'd helped last night. Was she clear on food yet?

Unlikely, Kendle decided. Despite the crowd right now, there hadn't been one yesterday morning. This would have to happen regularly for it to make a real dent in her tab. "I was thinking I should treat myself to something special today. Suggestions?"

The cook studied her in surprise, considering his answer. "Nails or hair? Women used to like that stuff. Some of ours still do."

"Maybe. Are those owners as good at their jobs as you are?"

Cutts snorted. "No, but they'll get it done if you've got anything they want." He glanced at her, saw the subtly lifted brow that most of the other

patrons didn't. "I've heard they're fans of music and science books."

"Odd combo."

"Yep. The hair and makeups booths don't make enough to splurge on things like reading or CDs. Makes them valuable."

Kendle mentally sighed in relief. She had a thumb drive in her kit that held over a thousand books, many of them educational. She'd been gathering the files whenever she could find them. She enjoyed reading. "Good to know. What can a girl do around here for fun?"

Cutts slid a portion of steaming chicken onto the buttered biscuits and smothered them in thick country gravy. "Yuri."

Kendle choked, spitting coffee across the counter.

The cook hurried over to wipe it up as everyone laughed.

Kendle gloated over the victory. Word would now spread to Renda that they were lovers. It would anger her rival and cause tension. For Kendle, it was a double win. When she slept alone, she had nightmares. Waking up screaming right now would make her seem weak.

Cutts slid the plate in front of her after adding a generous helping of fried potatoes with peppers and onions.

Suddenly ravenous, Kendle dug in, aware of the fresh snickers. The patrons were assuming that Yuri had given her a workout, resulting in a good

appetite. It wasn't far from the truth, but in the end, he'd agreed that killing Renda was enough to pay for the UN information that she wanted. Once it was done, he was supposed to tell her everything. Until then, he'd promised to tell her parts of it each night that she let him sleep next to her. Kendle had agreed. Yuri was handy, harmless. The same couldn't be said of Xavier, who Yuri had spilled his guts over with little provocation. Kendle had already guessed that they were enemies, assuming it was over Renda's dead sister. Yuri had refused to speak of that woman at all.

Kendle assumed Malia hadn't died a natural death, but she hadn't needed to confirm it once she'd figured out that Yuri hated Xavier. All she had to do was kill Renda, get the information and the hidden descendant, and then get back to Safe Haven. Everything else was added chaos that she didn't have time to sort out.

4

"They've chosen hand-to-hand," Yuri stated from the door of the tiny nail salon where Kendle was being given a custom job. He scanned her oiled body in familiarity and affection.

Kendle blushed on cue, adding fire to the gossip.

"What time?" She twisted her hand in the stirrup in search of a comfortable position. The nails gleamed bright red in the dim lighting.

“Same as last night.” He didn’t enter the small shop. It was already a tight fit with Kendle and the technician, but the smells were also thick, smothering. “Roughly the same size fighter, as well.”

Kendle heard his warning. “The bigger they are...”

Yuri grinned, leaving her to her manicure. He had no idea how she would win the fight, but for some reason, he was now positive that she would beat them all except Renda. Yuri had to hope on that one. Renda would use her whip. He’d already told Kendle, but she hadn’t seemed worried. Yuri didn’t have as much faith, but a small chance was better than no chance. He’d learned that well during his lifetime. Coming to America had changed nothing.

“Tell me about him.” Kendle smiled encouragement as the technician leaned over her other hand to repeat the labor.

The short, shrewd woman studied Kendle through decades of worry lines and wrinkles. “Included or extra?”

Kendle understood there might be something worth paying for. “Either or neither. It depends on the information.”

Rita made a nasty sound in her throat. “You talk like them.”

“Them, who?” Kendle assumed she meant the masters.

“Magic users.”

Kendle tensed involuntarily, immediately twisting it into fear. “Here? Magic users?”

Rita peered up at her suspiciously. “Like you don’t know.”

Kendle was forced to settle for a thick glower.

Rita paled a bit, but didn’t back down. “I know what you are. Be careful.”

Glad no one had been close enough to hear that, Kendle didn’t respond as the squat woman finished her nails. Kendle studied the gleaming red, running through possible outcomes. She needed to handle this before leaving the shop. “Did you know Renda’s sister?”

Rita’s face morphed into grief and deep rage. “Malia was my friend.”

Kendle felt the hint that there was a closer bond, but she knew better than to ask. “How did she die?”

“Renda!” Rita shoved Kendle’s hand from the stirrup. “You’re done. Get lost.”

Kendle stood up, not sure what to say. She chose to be silent and let the woman grieve. If Rita hated Renda that much, she wouldn’t tell the masters what she knew until after the final match.

As Kendle neared the exit, Rita slapped her fist against the counter.

Kendle pushed lightly into her thoughts, needing to be positive that she was safe until the final match.

Beyond that even, if you kill her. Make her suffer. Malia deserves justice.

Kendle gave the angry woman a comforting nod, eased. Rita was also a magic user. She couldn't reveal Kendle without expecting the same treatment in return. Both their secrets were safe for now.

Encouraged, Kendle headed for the collateral area to discover which team members Renda had released. She expected it to be the two weakest men, which meant Tyler and Carl would be with Conner right now, spilling their guts. She wanted to stop by and remind them to keep their mouths shut about Safe Haven and the descendants. Market Town already knew too much.

5

“Where is she now?”

Renda gestured toward the screens lining the wall of Xavier's lavish apartment. The entire market was on camera. “Visiting her men.”

Xavier leaned back in his padded rocking chair, contemplating Renda's accusation. “If you're wrong, you'll owe for it.”

“I can afford the fine. I'm telling you; she's hiding something.”

“You have permission to determine what it is.” Xavier waved off the protests of the other two masters in the room. He glanced at Yuri and Iram. “You will not tell her that we are investigating. If she discovers it, that will prove the accusation and she will be arrested.”

Yuri's lips disappeared into his pudgy face as he fought not to argue.

Iram shrugged, returning to his charming smiles and tones. "I have no deals with her."

"But you do have bets." Xavier saw Yuri tense. The Russian had multiple deals with Kendle.

Iram spread his hands out in a gesture of acceptance. "I will not tell the woman. My word."

Satisfied, Xavier glared at Yuri. "And you?"

Yuri pouted. "I will not tell her."

Renda marched from the meeting area in high spirits, content that Kendle wouldn't know she was being investigated for magic use. Renda had observed her fighter's flinch from the handshake, like the others, but she hadn't forgotten it. The scarred woman was hiding her power, but Renda wasn't afraid. In fact, she now hated Kendle more than she already had. The only thing worse than a do-gooder, was a descendant.

Renda had warned her sister about using her gifts, but Malia hadn't listened. In the end, her power hadn't even tried to save her. Renda had been glad, but it wouldn't have mattered at that point. She'd hated her sibling for most of their lives. When the market citizens and the masters had fallen for Malia's charms, Renda snapped. She'd been the little sister, the unwanted third wheel, for too long. Once she'd become a master here, Renda's needs and orders had been satisfied first. She'd enjoyed it for six months, until Kendle's arrival. Now, it was starting to feel like it had before she'd caught her

sister alone in the bathtub, back when Renda had been so tightly wound that only death satisfied her.

Renda snarled at the men she passed, hands in her pockets to keep from reaching out with swiping claws.

Realizing the old rage was getting the best of her again, Renda detoured from the upstairs shops to a rear training cubby that was for their fighters and guards. If she didn't work off some of this heat, she would explode. Sniffing out clues would have to wait.

Rita breathed a sigh of relief as Renda abruptly spun toward the stairs. The nail technician quickly closed the gates and secured them with her thickest lock. There was no evidence of what Rita was, but all she owned in the world was inside these walls. If Renda got in, nothing would survive. Rita had witnessed Renda at her worst, back when the market was first beginning and Yuri was on track to be named leader instead of Xavier. Renda wasn't stable and Rita wanted no part of that din. Rita was an Invisible. She was also weak and lazy. She would flee into the night before challenging Renda directly, but supporting someone who might be able to kill the slave master was an easy choice. If Kendle could take care of Renda and give Malia justice, the ghosts in this place might settle down enough for Rita to sleep at night. She was tired of hearing the dead cry out for blood. It was exhausting.

6

“This fight is not to the death. Battle begins in one minute.”

Kendle rolled her eyes at the same lackluster introduction, but didn't protest. She had to stay focused. Her opponent was a huge female that would have been right at home on a WWE program. Even her flaming hair and painted cheeks matched the image. Kendle wanted to laugh, but the voice inside said to end this as fast as she could.

Dangerous, the witch warned.

Kendle nodded at the female and got nothing in return, not even the flicker of a lash. *Great. Only match two of six and I already have the Ice Queen, Ivanna. Godzilla must come next.*

Kendle stepped forward to shake, controlling the shield over her skin this time. When they shook without a problem, not squeezing or playing games, the crowd was disappointed.

So was Renda, who was sure of what she had witnessed before the first fight. The Iranian moved closer to the ring to observe.

Ding!

Kendle lunged forward, but Ivanna beat her to the move. She hefted Kendle off her feet, arms like a vise around her ribs.

The crowd roared in approval as the females grunted and struggled.

Quickly! the demon ordered.

Kendle squirmed loose, sliding through the bottom of Ivanna's grip to land in a heap at her feet.

Ivanna frowned, peering down.

Kendle grinned, glad she'd thought of the oil. Before her opponent could figure out how she'd lost, Kendle slammed her new fingernails into the woman's exposed ankle, ripping upward.

Kendle rolled away as the fighter lunged down for her, driving a knee into the female's big nose.

Blood ran down Ivanna's cheek to pool with the puddles from her ankle; her tan and black uniform was dotted in crimson.

Kendle stood up in the tense silence of the crowd, attention staying on her opponent.

"Why isn't she screaming?" someone called from the crowd.

"She can't." Kendle didn't glance away as Ivanna struggled to talk, to move. "She's paralyzed." Kendle flashed her nails, wiggling her fingers. "I added the chemical, but the chick who does these is awesome. Best set I've ever had."

Hoping that small bill would now be paid, Kendle glanced down at her opponent. "I don't have the antidote. I couldn't take the chance."

The Dutch woman began to convulse.

"The Black Widow has struck again!" the speaker informed the spectators. "Come collect your winnings."

Kendle left the ring as the crowd cheered wildly. They cleared a path for her, being sure her claws didn't brush them even in passing.

Enjoying the feeling, Kendle breathed a mental sigh of relief and headed for the showers without glancing toward those plush master couches. She could feel Renda's rage from across the cool basement. It wouldn't take much to set that off and there were still three more matches to go before they could fight.

Mind now on the next challenge, Kendle guided attention to the shops where she needed fans to spend their winnings. She waved and called greetings, talking happily about the stock and the service. It was up to the shopkeepers to convert the sale.

When she walked by the empty pharmacy, Kendle nodded to the owner to indicate she would be by later. Hopefully the owner would wait up for her. If not, she would stop by in the morning. Kendle knew the next fight would be harder. She needed to get the proper supplies.

7

Kendle slid into the collateral room as the market closed for the night, bell ringing to signal the guards to lock it all up.

Kendle glanced to the sentry on the room, noting his bored attitude. She joined Conner and her four men at the center table.

"Good timing." Conner pointed angrily. "Tyler was planning how we escape from this place and kill all the troops on our way out."

Tyler paled at being rattled out.

Carl grinned at her. “Conner and I keep telling him that you have things under control, but he’s a rookie.”

Kendle didn’t show amusement at the joke. Carl was also a rookie. Kendle took the bottle of water Conner handed her, but she didn’t open it. She was busy reconsidering an option. She’d been in the market enough to pick out the weakest and sympathetic guards. An escape might be possible. A good leader considered all avenues. “Would you leave your team? Go get help and leave them to Renda’s anger?”

Tyler shrugged. “It’s what we’re taught, I think. We didn’t get to these lessons yet.”

“You stay with your team.” Conner had heard his father repeat it too many times to be confused. “She has it covered.”

“Do you?” Tyler demanded suddenly. “We’ll all be crippled if you don’t.”

Kendle placed a hand on Tyler’s hairy wrist. “You’re an Eagle. Act like it.”

Tyler’s face flooded with anger and embarrassment, but he held silent.

“Fear is a hard thing. I understand.”

Tyler let out his anger in a thick snort of resignation. He’d been reminded of who he was now, of what Safe Haven taught them.

“We’re not the underdogs.” Kendle smirked. “They have no idea who we are. It’s a huge advantage.”

She left them with that thought, glad only one of them was upset with the delay to their freedom. She was also encouraged that none of the men had been harmed so far. If their care had been bad, she wouldn't have handled things this way. If their care changed, she would adjust her plans. Their safety was a priority—right behind Renda. That evil had to be snuffed out. *I'm not leaving Market Town until it's done.*

Chapter Fifteen

Big Orders

1

“What are you doing?”

Tommy had dropped his dirty shirt onto his cot and knelt in the center of the room. They only got clean clothes weekly here.

“My morning workout. All this time lying around is making me fat and tired.”

The six other Eagles quickly joined their team leader, eager for the activity.

The guards watched them suspiciously, but didn’t protest. They weren’t certain if this behavior was allowed. None of their other captives had tried to exercise.

Renda found them all a while later, sweating and laughing as they put their bodies through a much-needed workout.

She slammed the door. “What’s going on?”

Tommy finished his last pushup, grunting. “We needed exercise.”

Renda kept her distance as the travelers continued to stretch and kick, to spin and spar. It looked as though they’d practiced it regularly.

Renda crossed her arms over her chest as she noticed the team leader giving her hot glances. She knew what he wanted, what he was, but she had no time for mating. She wanted information on Kendle. “Where do you come from?”

“North.” Tommy stuck to the small bits that Kendle had been able to pass to them during her walks and tours. “It got cold.” He looked toward the wall, where a window would have been if not for being cemented over. “Is it cold here? It wasn’t when we came in.”

“It is warm and sunny.” Renda lifted a brow. “Would you like to see the sunlight?”

Tommy snorted. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

“I will trade a walk, bound, for information on your owner.”

“Kendle doesn’t own us.” Tommy stood up. “And I don’t need bonds. I’m not leaving my men.”

The other team members didn’t know what Tommy was up to, but they all suspected it had something to do with the new slaves that had been brought in. They would be waking up soon, with their guts rolling.

Renda had noted their loyalty over the days she’d held them and didn’t doubt his words. She wondered what their scarred owner might think of Tommy roaming without bonds. “Let’s go.”

Tommy slid his shirt over his head, aware of Renda’s hot gaze on his sweaty skin. He’d been a camp provider long enough to know what she needed, but he doubted she would make a deal for

company until the night before the final fight. He was hoping for a few hours alone with her at that point. Tommy slowly approached her and held out an arm like a gentleman. "Shall we?"

Renda hesitantly took his arm, transported to her father and his friends doing the same thing for her sister when Malia reached puberty. They'd both been trained to dance in all styles, even those of the hated west, but Renda had never felt special doing it until now.

Tommy tucked her hand around his arm and patted her wrist. "Sunlight, you say?"

Renda was startled into a smile at the charm. "Yes."

He led them toward the exit, ignoring his surprised team and gawking guards. "Good. I'll bet you're beautiful in the sunlight."

Renda blushed down to her roots, speechless at the flattery even though she was well versed in sex and the foreplays that led up to it. Something about Tommy drew her like a moth to a flame.

Pretending to be distracted, Renda studied him intently, searching for the lies she could feel. Maybe a walk in the sun and a few drinks would give her the secrets she knew existed. If not, she would threaten to cut off his penis. That tactic usually got her whatever she wanted, especially once the blade was against skin. She didn't bluff.

Tommy knew he was playing with fire, but he also knew Kendle needed every advantage she could get in the upcoming fight with Renda.

Tommy wasn't positive that Kendle knew what she'd gotten herself into. He wasn't certain of his own chances against the Iranian, let alone Kendle's, considering that she was a rookie who had only received a couple months of training from Marc and the Indians. He didn't think it would be nearly enough.

2

Kendle enjoyed the hot water, taking advantage of Yuri's hospitality to use the shower in his apartment. Yuri's accommodations were lavish. The three rooms were layered in rich, exotic furnishings that would have set well in her former home in California.

While she let the water beat on her, Kendle carefully scratched the poison out of the acrylic nails, but left the talons. It would make her next opponent think her hands were still lethal. If they were distracted by it, she could use a different method to end the fight quicker.

Yuri knocked. "We have chosen battle axes!"

Kendle snorted at his cheerful call. He wasn't the one who had to use them. "Be right out."

"Take your time! New supplies and slaves have come in. I must go collect my share."

Kendle heard the door slam, but not lock, and shut off the water. She had to stay alert.

She dressed quickly, donning her weapons and setup for the next fight over wet skin. The door opened again as she came from the bathroom.

The guard set a tote on the ground. "Gifts."

"From who?" Kendle dropped onto the bed to tug on her socks and boots.

"A mix." The sentry scanned the area to be sure things were calm in here. "Lot of newcomers arriving to see your next fight."

"Will you be there?"

"No. I have duty over Renda's apartment."

"Are you on that post alone?" Kendle went to the window. Another group of people was entering the town. Most of the locals had chosen trousers and loose-fitting shirts, but the newcomers were clad in heavier, more durable gear that suggested some of them had traveled a long distance.

"Why do you ask?"

Kendle spotted a large group of troops coming through the closest gate with another load of supplies. She could tell they'd made several trips because of how tired and sweaty they were. "I'd like to get in there."

"I can't do that."

"Can *you* get in there?"

"Of course."

Kendle looked at him, encouraged by the tone. "Will you?"

The guard, part of the rotation that had originally landed with the UN convoy, nodded. "For the—"

“Yeah, I know. For the right price. Can’t anyone here just do the right thing?”

Ori stared at her as if she had grown two more noses. “That sounds like something an old-worlder would say. I thought you’d been around.”

Kendle pulled a face. “That is an understatement.”

The guard studied her, amusement dropping from his profile. “You can’t give me what I want. No deal.”

The Iranian man spun to leave.

Kendle threw her knife, hoping the aim was good. Marc had praised her progress with it.

The blade wobbled painfully as it stuck in the wooden frame by Ori’s arm. “Tell me what you want.”

The man’s hand tightened on the knob. “To go home, Ms. Roberts. Give me that and I’ll strangle her in her sleep.”

“Wow. Big order. I don’t suppose you have a second choice?”

The door shut softly as Ori left without answering, closing out the noise of the crowd gathering to witness this evening’s fight.

“No, I didn’t think so.” Kendle hadn’t wanted to let anyone know about Safe Haven because she hadn’t believed these people were good enough. After that, she’d realized she needed to let Angela make the choice. Now, she might have to take a UN guard back with her in order to win the final fight.

“Man, the boss isn’t gonna like this.” Kendle headed for her daily workout and tour of the shops. She would explore the gifts in the totes when she returned. “Angie isn’t gonna like this one bit. Maybe I can get Conner to explain it.”

3

“Are you ill?”

Kendle shook her head, placing the packaged syringe near the cash register. “I’m good as gold. I also have no money, as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Sylvia waved her off. “Just coming in here will help me. That pays for a syringe.”

“Thanks.” Kendle spent another minute admiring the stock in the woman’s kiosk so the people watching her would also shop here. There were only about ten people following so far, but it reminded her strongly of the old world when fighters and singers had groupies. She didn’t know what to do with them.

Kendle moved out into the warm hall, where the audience was steadily growing despite it not being noon yet. Kendle was glad, but the lackluster radio voice didn’t seem to understand how valuable new arrivals were. There was no excitement, no draw to the festivities, which meant no eager spenders. Her tab wasn’t going to be paid unless she got people shopping.

Kendle detoured toward the master apartment on the first floor, assuming the radio booth would

be there. She discovered the cords leading into a small kiosk next to Renda's apartment.

Kendle tapped on the glass, motioning to the tired-looking man inside. "Trade a break for an hour."

The dusky-skinned man, Kazan, stared at her. "What?"

"I'm supposed to eat and take a walk now. Trade me."

"On whose orders?"

"Mine."

"You aren't a master." He started to pull the door shut.

Kendle slid a hand in, where her remaining nails gleamed in warning. "I will be."

Kazan studied her for a long moment, understanding the threat. If he refused now, when Kendle took Renda's place, she would make him pay for it. "An hour?"

"Maybe less." Kendle joined him in the small, dusty booth. "She'll get mad when she finds me here."

"What'll keep her from taking that anger out on me?"

"You can say that I kicked you out." Kendle gently took his arm.

"Without marks?" Kazan snorted. "She won't believe that."

"Yeah." Kendle smiled. "Sorry about this. It isn't personal." She slammed the man's face into the glass.

Kendle jerked the door open wide as he fell, shouting. She dragged him out by his arm. "I won't forget this. Keep your mouth shut." Kendle dumped him outside and went back in, flipping the latch.

The radioman slowly got up and limped off, glaring through the bloody hand cupping his face.

Kendle sank down into the folding chair, reaching for the mike. "Let's breathe some life into this place."

4

"Good morning, Market Town! This is the Black Widow, coming to you from the first floor, where you'll find shops full of products that I know you need. Like what? How about medical supplies from that kiosk in the gym! Why not stop by and browse?"

Renda pushed Tommy away from the kiss she'd been about to allow. "That woman!"

Tommy hid a snicker, knowing it wasn't smart to poke the bear. "Should I go to my cell?"

Renda shoved him toward the door. "Like I'd let you go alone!"

Tommy frowned. "It's two rooms down. Where could I go?"

Renda growled her anger, but the tirade was cut off by Kendle's cheerful voice on the radio again.

"I wanted to let everyone know about my fight tonight. If you haven't seen me in action, you don't want to miss this. I believe we're using battle-axes!"

Tommy paused at those words, concerned. “Battle-axes?”

Renda grabbed his arm, furious. “Get back to your cell.”

For one instant, Tommy’s arms stiffened to grab her, but Renda was too alert. Her eyes flashed death for his men. Tommy backed down.

“Go right now.”

Tommy went quickly, not detouring. He was certain Renda was watching to be positive he went into the correct room. As Tommy closed the door, the rest of the team still here glanced up with snickers and smirks.

Tommy shook his head, telling his team it hadn’t happened. They’d agreed to try to get Renda alone to kill her. He’d only had her in her apartment for a full minute before Kendle had come on the radio.

Tommy scanned the room. The new slaves hadn’t volunteered any information or asked for any help getting through their captivity so far. Ben obviously hadn’t offered any from the cold silence. Tommy also didn’t think it wise, considering that each night their numbers were now dropping by two. The new people might be just as dangerous as they were.

“Here are some morning announcements!” Kendle’s voice over the radio blared through the market. “The café upstairs got a fresh load of fish yesterday! Better get it while it’s there.”

Tommy laid down on his cot, placing his big arms above his head. “Been quiet?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “You were only gone for fifteen minutes, dude.”

Tommy chuckled. “Felt like longer. She’s wild.”

“As in sex?” Josh leered.

“As in death.” Tommy frowned at the rookie. “You should see her apartment. Very morbid.”

“Can Kendle handle her?” Ryan couldn’t help his concern.

Tommy didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure. The few minutes he’d had with Renda said no.

“I’ve been informed that there are also new slaves!” Kendle’s tone became challenging. “Master Renda, who is in a lovely mood this morning, says she needs the money really bad, so stop by now for a quick examination of the stock!”

Ben burst out laughing as they listened to someone beating on something. Presumably, Renda was outside the booth. “Yeah, I think she’s got us covered.”

5

“Get out of there!” Renda slammed her hand against the glass. “I will break it!”

“No, you won’t!” Xavier’s harsh denial rang through the crowded hall, causing Renda to spin around.

“What?!”

Xavier gestured to the line of people gathering at her apartment. “She has increased your profit.” He nodded to Kendle, but didn’t smile. “All first floor shops are full.”

Cutts slid between them to flash a paper at Kendle.

She announced it quickly. “The upstairs café is out of fish now, folks, but he still has beef! Get two-for-one on hamburgers for the next hour!”

Xavier watched another shopkeeper come forward to give the scarred woman a message to read. “See to your patrons, Renda.”

Renda slammed her hand against the glass again, but did as she was told.

Kendle didn’t look at Xavier, afraid that he would see too much. She wasn’t certain about his motives. When he left the hall, she was relieved. That one was dangerous. Renda only thought she was. Kendle was almost looking forward to that battle, but Xavier scared her. He had the same type of eyes that haunted her dreams—hungry.

Kendle spent the next two hours in the booth, reading messages and reminding customers that deals were expiring or over. The pain in her bruised ribs kept her slightly out of breath, adding to the impression of eagerness.

Renda was pacing the hall outside the booth again. She’d handled her line of patrons, too fast in Kendle’s opinion, but Kendle hadn’t liked sending strangers in to bid on captive humans anyway, so

she wasn't going to mention it. While her team was safe for the moment, she felt deep empathy for the rest of the chattel here.

When there hadn't been any messages for half an hour, Kendle keyed the mike. "Well, this part of the fun is about over for the day, folks. I'll be here for another ten minutes if anyone has any last deals to offer. See ya tonight at my fight. You won't want to miss it. Will the Black Widow survive? Come find out!"

Renda was reminded that she couldn't fight with Kendle yet. Xavier wasn't going to side with her on this either. She stomped out of the market, leaving relief in her wake as two more shopkeepers delivered deals for Kendle to read.

6

"The betting booths are about to close. Five minutes left to bet."

Tired of the careless introductions to her fights, Kendle strode to the announcer and held out her hand. "Take a break or I'll give you one."

Kazan, not yet recovered from his earlier abuse, shoved the mike at her and vanished into the crowd.

Kendle climbed up onto the nearest chair. "Good evening, folks! Welcome to the Market Matches!"

People in the basement began shifting her way, but it was hard to hear over the games and chattering. Kendle got louder, pretending she was

the announcer for someone else's coming death or survival. "Tonight, we have a feature match between the Black Widow and some poor sucker chosen to die by her claws. Or will it be by her blade? Gather around and try to pick a winner."

Kendle twisted to include all areas of the wide room in the short time that she had to pull in more profit for the house. "We've got a lot of cubbies upstairs and a café that has promised to stay open and serve beer until the masters shut it down, so don't go away after the match. Celebrate the life or death of the Black Widow!"

The locals were mostly on one side of the ring, gathered together for protection from the rowdy, drinking spectators who had just arrived. Their manicured nails and shiny new haircuts marked them different, dangerous in their own sad way. They watched her with sly smiles and ticket stubs held tight. They'd already placed their bets.

People moved toward the ring; Kendle skimmed them, hoping to spot her opponent. She saw only hungry profiles waiting for death to hit anyone except them.

I will free you. Angela will let me. She'll send a force and we'll destroy this place with liberty and justice.

Kendle saw the man in the betting kiosk waving. "The booths are closing soon. We're gonna hold this match for exactly three minutes more so you can have a chance to bet. Better hurry!"

Now, there was a rush to the booth.

Kendle set the mike on the chair and took her place in the empty ring. Under a sleeve, her fingers went over the tape and stiff plastic, hoping she'd chosen the right chemical. The janitorial closet had been full of colorful liquids in cloudy jugs that she hadn't had time to decipher.

"The fight starts in one minute!" Kazan shouted, sporting a split lip. Someone had obviously clipped him for letting her take the mike and change the rules.

Not sure what to do, the clerk in the betting kiosk slammed the window shut.

Kendle leaned against the ropes, trying to appear unconcerned as her opponent finally made an appearance.

He had to duck to get through the door! Kendle kept her calm posture, controlling the terror that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Take your weapon," the announcer ordered.

Kendle quickly grabbed the smaller battle axe, still finding it heavy and awkward.

Maybe it will be for him as well, that voice guided. *Stick to the plan. Show no fear. Throw him off.*

Kendle obliged, blowing a kiss. "Well, aren't you a cutie!"

The big man, Griff, paused. Most people ran from him without a single word needed. He didn't know how to respond to the scarred woman.

Kendle waved at the other axe. "Come get it, Sweetheart. You're gonna need it."

Griff paused again, eyes going to Renda.

Kendle laughed. “She sent you in here to die. Don’t expect her to save you.”

The bell dinged before Griff was fully in the ring. Kendle wanted to take advantage of it, but she held sympathy for the mind-fuck she’d just given him. She waited until his hand was on the handle of the axe before rushing forward.

The tall man was fast. He snatched his weapon and rolled, catching her swing with the thick handle, but he had to grip it with two hands to do so. Kendle used her strategically free hand to slam the syringe into his chest and push the plunger.

She lunged back as he swung, shouting, but it wasn’t far enough to avoid the blade that swiped down her thigh, taking a wide swatch of jeans and skin. Blood began to spread down her leg.

Kendle waited for the next swing, but the syringe contents took effect, bringing a wave of vomiting and bleeding from the nose that sent the crowd into fearful watchfulness. It looked like a disease.

Kendle waited until Griff fell to the mat before moving. She slowly held up her arm to show where she’d hid the syringe. “Drain-O still clears those clogs!”

“We have a winner,” Kazan announced sullenly over the radio. “Booths are open.”

Kendle ignored the painful heat in her leg to scan the crowd and masters, hoping things were

calming down. Instead, she saw Renda gesturing wildly at the other three rulers.

Kendle sighed. "I'm starting to believe fate brought me here to kill her."

"So am I." Stan had appeared at her elbow. "Let me tend your injury at my shop. The people who come will pay for your service. Sylvia can bring you a new syringe."

Kendle allowed it gratefully. The pain was quickly becoming intolerable.

7

"He's coming here?" Xavier stared worriedly at the rider who'd just come in through the rear entrance to warn him. "Here? When?"

"Two days. He'll be here for the final fight."

Xavier waved a curt hand, dismissing the drenched man. "Get cleaned up and back to your normal duties."

"He said to tell you she'd better still be here when he arrives. He also wants to talk to Renda before you execute her."

Xavier blanched, turning so the rider didn't witness it. When the door shut, he dropped down at his plush table to consider the proper course of action. If Dirce Resi was coming here to talk to Renda, that implied she was the one who'd been telling market secrets. None of the masters wanted the UN boss around, except for Renda. She had been Dirce's private bodyguard before Malia's murder.

“We’ll have something waiting for you...” Xavier thought of the way tonight’s match had ended. A syringe of poison was simple and quick, and in a thick, shoving crowd, might not even be noticed until it was too late.

Xavier stayed at the table, brooding over his options. When someone knocked, he ignored it. If he wasn’t careful, he would end up being a UN lackey, but that wasn’t what the former tycoon had planned out for his future. *This is my town.*

8

“I need to be oiled again.”

Yuri paused in the doorway of his room, not asking how she’d gotten the guard to let her in. “Open or closed?”

“Open.” Kendle rolled onto her stomach. “I need them to pick a weapon for tomorrow instead of hand-to-hand. If they think I’m ready to slip out of their grasp, they’ll go for something easier to deal with.”

“Aren’t you worried that I will tell Xavier?”

“Won’t matter.” She smiled as he approached the bed. “The people you send to fight won’t take the chance. They’re scared of me. Did you see how my groupies have already disappeared?”

“Yes, along with customers as you walk by. It is odd that they will follow you, but not too closely.”

“They know a killer when she’s in the same hall with them.”

Yuri took the top position, rubbing, but he didn't enjoy it as much this time.

Kendle sensed his tension. "Are you okay?"

"My boss is coming."

Kendle frowned. "Xavier?"

Yuri snorted bitterly. "No, our leader is the one we all came here with as his protection. Dirce Resi is coming to observe your final fight."

Kendle tried not to tense further. She'd thought this was all of the UN people. "Are there a lot of troops around?"

Yuri didn't answer orally. His hardness along her thigh begged for him.

Mentally, Kendle didn't want to make the trade, but her body responded immediately. Kendle sighed. "If you've got your red wings, I'll meet your price."

9

"Tasers?!" Kendle repeated the next morning. "They chose tasers?"

Yuri brought the tray to the bed where she was lounging. "Fun, right? The odds are on you now."

Kendle sat up, not bothering to cover herself. He'd seen more than that last night.

Yuri patted her shoulder lovingly. "I must handle business. Sleep in, rest up. I have much money on you."

Kendle waited until he left and flipped the tray across the room, splattering oatmeal and eggs across

the wall and chair. The familiar cramping came. “Not good timing.”

She spent an hour in the bathroom, cleaning, dressing, preparing, but the rear of her mind kept repeating the word *taser*.

“The market is now open! Come browse our fully stocked shops and watch the feature match. You can even stay overnight!”

Kendle snickered at the flustered radioman. Apparently, the masters had decreed that her way was more profitable.

Kendle pulled her boots on, hearing the crowds outside the building and outside the door. The noises gave her hope that her profit totals from today would start clearing some of her debts. No one had provided a statement after closing each night, so she had no idea where she was on it.

Kendle braced as she exited the apartment. It might be a rough day. After her workout and a visit with her team, she didn’t have anything to do. That was dangerous when PMS was here. Those hormones would need an outlet that might not wait until a scheduled time. Even now, Kendle could feel the pressure building behind her sockets, the uncontrollable rage barely being held in check by polite society.

“Except, society doesn’t exist anymore,” she growled, causing citizens to retreat to a safer distance. “and I’ve never been polite.”

Kendle ignored the confusion around her. If she were lucky, no one would spark the rage.

Using threatening body language, Kendle began her workout of running around the building until she was too tired to keep going.

No one interrupted her.

Chapter Sixteen

The Human Condition

1

“She has to be eliminated.” Yuri clucked his tongue regretfully. “She knows too much.”

“Dirce will make that choice if she survives tonight. Did you tell her it is to the death?”

“No.”

“Good. The crowd will get a lot drunker and shop more after watching an electrocution. That type of death is not so fast.”

“Why?” Yuri wondered if he could use it to his advantage somehow.

“Because it reminds them they too must die someday, maybe as horribly. The need to celebrate after that has ruined many a poor man.”

Yuri shrugged, not completely understanding.

“Why are you betraying her?” Xavier stared in suspicion. “If she kills Renda, you have your revenge.”

Yuri nodded, eyes glinting in the dim morning sunlight coming through the window where they were viewing the courtyard around the building. “True. But she is an American, like you. I am Russian. We will never be friends.”

Yuri left Xavier to his arrogant assumptions that he was beyond harm from the other masters here. Xavier didn't know the big boss the way the rest of them did. Xavier had only met him once and been intimidated. The rest of them had served with Dirce for a decade. When the big man arrived, everything they'd built would end. Yuri knew which side to be on when that happened.

2

“This is the fourth of six matches that the Black Widow must win to regain her men and gear! Betting booths are closing soon. Come enjoy the blood and gore!”

Nearby, Kendle rolled her eyes. “No blood with a taser, you idiot!”

Kazan flushed.

Kendle moved away from him to keep from interfering. He had obviously been ordered to emulate her and that would have to be good enough. She had other things to worry about.

Kendle swept the basement, glad to find the games and kiosks all filled with eager players and shoppers. At the same time, she was horrified so many people had come to witness a death. The human condition wouldn't change until people didn't respond this way. She had no idea how that would ever be possible.

“The betting booths are now closed! The fight will start in one minute!”

Kendle climbed into the ring, picking up the taser lying in her corner. She checked it for a safety button and flipped the power on. The light came, a vivid green that flashed her to the island, to her paradise that had been ruined. “What am I doing here?”

“Dying,” a voice responded from the other side of the ring. “The same thing we’re all doing.”

Kendle recognized the bossy guard who had been following her around and caring for her men. “Well, this sucks.”

“Yeah.” Bossy grunted. “I thought so too.”

Kendle waited for him to get his weapon and for the bell to ring, but she didn’t hesitate to shoot.

She missed.

The electric darts flew by the ducking fighter and slammed into the cheek and chest of a spectator. Screams and cheers sounded.

Kendle braced for the impact as Bossy fired, dropping her empty taser, but she wasn’t prepared for the pain. It took all of her will power to remain standing and not piss herself. Ethan’s evil leer flashed in front of her mind... Kendle felt the demon within burst forward to rip the darts from her stomach.

Growling, she advanced, demon in the lead.

Bossy lifted an arm for protection.

Kendle slammed her wrist into his, injecting him with the syringe from her sleeve. As he tried to jerk away, Kendle used the nose breaker she’d been taught by Marc.

Blood sprayed as the man's nose shattered under her descendant strength, but he was already debilitated by the poison; there was no scream.

Guess Kazan was right about the blood. We'll get to the gore next time. Kendle shifted around to scan the masters and found a guard, April, climbing into the ring with her.

"I'll kill you!" April charged at Kendle with her knife.

Bang!

The woman fell heavily into Kendle, glaring up in shock as she died.

Kendle looked over with the rest of the crowd to find Xavier holding a gun.

He lowered it slowly, flashing a thin smile. "The Black Widow wins again! Booths are open."

The crowd cheered at getting two for their money. Kendle just tried not to puke. Her stomach had already been hurting. Now, it was on fire.

Kendle staggered from the ring amid congratulations that stopped short of touching her. She left the basement without revealing more of her misery, but the instant the barrier to her cubby shut, she slid to her knees in agony. Only her nightmare with Ethan had been worse than this.

3

"It's time to show me."

Rice paled, looking around.

Kendle waited for him to confirm that they were alone in the small greenhouse where he was tending his namesake.

“Now?”

“Today. I need to have time to make a plan for it.”

“If you survive.”

Kendle crossed her arms over her chest, tapping chipped red nails on her arm.

Rice’s shoulders drooped. “I’ll go to the collateral area after my shift ends. Be there.”

Kendle left him to his work, noting the bakery nearby where his brother and family were laboring. From outward appearances, the people in this town were happy, but it only took a little time among them to be coated in their misery and desperation.

Kendle winced at a strong cramp. She had two huge bruises on her stomach, along with puncture marks, and there were still two fights to go.

Kendle forced herself into a run, not changing her training pattern. It would make her look weak, but she also needed to pass the time until Rice could leave work.

Curious about the rest of the town she hadn’t observed yet, Kendle veered away from incoming trucks that presumably held more stolen gear or people. She wasn’t allowed to run around the rear of the market during unloading anyway.

She jogged through the gate with the normal nod to the troops, picking the opposite rocky road from the one she’d chosen last time. It had taken her

a full hour to reach the end of town when she'd chosen to explore this prison. As far as she knew, there was one street left she hadn't explored. She had skipped the dark alley yesterday when she'd discovered it, not wanting to be gone too long and raise suspicion. Kendle jogged there now without stopping, hoping it would give her a few extra minutes for investigation. The empty alley had drawn her for some reason she hoped to identify. She didn't believe there was anything to find, but there were hours to kill before her meeting and match.

The alley, blocked at one end by part of the wall around the town, was as empty as she'd assumed, but Kendle felt the menace as she stood in the dark corridor. It didn't surprise her to observe three market sentries waiting for her with cruel expressions as she emerged.

Kendle didn't wait to find out if there were more of them. She let the demon loose as she ran forward, protected by her bubble and her rage. They'd come alone. *Mistake.*

Renda watched in shock from a short distance. She'd sent the men out to kill Kendle so she didn't have to fight. She hadn't expected the widow woman to use magic openly.

Renda ignored their screams for help as she walked back to the market to tell the other masters. "This changes everything. I've got you now."

4

Kendle reveled in the blood. By the time she finished, she was coated in it. The locals who'd been there the entire time gaped in shock and fear. Those who came upon the scene paused with the same emotions.

Kendle slowly became aware of what she'd done. She wanted to be concerned, but the satisfaction from spilling blood was too great. She staggered to her feet, leaving the body she'd been chewing on to sweep the horrified witnesses with glowing red orbs.

The locals didn't run or call for help. They stunned Kendle by revealing their own descendant statuses and sending sympathetic support to her silently. Kendle shuddered at the urges and longings they tossed, unwilling but unable to fight the bonds they were forcing upon her. "I will free you."

Her speaking seemed to be the cue for them to disappear. All except for Baker, who handed her his coat to hide the clothes that were coated in blood. "There's a pond. You saw it on the way here?"

Kendle nodded, running an arm across her mouth.

He grimaced. "It makes a good place to go swimming. Drains out into the river."

Kendle understood the blood would be washed away. "Thank you." Her eyes faded to normal.

Baker breathed a sigh of urgent need. “Don’t lose or we’ll kill your men before she can sell them.”

Kendle ignored the threat. “Take me to the pond.”

5

“Here they come.”

Kendle didn’t glance around at Baker’s warning. “I wasn’t there. You heard screaming but didn’t witness anything.”

“You don’t tell me.” Baker glowered at her in scorn. “I’ll tell you.”

Kendle laughed happily. “Don’t push your luck, coward.”

Baker kicked water at her and stormed off in embarrassment.

Kendle smothered further mirthless amusement to stand up and meet the squad of guards that had been sent to collect her. The pond, surprisingly clear, was only a short distance from the gate, where the more sympathetic sentries watched in concern.

Behind them, Renda lurked.

“Come with us. Do it now.”

Kendle came from the water with a confused tone. “What’s wrong?”

The guard closest, who had been tight with two of the dead men, slammed his rifle into her ribs.

Kendle fell to the ground, groaning.

The sentries dragged her to the market under Renda's blissful supervision. As they took her by the gate troops and crowds of patrons who had come to view her match, boos and shouts of rigging the fight echoed through the air. The mood quickly became ugly.

Renda ducked from a hurled stone, unable to tell who had thrown it. "Get her inside!"

Kendle was aware of the demon gathering energy to fight, but the pain in her ribs and gut prevented her from holding it in. The men roughly grasping her arms let go of her as an electric current ran through her skin, shocking them.

"More proof!" Renda shoved her men back toward their jobs. "Knock her out!"

Kendle tried to bring up an arm, but she couldn't avoid the gun that smacked into her neck or the concrete that caught her temple. The lights went out all at once.

6

"She is waking. Bring in the witnesses."

Kendle groaned at the pain in her body, blinking against the glare of afternoon light. She couldn't find a place that didn't hurt.

"You are accused of magic use." Xavier came over to stand in front of the barber chair they'd brought in to use for this. "Do you have anything to say?"

“I’m Kendle Roberts, from TV. It may seem like magic—”

“Ugh!” Kendle grunted in fresh pain as Xavier punched her in the leg over her bandage. The material was still wet, so she hadn’t been unconscious that long. Kendle tried to count the people in the room and breathe as she scanned her surroundings. The meeting room held a long desk with two benches behind it and a single chair across from it. There was a window, with bars, and only a single door. *Not much to work with.*

“You will answer to these charges!” Xavier’s profile morphed into an obsessed fanatic. “Your kind is not welcome here!”

“I’m not a magic user!”

“We shall see.” He waved the locals over as Renda herded them in.

The sight of Kendle, bound and beaten, brought fear and more tension into the room.

“Did you witness this woman using magic?”

No one spoke.

Renda slammed the door. “Answer him!”

“We saw her visit Mr. Rice at the greenhouse,” one of them stated with a shaking arm around his wife.

“She was at the bathing pool for a while, swimming.” Baker stepping forward. “Is this about the dead guards?”

“Yes.” Xavier approached Baker with a menacing glare. “What do you know of it?”

“I reported it.” Baker shuddered. “I couldn’t get the dogs off them.”

“Dogs?” Xavier repeated. “Dogs got to the bodies?”

“Dogs killed them.” Baker gestured. “The pack came from that old alley that leads through the wall—the one your riders use when they leave.”

“You lie!” Renda flew forward, but Yuri grabbed her arm.

“Keep going.” Xavier listened for lies as Yuri shoved Renda toward the exit.

“The guards were walking by, maybe following that woman, and the dogs came from the alley and attacked.”

“Why only them?”

“Got me too, sir.” Baker raised his sleeve to show a taped bandage. He revealed the gory wound under the gauze. “After I reported it, I went home to get cleaned up and back to work.”

“You did well.” Xavier turned to Kendle. “Did you observe any of this?”

“I heard the screams...” She fought the groggy sensation, in a lot of pain from the injuries and the position. “I would have helped them if I’d seen it.”

“You are all lying!” Renda punched the wall. “Why do you lie for her?!”

Xavier motioned Yuri to open the door. “Remove the witnesses.”

Kendle’s stomach fell further at that tone. She knew it well. *Do not come out of your cell*, Kendle ordered mentally as Xavier came toward her with

his knife in hand. *Unless you want me dead, do not come out of your cell.*

Kendle's hoarse screams echoed down the hall to her team and beyond, but nothing could stop it. Thanks to the support of the UN troops, the masters had full control.

7

"Nothing! You have wasted our time!" Xavier flung the knife toward Renda's boots. "Get her down from there and take care of her—on your tab."

Renda had seen Kendle attack the guards with so much strength that they couldn't escape or fight back, only try to defend themselves. She marched forward to do more damage than Xavier had.

The leader grabbed her wrist in an iron grip. "I think you are afraid."

Renda couldn't stand to be called a coward. With her free hand, she slapped Xavier hard enough to rock his chin.

Yuri and Iram both gasped.

Kendle tried to stay conscious.

Xavier let go of her, profile darkening.

Renda stumbled back in fear. "I got carried away."

"Yes, you did." Xavier gestured toward Kendle. "Do what you were told."

Now without an option, Renda hurried toward the chair.

“You will ask if she can fight tonight. If she says no, you will take her place in the ring.” Xavier left, ignoring the crowd that booed and pushed against him to view into the meeting room.

The locals had been won over, many of them now decorating their bodies with odd makeup that resembled her scars. Kendle wasn’t flattered by the emulation. It repulsed her.

Renda unsnapped the cuff on Kendle’s wrist. “I saw you. It happened.”

Kendle lifted her head with the last of her energy, shoving into Renda’s mind. *I’m going to kill you. Make your peace with God.*

Renda flinched in terror and anger, pointing. “She threatened me! I heard her in my mind!”

Iram, the last to leave, lifted his nose in disdain. “That is desperate and pathetic, even for you.”

Renda screamed in frustration.

Kendle passed out with a smirk on her bloody lips.

8

Tommy and everyone else in the holding area jumped as the door swung open and slammed against the wall.

The guards hurried forward to help Renda as she struggled to get Kendle’s weight inside.

“Take that!”

The troops hefted the unconscious fighter up and took her to an empty cot.

Renda leaned against the frame, getting her breath back. "If she can't fight tonight, you all die!"

The door slammed and locked behind her.

The Eagles shoved by the sentries to surround Kendle with their protection.

Ryan looked at the nearest guard. "We need medical items."

The Iranian man snorted. "Not my problem."

"Are you certain?" Scott glared. "Renda didn't say only slaves would die."

Realizing he was right; the guard reluctantly went out to get instructions from the boss.

The Eagles knelt or stood around Kendle as Josh used his shirt to wipe away some of the blood from her face and arms.

"Thanks," Kendle croaked. She'd woken when the guards in here touched her with their harsh grips. Those men weren't like the others who had bonded with her. The guards in here were pure evil, like their mistress.

"What happened?" Ryan helped her get a drink from the cup that another guard brought over.

"I pissed her off."

The team tried to laugh, but the way Kendle cramped up and groaned made that impossible. "Who's the medic on this team?"

"Me." Josh frowned a little. "You want me to check you out?"

"I want you to bandage my broken rib and give me something for the pain if they'll allow it. I've got shit to do."

Tommy snickered.

Josh scanned her visible injuries and shook his head. “You can’t fight like this, not without recovery time.”

Ben gestured. “You heard our host. Do what you can for Kendle.”

Tommy knelt down and held Kendle’s hand. *Take what you need.*

Kendle gave him a grateful, pain-filled smile. Then she drew so hard that Tommy felt his guts churn. He braced as the tug increased. “This is some ride we’re on.”

Kendle grunted, half in agreement, half in pleasure. Energy flowing in was better than sex. It didn’t hurt to take energy from Tommy.

Tommy chuckled as the kneeling members of the team stood up to help hide what was happening.

Kendle let go when Tommy yawned, wary of hurting him. “I’ll be good now. Let me sleep.”

Tommy rose, waving Ben to take his place. “All we’ve been doing is lying around after eating and resting. Let us help.”

Kendle didn’t have the strength to resist. When Josh placed his hand over hers, she drew what she needed.

Renda’s sentries didn’t know what was happening. They didn’t see anything odd, but they were distracted by their concern over what had been said. Had Renda meant they would die if the Black Widow did? Worried that was the case, the troops began preparing a meal and gathering supplies.

Renda wasn't stable. Everyone knew that. It was best not to take chances.

9

"This is the fifth match for the Black Widow! How has she lasted this long? Come find out tonight! Betting booths are closing soon."

Kendle leaned against the ropes, eyeing her opponent. The energy from her team had done a lot for her internal injuries, including helping with the broken rib, but she'd stopped before the external wounds could be repaired.

Yuri came to stand by her with a wide grin, sliding a hand around her waist. "Your room has been broken into. You will stay with me tonight if you survive."

Kendle didn't argue. She wasn't surprised by the cubby being damaged. Renda was still searching for proof. She would only have 24-hours after this to find it and Kendle expected the Iranian woman to be in rare form as fear crept up on her.

Kendle scanned the four thick rocks piled on each side of the ring, then the woman waiting to grab her share. "Rocks are so archaic."

"It was that or machetes." The older woman stared at Kendle. "My aim is better than my arm."

Kendle was surprised into a grin. "I'm the opposite. Gives you the advantage."

"Yeah," Ellen muttered sarcastically. "Gonna kill me with a rock and she makes a joke."

Kendle realized Ellen didn't want to be here, but it was too late to change her plans now.

"This fight is not to the death," the announcer called. The bell rang.

"Yeah..." Ellen streaked for the rocks.

Distracted, Kendle was just reaching her pile when the first stone struck the back of her skull. The second caught her in the cheek, tearing into her skin.

Dazed, Kendle brought the demon forward to make sure her aim was good as she rose and turned. To do it, she took a third hit that split her lip open and sent blood splashing down her shirt.

Kendle threw the rock as hard as she could, as she had in the first match with the knife, but this time, her demon guided the aim.

The stone smashed against the woman's windpipe, producing a loud crunch that brought silence to the basement.

Smothering, Ellen dropped heavily to her knees, both hands coming up in futility.

Kendle waited for the call, holding the rest of her rocks. She'd only thrown one.

"The Black Widow will face our slave master Renda tomorrow night!" the speaker blared. "Place your bets! Place your bets!"

Kendle drew in another deep breath, and then struggled out of the ring. Her ears were ringing, vision blurry.

Renda, hovering nearby, watched in happy fear as she spotted Kendle's weakness.

Feeling the stare, Kendle couldn't resist leering over her shoulder.

Renda screeched at her, drawing attention and condemnation from the other masters.

Kendle got out of sight as quickly as she could, staggering up to Yuri's apartment. She needed to lie down. *I'm not feeling well.*

10

Kendle smiled as her turn came at the front of the crowded kiosk. "I came for something absorbent."

The afternoon crowd around them quieted to listen.

Stan didn't look at her. "It will be delivered shortly. I'll find you."

Kendle nodded her thanks and went to the collateral room, eager to meet with Rice. They hadn't been able to find time yesterday between her torture and fight.

Pain being controlled with pills Yuri had sold her, Kendle noted the happier moods of the guards and the prisoners. All of them were healthier after a week of steady meals. She'd sent all gifts and donations here.

Kendle settled wearily at the table, joined by Conner and Ben. The rest of the team that had been released took seats nearby to listen.

She surprised them all by waving over the guard instead of whispering as they'd expected. She

handed the man a slip of paper that he read with excitement and horror.

“For real?”

“It’s a better life than this.”

Ori ripped up the paper. “Tell me when.”

“In the next couple hours, a package will be delivered to me. I need you to coat the handle of her whip with it.”

Ori understood what would happen. “You won’t betray me?”

“We don’t do that. Safe Haven provides a second chance for almost anyone, including you.”

Understanding she’d chosen this man to go to camp with them, the team studied him intently, examining him for whatever she’d seen.

“You won’t betray me?” Kendle was honestly concerned over it.

“I never go back on my word,” Ori stated stiffly. “Not for her or anyone else.”

“Good. Do your part and you’ll be with us when we go.”

The door opened to admit Rice.

The guard went back to his place. “No more noise!”

Rice came to Kendle, glaring. “My brother said no reply. What does that mean?”

“He can’t answer what I asked. What about the other half of why I’m still here?”

The rest of the team hadn’t heard why Kendle had agreed to fight for them instead of just blowing

this place up. They listened eagerly as Rice explained.

“In the crib.”

“A baby.” She was revolted. “You’re giving up your own baby.”

Rice didn’t respond to the contempt.

“Far corner or near the shelves?”

“Corner.”

Kendle couldn’t remember if she’d seen the child or not. “I’ll need to judge the size and weight. We’ll carry it out in a bag or kit.”

“Them.” Rice dropped his chin. “Twins.”

Kendle’s mind flashed to the signs about magic users mostly being twins. “How did you hide that for so long?”

“There’s a panel under the mattress. We switch them out for feedings and sleep.”

“How long can that last?”

As if to answer her, a baby’s cry echoed, forcing the guard to yell at the person tending it.

Kendle sighed. “Okay. We’ll need two large bags and they’ll have to be drugged or they’ll cry during transport.” She glowered at him. “Can you do that without killing them?”

“We’ve had to a few times when Renda was in here.”

“Be careful. After going through all of this, I’d better not be given two corpses. I would have to come back and express my displeasure.”

Rice paled. “I have to go.”

Conner wasn't sure the man could be trusted.
“Don't forget who your real enemy is.”

Kendle waited for Rice to be gone before scanning the crib. “So, who knows how to change a diaper?”

Chapter Seventeen

Not The Favorite

1

Kendle woke to a heavy weight on her chest.

Her lids flew open in the darkness to find Renda sitting on top of her, eyes glittering with insanity. Renda's braid tickled Kendle's nose as she leaned down. "You die now!"

Kendle, caught in hazy sleep, sent a powerful blast of need out, calling for help.

Yuri jerked up next to her, hand clutching the blade he slept with. "What?"

Caught, Renda slashed with her knife.

Yuri jerked her by the long braid, throwing Renda from the bed. "Get out!"

Renda scrambled away from his fury, aware of how dangerous Yuri was with his knife.

"She will die tonight!"

Yuri manhandled her out of his room, growling at the troops for the interruption to his sleep.

Kendle breathed a thin sigh of relief, wondering how badly she'd been injured this time. The pain was minor and she was breathing okay, but that didn't mean much in the end. She gingerly felt her throat, coming away with wet fingertips.

"Are you okay?" Yuri flipped on the light.

“Yes.”

Yuri got his medical kit out to wipe away the blood and place a small bandage on her neck. “Good as new.”

Kendle laughed under his light touch. “Yeah.”

Yuri kissed her cheek and lay down next to her. Of all the women he’d spent time with since the war, this one was his favorite.

Kendle caught the thought, but didn’t respond. She knew Yuri was only loyal to Yuri. After she killed Renda, Yuri would probably betray her descendant status. Kendle wasn’t certain how she knew that he had figured it out, but there was no doubt. Yuri knew she was a magic user.

Yuri placed them back to back, enjoying the warmth. He quickly drifted off, not fazed by the dangers of this life. *Russia! Now that was a harsh existence.*

Kendle took a while longer to fall back asleep, mind worrying over the coming fight. Renda had been sitting on her arms, hitting pressure points that paralyzed people. Kendle hadn’t been able to move. That didn’t bode well for the coming match. Renda was obviously a good fighter who understood how to disable an opponent. If Ori didn’t get the poison onto Renda’s whip handle, Kendle would be flayed alive. That image wasn’t conducive to rest.

Outside, Renda prowled the market, frustration and fear boiling. She’d felt Kendle’s mental blast, heard the voice in her mind, watched the woman

tear three huge sentries apart with her hands and teeth. Not being taken at her word was more than the Iranian could stand. “Dirce will believe me. Dirce won’t let her kill me.”

2

“He’s here. Get up!”

Kendle rolled from the bed in a daze, grabbing her gun from under the edge of the pillow. “Who? What?”

Yuri tossed clothes at her. “Dirce. He wants to meet you.”

Kendle dressed in a blurry fog. She hadn’t dropped off again until daylight. She judged it to be noon now.

“You must hurry. Dirce does not like to be kept waiting.”

Kendle heard the fear and devotion, but she also caught the bitterness. She pulled on her boots. “What should I know about him?”

“There is no time for that. Come.”

Kendle let him lead her into the hall, running over previous conversations, but she couldn’t remember anything helpful.

The market was crowded, so much that Yuri had to elbow people aside for them to get down the stairs. The difference in the market was huge. Instead of the boredom and depression she’d been greeted with two weeks ago, there was now cheer

and hope. *Because they got to be a part of death and it wasn't theirs?*

Your light has fed them, the demon told her. That is why descendants were gifted to humanity. If you need these people to defend you, they will.

I've...infected them?

They were already infected, the demon corrected. The rage disease has spread around the world. You gave them hope for the future, even a short one while you are here. When you go, a little of that magic will remain.

Kendle was comforted by that.

The first floor was even thicker with people. Kendle was glad of it, but that relief didn't overshadow the concern about meeting Dirce. From everything she'd picked up, he was worse than Xavier.

Yuri pushed the door open, taking her arm again. "This is the Black Widow."

Kendle stopped, catching sight of the big boss. "Do I know you?"

Dirce chuckled, motioning for Yuri to leave. "Yes, Ms. Roberts. I believe we have a mutual friend."

Kendle took the seat he offered, noticing that they were alone in Renda's grimly decorated apartment. Renda's den had skeletons and animal dissections in glass frames with bloody fingerprints on the sides and tops. The floor was carpeted in animal skin and the curtains were dusty red

bedsheets. *What an odd mix.* “Who’s the mutual friend?”

“Chauncey.”

Kendle thought of the Keeper residing in a Safe Haven cell and tried to clear her mind as the full sense of danger settled onto her shoulders. This man knew about descendants.

The Greek studied her openly, standing near the window where defiant sunlight was trying to penetrate the gloom. It was obvious that Renda didn’t open the sheets very often. Dust was swirling around the room. Kendle concentrated on the beams instead of letting her mind run wild.

“You killed my spy.”

Bossy, Kendle realized. “Well, it was him or me, and I need me more than I did him, so...”

Dirce joined her in the chair across the small table that had been set with a meal for two. He didn’t smile at her quip.

Kendle didn’t touch anything as the wide man began to make a plate. Dirce didn’t wear the standard uniform or the colors of his troops and masters. He favored jeans and a long button-down with deep blue stripes along the tapered sleeves. His tan work boots were a common style found at any K-Mart, but his weapons were first class. Kendle tried not to gape as she continued to store observations about the boss that was twice her size, but not fat. Muscles bulged under his shirt. *Talk about fit.*

“Thank you!” Dirce gushed proudly. “Most people don’t notice!”

Kendle blanched. “What do you want?”

All pretenses fell like a broken mask. Dirce leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. “Why are you here?”

Kendle didn’t resist as he scoured her mind for everything that had happened with the guards and her fights. When he was finished, Kendle felt her demon powering up to fight.

“Eat now.” Dirce handed her the plate.

Kendle took it with a shaking hand.

“Easy, Healer. I mean you no harm.”

Kendle knew better than to believe that, especially since Ethan had once said that to her and then bit off her nipple.

Dirce blanched this time. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Please, eat. You’ll need your strength.”

“For what?” She picked up a strawberry. She hadn’t had one since being on the island.

“Your match, of course.” He began making a second plate. “We can’t disappoint the masses.”

Kendle pushed cautiously. “What about after?”

“You’ll be given your team and the gear, and sent on your way.”

“Why?”

Dirce gazed at her with glowing orbs that held the promise of the type of abuse Ethan had dealt out. “Because you’re not a threat to me. If I kill you, Safe

Haven will come here...and they are a threat.” He gestured at the plate. “Eat.”

Kendle did as he instructed, enjoying the fruit and pastries. Dirce also ate, but he never looked away from Kendle. She could feel him tinkering in her mind, trying to convince her to stay and help him with his goals.

Kendle shoved him out with a quick motion that surprised them both.

“Interesting.” Dirce’s blue helmet tattoo winked at her as he peeled off part of an orange. “Are all of your citizens as strong?”

Kendle thought of Angela and then brought down her mental wall. “Yes. Leave us be. We’re tired of fighting.”

“Who could give you a challenge?” Dirce stared at her. “The Mexican army will not return from that conflict. Who else threatens an entire camp of descendants?”

Realizing she’d said too much, Kendle tried to switch topics, but Dirce ripped into her mind brutally, going deeper this time.

Kendle forced herself to think of her nightmare with Ethan, the horror and the humiliation she’d survived. Dirce wasn’t able to get through that type of barrier. Even she couldn’t.

Dirce drew back in frustration, eyes settling into inoffensive chocolate. “You will leave and not return. If you betray this deal, I will hunt you.”

Kendle didn’t need the threat. “All I’ve ever wanted from this hellhole was to be out of it. I’ll go

right now, without the gear, if you'll give me my last two men."

"There are bets placed and bets to be paid."

Kendle now studied him the way he had her, seeing his smirk, feeling his eagerness. "Why do you want Renda dead?"

Dirce frowned at her accurate guess. He shook his head, but didn't answer, leaving Kendle to puzzle it. When she couldn't come up with anything, she moved onto the next item on her list. "I'd like to buy the freedom of the other people in the collateral area."

"Everything is for sale in our market. As long as you never return, you may shop."

"Thank you." She gestured toward the window, to the alley. "I'm sorry about your three troops."

Dirce waved off the concern. "They were hers. Mine would never betray a deal to protect a coward."

Ah. Renda trying to kill her to avoid the match had revealed a yellow streak.

"Yes. I don't need a coward protecting me."

"I can understand. Is that the job you'd give?"

Dirce nodded, scanning her from black hair to black boots. "You're not a coward."

"No. There are very few things that hit me that way."

"Renda isn't one of them?" He smirked a bit. "She can kill flies with that whip. I've seen it."

Kendle stood up, sensing he was ready for her to go. "Just as long as she uses it tonight."

Dirce caught her hint, chuckling. The creepy sound followed her out into the hall, where Yuri and Rice were lurking.

“What happened?”

Kendle realized she hadn’t settled the babies with Dirce. She shrugged at Rice. “Too soon to tell yet.”

Yuri grinned. “You’re alive. He must like you.”

Kendle spotted Renda coming down the hall and raised her voice. “Yeah, I think he’s gonna bet on me tonight.”

Renda slammed her fist into the wall.

Kendle hurried down the corridor, laughing.

3

“I’m not the favorite?!”

Renda’s shout was barely audible over the dings of games and chatter of a happy crowd. Spectators from across the state had come to witness this final match.

“I have been fighting here for six months! How can I not be the favorite anymore?! She has only been here two weeks!”

Kendle kept her chin down, trying to hide the laughter. Around her, the audience didn’t bother. They knew who was going to win.

Renda scanned the crowd, observing the satisfaction of the other leaders, watching the betting odds in the boxes go down on her survival.

“How many of you are in on this?! How many of you want me dead?”

Those around her didn't reply. Those furthest away hadn't even heard the shout.

Once again full of frustration and fear, Renda stomped to the ring, hand resting on the handle of her whip.

Kendle looked across the basement.

The UN guard over Renda's apartment was lingering near the dartboard as he waited with everyone else to see who would survive.

Kendle lifted a brow, to which Ori replied with a small nod. Hoping that meant it was taken care of, Kendle shifted her attention to her opponent. Now that the big boss was here from the UN, there was no way she could use magic. Kendle expected to be hit several times, but she thought she could stand it. She'd been hurt by Ethan and during the battles with the government, not to mention while surviving the apocalypse. These people had no idea who she was, despite recognizing her name.

“This fight is to the death!” the radio blared.

Renda glanced at the other masters in shock, unable to believe that she was being betrayed.

“Booths are now closed. The match will start in one minute!”

Kendle bent down to pick up her weapon. In the last sixty seconds before the match started, she scanned the basement and found no trace of humanity in the humans who filled the basement. In

that instant, she hated them all for forcing her to do this.

Ding!

Renda was fast. She flipped her whip with gusto. The first lash across Kendle's arm was a reminder that pain was also infuriating.

Be calm, Kendle ordered her demon. *Stay back*.

Renda snapped the whip again; a small chunk of skin flew off Kendle's wrist. Kendle screamed.

Renda lunged forward, snapping the whip again.

Kendle tried to defend herself from the blows, raising her arm to fight, but she had no skill with the weapon. She'd never even held one before. She tried to snap it like her opponent was currently doing.

The lashes met in midair, tangling. Kendle took advantage of her descendant strength to pull Renda toward her.

Aware of Kendle's poisoning tactics, Renda scrambled away, keeping her grip on her weapon.

Kendle jerked her whip, unprepared for the harsh snap. The whip cut into her chin as it flew backwards. Blood sprayed.

Renda wanted to gloat, but there wasn't time as Kendle snapped her weapon again. The razor sharp edges of her lash flew across Renda's arm, but didn't break the skin. "You don't know how to use that! Let me show you how!"

Kendle ducked, but not quickly enough. Renda's whip tore into the side of her neck, barely missing the artery.

If it doesn't work soon, you're done, the demon warned. *Let me come forward.*

No!

Renda snapped her whip again. Blood splashed down Kendle's leg.

Spectators groaned and muttered as the two women battled. Compared to their boring existence of slavery and scratching out a meager living, this was excitement. Bloodlust flew through the crowd.

Renda snapped harder, going for the kill this time...

How did I miss? Renda stared at Kendle's undamaged eye. Dizzy, she staggered, balance gone. She looked down, realizing she'd been injured. *Is my arm turning blue?*

Kendle stayed back as the poison on the handle finally began to take effect. As she had in the other matches, she waited to determine if Renda would die on her own. Some of the others, she might have spared at the end, but not this one. If Renda didn't die here, Kendle would kill her.

Renda tried to snap the weapon again, but it fell from her grip. "How did you get to me?!" Her knees caved, taking her to the ground.

"Anything can be had from Market Town for the right price." Kendle gestured. "Even someone putting something on your favorite toy."

“Who?” Renda struggled to breathe and form the last sentence before death claimed her. “Who did this?”

Kendle gestured toward the audience that had gone quiet so they could hear the conversation. “About half of them. You’ve made a lot of enemies.”

Renda glared up in final defiance. “Dirce?”

Kendle nodded, finally letting her true emotions show as a sneer of victory spread across her face. “It sucks to hear that something you love was taken, doesn’t it?”

Renda stared at her with horror, realizing her obsession with the weapon had killed her. Blood began to roll from the corner of Renda’s mouth, her eyes dilated... Then it was over. Renda slumped to the mat. Blood ran toward Kendle’s boots. *That’s the sight I’ll always remember you by now.*

“The Black Widow has won it all! The Black Widow has won it all! Booths are open! Don’t forget to shop!”

She climbed out of the ring amid deafening cheers from the audience, half of which were off duty guards and troops who had come with the big boss. Everyone had enjoyed her matches, except for the dead woman lying in the bloody ring.

Kendle moved toward the master couches, not certain of the protocol, but wanting to be positive that her men were released even though Renda wasn’t around to handle it.

Yuri motioned a guard toward the first floor. “See to her men.” He pointed to two others. “Take care of her gear. Have her ready to go by morning.”

As the two sentries disappeared, Kendle gave Yuri a grateful nod that revealed more of their intimacy than she’d intended.

Sitting on Yuri’s left, Dirce glanced at the Russian in aggravation. “Must you tag everything that walks?”

Kendle burst out laughing.

Yuri flushed. “You know me, Boss.”

Dirce sighed resignedly. “Yes, I do. You always get the best ass. I just don’t know how you do it.”

Dirce waved Kendle off to tend her injuries as the rest of the crowd gravitated toward the kiosks, games, and shops that were open for entertainment. “Someone clean up that mess. The market will stay open until midnight to celebrate the Black Widow’s victory! Start telling people that we will do this again next month. We need fighters for the matches.”

Kendle left the basement. She wasn’t certain she could contain her anger or her relief much longer. She needed a few minutes alone.

Instead, Kendle found all of her team waiting nervously outside Yuri’s apartment. Kendle sighed. *No time for emotions right now. I still have business to handle.*

Kendle’s team surrounded her with support and protection as Josh knelt to tend her injuries. He and all the others were surprised to have been given their

gear. They'd thought for sure it had been sold. Most of them had doubted at one point or another that Kendle would be able to secure their freedom. Standing in the hallway, with no guards or bonds, was a great relief to the ten males.

"We'll be ready to go in the morning. You can sleep for the ride." Tommy had been grabbed, along with Josh, and shoved into the hallway to find the other team members being marched upstairs. When they hit the top of the steps, the sentries had pointed them toward Yuri's apartment and then left.

"We can't go yet." Kendle knew Tommy and Josh still didn't know about her deal with Rice. Kendle let the others quietly fill them in, scanning the hall. Both people she expected were already in the crowd, moving toward her.

Kendle motioned to Rice. "You guys are gonna spend the night at his place." Before anyone could argue, Kendle smiled. "I'm spending the night here. Meet up with me in the morning."

Kendle went inside, holding the door for Yuri. When she gently shut it, the team was forced to accept that she had made other plans.

Tommy grinned. "Guess that means we have the rest of our evening free."

As the team scanned the shops, all eyes came to rest on the small café that had a line out into the hall and beautiful smells wafting through the air.

"Anyone mind waiting?" Tommy asked.

None of them did. It would allow them to stay close to where Kendle was for as long as the market

was open, and let them hear some of the stories, meet the locals that had apparently been won over. It was obvious she'd also been won over by them. Why else would she stay and help these cowards after everything they'd done?

Tommy led the way toward the café.

All of the men were surprised when the crowd parted to let them through. As they reached the front of the line, Cutts glanced up in happiness.

"You guys eat on the house! Come sit in the front."

Surprised at the difference in their treatment, the team did as they were bid, each accepting congratulations on having the Black Widow as a member of their team.

"What the hell did she do here?"

Tommy shrugged at Ryan's whisper. "I don't know, but it saved our asses. We'll have to make sure we show our appreciation somehow."

Ben grunted his thanks to the cook as the happy man set a large drink on the counter in front of him. "Yeah, now we have to figure out what you get for the girl who already has everything, including her own whip scars."

The team snickered a little, each feeling guilty for her new injuries. It was impossible not to, considering that they were now free and being fed, while she was alone with a Russian man that they didn't trust.

“I think maybe we’ll hang around in the market.” Tommy scanned his team. “We can sleep in the hall if we have to. We’ve got our gear.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Cutts gestured. “Every shop here has gained profit since the Black Widow showed up. Anyone will give their cubby to you. All you have to do is ask.”

Tommy shoved a straw into his cold drink. “What deal did she make with you?”

Cutts glanced around the happily filled café and then over to the cash register that had real money sticking out of it for the first time in months. He hadn’t known that greenbacks were still a currency in the United States. “She saved my life. You know how that feels.”

The team did. They ate their meal in silence, contemplating how lucky they were to have been sent on this mission with Kendle. Nearly anyone else would have gotten them killed.

Rice, seduced by Kendle’s choice to stay the night with Yuri, joined the men in the café for a meal. He wasn’t a part of the festivities, but because he had brought them into this, he was a part of the situation. There was also the fact that his needs hadn’t been met yet and he didn’t want to spend time away from the information and news. Too many lives depended on Kendle coming through with the rest of their agreement. For him, the fighting wasn’t over.

“This will all be over in a few days.” Yuri handed her the bottle of oil. “I don’t have the right to do this with you anymore unless we make a new agreement.”

Kendle set the bottle on the table, then dropped down onto the bed. “Do you really think I would be here if I were doing this for money?”

Happy to discover his company had been enjoyable, Yuri joined her on the bed. “Would you like to clean up? Can I get you a meal?”

“No.” Kendle laid down. “I need to rest. Just keep me alive until morning and then my team will take over.”

Yuri made sure the apartment was secure. When her snores began to sound a few minutes later, he pulled the blanket up over her.

Yuri studied her scarred face for a long time, remembering when he’d done the same with Renda’s sister. Now they were both dead, but this warrior was here. “I don’t want to let you go. I’m going to ask Dirce to let me keep you.” He flipped off the light. “My new Kendle baby.”

Chapter Eighteen

Blindsided

October 12th

1

Angela woke suddenly, stomach cramping as she shot up. “I have to go.”

She’d spent her days with Adrian sleeping, eating, and crying. It hadn’t been any different from being in camp.

Adrian didn’t waste time questioning. He rose from the bedroll next to her, pulling on his boots.

Angela stood up slowly, fighting the urge to run. “Tell them to get everyone in. Dosimeters should be up.”

Adrian hurried to the radio, dragging one boot by a lace. “We’ll go in through the bottom tunnel?”

“Ask Marc.”

Adrian quickly keyed the mike. “Bastard to base.”

“This is Safe Haven,” Kenn responded tonelessly.

“We’re coming in.”

The radio was quiet for a few seconds. “Copy. Instructions will follow.”

“Roger that.”

Adrian began to gather his main gear, aware of Angela already limping toward the entrance.

Still not used to acting like an Eagle instead of leading them, Adrian swallowed instructions and followed her out into the cold darkness.

Angela went to the snow-covered bike, but Adrian put a hand on her arm when she would have helped him. He glanced at the dark, icy landscape.

Angela reluctantly drew her gun and stood watch. She was barely awake. Physical labor, though painful, would have woken her a little quicker.

Adrian found the edge of the frozen tarp and braced for a huge pull that jerked it from the bike. He let the tarp fall to kick away the snow, and then slid onto the cold seat to twist the key that was already in the ignition. “Home?”

Angela had to holster, unable to hold her weapon while climbing or moving her lower body. The pain in her abdomen was still too bad. She slid onto the bike behind Adrian. “Yes.”

Adrian wanted to go slow, to be careful, but he knew better. He drove as if he were alone, on his way to her.

Angela was forced to mold herself to his warm body, but it didn’t help the misery of pain and cold. She also didn’t ask Adrian to dim them as they neared a camp of refugees that were a short distance from the cave. They blew by tents and bodies.

Angela sucked in the horror, the guilt. If she’d tried harder, she might have been able to save more

of her fellowmen. The small group they'd just passed wasn't bad, only desperate.

"You aren't meant to save them all." Adrian repeated her words to him upon first joining Safe Haven. "Fate makes that choice."

Angela sobbed against him, not caring when the tears froze to her face. She was crying for her country now and that was okay.

Adrian felt her pain as if it was his own, but that soul-crushing weight of leadership was absent. He gunned the throttle in relief.

2

How long?! Marc was ecstatic that she wanted to return, but furious that she was being transported by one person in the middle of the slick night where it would be difficult for him to reach her quickly.

Ten minutes until the intersection at the bottom of the hill, Adrian answered, sounding distracted.

Marc didn't make it worse with instructions or complaints. He broke the connection and headed for the bottom tunnel. He didn't take anyone willingly, but Kyle refused to let him go without an escort. He and Jennifer walked behind their new boss, glad Angela was coming home. Once she was back, things would calm down. The last week had been full of fights and doubts.

Marc caught the thought. He hoped it was true, but the demon said trouble was coming with her, not

peace. Marc didn't care. If Angela was coming back, she was awake. She could resume command.

Jennifer's snort made Marc tense. "What do you know?"

Jennifer didn't answer. The visions she'd had were foggy at best. She just knew Angela better than her mate did.

"Whatever." Marc didn't have time for teenage drama. Angie was coming home. Angry or not, hurt or not, he'd missed her.

Thanks to Marc's quick pace, the trio made it to the bottom of the tunnel in record time. Marc led them into the darkened shadows of the final twisting cavern, where a cleverly placed gray tarp hid a Gator.

Kyle drove, familiar with the vehicle since he and Neil had alternated driving it to various locations to keep it hidden from everyone. It had been an emergency transportation for the council if needed. It wouldn't have held everyone comfortably, but it would have held them. Due to the slower speeds, it wasn't ideal. Under these rugged conditions however, it was perfect. It took them down the iced-over mountain path and by the small refugee camp that was now dwindling instead of growing. Fighting and starvation had thinned that herd since they'd handled the train people.

Adrian wasn't in sight as they arrived at the snowy intersection. Wind blew drifts and ice across the road as they tried to spot the former leader.

“There.” Kyle pointed to a taller drift near a telephone pole.

They watched the drift become a white tarp that was jerked aside by a man on a bike, holding a woman in his arms.

Marc was out of the gator in a flash, crunching toward them.

Kyle and Jennifer took positions nearby, neither of them caring for how open it was here. Anything could happen.

Jennifer shared a concerned look with Kyle, but he didn’t have time to agree as lights flashed their way from a narrow street that should have still been blocked by the avalanche.

Marc had started to take Angela from Adrian, but now he spun around, drawing a Colt.

The truck skidded to a halt at the corner, door flying open.

Marc prepared to fire, like Kyle and Jennifer were doing.

“Don’t shoot! Oh, God! Marc don’t you shoot me!”

Hearing the name froze all of them. It was someone Marc knew.

The woman slipping toward them in a hurry had left her headlights on, engine running, and was clutching a form that could only be a thin child.

“Oh, God!” The brunette ran toward them as fast as she could on the ice. “We have to go!”

Marc glared at Adrian, who flashed Angela’s words about the dosimeters. Understanding the

threat that was coming, Marc's gut tightened into a ball of lava. *Safe Haven!*

Marc waved toward the Gator. "Get her up the hill. I'll follow you."

Marc grabbed the panicking woman by the arm and swung her around, ignoring everything except his need to get to the cave. The herd was in danger.

"No! Stop, Marc!" Julia tried to resist, but there was little she could do as Marc pushed her toward her truck. "We have to get under cover."

Marc took her to the passenger side, causing Julia to fall silent. She watched fearfully as he slammed her door and slipped around the front of the old Chevy to take the driver's seat.

"Hang on." Marc followed Kyle, who was already rolling. "Rough road."

Julia clutched her son, bracing with her legs. She also kept her mouth shut, stunned that she'd found Marc standing in the middle of the street right when she needed him most.

Marc concentrated on the drive. The woman's truck wasn't equipped for the climb that it now had to make.

The demon however, disappeared to dig for information on the woman and child huddled in the passenger seat. He remembered this serpent in their garden all too well.

Angela moaned as the Gator slid on a patch of ice that had melted a bit from the first ride down. It was icing over in a slick sheet that refused to give them enough traction. Kyle shifted gears, rocking, and they shot forward. Jennifer warned Marc mentally, but wasn't certain that she had needed to. Marc was hell behind the wheel, like Kenn and Billy.

Even though she'd expected it, Jennifer was still impressed with the way Marc walked the battered truck up the hill sideways. It was a delicate balance to hold a vehicle on the edge like that, and it implied the person doing it was a master.

Marc was just glad when they finally reached the tunnel. The silence from the woman and her child was a bit unnerving. He'd been braced for crying or constant chatter while he was trying to concentrate. It had been a relief not to have either, but it had also been a concern. He hadn't had the spare focus to scan her yet, but he was already positive the woman or her child was a descendant. There wasn't a hum of power or anyone in his thoughts to give it away, but he knew what he knew. His radar was much sharper now. He needed to get them under cover so he could at least see her face. She and the kid were wearing more layers than the Eagles did whenever he sent them out.

Marc went to the passenger door, holding it for her and then led her into the bottom corridor, where Kyle and Jennifer were following Adrian toward the camp.

Marc waited until the others were out of sight before turning to his unexpected company. He flipped on his belt light and crossed his arms over his chest. “Who are you?”

Julia set the boy onto his feet, keeping an arm around him. “An old...friend.”

Marc scowled as flashes from an ugly past slapped him like the recent rifle butt to the skull. “Julia?”

She pushed her hood off to reveal a gaunt profile under a desperate expression. “Hello, Marc.”

Marc hadn’t thought about Julia in ten years. “How did you find me?”

“I heard the Ghost defy and then defeat the government.” Julia swallowed nervously. “After that, Cody tracked you down.”

Marc stared in dawning horror and shock as Julia slid the boy’s hood off. It was like looking into a mirror.

Julia cringed as Marc’s facade morphed into every nightmare she’d ever had of this moment. She’d always hoped it wouldn’t have to happen. “Please, let me expl—”

“What have you done?!” Marc was unable to process more than the obvious yet. Julia was here. Julia had a son that looked like him. This was his son. Julia had...stolen a child from him! “You liar! You whore! You awful, awful human being!”

Julia held the boy when he would have lunged forward to attack Marc. She deserved everything he

gave her, even if he tossed her out. Cody was all that mattered now.

“How could you do that! You...you...liar! Thief!” Marc spun toward the tunnel, staggering in his pain.

“Wait!” Julia scooped up the struggling boy, running after Marc. “Wait!”

Marc didn’t.

“You, *Boot!*” Julia screamed, using the only way she knew to get his attention.

Marc’s fury passed the level of violence. He twisted around to hit her.

“He’ll die without you!” Julia screamed, not scared after the life she’d led since betraying him. “Hate me, throw me out, shoot me, but do right by your son, Grunt!”

Marc froze, glad she’d called him a grunt. He wouldn’t have been able to stop himself if she had hurled another insult. He stared at her defiant face, seeing the terror of a mother who had nowhere else to turn. He didn’t care about her, but the little boy on her hip, now suckling his thumb in fear, was hard to ignore. “What’s wrong with him?”

Julia sighed in relief. “He’s in shock from things we saw. He’s getting better.”

Marc scanned them, digging deeper than he’d ever gone into someone other than Angie. When he was satisfied that Julia didn’t have a hidden agenda, Marc motioned toward the corridor where Eagles could be heard coming toward them. “Get moving.”

Julia tried to hurry, heart pounding. She'd been sure that he would kill her. It was worth it for her son to be with someone who wouldn't let his gifts be used in ways that would harm him further. Cody had been through enough.

Julia tried to keep up with Marc's stride, but it was impossible. She tripped repeatedly in her worn boots and weak condition. They had always been on rations, but the last weeks had been harder than usual. There hadn't been much food. Julia tried to be grateful her son didn't weigh as much as normal as she struggled up the mountain tunnel. She'd found Marc. When his anger eased, he would do right by their son. That was all that mattered.

Marc wasn't immune to her suffering. He didn't care. It was the child's cry of pain when she tripped and fell that got him to relent.

Nearly snarling, Marc stomped to them and snatched the boy up.

Julia waited at his feet for the beating she deserved. He had his son. He could cast her out right now.

Marc wanted to. Her thoughts were easy to read, but her remorse had no effect on him. Nothing she could ever say or do would allow him to forgive her.

The boy in his arms was light and still, curled around his arm and shaking. Marc tried to give him back to his mother as she stood up, but the boy wouldn't let go. Marc glowered at Julia in confused anger. "What's his deal?"

Julia rushed forward to take her son, but the boy still wouldn't let go.

Marc caught a detail he'd missed in all his rage. "Why doesn't he talk?"

Julia paled a bit, retreating. "He's fine."

Marc shoved into her mind, immediately wincing at her memories of the boy being born. She was in what appeared to be a shed.

Julia slammed down the wall she used with her son.

Marc waved a hand; she was knocked against the tunnel wall. She stayed on the ground, gasping.

"Please, don't."

Marc pulled in the physical form of his anger. It was the first time he'd used it in Safe Haven. The little boy hadn't budged from his curled position around Marc's arm, but his voice was like hearing Charlie speak.

Marc turned toward Safe Haven, catching Adrian's need for him to be there to enforce Angela's wishes on the newest crisis. He tucked the child onto his hip, glad when the boy automatically wrapped his legs and arms around for a better grip. "Keep up!"

Julia hurried to her feet, dizzy. She'd known he would be mad, but deep down, she'd still believed Marc wouldn't hurt her.

"You were wrong."

Julia stared in shock as she realized Marc was an alpha. "He got it from you!"

Marc understood then, more than he wanted to. Julia had believed it was a curse, that the boy was ill. She hadn't been able to accept that her son had gifts. She'd chosen to hide them. Marc instinctively held the child closer. "That won't happen here. You can be who you really are."

Cody didn't answer, but he was listening. His mother had always spoken of his father in terms of a hero. Cody needed that to be true. Nothing else his mother had told him was.

Marc quickly ran through the chaos this would bring, trying to spot big problems that had to be handled right away. Based on what Safe Haven had already gone through, Marc only asked a few important questions. "You running from anyone? Being hunted? Sick? Planning revenge on someone here?"

Julia snorted, out of breath. "No, to all."

"What do you want from us?"

"Us?"

"Safe Haven."

"I came for you, Marc. I don't care about your camp."

Marc didn't tell her that she would in time. He already wanted her gone. He had enough on his plate. "What do you want?"

"For Cody to be safe."

"You've been doing that until now, I assume. What changed?"

"Supplies are getting scarce." Julia felt like she might faint. This was more exertion than she was

used to. “And raiders are getting bolder. Our group was attacked. I barely made it out.”

“So you want to dump him here with me or do you want to be invited in too?” Marc faced her as they reached the guard booth at the summit of the corridor.

Julia didn’t answer. She didn’t have the right to ask for anything except her son’s life. If Marc gave her that, it was enough.

Disgusted, Marc waved a hand at the guard. “Get someone on her. She doesn’t even visit the latrine without company.”

Barry nodded, not showing his surprise at Marc’s hostility. He hadn’t spoken when Adrian had gone by with Angela in his arms and he didn’t now either. It was obviously a bad time to bother anyone.

4

Angela couldn’t stop the tears as Adrian carried her into Safe Haven. The guards around them assumed she was in pain. Angela let them. She couldn’t explain how it felt to be back here without the baby growing safely inside her.

Adrian cradled her, understanding as much as he could. Her misery was hitting him in harsh waves that threatened to bring tears to his eyes, but he didn’t know what to do to help her, other than what he was already trying. Losing a child wasn’t something you got over in a month or even a year.

It was something you carried your entire life. He knew.

“You didn’t tell me that.” Angela sniffed against his shoulder, ignoring their audience as he took her to the medical bay. “Why not?”

Adrian shrugged, glad his chest wasn’t hurting as they neared the lower levels of the camp. “Just didn’t come up. I would have.”

“Son?”

Adrian nodded stiffly. “My eldest.”

“I’m sorry.” She shuddered, trying to restrain the flood.

“So am I.” He shifted her gently into Doug’s waiting arms. “So am I.”

Angela buried her cheek against Doug’s chest as tears broke over her face.

Adrian immediately went down the ladder. He didn’t want to push his luck, but he was also curious about Marc’s visitors. Was that really a bastard child from Marc’s past? Adrian hadn’t thought Marc capable of walking away from a woman carrying his child.

“He wouldn’t!” Jennifer glared. “Quit enjoying his pain. It isn’t right.”

Adrian didn’t reply. They should all be back in their previous lives, worrying over bills. None of this was right.

Jennifer agreed, but with the revelations of the last months, she had come to understand what her role was. Peace wouldn’t come until past behaviors changed, and past behaviors wouldn’t change until

they were pointed out. Half of these people didn't know the line between right and wrong anymore.

Adrian was instantly furious at the teenager for what he saw as an attempt to wrest control from the council he'd put in place. "Who are you to be the moral judge of *my* refugee camp?"

Jennifer paled a bit at the accusation. "I wouldn't do that. The council choices are final."

"Didn't sound like it." Adrian didn't care that Kyle was coming toward them with a shitty expression warning of violence. "Don't get ahead of yourself as an Enforcer, Jennifer. You haven't lived enough yet to understand what drives people to make the choices they do. You have gifts, but you won't deserve them until you gain the wisdom to know when to interfere and when to stay out of it."

Jennifer wanted to argue that, but couldn't. He was right. She didn't understand humans at all.

Kyle fell in behind them, forcing himself to listen before reacting. He hadn't cared for Adrian's body language. He was certain he wouldn't care for the words either.

Falling back into leader was easy for Adrian as the couple stayed close, appearing to escort him out. "It isn't about understanding. You have to search deeper. And then you have to dig. People hide who they are, what they want. When you can determine a future reaction, based on a past event, you're close. When you can accurately predict the reactions of an entire group that you've never met before, whose past you don't know, then you're

there. Past Enforcers didn't take official roles until well into their thirties, and many of them didn't qualify until they were half a century old."

"Qualify?" Jennifer's anger was fading with the new distraction.

"There are tests for all descendants, tests to pass to take your rightful place. Like school. No one is born knowing everything."

"Interesting..."

Adrian was impressed. Kyle knew how to pick them. Jennifer would be a full partner in any relationship. It was nice. "We can't do it here. Boss lady will shut it down."

"Because of the sheep?"

"No. She doesn't want us competing and destroying the peace."

"You've already discussed it?"

"It's in my notebooks. I gave her both angles on it. Because we haven't heard anything, I'm assuming she chose not to and that's why."

"Makes sense." Kyle respected Angela a lot, but it went up now. The descendants could have taken over the camp, like Sonja. Kyle was grateful that Angela was good.

Adrian began to laugh.

Jennifer and Kyle believed they knew why he was amused. The mobster flushed angrily, but Jennifer knew he was right. Angela had wells of darkness. "But she's also our light."

Adrian nodded. "Yes, she is."

The tunnel narrowed as they reached a checkpoint, where the guards approved of Adrian having a high-level escort.

“Is there something we can do for her? I’ve been scanning, but I don’t know.”

“Leave her be for a while? Maybe send her off with you...”

Adrian was happily surprised, but he knew better than to mention how big of a concession that had to be for both of them. “She has to face the pain, but she’ll need breaks from it. When she’s ready for one, Marc will let me know and I’ll take her out for a while. Over time, she’ll come back to most of the Angie we all know.”

“But we have a lot of trouble coming.” Jennifer shook her head. “We need her in charge now.”

“I understand. But you’ve got Marc and the council. They’re good at what they do. Have faith.”

Jennifer and Kyle were now the ones surprised. They’d never thought to hear Adrian supporting Marc.

More conversation had to wait as Marc and his guest reached them.

Marc’s face was red, but his hold on the boy was gentle. The woman behind him didn’t get a glance as Marc stomped by. Both of the descendants he passed immediately began scanning him and the kid for details.

Marc was in no mood for it. He spun around to glower.

Adrian coughed. “I’ll be around.”

Jennifer flushed as Adrian scooted off. "Sorry."

Marc grunted, ignoring Julia's surprise. "Keep track of him."

Kyle and Jennifer followed Adrian.

"Come on." Marc shifted his son to his other arm.

Julia stayed on his heels, unable to place this hard, angry man with the young Marine from whom she'd stolen a child. He'd clearly changed.

"Are you the boss here?"

"For now."

Julia was both relieved and worried over the answer. It gave Marc the power to let them stay and the power to remove them.

"You'll be allowed to stay while I figure out what I'm doing with you," Marc informed her gruffly as the boy clung to his jacket. "After that, you'll abide by the choice I make."

"I will."

"Your gratitude will earn you no sympathy when people find out what you've done. Keep your mouth shut as much as possible and you may get out alive."

Always near Marc now when he wasn't scheduled for anything, Billy fell in step. He'd overheard enough to be concerned. Marc wasn't the type to hide things unless there was a great reason. The woman must be trouble.

"She is." Marc waved. "I want a guard on her. Now."

Billy vanished to locate the right volunteer for private FND. He didn't need to be told to keep his mouth shut. He hadn't been chosen because he was stupid.

Marc took the boy to the medical bay, furious. Angela was going to flip out.

"Who is Angela?" Cody was scanning everyone they saw, but he'd kept the link into Marc's mind open.

"You're strong. That's dangerous here. Can you control it?"

"Of course." Cody halted his explorations to bring down a barrier over his mind.

"Good, boy. Try not to let anyone in, okay?"

Cody nodded, glad to have a game to play. The trip here hadn't been any fun at all.

There was a kind of awed silence as Marc entered the medical bay and sat the child onto the nearest cot.

Cody immediately climbed right back into his arms, much like a monkey.

From the corner, Angela chuckled harshly.

Marc winced. He knew what that tone meant.

"No time for it now." Adrian gave Angela a sharp look. "We have to shut down the rest of this tomb. The fallout is coming."

Marc motioned Neil and Jeremy to get the equipment. They'd been doing monthly testing of the levels while out in the open and when they'd first explored these caves. It hadn't been done since, except for the dosimeters in the air quality chamber.

“The numbers aren’t bad down here yet or Sam would have called you.” Angela leaned against the cold stone next to her cot. She’d insisted on remaining standing.

“We need to test things now.”

“Just tell Theo’s crew to get on it. They know what to do.” Angela led him through it, grimacing from the cramps in her gut. The traveling hadn’t been good for her, but it had been necessary.

Kenn came through the tunnel, face unreadable. “There’s a call for the boss.”

Marc sighed. He knew who that was.

“This is my moment still.” Angela pushed resignedly away from the wall. “You close us down. I’ll buy time from Sebastian’s people.” Angela limped toward the tunnel, brushing by Julia without even a glance. She did spare a small smile for Marc’s son, however. It certainly wasn’t the kid’s fault.

“I like her.” Cody stared with wide eyes. “She’s beautiful—even on the inside.”

Angela felt Julia’s pain and was satisfied for the moment. She had other demons to fry right now, but that snake would be handled.

“The transmission is from the Indians.” Kenn led her through the corridor toward the radio cubby. Behind them, Marc began calling out orders.

“They’re escorting the Mexicans. They couldn’t stop the army from coming through, but they did manage to negotiate themselves into escorts so they could be here for the fight.”

“There isn’t going to be one.” Angela grunted, fighting cramps. “Start selling that. No fight, no more massive death if we stay in here. They can’t reach us.”

Relieved, Kenn left her alone at the radio cubby to get the word spreading.

Angela slid into the warm chair with a sigh and a grunt that combined to produce a whimper. She needed to rest. “This is Safe Haven. Go ahead with your message.”

5

Camped in the charred lobby of the train station Safe Haven had destroyed, Bryson rubbed his hands over the weak fire, stewing. Sonja was buried not far from here. He’d dug her grave with his bare hands, enjoying the pain as each fingernail had snapped and ripped off. It was no less than what he deserved for letting his master die. He didn’t eat meat and had been spared, but his minor gifts hadn’t been enough to save his mate.

“We will be at Safe Haven in hours,” the radio crackled lowly. “Our guests are many, and upset.”

“Copy that. Please tell Mikel to kiss my ass.”

Bryson stared at the radio in disbelief.

The pause on the other end of the radio implied that person was reacting much the same.

“Did you hear me? Tell him to kiss my American ass.”

“Are you sure that’s the message we should deliver to a very large army searching for vengeance?”

“Yes. You are not to interfere. In fact, it is my wish that you and your people depart these lands before the truce between white and Indian is broken once again.”

Now the pause was longer. Bryson was certain the voices were trying to read each other, as well as between the lines, but he couldn’t figure out a hidden order if there was one.

“Very well. We will leave Safe Haven lands. If you survive this foolishness, we look forward to trading with you.”

“Go in peace, my friends, but do go. Linger could be detrimental to your health.” Angela’s words left no room for doubt about her wishes. She wanted the Indians gone and the Mexicans pissed.

Bryson huddled over his fire and tried to figure out why. When he knew Angela’s goals, her motivation, he would be able to destroy her and all she held dear. Unlike those who’d tried before him, Bryson held a strong advantage. He didn’t have anything left to lose and his patience was endless.

6

Kenn was waiting when Angela emerged. “Are you crazy?!”

“I gave you a job to do.”

“I did it. I told Tonya to tell Hilda.”

Angela smirked. “Yeah, that’ll work. The grapevine seed came from her ancient ass.”

“You riled them up. How will we avoid a battle now?” Kenn stayed with her as she slowly walked toward the stairs to the next level.

“Do you trust me yet, Kenn? Would you tell me your deepest secrets in full confidence that they would be protected?”

Kenn considered it and slowly shook his head. “It’s better between us now, but no.”

“Then why do you imagine that I would give you such a pass, when it was your crimes that came between us in the first place?”

Effectively silenced, Kenn still stayed with her as she roamed without Marc’s protection. Their newest boss wouldn’t like it if Angela was found wandering alone. Kenn didn’t intend to get back on Marc’s shit list.

Angela smirked, hidden by her hair and lead position. *Like you were ever off of it.*

The witch snickered with her at the private thought. Kenn assumed he’d been forgiven, replaced by the hatred for Adrian, but he couldn’t be more wrong. Marc wasn’t the forgiving type. Kenn’s final reckoning with him, like Adrian’s, would come.

“What can I do to help?”

Angela sighed. “Just stay close. Marc won’t let me out for long.”

Kenn knew that to be true.

Angela entered the cafeteria-style room, where a few dozen people were enjoying the evening coffee and cookies Li Sing had made. The little man was a genius when it came to cooking with the wrong ingredients. His Chow Mein with tuna had been a lot better than it sounded.

The mess fell silent as Angela was noticed, but she didn't wait for their thoughts. She gave them what they needed.

"We don't have to run yet. We *are* safe here right now. I'll handle it like I have the other threats that have come. Have faith in me."

It was enough for most of them. Despite the dangers of the apocalypse, their administrators were doing a great job of keeping people alive and together. This mountain was proof of that. So were her injuries, most of which were not bandaged so the air could reach them now that the danger of infection had passed. The black stitches in her arms glared harshly in the lantern light as she carefully chose a kid's mug for a cup of strong coffee. It hurt her to lift more than that.

Kenn would have served her, but he knew she wanted the camp to see that she was healing. He clamped down on a protest when she went to a table instead of going back to the medical bay. The camp needed to be calmed and Marc was busy closing up the shop. She had to be here.

Other Eagles in the cafeteria felt the same way. They'd been worried over camp reaction, not how Angela had handled the transmission. The

Mexicans would learn that Safe Haven was the power in this country.

Angela slid carefully onto the bench next to Shawn, who was helping Missy with math papers. She'd had her first school day and wasn't happy.

"I know this stuff already." Missy pushed the paper toward Shawn. "I should be in a higher grade."

"We don't let kids skip." Angela wrapped her hands around the warm cup of coffee. "You may be smarter in those subjects than the kids we've placed you with, but they also have things to teach you. Socialization is important. You need friends."

"Why?" Missy resisted Shawn's attempts to get ketchup out from under her fingernails. "Sonja always says they're a weakness."

"They are." Angela forced a smile. "They're also a source of joy and strength. One balances the other, as with anything else in life."

Missy's face scrunched up in concentration. "So it's worth the risk?"

"The pain. It's worth the pain."

Shawn wanted to pad that, but with Angela sitting next to him, he couldn't.

Angela sighed, resting against Shawn's big shoulder. "If you don't want me to tell her the truth, I won't."

"Someone else will?" He shifted a bit so she would be more comfortable.

“Or she’ll be crushed by it because she didn’t know it could happen.” Angela drew lightly from the strong man.

Shawn didn’t notice, too busy examining the choice before him. When he leaned toward Missy, ready to ask what she wanted, Angela was able to move to her next chore. She slowly stood up, waving him off when Shawn would have helped her. “She’s waiting to hear your next words. Don’t change them.”

Shawn still helped her up, giving Kenn a hard glance as he appeared at her hip.

Kenn ignored the Eagle and everyone else, fingers hovering over his radio. He knew it was coming.

“Where is she?!” The radio blared with Marc’s angry tones.

“Eating,” Kenn answered evenly.

Angela gave a small grin and continued to the next table with her coffee.

Kenn hurried to the buffet line to make her a tray. He wanted to be able to prove his words. Marc was in charge now; Kenn remembered his time with that grunt as their fire team leader. There had been no room for errors.

Instead of anger, Kenn was pleased to be excited. He’d become a better person while laboring under Corporal Marcus Brady. He was actually looking forward to that happening again.

“Damn weird place we came to. It can turn a punching bag into a queen and a king into a servant. That’s some magic.”

Chapter Nineteen

Reluctant Bonds

1

More people came to the cafeteria, upset over the attack. When they saw Angela and then the wide room of calmly eating and conversing dwellers, they got in line for food or drinks, knowing those already here would fill them in. There clearly wasn't as much reason to worry as they'd believed upon hearing the radio exchanges.

"May I join you?"

The two Eagles jumped apart, caught conspiring.

Angela limped toward the bench across from them, not hiding her discomfort. The pregnancy jeans and loose blue top didn't disguise her injuries or her disabilities. Stitches and scars gleamed under the florescent lights of the mess, declaring that she would never be a full Eagle again. Her body wasn't capable of it, despite being helped by powerful descendants. She was lucky to have survived at all.

Both males immediately got up to assist her, drawn from their fantasies of getting Billy banished.

Angela let them help. She'd used a lot of her strength getting rid of the train people. She hadn't replenished it all yet.

“I’m sorry.”

Quinn’s lips thinned into a line, but he didn’t apologize like Jax just had. They hadn’t wronged Angela.

“It is my camp that you were about to upset with your petty jealousy.” Angela groaned under the noise of chattering inhabitants. “I’m not happy about it.”

Quinn would have forced out the required apology, but Angela stopped him. “It’s worthless if you don’t mean it.” She hated these moments almost as much as the killing. She liked both of these men. She didn’t enjoy punishing them.

Why are you doing it at all? Adrian asked in her mind. *Where is Marc?*

Kenn slapped Angela’s tray down in front of her and retreated. It appeared that he’d taken two small bites of her hamburger and a drink of her milk.

“Mustache.”

Kenn wiped it on his sleeve and then turned to monitor the mess.

The cafeteria went cold as Marc and his guards stormed into the area a few seconds later.

Kenn nodded to Marc and vanished, glad to be relieved of the duty and the drama.

“It occurs to me that you’re right,” Angela motioned to the pair waiting for her punishment. “You can tell your new boss what you were planning for his student. Do it now.”

Quinn and Jax angrily did as they were told.

With Marc distracted again, Angela hurriedly stuffed in a few bites and rearranged the remaining food to appear as though she'd eaten more. She would pick on it while she was here, but everything tasted like sawdust.

“These seats taken?”

Angela swallowed. “Nope.” She was glad of the welcome she was receiving mentally and physically. She hated disciplining her people. She found it impossible to be as hard on them as they needed. Marc had no such qualms, however. He was now shouting silently at Jax and Quinn while the camp went on with their meal, unaware.

The Special Forces team members who didn't have duty sat down, sandwiching Angela with their approval and protection.

“We weren't sure how to handle that since Jax and Quinn are both on our teams.” Daryl smiled at her. “We haven't dealt with jealousy in their lessons yet, you know?”

Angela nodded, pleasure flowing through her from all the heat. Guys with strong bodies put off a lot of that. It was wonderful when you couldn't seem to get warm. “When did it start?” She tore off a small part of the fresh bread on her tray. It was flat and grainy, made from what baking supplies that remained, but bread was welcome in any edible form.

“When Marc began mentoring Billy openly.” Wade was thrilled to see her. “Other than Billy, the lower ranks still haven't mastered as much as they

need to. After running sets with the rookies for a few weeks under the new teams, we understand why Marc chose him. Senior men pick up on things like that.”

“Yes, you do.” The mental links she’d encouraged in the Eagles were still being strengthened. Angela was delighted. She’d had too many things on her plate to continue guiding them. “Do you like the new setup?”

The males all snorted or teased her.

“Uh, let’s see.” Wade beamed at her. “You made us the top two teams for all time. What’s not to like about that?”

Angela absorbed their goodwill. She had adored her time with the teams before. She could have that again, with a few limits.

Angela caught sight of Samantha and the soldiers the storm tracker had made friends with during the Donner fight. The doctor had sent down word that they and Adrian were clear because no one else in their group had tested positive for problems. The leader of those soldiers, David, limped straight to the table full of tensing Special Forces men.

“Are you going back to him?”

Angela swallowed the bite of chilling rice and beans that Kenn had chosen to accompany her burger. It was a healthy choice for a survival situation. She was surprised by it. “Is there a reason why I should?”

David scowled, leaning on the table in front of her. He ignored the two men who bumped back with their shoulders, staying put. “He doesn’t deserve to be down there alone.”

“No.” Angela let her words carry. “But the camp voted and I will honor that, always, no matter how much I may not agree. I won’t interfere with the will of the people.”

Furious, David spun around and stomped from the cafeteria.

His soldiers wanted to follow, but Samantha waved them toward the table nearest to Angela and the Eagles. “Have a seat. Let’s talk about my hunting team.”

Torn, the rookies followed Samantha. The light of Safe Haven was obviously wearing them down. Sam had been given the duty of helping them adapt to the rules since they’d been cleared to join the general population. She was trying to fit it in between shifts over the air quality station.

Jeremy waved at her as he went by; drawing a blush from her and chuckles from witnesses, further dissipating the previous tension.

People continued to come to the mess as word spread. Some of them had been slaves in Cesar’s camp, while others had been with Safe Haven while they were being hunted by the ruthless Mexicans. Very few people had been bothered by Angela removing Sebastian and his group before they could become a problem.

Samantha took the soldiers to the double table that already held Cynthia, who was scribbling intently on the next edition of her paper, and Charlie, who was laboring over plans for Kenn and their rookie team. Everyone had been surprised when Kenn had picked Charlie as his XO and Charlie had refused.

Angela sighed. “How is Tracy doing? And Candy?”

“Good on Tracy.” Morgan dipped his burger in mustard. “She spends a lot of her time training alone with Charlie or helping with the animals. She’s down there now, feeding them.”

“Give her some more time before you put her on anything stressful, but she needs to get to work in the other ways. When she feels like an Eagle again, she’ll feel safe.”

You think so? Charlie asked without his usual bitterness. He hadn’t believed his mom cared about Tracy. He was glad she was getting an update.

Yes. It helped me.

Charlie knew that to be true. He smiled at her, getting one in return, and then continued working on his papers.

Angela shut her eyes as chills swarmed her. She didn’t have much energy. She needed to finish this. “What about Candy?”

All the men frowned. They’d discussed it only yesterday.

Greg answered her when the others didn’t. “Not great. It’s almost like...”

“She misses Conner?” Angela supplied tonelessly.

“Yeah. She stays to herself. No more haircuts or training.”

“She refuses to discuss Lee at all. It sucks.”

Angela understood. She also understood not wanting to talk about the things that hurt. “Marc needs to make the choice on her, not me. I’m biased. I liked Lee. I don’t like Conner.”

“Exactly.”

“Yes.”

“That.”

The Eagles agreed Conner was trouble. He had bonded with Candy against her will, much like with herself and Adrian. It wouldn’t end well if she or Candy succumbed to the darkness.

Greg heard footsteps coming. He looked up, which drew the rest of the Special Forces men to scan the mess.

Angela stored the cause and effect, pleased. Greg was coming along nicely.

Neil, top guard on this floor, came through the tunnel. After quick glances around at the short food lines and full, content tables, he returned to his rounds. Other levels weren’t as calm, but most of their population was gravitating toward the mess as word spread. Neil was glad Angela and Marc were both on his floor.

Lost in her reflections, Angela was happy with how Marc was doing. Most of the cave had been battened down. The air vents to the top had been

closed, while the vents that went miles in two other directions had been opened. Depending on the shift of the wind, Safe Haven would be pulling clean air at all times. As the cloud of fallout centered over them, they would lock down completely and then the waiting would begin.

“Room for two more?” Seth hoped so. Becky was sleeping again. The morning sickness was keeping her off her feet.

Jeff was behind Seth, expression saying he didn’t belong here and he knew it.

Kevin had volunteered to gather the supplies they were taking to Sally. He wasn’t ready to face the camp.

Jeff knew exactly how he felt as Angela and everyone else at the table centered on him.

Angela hid her upset stomach. “Always.”

Jeff gave her a quick sweep, reading the discomfort. “You haven’t changed.”

Angela snorted as the guys at the table slid down for Jeff and Seth. “No. You?”

“Maybe a little.” Jeff took a place next to her. “I’ll be more careful of animals from now on.”

Angela grimaced. “Same here.”

“I’ll be leaving to take some supplies to Dog.” Jeff met her eye. *I’m probably not coming back. I expect Kevin to go with me, but I’ll leave him here if it will help you.*

Angela sighed. *No, as much as we need Kevin, it will just bring trouble. He’s more useful to you at this point.*

Jeff placed a hand on hers, sending a bolt of good health into her. *I don't want more people to know.*

Angela didn't tell him that Kevin had already mentioned it to too many guards for it to remain a secret. "We have a few sets of heavy gear. It would be safer if you used it. The levels out there are going to get *very* high."

Those quiet words explained a lot for the people who were able to make the connection. The men around her went silent, studying the implications as they tried to guess what would happen next.

Satisfied she'd given them enough to use to keep the camp calm, Angela finished with Jeff. "I need something you won't want to do, but Adrian has to give Sally a message. She's important to the future. Tell Marc to take him along for the food run in the morning."

Jeff carefully patted her cold fingers, unable to believe how badly she'd been hurt. "I'll talk to him."

"Thank you." Angela slowly stood up as Marc approached the table. She held out a hand, letting their blue spark of connection be viewed.

Marc felt his rage fade another notch as their fingers and force connected. It was impossible to stay mad with her weariness dragging him down. "You okay?"

She curled against his chest weakly. "Yeah. I could use a nap."

Marc caught her as she stumbled, steadying her. "Let's go."

People smiled as the couple left, tension gone except in their concern over her health. They had been told it would take time, that Marc would protect them, but knowing Angela was helping was a large comfort. Their seer had returned. It was okay to breathe and live again.

Marc took Angela to the shallow impression on the same floor as the brig and medical bay, wondering why she hadn't said anything about Julia yet. That viper was currently occupying a cell in the brig while the doctor ran her blood test and the Eagle on duty collected her story. The boy, Cody, had free run of the brig while his mother was being interrogated.

Marc directed her in as Morgan caught up to them.

"Who do you want in charge while you sleep?"

Marc sighed, flashing a hand signal that was opposite of his answer. "I'll get my notebook for you. It has my wishes on that topic."

Angela let Marc remove her boots and tuck her in, already dozing.

Marc flipped off the light and began pulling the door shut.

"Marc?" Angela called sleepily.

He paused, tensing. "Yeah, Baby-cakes?"

"There's no need to do that with me. I won't ever interfere with your choices."

Marc smiled wryly. “Fine. I took a pep pill right after the Mexicans called last time. I’m good to be up for a while.”

“Thank you.” Angela yawned and spoke at the same time. “Good night.”

Marc shut the door, grunting. He’d much rather climb in and hold her, but there was work to be done and his body was able. He and Morgan went to the brig to sort out plans for their morning run out of the mountain.

Angela burrowed deeper into the blankets, ignoring the heart crying out in pain and loneliness. The same misery would still be waiting for her when she woke. There was no need to rush through it all at once.

Outside, Shawn took up his post. He chose a shadowy spot along the narrow curve in the tunnel and blended in. After everything he’d done, having this second chance to guard Angela was a gift from Marc that he wasn’t going to waste. Anyone who came by would be in his crosshairs the entire time and he didn’t care who they were.

2

“I don’t care who she is! I’m not doing it.”

Tonya immediately flipped the doctor the middle finger.

Marc sighed in annoyance. “Listen, children. She’s here. She’s asleep. Do either of you want her up?”

Tonya and Doctor Brooke both denied that, faces contorting into ugly stretches of concern and fear.

“Neither do I. She needs to rest, but if she senses all this anger, she’ll be up and there will be hell to pay.” Marc realized Angela being home would give him another weapon to use against those who disturbed his peace. “Unless you two want her to make this choice?”

“I do.” Tonya pouted. “But in the morning.”

“You’re the boss here.” The doctor sneered. “Tell this one to stay out of the lab.”

Marc picked up the paper Tonya had flung at him upon storming into the security impression without knocking. The numbers caught him, held him.

Tonya sat down in the chair across from the desk before the doctor could, confident Marc would support what Angela wanted.

“I wouldn’t if it wasn’t important.”

The doctor tensed as he realized they were communicating in the way that he couldn’t.

Marc frowned. “She was making an assumption that I would agree with Angela. It’s not true.”

Eased, the doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Well?”

Marc dropped the paper on the desk, pointing at Tonya. “You’re in charge of this project. The lab is yours. The doctor will stay out of there unless he has work to do for a patient.”

“I’ll stay out of there period!” Doctor Brooke pointed angrily. “She can do it all.”

Marc regarded the man in contempt. “If she can, then fine. If she can’t, you’ll do it or you’ll be put on half rations for only doing half of your job.”

The doctor gaped, open-mouthed.

Tonya buried her chin in her chest to keep from laughing in delight.

“Get to work. Both of you.” Marc glared. “And if she gets up from either emotion you’re both spewing now, there will be a price to pay and it won’t come from her.”

Marc waited for the pair to be gone before chuckling lightly. He didn’t understand why the doctor had refused to continue the research on the cannabis oil, except for old world prejudices. There was nothing wrong with using the last of Tonya’s stash to discover if the drug would help their cancer patients.

Marc doubted that it would do that, but it would serve the purpose of eliminating the last of the smokable material from the camp. They’d already eliminated all narcotic use over the last six months between people being too scared to leave camp on their own and all drugs being locked up. Cigarettes were also almost gone, with only a few dwellers still having any packs hidden. Those were being used as trade items and the price was high.

Marc was pleased. The harsh withdrawals were over for their population, except for the potheads, and their turn had now arrived. *It’s great.* He lit a

very stale generic cigarette. It was his last one. Marc planned to suffer through the forced quitting with his people. They would find strength together, as they'd been doing with all the things that challenged them. For what they'd gone through, Marc thought they were all handling it pretty well. It certainly could have turned out worse for all of them.

Am I forgiving her? He exhaled and coughed.

Maybe, but it didn't matter. He still wanted her. He'd made that choice. Angela could be Satan himself and he would still crave her touch, her light.

Marc finished the smoke in silent contemplation, not as stressed as he'd been while Angela was gone. He assumed that most of their camp felt the same. The next few hours would provide the best sleep any of them had gotten since Vlad brought the mountain down.

Wide awake thanks to the pharmaceuticals, Marc opened his notebook and made plans for the morning run. The camp needed food. He would retrieve it.

3

"This will be one of our last trips out of the mountain for a while." Marc swept the eager group of men around him. They had just passed the last guarded checkpoint before the bottom exit of the mountain. Marc had waited to give instructions until they were out of the range of both camp members and guards. "We're checking the Det-Cord down

here on our way, to make sure it's still rigged to blow. Other than the topside, where Greg has been working on the gate and cleanup, this is the last entry or exit from our den."

Marc held out small black bags that contained replacement parts and tools. "If you have to work on anything, remember to be careful. We pieced this together with what little remained from our fights with the bunker. It's fragile."

The Eagles stowed their new items with care, exchanging uneasy glances in the gloom of flashlights.

Marc understood their fears, but he didn't try to soothe them. There was nothing comforting that he could say. *If it blows while we're in here, we'll die or dig our way out.*

He didn't think these guys would find it funny the way a team of soldiers might have.

The walk to the trucks was slow, tense, and cold. By the time they reached the exit, after reattaching the Det-Cord in two places, they were frozen and grumpy. These tunnels were frigid for humans even though they were in their thickest gear.

Spotting dim dawn light, Marc led them out quickly, using his mental grid to scan for waiting problems among the boulders. This was only supposed to be a short trip out. They would drop off supplies to Sally and then hit some adjacent locations in hopes of finding food.

The waiting trucks, freshly refilled from their last run by level six men who were now sleeping happily in the caverns above them, were a happy sight for the team.

Marc gestured to Jeff. "You're with me." He went to the lead vehicle, glowering at Adrian. "So are you."

Adrian and Jeff hurried into the cold vehicle that would at least provide shelter from the wind that was blowing sheets of thin snow and ice over them.

Marc got the engine running and adjusted the seat, still scanning as the rest of the team split themselves between this truck and the one other he'd chosen to take. Marc noted the quarter tank of gas, holding his hands over the heat vent as beautiful warmth started to emerge. Kyle had carefully measured the fuel for this run. He had to watch it or they would be trapped below and have to cart everything up on foot. "Any of our alarms disturbed?"

Kyle slid into the seat behind Jeff.

Morgan took the other seat, intentionally sandwiching Adrian uncomfortably between them.

"No, we're good." Kyle elbowed Adrian over. "They haven't gotten to this section of the mountain yet."

"How long?"

"Kenn said to tell you not to let the sun get too high, so I assume a few hours." Morgan shouldered Adrian back against Kyle.

“Good enough.” Marc shifted into drive. “Let’s roll.”

The ride down the slick hill wasn’t fun, but it wasn’t terrifying for the men on this run, despite the drop-offs waiting if their drivers steered them wrong. The relief and excitement of being out of the tomb for a little while had smothered those fears.

“Where is she stashed?” Marc came to a halt at the level ground near the bottom of their road. He didn’t see anyone around them yet.

Jeff pointed toward the small business district in the distance, where industrial buildings rose in stunted growth from the snow-covered landscape. “There’s a warehouse.”

“Warehouse? With all of the places available now, why did you choose a warehouse?”

“You’ll understand when you meet her.” Jeff didn’t want to fill Marc in with Adrian listening. He knew about the man’s weak stomach; he was hoping Adrian might puke upon entering the warehouse. Jeff had absolutely no faith in Sally’s willingness to clean up after herself or her animals.

Marc steered them in that direction. Whatever it was, it could wait.

“What about any survivors we run across?”

“I’m only out here to pick up food.” Marc studied the map, missing frowns from the Eagles.

Kyle didn’t push, but he wanted to.

Adrian saw the reaction, but he couldn’t comment on it. Whenever he’d gone out on a mission, it was with the understanding that if they

found survivors, the people would be evaluated for being brought into their haven. The new boss apparently wasn't going to give everybody the same gift he'd been given.

A block later, they rolled by a small camp of refugees without a word spoken. Disappointment returned, stronger.

Not scanning, Adrian assumed Marc was wondering why his guys weren't happy with him, but again, he didn't speak up. The Eagles were expecting their boss to care about everyone, even those they didn't trust. They were quickly learning that Marc didn't think like Adrian and Angela. Marc didn't care if everyone survived. He had his picks in the people he thought were worthy. In some ways, it would make him a great leader. Safe Haven's population would be smart, productive. Adrian actually respected him for the choice. It was a hard line that he himself had not been able to follow, nor had Angela. They both had sympathy for all life.

Marc didn't correct Adrian. He knew why the men were disappointed, but he was making the only choice he could. In less than one day, the radioactive cloud would be over them. They had to get business done and get back inside. As for the people they were leaving out here, Angela had already scanned them. If they were supposed to be a part of the camp, they already would be.

As the Safe Haven vehicles rolled by, few of the refugees paid attention. Adrian's sweeps of the refugees didn't reveal much good in these groups.

The desperation they had already been through, combined with the evil in their hearts, allowed for no peace. The smartest refugees had already left. They were off to locate shelters that would protect them during the winter. The takers and the beggars were the ones who were still here, so Adrian understood Marc's indifference. He just wasn't that hard.

Adrian forced himself to open one of the newest notebooks Angela had sent to him through an Eagle, needing the distraction to keep from bringing it up. Marc already wasn't happy to have him along for the trip. He didn't want to make it worse.

Picking it all up, Jeff directed Marc to the warehouse. Despite being in the middle of what used to be a busy town, the location was good. Most of the refugees were camped at the bottom of Safe Haven Hill. There was almost no one in the small town next door. "Over there, by the black billboard."

All but two of the Eagles hurried to the warehouse—not because they perceived a threat, but because the icy winds overwhelmed them as soon as they stepped out of their vehicles. After the warmth of their vehicles, the nasty difference brought tears to their eyes and snot to their noses.

Kevin hurriedly unlocked the warehouse, waiting for everyone to get in.

As Adrian passed, the former leader kept his chin down and his thoughts to himself.

Wise, Jeff thought, coming in last.

Kevin slid the door shut; Jeff quickly locked it as the men around them flipped on belt lights. The dim sun coming through the filthy windows still revealed too many shadows for their liking.

The first thing the Eagles noticed about the warehouse was the smell.

Jeff and Kevin had been in Safe Haven for a week, but neither of them were surprised by the state of the warehouse. The smell of garbage, urine, and feces was enough to make all of them wish for the icy cold fresh air outside.

Marc gestured for the Eagles to put masks on.

Jeff led the way to the rear storage chamber, where he and Kevin had barricaded entrances and exits so only the front needed to be guarded. It didn't look as if there had been problems. It also didn't appear that Sally or the wolves had been outside at all.

Jeff opened the door to find a gun in his face. He quickly smacked it to the ground and then shoved Sally away. "Damn!"

Jeff didn't bother to introduce anyone. He went over to Dog to make sure the wolf was still alive.

Marc did the same.

That left Adrian and the Eagles to deal with Sally, who was furious to have her den full of descendants. She backed into the dusty corner, retrieving her weapon. "Get out!"

Before the Eagles could make things worse, Adrian hurried over the garbage piles to place himself between her and them. He held out a hand,

wishing he'd kept his gloves on while reading the notebook. "Maybe you'd better let me hold that until we're ready to go."

Sally wanted to argue, but it was clear they could take it by force. She surrendered the 9mm reluctantly.

Adrian tucked it into his pocket, feeling the light weight. He wasn't positive that it was loaded. It was something of a relief that Jeff and Kevin hadn't given her a loaded weapon. Sally was obviously deranged.

Marc knelt next to the wolf that was obviously sedated. A quick examination of the wounds explained why. The battle had to have been awful. The wolf was lucky to have survived. Marc looked at Sally. "Thank you."

Sally didn't reply. Her face was still squished in that place between murder and terror. It made her appear quite dangerous.

Marc placed a hand on the wolf's head, noting Dog's new mate sleeping nearby. He shot a blast of healing energy into his friend.

Dog didn't wake up.

Marc hadn't expected him to, but it would have been nice to be able to say goodbye to his old friend. Marc had come to understand that keeping the wolf and humans in the same environment was wrong. Dog had never truly been given the chance to return to freedom since they'd come together. After so many years, the animal was probably ready to live

a normal lifestyle, not to be someone's pet that was always in danger.

Marc observed the sleeping female. Even in slumber, her nose was against Dog.

"Where will you go?"

Sally didn't want to tell Marc, but she needed an escort. "Northwest." She glanced reluctantly at Jeff. "Will you both take me?"

He agreed curtly. "Yes." Jeff and Kevin had already discussed it. There was nothing keeping them in Safe Haven.

"The wolves should be ready for travel in about three days."

Marc gestured the Eagles to unload the bags they'd brought. "We donated a few things we thought you might need, but there is no radio. After this, there will be no contact with Safe Haven for you."

Sally understood that meant she wasn't being invited in. She didn't mind.

The only thing left was to leave Dog. After more than a decade together, it was hard to do. Suddenly very angry at the world, Marc spun toward Adrian. "So what's the deal? Are you done?"

Adrian shrugged, still standing by Sally. "I'm not sure. Neither of us would have let her in either." He meant Angela and himself.

"Well, get done. I want to be gone. It stinks here."

Kyle was eager to get back outside. "Do you want a litter brought in for Dog?"

Marc shook his head. "He's staying."

Adrian was surprised the wolfman was leaving his pet behind.

"If he wanted to be with me, he would. Eagles brought him back in a truck. He didn't come on his own."

Adrian pushed out the personal drama to try to figure out what he was supposed to do with Sally. He wished Angela had given him more information and then mentally grimaced at the irony. How many times had he done this to others, making them figure it out for themselves so they learned something from it?

Sally stared at Adrian, aware that he was a descendant. Not only did she hate him, she was scared of him. He was strong, vivid to her.

Adrian was nervous. It was hard for him to perform on demand. He wasn't the boss anymore and his confidence in himself and his abilities had been shaken. He couldn't concentrate with two of the men he hated and respected the most watching, hoping for him to fail.

Sally reluctantly put her hand in Adrian's when he held his out. It wasn't as if she had another choice.

Adrian anticipated a revelation as their fingers touched, but there was nothing. He wasn't sure what to do, beyond wait with her grimy skin against his. He hoped this wasn't a crazy attempt by Angela to try getting him and Marc to bond or even

communicate. They had already said enough to each other.

Everyone waited in tense silence for something to happen. In the quiet, came the rustling sound of an animal.

Marc glanced down to find Dog slowly waking. Not positive what type of reception he would get from the animal that had been living away from him for more than a month, Marc waited.

Dog came to in a good mood as he realized the pain of his injuries was a little less and Marc was here. He sniffed Marc's boot, tail wagging.

A thick sense of homecoming swept over the room.

Relieved, Marc carefully scratched the wolf's chin. "Hey, boy."

Now distracted between two scenes, the Eagles waited for something interesting.

Surprised to discover the strange leader knew the wolf, Sally pulled her hand out of Adrian's, not sure what he had been doing. "Will you go now?"

"That's not up to me, but if it were, I would say no." Adrian shrugged at her glare. "Whatever I was sent here to talk to you about has to be settled first."

Marc was happy to spend a few moments with Dog now that he was awake. "Go on."

Adrian motioned Sally toward the front of the warehouse. "Let's try it out here."

Eager to be out of the Eagle-filled building, Sally followed.

Dog's injuries were healing faster now that Marc had helped. He looked over to be certain his mate was okay, not whimpering from the stitches. Seeing that she was still asleep, Dog nudged his former owner.

Marc knew without being told that Dog didn't want to return with him. "I'm glad you woke up. We get to say goodbye."

Dog was relieved that Marc understood, but there was also sadness. *Perhaps we shall meet again in the future.*

Understanding Dog had left to avoid a scene like this, Marc didn't drag things out. He gave his friend one last scratch across the top of his head, sending another beautiful bolt of healing light into the wolf. "You've always got a home with me if you want it."

Tired of the constant pain brought to them by the apocalypse, Marc and the Eagles exited the smelly compartment. As they passed Adrian, who was conversing with Sally in low murmurs, Marc noticed a knife drawing on the concrete wall. It was very detailed for being gouged out with a blade tip.

"Did you do this?" Marc could feel the importance.

Sally scowled. "Why?"

"Did you see it?" Marc gloated a bit that he'd caught it and the former leader hadn't.

Shamed, Adrian studied what Sally had carved... Magic filled the room.

The warehouse around them disappeared as the picture enlarged, allowing the cold snow to blow over him as if he was being buried in an avalanche. It quickly became hard to breathe.

Adrian saw seven shadowy forms walking toward him in the distance. “Alexa!”

Marc and the Eagles held silent as they waited for Adrian to finish whatever it was that he was going through. They held more sympathy for Angela and her moments like this than they did for him, but it also hadn’t escaped anyone’s attention that Adrian had now taken Angela’s place in this department. It pissed them off.

A moment later, Adrian snapped out of the vision, breathing in big gasps. “I’m going to need...about twenty minutes...with her. I’ll catch...up.”

Marc motioned the Eagles toward the exit. “If you’re not there, I’ll blow it anyway. No one gets in or out after us.”

Adrian returned to Sally as the Eagles left, not doubting it. He didn’t know how he would get back, but this was too important to rush. His daughter’s life depended on it.

4

“Don’t take your time getting here.” Marc pointed to a place on the map. While they gathered food, Adrian could finish his business with the crazy woman.

Kyle flipped the heater to high against the icy conditions and rolled them four blocks to the first location on the map. He didn't comment on leaving Dog or Adrian behind. He wanted to offer Marc comfort on both of those headaches and solicit some much-needed advice, but he also needed to stay aware of their surroundings. There would be time for talking when they got back to camp, he hoped. For the guidance he required, Marc was the perfect person to ask.

It was clear from first glance that the local sheriff's office had been cleaned out because there was nothing left of it. It had burnt to the ground. Around it, were the usual signs of doomsday—bones and clothes mildewed to the ground from ten months of apocalyptic weather.

"We'll keep going." Marc showed Kyle the next place on the map. He had three to try.

Kyle and his team didn't speak or do anything except keep watch for trouble as they traveled through the city. Helen, Georgia was a ghost town. If not for Sally and the refugee tents on the outskirts, it might have been completely deserted.

The ritzy country club a mile away had also been damaged, but the broken doors and windows were associated with the draft. Marc gestured the team in, leaving two Eagles with the vehicles.

The men cleared the building fast, lights flashing over signs of struggles for life and signs of struggles for death. Plush furniture and swanky

decor were offset by the heavy scent of recent decomposition.

Marc ordered the Eagles to put their masks back on as they walked down a cold, trophy-filled hall to emerge in a small kitchen that fed them into a large dining space. The eating area was where the bodies were, but the kitchen was still stocked with enough food for the Eagles around Marc to clap him on the shoulders.

Marc and the others loaded everything they could carry. They would sort through what was still edible later.

While Marc and the Eagles cleaned out the country club, the two guys on duty at their vehicles stayed alert, trying to stay warm as they smothered the uneasy sensation that always came any time they were out in the open now. Their break from the stone was welcome, but the short hour they'd been out here had already been enough to remind them that outside was the most dangerous place a person could be now.

As if to prove the thought, engines rumbled in the distance.

Billy got on the radio. "Boss, company! We're coming in."

Unable to move the vehicles without being noticed, Billy and Jeff hurried into the country club.

The convoy of vehicles in the distance didn't come directly toward them, but it was close enough for the Eagles to hold their breath as they tried to

estimate the enemy numbers. It sounded like the Mexicans had come in force this time.

Marc and the other men joined Billy and Jeff in the entrance, each taking peeks that were quick and careful.

“Where do you think they’re going?”

“I’d say they’re trying to make sure they have the bottom of the mountain surrounded,” Marc answered Kyle’s question. “Once they have that, they’ll climb up to explore passages and entrances. If that doesn’t succeed, they’ll try to burn us out.”

The convoy was still rolling past, over fifty trucks now. Kyle frowned. “I hope she has a plan for this. Adrian didn’t.”

Marc grimaced. “She does. That’s the last of them. Let’s roll. We have to get to our road before they do.”

The Eagles hurried into their vehicles, where Kyle and Daryl drove them out of sight. When no one chased them and bullets didn’t slam into their windows, everyone relaxed a little. Kyle knew how to get them back into the mountain. They would be there before the Mexicans. No one knew if they would have enough time to exit the vehicles and get into the tunnel before being spotted, but it wouldn’t matter at that point. The wired explosives would be enough to ensure the Mexicans wouldn’t follow, while providing protection for the team—if it didn’t trigger a collapse of the entire corridor. Either way, the enemy wouldn’t get in. Neither would Adrian, unless he rolled out right now.

Marc refused to send him the warning.

Chapter Twenty

Walking A Tightrope

1

Adrian stepped out of the warehouse to find David sitting there with the passenger door of his beater open. “Thought you might need a lift.”

Adrian climbed in, grateful. His business with Sally hadn’t taken long, but it had been illuminating. It had also been directly connected to the man now steering the car down the alley. David showing up now was another sign.

“There’s trouble.” David informed him of the Mexican army’s arrival. He had tried to estimate their numbers but failed to get an accurate count. “There are a lot. High hundreds.”

Adrian grunted, but didn’t respond otherwise. After all the bad dealings between Safe Haven and the Mexicans, Adrian would have been surprised if the enemy had come light. The guerillas were prepared for war, but they weren’t prepared for Angela.

“There’s Marc.” David pointed.

Adrian motioned him to follow. “Keep up.”

The Eagle vehicles were traveling at a rate of speed that made Adrian think their entrance into the mountain was going to be quick. He didn’t know if

they had been spotted or if Marc was just being careful, but Adrian felt the tension in the air. However, he was relieved the man wasn't going to stay out here and try to forage while the enemy surrounded their base. Adrian knew he was underestimating Marc's ability to lead, but it was hard not to, considering how bitter he was.

Adrian and David fell in behind Marc and his team, exchanging waves as they were recognized. The three vehicles flew toward the only road to the mountain that was still open to traffic on wheels.

"How did you know where I was?"

"I saw them leave without you." David didn't want Adrian to know he was following to absorb lessons in secret. "I figured he had left your body."

Adrian chuckled. "Thanks."

"No problem." David motioned toward the glove compartment. "I found smokes."

Adrian broke into the name brand carton, lighting one for himself and the driver. As the nicotine glazed their minds, the rumbling engines grew louder.

"Wow. That's a problem." David hit the gas to stay on the bumper of the truck in front of them as the enemy came into view, Winston hanging comfortably from his lips.

"Here we go." Adrian exhaled. "We couldn't get three hours of peace."

David sped up again. The Mexicans had spotted them; they were turning in this direction. It would be a mad dash to the tunnels. There was no chance

that Adrian hadn't planned for this problem, as far as David was concerned. His mentor might not be liked by many people, but when it came to predicting the moves of an enemy, Adrian was boss. David was confident the man had something planned.

"It's going to get bumpy up here!" Kyle drove the truck by their hiding place and up onto the larger rocks that lined the exit. He had to get them close enough that their vehicles would provide cover while they ran for the entrance. If they left their trucks at the flat hiding place, they would be easy targets.

Kyle tried to get all the way up to the entrance, but twenty yards away was the best he could do due to the huge boulders and steep drop-offs hidden by stone and slushy ice. As he steered away from the edge, the truck's engine stalled, running out of fuel. He'd cut this one too short with his gas estimate.

Kyle slammed it into park and leapt from the protesting truck to get to Marc.

"Let's go! Let's go!" Out and running toward the tunnel, Marc made sure everyone went ahead of him, including Adrian. He wanted to blow the entrance now. If the Mexicans got into Safe Haven, they would slaughter almost everyone. "Run! Run!"

The team made it to the entrance before they heard the first gunshot. As bullets began to ricochet off the cliffs and crags around them, Marc brought up his shield. He was in the rear of the line. As long

as none of the slugs got by him, everyone in front would be fine.

Aware that Marc was being shot at, Kyle and Adrian gestured the others to keep moving. They all wanted to be close to the man in case Marc tried to rescue someone or do something else stupid like that. New leaders were notorious for trying to keep all of their people alive, but sometimes it wasn't possible.

The Mexicans came up the hill in an orderly formation that was terrifying. The tank leading the procession was flanked by a big semi with a grinning lunatic behind the windshield that immediately reminded the senior Eagles of the rest stop and Cesar.

Eagles shoved into the tunnels to avoid the continuous shots, all hoping the tank didn't fire.

"Fuckin' ghost won't quit haunting us!" Kyle unconsciously rubbed the scar on his hand from Angela's teeth.

Marc joined them, shield glowing brilliantly. Out of time, he motioned to Kyle. "Do it."

Everyone else hurried up the corridor as the mobster knelt down to recover the control box hidden in a crevice in the stone. Thanks to Theo's setup, everything was ready, but they would all need to be running as the bottom portion of the corridor collapsed.

Kyle set the pack down, finger hovering over the switch. He wanted to do damage with this first

blow. Like Angela, he needed the enemy to know how dangerous they were.

The first group of guerillas reached the top of the rocky entrance hill and started into the tunnel.

Kyle flipped the switch. He took off running, but was lifted off his feet in the concussion from the blast. He flew forward with the debris.

The explosion wasn't large. Most of Safe Haven had no idea that there was yet another life or death struggle happening on their doorstep, but for the team in the passage, the noise was deafening and tiresome. They were sick of explosions and rocks falling.

As the lower part of the cavern collapsed, Kyle managed to crawl forward through the shock. It was just enough to be in the camp as the tunnel sealed behind him.

The explosion triggered a small avalanche from the cliffs above the tunnel, burying the guerillas that had rushed in. It rained down on the tank, doing no harm, but the semi was sprayed with heavy rocks and then slammed sideways by a washing machine-sized boulder that flew through the windshield. The semi shuddered; the cabin rocked toward the edge of the cliff.

A few vehicles back, the leader of the Mexicans stood up to lean on his jeep frame, staring in disbelief. He'd just lost two dozen men and a semi, plus the driver. *How did that happen?*

“I told you we should have let them go,” a snippy voice quipped from the vehicle next to him.

Mikel’s throw was so fast that Marietta didn’t know there was a blade protruding from her throat at first. It was more of a straight razor with a handle than a knife.

Marietta sucked in air around the blade, panicking as she realized what was happening. Tears rolled down her bronzed cheeks.

Mikel reached out and snatched his knife free, not bothering to wipe it clean as he stowed it in the special sheath on his belt.

The woman, his latest, fell off the foot rail where she’d been standing. Marietta had been a good shot, but she’d run off at the mouth one too many times. He was glad to be rid of her.

Mikel slid into the seat and began turning the jeep around. He didn’t order his guys to dig out any fighters who might have survived. He’d brought enough men to spare on moments like this. He’d simply been surprised to view two of his main targets out in the open. Mikel was certain it wouldn’t happen again. The rats would dig in now, hoping their hunters would get bored and depart.

“You don’t know me!” His madness echoed off the cold cliffs. “I’m not my cousins. When you finally emerge, I’ll be waiting... If I don’t dig in to you first!”

Disoriented, Kyle didn't struggle when Adrian hefted him up and over a shoulder. He just wanted the ringing in his ears to stop.

The trip up the tunnel seemed longer than it actually took. All of the men were tired. That was the way things were now. No one put in a full eight hours of labor anymore, so when real labor came, their bodies weren't used to it. Adrian had known that was a possible risk, but there had been little choice. People were now undependable in most situations. They needed breaks from the way the world had become *eat or be eaten* so abruptly. Hiding from reality that way made them all a bit unsteady when they came out, but it was a small price to pay for sanity.

There was no way the people who had survived the apocalypse could be shoved right back into 9-to-5 lives. They would have to be nursed into that lifestyle, if they were ever able to do it again at all. The children of this generation might be able to pick up where their parents had left off, but the inhabitants who made up Safe Haven's everyday life right now were broken souls.

When they reached the top of the corridor, Zack met them. Marc motioned Adrian and David toward their usual spot. "You guys are in quarantine down here."

Adrian nodded as he put Kyle on his feet, winded. He didn't want to be in the medical bay around Angela. It would already be hard enough to stay away from her knowing how close they were.

Marc gestured to the duty booth where Allan and Howard were on watch. “Drop the food here. They’ll see that it gets to the stock rooms.”

The rest of the team went up to the medical bay to be tested. On the way, Marc sent runners to the senior guards on duty to let them know things were fine. It wasn’t necessarily true, but they were a little safer than they had been before the trip out of the mountain. Other than that top entrance, now there were only two tunnels open and one of them had Adrian camped at the entrance. The other was hidden so well that not even Safe Haven’s citizens had found it until a few days ago. The enemy wasn’t getting in.

Safe Haven also wasn’t getting out. According to Angela, that was the only way they would survive. Marc wasn’t looking forward to viewing the proof of her words. As far as he was concerned, if they survived the radiation, they should stay down here until winter was over and deal with everything else come spring.

Adrian shook his head, picking up the thought. Marc still didn’t understand how important it was for the camp to be off American soil as soon as possible. *But Angela does. She’ll make sure it happens. That’s why I gave her leadership. She won’t let me down.*

Neil was perched on the edge of the security post as the dusty team emerged from the bottom levels. He was no longer on duty over Angela, but he had stayed with her anyway when she'd wandered down here to wait for the team to return. Her official guard, Brandon, was in the shadows, trying to blend in and impress everyone. "Anything I can do?"

"Not that I can think of." Marc slid the kit off his shoulders and began stripping gear. He waved the others to continue. "We already had the top levels mostly closed off. All we have to do now is stay in and keep things tight."

"Sounds like easy duty."

Angela tensed.

Marc and Neil exchanged concerned glances as a chill swept through the tunnels.

"The kids!" The cry echoed down the cavern.

Heavy steps rushed their way.

"You'll be in the medical bay?" Marc spotted Hilda and Ray coming toward them.

"I will. Be careful." Angela stepped aside so he could go by. Life as Safe Haven's boss was never easy.

Neil still stayed with Angela, but they'd barely gotten out of sight when more steps sounded from the opposite direction.

Millie hurried to them with a horrified expression. "Becky's gone! She left a note."

"Becky ran away?" Neil went into angry shock. "Why? When?"

Millie grabbed his arm, dragging him toward the living quarters. “Come on. Peggy found the note. She wants Doug to chase after the idiot girl.”

Breaking the rule without even thinking about it, Neil went with her, gesturing to Brandon. “Tell Marc.”

Brandon took off down the tunnel at a fast jog. He would relay the message to the first guard he found and then resume his post.

Angela was left alone.

Glad of it, she carefully climbed the level ladder that emerged near the brig. She was never happy about chaos in camp, but one thing always led to another. These two events would bring about more of the changes Safe Haven needed. All they had to do was the same thing they’d been doing—survive it long enough to learn from it.

The detention center, which was one bare step above the brig in comfort, was shoved into a rear cave and had wider cells with the same steel bars. Theo and Kenn had worked together on that one to keep it quiet. They had a more modern system than the camp would care for. Thanks to water hoses and drain cracks, prisoners didn’t even have to be let out for baths. It wasn’t pleasant, but it was the safest way.

Chauncey was in the farthest cell, where he would be trapped or crushed in a collapse. His cell dipped down sharply in the rear, preventing room for exercise.

“I’d like to switch you to a better place.” Angela slowly sat on the stool by his barred gate.

The guards, Barry and Whitney, came closer to protect her, but they didn’t alert anyone. Both of those men considered Angela their leader and as such, she had every right to be here alone.

Chauncey stood up and came over to the bars. He looked rough, but Angela suspected much of it was an act for sympathy. “Extra food portions?”

Caught, Chauncey grinned. “Good grub here.”

“I’ll give the cook your compliments.” Angela observed him coolly. “You’ll miss our food when we go.”

“To the island?”

“Yes. You’ll be *here*. I’ve seen it.”

“But I gave that girl the information! You’ve read it!”

“So?”

Chauncey regarded her in horror. “You don’t want them to know about my gift.”

“I don’t think I can keep them from killing you.” Angela leaned against the wall. “When the others like me find out you were the reason the government was able to keep track of us, someone will shove you down the stairs and claim it was an accident or gut you in the shower. I can’t protect you.”

Flipping into sullen, the man tossed himself down onto the cot. “I want to go with you.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

“Convince me it’s worth the trouble of extra guards and drama.” Angela pointed. “Give me at

least two great reasons why you should be forgiven and embraced as one of us.”

Chauncey studied the options and came up with one—telling the truth. “I came here for Safe Haven’s light. In any way that I could.”

“I knew that and still let you torment me.”

“Because it was also the truth. I was told to come here.”

“By Donner.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been screwing with me because you can or because there’s more to the plan that hasn’t happened yet?”

“Because I hate you!” Chauncey’s rage turned his face purple. “I hate you and all our kind. We’re evil!”

The guards came to stand next to Angela. Whitney’s cast glinted with signatures in the lantern light.

“You can only track and record. You have no true value to anyone.”

Broken, Chauncey dropped his chin. “Yes.”

“Now that we have the truth, the leader of Safe Haven, Marc, will decide your fate.”

“I want to touch the ocean,” Chauncey whispered sadly. “I never have.”

Angela refused his plea, returning to the medical bay after ordering the guards to tell Marc everything. Another loose end would be cleaned up once people knew. Chauncey was a traitor, sent in

by Donner to mess with descendant minds. Absolution could never come from one such as him.

Angela entered the medical bay in time to observe Doug awkwardly placing Peggy's large form onto one of the cots. She'd obviously fainted at Doug refusing to go after the wild girl. The doctor and his students were gathered around the pair, quacking in concern.

Not wanting the stress, Angela left. She would pick a quiet place to curl up for a while. Being in these passages was a constant reminder of her missing child.

Hoots and cackles from children in the game area floated down, taunting her.

Angela found an empty storage compartment and curled up on the floor, tears flooding.

4

"The kids have to be in that hidden tunnel." Billy joined Marc in the living quarters an hour later. The camp had needed to be calmed down again after hearing that some of their kids ran away. "We also have two women missing who were slaves in Cesar's camp."

It was understandable that the former slaves and children who had been held by the Mexicans would be scared, and fear caused people to do crazy things. Once Marc explained it that way, people would settle down and then he would be free to investigate how it had happened. He'd already discovered that

the night post on the kids' quarters had been empty for fifteen minutes while the duo snuck off for a few minutes alone in a stock room.

Both of those Eagles were now in the brig for dereliction of duty, but the damage had been done. They had eleven missing people, counting Becky. Marc didn't have her on his grid. He also didn't have the kids, implying they were being shielded. As far as he knew, Becky didn't have that type of gift and neither did any of the children. He had told Kyle to assume they'd been taken. He hadn't told Jennifer anything. He didn't need to. She was currently digging through the people who had access to anything the kids needed or wanted in case they'd been lured out. When she got out of range of the main cave, Jennifer would redirect her focus to breaking through whatever shield was over them. No one kept her out. Marc refused to contemplate the other implication of neither of them having the people on their mental grids.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

"Yes, I need..." Marc paused as Kenn appeared to flash a subtle hand signal.

Marc sighed. "I need you to stay here and keep working with people the way we talked about in our first lesson. Be careful, but don't lie."

Billy swallowed nervously as he took Marc's seat next to the security post. "I'll cover it."

Marc went to the radio, mind racing. "This shit always comes in three or more. Put Tonya on the radio and find Samantha. I need to know what the

weather is doing, and I'd like Jeremy on the laptop. I also want a current fallout level."

Kenn vanished, eager to be in the mix now that chaos was visiting them again.

Marc closed the door to the radio cubby and sat down in the warm chair. *This should be fun. Nothing like walking a tightrope with weights on one ankle.*

"Safe Haven, here." Marc hoped he was wrong about what this was. He hadn't known Angela planned to piss off the Mexicans, but after the narrow escape that had killed people, he should have expected a kidnapping. He just didn't know how they'd gotten in. *That's what I get for treating her differently. From now on, Angela will have the same rules as everyone else.*

"Where is the woman who spoke so rudely earlier?" a Mexican voice demanded.

"Resting. I'm in charge of this camp." Marc used a firm tone. "You were told to leave our country. Why are you still here?"

"We are at the base of your mountain. We have surrounded it. Until we get what we came for, we will not leave."

"What did you come for?" Marc assumed it was revenge for Sebastian and Cesar since there hadn't been an immediate ransom demand.

"My family. I believe their names are Royan and Romero."

Marc leaned back, stunned. He'd never imagined the Mexicans would want Cesar's sons or

that Cesar still had relatives left to haunt them. This added a new layer of trouble to the situation.

Marc keyed the mike. "Roy and Romeo are members of this camp." He used the version of the names the boy's had chosen. "They will not be handed over to anyone. Leave now before things get uglier."

Chilly amusement came through the radio. "My men were right about you and the woman being dangerous, but it will not matter. We defeated the patrols of soldiers who came south during your war. We do not fear the cold or the flames. We will not leave until our family has been released. Would you not do the same, if we held relatives of yours?"

"Yes, because they would be slaves if they were with you. These boys were rescued by Safe Haven. They have become full members, with all of our protections. We will not hand them over."

"We will not leave. After a month, when your bellies are hungry, we will be here. After three months, when your people are dead and dying, we will still be here. Perhaps you wish to consult with the woman who makes the decisions?"

Marc didn't reply. He'd already given his answer.

"Couldn't give them to you even if I wanted to." At least he knew why the kids had run away. They'd assumed they would be handed over and fled to avoid recapture. Marc suddenly didn't blame them one bit.

Marc went to the brig to get a fresh vest and gear. After that, he and the Special Forces teams would hunt for their missing people. Their morning was just getting started.

5

“The numbers haven’t changed down here in the cave yet.” Jeremy had arrived at the brig to deliver the update, catching Marc as he donned his gear. “Nothing is moving on the satellite, except refugees still coming in from the west.”

“What about the weather?” Marc laced his sturdiest boots. He didn’t know how long this hunt might take or where it would lead them. He wanted to be prepared.

“Cold as hell, but no storms other than the one that went northeast of us yesterday.”

“Good. Help keep things under control here while we’re gone.”

“You know it.” Jeremy wasn’t glad they had more trouble, but he was glad to be needed after his screw up. He was also grateful that Samantha hadn’t been told.

“Keep track of Angie?” Marc asked suddenly.

“I’ll go to her as soon as you give the word.”

“Now.”

Jeremy exited the brig, eager to do the quiet labor.

Marc shoved a thicker coat into his kit and went to the bottom tunnels.

6

“Is she with them?” Seth demanded it as he joined the guys in the top floor training room, wearing a copy of their uniform and gear despite not being Special Forces yet.

“We don’t know.” Neil was sporting more equipment than he knew what to do with. Marc had insisted.

Becky’s note had been short. Seth replayed it repeatedly in his mind, falling in line behind the two teams when they exited the training chamber that held their lockers.

I’m a danger to this camp, to every person here, because I can’t control my nightmares. When I can, you’ll see me again.

Seth could feel the yearning for death in her words, the impossible goal of erasing the past in the scribbled letters. She wasn’t coming back.

The mission team stopped at the medical bay to collect Doug and Jennifer, then went down to the tunnel the kids had taken.

Marc advanced into the darkness as soon as the team came in sight. He’d already been here, updating the fresh Eagles at this checkpoint. There was no other way the kids or Becky could have gone.

Most of the team believed they would locate the entire group huddled together for warmth before

they reached the end. The children hadn't taken their coats.

"How long have they been gone?" Doug was ashamed for not taking time to tell the boys they wouldn't be handed over to the Mexicans. He hadn't imagined that was an issue.

"Marc narrowed it down to two hours." Daryl and the big man were bringing up the rear as the quicker men hurried forward to protect Marc.

"Let's move!" Marc called from the icy darkness ahead of them.

The team shifted into a faster pace, breath steaming out around them like small clouds of moist, ominous fog.

7

"Coming in." David spotted the light from Adrian's fire, but not the man himself.

Adrian emerged from the wall as if he was a part of it. His new clothing was a perfect match to the stone. "You need something?!" Adrian didn't want David getting in trouble for visiting him.

"A place to crash. You got room?"

Understanding the choice the healing man had made, Adrian lifted a brow. "You sure? It's cold down here."

David slung his gear to the ground near the flames and knelt by the coffee tin that was boiling over on the fire, causing it to spit in protest. "Not

very warm up there without your woman in charge. That Ghost is some hard piece of work.”

Adrian nodded. It was a fair assessment. Marc had a moral line that was absolute. He wouldn't break it, but the apocalypse, combined with leadership of Safe Haven, would give the man new insights into survival.

“You eat yet?” David handed Adrian a cup of the burnt coffee.

“I have a wonderful meal of ramen noodles planned. I found a case of chicken flavor last week.”

David grimaced. “You know those things are poison, right?”

Adrian laughed. Unable to help it, amusement bubbled out into the tunnels, spreading light that he no longer had the right to share with his camp. Horrible sadness stopped the mirth, replacing it with sullen depression.

David dug through his bags and pouches. Very happy with the minor pain instead of flaring agony in his ankle as he bent and knelt, he labored silently for his mentor. He already felt better. *This is where I belong.*

Adrian sat down on the flat rock and opened his notebook. He had put it down when he'd heard the steps. With the Mexicans on their doorstep, he was twitchy, and not inclined to take chances.

After adding a bit of tinder and a few logs to the fire, David poured his canteen into his cooking pot and placed it over the fire, with the lid. While he waited for it to boil, the soldier gathered a few

items, mixing them together in the tiny frying pan that had come with the camping cook set. He still didn't speak.

Adrian watched the man assemble a meal, stomach growling. He'd missed real food since his banishment, along with toilet paper and coffee that didn't taste like ass.

David covered the pan and used two bottles of water to fill his small kettle. He added two tea bags and the rest of his personal stash of sugar to the kettle, then replaced the lid. As the first pot came to a boil, David deftly slid it onto the stone floor and placed the frying pan over the flames.

The large baggie of jasmine rice captured Adrian's attention as David dumped it into the first pot of boiling water and used the lid from the frying pan to trap the heat.

Adrian realized he was being given a gift. "Who sent it?"

"Li Sing said to hurry up. He needs someone to play chess with."

"Tell him I'm working on it."

"I will." David pushed the kettle onto the flames before swirling the frying pan around. A wonderful smell began to fill the tunnel.

David set out one bowl and a large mug with a lid.

"You're not eating?"

David snorted. "I couldn't swallow another bite. Li forced me to make it while he watched. Would have been rude not to eat it when he told me to."

Adrian was impressed with Li again. He'd wanted to be positive Adrian got enough food to hold him through a full day. He couldn't do that if his company needed to be fed too.

David rotated the frying pan and the kettle every couple of minutes, slowly warming both until they were fully heated. The tuna stir-fry over rice had been amazing. David wanted to witness Adrian's expression when he tasted it.

"Coming in," a familiar and not entirely welcome voice called from the Safe Haven direction.

David noticed Adrian's tension and shifted so he had a clear shot at the new guys if it was needed. Everyone here referenced Jeff and Kevin as if they were saints, but David wasn't taking the chance with Adrian's life. The new bruises the blond had were glaring in the firelight as if to support the choice.

Jeff and Kevin appeared through the gloomy passage, both cold and concerned.

"Have you seen Angela?"

Adrian was on his feet in an instant. "What?"

"He hasn't. I told you she wouldn't do that." Kevin flashed Adrian an uncomfortable glance. "Jeremy is looking for her. We don't want to bother Marc and we don't want to piss her off if she just wants some free time. We stopped by the medical bay to talk to her about Sally, but she isn't there."

Adrian hit his radio. "Who has the Raven?"

Silence came for a moment and then Angela's voice echoed. "I'm fine. Visiting with an old friend."

Adrian frowned. "Chauncey."

"Yeah, what's up with him?" Kevin was curious. "We've never had a prisoner before, at least, not for so long."

Adrian didn't mention Kevin's use of the word *we*, but Jeff noticed it and scowled.

Adrian didn't know what to say as he sat down, eager again for the food since Angela was all right. "Don't let the boss lady spend too much time with Chauncey. He's bad news. He plays with her mind worse than *I* ever did."

Jeff took the warning to heart. Now that he was here, his feelings of duty and loyalty to Angela and Safe Haven were returning by the minute. He couldn't wait to be gone again before this place sank the claws back in too deep for him to escape.

"How did you guys get hooked up with Sally?"

Jeff sent Adrian the mental story of all they'd gone through, tolerating the slime ball because Angela had said it was important. He hadn't snooped on Adrian's moment with Sally, but he was now wondering if he should have.

"Wow. She's nuts. You're lucky to have gotten out." Adrian was impressed. "Are you sure you want to leave Safe Haven for that?"

"Yes," they answered in unison, tones clearly implying he was the reason.

“Sorry to have bothered you about Angela.” Jeff exited the tunnel, unable to stand being around his former boss. He’d been gone long enough to understand that his anger was from the disappointment and the betrayal. Crista’s death had been an awful accident on the part of Safe Haven’s leadership, as had Tracy’s assault and the other injuries and deaths they’d suffered. Fights for freedom required that type of sacrifice. Jeff had accepted it years ago. What he couldn’t accept was the betrayal that had come from someone he might have once considered a brother.

Adrian tensed as a wave of pain he wasn’t allowed to feel slapped at him. “Oh, you little liar!”

Kevin lifted a brow.

Adrian wasn’t going to pass the job to someone else. “She isn’t with Chauncey anymore. I’ll be back.” Adrian headed for the next level. “Will you be my escort?”

Kevin nodded, though he wasn’t positive a former Eagle was enough for the camp or for Marc. He would claim he didn’t know the rules so Adrian would get the blame if there was trouble.

“There won’t be.” Adrian increased to a jog. “Marc’s busy or she wouldn’t be alone.”

Kevin heard the tone and frowned. *Why can’t Angela be alone?*

“She’s not herself, from losing the baby.” Adrian increased his pace again, forcing Kevin to concentrate on his footsteps around the gaps and piles of rocky debris instead of asking questions.

Kevin wasn't as familiar with these lower caves as Adrian was. He hadn't spent the last month alone in them.

"Where is she?"

"We'll have to search." Adrian lit up the bond he and Angela had created through the forbidden call, swarmed with hatred for the slobbering voice on the other side of the barrier that had refused his pleas for help. If the day ever came that the situation was reversed, his reply would be the same.

A golden wisp lit up before them and then faded.

Kevin was instantly fascinated. "What was that?"

"My tracker." Adrian didn't give Kevin any more details than he might already have.

Ignoring the sentries on the stairs, Adrian stopped at the top and waited. The small golden ball lit up for a brief second and took off up the damp wall.

Adrian went to the next level, not answering the questions of anyone he passed. Because he had an escort, the Eagles let him go by.

Adrian tracked Angela to the rear of Safe Haven's storage space, wedged between dusty bags of wheat and flour. Tears were dried to her cheeks. "Angie."

Adrian kept his distance as Kevin went to her, blocking the view of anyone who might have followed them. A minute later, Kevin had her on her feet.

Adrian reluctantly backed out of the compartment. Marc wouldn't like it when he found out who had helped her. He didn't need to be there to feel it.

Kevin took Angela to the medical bay, glowering at her guard as he came running toward them in panic.

Brandon opened his mouth...

"Shut up!" Kevin hissed, catching Angela's need for this to remain between them. "Get her arm."

Certain he had just lost his next rank, Brandon gently took Angela's arm and helped get her settled with the doctor and students, who scolded her the entire time.

Angela didn't respond. She stared at Peggy's unconscious form in misery, refusing to glance away until the doctor finally sedated her to get away from the creepy tension. She wasn't doing well.

Chapter Twenty-One

Would You Believe?

1

“Do you hear that?”

Kyle shook his head. He didn’t hear anything except for their funny echoes rebounding off the stones, but he didn’t doubt Jennifer.

Jennifer wasn’t sure why the kids weren’t on her mental grid. It bothered her that Marc couldn’t detect them either. She was positive they were alive. She was bonded with some of the missing children. She would feel it if they’d died.

The tunnel was icy. The temperatures in these surface caverns were below freezing. They wound along the earth like a large snake trying to dig a way into the mountain. She shivered, straining... “Listen.”

The team stopped, waiting to hear anything.

A soft whimper of relief broke the silence.

“It’s them! They’re here!”

“I told you they’d come for us.”

Jennifer and Kyle led the men forward, eager to comfort and then scold the children.

Marc was busy scanning to find out what had happened with Becky and the two missing women. He scowled at the images of the two females

running straight out of the corridor into the cold and waiting arms of the Mexicans. He didn't want to imagine their fate.

Ahead of the team, the tunnel curved, making a small pocket protected from the wind. They found the eight missing kids there, huddled behind a small fire. They were all grateful to see the Safe Haven adults.

Roy and Romeo stayed back as the other kids ran forward to hug their rescuers. The Eagles drew coats from their kits and tried to warm tiny hands.

Doug went to his boys, kneeling down. "Why?"

When they wouldn't answer, Doug took their cold hands and led them to the others. "Come on. Get your coats on and we'll talk on the way."

The boys went willingly, exchanging glances of relief. They both expected to be punished for running away, no matter how scared they were. Safe Haven's adults were brave. They wouldn't understand being afraid.

"Not true." Jennifer ran a caring hand over Roy's short, stiff hair. "We were scared when we found you gone. It would hurt us to lose you."

"Yes!" Doug zipped the smaller boy's coat and lifted the child into his arms.

Jennifer took Romeo's hand, reading what had happened while he thought she was comforting him. "Did you see Becky?"

"She made us come back. We saw her and followed. When we realized there was a way out, we voted to take it. Becky was down at the exit,

waiting for dark she said, when the other two girls ran out.”

Roy peered up at Doug. “She was mad at us. When she shouted, we ran.”

The adults were happy that Becky had sent the kids back, but also angry that she hadn’t escorted them.

“We were coming, but it got so cold!” Romeo shivered. “We voted to build a fire and wait for the Eagles. We knew you’d find us.”

Doug hugged both children. “We won’t let them take you!”

Marc gestured for half of a team to escort Doug and the kids.

As the marching recommenced, Kyle kicked out the small fire and waited for Jennifer to take the lead again. Marc was having her guide them down each set of adjoining corridors, trusting her to track as she’d been taught. Kyle didn’t tell her that every man here had also evaluated the evidence after her and arrived at the same conclusions. It was likely she already knew, but it was to be expected. Eagles were taught to do the math for themselves, as well as to trust their leader. Problems only arose when one of their totals didn’t match up, something they needed to know anyway.

Seth stayed in the rear, dwelling on his bad thoughts. He didn’t care that the men here outranked him. That wasn’t why he stayed back. Seth knew he wasn’t in the right frame of mind to lead a mission. A few months ago, he would have

been fighting for lead, but he wasn't Marc or Adrian. The best people for this job were already doing it.

Jennifer and Kyle rounded another corner, only to stop again. Becky had written a message on the wall, carved with her knife. A small flashlight was shoved into the crevice across from it so the words wouldn't be missed.

Unless I'm a hostage, stop chasing me.

Jennifer and Kyle stepped aside to let Seth read it, not sure what to do. Marc and Angela would probably say to locate her anyway and be certain that she was okay, but Adrian would say it was her right to leave or stay. It was a hard choice. These men had been trained using Adrian's methods, but Marc was in this rescue party.

Seth stared at the message for a long time, fury and disappointment warring with common sense.

Jennifer and Kyle went to opposite ends of the curve to wait, keeping the team between them.

Seth slowly twisted toward Marc. "Is she?"

"No." Marc shrugged. "We only have one prisoner right now. Chauncey."

"Then I'm going after her." Seth couldn't make any other choice. "I'd like the escort if you want to send a few people with me."

Relieved, nearly everyone nodded. If Becky made it out, the Mexicans would get her. Her time with Rick would seem like a vacation in comparison, but Seth wouldn't be there to save her this time.

Marc knew where he was needed most. He gave Seth all but two of the men and hiked back up the corridor to help Doug and the others with the kids.

Seth turned toward the bottom of the tunnel and resumed walking. Behind him, the Eagles came, but Jennifer didn't retake the front of the group. Seth was the leader now, able or not. She was his protection.

2

David had Adrian's plate and mug ready when he returned. Adrian ate all of it, relishing the taste and smells. He didn't let his worry interrupt his appetite. When Marc got things under control, he would care for Angela. Until then, Kevin and the others would do it. Right now, Adrian needed to care for himself. Later, when they figured out that only his light could heal her, things would be as they had been before his secrets had destroyed so much trust.

Not fast enough. Angela had implied he only had weeks. How was he supposed to prove his worthiness and earn forgiveness from everyone in just a few weeks?

Stomach full, Adrian lit a smoke and sipped his sweet, hot tea, not hating the tunnel as much. Down here, he could think.

"Is she okay?"

Adrian belched. "She's surviving, like the rest of us. A lot going on up there."

“You hear how she handled the call?”

“Just like I taught her.”

“Was she really a rookie when she came to Safe Haven?”

“A level one. Marc had been teaching her on their way to us.”

“So their story is true? Childhood sweethearts?”

“So they say.” Adrian didn’t let himself lie, though it hurt. “Seems to fit. You could fry eggs on the heat between them.”

“Must be nice to feel something like that for someone.” David washed Adrian’s bowl, then refilled his mug from his thermos. Li had also insisted he make his own tea to carry.

“Were you married?” Adrian tossed the soldier a smoke from his pack.

“No. Never found the right girl, or she never found me.”

“Isn’t this the part where someone says there’s still time?” Adrian understood loneliness too well.

David chuckled, finished with the cleanup. He dug out his bedroll, placing it across the fire from Adrian. He knew the former boss was expecting an explanation of some sort. “Wake me in a few hours for my turn.”

It hadn’t been lost on David that Adrian was the terrifying guard dog Safe Haven needed. David was honored to help. He often wished he’d been with them from the beginning and then he too would feel as though he belonged here, that he deserved to be a part of this amazing group.

Adrian sympathized. The soldiers would have taken longer to adjust even if he had still been in charge, but David had the same craving as Kenn when he'd first come. This man wanted to prove he was valuable. David would make a great right or left hand for a smaller group. He didn't deserve to be saddled with a disgraced leader. He was worthy of...

Adrian froze as a premonition overwhelmed his senses. He still hadn't learned to control it. The moments were too rare to allow practice.

The tunnel morphed into a western town Adrian had never been to. The swinging doors, muddy streets, tolling church bell, and dusty horses suggested the old west, but the sky was lit with an unnatural backdrop he couldn't mistake. He spotted other signs that implied it was after the war, like the use of modern lanterns and tents. The handstitched patches in modern fabrics confirmed it as a post-war date.

The vision grew clearer. Adrian saw an empty blacksmith hut gleaming from pristine care. A reflection sparked in the window of the hut, showing a group of hardy fighters. Adrian studied their leader with the love a father held for his only daughter. "Alexa."

David glanced over to find Adrian's eyes open but rolled back in their sockets. It was more than odd.

"I knew you were alive." Adrian blinked as the vision vanished, forced to replay it in his mind as he scoured for details. He'd stayed away from Alexa to

protect her. He hadn't had fresh information about her in half a decade, until today. The vision with Sally had been quick, but this second premonition was detailed.

"You okay?" David rose up on one arm. "I'll make a run if you need something."

"I don't suppose you know how to shoe horses?" Adrian looked over distractedly.

"I do." The soldier smiled, remembering his days as a rodeo cowboy. "Loading them can be a bitch. Shoeing is easy in comparison."

Adrian felt the magic of fate all around them. "If I told you there was another me out there, one who isn't broken and needs you, would you believe?"

"Maybe." David sat up. Adrian clearly needed to talk.

"What if it took years of waiting?"

David frowned. "I'd need proof of some kind, but yes, I'd probably want to know if it was true. There doesn't seem to be a place for me here."

Adrian sighed in relief and frustration. "What proof can I offer?"

3

Seth spotted Becky's prone form as they left the shelter of the cold corridor, heart pounding in dread. They'd been traveling for an hour since finding the kids.

Before he could rush forward, Jennifer pointed to the glint of metal in the distance.

Becky waved at them. "Get down!"

Seth collapsed in relief, joining the others on the icy, rocky ground.

Becky watched the Mexican army surround the bottom of this mountain section in the fading afternoon light. She didn't reciprocate when Seth crawled up and clutched her as if she'd been gone for days. She shrugged him off. "We've got trouble."

Seth and the others realized the guerillas were coming straight toward them.

"They know about this tunnel somehow." Becky was furious about it, assuming they had another traitor. "We have to close it."

"And quietly." Kyle concurred with the choice. "If we call it in, they'll rush up right now. A lot of our people will get hurt."

"Fall back." Jennifer motioned to their men in the rear.

Jennifer motioned to Kyle. *Do you have anything on you?*

She sent an image that made Kyle shake his head regretfully. *No, but I will from now on.*

Jennifer studied their surroundings as they reentered the cavern.

"We'll shoot it, make the entrance fall." Greg dug through his kit, quietly. "Or a grenade?"

"What if they know about the other tunnel we still have open?" Ben ducked down as the Mexicans got closer.

“Yeah, there could be another group coming up to that passage right now!” Greg swung toward the entrance. “We have to call Marc.”

Kyle made the choice after a quick evaluation. “We’ll move further up and then contact Marc. Let them get into the tunnel here first.”

“Then we set off the emergency charges?” Greg knew they’d placed them all over the summit of their mountain. They’d had all this set up for the top, where it neared their actual camp. No one had wanted to have to dig out the entire mountain when it was time to leave.

“That’ll seal us off completely.” Becky’s tension rose. “We’ll be trapped.”

“Yes, that’s what Angela wants.” Jennifer was too tired and cold to scan Becky deeper. “The fallout is coming. She thinks we’ll be safe if we’re buried under the earth.”

“She might be right.” Kyle motioned them to go up the corridor. “Come on.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Becky darted out of the cave.

Seth turned to Kyle for help.

The mobster shook his head. “She just made her final choice. Make yours.”

Seth followed Becky.

Both of them vanished into the shadows.

When no shouts of discovery came, Kyle and Jennifer stuck to their plan.

“We’ll use all three launchers.” Kyle got his from the kit. Special Forces teams now carried

bigger gear for moments like this one. Angela had added to their arsenal and Marc had insisted that they bring it.

“Aim for the cracks and gaps. Theo said those are weak spots.” Jennifer jogged up the tunnel. Except for Kyle and the three guys doing the launching, the teams would keep traveling. They needed to be out of the way of the blast, but there was also a chance that this entire passage could collapse and kill them all where the last one hadn’t. Everything was a risk.

Jennifer heard the sound of the launchers firing and keyed the radio on her belt. “Incoming! Check the tunnels! Incom—”

4

“Check the tunnels! Incom—”

Adrian and David leapt up, grabbing for weapons at the broken transmission. They staggered to the entrance that came from the bottom of this passage, not waiting for orders.

“You see anything?” David turned his radio down as it went crazy with voices.

Adrian squinted into the darkness. “No...but I feel something.”

“All teams to stations!” Adrian’s radio blared with Tonya’s angry voice. “This is not a drill. We have intruders! All teams to stations!”

“Down!” Adrian lunged toward David, taking them both to the hard ground.

A blast of bright red light flew through the darkness. The blast of energy sailed over their heads and slammed into the stone, splintering chips in a dangerous shower.

“Blow it!” Marc commanded over the radio. He had just sent the kids to the medical bay for a checkup when Jennifer’s warning came.

“Hit the button!” Adrian fired back.

David scrambled toward the box Theo and Kenn had rigged, dodging bullets and bright flashes.

Adrian spun, knocking David out of the path of another energy blast. He bounced off a wall, spinning again to avoid a small hail of bullets. It put him right next to the box. Adrian dropped down on top of it, bringing up his shield. “Get in here!”

David crawled, returning fire, until he was touching Adrian’s leg. The shield immediately enlarged to include him.

David stared in fascination.

Adrian hit the button.

The cave below them imploded in a series of thundering explosions, shaking the stone to send showers of dust and dirt through the lower passages. The mountain groaned in agony.

The Mexicans who hadn’t been buried kept coming through the corridor, reaching them despite great shooting. It forced Adrian and David to retreat to the ladder. There were too many guerillas to fight this way.

“Hurry!” David lunged through to the next floor and began pulling the rope. Adrian, halfway up,

grunted at pain in his leg, but managed to help yank the ladder up as he hit the stone. They got it out of reach as the Mexicans reached the hole, firing through and into the rock around it.

Both men cowered from the barrage, hearing nothing but the ringing of guns and slugs pinging off cold stone.

“Get back!” Marc called loudly from behind them. He knew hearing was difficult when you’d just had your ears overloaded.

Adrian and David rolled out of the way of the advancing Eagles who were carrying vials.

Adrian scowled as he realized what they were doing. He didn’t approve of taking hostages, but he didn’t interfere. He was just glad to be up here and not down there.

Marc deftly tossed two vials through the hole, ducking gunfire and flying metal.

Two more Eagles ran forward to do the same. Glass shattered. Coughing replaced the gunfire and shouts.

Marc and his team retreated, scanning the areas around them in case anyone had gotten through. On the top level, Greg and Daryl were doing the same if it was needed. Marc didn’t think it was. Greg had been out there working on the gate all day. He would have spotted anyone entering through that part of their mountain.

The homemade knockout gas worked quick. In less than a minute, the loudest noise below them

was the shifting of the mountain as it settled, then soft groans and thuds as bodies hit the ground.

Marc gestured the Eagles forward. “Keep dosing them until they’re all out or they surrender. If it kills them, so be it.”

Billy snapped a salute that hurt Adrian as much as it made him proud. He’d overlooked the driver. Marc hadn’t.

The radio lit up with a barrage of furious Mexican words that only a handful of people in Safe Haven were able to decipher. The Mexican leader was furious that both his attempts to penetrate the mountain in broad daylight had failed. Marc went to the other site, where Kyle and Jennifer had been heard from last. He didn’t spare a glance for Adrian or David, who now had to be given a place within the camp. All of their gear was below.

Marc waited for a clear pause while he walked, then addressed the man over his belt radio. “I now have fifty of *your* men. Another undetermined amount have been buried alive. Leave these lands and I will release your men, unharmed, after we finish digging them out. Refuse and I’ll let them die where they are.”

“You will pay for this!” The radio vibrated with Mikel’s fury.

Marc kept climbing to the upper level. “No one fucks with Safe Haven while I’m in charge, little man. You’ll learn that.”

Despite his revulsion, Marc had finally accepted Angela’s plans for the Mexicans. They’d proven

they couldn't be trusted by trying to infiltrate as soon as they arrived. Guerillas had been sneaking into place before that first verbal exchange or they wouldn't have reached Adrian's sewer site yet. Mikel was another snake, something Marc had no remorse over removing. It was why he'd become a Marine. Some people needed to die. That was even truer now.

Adrian was impressed with Marc's mindset. It showed the man was coming to the important realizations faster than Angela had estimated. It was encouraging. While Adrian was earning his way back into the camp's good graces and Angela was healing, Safe Haven would be taken care of by someone who was a fierce defender of right and wrong. Marc's time in charge would be short, but productive.

The need to document it came. Adrian thought of his notebooks and valuables, all now within reach of gassed enemy hands. *That won't do.*

"I'm going back down." Adrian glanced at David, ignoring the surprise of the Eagles now on duty here. "You got me?"

"You know it." David stood. "Been too quiet for me, Boss."

The other Eagles, the ones who had trained with Adrian and lost faith, felt his absence keenly at that second. Those had been their moments, their emotions and words coming with every victory together. Adrian had found new Eagles, but they didn't have a new Adrian.

Adrian knelt by the smoky hole. "I'm coming down. You shoot me, you'll die." Adrian didn't wait for anyone to stop him. He dropped through the ten-foot hole, landing on bodies.

David fearlessly followed him down.

The Eagles, bound by orders, crowded around and tried to watch.

Adrian chuckled as he took in the scene. The vials of gas had succeeded. Nothing was moving. "They're all out."

Adrian and David quickly gathered their personal items. Then they took all the weapons from the captives on the way back through the tunnel that looked like this part of the mountain had collapsed. It took a little while, enough for both of them to become nervous about the Mexicans recovering. This fresh gas wasn't concentrated; it didn't last. When you were stuck inside a mountain with only a few vents, poison gas wasn't just dangerous to the enemy. It had to be used carefully, in low strengths.

Adrian tied his kit and the two bags of weapons to one end of his rope while David tossed the other end to the watching Eagles. Those men now approved Adrian's action. Disarming the enemy while they were unconscious was brilliant.

Drawn to one of the collapsed forms, Adrian carefully hefted the short man over his shoulder and went to the hole to be pulled up.

When the Eagles got his doubled weight to their level, they took the prisoner from him so he could help David up.

Groans and mutters came a few seconds later.

Billy hurried forward to drop another vial of gas. After the crash, there was silence again.

Adrian motioned toward the man he'd brought up. "I'd get your new enforcer on him ASAP. If he wakes up before she gets here, just shoot him. He's too much for you guys to handle alone."

The Eagles took the warning seriously, dispatching two men to take the prisoner to the brig while another went to get Jennifer. The rest stayed on guard around the hole.

Adrian claimed a nearby corner and put his sleeping bag down. He was beyond tired.

David took first watch, impressed. Adrian might be in disgrace, but he was still a genius. All survivors needed people like that. David reflected on their conversation, on the agreement he'd given after hearing the details. If it was a hoax, he would be left behind when Safe Haven got on their boat. If it was true, he would have the chance to serve a pure descendant who was worthy of his devotion. It was a hard choice, but in the end, he'd had to acquiesce. All David wanted was to belong with a good leader, but those here were too corrupt. He'd come to their light too late.

5

"Kyle!" Jennifer crawled through the rubble and smoke toward where he should have been. The tunnel was groaning and shifting around them,

dropping more rocks and dirt through the darkness.
“Check in!”

Kyle coughed in a series of painful hacks.

The sounds sent relief through Jennifer.

A light flashed on as the team counted off.

“We’re here,” Morgan forced out roughly at the end of the count, wiping his face. They were all coughing, covered in dark dirt and glowing particles.

“What is that?” Jennifer pointed to a glint on one wall.

Kyle and the others edged forward to check it out.

“Looks like...gold.”

Jennifer chuckled. “We struck gold?”

The teams cheered even though they didn’t have a use for wealth now. The old world mentality would never be erased from the generations who’d lived in it.

“We’ll have uses for it, I think.” Barry led the way as they headed back to the main camp. There was no sound from the Mexicans on the other section of the new stone and debris wall. The cave-in had been perfect, but they’d been too close. The rush of debris and dirt had slammed into all of them, knocking them off their feet and surrounded them in a smothering whirlwind of dust and debris.

“I’m sure Angie will think of something.” Jennifer curled an arm around Kyle’s waist. She wasn’t afraid of him anymore, but he was still scared of her. His embrace was filled with control

and longing. Jennifer rested against his arm as they trudged victoriously up the passage. He'd waited enough and so had she.

Can you get us a sitter for tonight?

Kyle tripped, hitting the wall. "What?"

Jennifer giggled.

"No." Kyle understood why she might be asking for that.

Jennifer smiled wider. Now that she'd made the choice, she would follow through.

Kyle swallowed nervously, sensing her thoughts, her mood. He wanted her body. He always had, but he also wanted her love. Without the second, the first was meaningless. He wasn't going to let her pay off a debt with sex and ruin what they had.

Jennifer put a hand on his arm, slowing them until the others got out of sight.

Kyle tensed as she stopped, not sure what to expect. He had to do this slowly, he had to be careful, he had to protect—

"Kyle."

He froze as her lips neared his, heart pounding.

"All you have to do is love me. Do you?"

"More than anything, Jenny." Kyle groaned in desperation. "I want to marry you!"

He immediately regretted spilling the truth.

Jennifer spoke against his clenched lips. "Autumn will make a cute flower baby."

Kyle almost stopped breathing. "You... You'd..."

Jennifer laughed again. She placed a soft kiss to his dusty lips, body warming despite the cold temperature. "If you ask me nicely."

Kyle kissed her back, unable to fight it. *I love you. I love you. I love you!!!*

Jennifer soaked it up to replace the awful cruelty that Cesar had stored for their physical moments. Kyle wanted to love her, not possess her. As she curled her arms around his neck, ignoring the approaching footsteps, Jennifer connected their minds. *I love you too.*

Always?

Always.

Marc waited impatiently as the couple sealed their new bond. He could tell this tunnel was no longer a danger or these two wouldn't be necking in the dark. As they broke apart, still exchanging mental promises, Marc sighed, heart hurting. He missed those days with Angie. Would they ever have them again?

Marc's demon, who had been angry for the last few days, spoke up. *Only if you accept Adrian in her life. She needs him.*

Marc locked down on that voice, furious again. She wouldn't need him for anything once they dumped Safe Haven on that island. Adrian would become a vague, shifting memory.

Jennifer felt Marc's anger surge and reluctantly broke the connection with Kyle.

"Adrian went down and grabbed their descendant." Marc was now scanning their entire

cave system and the thoughts of the nearest guards. “I want you to check him out and report back.”

“You got it.” Jennifer kissed Kyle once more and then jogged up the corridor. She was quickly out of sight.

Marc turned to Kyle, who had tensed as soon as he realized who was waiting for them. Marc could have said any number of nasty or supportive things in that moment. He chose to be a friend to the mobster. “Double the foreplay. Pretend she’s a virgin.”

Kyle flushed. “I’ve considered that already.”

Marc snorted. “Yeah, I’ll bet you have.”

Not hearing any condemnation in Marc’s tone, Kyle stepped closer. “You went through this with Angie, right?”

Marc flipped his light around to shine behind them. His hinky feeling hadn’t gone away yet. “She was terrified. After a while, she loosened up, but that first time was hard on her. I could tell how scared she was. All those old fears came back in that second. We fought it together.”

“She loves me.” Kyle grinned like an idiot.

“You’re about the only one who didn’t know that. Some observant Eagle.”

The men shared a laugh, but Marc didn’t take them out of the tunnel yet, sensing there was more he needed to do here. He waited for Kyle to speak, trying to be the boss everyone needed.

“We struck gold.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Kyle coughed, still trying to clear dust from his lungs. "I'd like to take some of it. For a ring."

"I have no problem with that now. A wedding sounds like something the camp needs."

Kyle was relieved. It had been his way of asking if the camp would accept him and Jennifer as a married couple.

Marc motioned toward the darkness. "Get what you need. Theo can shape it for you."

Kyle vanished into the darkness.

Marc went back toward the main camp, full of new contemplations. Kyle and Jennifer were going to get married. That would give other couples the idea. Safe Haven was about to have a rash of proposals and broken hearts, but also parties and celebrations of normal life continuing. Angela would love that.

Marc stopped. *Damn. Will she? What if she's worried over who might ask her? Does she expect me to, even though we just lost a baby? Does she want Adrian to ask? Would she say yes to anyone right now? I have to figure out what she needs and then I can answer those questions.*

Now dwelling on personal drama, Marc slowed for more time to weigh things. Marriage wouldn't solve their problems... Angie would never betray him, but if they were married, Adrian would be distanced even more.

Wondering if he'd inhaled too much gas, Marc continued to stew on it as he went to the upper levels. He wasn't the boy scout anymore. He was a

man determined to fight for his love, no matter how
dirty that battle got.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Hard Way

1

“So what now?”

Becky leaned against the stone, hating where she'd chosen to hide. Hundreds of Mexicans were coming up the road and swarming around the collapsed entrance. She and Seth were trapped fifty feet above the patrol that appeared to be making camp as well as investigating the scene. When the corridor collapsed, a billowing cloud of shrapnel-filled dust had enveloped the area, allowing her and Seth to climb, unnoticed, onto this ledge. They were now hunkered down behind two boulders that barely hid them.

“We'll sneak out during the chaos.” Becky wished she'd kept walking when she saw the vehicles coming. She also could have warned Angela, but she hadn't. She'd waited for Seth.

“Why didn't you keep going?”

Becky winced. He was so smart sometimes that it was frightening. “I wanted you to come with me.”

Seth sighed. “Well, I guess you got what you wanted.”

Becky didn't reply. She hadn't meant for it to be this way. When he got over being mad, he would realize she hadn't planned on this happening. Then he would get pissed again when he found out she hadn't warned the camp. The excuse that she'd known the rescue party was close wouldn't fly with him or anyone else. Seth might be able to return to Safe Haven, but she couldn't.

Becky sighed as the weight of the choice lifted from her chest. It was over. She could go forward from here—away from her ghosts, with the man she loved. Yes, she was getting exactly what she'd wanted.

"Where are we going?" Seth wondered how he would be able to protect her while they were alone. They were both cold and scared already, and it had only been thirty minutes.

"South, for now. I... I can't be locked up in that mountain, Seth. I just can't."

Seth felt a little better after hearing that. He hadn't known she was suffering from mountain sickness. Many people were and the distractions only worked so well. If too much fear came, the camp would also have run. Now, they couldn't. It was tough it out or die.

Sort of like us. Seth was glad for once of the dim sunlight trickling through the thick clouds. He had faith in making an escape if Becky could take the climb. He had almost no faith in his ability to help her give birth out in the wastelands. That was one

of a hundred problems to conquer—not the least of which was the radiation they were now absorbing.

Reminded of the dangers of waiting, Seth noticed a lapse in the dusty security patrol below them and motioned Becky to start climbing. There was a partial passage right above them. It went half a mile into the stone before coming right back to this section of the mountain, but they would be out of sight of the Mexicans. When it got darker, they could walk out using Safe Haven Hill, where that short tunnel ended. It was a former ant hole, however, and could still be dangerous. Once in that cavern, Seth planned to radio Marc and ask if he wanted them to do anything before they headed off on Becky's adventure. He had no idea where they might end up, but at least they would be together without seeing Neil every day.

Spirits improving, Seth climbed up the mountain with Becky's ass in his face. *Yeah, this might work out well.*

2

The quick resolution to the Mexican infiltration was a comfort to Safe Haven. Instead of the massive panic it could have caused, most people went about their daily routines while listening to the radio. It was almost as if they were enjoying a show about something happening to someone else, instead of being right above where the action was actually taking place.

“You’ll be sorry that you have done this!” the radio crackled.

Marc didn’t respond to the threat even after he finished draining his water bottle. He was going to let this play out, at least for a while. When the camp started to have a problem with it, he would have to have another solution ready. Until then, it was as good as any and it didn’t risk any of Safe Haven’s people, which made it ideal. As a military strategist, Angela would have been valued.

“Are you there?” the Mexican shouted through the radio. “I will make you pay for this!”

Again, Marc didn’t answer. It was a mental tactic. Not only would the man hate being ignored, it also told the camp that leadership wasn’t in a hurry, that he had things under control. Marc frowned as he realized he had learned that from Adrian.

“You will give us the children or every one of you will die under that stone!”

Marc was forced to reply, able to feel Angela’s anger at the threat. “The children in question do not wish to leave the safety of Safe Haven. They were asked. They said no. I will tell you this for the last time. Get lost or face our wrath.”

Marc exited the radio room, gesturing Kenn to go quiet. Word would be passed to use the lighting system. As of right now, the Mexicans wouldn’t be able to monitor their transmissions. There wouldn’t be any.

As Marc left, Billy and a few others joined him, waiting for orders. Eagles liked to stay busy, but it was also easier to work than it was to dwell on what could happen if things went badly.

Marc didn't have much for them to do. Thanks to how things were already set up in their haven, all they needed to do after blowing the entrances was to ensure that they had security cameras and audio up. Kenn and a few of the lower Eagles were doing that now, using it as a training class. It had occurred to Angela they didn't have many dwellers who could handle explosives or wiring.

Marc had concurred that it was a future problem and approved the schedule. He wanted to go to the weather room to check on the cloud that was coming, but he had other things to take care of first. Because he was Safe Haven's boss, he would have to make himself accessible. After that, he would be free to do rounds and get updates, then sleep. With past administrators, information had been handled. They didn't have to search for updates and numbers. Marc hoped the tradition would continue with him, but if it didn't, he knew what to do. There might be moaning from people who still wanted Adrian or Angela in charge, but Marc didn't anticipate many problems. Now that they were in here together with no way out, people would obey the rules or occupy slots in the brig.

Thinking of the brig brought Chauncey to mind. Marc frowned again. He still wasn't certain what to do with that traitor or the one Adrian had brought

up. Common sense told him to use bullets and not waste tears over it. Morality said the man hadn't committed a crime that was against Safe Haven's code of conduct. Those laws were currently being redrafted by the council during their free time. They all wanted to make sure traitors were dealt with harshly from now on, and that there were strict rules for handling those issues. Marc didn't want public executions, but maybe for a little while, it might be necessary. The results from his demonstration at their gates had proven to him that the method was still effective, even if it was intolerable to him personally. He would do whatever it took to keep the peace here, to keep people safe and alive. Adrian and Angela didn't think he had reached that point yet, but they were wrong.

3

"What about them?" Billy and Marc stood a few yards from the hole where Adrian and David were camped. Neither of those guys knew Marc was here, but the guards did. They'd snapped to attention, proving they were alert enough to continue their shift.

"Leave them alone for now." Marc's mind protested, but he didn't take it back. Angela's notes had made this choice.

*Leave them alone when you have the hostages.
It's covered.*

Billy didn't know how Adrian and a few others were going to keep the Mexican prisoners down in the hole from escaping or plotting, but he didn't question it. He assumed that come morning, different orders would be given. The camp had been told the guerillas were in a lower corridor that was blocked at both ends.

Billy pondered that for a minute and then followed Marc out of the area. If Marc buried this hole, the guerillas down there would die of suffocation or starvation. It was a neat, awful solution.

Marc let the understudy assume what he wanted. Marc didn't know what Angela meant by it being covered, but he didn't doubt that it would indeed be awful. With her and their enemies, it always was. She had no mercy. As he left, Marc fulfilled the last order on her notes concerning the Mexicans. "No guard."

Now Billy began to protest quietly, but Marc refused to rescind the order.

As the two men went to the main camp, followed by the confused guards, David and Adrian didn't wake up. They had both been up for more than twenty hours. They were beat.

Half an hour later, a tall, gangly man in a white coat approached the hole where the Mexicans were waking. He could hear their low murmurs of fear and anger at their situation.

Chris ignored the two sleeping military guys near the hole as he approached it. The vet dropped a pouch into the darkness. "I brought some food. Please don't tell on me!"

David, awake and now angry, tensed to grab the man.

Adrian, lids still closed, slid a hand over David's wrist to keep him from reacting.

Chore finished, Chris hurried back to the animal area, where he had placed his cot. He couldn't stand sleeping around the guards in the general living quarters. He never knew if he might talk in his sleep. That would be a problem.

David rose up on one arm when the vet was gone. "Why?"

Adrian didn't answer.

"Should we tell Marc they're awake?"

"Go to sleep. In the morning, keep your gob shut."

Confused, David listened to the eating and plotting below until exhaustion forced his lids shut against his will.

4

"Billy loves me. I don't understand why we can't tell people or spend time together."

The twelve-year-old's voice carried to the Eagles who were cleaning up the mess from extra hours in the reading and entertainment chambers by upset camp members. All conversations stopped so

the men could listen. The girls weren't supposed to be up here right now. No one was. The kids also weren't supposed to be alone. Someone would be in trouble for letting these girls give them the slip again. All four guys instantly thought of Shawn.

"You can't say that!" Missy hushed the older girl, pointing to the adults gathering trash from the cans that lined the passage. "They'll tell."

"Not if we don't have to." Shane stared at Missy. "But when you break the rules like this, it isn't going to help him, you know?"

The two girls glared back in response to the warning.

Shane firmed his shoulders. He was the highest level among this group. He had to do what was right. "I don't care who you are or what you can do. Why are you up here? Everyone heard Marc say the top floor was off limits until tomorrow."

Leeann reluctantly held up her hand. "I want to put this in his locker."

The sight of the handmade card brought grins and frowns in equal responses from the Eagles.

"Go on." Shane waved. "But this still gets put on the report. We don't break the rules for anyone."

"And that's why we can't ever talk in front of you! Shawn is nicer!" The little girl stuck out her tongue and shoved Leeann toward the training room where the lockers had been set into an impression in the stone.

Logan shook his head. "Someone should warn him about her."

Jake scowled. "She's just a baby. Let her alone."

Logan shrugged. "His problem, not mine."

"Don't think he wants it either." Whitney tied the bag gently; his arm was only recently out of the cast. "Shawn is honoring a debt he doesn't really owe."

"Looks like rough duty." Logan shook his head. "That one is trouble."

Missy, who had excellent hearing, marched back out to the men. Her hand came up to her tiny hip. "Why don't you like me?"

The males all flushed, going quiet. It wasn't often they were scolded by a child.

"I didn't do anything to you. Tara did. Stop blaming me. I'm only five!"

No one knew what to say.

"You do blame me. I knew it." Missy's facade became angrier instead of oozing tears like she could feel them expecting. "I'm almost sorry I saved you all, you know? This place sucks for me."

She went back to the tunnel where Leeann was gaping in shock. "Come on. His locker is right in front, by the boss. Let them tell. The Ghost understands love even if they don't."

The men didn't speak again until the girls were gone. As the pair disappeared haughtily down the ladder, Shane glanced at the book. "Someone record it. Put it down as...girls being girls."

That brought amusement back to erase the tension. The four guys continued their labors, but the girl's accusation stayed. Missy was right. The

people who had hurt them were gone, but the Eagles were still unhappy. It was showing.

Whitney sighed. "We need Angie to take control again."

Jake nodded. "I think so too."

"Would she approve of those two matches?"

"She already has, as far as I know..." Logan caught Shane's hint. "You want to help them?"

Missy was obviously too young, but Leeann wanted Billy's attention. That came from spending time together.

"Do we trust him to only cover her needs?" Shane frowned. "I don't want to get her hurt."

Jake snorted. "He's the boy scout's double now, remember? He'll handle it like Marc did with Angie. The girl will probably still be a virgin when she's twenty."

"Good." Shane shrugged. "If it's time spent as friends, I have no objections. Anyone else?"

The rest of their shift went by as they discussed trading and rearranging future schedules to give the girl what she wanted. Billy's preferences weren't discussed. He'd cut his hair and begun attending the couples' class right after Angela had killed Donner. They already knew what he wanted. They just needed to be sure he didn't get it too soon.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this." Whitney was worrying as they went to the garbage floor. "It might cause trouble."

Logan swung a leg over the ladder as he held onto the three bags of trash. "Might also be fun to watch, like Morgan is always saying."

Shane chuckled. "I guess it was getting kinda boring down here."

"Yep. Bet it changes soon."

"Why do you say that?"

Logan pointed to where Cynthia was slipping into the showers that were usually used by the rookie Eagles. Kevin and Jeff had gone in there right before Shane and his crew had gone up to collect the trash.

Jake gestured the others to go on, feeling like he should hang around and see if Daryl was about to be cheated on.

"It's none of our business." Shane jerked his thumb. "Let's go."

Jake reluctantly did as the ranking man ordered. They would all hear about it later. The guard in the shower area down here was Allan. That guy couldn't keep his mouth shut about anything.

Cynthia handed the bottle to Allan. If she kept him in whiskey, he didn't care what she did. He had a thing for her too, so that definitely helped. Usually the bottle was a bribe to be allowed in to interview rookies before their excitement could wear off. Tonight, she'd come for something more dangerous.

Showering in stalls that were in the front of the drafty room, Kevin and Jeff spotted her at the same time.

“What did you do, man?” Jeff switched into fast rinse mode.

“Nothing. I mean, I don’t know of anything.” Kevin floundered. “Help me!”

Cynthia glowered at Jeff as she came to stand in front of Kevin’s stall.

Jeff shut the water off and stepped out to grab his towel. “You’re on your own, dude. See ya.”

“Hey!”

Jeff decided to get dressed near the guard booth and took his kit there. He would watch the show from a safe distance.

Kevin slapped the faucet, flipping off the water. “What?!”

Cynthia stepped closer. “I want you to leave.”

Kevin blanched at hearing her say it so cruelly, anger rising. “Yeah, I guess so. You don’t have to feel any guilt if I’m not here.”

“I don’t have anything to feel guilty about!”

“You and I were dating before the Donner plan.” Kevin pointed. “When it was over, you were with someone else and I was left holding a hard-on that I never got to use.”

Allan and Jeff stared, dumbfounded. Kevin never spoke to anyone that way.

Cynthia sneered. “Been holding it for a long time, have you?”

Kevin knew what she was doing, but his own unhappiness wouldn't allow him to cave. This time, he was going to win an argument. "I'll leave on one condition. You agree, meet that condition, and I'm gone the same day."

"What do you want?" she asked warily.

Kevin leaned on the stall to leer at her from hair to boots. "You."

Cynthia turned red, hand coming up to cover her stomach.

"Adrian's kid doesn't scare me, lady. Let him loose. As soon he does something, you'll be killed and so will the father."

"He doesn't understand that." Cynthia switched tactics. "We're not safe here."

Kevin didn't doubt that was true, but she only held power over him in one way now. "Two hours of your life. It's not that much to pay."

"How can you do this to me?" Cynthia was shocked. She'd never believed he was the type of man to do this.

Kevin came from the shower, hard for anyone to witness and not caring. His desires weren't a secret. "See, that's the problem with you, shark bitch. You believe we're all as ruthless as you." Kevin reached around her for a towel, making her flinch. "I'm already leaving in two days. I don't need your bribe or your body. Go away."

It was a powerful moment for Kevin and the witnesses.

For Cynthia, it was proof that she'd made the wrong choice. "I'm sorry."

Kevin nodded, wrapping the towel around his waist. "So am I. I could have had a loyal mate by now if not for you."

Kevin left her standing there, crying.

Jeff followed, not sparing the reporter a glance. He was firmly in Kevin's corner.

Humiliated, Cynthia stormed out with her heart on fire. She'd had it all and in the same night, she'd also lost it. Fate was a cruel bitch. Just when she'd believed her past was conquered, it had returned to hit her hard enough to take her breath away. People from the past weren't supposed to come back to haunt you. They were supposed to stay gone.

5

Marc was shaken from sleep by a light tapping. He opened his lids to find Billy in the cubby where he'd crashed. "What?"

Billy leaned down, whispering.

When he rose, Marc had already shut his eyes. "Good. Tell the camp they dug themselves free. We're on radio silence. They won't know otherwise."

"Some folks have their own radios." Billy tried not to get upset. "This won't go over well."

"They won't know."

"They will, and you'll be blamed."

"I already am, either way."

“This isn’t right.”

“Fine.” Marc yawned. “You tell them Angie gave the vet orders to kill off as many of our problems as he can before he gets caught. They may give him a medal.”

Billy scowled as he realized Marc was right. “So why not tell them the truth?”

“Because they’re trapped in here with a psycho that has orders to kill anyone who proves to be a problem. It’s a catch-22. Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

“So we’re not?”

“No, we’re not trapped.” Marc pulled the blanket up. “Tell the traitor to handle the cleanup. He’ll love it.”

Billy was happy again as he shut the door. The image of Adrian disposing of all those bodies was great. It was exactly the type of work a banished dog should be given.

6

Thanks to the excitement, Safe Haven was up early. It was barely dawn, but the mess was crowded as Marc made his way through the line to get a cup of coffee. He’d gotten three hours sleep and considered that good after everything that had happened. He was already looking forward to bedtime.

“Good morning, Boss.”

“Need anything, Boss?”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

Marc tried to ignore the pride, but it was impossible not to feel it. The power that this position gave a person was incredible. “Not right now, thanks.”

Marc was hit with the same question repeatedly as he joined the line to get his coffee, occasionally stopping to chat with someone to receive an update. While he mingled with the crowd, he listened to the people. The things he heard were better than what he had expected.

“We should be fine. This mountain is old. Been here longer than humans have.”

“Yep.”

“The Mexicans don’t know who they’re messing with,” another member added, shoveling eggs into his mouth.

There were still a few chickens laying and producing enough to keep offering them for breakfast as long as there was a wide variety of items for people to pick through. Not everyone wanted eggs, not everyone wanted oatmeal. It worked out well as a buffet style. So far, Safe Haven was satisfied with the meal choices despite being on rations.

Marc joined a small group of Eagles at the furthest table, wanting to blend into the crowd. It was easier to observe when he wasn’t the center of attention. Taking over leadership of Safe Haven wasn’t something to play around with. He needed to get organized. After that, it would be a simple

matter to put his personal choices in place. He was picking people who were trustworthy and loyal, worthy of the positions that he would gift to them.

Sitting not far away, Jennifer nursed her hot chocolate and pondered Marc's thoughts. Didn't he realize that was the same mentality that Adrian had shared with Angela to bring them all to this chaos? *Why do all of Safe Haven's leaders have to learn things the hard way?* It wasn't like they set out to be corrupt, but they became that way every time. Jennifer wondered if it was because they spent too much time fighting who they were and what needed to be done.

Jennifer thought of Kyle and his words to her when he'd come to bed last night.

I want to wait, Jenny. Our wedding night will be beautiful.

She'd been tired and relieved. Now, she was full of love and respect for him. She really did have the best one here.

Jennifer scanned the eating masses, much as Marc was doing. For some reason she believed it was important for her to keep track of what was going through his mind. She wasn't stalking him, though she certainly didn't trust him yet. It was an instinct that said she could be useful if she monitored the things that he wasn't able to say.

Marc wasn't certain why Jennifer was keeping track of him. He assumed that she was doing her duties as the Enforcer in Safe Haven. He didn't mind. He didn't have things to hide, unlike their

former leaders. He had morals and ethics. He would run Safe Haven by those values.

Taking advantage of an opportunity, Marc motioned to the couple who had just entered the mess.

Charlie guided Tracy toward the table where his dad wanted him, not caring why he was being asked to distract Jennifer. It worked out well with his plans. Tracy needed to get back into regular camp life. She wasn't spending enough time with other people and he knew that wasn't good for her. He planned to encourage her to spend time away from him now, to see if she was healing, and if she was ready for duty.

Marc sighed. *Not even close, kid.*

"I wanted to ask if--"

"No." Jennifer flushed as she realized she'd overstepped.

Charlie scowled when Marc didn't override Jennifer's choice. "Why not?"

Jennifer looked up as the couple sat down, noticing the relief on Tracy's profile. "Because she's suicidal, like Angela. How did you miss that?"

Tracy winced.

Marc tensed.

"Not anymore." Charlie patted Tracy's tense shoulder. "She's good."

Jennifer's brows drew together. "She'll blow her brains out if you give her a gun."

That's enough. Marc's handsome face didn't reveal his displeasure. Angela's mental condition was now common knowledge.

"I thought they knew." Jennifer dropped her chin. She would have to find a way to monitor people, but not let them know about it.

With Jennifer subdued, Marc returned to his observations of the camp. They had new inhabitants who needed to adjust, on top of those who were already members and having trouble adjusting to being underground. Then there were the nosey ones who wanted to know exactly what had happened with the train people. Those folks were eager to read the latest edition of Cynthia's newspaper for details the guards wouldn't give them. The paper was due out in a few days, but Cynthia wasn't in the mess working on it like she had been daily until now. She was avoiding Kevin.

That man, with Jeff, was currently occupying the rear table with Zack and a few others. Mostly Eagles, the group was spreading their mirth across the room, telling the camp members there was nothing to be afraid of, that Marc, Angela, and Adrian had it covered.

Marc hoped that was true. If Angela's plan for the Mexicans failed, if there was a problem inside the mountain where they needed to get out quickly, all the plans might come crashing down and everyone could be lost. It was a relief to know that the plans were solid. It was also a terrible weight to carry. He scanned their army.

Near the table with the Eagles, Doug and Allan were sitting across from the boys who had run away. The brothers looked like they'd been thoroughly scolded. They were also relieved to be back in the warm embrace of Safe Haven. Their hours alone in the tunnels had been a reminder that any world was a hard, cold place for kids without a protector. The other children had already eaten and were back in the living quarters, being scolded by the den mothers. Hilda was supervising it, as Peggy wasn't in any condition to. Becky choosing to leave Safe Haven without saying goodbye was a hard blow for her to accept. Marc didn't expect to hear anything else about women being in control. Peggy would spend the next weeks and months evaluating her choices as a mother and coming up short.

At the table next to Marc, Theo and Debra were sharing a meal; both of them were recovered enough that they'd been released from the medical bay. They had injuries people stared at, but everyone was happy to have a new hero in their midst. If not for having a cast, Debra would have already earned a slot to try out for the Eagles. There was still talk about whether or not she was eligible. No one wanted to bother a boss with an unimportant question during a situation like this, but Marc was positive someone would gather the nerve eventually. Eagles always wanted to know their hierarchy.

Marc tensed as Julia and Cody came through the passage, followed by two guards who were unhappy

to have the duty. Marc hoped she knew better than to join him at this table. Not only was she not a member of Safe Haven, even if she had been, her rank would be so low that it would have been an insult to the other Eagles who knew better than to approach the table before they achieved a level of rank that was respectful. Until then, all requests went through their team leaders or den mothers. The military system Adrian had insisted on kept order. It succeeded as long as people followed the rules.

Marc winced inwardly as a tray slammed down on the table in front of him.

“Do you know what they expect me to do here?!”

“Work?” Marc lifted a sarcastic brow. “Be honest?”

His open bitterness lent more truth to the boy’s story that his mom had stolen him from his dad.

Julia ignored his anger. “They want me to put him in classes. They want me to teach Cody how to use his gifts. Are they crazy?”

Marc didn’t waste sympathy on her. “The boy will be taught to control himself or he won’t be allowed to stay here. The only way that can happen is if he attends the classes with the other kids that are like him. You are *not* allowed to interfere.”

Julia wanted to protest, but a group of Eagles approached the table, forcing her over.

Cody didn’t like being ignored; he squirmed out of his mother’s hand and returned to Marc. He stood there silently, waiting to be acknowledged.

Marc waved at the empty bench. “You can stay.”

Julia was forced to leave her son.

The guard trailed the older brunette back to the temporary cot she had been assigned. When she wasn’t carrying out duties or chores, Julia was supposed to stay in the living space where Hilda and the other den mothers could keep track of her.

Cody sat quietly while Marc talked to the Eagles about security shifts for the rest of the week. Safe Haven already had a great routine. There was only a few things he was going to adjust and that was mostly how leadership handled issues. A moral society had to have a moral leader. Without that, everyone was screwed.

Marc wondered what the child was thinking, but he didn’t dig into Cody’s mind again as he’d done in the tunnel on the way up here. He would respect the boy’s privacy, but he would have to develop a way to deal with the strange kid. Cody was obviously different and Marc wasn’t sure how to handle him. He didn’t have instant love for the missing child, and he was now experiencing guilt over that, but it was just like sitting next to someone else’s kid. He would be polite and he would care for the boy, but he didn’t feel like it was his son, not the way he did about Charlie.

“Mom told me you would react that way. She said it’s because we don’t know each other.” Cody peered at his father through the same shaggy locks.

“Do you want to get to know me? I can leave you alone.”

“Easy there.” Marc automatically offered comfort. “This is new for me and it’s new for you. We will adjust. At some point, the bond of family will show up. It’s the normal course of events. We have to be patient, but we also have to obey the rules. We never lie to each other. No matter what it is, no matter how hard it might be to talk about, we *never* lie.”

Cody blew out a relieved sigh. “I have no problem with that. I don’t like it when mom lies. It causes trouble.”

Marc thought of the coming argument with Angela over the child. “Ain’t that the truth.”

The two males shared a smile, unintentionally sending a wave of positive energy across the mess that reminded everyone of Adrian. Angela didn’t have the same effect. Her waves of energy made people want to accomplish things. Adrian’s energy provided the peace and calm of home. Marc’s was a combination of both, depending upon the situation. Right now, he didn’t expect much from anyone except for them to continue their daily business as if he wasn’t watching and observing. Later, when he was ready to make changes, things might get a little tense. Marc still didn’t anticipate trouble. These people were going through an apocalypse. Surely, they could do the right thing.

Marc remembered assuming the same thing about Angela before she’d made the choices that

had stolen all the joy from their lives. He had never believed she would fall as far as she had. He'd often suspected that she would have been an activist or someone who fought for the rights of others even when the odds were unwinnable. He had never believed she would order a death, let alone do it herself. It was amazing and awful, how a person could change depending upon what life shoved them through. Some people handled changes well. They seemed unbreakable, while others collapsed at the first sign of pressure, but not Angie. She thrived during the process. It was scary.

Marc noticed that Cody didn't have anything to eat or drink. He hooked a thumb toward the food line. "Are you hungry?"

Cody shrugged, shy. He didn't know these people. It was scary.

Marc melted. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

Marc was right about the attention it drew as he took the boy's hand and led him to the line. It sounded like all conversation ceased.

Stressing, Cody immediately put his thumb in his mouth and began sucking.

"That's bad for your teeth."

Cody bobbed, not removing the thumb. "Mama says da same fing."

"You're also too old to suck on your thumb."

Cody nodded again, slowly putting his hand down. "She says that too."

Marc sat two cups and plates onto the tray. “Then why do you keep doing it?”

Cody regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, trying to decide if he could trust this new stranger in his life. He leaned in. “Because I get scared.”

Marc felt it then, the bond and the thick fear that implied Cody needed to be protected from his mother. He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about that now.”

Cody stared up in fearful admiration. “You promise you won’t leave us?”

“I won’t leave *you*. Your mother will have to make her own deals. She’s done bad things to me.”

“She tried to hide it. I didn’t know until a few months ago. I’m sorry she did that to you.”

Marc’s forgiveness snapped into place for the boy, who didn’t deserve his anger. He knelt down to give the child a quick hug. “Not your fault. You’re safe now. You’re here with me and that’s all that matters.”

Angela stopped in the mess entrance to lean against the cold stone, unobserved except for her escort, her suicide watch. Observing Marc with the young boy was heartwarming.

It was also heartbreaking.

Angela slowly went toward the medical bay, and then detoured to where Adrian had found her earlier. She suspected it would become a favorite location.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Good And Bad

1

“So, what are we doing today, Boss?” David and Adrian were enjoying a hot shower on the top floor among the Eagles. He was hoping to cut through some of the tension. The other men in the shower weren’t exactly happy about them being here, but no one had protested yet. The Eagles were busy casting harsh glares at two soldiers from Tonya’s captivity who were in stalls near the front guard booth. At that moment, it was easier to overlook Adrian’s pale, freshly scarred body for the healthy men who would be able to compete with them for rewards and women. David knew there was going to be trouble either way. The Safe Haven fighters didn’t like living with their enemies.

Steam floated through the stone space as two dozen stalls ran at the same time, creating a sauna effect that would normally have been soothing to the two men. David wasn’t enjoying it.

“They’ll adjust.” Adrian scrubbed his dirty hair into a thick lather. “She’ll handle it.”

David frowned, keeping his voice low. “Is she capable of handling anything right now?”

Adrian refused to answer that.

David sighed. "So, today?"

"Today, we walk. Marc wants a complete evaluation of the cave and all security. We'll be on rounds of these tunnels all day."

David was both relieved and nervous over the plan. It meant Adrian was being put to work and that was good, but it also meant his boss would be around all the people who hated him and wanted him gone. David didn't believe that was a good idea, but it was a waste of time to tell Adrian to be low-key about it. The former leader had been chomping at the bit to get in here. He wasn't going to hide.

"No, I'm not." Adrian rinsed water from his face. "I'm going to follow my orders to the letter. I expect you to do the same."

"Just as long as they keep their hands to themselves." David wasn't going to let anyone abuse Adrian.

"I appreciate that loyalty. But I've earned a lot of this. Don't get involved or they'll blame you."

David wasn't worried about blame. He cared for Adrian's health. The former ruler had had a heart attack, been shot and beaten, and then forced to live on the outskirts of the camp he'd built like a wild animal. He'd been punished enough.

Warmed by the allegiance, Adrian toweled off quickly, eager to be busy. "Five minutes. Meet me in the mess."

Adrian wrapped his towel around his waist and went to the locker he'd been assigned. He calmly pulled the banana peel from the grate and opened it.

He didn't react to the written message on the interior: *Die, traitor!*

David glowered at the snickering Eagles in the corner stalls, but they ignored him. They knew he was powerless here.

Whistling happily, Adrian tugged up his jeans, flashing his bare cheek toward the corner.

The Eagles there scowled as they got the message. *Kiss my ass.*

David laughed out loud, temper soothed. He hadn't been with Adrian long enough to believe the man could take what was dished out to him. This loyalty made the need to protect Adrian overwhelming whenever there was a threat.

Adrian strolled from the shower with his towel around bare shoulders, carrying his kit, leaving the wash area before tempers could flare. He was a catalyst. *I'm not going to let one of you young shithheads aggravate the boss and force him to banish me again. I see your tricks coming and in a minute, I'll raise you a blast of light that'll remind you who gave you this new life. It certainly wasn't Marcus Brady.*

Gathering his joy, Adrian pulled on his shirt against the chill. It pleased him that only his damp skin made that necessary. Heat was flowing nicely, keeping the top three levels of the cave at an even, comfortable temperature.

Adrian moved through the corridor as if people weren't staring and pointing, grumbling. That would change once he was contributing again. After

that, he would be ignored. Adrian had no delusions about what his future now held with these people. Many of them would never forgive him and even those who did would never trust him again.

“Momma warned me there’d be days like this...” he sang. She really had and he’d still agreed. The price was worth the goal. “Anything for you,” he whispered, letting his light glow for the first time in the cave.

The bubble around the mountain lit up vividly. It sank down into the stone to surround the survivors with care and kindness that was shadowed by a fierce rage promising to shelter them in any time of need. Their shepherd had returned.

2

“I hate it now, when he does that.” Jeff thrust his kit into the floorboard and slammed the door. “Hurry up, will ya?”

Standing by the passenger seat, Kevin was still caught in the glow. Adrian’s magic was light and warmth, pleasure and compassion. It was amazing.

“Are you staying?” Jeff glared. “Caught the fever again?”

Kevin only needed to reflect on what all that would entail, how hard he would have to work to earn his way back up through the ranks. “No. I’m set.”

Jeff and Kevin were at the top of the camp, near the new gate Greg, Daryl, and their crew had almost

finished. Their Rover was loaded and they were dressed to travel. Goodbyes, the few they'd given, had been delivered last night.

Jeff slid into the icy seat, eager to drive through the avalanche aftermath. A very narrow ledge hadn't been hard to clear once they'd gotten approval to shove abandoned and damaged cars over the edge. They'd finished that an hour ago and decided to blow this popsicle stand before things melted. They would be the last people to use this route for a long time. As soon as they were gone, Greg and his crew were going to blow this street so travel here could only be on foot, discouraging the Mexicans from advancing further. Everyone was assuming the road was already closed anyway because no new refugees had come yet. Marc wanted to make that a reality.

Jeff scanned the surroundings. It looked like half of the mountain had come down on their doorstep. The drifts of snow were higher than the Range Rover he'd chosen from among the available vehicles. The gate had obviously been destroyed while being mobbed by refugees. It bothered Jeff to know the bodies would remain buried. He wanted them piked on the new gate, as Marc had done before. Those invaders had taken a place of freedom and liberty and changed it into an Orwellian, camera-infested zone where every moment had to be under scrutiny to protect leadership from assassins. It was sad to have their dreams shattered this way.

Kevin got in and shut the door, shuddering at the wind. "Heat up, okay?"

Jeff obligingly increased the warmth coming from the vents. "Getting off this mountain might be fun or it might be deadly. You sure?"

Kevin forced the excitement. "You know it!"

Jeff shifted into drive and inched through the open gate.

Neither of them waved at the crew, though the crew did pause to wave at them. The crew understood the urge to roam, but most of them were still hoping Jeff and Kevin would change their minds.

Not gonna happen. Jeff braced for the first deep drift. *Without leaders who can work together, you're all gonna die in there. I won't be a part of that in any way.* Jeff eased on the gas.

3

"He's gone?"

Daryl nodded, going from cold to concern. He dropped his gear near the washroom, wincing at how wet his socks were. He needed to get warmed up and into dry clothes. He'd come in to do that and run into Cynthia near the ladder.

Daryl didn't care for her wild appearance. Her jeans and blue button down shirt didn't appear to have been washed or changed recently and a lace of her boots was undone, but it was her dazed, lost expression that had made him pause.

“Noise coming,” the radio cracked.

Daryl flipped it off, assuming Marc had given permission for the one-time break from radio silence.

“I can’t believe he didn’t say goodbye.” Cynthia was stunned. Kevin was gone.

“Why does that surprise you?”

The reporter heard Daryl’s jealousy, but it didn’t penetrate. Kevin had abandoned her. *I told him that I’m in danger and he left me here.*

You deserve this for what you did to Matt, her mind accused. Killer.

The ground rattled above them as if to reinforce her belief, showering her with dust from the levels above.

Cynthia stumbled toward the washroom, not responding to Daryl’s questions. The wash spaces were on every floor and mostly identical. There was a row of deep sinks, a guard booth, and shower stalls. In these small crevices, there wasn’t much room for anything more. Cynthia chose the smallest one, slamming the door shut.

Daryl let her go, too busy to spend real time on it. Marc had restarted a tentative training schedule and Daryl, along with the other senior men, had classes to teach.

Daryl detoured toward the couples’ area, realizing he’d forgotten his notebook. There hadn’t been a reason to carry training notes if they weren’t in training, so he’d gotten out of the habit.

As Daryl entered the living chamber, he saw a tense guard watching three men in the rear from his booth. No chatter came from camp members around them who were in various stages of living.

Nathan, the sentry on duty, spotted Daryl in relief. He wasn't certain how to handle these personal drama situations. Pamela usually did it when they had this shift together, but she was in the far bed with female trouble. He hadn't asked what kind.

Sighing, Daryl joined the possible COPs scene in progress. He hated to get involved. He was fine with Dale and he liked Ray. Dennis was a stranger.

Daryl scanned the room and the new man as a tense silence fell over the trio at his arrival. Dennis's bright clothes fit in perfectly with the colorful curtains and blankets that members had chosen for their forts, their privacy. Even the sheets and pillowcases were shaded, making the space appear a bit like a carnival to Daryl.

"Ray, Dale." He looked at the new man, hating the stinging in his toes as they warmed against damp socks. "Dennis, is it?"

Dennis flashed a huge grin. "Cool. You've heard of me."

Daryl frowned. "None of it was good. Why don't you run along?"

Dennis's mirth vanished under a hurt profile. "What? Dale and I were just hugging. We've been through some rough shit since the war."

Daryl pointed toward the exit. “Don’t you have a job?”

Dennis grinned again as he left. “I traded my shift for my dessert. People love Li’s pies.”

Daryl glanced at Ray, who had his hands shoved into the pockets of his Eagle jacket. Daryl saw embarrassment and dislike, but none of the wild rage that usually accompanied a mistaken moment. Ray had clearly witnessed something that made him think Dale was cheating on him and he’d confronted his partner, as anyone else would have done.

Daryl knelt down in front of Dale, who was sporting a split lip. Dale, unlike Dennis, had chosen to stick with browns and greens for his ensemble, but the colors weren’t flattering. *They should switch. Dale’s skin is too pale for brown.*

Around the men, the camp and Eagles went about their rituals and schedules, but all of them were listening. Daryl was sure the story would spread before the conversation was even finished. “Who hit you?”

“One of the shower babies didn’t like me being in there. Dennis helped me, brought me here.” He gazed up at Ray with fear and anger warring. “Why are you so mean to me?”

Trapped, Ray spun away from the cots and stomped to the exit. He wasn’t capable of rational thought right now, let alone rational discourse.

Daryl forced himself to get involved even though he didn’t want to. “Dale? Are you cheating on Ray?”

The pale man flinched. "I'm not. I won't."

"But you want to..."

Dale didn't answer.

Daryl patted Dale's delicate wrist. "I remember when you first came to Safe Haven. Do you?"

Dale nodded, not looking up or speaking. He was waiting for more abuse.

"Do you recall what Adrian told you that night after we rescued your group? Not Ray or the others, but you?"

Dale sniffed. "He said to be brave and I can be happy."

"Do you know what he meant yet?"

Dale shook his head, tears coming. "I've tried to, but I'm not like you guys!"

Daryl patted him again. "He meant moments like these, Dale. If you're not happy with Ray, tell him. Be brave and make the choices that are right for you."

"But he'll be so hurt!" Dale whispered in horror. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Dale's tears overflowed; Daryl hugged him awkwardly, telling himself he would have done this for anyone in the camp.

"I'm so sorry!"

Daryl glanced over Dale's shoulder to find Ray standing in the tunnel entrance. When Ray raised a sad brow, Daryl didn't reply. It was up to Dale to do the right thing. Daryl set Dale back. "You have every right to be happy. Just be sure what will accomplish that, you know? We need all of our

members, including you, to try their best. Do the right thing and the rest will work itself out, okay?”

Dale sniffed again. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” Daryl rose, grunting as both knees popped. “Oh, Dale?”

“Yes?”

“Stay away from Dennis until you make up your mind. If Ray kills him over you, I’m the one who’ll have to hang my friend. Please don’t let it come to that.”

Daryl left him with that warning, hoping he’d handled things correctly. They really didn’t need any more shootouts in camp. The people were twitchy enough already over having a Mexican army camped on their doorstep. They didn’t need another reason to stampede.

Kenn watched from the rear corner of the living quarters where he was checking the wiring, a little concerned. Ray had promised not to tell anyone that his power had finally presented, but Kenn wasn’t certain the firefighter would keep his word while he was upset. Now that he and Dale were having trouble, Ray would need a friend to talk to and spill his guts.

Kenn turned toward the tunnels, mind once again a ball of confusion. He hadn’t minded the beer and conversation with Ray before, but now, it would be strictly for nefarious purpose and Kenn didn’t think he could withstand the fall from grace this time. It was a long way down.

“The numbers are going up rapidly. Well above danger levels.”

Marc had stopped by for a report, but he hadn’t expected to see levels increasing on the strips. The personal badges were stuck to the wall under the air vents and to the under edge of a ledge near the camera outside. The numbers in here were the same as they had been yesterday, but the outer numbers had almost doubled.

“It rained last night.” Samantha tried to remain emotionless as she updated him. “Just a little, but it was enough to bring down more of the radioactive debris. They’re being exposed as we speak.”

He saw the clipboards had been switched to the hourly monitoring sheets instead of the daily copies they’d begun with. They would go to hourly if the levels down here began to rise. “When?”

“It’s individual, so I can’t determine it to the minute, but I would guess we’ll start seeing signs in the next couple of days.”

“What kind of signs?”

This cluttered weather chamber was the base of their operations with the Mexicans, but most people wouldn’t be able to tell that from getting a peek. They’d put the vents up high, lining the wall below them with tape that would be labeled and contain nametags a short time from now.

“No energy, bleeding from orifices, hair loss, sores.”

“And it gets bad from there, right?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a hell of a cleanup if we’re spared.”

Marc had already covered that in his notes, but he didn’t tell her that he’d chosen to leave it to nature. There were some details people didn’t need to know. Samantha would watch them die on camera. That was enough guilt and horror to carry and Marc was aware of the weight. Samantha wasn’t showing yet. Most of the females weren’t, but Samantha also wasn’t getting much exercise or sleep while doing this. Marc was glad it would only be for a couple more weeks, but he wished he had more Eagles so he could give her a break from this.

Samantha tried to smile. “I’m good. Honest.”

Marc had to take her word for it. She was needed here.

“Li’s still adding the potassium iodine like John did?”

Marc nodded. It had been strong enough to taste through the improvised chili the cook had made last night. “We’re easing it down, though, waiting to see if we need it. There’s only so much and there have never been tests to determine if prolonged use diminishes effectiveness.”

“So we could make ourselves immune to the iodine, like an antibiotic?”

“We don’t know. Test results were limited even before the war on anything connected to a military weapon or program.”

“I’d forgotten where all of this came from. What are we doing? Are we like them?”

Marc left without answering. Unlike Adrian, Marc refused to lie and say they had no choice. There was always a choice. They could have warned the Mexicans. They knew the army waiting for them to emerge had little experience in nuclear meltdowns. They’d chosen not to because in the end those men had to die anyway. Making this choice would save their own camp, their own troops. It hadn’t been an easy choice, but it had been the one that gave them a future.

5

“He shouldn’t be here.”

“You don’t get to make that choice.”

“Yes, I do. We voted.”

“The boss has the final say. We need him.”

“So she says.”

“So all of them say or he’d be dead by now. Let it go. We have bigger problems.”

Adrian refused to make eye contact with the tables of Eagles at the mess. He’d come in after breakfast was typically over, but there were still four dozen men and women enjoying a lingering meal.

He took a cup of coffee and went to a rear table that had no one around it. He wanted to make it clear that he didn't believe he'd been forgiven or that he was a full member again. He much preferred David's notion of a dangerous guard dog that couldn't be trusted not to bite if you were stupid enough to extend your hand. It suited him.

Adrian was thrilled with the mess. Angela had taken his advice in the notebooks and placed the tables in the center, with the lunch counters and drink lines along the walls. As a result, the warmth from the counters negated the need for the heating vents to blow in here as strongly, which also cut down on foreign objects winding up in their food from swirling through the air. It gave the room a community-meeting mood. He was willing to bet Eagles on downtime spent many hours at these tables, contemplating their future.

The mess returned to the previous levels of noise and chatter, but the people continued to stare and glare in Adrian's direction.

Adrian ignored them. They had to get used to seeing him around again before he could ask them to recognize who he was now.

And who are you? his demon questioned sarcastically. *Besides trouble for all of them?*

Adrian sighed, clamping down on his guilt. *I'm not that person now. Go away.*

Who is that?

At a nearby table, Kyle shifted his arm so the baby could see Adrian. *Our first leader.*

Why do they love him and hate him? The infant batted at the air with sticky fingers.

Kyle continued wiping away the spit from her neck and arm. *Because he's both good and bad.*

Autumn gurgled. *Like me.*

Kyle frowned. *Why do you think that?*

Mommy cries when she holds me. I must be a bad girl.

Kyle stifled a moan. This ghost would never leave them. *Your mommy adores you. She cries over other things, not you.*

Good. Love mommy.

Me too, Squirt. Kyle captured the fingers that needed to be cleaned, gently wiping them.

Autumn couldn't view very far with her infant sight. She squirmed unhappily, grunting.

What, Honey?

Wanna see!

Kyle realized what she wanted and sighed, dropping the used wipes into the basket hanging from her pumpkin seat. "Just for a minute and then you have to get a nap."

Autumn let out a happy sound that Kyle couldn't name. It sank into his heart and made him content. *Nice. Your mom does that to me too.*

Adrian glanced up as a shadow fell over the table.

"This is Autumn. She wanted to meet you."

Adrian grinned at the baby. "Hi. You sure got big since the last time I saw you. Growing quick."

Not quick enough. A cloud came over the child's perfectly pink little cheeks. *Stuck.*

Adrian sympathized. He extended his arm, not certain if Kyle would allow it.

Kyle almost didn't. If not for Autumn's eagerness, he wouldn't have.

Please, Daddy?

Kyle resignedly handed the baby to his former mentor. *She's gonna twist me up like that for the next sixty years or so.*

Adrian settled the cute girl into the crook of his arm, smiling down at her. *How old are you?*

Three months next week!

Adrian got the sense that she was struggling to force her fingers to hold up that many. *Can you count?*

Up to twenty. Daddy taught me!

Adrian gave Kyle a nod of approval. *That's good. Try hard to learn everything you can during this period. The smarter you are when you get control of your body, the better.*

Why?

Because you're the future, Sweetheart. You may lead these people after your mom. Adrian glanced up at Kyle, who was frowning. *Your dad won't like it, but you have a big future.*

Autumn's little face wrinkled up. *Sleepy.*

Adrian carefully stood up to return the child. *Come talk with me again. I'm not all bad.*

Autumn cooed. *Oh, yeah!*

Adrian grimaced as the diaper against his arm grew warm and heavy. A terrible odor rose to assault him. *Wow, kid. Just, wow.*

Autumn gurgled happily.

Kyle took her back, chuckling. "That's my girl."

Adrian found his arm dry, but sniffed it anyway. He recoiled in shocked offense at the stench. "What the hell are they feeding that kid?"

David entered the mess and spotted Adrian. When he saw that his mentor only had a cup of coffee, that's all he took from the empty line as well. He didn't speak to anyone, but he nodded at the small table of soldiers in the opposite corner who were also getting the banished treatment despite being taken into the Eagles. He joined Adrian, taking his notebook out.

Around the mess, those who'd served with Adrian scowled at the sight. The sense of loss, of not being the one to do that with him, was keen.

Adrian knew. He gestured toward the exit. "We'll do it while we walk."

David followed without argument, but he knew why Adrian was leaving and it bothered him.

It also bothered a few of the other members in the mess, but they knew better than to defend Adrian. He had to earn that first.

“Make it count. We all have the urge to start popping off rounds, but you have to repeat it to yourself until you no longer need it. *Make it count.*”

The Eagles reloaded their weapons, glad of the ear protection and the thicker barrier on this room. If not for that, their hearing would be damaged and the camp might panic. The sound of gunshots in a cave was awful.

Outside, Adrian and David waited for a pause in the noise. They knew better than to just walk on in, but a sign had been posted on the door for those who didn't.

David frowned, nose wrinkling. He kept catching a rough smell, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Adrian knocked. “Coming in!”

David followed him, sniffing as the odor increased and then vanished. Maybe there was a sewage problem.

The sweaty, uniformed Eagles glowered at the interruption, telling David to stay back, that he would never be one of them because of who he was loyal to. David mourned the training, not the friendships and bonding. He'd had that both before and after the war with his fellow soldiers. That wasn't what he was searching for now.

This training space had four-foot thick concrete barriers in the rear and a long distance between the shooters and the targets. Adrian still saw places where bullets had chipped shelves and ledges, and had to force himself not to comment on it. This was

the longest chamber. If there had been a safer place to put their range, Angela would have chosen it.

Marc motioned the class to holster their arms. “He has a signup sheet for anyone who wants to kick up their training. Five minute break.”

Marc refused to give it more support than that. If Adrian wanted students, he would have to gather them himself.

Adrian set the clipboard, one of many that he’d made for today, onto an empty weight bench. “Think you can kick my ass? Come prove it.” Adrian twisted neatly on his heel and left the room.

Marc’s eyes narrowed. *Damn! Now I want to take the class.* He wasn’t surprised when half of the students went over and put their names on the sheet while boasting. He also wasn’t upset. These men needed to know how to defend themselves and this camp. Adrian deserved to be beat on. It was a good match.

“Was that wise?” David stayed close as they walked to the ladder for the next level.

Adrian shrugged. “I have to get them there before I can get through to them.”

“Fair enough. What’s next?”

“Let’s start at the bottom and work our way up.” Adrian swung onto the ladder. “I have more fans down there.”

David drew back from the stench now rising from the hole. *It’s a wonder the ladder doesn’t melt!*

He tried not to gag. *We must be in the direct breeze of the sewer right here.*

David understood Adrian's joke about having friends down here as soon as he saw Cynthia prowling the bottom cavern, muttering and twitching. Her hair was wild, clothes wrinkled and dirty, and her face wasn't painted.

"Should we tell someone about that?" David followed Adrian into the nearby waste sector.

"No. They'll know soon enough, if they don't already. I can't interfere."

"Even though it's your kid?"

"Especially because of that."

"But it's your kin."

Adrian sighed, voice lowering. "It's pure evil. Safe Haven can't handle it."

"Could you?"

Adrian considered it again and came to the same conclusion. He sighed. "I don't believe so. Conceptions during bloodlust are dangerous. We never meant to create a life at that moment."

David understood as much as he could, but he still didn't agree. *A baby can't be evil... Can it?*

7

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Julia leapt to her feet as Jennifer's harsh words rang through the cell.

Jennifer stormed into the detention center, angry to discover Marc's ex around their prisoner. "I asked you a question. What are you doing here?"

"I got lost. I was —"

"That's not gonna fly!" Jennifer grabbed Julia by the arm and dragged the older woman toward the door with a strength that surprised her. "I don't know who the guard is on the detention center, but you just lost them their place in the Eagles. They won't thank you for that. If I were you, I'd stay in the living quarters until I was given permission to leave. You've got one more mistake and then Marc will throw you out to the Mexicans!"

Jennifer dragged her into the corridor as Eagles came from every direction.

"Who are you?"

"Who goes there?"

"What are you doing in there?"

"Where's the guard on the detention center?"

Julia kept her hands in the pockets of her jean jacket, fists clenched to keep from resisting. Her survival had always depended on fighting back, but she already knew that wouldn't succeed here. If she attacked this girl, Marc would throw her in the brig for the duration of her stay.

Jennifer waited for the guards to come through the darkness, braced against the coming flashlight glare. The lack of light in this tunnel was what had drawn her in the first place. "It's Jennifer."

Marc and Billy came through the small crowd of Eagles, neither of them missing the way Jennifer's hand was clenched around Julia's arm.

"Let's step inside, shall we?" Billy waved, sounding much like his mentor.

"No." Marc waved Jennifer on. "We get the report later. If it was an emergency she would have been shouting for us." Marc and Billy disappeared down the corridor as the crowd broke up.

Jennifer shoved Julia toward the living quarters.

Julia allowed the teenager to get away with the rough handling, but inside she was secretly reveling in the information that she had learned from Chauncey. The Keeper had welcomed her with a mental invitation that would have been impossible to resist. Once she unscrewed the bulb from the tunnel, it had been easy to distract the guard and send him for a replacement while everyone else was asleep and crews were at skeleton levels. Once Chauncey began talking, she had learned a number of things that could be useful once she figured out how to use them to her advantage. Marc was the boss here and Angela was the power, but the information Julia had just learned could change everything.

Julia winced as Jennifer's step quickened, grip tightening. Julia dug in her boots, trying to stop them, but the teenager had more strength. Julia was forced to go where Jennifer wanted. *For now.*

Chapter Twenty-Four
Insanity Runs Deep

1
The Quest Chronicles
Cynthia Quest Reporting
October 13th

Page 1

**Should Safe Haven have a Non-Descendant
Ruler?**

Slaughters, planned mass murders, and another foreign invasion. Nothing has changed since Angela's mad plan to defeat the government. Nothing has changed since she let hundreds of terrified refugees die in an avalanche. Nothing has changed since the slaughter at the train station. Now, we have a foreign army dying around us. What's next? Burning people to please the spirits? How can Safe Haven keep espousing morals while killing without consideration? We can't, folks.

**Should Safe Haven have a non-descendant
leader?**

I obviously think so, but I was curious about how the rest of this refugee camp felt. I spent the last week interviewing the camp members who have

been hurt the most by our fearless rulers. Here are some of their words, uncensored.

Tracy: I don't know. I mean, they see things before they happen and protect us.

Cynthia: You weren't protected.

Tracy: I'm lucky to be alive. I was protected.

Cynthia: So you like having a magic user in control of your life, deciding it was okay for you to be raped and beaten?

Tracy: I didn't say I was okay with it.

Cynthia: So you're not.

Tracy: I'm done talking to you.

Cynthia: How do you feel about having descendants running this camp?

Zack: I don't care who it is as long as they do a good job. So far, Marc is fine.

Cynthia: Marc isn't really the leader here and you know that.

Zack: Yes, he is.

Cynthia: You sound protective.

Zack: People keep trying to kill our leaders. We have to defend them.

Cynthia: With your life, even when they murder innocent people to achieve their goals?

Zack: Since their goals are to keep us alive, yes. Our leaders need us to do these things because no one else will.

Candy: I would vote for a non-descendant leader, as long as they were strong enough to keep us all safe.

Cynthia: What about our current and former rulers? Are you happy with the job they've done?

Candy: Happy? You're kidding, right? I lost my love, my heart. I'll never be happy again.

Cynthia: Who do you believe should be in charge?

Peggy: I don't make those choices.

Cynthia: You do, actually, every time you vote.

Peggy: Marc wasn't voted in. The title was passed to him, like with Angela.

Cynthia: Yes, these descendants appear determined to keep the crown in the family. Do you think there should be a new rule about that?

Peggy: Yes, but not the kind you mean. I believe women should be the only ones allowed. I don't care if they have gifts. I want them to be female.

Cynthia: Well, that'll come as a surprise to some of the camp. Can you tell me why you feel that way?

Peggy: Under Angela's leadership, I felt safe. I can't say that anymore and I never felt that way while the traitor was leading us. I want Angela back and after her, who knows? Maybe you.

As you can tell, there is turmoil in Safe Haven over the choices and methods of the descendants. Perhaps the time has come to consider removing them from power now, while we still get a small say-so in the way things are handled. If we wait, we'll be even more powerless than we already are.

Marc sighed, turning the page. Cynthia was foaming at the mouth after being denied the position of Angela's XO for the train run and, of course, Kevin leaving again. She didn't understand how valuable Jennifer had been and she never would. Angela had reduced Cynthia to need-to-know status right before she'd gone up the mountain to challenge Vlad.

Page 2

What Happened to the Train Descendants?

We don't know for certain. We were told another fight was coming. We were given an estimate of five hundred fighters, many of them descendants, coming to take revenge for one of Angela's murderous choices. So what happened to them? Did we make a deal? Was there a fight? The clues I've found are below. You can make your own choice, but I personally believe the men who say they saw it.

Kyle: The train people are gone, no longer a threat. Let it go.

Shane: We burned it. There isn't a mess. Wait. Don't print that, okay?

Chauncey: More than five hundred. The trains were full of slaves.

Jax: There was a call made to their town. Something about establishing a trade route now that their leader is dead.

Quinn: The library went up in flames. No one could get out.

That sounds like mass murder to me. When I asked our current ruler about it, this was his answer.

Marc: We had a problem and now it's gone. Can't you just be grateful that you didn't have the chore this time?

I'm not comforted, ladies and gentlemen. You shouldn't be either.

We now have as many descendant children as we do normals. Does that scare you? It should. We need to keep track of these kids and what they can do. Unleashing them on the world isn't right, no matter where we settle. They need to be tracked and maybe even locked up until they learn the Safe Haven code of honor.

Marc growled in anger, not caring that Cynthia was sitting in the far corner of the mess while he read her paper. He could sense her fear of his reaction, but he didn't sense any regret. She'd meant to piss him off and stir up the camp. The only thing he didn't know was why.

Marc continued reading, controlling his emotions to present the passive, bored face he'd used all his life. It had served him well in the Marines, but here, it was lifesaving.

What would this registry accomplish?

For starters, when certain powers were used against us, we would know who it was. We could track them down if needed, using the Keeper, Chauncey. If we get them in line now, we may not have as many problems later. I realize they've done amazing things for us, but do you honestly want to let them roam loose? When other groups use them against us, it will make the human assassins seem like a joyride. Tell our ruler we want a descendant registry, starting with Marc and his mate. Tell him

we want to know exactly what they can do and how it works, so we can protect ourselves from it.

Are the descendants reading your thoughts?

There's really no way to know, is there? The very idea revolts me. It is unnatural, but it's also a violation of our right to privacy. None of us here agreed to have our minds, our deepest and most private contemplations, read by people who do not have to subject themselves to the same humiliation.

How can you defend yourself?

Guard your thoughts by singing, humming, and thinking of nonsensical things while around known descendants. Warning! They will know you're hiding something if you don't do this very carefully.

Page 4

Should there be a law against magic?

After witnessing the horrible things these descendants are capable of, we would be safer if there was no magic used inside our gates. Let those terrible powers be used in our defense, never in offense or against each other. We have a right to be protected here. That was promised to us, not toiling under the thumbs of beings who wield their odd powers like ignorant children playing during a lightning storm. If they are forbidden to use magic here, some of the people hunting us will stop. They won't know we have descendants and they'll bother

someone else. We can't keep exposing ourselves to the dangers of magic. We need to ban the use of it except in extreme cases. Please join me in signing the back of this page. It is a petition, asking that the things discussed in this paper be added to the next mandatory camp meeting.

Marc closed the newspaper, aware of people watching both him and Cynthia for their reactions. He wanted to shout at her for the lies and half-truths, for the accusing tones and insinuations, but he only nodded to her and left the mess. Lunch was over for him.

Cynthia watched him go, eyes glittering. Angela wanted her unborn child dead. The baby had picked it up and informed the reporter of the coming threat. Cynthia was now taking direct, challenging steps to prevent that. "If you think this is too far, you have no idea what I'm capable of. But you're gonna find out I'm no one to double cross. Everyone else has missed you when they tried to take your life, Boss Lady. I won't."

Not far away, Angela sighed in relief. *I'm counting on it, Cyn. Please keep shouting for justice. Fate is listening.*

2

"What did you and Julia talk about?"

Chauncey paused in reciting the types of toys that were in the wash area. Jennifer scared him.

Jennifer sat down at the mess table, aware of people quieting to listen. Word about her new job had traveled.

“She asked about Marc and Angela.”

“What did you tell her?”

Realizing he should have kept his mouth shut, Chauncey paled. “I’m sorry. I thought she was one of you.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because of her son.” Chauncey smiled. “Cody’s a great kid.”

“What about his mother?”

Chauncey gazed at her blankly. “I only track descendants.”

Jennifer stored that. “We’re going to move you into the general population. You’ll still be under guard.”

“I get to stay?”

“For now. All of our tunnels are closed. When the thaw comes and we dig out, you’ll be sent on your way with a vehicle and gear.”

Chauncey crossed his arms over his chest, lower lip sticking out. “I wanna stay.”

“That’s already been decided. The answer was a unanimous no in the council vote. We can’t trust you.” She stood up. “Be glad they didn’t vote *my* way.”

Chauncey understood she had voted for his execution. “I had to do what Donner told me to.”

“Now, you’ll do what we tell you.” Jennifer took a notebook and pen from her deepest pockets. “Start writing the history of the descendants.”

“Why should I?” He glared sullenly. “I’m not getting anything out of it.”

Jennifer let her eyes glow red. “If you refuse, the council voted to let me kill you for tracking our kind and selling them to Donner.” Jennifer moved toward the exit, not letting her eyes return to normal yet. “There’s trouble in the security room. All patrols to duty!”

The mess flooded with movement, no one doubting Jennifer’s warning. Marc was alone in the security space, eating there while catching up on paperwork.

3

Marc wanted to respond to the illegal calls on the radio and the frantic feet flying toward him, but the woman with the red scarf cocked the 9mm in her hand.

Marc lifted his palms, indicating that he wasn’t going to do anything.

“I want out of here.”

Marc lifted a brow. “I’m not sure that’s possible after this.”

The stocky woman slowly lowered the weapon, but she didn’t remove her finger from the trigger. “I decided not to do this a long time ago. I became one of you.”

Marc chose a polite tone. "What changed?"

"You have an enforcer!" Gladys trembled. "She knows why I was sent here."

"So what's the plan now? Force me to take you top side and vanish."

Gladys hesitated. "I don't want to leave..."

Marc sighed, hating this part of his job. "You can't stay after this and I can't let you go." Marc braced for it. "Open fire!" He dove under the shield of the desk as two guns began to shoot through the door.

Gladys flew forward onto the chair, blood flying across Marc's papers. Her gun didn't fire.

"Clear!" Marc stayed down.

The door, now broken, swung open to reveal Angela and Kenn standing shoulder to shoulder. Marc could tell her not-so-neat shots from Kenn's perfect aim, but all of hers were good enough to qualify for level three.

Angela's hands trembled, arms cramping, mind screaming. She stared at the body.

Marc gestured Kenn to take the weapon.

Kenn was impressed. He and Angela had arrived at roughly the same time. Everyone else was lining the sides of the corridor.

Angela shoved the gun into Kenn's hands and staggered toward the medical bay. She jerked away from those who would have helped her, growling in pain and anger. Her injuries were burning.

Kenn holstered and placed Angela's warm gun on the corner of the desk. "I'll call in a cleanup crew."

Marc began to gather his papers and gear to take into the brig, mind already going to other problems. Missy had warned him about Gladys. If the Eagles had missed, Marc would have tried to shoot her from under the desk.

He stepped over the legs of the corpse as if he hadn't been attacked. "I'll be around."

4

"We need to talk."

Cynthia slammed her coffee mug onto the desk. "I'm working."

Marc settled into the chair across from the reporter, seeing she was busy scratching out another inflammatory edition of her paper. "I'm reassigning you."

Cynthia looked up in confused surprise. "What?"

"Someone else will run the newspaper for a while. I'm giving you a break."

Cynthia glared, leaning forward aggressively. "You are not taking this away from me."

Marc crossed his arms over his chest and stretched out his legs so she would have to step over him to leave the janitorial closet that she'd appropriated with permission.

Cynthia tried being meek. “Please. It’s all I have.”

“You’re going to have a baby. I’d like you to concentrate on being healthy. We need children. You know that.”

“Tell your bitch!” Cynthia’s tears of rage filled her eyes to spill over pale cheeks. “She’s going to kill him. Are you in on it? Why are you here?”

Marc realized Cynthia was having more trouble adjusting to life down here than anyone had believed. He sent a calming force over her, using his alpha strength.

“No, don’t!”

Too late! A cold wave of hatred flew down his throat as the chair tipped. *This isn’t my night.*

Marc released his demon to fight the choking force, but reigned it in when the evil inside would have finished the job. His strength was easily able to force the child’s hatred back into Cynthia’s trembling body, where she would hopefully reabsorb it.

“I’m sorry.” She cowered along the wall. “Please don’t.”

Marc slowly stood up and righted the chair that had fallen over when the force hit. *I’ve gotta start expecting this stuff.*

Marc stewed on what he knew of issues like these, waiting for both of them to calm a little.

Cynthia slowly sank to her butt on the cold stone, knees drawn up for protection.

“I’d like for you to meet with the doctor,” Marc cleared his sore throat. “He’ll give you something to help you stay relaxed, something that won’t hurt the baby.”

Cynthia stared back in abject terror. “That’s how she’ll do it.”

“A lot of people have the mountain sickness. Combine that with a child like yours, and you’ll have an even harder time of it. You need help adjusting.”

“She’s never going to let us out of here alive.” Cynthia lowered her forehead to her arms. “You remember this conversation, boy scout, ‘cause when I die, you’ll know who did it.”

There was no mistaking the fact that the reporter needed help right away. Marc opened the door. “Please stay here. I’ll send someone down to help you to the medical bay.”

“I’ll kill her if you put me in there.” Cynthia shuddered. “It’s her or us.”

Marc shut the door, waving Nathan over. “Don’t let her out of there. Someone will be by.”

Nathan, frowning at Marc’s newly mussed condition, nodded. “You got it, Boss.”

Marc didn’t feel a sense of happy pride at the name this time. Right now, he didn’t want to be in charge. He had to handle something he was almost too tired for, but considering how badly things were going with the woman who still had her child, this couldn’t wait.

“You haven’t been to see her.”

Adrian didn’t glance up. “I’m doing what I’m supposed to—staying away from both of you.”

Marc took a seat across from his enemy. It was too bad he couldn’t let Adrian stay down here in this dusty place atop the cavern holding the Mexican bodies. Adrian and David hadn’t presumed to go upstairs for sleeping arrangements and Marc hadn’t told them any different. He hadn’t been certain then. “You’re supposed to help her.”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Marc could feel the wheels spinning in Adrian’s head, but he didn’t pick up anything negative. It appeared as if Adrian was trying to find an honest way to obey the rules and was having a hard time with it. That wasn’t surprising. Changing from a piece of shit into a good person was almost impossible for anyone, let alone for someone who had done the things Adrian had. Marc didn’t believe it was possible.

Adrian didn’t respond to the thought. He wasn’t sure if it was possible either. He also wasn’t certain which way he would go when things all came down. He missed teaching Angela. He missed leadership, missed being a hero. At some point, all of those things were going to come to a head, but for now, Marc was the boss. “Are our deals still in place?” Adrian fished. It didn’t seem as if Marc was here for anything particular.

“Do you think she knows we have these talks?”

Adrian sighed, setting his plate down. He’d enjoyed the first few bites of Ramen, but his appetite had left with Marc’s arrival. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe she has a reason for it?”

“Yes.” Marc did, he just hated it. Sighing in resignation, Marc pushed out heat to warm the tunnel. He’d discovered a new gift by accident in the shower when the water had gotten cold. He could now modify the temperature of the environment around him.

“Do you know what her reason is?”

“I have suspicions. Probably the same as yours.”

Adrian groaned as sensations began to return to his cold toes. “Most likely reason?”

“So we’ll learn to tolerate each other and recognize that our skills are complementary.”

“Yeah.” Adrian leaned back, accepting the moment for what it was. Marc was upset and needed comfort. He’d come to the only person available who understood. “Imagine a leader like her, with arms like us and legs like Neil and Jeremy.”

“What would Kenn and Tonya be? The ass cheeks?” Marc forced himself to give it a chance for this one moment in time.

“Nice.” Adrian chuckled. “Guess that makes Kyle a middle finger.”

Marc snickered. “He’d like that.”

“So would Jennifer. She’s the matching finger on the other hand.”

“You think? I’ve been guiding someone else into that slot.”

“Where do you have Jennifer?”

“I don’t. She’s above me, according to Chauncey.”

“No one is above the alpha.” Adrian loosened his top jacket button as the heat in the corridor increased.

“Then I don’t know. Tell me.”

“She’s Kyle’s match in every way right now.” Adrian made sure his tones were neutral so the man would listen. Marc needed to know these things. “In time, she might become Angela’s match.”

Marc hadn’t considered what would happen as their descendant powers continued to grow. “And Billy?”

Adrian tensed. “He has work in the west.”

“What kind of work?”

“The hard kind that might lead to miracles.” Adrian shrugged tiredly. “I don’t know what happens exactly. The flashes are only strong when I’m...” Adrian sat up and got a drink of water from his canteen.

“When you’re with Angie.”

Sorry the tension had returned so soon, Adrian grunted. “It’s more like when I’m in her thoughts. When she won’t let me in, I can’t pick up much.”

“She won’t talk to you?”

“No. I’ve only tried once or twice. Didn’t want to start new problems or push her too hard. She’s in a lot of pain.”

“What does she need?”

“A lot of things. Mostly, your forgiveness.”

“What if I can’t give it to her?”

“Then let her go and I’ll do the best I can to keep her alive.” Adrian glared. “But I don’t think she’ll be okay if you walk and neither do you or you’d already be gone.”

“I wouldn’t leave her in this condition.”

“Would you leave her if she showed signs of recovering? Have you brought down that wall yet? Will you give her to me now?”

“Not on your life!”

Adrian smirked. “Good.”

Marc stared in confusion. “What?”

Adrian’s grin widened. “Things have changed on you again. I’m done making deals and plotting against fate. I’m going to be one of the good guys...for real this time.”

Marc’s stomach flipped. Adrian being evil was the only advantage he had over the man.

“See, that right there is what I don’t want to put her through anymore.” Adrian yawned. “I refuse to be the cause of more pain.”

Marc wasn’t certain if he believed that, but there was no doubting the genuine tone and concerns. “So how does it work? We follow Neil and Jeremy’s example?”

Adrian shrugged. "If that would succeed, I'd agree. You already know that."

"It won't."

"We know."

"What would?" Marc could sense Adrian's reluctance to discuss that part of it. "What gives us all peace from the garden mistakes?"

"Nothing." Adrian's eyes became dead pools of certainty. "We can't call again. I won't ever do it and neither will she. Stop."

"But if we did, what would we have to have ready? What does He want to be able to forgive us?"

"A society without any of the commandments being broken. If we call again without that, the world will end. All life will be removed."

"Just one or all societies at that time?" Marc leaned forward to poke at the fire with Adrian's stick. "And what constitutes a society?"

The silence said Adrian wasn't going to give him that information willingly.

"It's not that I'm unwilling." Adrian hesitated. "It's just that I can't trust you to do what's right for her anymore. Our roles have been reversed, except you still get to be with her. You're only hurting yourself, by the way. She doesn't miss you when you avoid her. She misses her babies."

Marc winced, then pushed on. "At least tell me why you won't tell me."

Adrian took a small pouch from his pocket and rolled a thin joint. "I found this while scavenging. If I don't die, you can try it."

Marc snickered. "Maybe that's how we can get along. I'll use you to taste my food first."

"At least I'd be useful then."

"You want to do quiet labor for me like the other men?" Marc was surprised.

"You're the alpha." Adrian sighed. "Of course, I do. Then there's the fact that I've been up front for so long that I don't fit into the rear now."

"You'll have the classes."

"Yes, and I'm grateful, but it's not the same. I could help you personally. Not with her, but with leadership."

Marc had already decided to do that, but it was gratifying to hear Adrian's almost begging tone. "I'll think about it."

Adrian immediately brightened. "Cool. Thanks."

Adrian's happiness hit Marc while he wasn't braced for it. The brief time he'd been in awe of the man flooded back as he stared. "You had it all and gave it up, for Angie."

"No." Adrian didn't make eye-contact. "For a one-in-a-million chance that I might have a short time with Angie. You can't imagine my level of devotion."

"Really?"

"Really." Adrian ignored Marc's new wave of rage. "I've observed your history from her point of view. You never sacrificed anything for her. You still haven't. She's been destroyed. You're the same as when you arrived."

“I’m a lot angrier.”

“That’s another reason why I won’t give you whatever plan you’re subtly asking me for. I’ve corrupted you in ways. So has she. We’ve agreed not to do that to you again. If you want the information, you have to ask her.”

Marc had expected that. “If you don’t have the knowledge I want, you’d better get it. No information for me means no FND from me and no acceptance from the camp.”

“You can’t buy me on this. I’m not going to let you try using a loophole during a forbidden call to the Creator.”

Now that it had been spoken aloud, Marc could hear how crazy it was.

“Does that change your mind?”

Marc shook his head. “Not one bit. I’m relentless when I believe something will succeed.”

“You can’t fool the Maker.”

“It’s not fooling or lying. It’s using the exact terms to satisfy the requirements.”

“But it’s meant to apply to a society that is actually living by the commandments, not just obeying them.”

“The difference wasn’t specified, was it?”

Adrian’s brow puckered. “Not that I know of, but all we’ve ever had is tattered remains of books or scientific papers we were able to steal from government labs. There is absolutely no proof that it would earn us forgiveness. That is purely speculation.”

“And it came before the call you two made.”
Marc knew that mattered. “What did that change?”

“I’m not sure. So far, I haven’t found anything, but the connection was short and without compassion for our remorse. I don’t believe your society can have any killers in it, Marc. Think about that for a minute. No killers, of any kind, for any reason. It’s not possible.”

“Is it no killers or no murderers?”

“No one knows for sure. Another reason the call was, and remains, too big a risk to take.”

“Where can we get accurate information?”

Despite his objections, Adrian did want to secure their future that way if it was possible.
“You’ve been scroll diving?”

“Yes, but I can’t go much further. I don’t have enough breath left to explore by the time I get down there.”

Adrian was surprised Marc had already explored his demon that far. “I can help with lessons to strengthen your mental lungs.”

“Do I have that information down there somewhere? Because it feels endless. I’ll never be able to sort through it all to find what I need.”

Adrian realized Marc had been gifted with a full knowledge bank, but he didn’t say so. “Take the witch next time, instead of your demon. She’s ancient. You’re new. She might have an instinct for it.”

“How can I be new?”

“You’ve locked your power away in every lifetime, except for this one. You’re new in many ways.”

Marc gestured toward the abandoned joint. “You gonna light that or what?”

Adrian chuckled, getting his lighter. “Yes, Boss.”

“It’s nice when you do that.” Marc sent out a wave of obedience.

Adrian sighed. “So is that, but I’m not going to tell you what you want to know. I’m not going to give you a plan.”

Marc smiled cruelly. “I already had the plan. I just needed you to confirm it.”

“Confirm what?”

“That it’s even possible.”

Realizing he’d been tricked, Adrian tossed the joint at Marc. “Test your own shit.”

Marc laughed as he caught it. “Thanks. I will.”

Silence fell for a moment as Marc smoked and Adrian thought.

“Are you gonna try it anyway?”

“No.” Marc blew out smoke in a steady stream. “I will keep digging for all the information, though. Maybe in the future, we’ll have the right set of circumstances.”

“And until then?”

“We build it. Maybe He’ll come on His own and we won’t be in trouble.”

Adrian let out the breath he’d been holding. “Good. That’s good.”

“It’s Angie’s plan.” Marc stiffened. “The one she was working on right after we returned from killing Donner.”

“How far did she get?”

“She has two big notebooks, but it only covers the top issues. She didn’t even want to try the coveting commandment. Wanting what someone else has is natural, up to a point. It’s what drove mankind to create a world that can do heart transplants and walk on the moon.”

“It’s also what caused our downfall.”

“Yeah.”

Both of them internally deliberated their own roles in that and fell silent for another long moment where scenes replayed repeatedly while they dug for meanings and solutions.

“This is what she wanted from us spending time together.” Marc knew it for certain at that moment. “Both of us working on her goals.”

“Yes.”

Marc met his eye. “Cynthia is having trouble.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ve been forbidden from interfering. And I won’t.”

Marc knew an order like that could only have come from one person. “So Cynthia’s right?”

Adrian lifted a brow. “About what?”

She didn’t trust him with it, Marc realized in elation. *She doesn’t trust him.*

“Get moved into one of the living areas. David too.” Marc passed the joint and stood up. “Then I want you to spend time with Angela. Make sure she doesn’t have the trouble that Cynthia is.”

He ignored all of the expected responses that came from Adrian, holding up a hand. “That’s an order, and I’d better hear about it soon or I’m sending you out by yourself to kill Mikel and all of his men. Do your job carefully, but do it. No one slacks off in my camp.”

Adrian stared in suspicion as Marc left. “You just gave me something I want more than anything... What are you up to?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tough Love

October 14th

1

“**W**here do you think they want us?” David snorted sarcastically as the two guards in the singles’ area both motioned at cots next to the security booth.

Adrian grunted, trying not to react to all the hostility. No one wanted him in here. Adrian could imagine the fight Marc had gotten on this one. He also assumed the boy scout had soothed them with the idea that he could be hit more often if he were bunking with them.

Adrian dropped his kit on the cot and strode to the security booth, holding out a sheet of paper. “Make sure the boss gets that.”

Green read the note. “I’ll handle it.”

Adrian didn’t know the guard and the guard didn’t know him. There was no reason for animosity. There wasn’t any until the other sentry read the note.

“We are not wasting Marc’s time with suggestions like this!” Zack crumbled the paper and tossed it into the trashcan. “You can’t earn your way back in with us. We won’t allow it.”

Adrian didn't reply. Tempers were too hot right now, but he had faith that Green would still deliver the message. Having mice in the cave wasn't a good thing. In time, it could be downright dangerous.

Sort of like sleeping in here. Instead of bringing up his shield or trying to converse his way out of future beatings, Adrian sent a wave of his magic over the room, coating them all in his good mood. He smiled as the mutters became confused murmurs. "I'm glad to be back. Thanks."

People glared and scowled, but with his light smothering their negativity, there was no choice but to accept that Adrian was still a powerful force.

"We'll handle something important first. It's gonna be a long day. Might as well start it out right."

2

"I have updates for you, Boss."

Marc waved Morgan into the brig.

"We put people on the other possible threats that Missy identified. We'll let you know as soon as anything breaks there."

Marc made a note on it as Morgan continued.

"We passed the word about no magic. Most descendants have been told by now, but we can't stop the kids from using it."

"I know. The kids aren't the problem."

"Ray is asking for a few minutes of your time, alone."

Marc wrote it down. "I'll find him later. Next?"

“Candy resigned from the Eagles.”

Marc wasn't surprised. She hadn't been spending any time with Theo's team. “Next?”

“Billy got into it with Jax over the punishment you assigned.”

Marc looked up at that. “Why isn't someone in the brig here with me?”

“Because Billy said he slipped and Jax let him.”

Marc sighed. Quinn was slowly accepting it, but Jax was a hothead who still believed he was perfect. “Put him with Adrian on the next schedules. Don't tell Mr. Perfect what's going on. Let's see if he can still work that old magic and bring Jax around.”

Morgan made a note, smirking. If Adrian couldn't do it, that would prove he was useless to the camp and he could be removed. Marc was clever.

“We haven't had any attempts at contact from Tommy's group or Seth, but the Mexicans are still calling and so are refugees. Samantha saw another big group of them come in last night. They were given shelter.”

“With Mikel's army?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that can't be good,” Marc sighed. “Keep me posted.”

“I will. Last thing is health. The doctor is reporting an increase in colds.”

“Colds?”

“Said it might be a Yellowstone effect.” Morgan shrugged. “He’s pretty nasty most days. I didn’t ask for details.”

“I’ll handle it. Next?”

“We’re passing the word now about the monthly celebrations for birthdays and holidays. Are we ready to do it on the 14th?”

“Sounds fine. Angie had things gathered for this. She knows people need to have a good time.”

“Cool. That’s it from me for now.”

“Okay.” Marc saw Morgan was wearing the full Eagle uniform, the one Adrian had always required men to wear while on duty. He didn’t protest. Morgan had the right to forgive Adrian, like everyone else. “You’re off tonight?”

Morgan grinned. “Yep.” He scanned their prisoner, not liking his baby face or his long blond hair. The stocky man was trouble, from his alligator boots to his uni-brow.

“Gonna watch the lessons later?”

Morgan’s grin widened. “Yep.”

Marc chuckled. “Have fun.”

Morgan closed the door, motioning the guard to stay alert. Not only was he going to watch Adrian get his ass beat, Morgan planned to participate.

Marc glanced over at the exhausted prisoner who had pretended to be sleeping while the guard was giving him updates. “You can go to sleep soon. You’ve been found guilty of treason, murder, and other crimes. Do you deny them?”

Mickey, only alive because his time to walk the mile had been scheduled for the day after war, didn't answer. He was now waiting for his chance to escape this future, as he had that one.

Marc tried to dig into the man, but the shield over Mickey's mind was too thick. Marc shrugged. "I could have the Enforcer talk to you."

Mickey jerked upright, voice cracking. "You have an Enforcer?"

Marc smiled, putting his hands behind his neck. "And she doesn't like you. You're in our brig. That's really all she'll need to know."

Mickey talked. He didn't stop until Marc told him to.

An hour later, Kenn and Neil came into the brig with duct tape and a bag.

Neither of them spoke. They didn't need to. Both men had been expecting the chore.

3

"It's about time."

Adrian didn't respond to Wade's mutter as he entered the medical bay.

Angela was still in the rear, behind a partition. Other than her guard, they were alone. The doctor and his students were doing fieldwork on some of the animals the vet had chosen for a class. Adrian wasn't certain why Angela wanted the medical crew to know how to milk a cow or feed a chicken, but

he wasn't going to ask. He assumed something like that was prep for problems they were going to have on the island.

"It's to teach them compassion." Angela flinched as he pulled the partition open and left it that way.

Adrian saw the bruises on her arm where a new IV had been inserted and understood the doctor had been letting his students practice on her. "That son of—"

"I insisted." Angela hadn't heard Adrian come in, but she had, at the same time. Her soul had felt him when her senses had failed to. It was scary.

Adrian took the empty chair next to her bed, wondering if she'd had another episode or if something else had made the doctor decide to strap her down again.

"He said I was intentionally scratching myself while I slept." Her voice broke. "Now I'm afraid to sleep."

Adrian flipped the buckle on the strap and actually felt the wave of relief and approval from her guard. His own sentry, Greg, was sending out the same vibes of anger that Adrian was experiencing. Marc should be here helping her through this.

"He has to help himself first." Tears oozed over her hollow cheeks. "He checks on me every night."

"Like that's enough!" Adrian went to the neat cabinets that were stuffed into a small impression in the stone. "Where are your clothes?"

Angela gazed up blankly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Adrian noticed a slight slur this time. “He’s drugging you? You’re letting him drug you?!”

Adrian’s roar brought several Eagles into the tunnel, but Greg and Wade quickly shut them down and sent them away. The doctor had been given free rein with Angela and her depression was letting her agree to things she normally wouldn’t have.

“Does Marc know about this?” Adrian looked at the guard instead of her.

Wade shrugged. “If it was me, I would, but he hasn’t asked for details and he cuts us off when we try to give them.”

“He has his own pain.” Angela sighed miserably. “You’re not being fair to him. He also lost a child.”

The Eagles fell silent, but Adrian’s mental cursing rang in Angela’s mind loud and clear. She couldn’t help the small part of her that concurred. Marc should be here caring for her, but the leader in her knew he was needed where he was.

“There’s room for both,” Adrian dropped a pair of green scrubs onto her leg. It was all he could find. “I told Kenn no one could balance the two, but I was wrong.”

Angela didn’t answer. She also didn’t touch the clothes.

Adrian didn’t want to force her to fight, but their bond was feeding him too much of her agony and depression. He began to dress her.

The guards were relieved. If Marc wasn't going to make her start living again, someone had to.

Angela's eyes blazed with rage, but Adrian didn't stop. He slid his hand over her arm and gently pulled her into a sitting position.

Realizing he wasn't going to quit, Angela shoved his arm away. "Give me a minute!"

Adrian closed the partition, but didn't leave. He did turn around, but he wasn't positive about making her do it all alone. She was too pale, too fragile, to not need assistance. It was hard to believe she'd had the strength to reach Marc last night, let alone enough to fire a weapon.

This is what it looks like when a soul dies, Angela sent bitterly. *I don't want any part of your plots or plans. Get out. Go away.*

Adrian didn't budge.

I'm going to scream for Marc.

"Please do," Adrian replied instantly. "He sent me. He'll know I did what I was told and get off my back."

"Marc sent you?"

"Yes." Adrian didn't respond to any of her curses.

The guards were eased to hear it. That meant Marc wouldn't be mad over Adrian being here. Not that it mattered to Wade. He was tired of Angela's misery. At this point, he didn't care who helped her.

"Come on. It's time for a lesson."

Angela folded her arms over her chest and glared with red orbs. "Make me."

Adrian leaned over to push out an incredibly strong wave of alpha command. "Get out of this bed and get dressed. Do it now!"

Angela laughed in his face.

Adrian leaned closer. "Fine. If you aren't up in five seconds, Sweetheart, I'm climbing in with you."

"You can't—"

"One."

"Don't ever—"

"Two."

"I should let you so Marc can shoot you again!"

"Three."

"Fine! Asshole."

Adrian moved back, but held out a hand. "Let's go. Nice and easy."

Angela tried to do it fast anyway, to hurt herself for the way her heart was responding to Adrian's arrival, to his presence, to his hand around hers. It wasn't an attraction, but relief that he still wanted her. *I'm not supposed to feel that way! Stop it! Hate him! He's bad!*

"Yes, I am." Adrian firmed his arm for her to lean on as she stood. Her smell wafted over him.

Adrian grimaced. *No vanilla now.*

"Then take me to get a shower."

Adrian scooped up the clothes and waited for her to clutch the ends of her gown shut. "Up or down?"

Angela balked. "Out in camp? Like this?"

“What would you tell one of your patients?”
Adrian led her slowly to the corridor.

“That injuries come before appearances.” She glared. “Do you know how much I hate you?”

“I’ve got some ideas on it. Living area or Eagle showers? They’re equal distance.”

Adrian shook his head at Greg when the Eagle started to insist they stay and use the showers in the medical bay. They needed to get her out, not give her a way to stay hidden.

“Up.”

Adrian’s mood lifted further. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t welcome. Angela was and the magic of the Eagles was amazing to witness, even if you were an enemy.

“You’re not their enemy.” Angela’s cheeks were bright red as they trundled by guards and camp members who stared in surprise.

“You’re not either.”

“I’m not the one feeling that way.”

“No?”

“No.”

“They have no reason to view you with hostility?”

Angela considered it.

Adrian led them to the stairs and gestured her to go first. He quickly turned his back so he wouldn’t be able to view her ass.

Now a very deep shade of red, Angela climbed the ladder as quickly as she could while holding her gown closed.

Adrian counted the seconds, two per rung, and then followed her up. He kept his chin down. People would be watching even small moments like this. He had to be careful.

“No, they don’t. We’re not the enemy.”

“I agree. However, there’s always a good guy and there’s always a bad guy. While we’re in this cave, that’s my role. Let them vent when we get up there. They’ve earned it.”

It took five minutes to reach the top level of the cave; word spread quickly, drawing curious, relieved people who kept their distance when they saw her escort and their two guards. Greg and Wade motioned people away when some of them would have welcomed Angela or questioned her. As they walked through the damp, drafty tunnels, now the complete center of attention, Greg understood why she’d chosen the Eagle showers instead of the living quarters. The Eagles would give her privacy once she was in there. The camp would mob her even when she was naked.

Angela was aware of the improvements in the cave and the health of the people they passed. She’d been secluded so long that it was like witnessing something that someone else had accomplished.

“You built this.” Adrian came to her side as she paused to stare up at the massive catacomb of ladders and corridors that were filled with survivors of multiple wars and atrocities. It was amazing.

“We.” She sent her witch out to survey her domain. She hadn’t done it since before going up the mountain.

Settling into his role with a sigh of contentment, Adrian took her arm and kept her on track while she searched for trouble.

“Tell him there are moles in the maze again.” Angela stared at nothing they could see, voice like the dead. “Watch the kitchen. Dark spot there.”

Adrian noted the warnings like he always had, but he also made sure Greg wrote them down.

Angela came out of the mental daze, hating the drug haze she couldn’t shake.

“We’ll get coffee after this.” Adrian braced. “In the reading room.”

Angela nodded stiffly as they came into view of the showering men and women. It was almost full. Angela looked at Adrian with deep displeasure. “Nice timing.”

“I thought so.”

“You knew the Eagles were going to use me for bait the first time I came out?”

He gestured toward the rear of the steamy stone space. “They have a stall waiting for you and an assistant.”

Angela scanned the profiles, spotting just as many rookies as senior level men. She stared at Adrian with open fear. “I am sorry that you were banished.”

Adrian’s heart broke for her all over again. She wasn’t sure if he was about to pay her back for it.

She didn't trust a single soul on the planet now. "It's okay, Baby. We'll keep you alive."

Greg glanced at the guards on the sector and made a sharp gesture.

Allan and Pamela hurried over to give her an escort, glaring harshly at the rookies. "Finish up and clear the room!"

Adrian kept a hand on his holster, able to sense the tension without touching Angela's arm. Someone in here wasn't friendly. Marc was wrong about her being safe among the Eagles.

It may be my mental state rubbing off. Some of these people are sensitive to our moods.

Adrian assumed she was trying to be positive she wasn't overreacting, but he could feel the danger and swept the chamber. *Are you getting anything?*

No.

Are you searching?

No.

Adrian realized she was hoping to be killed and cursed as he twisted too late to stop the assassin who ran up behind them.

Adrian watched the gun go to her head.

Click!

Adrian tackled the man.

"Get them!"

Three other traitors were also pulling triggers on blanks as Kyle and ten other pissed Eagles slammed them to the ground.

"She has to die! Kill her!"

“Kill her now!”

Adrian held one of the struggling would-be killers while Wade and Greg tied his arms and then gagged him to stop the awful shouting.

The other three men, tall and not appearing the sort to do this, began shouting as well.

“It’s the end! She’s brought the end!”

“God hates her! She has to die!”

Kyle and the Eagles quickly gagged the men, not being gentle. “Take them all to the brig.”

“Wait. Maybe we shouldn’t do that.”

Heads twisted toward Barry, who was furious and ashamed—the same emotional brew of everyone here who’d been part of the plan to trap the ammo thieves. “We have them dead to rights. Do we need a trial?”

Muffled screams came from the bound and gagged assassins as the senior men shared agreeing glances.

“Take them to the brig.” Kyle satisfied both sides. “They may have information we want. If not, we’ll drop them into a hole on the bottom level, like we did with Jayson’s body after the Ghost finished slicing and dicing him.”

Relief and fear came from the four assassins as they were shoved out of the showers.

Kyle waited until he was sure the acoustics of the cave wouldn’t carry his voice further than this room. “Nice work, everyone. Please remember to thank Barry, who had the courage to suggest this plan.”

Adrian still wasn't allowed to express his outrage. He'd fought against using her this way, but as a banished traitor himself, he'd been ignored.

He turned to Angela, ready to take his anger out on her for not even trying to fight back, but she was already in the rear stall with Jennifer.

Left without an outlet and unneeded, Adrian walked toward the tunnel, where David was now lingering with the coffee he'd been sent for.

No one spoke to him at all.

"Did you know Barry told us to put blanks in all rookie guns today?" Jennifer was helping Angela soap her hair.

"Yes. Barry snuck in to get my permission. He didn't know the day then, so I wasn't positive it had been covered."

"You didn't believe Marc had you covered."

"Does he know about this plan?"

"No. We didn't think he would have agreed."

"He wouldn't have, but that's beside the point." Angela rinsed her hair, stomach cramping as she leaned back. "He didn't have me covered. He's just now realizing I was in danger again and he missed it. He'll show up here soon, but Adrian will keep him out or piss him off to distract him."

"Because he knows you don't have the energy for this right now?" Jennifer wrapped the towel around Angela's clean hair.

Angela shrugged. "More likely he knows that each moment like this forces me further into

isolation. I'm not safe even to take a shower. Marc will never be able to protect me..."

"Like Adrian could."

"Yes and no. Adrian would do better because he would use me exactly as you did today and it would remove these wolves from our sheep faster. It also risks my life, so there's a price to pay if he ever miscalculates."

Jennifer paled. "How many more are there? Please tell me we're about done with this part."

Angela didn't answer right away. With the capture of the four today, the future might have changed.

Jennifer could feel Angela straining to open doors and sent a burst of her youthful energy into her mentor's arm. "Here."

Angela was grateful as the barrier swung open, but the darkness wasn't a comfort. Tiny pinpricks of evil lit up the darkness like fireflies on a summer night.

"Damn." Jennifer was getting the vision clearly. "Too many to count."

Angela ended the connection to conserve the energy she had and to save what she'd been given. "Yes. The future holds much more of this before we'll have peace, but even then, there are killers, betrayers. We have a long fight remaining to achieve peace." Angela shivered.

Jennifer wrapped the large towel around Angela, wishing she could speed up the recovery time. With all that danger waiting for them, this

camp needed Angela at the helm. “I have updates and notes for you. Adrian told us you won’t want them yet.”

Angela forced herself to ask. “Anything that can’t wait?”

“No.”

Jennifer didn’t push. Adrian’s suggestions had sounded good, and he’d gotten her here. It was a start.

“He dragged me from the bed!”

“You’re lucky he didn’t climb in with you and try to soul meld or something. He’s looked rough for the short time you’ve been apart.”

Angela stared in dismay. “You know.”

Jennifer nodded, keeping her voice low enough to be shielded by the few showers that were still running. “I scanned Adrian when he came to me. I don’t trust him at all.”

“Good.”

“When will you tell Marc?”

“Marc figured it out weeks ago.” Angela slowly buttoned the long shirt over her comforting tank top and stretchy jeans. Jennifer had had them waiting for her. “That’s why he sent Adrian instead of coming himself.”

“The big guns, huh?”

“Something like that.” Angela sat on the bench outside the shower to let Jennifer help with her socks and shoes. Bending over was still hard. “He hoped Adrian would be able to use his alpha command on me because of the bond.”

Jennifer chuckled. “Wonder if he’ll be surprised to find out you’re above Adrian in every way.”

“He hoped it would succeed, so he tried. He didn’t expect Adrian to drag me here and let you use me for bait. Be prepared for that reaction.”

“I am. I have a few words ready.”

Angela didn’t tell the teenager not to scold Marc. Jennifer would find out that was a bad idea on her own. Marc had to learn to handle all the roles of leadership, including unhappy people.

“You look better.” Jennifer dropped Angela’s gown into the small dumpster set aside for extremely dirty or contaminated materials. It would all be burned later.

“I smell like me again, at least.” Bracing for the pain of the weight, Angela slowly slid the wrist blade into place with a satisfying click that drew approving glances from the senior Eagles using the stalls near her. The other men and women were in various stages of dress and waiting.

Angela understood they expected to talk to her or at least for her to talk to them. *Do I have anything to say?*

Jennifer held out Angela’s gun belt, making the chamber go silent.

She strapped on the heavy weapons and squared her shoulders. *Can I do this now?* Angela let go of her control for a brief second; tears immediately flooded down her cheeks.

She didn’t look away, but most of the hopeful Eagles did.

Angela slowly wiped her arm over her face and walked toward the corridor.

Adrian came through with a huge scowl, drawn by her waves of pain. “Don’t do that! Lock it up!”

Angela sucked in a deep breath, taking Adrian’s comfort openly as he placed a hand on her arm. “I’m sorry.”

Adrian sighed, voice gentling. “So am I, but you have to control it. Your emotions can trigger new gifts or activate them, and you don’t have the energy for that right now. Breathe.”

Angela allowed him to guide her out of the shower and into the first training space. She didn’t bother to scold him for lying about where they would go next. She headed for the rear, where she’d planned for the coffee pots and water cases to be placed upon stocking the cave for the camp’s entry. She had wanted the people guarding their lives to have places where they could gather and bond, but also places where they could escape the constant demands of the camp.

Angela poured a cup of the thick coffee, but refused the thin cookies when Tracy gestured to the tray.

“You sure?” Tracy smiled. “Li had them sent up. He thought you’d come here next.”

Angela scanned Tracy, delving in without permission or consideration.

Tracy paled. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. None of us are.” Angela set her cup down untouched and walked toward the exit.

“No.”

Angela stopped, but didn’t turn at Adrian’s command. This wave of alpha order was stronger because it was open, fueled by the witnesses and the emotions at having two of their leaders in the same place.

Adrian released his hold, sorry he’d revealed it to her. He should have waited and used it on her when it really mattered. “Let’s work on your arms.”

Angela turned around with so much rage showing that Adrian dropped his head. “I won’t do it again.”

It flashed Angela to her past, to another voice saying that to her for an unrelated reason. She and Marc had been children then, with no idea of the horrors waiting for them. They’d thought the ones they were dealing with then were as bad as it would get.

“Come back to me,” Adrian called.

Angela felt his warmth surround her, pulling her from the haze of the past. She spent a lot of time there now, searching for meaning, for clarity. Everything she’d become was connected to those miserable years and she searched them relentlessly.

Adrian took her hand, sending a wave of need that snapped her out of the maudlin and into angry awareness.

Angela jerked her hand free, unable to hide the wince. Her arms were always sore and heavy.

“A few days of this will help. You should have been in physical therapy already.”

“I refused it.” She stepped into the machine to avoid his touch.

“It’s on the easiest setting. Do five reps on each arm. Wait two minutes between sets.”

“How many sets?”

“I’ll let you know.” Adrian switched the machine on.

The entire room was a training area, with gym equipment, lockers, and mats that lined the floor. It was also a defense lesson area. Adrian could tell from the faint blood splatters on the mats. Most of their fighting lessons didn’t draw blood, but kai always did. He spotted the couch along one wall and the counter with drinks and snacks nearby. *She made them a place to hang out and bond away from the camp.* She’d known they would need that. Camp members weren’t allowed in the training areas.

Around them, the Eagles slowly resumed their workouts and conversations, but everyone watched as Angela began pulling on the rope with two pounds of weight.

“Damn.” Angela clenched her eyes as pain seared her arm on the first pull. “That’s insane.”

“Because it’s only been a few weeks?” Adrian stayed close enough to grab the rope if she slipped.

“Yes. I never watched the patients suffer through rehab.” Angela pulled down for the second rep, almost tearing up. “Yeah, this sucks.”

Adrian started to ask if she wanted to do something easier first...

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” Angela yanked harder, pulling the weights smoothly this time. Tears flooded over her cheeks.

“Two more.” Adrian watched her shirt for signs of wounds breaking open. Her stitches had been out for a week and the scars were bright on both arms. The right was bigger than the left. More damage had been done there.

Angela struggled with the fourth pull. *It hurts! I deserve this.* Angela groaned as she reached the bar, breath coming out in a hiss while she controlled the descent. Before she had time to recover, she pulled down with her self-hatred.

Adrian flinched at her low cry, but didn’t interfere as she controlled the release and immediately began on the other arm. This wasn’t about his emotions or her physical pain. It was about the future.

It took all of Angela’s concentration to keep pulling on the bar. She wanted to die. Hurting herself was the next best thing, but her body didn’t want to do it. Every pull was a fight for life that her mind didn’t want, but her heart longed for. It left no room for stewing on anything else.

Adrian made sure she was left alone, but he didn’t let her go so deep into her thoughts that she

was able to tune out again. The pain was horrid, but it was also healing. He knew.

So did the men and women around them who'd been hurt or made mistakes and had to claw their way back up to being okay with surviving. Those here who hadn't had those epiphanies yet would still tell the camp members that Angela was fighting hard to recover and get back to them. It was a win-win for everyone, if Adrian could get her to keep doing it.

"Don't let Tracy leave." Angela was openly crying now. "I need company."

Adrian motioned to the guard.

Greg stopped Tracy and Charlie. The couple had been invited in by Daryl, who had hoped they would stay. He didn't get many opportunities to observe them. Tracy still wasn't spending any more time in the camp's eye than she had to.

Tracy didn't want to stay. It was clear in her expression, but she took the machine next to Angela anyway. She had thoughts that she needed confirmed or denied. She just wasn't positive she was ready for the answers.

"You're doing better in some ways." Angela waited the allotted time before starting her next set. "You can think again."

"Yes." Tracy switched on the machine and set it to her last Eagle level automatically. When she pulled, she wasn't prepared for the pain either. "Ouch!"

Angela nodded, bracing. "Yeah."

Both females did their set without speaking or sweeping the room, needing their energy to complete it and their will power not to make any more sounds.

Tracy was able to do it.

Angela wasn't. The last rep tore a cry from her.

Adrian stepped forward. "Three minutes between sets."

Angela ignored him to look at Tracy. "Please forgive me."

Tracy's eyes filled with tears. "It was me or her, right?"

Angela winced. She hadn't thought Tracy would figure that out.

"Right?"

"Yes."

Tracy blew out an angry breath. "Death, or rape and a beating. Great choices."

"I'm sorry."

"What if it hadn't happened?" Tracy had to know. "Was there another way?"

Angela gave her the truth. "There were many ways. I chose the one that saved the most lives."

"It saved lives?" Tracy hadn't believed anything good had come from it, other than how real it had appeared to Donner and the big bunker.

"Yes. If Sherman hadn't found a hostage, he would have been the sniper we couldn't guard against. Crista would have survived. You would have been unharmed. Sherman would have shot

Donner and then me. The big bunker would have blown up the mountain. It saved everyone.”

Tracy stared into Angela’s eyes, wanting to believe her. “Can you prove that?”

“No.”

“I’m supposed to trust you on it?”

“You are alive,” Angela pointed out ruthlessly.

“Why is that?” Tracy frowned. “Why me over her? Was it because Charlie loves me?”

“No. In fact, that almost swung it the other way.” Angela braced to do another set. “I didn’t want his possible misery to influence me, so I used a list of pros and cons. It was close until I got down to service for the camp and then you outmatched her in every way. She spent her time chasing Jeff and adventure. You labored behind the scenes because you wanted to be a part of something bigger than yourself. We needed you more.”

“You’re okay with making choices like that?” Charlie demanded from behind them.

Angela shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Then why do you do it?!”

“What’s the alternative?” Angela shot right back, reaching for the rope. “I could have not done it and we’d all be in labs, bunkers, or graves right now.”

Charlie couldn’t deny that. He stomped over to a bench in the corner and plopped down to wait.

Tracy sighed. “He’s so young.”

“And angry. When he scares you, tell him. He won’t even see it if you don’t.”

Tracy didn't deny it.

Angela understood. Her heart broke again. "My entire life has been that way. I thought Safe Haven would be different."

"It is." Tracy tried to see the bright side. "We're hurting, but the camp isn't. They're happy and healthy because of it."

Angela paused. "Does that make it worth it?"

Tracy considered, wanting desperately to heal. "I believe so. It lets me sleep easier now, since I decided that it matters. What you've told me will also help when it's three o'clock and no one hears my mental screams."

Angela flashed to her last dream, of still being on the mountain with Vlad, except Adrian didn't come. "It'll get better if we stay in the light. We've told other people that, right?"

Tracy nodded shakily. "Together? I don't think I can do it alone."

"Yes. I owe you that."

Tracy started to say she didn't agree, and then closed her mouth.

"Good girl." Angela pulled on the rope. "When you need it, call in the marker and I'll honor it no matter how hard it is."

"Thank you." Tracy accepted what none of the others here would receive from Angela for her actions to save them from Donner and the government.

"We'll need to do this every day."

Tracy didn't argue.

Adrian was more than relieved. He was ecstatic. His wave of joy flooded the chamber, along with determination to keep those good vibes flowing no matter what it took or who it pissed off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Detained

1

“**W**hy is Cynthia being held in the detention center?” Tonya turned around on the stool as soon as Kenn entered the radio room. She was eager to be finished here. The radio space was warm, adding to her impatience. She didn’t need as much heat as some people did, but Kenn liked it roasting most of the time.

Kenn had paused at the query. “How do you know that?”

“I gathered the air quality reports from Samantha a little while ago. Nathan was busy, so Greg asked me to get them. I saw it on the monitor.”

Kenn realized Samantha and Neil had been given the full feed from the entire cave. He wasn’t sure why that bothered him, but it did. “She had a run-in with Marc and melted down. She asked to be put there.” Kenn only told her what he was supposed to. Tonya was among the biggest gossips in camp. “Let me have those reports. I’ll take them to Marc.”

Tonya handed him the packet. When she finished with this, she was going to the lab to check

the results from her first tests. It had sucked to discover their friendly cat had cancer, but it did make a good test subject. If her research helped the cat, maybe it would do the same for people. Tonya had no idea if it would. No one did anymore. All she could do was try it and hope.

Kenn stuck the envelope into his notebook and left. He didn't feel guilty about using her this way, but he did pity Tonya that she couldn't be brought deeper into the chain of command. She would never be a full partner for him, not like Angela might have been.

Kenn made sure he was alone in the tunnel before dumping the envelope into a burning trashcan like Marc had told him to do. The camp couldn't know the real levels of radiation out there until it was gone, so these papers had been invented with good numbers for Tonya to spread. In reality, the numbers were still rising at the bottom of the mountain. The Mexicans were dying. Samantha was now filling out nametags. Until they had to use the dosimeters, the camp didn't need to know what was coming.

2

Tonya spotted Peggy as she came from the radio room at the end of her shift, but it surprised her when the den mother fell in step. The cool corridor was a nice relief from the sweltering radio space,

but Tonya didn't stop to enjoy it. She had plans for the evening.

"Got a minute?"

Tonya shrugged. "You can walk with me if you want. What's up?"

Peggy kept pace as Tonya walked to the lab to check on the cat. She'd given it a dose of oil mixed in canned foods every morning since she'd prepared the concoction. So far, none of the results was promising.

"I'd like to ask you how you feel about leadership."

Tonya met Peggy's eye. "What do you want?"

"Your help. All women need your help."

Tonya knew what was going on with Peggy and Hilda. She was just surprised to be a target of their conversions. "What did Angela say?"

"Nothing, recently."

Tonya frowned. "And before that?"

"She encouraged it. She's one of us."

Tonya shook her head as they reached the ladder. "Not me, then. If she was still encouraging it, the camp would get to vote."

"Wait, you don't understand."

"No, I get it." Tonya pointed. "You want me to screw up my place here to take a chance on being the next female ruler, but I've got news for you, Peggy. This camp wants Angie; they don't want any woman other than her."

"That's not true."

“It is.” Tonya stepped onto the ladder. “The fact that you don’t know it, but you still believe you can find a candidate, is scary. Listen to the camp. They want Adrian back.”

Peggy’s profile iced over. “That will not happen.”

Tonya shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not, but I do know he and Marc would both have to die, along with half the men in this camp, before they’d give it to another woman.” Tonya went down the ladder. “And then there’s the fact that I don’t want it.”

Peggy let the younger redhead go as she caught sight of the guards at the bottom of the ladder. They were both rookie females and neither of them were happy with the conversation they’d been able to hear. Peggy glowered at them and got the same in return.

Is Tonya right? Is the time for female rule already over? Stewing, Peggy marched toward the living quarters.

Behind her, Doug moved through the tunnel with a huge scowl.

3

“The doctor won’t treat her.” Morgan joined Marc in the brig, where they had the place to themselves. “He doesn’t want to treat any of the descendants.”

Marc sighed, putting his pen down. “What happened?”

Morgan grinned sheepishly. “Autumn told him his hands were too cold.”

Marc laughed. “Well, I can see where that might shock him.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing. We’ll have our other doctor take over the descendants.”

Morgan frowned. “Angela can’t be around the pregnant women right now. Maybe not for a long time.”

“I meant Millie. She doesn’t mind dealing with us. Send her in to talk with Cynthia.” *I have to know if Cynthia’s right. I have to know if Angie is that far gone.*

Morgan swept the empty cells. “The hole is filling up.”

Marc didn’t answer. They’d disposed of the assassins who’d attacked Angie in the shower while she and Adrian were there. While he was relieved that another set of assassins had been unearthed, Marc couldn’t help feeling useless. He and Missy, along with Neil and Jennifer, were going to dig out the rest of their moles. Then maybe he could sleep at night.

4

“Why were you in there? Tell me the truth!”

Candy paused outside the washroom, where Jennifer was interrogating Julia in the shower.

That's to get her off guard and make her nervous. Angela taught us that in one of the last few classes before Donner came. Candy lingered, not eavesdropping, but so restless that she had no idea what to do with herself.

"Whatever your deal is, it won't succeed." Jennifer glared. "I'm watching you. If anything else goes wrong with them, I'll know who to come to about it."

Candy moved away from the entrance before Jennifer came out and directed that anger on her. Candy didn't think she could take it. All she felt like doing was sleeping and that scared her. Unlike the other women, Candy wasn't feeling any movement yet or hearing any contact attempts. As far as she knew, Lee hadn't been a descendant and she knew she wasn't. Her babies were normal. She wasn't disappointed, but in the excitement of having fetuses who could communicate, her own wonderful pregnancy was being overlooked. "So am I." She took the ladder to the lowest level. "We're alone now, kiddies. Just you and me and you."

Candy, wearing a long white dress over leggings and slippers, trailed a hand along the corridor wall as she went. She didn't care about the bugs down here, the dampness, or the draft from where the heat refused to come much lower than the third level in any strength. She liked this tomb.

Candy went to the hole where the Mexicans had almost gotten through. There was no need for a

guard now, so she didn't have to find an excuse to be here.

Candy slid the board over the hole aside and carefully sat down on the edge. The smells coming up weren't bad because of the piles of dirt that had been dumped and shoveled, but it was still enough to make her guts roil.

Candy stared down at the skeleton hand right below her swinging feet. *I'll bet no one would miss me. I spend over half my time here and no one knows. I'm really the invisible.*

5

Billy hurriedly took the card from his locker amid the teasing and disapproving glowers. He stuffed it into his pocket and wiped his expression before turning toward the exit.

"Got plans, Billy?" Zack teased.

"Yes, I do." Billy coolly gestured toward the top floor. "I have duty over the TV room tonight for the preteens. Wanna join me?"

Zack made a face. "No thanks. All the stolen kisses makes me sick."

Billy laughed. "I understand." Billy walked calmly to the ladder, keeping his profile blank. Leeann was watching a movie there tonight with the other older kids. He and Ray would be the adults for those two hours.

Billy's heart thumped at the thought; he controlled the reaction, forcing himself to go slow enough to appear normal. *This is wrong. She's a kid.*

Billy shoved away the thoughts. Leeann wouldn't always be a kid. When she grew up, he wanted to be there. Until then, he would spend innocent time with her so they knew each other. When she was older, they would be a couple.

"Unless she changes her mind," a voice warned from nearby as he hit the top floor.

Billy grinned at Jennifer. "Easy there, Enforcer. I'm like Kyle. I want them willing."

Jennifer blushed, snickering. She liked Billy, and Leeann was already positive they were going to get married at some point. Jennifer was just exploring her new duties while reminding the men here that she was keeping track of things. She was also still a bit wound up from grilling Julia and getting nothing.

"It's good when you do that." Hilda would be roaming the floor during the movie, eager to catch anyone committing offenses. She scanned Jennifer's Eagle uniform and then her own blue jean jumper and t-shirt. "We need you."

Jennifer studied the den mother without regard for who had been in Safe Haven longer. "I see the lies you told to get accepted."

Hilda's cheeks became red. "I didn't lie to Adrian."

"Yes, you did, but that isn't what I mean. I meant to get into this country." Jennifer leaned

forward. “Are you really a good guy in all that? ‘Cause I’m starting to believe you weren’t.”

Hilda’s rage flooded the tunnel. She stiffened in severe offense. “How dare you!”

Jennifer shrugged, moving down the corridor. “I think the better question is, should *you* dare?” The teenager placed a hand on the rail, aware of the guards listening to the conversation. “If you’re the best that female leadership has to offer, Hilda, we’re all gonna pass.”

“What about you?!” Hilda clamped her lips shut, angry that the girl had been able to get her to say it aloud in front of witnesses.

“You guys are planning for me to take that job?” Jennifer began to laugh, loud and long. She was still expressing her mirth when she hit the next level.

Logan and Whitney, the guards on this level, stared at Hilda with raised brows and smirks, waiting for her reaction.

Hilda huffed off down the corridor, shoulders hunched in frustration.

The two guards snickered, not being quiet about it. And then they recorded it, positive Marc would want to know.

Billy slid into the movie room, glad to find he was the first one here. Instead of immediately getting things ready, he took the fragile card from his pocket to examine.

Happy Birthday, Billy. Love you.

It was a simple card from a prepubescent child, but it lit Billy's heart up and brought a huge smile to his lips. No one here knew his birthday. He hadn't told them. Leeann had cared enough to dig for the information.

"Hi, Billy!"

Billy's heart skipped again as Leeann's voice rang through his mind and went straight to his heart. *I'll love her forever. I'll have others until she's ready, but once she is, I'll never stray.* "Hi, Leelee."

The girl blushed at being called by his endearment in front of Missy. She also beamed.

The heavier, steadier furniture was on this floor. It had been easiest on the movers, but these chambers would get the most use and therefore, the most wear and tear. The heavy bookshelves and plush couches were favorites of everyone in camp. When shifts ended, members rushed to get the recliners and the best flat screen views. Billy motioned toward the shelves. "You ladies get the movie. First come, first pick."

Missy ran to the shelf, but Leeann came straight to Billy. "Did you like my card?"

Billy showed her his other hand, where the card was still clutched in a death grip. "I love it. Thank you for knowing what day this is."

Leeann took her hand from the pocket of her jumper. She held it out.

Billy took the cookie without seeing it. Only her eyes existed for him. He felt like he was drowning.

Leeann let go of him and the cookie, spinning toward the shelf as voices of the other kids echoed.

Billy recovered slower, barely getting the card into his pocket before a dozen preteens flooded the room with different hormones.

Across the din, Leeann smiled at him again. *Sorry.*

Billy chuckled. *Don't be. I'll build up a tolerance after a while.*

Leeann giggled. *No, you won't.*

Billy sighed happily and went to set up the DVD player for their choice. Even two hours of babysitting couldn't dim the mood.

"We did him a favor." Logan and Whitney walked by on their round of this level.

Whitney, still not convinced it was a good idea, couldn't deny the happiness flowing from that space. Both Billy and the girl were throwing off those vibes like a dog shaking water. It was nice, unlike most of the emotions in this cave right now. Whitney didn't know exactly what was going on, but his stomach had cramped into a ball after dinner and hadn't eased yet. Something was coming and he had no idea what. It was terrifying.

6

"He knows a lot of stuff, Marc." Kyle dropped down into the chair, delivering his report on Chauncey. "We need him to write it all down."

“That’s a good idea.”

“Jenny thought of it.” Kyle was proud of her. “After he gets it on paper, she still thinks he should be handled like we have the other prisoners we’ve had since coming down here.”

“I’ll take it into consideration. I’d really rather keep him, the way he’s kept us, you know?”

“Yes.” Kyle did. Chauncey had a handy talent, but he couldn’t be trusted. It was dangerous.

Marc sighed. “Get a place set for him in the singles’ room. We put strong guards in there. Have them record anything he says that we can use or need to know.”

“You got it.”

“Any problems with Hilda or Peggy?”

Kyle shook his head, smiling a bit. “Not a word for weeks now. It’s been good.”

“Yeah.”

Kyle heard the tone. “What is it?”

“No news is not always good news. It’s nothing, I’d bet...”

“But it’s bothering you, so it isn’t nothing.”

“Exactly. Keep an ear on that for me, will you? I’d be willing to bet they’ve tried to have conversations with people even if they didn’t have any success.”

“Be happy to. Anything else?”

“Nope.” Marc felt the mood improve. “Enjoy the fight.”

“Where are you going?”

Cody plopped his thumb into his mouth at his mother’s icy tone.

Lying on the cot she’d been assigned in the singles’ area, Julia rolled her eyes. “Go on. Stay away from the ladders.”

Cody left the thumb in place as he walked through the tall cave toward the exit. There were many people in the living area, but none of them spoke to him. The little boy assumed it was because of his mom. They didn’t talk to her either.

Cody stayed close to the wall, scared of the edge even though it had a rail with fencing. He went by the bathroom and continued toward the ladder. Cody peered up at Quinn, seeing the eagle on his jacket. It was pretty.

Quinn, on duty, smiled. “Hey, Cody. You okay?” The boy wore what the other kids here did—jeans and a shirt with a jacket—but his pale skin and bright eyes marked him a descendant upon sight. He didn’t need to do anything to be known for what he was.

Cody shook his head, speaking around his thumb. “She needs me. My dad’s busy.”

Quinn motioned Brandon to take his place, then held out an arm to Cody. “Want a lift?”

The boy smiled and stepped forward.

Quinn carried the child carefully down the ladder, not positive who he was talking about but

willing enough to help the kid. He liked Cody. The boy's mother was a different story. "Which floor?"

Cody's little shoulders shrugged.

"Okay. We'll search them all. Top or bottom?"

"Boffum."

Quinn gently took the boy's hand from his mouth. "That's better." He looked around, nodding to the guards on duty as they reached the next level. "This floor?"

Cody concentrated, then pointed down.

Quinn went to the ladder.

As they vanished into the depths of the cave, Cody waved at the sentries.

Gary smiled. "Cute kid."

Francis nodded. "Yeah. Quiet too, like his dad."

"Think he'll be like Marc?"

"Too soon to tell."

Quinn shifted Cody to his other hip as he reached the next ladder, this time not stopping. While holding the boy, it was almost as if he didn't need to wait for directions. He could sense the wave of misery, of desperation. He needed to get lower.

Olivia frowned. "What's up with that?"

Andrew, her partner for this shift, shrugged. "No clue. You think Quinn is doing something he shouldn't be?"

"Not after Marc knocking Jax down in rank this morning. He wouldn't take that chance."

Quinn, who was climbing slower after three levels, frowned. He hated it that the camp was

gossiping about his jealousy of Billy. He didn't want to feel that way. He just did.

Cody pointed as they reached the bottom of the ladder. "Vere." Cody squirmed down. "Fank vou."

Quinn followed the child to a rear storage area, not about to leave the kid down here on his own.

Cody stopped in the entryway to the corridor where Adrian had been staying.

Quinn froze behind him, spotting Candy sitting on the edge of the hole, legs dangling. Quinn brushed by Cody quickly, wishing he could use his radio to tell Marc they had trouble. Training on the new threat lights system hadn't happened yet.

Cody went to the ladder. When he reached the top rung, Olivia hefted him up and into a safe area. "Where's Quinn?"

"Helping the lady." Cody straightened his shirt. "She needs help."

Both guards rushed down the ladder as Cody continued to the storage area nearby. He entered the darkness without fear, going to a rear shelf that hid the woman lying on the floor.

"You're very brave. Thank you."

Cody sank down next to Angela and rested his cheek on her shoulder.

Angela felt the pain again of her missing child, but it was swamped by the confusion of the boy next to her. She shoved her agony aside to help him with his. "She might change."

Cody shook his head. "Momma's bad."

Angela didn't lie again. "We'll love you. Your dad already does."

Cody looked up at her. "Can you?"

"Easily." Angela smiled, sliding her arm around his shoulders. "Would you like that? I get lonely."

Cody nodded sadly. "Yes, please."

Angela's wound sealed a fraction as the boy wrapped his thin arms around her. "Thank you," she whispered.

Cody smiled. He brushed his dark hair from his eyes and used his free hand to finger Angela's thick black braid while they waited. The shade was identical to his own.

8

"She broke up with me."

Marc didn't spot anger or depression and was glad. Angela's notebooks had given him a timeline. They were nearing what she called the wildcard flip. He had asked and been told that meant fate got to play a card and they never knew what it would be, only that it was always lethal to them. Marc was very aware that they had entered that timeline now. They needed their people to stay alert, not to be love-stricken or heartbroken. *Like me.*

Daryl sat down across from Marc at the mess, aware of those around them listening. "I tried to talk to her, like you asked and she told me to move out of the couples' area!"

Marc grunted. "It was worth trying."

“She’s rough, Marc.” Daryl lowered his voice to a mutter. “She thinks Angie wants to kill her and the baby.”

“I know. That’s why I sent Millie to her. I believe she has Mountain Sickness.”

Daryl’s profile eased a little. “I didn’t think of that!”

“She needs time to calm down; we’ll get her up toward the top as soon as she’s okay to be out in general population. We’ll help her as much as we can.”

Daryl hesitated.

Marc shook his head. “No, you don’t have to. If it was over, it was over.”

“I didn’t want to abandon her that way, but she’s not stable. I’ve been noticing things.”

Marc spotted Billy and Jeremy coming into the mess and waved them over. “Let’s get the updates done so you guys can go to the lesson tonight. You’ll feel better after a good workout.”

All of the men grinned, pondering how enjoyable it would be to beat on Adrian. Marc was almost sorry he wasn’t going.

Jennifer came through the tunnel.

Marc waved her over. He’d sent her to interrogate Julia and Chauncey, hoping she could tell him once and for all if those two were trustworthy to be loose in camp.

“Definitely not.” Jennifer joined him. “I talked to her while she washed, but she went into the living

quarters and there were too many ears. Plus, the boy was there and I didn't want to scare him."

"What did she ask him?"

"The basics about you and Angela—where you met, how long you'd been a couple. Then she asked about the gifts you two have."

"What did he tell her?"

"He says he only tracks people, but he's lying. I don't think he told her, though."

"Why's that?"

"Because he wants to go to the island with us. He won't screw that up."

"What about her?"

Jennifer frowned. "I wouldn't let her roam anymore. Give her guards that do their jobs."

"You."

Jennifer shrugged, pleased. "Sure."

Marc gestured toward the small group of Eagles leaving the mess. "Are you going to watch the chaos?"

Jennifer smiled a bit. "No. I'm spending the entire night with my daughter."

Marc waved her off in approval and resumed his paperwork and meal.

9

"Are you about done?" Neil gently smoothed a curl behind Samantha's ear. She appeared dead on her feet. Neil hoped to get her out of here for some

fun soon. The camp party on the mess level would be a good start.

Samantha took in his new bruises and smiled tolerantly. Neil was preparing for the new training. He still hated Adrian, but he enjoyed having a challenge. Samantha assumed he would attend all the lessons his former teacher held.

“Just a couple more minutes. I have procedures to follow now.”

Neil realized something had happened and scanned. As he got to the desk, he realized Samantha was filling out nametags on the unused dosimeters. Horror rose in his throat. *Getting them ready for the camp.*

Neil studied the monitor, where the bonfire showed several people who appeared to be staggering around drunkenly. “They’re sick?”

“They’re dying. The numbers outside are now toxic after a few hours of exposure. They’re living in it.”

Neil took out his notebook and flipped to the rear pages, where he’d been given notes. “She told me to do something when the levels went up... Here it is.” He read the scribbled message. *“Turn off the monitors. You don’t need to watch what I’ve done.”*

Samantha sighed in relief. “Thank you. It was getting hard.”

Neil reached over and switched off the screens, now understanding why Samantha hadn’t allowed her relief in yet. That man was sitting outside the

door in confusion. "I'll send him to do something else."

"Good. After I finish these tags, I have to take the packs of iodine to Li to add to the food. We need to increase our intake right now."

"I'll do it. What else?"

"Unfortunately, not much." She opened the next box of personal radiation monitoring badges. "All we can do is hope it only kills them."

10

"It's time for bed, children." Hilda waved at Billy to shut off the second video the girls had slipped in when the first ended.

Billy did as instructed, but he hated to end their time together. He didn't know when he would get to see Leeann again.

Leeann glowered at Hilda, bringing the German woman to a halt.

Hilda frowned, hands going to her hips.

Leeann began to pout, bottom lip quivering.

Billy started to step between them and froze when Leeann gave Hilda a pointed glare of triumph.

"What's going on?"

"She says you won't protect me," Leeann told him, making Hilda wince. "You just proved you would."

Beaten, Hilda jerked a hand at Billy. "You have ten minutes and then you bring her straight to her cot! I will be waiting."

Billy thought quickly. “Don’t you need help getting them all down there?”

Hilda happily seized on that. “Ya. You come along now.”

Leeann pouted, but Billy was relieved and told her so silently. After he explained how much trouble them being alone could cause, Leeann marched up to him and took his hand.

Billy froze at the fiery bond now running up his arm and into his mind. “What did you do?”

Leeann let go of him. “We won’t see each other again for a long time. I had to make sure you don’t forget me too.”

Billy paused in fear and confusion. “What?”

Leeann skipped ahead to avoid the question, leaving Billy to round up the slower kids. Her words were echoing with a certainty that was horrifying.

In the movie room, Ray was closing it all up and putting things away. As he knelt down to retrieve a hair barrette from under the edge of a chair, two people walked by. Ray glanced over, recognizing the shoes. They were Dale’s sneakers.

“In here!”

Ray stayed down as the couple came in, laughing and hugging. When they began to kiss, Ray cleared his throat. “This chamber is off limits. If you get lost now, I won’t report it.”

Dale and Dennis found him on the floor; their reactions were the complete opposite. Dale was humiliated, crushed. Dennis was ecstatic.

Ray stiffly stood up, eyes locked onto Dale in fury. He wanted to hit his partner for the first time ever in their relationship. Ray's fist clenched.

Dennis immediately cowered, pushing Dale aside to get out of the way.

"We're through." Ray left the room. Then he left the floor. If he could have left the cave, he would have kept going until this fire, this lethal hatred, had burned itself out. As it was, he was locked in here with them.

Ray's gut boiled as he marched straight to the blanket-covered corner he shared with Dale. His mind flashed to waking this morning, to Dale's soft kiss on his cheek, to their words of never fighting again. He ripped the blankets down, not caring who fled or who watched.

When Ray was finished, all of his things were in two duffle bags and Dale's were untouched. The Eagle stuck his chin in the air and left under the knowing gazes of the people who had witnessed Dennis and Dale's romance, but hadn't told him. The two weren't being subtle about their attraction whenever Ray wasn't around.

Ray went to the other end of the corridor, to the singles' area. He paused in the entryway, cheeks scarlet with embarrassment.

"Over here." Daryl recognized the expression since he'd just been wearing it himself.

Ray took the empty cot by Daryl in relief. "Thanks."

“Sure.” Daryl grunted. “Bitches, man.”

Ray paused, almost smiling. “Yeah. That’s exactly it. Bitches.”

The two new bachelors shared a bitter laugh as they got settled into their new roles as single men. Daryl hadn’t been out of it for long, but Ray had been with Dale since the war. When tears threatened, he sat on the edge of the cot and began to converse with Daryl about whatever topic came to mind.

After a bit, Daryl realized what Ray was doing and understood he would be able to do the same when things got rough. Daryl allowed Ray to use him for support. *Why not? No one else in this tomb understands how much I already miss her.*

11

“I can’t find Cody.”

Marc didn’t glance up from his paperwork, but he did send out his grid to scan for the child.

Julia leaned on the table. “Where is my son?”

Marc pushed deeper. “Bottom level.” He scowled at her. “Why is *our* son in the bottom level alone? Are you trying to get him killed? There are gaps and holes down there, not to mention bugs and the occasional angry ant.”

Julia flushed, arms crossing defensively. “He had to use the bathroom. He didn’t return.”

“You let him go alone?” Marc’s anger grew. “Without worrying over the strangers he might run into or the dangers he might face? Some mother.”

Julia stuck her nose in the air. “I was told we were safe here. Is that not true?”

Marc sighed, trapped. “Yes, it’s true, but I can’t control bad people and you should know that since you are one yourself!”

Julia realized Marc had gotten too angry for conversation. She turned to go.

“Leave them alone.” Marc recognized the other hot spot on his grid. “He’s with Angie. She’ll look after him.”

Julia’s face flooded with anger.

Marc shrugged. “Go talk to her about it. When they find your body, that’ll make things easier for me.”

Julia left the mess, ignoring the frowns and grumbling at the way she was treating their leader. She didn’t care about any of them, Marc included. She cared about Cody. That was it.

“She’s a strange one.” Doug nodded as he went by the table with Roy and Romeo.

Marc grunted in agreement, smiling at the boys who stared at him wide-eyed. He didn’t know why, but he doubted it was anything to worry over. “Want to join me?”

Doug grinned happily. “That’d be great.”

Doug settled the boys with their trays and went back for his own, leaving Marc with the shy kids. He smiled again. “You boys okay now?”

“We’re good,” Roy answered.

“Are you gonna kill Uncle Mikel?” Romeo asked abruptly, bringing the noise of the mess down several notches.

Marc thought of Cynthia’s paper, the accusations, and then the future. He nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. He farts a lot.”

Laughter rolled across the mess, allowing Marc to relax. He liked telling the truth. It always worked out better than a lie.

If only that were true. A few tables over, Kenn sighed. *If only that were true.*

12

“Boss wants to know if you’re done with the evaluation of the cave.” Kenn joined Adrian and David on the second level. The two men had clipboards and were scribbling notes as they studied the new lighting system.

Once he’d taken Angela to the training space, Adrian had returned to his other duties to show people he wasn’t going to try riding her coattails into forgiveness. He wasn’t positive where she was right now, but he hoped it was with Tracy in the mess, having a public evening meal. “Shortly. He’ll have it before I sleep.”

“Good enough.” Marc had asked for it by morning. “Need any help tonight?”

Adrian grinned, getting a flicker of their old connection. “That would be great.”

Kenn nodded to David and left, unable to deny the need to serve Adrian that still existed. The Marine went toward the lab to check on Tonya, not worrying over it. There was nothing wrong with him still helping Adrian as long as his goals were the same as Marc's goals.

Adrian caught the thought and lost his good mood. He motioned toward the lights. "Tell me."

David frowned at the coldness Adrian was using to hide his hurt feelings. "You don't need them anymore."

Adrian sighed. "Yes, I do. Tell me what these lights mean."

"Red is a fire," David recited in boredom. "Green is all clear. Orange is an unknown problem."

"And blue?"

"Total alert for the entire camp."

"Good. We'll be posting notes and signs around these so people know which button to hit."

"Does it connect to all the floors?"

"It does now." Adrian led them to the top level. "Theo's crew finished it up this afternoon. Since we don't have radios right now, this will help us keep track of issues."

"Can't we use a short-wave frequency?"

"Not yet. The Mexicans are close enough to pick it up."

David followed his mentor tiredly to the top level. They'd been touring all day, fighting off hostility and silverfish in the dark, damp corners. David was ready to be done.

“I’ve got that class in a few minutes anyway. I want to hit the lockers and then you can take the notes to Marc.”

David forced an eager attitude. “Can do, Boss.”

Adrian tried to hurry in the training room. The few fighters in here right now were putting off violent waves that forced him to skip evaluating the rear wash area and the storage crevice where they were keeping the gear. He didn’t believe it would matter much. He’d noted what was important. “I’m headed to the mess for a mug and then I’ll be up here for a couple hours. Deliver those to the big chief and then you’re off duty.”

David yawned, taking Adrian’s clipboard. “You’ll find me in my cot, snoring, unless they smother me.”

Adrian doubted sleep would be happening anytime soon, but didn’t say so. After a long day of labor, Eagles felt like they could drop off the instant their heads touched their pillows, but that wasn’t usually the case. Even mundane work had to be gone over mentally, and the brain enjoyed doing it while the rest of the body was stationary. He’d often found Eagles up in the wee hours, sorting through paperwork for a form they’d forgotten a question on. Adrian had encouraged that. After a while, people did it automatically and the good ones corrected their future behavior.

Adrian yawned. The class might be a good place to catch a nap if no one showed up. He hadn’t returned to collect the clipboards so he didn’t know

if anyone had signed up. It might be a very boring night.

Adrian shrugged. *I don't care if it is. I'm with my camp. The rest is secondary. I'm home.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Laughter

1

“This is boring.”

Charlie looked over to find Tracy staring toward the hall steps to topside. The exit was patrolled by three rookie Eagles. Thanks to the avalanche and then blowing the tunnels, this top entrance was finally the only one still open. Safe Haven would be trapped in here if anything happened to this level.

Charlie checked his watch. It was evening snack time for most of the camp, but some members had activities or training lessons on this top floor. One of them was Adrian.

“Three more minutes?” Charlie had brought her up here on the pretense of helping with his shooting, but she’d quickly discovered that he didn’t need it. After half an hour of practicing on wall targets in the farthest training chamber from the stairs, she had lost interest. But Charlie hadn’t. He’d felt her restlessness days ago. When he’d spotted the name on the class roster, he’d begun gathering gear.

Tracy sighed. “Okay.” She didn’t ask why he was here or why she was along. She was trying not to let her mind get the best of her. When things got dark and quiet, she got scared. Charlie usually kept

her occupied, but tonight he'd insisted they gear up for paintball so he could practice without having to register for the big training room.

"How many signed up?"

"Almost a dozen. Marc sent three others. He wants them calmed down or sent out."

"You got it."

Tracy and Charlie went still and silent as voices came down the hall. Kenn and Adrian were the first people to arrive for the kai class that was in the center impression along this corridor. Neither of them noticed the couple.

"Okay." Adrian scanned the training sheet, hiding his pleasure at being here. "We'll get his picks out of the way and then do evals. Angela wants to know where the Eagles are."

"All of them? That's a tall order."

"Yep. Should keep me busy for a while."

Kenn nodded, but didn't say if he liked that or not. He was still playing it cool with his former idol. Kenn suspected Marc had put them together to test his new loyalty and he didn't like it.

The two men stopped at the entrance to the large training area that was one door up from Tracy and Charlie.

"Any notes or messages?"

"One from each."

Adrian sighed. "Give me *his* first. Might be the easiest."

"No fraternizing during the class or sucking up to get into anyone's good graces."

“Never did that before and it wouldn’t work for me now. Hers?”

“You leave the door open tonight.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Kenn hesitated. “I think she wants them all to know you’re here, doing FND.”

“Easy enough.”

Kenn and Adrian paused to let Shawn and Missy by. The little girl was still having trouble sleeping in the common chamber. Shawn had gotten into the habit of bringing her up here in the evenings to settle her down with cartoons or reading. Kenn liked the kid. She refused to lie to anyone. That was so hard to do in any environment that Kenn was impressed the child was sticking to it.

Kenn smiled when the girl gave Adrian an ugly glare and then turned it on him. “Good night.”

Missy rolled her eyes. “You’ll see.”

Kenn frowned. *I don’t like the sound of that.*

Shawn led Missy into the reading area without acknowledging either man. Missy had her favorite blanket and her bunny slippers, but her pink pjs set it off for Shawn. She was a baby. She needed to be protected.

“You got it all set up or should I?” Adrian sensed Shawn’s coldness. Missy, he didn’t know, but the power she held was being used on all of them. He could feel the peeks into his mind and into Kenn’s. She was strong.

Kenn flipped on the power, being careful with the wires connected to the switch. They didn’t have

covers over most things yet. “Mats are down and chairs have been stacked.”

Adrian admired the lighting and equipment. “We’re all set then.”

“Just need students.”

Adrian was more nervous about his reception from the Eagles than he was willing to show, but the thrill of being back with his camp was the strongest emotion right now. Later, if no one showed up for this class, he would be crushed in a way that even Angela’s brutal rejections hadn’t been able to accomplish. “Might be a boring hour.”

Not even close. Charlie gestured Tracy to follow him further into the dark room that was being used for overflow training or those who wanted to exercise.

“What are you doing?” Tracy knelt down next to Charlie when he stopped to dig through his kit.

“I have fifty paint balls. You?”

Tracy counted, frowning. Charlie’s excitement was clear. “Thirty. Why?”

Charlie sent her the image that had brought him up here when he really preferred to have nothing to do with either of the men talking in the tunnel.

Tracy shook her head, mouth opening...

Charlie didn’t give her a chance to protest. He checked his gun as he walked toward the doorway. “He’ll take me down quick... Unless I have a partner.”

Tracy stood there, unable to deny the excitement. Since the attack, she hadn't done anything Eagle related or even much physical activity. She hadn't cared that her skills were rusting or that other people were getting ahead of her. *I've been blaming my job!*

She looked toward the doorway, where Charlie had paused in the shadows to wait for her. His expression said he understood, but she was wrong and he was going to prove that to her.

Do I want him to? Do I still want to do this? Tracy sighed. *Maybe. I need to know how it feels now. If it hurts too much, I'll officially resign.* If she could handle it, she would think about staying in. *He must know me pretty well to be able to predict my reaction to this.*

Tracy gave Charlie a small smile he returned in relief. There was also a bit of arrogance that he had been able to guess what she would choose. It was sexy without trying.

"That's dirty." Tracy hurried to catch up.

"Yeah. You ready?"

"What happens after you do it?"

"We run to the mess, dropping gear as we go, and try to blend in. When people see who it was, I think they'll hide us."

Tracy tried not to giggle. "Okay."

Charlie knelt down, aiming for Adrian. Kenn was still next to him and there were students coming in now, making it a challenge. The teenager waited patiently for the right moment.

Adrian was surprised at the polite nods from some of the senior men who'd signed up for his class. He had expected lower level members with bad attitudes. Adrian didn't speak to any of them, feeling things out first. The mood was tense but not ugly. He took hope from that. He'd been looking forward to this moment since learning Angela had plans to bring him back into the camp. Once he was useful again, the hatred would stop and his light could once again shine and protect them.

Neil and Kyle entered the training room without the respectful nod. Neil had been unable to resist the workout Adrian would give him. Kyle couldn't find another excuse for the conversation he wanted to have after the others had gone. Everyone else had come to either watch the fights or check their skills for the next tests.

Morgan and Greg were the last two students to come through the hall. The two Special Forces men wore foreboding scowls. Neither of them had forgiven him.

Getting a clear spot as the two fighters glared at their former leader, Charlie pulled the trigger...right as Allan came out of the training space.

Blue paint splattered against his shoulder, spraying Adrian's arm.

"Ow!" Allan spun around, grabbing his shoulder. "What the hell was that?"

Realizing he'd trapped them, Charlie slid deeper into the shadows.

"Uh-uh!" Tracy shoved him back out, determined that he would take the heat for this, not her.

Panicking, Charlie lifted the bulky gun and fired again. If he was going down this fast, he at least wanted to get Adrian.

Allan ducked and rolled inside, out of the crossfire.

Too late to get into the safety of the training chamber in time, Morgan and Greg were splattered with blue paint.

"Come on!" Charlie grabbed Tracy's hand, dragging her by the surprised Eagles with a pointed glare at Adrian.

Morgan slung paint from his arms. "Why you little...!"

Adrian cleared his throat, wiping away the light splashes. "That was meant for me. Sorry." Adrian motioned toward the mats. "Paint washes off."

Tracy's giggle floated down the hall, convincing the senior men to let it go. Hearing her happy was wonderful.

Charlie thought so too. So much that he made another rash choice as they passed the small shower area that was for people who had finished a workout or class. Shane, in flip-flops and a large red towel, was leaning against the next entrance—the reading room. Brittani and her group, along with several camp members, were enjoying the quiet and the

selection of books. Shane was staring in wistful awe at the black woman sprawled across the plush recliner with a copy of Moby Dick.

Shane heard running feet. As he turned, a cool draft sent chills over his bare legs.

“I got it!”

“No way!”

Still holding hands, Charlie and Tracy fled down the long hall, cackling wildly.

Shane, realizing his towel was gone, turned around to find everyone in the reading chamber staring at him. He dropped a hand over his shriveling parts, flushing scarlet. “Excuse me, will you?” He took off running after the couple. “I’m gonna kill you!”

Gus looked at Brittani, noting her small smile. “These people aren’t right.”

Tracy, caught up in the fun, fired at the naked man chasing them. Instead of being traumatized at the sight of his fury and his big body, Tracy was empowered. Her aim was rusty, however. The shot went into the TV area, where Shawn had been reading a book to Missy in hopes that she would get sleepy. Pink paint flew through the room, coating his jacket hanging on the wall.

“What’s that?” Jerked into alertness, Missy’s head came up fast, slamming into Shawn’s chin.

“Damn!” Shawn lurched backward, hands coming up to clutch his skull as stars and tiny flickers of hot pain danced across his vision. Hitting the arm of the couch, he flailed helplessly. Losing

the fight, he fell over the edge and thumped heavily to the carpet.

“You!” Hilda came by an instant later, shouting and pointing at Shane. “Clothes! You put on some clothes!”

Shane and Hilda moved away from the TV chamber.

Shawn rubbed his chin and jaw, wincing at the fresh flare of pain.

“Your big head hurt me!” Missy stared at him over the arm of the couch. “Say you’re sorry!”

“I am.” Shawn groaned, dazed. “I really am.”

Missy gave him another reproachful glare and then climbed back into her blankets. “I didn’t know you were gonna be so much work.”

Shawn stared at the couch in startled pain. “I’m sorry?”

“That’s better.”

Shawn began to explain it and then stopped, slowly standing. He wasn’t sure he could handle that right now.

More shouting echoed through the tunnels.

“Try again.” Shawn rubbed his jaw. “Hilda will quiet them down.”

Missy pointed at the light above them. “Bright.”

Shawn obediently got up to switch off the light, able to hear remnants of the chaos as Hilda tried to convince Shane to get dressed. She insisted on accompanying him, bringing more shouts of unfairness.

Ahead of them, Charlie and Tracy had reached the stairs, but the couple hadn't counted on the boredom of the Eagles. The noise had brought half a dozen guards from the third level who were now standing at the top of the stairs, staring at Shane in amused surprise.

Charlie spun Tracy toward a small cubby to reload. "Get set. We have to go back."

Tracy was having too much fun to protest. The guns they were using weren't harmful and the paint was washable.

Charlie was determined to get Adrian. If that meant running back and forth until he got a clear shot or they were captured, that's what he was going to do. "Let's go."

Zack and Nancy spun around as Tracy and Charlie burst out of the shadows, but it was too late to evade the pink and blue balls that hit their legs and shoulders.

The laughing pair ran down the hall during the shock, shoving by Hilda and Shane.

"See! They started it!" Busy arguing with Hilda, Shane didn't see Tracy stop and take aim.

"Ow!" Shane jumped forward as he was hit in the ass.

"Tattletale!"

Thrilled, Charlie tugged her down the hall.

"Here they come again." Gus tensed. "Maybe we should go downstairs."

Tracy and Charlie ran by the open doorway, followed by three Eagles.

“Duck!”

Blue paint sprayed the wall of the reading room as one of the men was hit.

“We’re probably safer where we are.” Brittani was smiling. They’d all been cooped up in this mountain for a while now. Paintball sounded like fun. She got up and went to watch, not worried about being caught in the crossfire.

Still near the doorway after he’d turned off the light for Missy, Shawn stared in shock as Shane, naked except for one pink cheek, ran after Tracy and Charlie. “Idiots.” Determined to get Missy to sleep, Shawn walked toward the couch.

“Give me that towel!” Shane’s voice carried loudly through the tunnels and chambers. “No. Wait! Don’t shoot me there!”

Distracted, Shawn’s foot caught an edge of the rug. He flailed again for balance and lost it, falling over the couch and onto the coffee table.

Startled, Missy began screaming.

“I’m sorry!”

In the next room, Missy’s scream was chilling.

It echoed as if someone was being murdered, causing the training to stop before bodies did. Adrian took Neil’s knee in a bad place. He dropped to his own, groaning.

“Damn.” Kenn hurried over. “Can I do anything?”

“Your radio,” Adrian grunted, unable to move. “Key...your radio.”

Kenn leaned down, hitting the button.

“Making me...leave the door open...was cruel and unusual punishment!”

Angela’s hard chuckle echoed back.

“What’s going on down there?!” Marc was busy supervising the mess. With hundreds of people here to eat and many of them new, it was a bad time for leadership to leave. He also wasn’t happy about radio silence being broken for such a trivial matter.

“An unprovoked paintballing, de-towelings, butt decorating, and emasculations. Just the usual.”

Aware that most of his Eagles were tied up or off duty, Marc hit the button on his radio. “FND on level one for off duty Eagles. Quiet things down.”

Billy, Jax, and Quinn immediately tore out of the mess, shoving each other into walls to get the lead.

“They didn’t ask what it was.” Wade was Marc’s shadow.

“Nope.” Marc snickered. “They’ll remember it next time.”

Wade had already gotten an update from one of the men the pair had shot. He snorted, thinking of how well both Charlie and Tracy handled their real guns. “Five guys shot so far. Doesn’t say much for security on that level.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Marc took out his notebook and wrote that down. He would have to punish Charlie and Tracy, but it had exposed a weakness, so two good things would come from it. Angela would like it that Tracy had come out of her shell, no matter the reason why. So did Marc.

Fighting the urge to watch, Marc switched his attention back to the camp members who were waiting for his answers on the questions that kept coming. How had Angela stood this all the time?

I enjoyed it, Angela answered tiredly, hard amusement gone. *I like the job. You don’t.*

Marc couldn’t argue that point. He didn’t try. Instead, he sent her the image of a happily snacking mess of survivors, knowing she would be comforted.

Thank you.

Anything for you.

More than pleased, Angela used a small bit of her recovering energy to bring the shield up around the mountain. It glowed vividly for a few seconds over every doorway, corridor, and chamber, bathing her people in peace. She couldn’t give that to herself, but she could do it for them.

Marc felt the mood shift and recognized the cause and effect, but he couldn’t duplicate that. Only Angela gave the camp this sense of safety. Not even Adrian had provided this level of protection and defense. Angela would do anything, risk anything, to keep them safe and when things went

wrong, she was always there to take the blows for them. Her weakness for Adrian was her only flaw.

Marc glanced around the mess, but his thoughts went to the training class and Adrian's strangled words over the radio. He doubted the fun was over up there yet. All the guards were lower level because of so many senior fighters being on that floor for Adrian's class. Charlie would take advantage of it. As long as Tracy kept laughing, the boy would keep shooting.

2

"Are they training or playing?"

"Both, I believe."

Instead of her being mad about Gus witnessing the Eagles having fun, Brittani stared at Shane, who had been stopped in his tracks by Zack.

"At least put the towel on." Zack didn't want to listen to Shane's complaints about Charlie and Tracy. Hilda had gone to get Marc.

"Duck!"

"There they are!"

Ahead of them, another group of Eagles was shot and began shouting.

Jax and Quinn came up the ladder with paintball guns in hand. They'd seen the defeated Eagles on their way up and detoured to grab their gear, hoping it wasn't over by the time they got here.

In the training space, David edged closer to the door where Shawn was taking Missy to the

bathroom. The child appeared calm now, but Shawn didn't.

Jax and Quinn ran into the storage area right after Tracy and Charlie, but the clever woman remembered her training and spun around to shoot out the light.

Paint splattered over the bulb, dimming instead of breaking it. Sizzling sounds came from the hot glass.

Tracy dove under a stack of boxes and then crawled away from the noise she'd made, hearing them tearing boxes from neatly stacked lines.

Across the room, Charlie did the same. He also used his gift to track the two Eagles who had gone quiet.

Tracy edged back toward the door; positive Charlie was doing the same. They'd been trained not to trap themselves and this cavity didn't have another exit.

Charlie met her at the end of the boxes, waving her to go first.

Behind them, Jax spotted the movement. "There!"

Charlie and Tracy both fired, splattering the men and then taking off out of the tunnel.

Shawn, coming from the bathroom with Missy, jerked toward the wall, shielding the little girl with his body.

Jax and Quinn returned fire without checking for a clear line; green paint splattered all over Shawn's spine.

“Oh, come on!”

Seeing the door was still open, Charlie fired into the training room, laying down a spray pattern.

Adrian jerked as paint hit the side of his neck, putting him in the wrong place for Kyle’s swing. The fist landed on his chin instead of his palm. Adrian staggered, arms flailing.

Also hit with paint and scrambling to get to cover, David ran into Adrian and knocked them both to the mat in a painful heap.

The other fighters in the training space ducked behind equipment and stacks of mats, laughing.

On the covered edge of the door, Kenn kicked it shut. Adrian had been punished enough for one night. *But I got off clean. No paint, no punches, no bleeding.*

David lifted his head to find Adrian. “We match now. My piss is blue.”

Kenn burst out laughing.

“Billy just came up the ladder!” a voice called excitedly. “We have them trapped!”

The sound of paintballs pinging off the walls and door echoed, proving Quinn wrong.

Adrian and Kenn winced, exchanging looks.

“You think he wants both of us?”

Adrian sighed. “Unlikely. You and the others can probably leave.”

Man, it feels good to not be a target. Kenn spun around and banged into the closed door with his nose. Blood rolled over his lips and chin as he dropped to the floor.

“Send Mitchel out and we’ll spare the rest of you!”

“Too late for that,” Kenn crawled away from the door. He looked up at Adrian. “You had to teach them to shoot first and talk second.”

The Eagles in the room smirked and chuckled hard, but they also stayed under cover.

“We’re serious. Send him out or we’re coming in!”

Adrian sighed resignedly, going to the door. He opened it while bracing for a blow.

Charlie and Tracy started to open fire when yellow paint began to pelt Adrian, driving him back into the training chamber. More paint splattered the room, spraying Kenn’s boots and David’s knees.

Charlie lowered his weapon, turning. “Who stole my thunder?”

“That would be me.” Marc dropped from the ledge behind them. He’d donned the gear Angie had been gathering for the guards during their time in the mountain. The new stonewashed fatigues hadn’t been given out yet, but Marc was sure they were about to be very popular. “You were stealing my target.”

Eagles laughed in gasps and wheezes, some of them crying.

Charlie and Tracy joined the others with smiles, weapons now pointed at the ground.

Marc lifted his gun and emptied it into their legs, arms, shoulders, and chests.

Tracy cowered under the onslaught, arm coming up as Charlie attempted to fire back. Marc hurried forward to place his boot lightly on the boy's wrist. "You're out. It's over."

Marc scanned the training room. Kenn and David had hit the deck again when he'd begun shooting. Adrian still hadn't risen. All of the other guys were splattered, disheveled, and twitchy, waiting for the next shot to come or the next blow to land.

"Good class." Marc gestured. "Keep it up."

Adrian groaned. After the kick he'd taken, that wouldn't happen for a while.

"All the better." Marc grinned. "Beers in the mess in one hour. The attackers are serving."

3

"Got a minute?"

Adrian was sitting on a chair near the mats that were covered in pink, blue, and yellow paint smeared into odd shapes. "What's up?"

Kyle waited until the last two Eagles left. "What happens to an Enforcer when they can't enforce anymore?"

Adrian gestured toward the other chair, now taking a pain pill from his pocket.

Kyle grinned as he realized Adrian had expected to be hurting when this night was finished.

"Not like this." Adrian sighed. "I think Marc's balls were rigged."

Kyle chuckled again, but inside, he waited tensely for the answer.

“Some of them do fine with retirement. Most don’t make it that far. They usually die doing their jobs.” Adrian took a pack of baby wipes from the desk by the chairs and then put them back. Wipes weren’t going to handle this mess.

“Autumn is asking questions about her father and about why her mom gets sad.”

Adrian winced. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t usually happen so fast, but our children are surrounded by others who are learning new things every day. It spreads.”

“Are you saying their gifts can transfer?”

“No, but they can help kick in the gifts of others around them, depending on what theirs are. Puberty is the normal age line for most physical gifts, though. The mental conversations are actually very handy when they’re little.”

Kyle concurred with that part. “Is there any way to slow it?”

“Keep them away from others who have gifts. But that’s impossible down here and not good for her anyway. You know that.”

“I do. I’d already considered it and ruled it out.”

“Good. If you isolate her, she might believe she’s bad and then become that way because of the perception.”

Kyle moved toward the exit. “Thank you for your time.”

Adrian grunted, body throbbing in several places. He was happy to help the mobster, happy to help the camp period.

Adrian forced himself to his feet, wincing and groaning at the pain. His groin flared with agony as he John Wayne walked to the exit. He couldn't wait to climb down the ladder. "Maybe I'll fall off. It's gotta be better than this."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tears

“In the dark of night, the wildcard flipped.”

1

“**I**t comes.”

Marc smothered a chill, glancing up at the doorway to the empty brig. “What?”

Now wearing the same clothes as their hosts, Natoli and his men had kept to themselves while being locked in the mountain. Other than the day they’d handled the train people, Marc hadn’t seen them the entire time. He’d assumed the Indians were practicing their natural skills and avoiding possible trouble with the camp. Marc had been surprised they’d returned the night of Angela’s fight with Vlad.

“Get to her. It comes.” Natoli marched from the doorway, moving fast.

Behind him, the hall was littered with people walking through the cave to get ready for sleep.

“Hey!” Marc went to the hall, noting Adrian’s head peeking out of the shower entrance. “What is it?”

Natoli didn’t stop in his quick march toward the rear of this level. “Death.”

Adrian entered the hall. “For who?!”

“For all of us, Adrian Mitchel.” Natoli vanished.
“But especially for those *you* love.”

Marc and Adrian immediately thought of Angela and took off running.

Fucking assassins! Marc swore furiously. *I’m piking this one. I don’t care if it is inside with us. I’m piking it and then I’ll make every camp member walk by it!*

Adrian understood Marc’s outrage, but he didn’t believe Marc’s Indian friend would have come to him if there were an assassin with Angela. The Indian would have saved her first, and then reported it. Natoli and his men truly were Shadow Warriors in Adrian’s opinion. The two who’d been following him around the cave had blended in to the stone and people perfectly. If not for their occasional reflections on something he was doing, Adrian wouldn’t have known the braves were there.

Marc slid down the ladder, using the metal, outer part to avoid splinters. He hurried toward the medical bay, frowning at all the calm chatter and relaxed people moving through the corridors. It didn’t feel like there was a threat here.

He drew attention when he pulled his gun and slipped into the dark medical bay entrance. People hurried out of the crossfire.

The guards on the ladder and detention center observed nervously from their posts, not sure what to do since Marc hadn’t waved them over.

“Where is she?!”

Marc’s shout brought them on a run.

The doctor and his students quacked unhelpfully about how Angela never slept here anymore and barely spent time here and why didn't he already know that.

"Find Greg! He's her shadow."

The small group of men spread out as Marc used his grid to search for Angie. She'd been in the bottom level earlier... "She still is!" *Maybe she needed help all this time. When Julia came, I should have gone to her then.*

Maybe. Adrian looked at Marc. *But she isn't scared.*

You can feel her emotions?! Why didn't you tell me that?!

Adrian stayed on Marc's heels, but he didn't answer that question. "She's sad right now. Incredibly sad."

Marc realized Angela might be the danger and increased his pace. *Don't do it! Please don't do this.*

2

"Come on!"

"We're in trouble already!" Tracy protested, but she let Charlie pull her from the living quarters where they'd been grounded and then tug her toward a storage hall. She didn't realize her usual fear of the dark had been replaced with annoyance. "We're gonna get put in the brig this time."

Charlie moved faster, heart beating wildly. "Hurry!"

Tracy got the idea something was wrong and stopped resisting. She kept pace with him, but he didn't release the death grip on her wrist. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I can't see yet." Charlie jerked her into the pitch-black crevice as a loud crunching noise sounded through the cavern. It was as if every radio had switched on all at once and then shut right back off.

Tracy let Charlie put her into the washroom where pile after pile of dirty laundry waited for the washing crews. "What are—"

"Sh..."

"But we should tell your dad!"

Charlie placed himself between her and the exit. "He's sensing it. He'll get to my mom."

"Is it more assassins?"

Charlie struggled to force the barrier open in his mind, wanting to warn people, but he couldn't because he didn't know what the problem was. He'd never felt anything like it. The sense of death hadn't been this thick even when they were fighting Donner and people were dying daily. "Stay close to me."

Tracy was suddenly terrified. She came forward to wrap her arms around his lean hips. She rested her cheek against his stiff shoulder, shivering as a thick sensation of doom swept over her. "We're not all coming out of this one, are we?"

“I don’t think so...” He gasped, finally getting a clear glimpse of the future barreling toward them from the west. “But you will!”

Charlie spun around and shoved her into a pile of the clothes. He fell on top of her, locking their mouths and their minds. *Come fly with me. Neither of us needs this memory.*

Tracy responded eagerly, not ready to face another horror in the darkness. She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him bury them in the clothes on the floor and the thick, protective fog that was filling his powerful mind.

Around the couple, Natoli and his men were doing much the same. They hadn’t been noticed by Charlie and Tracy. They were already under the piles of coats, shirts, and pants, mentally chanting rings of protection in hopes of surviving what shouldn’t be survivable.

3

“Come here! Hurry!” Angela and Cody slid into the farthest corner of the storage crevice as the stone began to shake. She shielded the child with as much of her body as she could, crooning to him when he began to cry.

Dust and dirt fell from the walls and ceiling as the stone started to vibrate. The tremors they’d had before were light and short, but everyone knew this was different from the instant it began. The sound was harder, thicker, deeper in the ground.

The mountain around them groaned as the tremor increased. Pictures rattled from walls; dishes slid from shelves. Cabinets fell over, crashing to the floor to spray people with shrapnel.

Lights flickered as the rock shifted, snapping power cords that sent darkness through sections of the cave. Startled cries began to echo from every level.

Marc had one concern. He flew through the tunnels, shoving by people to reach the ladder. He had no words to calm his camp in this moment. There weren't any. "Get to Angie!"

Adrian, still layered in paint, was shaken off his feet as the rumbling thickened, but he used the motion to swing onto the ladder. He gripped it lightly, letting his body weight carry him swiftly to the bottom. Ignoring the wooden splinters in his palms, he landed in a heap, arm coming up as part of the wall fell.

Marc leapt over the debris pile, zigzagging through falling rocks and dirt to reach the storage area. As he got there, Adrian appeared, covered in dirt.

"Blocked!" Marc shined the light on his belt as dust fell on them and sound became distorted.

Adrian would have gone forward to start digging a hole into the storage chamber, but Marc pulled him back as another part of the wall collapsed and piled up where Adrian had been standing.

Waves of dust from the impact slammed into the men, coating them in filth and tiny cuts. The ceiling

above them cracked from the violent shaking and gave way.

Adrian tried to shove Marc clear, but it wasn't far enough. Both men were coated in falling rock and debris.

Coming from the bathroom next door, Greg hurried toward the fallen men.

Clumsily climbing down the ladder to reach the bottom tunnel, Julia lost her balance and slipped, falling straight down.

The third level crumbled. It slammed into the bottom floor, crushing anyone who wasn't under a ledge or another strong shelter. Pieces of the radio chamber and security area fell in front of the storage room, blocking it further.

In the rear of the crevice, Angela held the boy tighter and tried not to feel the agony of her people as they died.

4

In the animal area, Bobby held onto the wall and tried to stay on his feet. Debris fell from the levels above like deadly rain as he waited for the quake to stop... "Hey!"

Bobby was grabbed from behind and shoved. As he fell down the deep chasm that had opened, he stared up at his killer in shocked betrayal.

The vet jumped back as people below came toward the body. He spun around to leave the scene of the crime and found Ray standing there.

Ray had been hit by falling debris, causing blood to run over one eye. He gaped at the vet, unable to believe what he was witnessing. He staggered forward, hand out...

The vet shoved him away from the edge, hard. Ray slammed into the stone wall and dropped onto the ledge the vet had been hiding on when he'd spotted his opportunity to get rid of an assassin.

The rumbling came again, a second tremor the vet assumed, but Chris kept moving. Others could be dealt with the same way during this chaos. He wasn't going to waste this chance to do his job.

5

"In here!" Peter shoved his men into the narrow crevice behind the guard booth. He and the two soldiers had been following Marc, hoping to earn points by helping him out somehow, but the ladder was gone now and the hole had widened into a huge gap that couldn't be scaled in the flickering panic.

Boothe and James squeezed into the crevice with the guards and a few of the camp members who had already taken cover here.

"Move back!" Peter spotted another group coming from a corridor that hadn't been blocked off yet. He ran out to help them with the elderly man and woman, recognizing Brittani's mother and father.

Behind them, Gus and his brothers were carrying people who couldn't run fast enough.

The walls trembled thinly, dust falling...

“Get away from there!” The ledge collapsed heavily onto the group, knocking several of them down. Gus and his brothers shoved those in front of them to safety, lunging with their precious packages.

Peter pulled Gus’s big arm, trying to rebalance the big descendant who was tilting toward the crack. Peter grunted, yanking them onto the floor as the rest of the corridor collapsed.

Gus shoved Missa into Peter’s arms and twisted around. “Gotta go back!”

Joseph took the terrified female as Peter held onto Gus. “You can’t! It’s gone.”

Gus stared in horror at the twenty-foot gap where the tunnel had been. On the other side, shadows moved and screamed as the quake continued to rip their lives apart.

6

Nancy screamed as she fell through the deep crevice that opened up in the washroom. She braced for death.

Shane saw her and dove without thinking. The fast action allowed him a lucky leap that slammed him into her falling body and carried them both into the now open cavity of the washroom.

They hit the floor and rolled into the debris piles already there.

Nancy groaned, being pelted with falling rocks. “Help!”

Shane didn’t react at all. He was unconscious from hitting his skull.

Nancy crawled over to him, aware of pain and blood in various places on her body. “Shane?”

Nancy saw something moving through the dirt and dust, crawling toward her... “Help!”

The ants came through the crevice in a small horde, chittering angrily.

7

On level three, Samantha curled under the edge of the desk in the weather room as the rock fell, collapsing the chamber. As the bottom dropped out, all she could do was scream.

In the corridor by the weather room, Neil and Jeremy had come running. They were knocked into what remained of the radio cavity as the rest of the floor fell onto the level below.

“Samantha!”

She didn’t answer.

Jeremy, flooded with guilt over being too drunk to be in there instead of her, threw himself into the hole after her.

8

The medical bay and the lab were also struck with the strengthening tremor; the sounds of

breaking glass were as loud as the screams for a few seconds. Half of the medical bay crumbled, taking two of the little ducks along. The doctor shoved the rest of them into the showers and crammed in with them, hoping the reinforced floor there would hold.

In the lab next door, Tonya and the cat huddled in a far corner, unable to get out for a huge gap in the floor. Through the dust and rock, Tonya could see the bodies of those who had already fallen. More dust came through the lab as another part of the wall collapsed into the hole.

Tonya shuddered, not feeling the cat claws sinking deep into her arm.

9

On the second level, where the majority of their people had been, the washroom caved, trapping camp members and Eagles. The ladder was crushed by falling stone, killing several citizens as they tried to reach the lower levels and loved ones.

In the sleeping areas, forts fell over and people were tossed from their cots. Candy and Cynthia, both sedated, slept through it all. Around them, there was chaos as people tried to flee. Many were stepped on and kicked by the panicking crowd. Dale was one of those. He cowered on the floor as the chaos grew worse.

“Come on!”

Dale felt a hand on his wrist and followed his rescuer blindly, coughing at all the dust.

“Stay in there!”

Dale tried to see who it was as he huddled in the tiny closet of the sleeping chamber, but a white jacket was all he glimpsed before the person was gone.

Dale sank to his knees and cried as he listened to the tragedies unfolding throughout the cave.

10

Li tried to make it to the rear of the kitchen, where most of his family had gathered for their evening tea, but the shaking was too strong to fight. He fell into the cabinet, knocking pots and mixing bowls to the floor where they clattered and banged endlessly as the tremor intensified.

“Li!” Li’s wife, Sophia, crawled over to hold him as the debris continued to fall from the upper levels and the kitchen came alive with dropping dishes and breaking equipment.

In the attached mess, Hilda herded the children and pregnant women into a corner, with the help of Jax and Quinn. Doug and Peggy joined them, reaching the space right as the center of the mess dropped out. Tables and screaming people fell through the hole, including Chauncey.

11

Trapped in the destroyed garden area, Jenny held her squalling baby, aware of the screams of the

children in the cave more than the shouts and cries of the adults. Jennifer could sense their terror, and the pain of those who were injured. Because she was experiencing it, so did Autumn.

“Jenny!”

“Here!” Jennifer coughed, lifting her jacket to slide Autumn under protection from falling debris and dust. She couldn’t see much beyond a faint glow above them.

Kyle shined his light across the gap, unable to see her through the falling dust that looked like ash. He narrowed her location by the sound of her coughing and Autumn crying. The infant was also screaming for him mentally, driving Kyle to leap across the gap without waiting or surveying further.

Jennifer shouted as a shape came hurtling through the loud darkness, cringing away with the baby shielded.

“It’s me, Jenny!” Kyle wrapped arms around them, heart beating furiously. He reached around her gun to put a calming hand on the baby.

Her tiny fingers clutched at his, shaking in horror. “Shh... Shut it off, Jenny. She’s getting it all.”

Jennifer gasped in pain as she realized their mental connection was feeding the baby details she couldn’t handle. Jennifer slammed the wall down, trembling. “Kyle...”

“I know. I know.” He held her tighter as the tremor continued to shake the mountain and shatter their dreams. “I’ll get us out. Shh...”

Across the gap, Billy and Shawn scanned the hole and chose not to follow Kyle. Both men were listening to the screams of the children above them; their future mates were calling for them relentlessly. In that moment, there was no pretense.

Billy gestured toward the ladder that had fallen but only broken in half. “That’ll get us part of the way. We’ll climb the rest.”

Shawn immediately staggered through the debris and shaking floor to help Billy get the ladder. Missy was up there. He was going.

Billy and Shawn hefted the heavy wooden ladder toward the hole, climbing over items they refused to identify. If someone had moved or groaned, they would have helped, but there was nothing from the piles of furniture and broken rocks.

“Look out!” Shawn leaned into the ladder as a huge chunk of something whizzed by his shoulder from above. It crashed heavily to the floor below. “You okay, man?”

Billy didn’t answer.

12

“Fire! There’s a fire!”

“We have to get up there!” Theo pointed toward the top of the cave, to the thin glow. His clubfoot was forgotten in his fear for everyone. “We’re on fire!”

Debra clung to his arm, not hearing but deeply experiencing the quake and the agony around her.

Greg was trying to dig Marc free. He'd been using the bathroom by the storage crevice, waiting on Angela when the cave had begun shaking.

Theo grabbed his arm. "Fire!"

The word got through to Greg. He shined his light toward the top, breathing heavily through the dust and smoke.

Theo took the rope from his belt. "It's not long enough to get all the way up, but we can throw it between levels if there's anyone there to catch it."

Greg took the rope, reluctantly leaving the pile of big stones. He hadn't heard any sound from Marc yet.

Theo shined his light so Greg could evaluate the situation while he tied the rope with hard knots for gripping.

"Are we the only ones down here?"

Theo shined his light, seeing bodies but no survivors. "I believe so."

Debra gestured toward a nearby pile of debris.

"Help..."

"Billy!" Theo rushed over to help dig the Eagle free as Greg started to climb. The rope was long enough to reach the next level, if they got half way up to it first.

"Stay with him." Theo signed to Debra, giving her the smaller light from his belt. Billy was now unconscious but still breathing, which was better than most of the people under the debris were doing.

He shrugged off Debra's concern to follow Greg even though he'd only had his cast off for a week. This was no time to let that hold him back and he wasn't going to.

"Hello up there!" Greg grasped the dusty rocks and began to heft his body upward. "Is anyone up there?"

13

Stuck on the second floor, Kenn stared down the hole in shock. He didn't know how anyone could still be alive down there but he could hear the screams and shouts that verified someone was. "Tonya!"

"Kenn!"

Kenn spun around to discover Morgan and Daryl coming toward him, coated in dust and dirt.

"She's down there!" Kenn winced at the distortion. "Part of the radio room fell!"

Daryl and Morgan also needed to get to the lower levels. Morgan held up the rope he'd grabbed as they shoved their way from the singles' chamber.

Kenn grabbed it and tied it around his waist.

"Is anyone up there?" someone shouted from below.

On the other side of the gap, Neil was gawking in horror at where Jeremy had disappeared from view.

The tremor increased in strength as the full heart of the destructive waves reached the mountain.

Rock fell in thick chunks; dust swirled through the air. On the top level, the tunnel collapsed most of the way through, trapping people and cutting off any chance of reaching the top through this tunnel. As the cords were severed, the entire cave was plunged into darkness.

Topside, the mountain shuddered. Barns and shelters fell over, unable to take the violent shaking. Snow began to slide. When the new avalanche barreled down the cliffs to crash through the gate and cover Safe Haven, only the people at the bottom of the mountain noticed.

Mikel gazed up in horror as the snow and rock crumbled, barreling toward his army. “You treacherous bitch!”

Mikel’s men staggered toward their vehicles as the ground shook. Nearly all of them had sores and bleeding gums from the curse Angela had put on them.

“I will not be killed by you!” Mikel was aware of men fleeing and his women screaming at him to run, but the Mexican didn’t run from anything.

Groups of soldiers and refugees from the west flew toward their vehicles as the tremor strengthened, trying to escape the path of the snow that was almost upon them. Some of them helped each other; some of them shoved people aside in panic.

Mikel was still ranting at Angela when the avalanche reached the bottom of the mountain. As if unable to get through his hatred, the rocks and

snow slammed into the ground on either side of him. He was knocked to his knees and pelted with tiny blades of ice and rock, but he survived.

His army wasn't as lucky. The two streams of snow smacked into the hard ground and flew across the camp, smothering the tents and campers. It wiped through the vehicles as if they weren't there, sending metal flying through the cloudy air. Snow rained down on everything, blanketing the entire center of the camp all the way to the next mountain ledge and then part of the way up it.

"Keep sending your curses, witch!" Mikel cackled madly as the ground continued to shake under his knees. "Nothing you can send will kill me!"

Above the destroyed camp, the sky sparkled hazily under the dim shelf of clouds that had hung over the area for the last week. Even after it rained, the cloud was there. The Mexicans hadn't noticed, but the refugees had. Many of them had fled Mikel's tents and nightly parties when the sores appeared. Those who hadn't fled then now did so without stopping for any of their gear that may have survived the earthquake and avalanche.

The soldiers on both sides of the destruction observed it all in horror, unable to do anything else. When the refugees ran and drove by them, the Mexicans let them go. None of them cared about the freeloaders or the women. They wanted power.

"I will never leave!" Mikel was still screaming through the rumbling. "I cannot be killed by you!"

The men who heard him were filled with his confidence even while rubbing at sores and watching their friends die under the snow. Mikel was invincible, immortal, and after they dragged the witch from her fortress, they would be as well. The two boys in there weren't valuable at all except as an excuse to the pathetic refugees out here who could have overwhelmed them if given enough time and reasons.

“We will have the witch!”

Many of Mikel's men cheered at the proof of their leader's words. The rest were dead or dying.

Inside the mountain, screams began to fade into groans and tears...and then silence.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dirce's Way

October 15th

1

“So, who do I have to kill for that load of locals in the collateral room?”

Kendle's voice cut through the gym, where slave time had come around again. Kendle had spent the last days staying out of Dirce's way and avoiding Rice, who had begun to hound her. She and her partners had chosen to camp on the outskirts of town while they recovered. None of them had missed these signs and scents of civilization.

Dirce, lounging in Xavier's center chair, waved her forward. “We have made arrangements for them, through the private bid you provided. I have agreed.”

Kendle gave an uneasy smile. “Thank you. What's the cost?”

“Don't come back.”

The chilling demand brought silence to the steady crowd of traffic that was still lingering from the matches. As long as she was here, some of these people would stay just to say they knew which way she'd gone.

“I won’t. Do I collect them or are they delivered?”

“They’re being released now.” Dirce’s eyes narrowed. “I hear that Ori will be joining your team.”

“On probation, like my other two rookies were.”

The two men shared grins. “We leveled up!”

Ryan frowned. “She can’t do that.”

“I’ll bet she can.” Tommy slapped Ramer on the shoulder and shook Carl’s hand. “Welcome aboard the nightmare.”

The team’s laughter was odd to those viewing it, but Kendle understood completely. They were bonded. It would be hard to break those bonds after being held captive together.

“He is a good man.” Dirce brought the attention back to him. “We will miss him.”

“Do I owe you for that?” Kendle asked suddenly. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask sooner.”

Soothed, Dirce shook his head. “Ori has been docked for the mistake. He’ll meet you at the gates when our business is finished.”

“Excellent.” Kendle was instantly worried. She knew that tone. *Ori will need medical care. Light duty for a while.*

Dirce’s lip curled as he read her thought, but he didn’t change his mind. The sooner she was gone, the better. “Our last item is the funds owed to you. After totaling it up, you are owed a thousand dollars. How would you like to be paid?”

Kendle blinked. “Wow. Ok. Uh...what are the options?”

Dirce gestured at the racks of gear she’d assumed were trade-ins. “You can take it from there, from any of Renda’s booths, or you can make a deal with Iram to get your vehicles.”

“Vehicles. Fully gassed.”

Iram smiled, greed bleeding through the charm. “The boy.”

“No. Counteroffer?”

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Iram grinned. “Take the vehicles as my gift. I made more profit during your time here than I have since we landed at Souther Field.”

Dirce frowned. It was the barest flash of disapproval, but Kendle knew he didn’t want people to know where they’d landed. Kendle stopped herself from considering it further. “I can’t do that. I still owe you for the two totes of food you sent on my first day.”

Iram now frowned, telling Kendle she wasn’t supposed to mention that. She sighed. “Can’t get it right today, gentlemen. Please let me leave now before I make this worse.”

Dirce waved a curt hand at her. “And do it now, before I decide that Yuri was right to want you eliminated.”

Kendle turned furious eyes on the Russian.

Yuri smirked. “You knew what I was when you handed me the oil.”

Kendle nodded angrily, jaw clamped as she resisted the need to spill his blood for the betrayal. She regarded Dirce with scarlet cheeks and plans for revenge displayed prominently in her mind.

Dirce smiled, seeing that she wouldn't be letting it go. That was good. It would bring her back, against their deal, and allow him to execute her. He couldn't do it now because she hadn't done anything wrong by the public view. She was too loved. He couldn't take another riot in a town that he controlled. Those in charge of the rations wouldn't forgive another slaughter, even to get things under control. It interrupted the food supply.

Kendle spun smartly on her heel, snapping her fingers at her team.

Each of those men gave Yuri a nasty glower as they also spun neatly and followed her from the gym.

Yuri felt the menace, but Kendle and her people were forbidden from returning. He was safe.

Dirce rose, disguising his laugh with a cough. *You don't know what you've done, my stupid friend, but you'll figure it out too late. I have faith in that.*

Dirce went to Renda's apartment, taking a position at the window to view Kendle's exit. It bothered him to see how many of the locals came out to wish her well and beg her to stay. "You could have had them all, Ms. Roberts. You gave up too easily."

Kendle stopped, glaring at him from the chattering patrons and fans, across his flytrap shops

and distractions. *I don't want it. If I did, all I would have to do is tell them what you are. Be careful planning my death, Dirce Resi. Every person who tried so far has ended up shredded.* She grinned widely, making sure he could view it. *You're in good shape. Bet you'd scream for a week.*

Against his will, Dirce shivered. He dropped the curtain, hating himself for the weakness.

Kendle ignored the concern of her partners to exit the market and leave the town. She waved Ori to join them as she spotted his beaten face and empty hands. Rice, she ignored. He was busy greeting the family he liked and reluctantly accepting responsibility for those he didn't as they came through the gate. She'd told him to meet her where she'd been taken for a fool. Kendle was trying to get set up to be certain they weren't followed. She also wanted satisfaction from Yuri.

Kendle and the team made camp near Rice's tunnel entrance, using the light trees and the chilly breeze to remind themselves they'd won this round in the constant battle for survival.

"Weren't you supposed to be branded so we have safe passage?" Ori was standing near the tent Carl and Dexter had erected.

Kendle lifted her sleeve, where two letters glared in bright red scabs. MT. *Market Town.*

Kendle dropped her sleeve as the rest of the team muttered and grumbled, flashing glowers at their unwanted guest.

Ori flushed.

Kendle waved him into the tent. “You’ll be on duty tonight. Rest up.” She didn’t wait for him to argue. “Do it now, or stay here and forfeit your end of the deal.”

Ori scowled. “I know why you want me in there.”

Kendle scoffed. “If I wanted you dead, I would point and every one of my men would try to be the first one to blow your brains out.”

Kendle stood up, moving toward the open area that bordered the spot where she’d chosen to camp. “We’re going for a walk. Sleep or don’t, but you fall out on sentry duty tonight and I will point.”

Tommy and the others snickered, joining her to make their plans. The feeling of revenge had flooded the team upon seeing how much Kendle had been hurt, but that brand had sealed the deal. They weren’t leaving yet.

2

“Where did they go?”

Xavier, now reduced to messenger, pointed toward the south end of town. “A mile out.”

“She didn’t keep going?”

“No.”

Dirce pounded his fist against the desk. He had new orders to follow her to Safe Haven while the troops prepared this place for a fight, but she wasn’t leaving. He’d pushed her too far by revealing Yuri’s betrayal. Dirce realized it too late.

“What’s wrong?”

“It isn’t over yet.”

Xavier didn’t know what to say and kept his mouth shut. He sensed a punishment coming for the deal, but he wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. Massive trades to increase profits were in their guidelines for this type of situation.

“I need her to leave.”

Xavier was surprised at the admission. “How can I help?”

“Let her finish her business here so she’ll go.”

“I thought we’d settled it all.”

Dirce snorted harshly. “You have no idea what someone like that is capable of. You’re lucky to be alive.”

Xavier didn’t doubt that after witnessing Dirce’s fear. There was no mistaking the scent of it.

Dirce’s shoulders tensed. “I can still end you.”

Xavier paled at the proof of magic. Dirce was the reason this market and all the others they conquered were cleansed of their kind.

“I didn’t know that,” Dirce stated softly. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Xavier questioned nervously.

“For finally giving me a reason to kill you that my boss will accept.”

Xavier glanced down as pain swept through his abdomen. His guts began to slide out.

Xavier looked up to see the scythe slide back under the chair Dirce was sitting in.

“Tea with that?” Dirce asked politely.

Xavier slid to his knees and then slumped over without making a sound.

Dirce laughed quietly and gestured for the guard to clean up the mess. “Pass the word. Magic users are no longer to be hunted. Anyone who harms a magic user will be disemboweled.”

Dirce cackled again at the sight of intestines roped over Xavier’s gory shoes. “I make friends everywhere I go.”

3

Yuri snapped awake as his door opened.

“Baby?”

The sound of Kendle’s voice was enough to get Yuri on his feet. He grabbed his gun, but Kendle shut the door, plunging them into darkness.

Outside, the sounds of a struggle came, along with shouts and shots.

“No protection. Yuri, baby...”

Yuri shuddered at a caress on his cheek. He spun to fire as something sharp sliced into his wrist.

His scream echoed loudly, gun falling as blood sprayed the bed and walls.

“Beautiful.” Kendle crawled along the ground at his bare feet. She stabbed hard, pinning him to the ground as her blade sank through.

“Ahhh!”

“We had a deal...” She clucked as he dropped to the other knee, screaming, trying to pull himself

free. “I did know what you were when I handed you the oil.”

“No more! Please!”

“You had a second chance and you blew it.” She punched the foot pinned to the bloody floor, getting another scream that made her demon beam in happiness. *Nice. Again?*

Kendle obliged, chuckling. “I aim to please.”

Outside the room, the Eagles had secured the guards and were standing in two groups on either end of the red door. None of them considered interrupting, despite the sounds of footsteps and shouting coming up the nearby stairs.

Tommy finished reloading his gun. “Stay there or we’ll kill all of you!”

Dirce opened the door anyway. He was immediately driven back by a single shot that splintered a chunk of wood from the frame. Tiny shrapnel flew into Dirce’s hand.

“That’s your only warning, mister. The next one goes through your brain.”

Dirce paused behind the wall, waving a patrol of men forward.

“Is that the Black Widow?” One of the patrol men stilled. It was the one Josh had dubbed Demetri.

“Get in there!” Dirce advanced furiously.

“Do it yourself.” Demetri ran down the stairs, joined by several of the guards who hadn’t wanted

to come at all upon hearing who was causing a ruckus.

Dirce slammed the butt of his rifle against the banister. The top knob snapped off, flying down the stairwell.

“We’ll be gone in five minutes,” Tommy stated in the pause. “Let us out and no one else has to die.”

All around the team, cubbies were being barricaded and people were getting down on the floor. The locals knew Dirce wasn’t going to agree to those demands.

Josh pointed. “We have a runner.”

Tommy shook his head. “Let it go.”

Dirce waited for them to be distracted, planning to sweep the team with gunfire as he ducked into the cubby across from Yuri’s.

Josh eased toward the door. “I’m going after him.”

Tommy scowled. “Boss said to stay together.”

“I’ll catch up.”

“Josh!”

Dirce eased the door open...

Bullets slammed into the wood and glass, shattering the pieces into Dirce’s unprotected face. He dropped down to his knees as the troops behind him were hit by several of the slugs. Bodies fell heavily over the rails.

Dirce held his bleeding cheek. Two more men fled down the stairs. Dirce was forced to wait. He only had a dozen men with him now and he already knew they couldn’t match that type of shooting. He

wasn't even certain that he could. He'd never witnessed anything like it. In real gunfights, people always missed or went full retard, but not these men. Their descendant masters had trained them well.

Dirce counted two minutes and then stood up, motioning for the remaining men to go down to the first floor. "I'm not beaten yet. You wanna play with fire? Let's play!"

4

Kendle emerged from Yuri's apartment coated in things none of the team wanted to try identifying. It reminded all of them strongly of fighting Donner alongside the women. The females liked to wear their enemy's blood. It was intimidating.

Kendle calmly walked through the halls of the second floor, passing cowering residents to reach the manicurist cubby across from her shop.

"I'll owe you for the damage." Kendle used her arm to shatter the glass in the booth. Rita hadn't pulled the gate down over it tonight.

No need. Rita came from her cubby wearing a thick pack. *I'm coming with you. That's why it isn't locked down.*

Kendle didn't have time to bargain. She marched to the rear of the shop and began prying off the paneling that shielded the window. She'd noticed the draft while getting her nails done and marked it as an emergency exit.

Kendle shoved the rusty window up and climbed out onto the fire escape, glad the gate guard had taken her advice to keep locals around the front. She tried to be quiet as she went, going half way before waving at Rita to come next.

The team waited until the women were on the ground before slowly easing their weight onto the rusting metal. Thin clangs and groans echoed.

Everyone was relieved when they were all on the damp ground, but it had taken so long that they were all twitching and jumping at shadows as Kendle led them toward the hole in the fence the guards hadn't sealed yet. Once his men had inspected the wall, Xavier had been told there were multiple problems. He'd assigned a crew, but those workers hadn't been eager.

Kendle held the bush for her team to go first, studying the lit market. She could see shadows on the top floor, through the window they'd used.

Kendle concentrated. *Bring them now or keep them. We have to go.*

Positive Rice would make it in time, Kendle took her partners through the dark, silent streets toward the alley where she'd torn apart the guards. She was glad they couldn't see the bloodstains in the dark. She was still hopeful that her men would never have to know what she'd done here.

Kendle chuckled, catching herself. She was coated in Yuri's blood. They knew what she was.

Tommy placed an arm around her tense shoulders, not letting his stomach interfere with

what he needed to do. “We’re Eagles. That includes you.”

Kendle smiled gratefully. “Thanks.”

Tommy gently shoved her away as he felt the heat baking off her skin. He couldn’t stand that much fire at once.

Kendle sighed. *No, not many can. Even Yuri needed chemical help to handle me.*

Adrian didn’t, her witch commented snidely.

Kendle led the team through the large hole in the broken wall and then began circling toward their campsite to pick up Ori and the twins. She couldn’t wait to be gone from here.

“We’re one short.”

Kendle stopped. “Who?”

“Josh went after a runner.” Tommy took her arm to keep them moving.

Kendle slowed her pace, considering the options. “Fine. We’ll wait around. Should be a breeze.”

The men snickered at the joke, not as worried as they probably should have been. They were free and they had their guns. Using them was appropriate after what they’d been through in this shitty little town.

5

Demetri ran harder, hearing the heavy steps. He assumed it was the Black Widow. His heart thumped heavily, remembering the promises of pain

and death that her partners had given. If he got caught, it would be ugly.

Demetri detoured into an alley near the gate, hoping to get lost in the din of shouts, guns being set up, and troops coming from all areas of town at Dirce's calls over the radio. Demetri had already shut his off. He held still, trying not to gasp as the steps came closer...and stopped!

"How many do I owe you?"

Demetri blanched. *Too many.* He darted out of the alley as a hand shot out and grabbed his pocket.

He scrambled loose, shouting in triumph as he got free. He ran faster, not peering over his shoulder.

Josh stayed where he was, waiting...

The explosion wasn't huge but it blew parts of Demetri across the troops that he was shoving aside, also killing several of them.

Josh vanished into the darkness, smiling happily. *I'll have to thank Angela for sending those grenades with us. That was cool.*

6

"Where are they?" Rice held a gurgling baby in each arm.

"She said they were going for a walk." Ori was sitting in the opening of the tent. He was busy digging through the kits and packs for valuables. He was positive he'd been abandoned, but he couldn't go back to the market emptyhanded. He planned to

gather what he could use and set off for the western wastelands, where neither Dirce nor the Black Widow could reach him.

Both men jumped as an explosion came from the town, lighting up the section where the market would be. They'd already listened to the gunfire with growing worry.

"I can't stay here." Rice shoved the kids at the sentry. "These are hers. Keep them alive or she'll kill you."

Ori tried to resist taking them, but he refused to let the babies fall. He juggled them awkwardly as Rice ran off into the woods and vanished down the hole he'd come from.

Ori regarded the two startled babies, stunned. "What just happened?"

"You got stuck holding the diapers." Kendle came from the opposite thicket of tall trees beside the camp.

The Eagles hurried over to grab their gear and the tent, loading Ori with the diaper bag.

"Time to roll. Keep up." She motioned Ben and Ryan to help him and took off running away from Market Town. Her team brought up the rear as the group disappeared into the coming sun, leaving a furious UN boss waiting behind a barricade that wasn't going to be used.

Ori ignored his shock and revulsion at Kendle's coating of blood, seeing Rita from the nail shop. He stayed next to her as they fled for a new life, both hoping Safe Haven was everything they'd been

dreaming of since the Black Widow had arrived. The voice they'd heard in those dreams had been a person of great power and empathy that they wanted to believe in. The need to put a face to that power was urgent.

Kendle took them for a fast run, leading them to the abandoned farmhouse she'd studied several times during her workouts. The two trucks in the garage hadn't been much, but she'd been able to sneak out and bring back a battery and some fuel. She was now deliriously happy that she'd planned things out this far.

"When did you do this?" Conner and Tommy were filling the tanks while everyone else climbed in, not using lights and not slamming doors.

"I had a week to wait before I could kill anyone." Kendle shrugged. "I had to stay busy."

Conner smiled at her. "You did really well."

Kendle refused to waste time on emotions. "Get in."

Tommy and Kendle took the driver seats of the rusty brown and red trucks that Kendle believed had once been used to haul hay. Pieces of yellow, molded straw stuck to them as they piled in the cabin and the bed, hunkering down in case there was gunfire. Kendle met Tommy's eye in the mirror. *Ready?*

Yes. I'd like to go home now.

Kendle started the engine. *Me too. Let's roll.* Kendle drove calmly, without lights, down the

driveway and steered them away from Market Town.

I'll be back, Dirce. Watch your six.

A mile away and realizing she'd gotten out of town somehow, Dirce didn't need to catch the thought to know what Kendle would do. He knew of Safe Haven. If he'd had another choice, he would have killed her and her men, and pretended they'd never even been here, but by the time that he'd arrived, the locals had already been converted. After seeing what she was capable of, the UN boss decided he'd had enough of this town too. "Load us up. We're leaving."

"What about the locals?"

"Leave them alone." Dirce decided he would send a cleanup crew tomorrow night while this town was busy celebrating Kendle's victory of breaking the UN hold over them.

"We can't tolerate that type of disrespect, Ms. Roberts." Dirce climbed into his warm, bulletproof UN vehicle and waved at the driver. "Take me north. I want to know where she's going."

7

"We have a tail."

"I know." Tommy didn't slow down. He was staying on Kendle's bumper. "She isn't stopping. She knows too."

Ben settled back, content to let Angela help them finish off this unexpected danger. No one doubted she would when she found out what had happened here.

Ahead of them, Kendle wasn't as certain. She'd gotten her men out, but she'd chosen to take them back in and do damage.

"She'll understand."

Kendle glanced over at Conner, catching the tone. "Did she tell you this might happen?"

"My dad said we'd be home early, without making it to our destination. I didn't believe him."

"Wish he'd told me that." Kendle grumbled, but she wasn't mad. She'd had dreams that could be called predictions, but she hadn't told anyone about them either.

"Why not?"

"Because I wanted those things to happen." She admitted it without guilt. "So I let them."

"You sound like my dad."

Kendle was startled into a grin. "Yeah, I guess I do. Could be worse. I might sound like Angela."

Conner snickered. "Man, when she finds out about this place..."

Kendle hoped he and the men were right. "Should be ugly."

Conner glanced back to where Ori, Rita, and a few of the team members were settling in and caring for the babies. "Can we make it on the gas we have?"

“Not a chance, kid. We’ve got about six or seven hours and then we’ll be on foot. Sleep now, while you can.”

“What’s the plan? New wheels?”

“Hopefully. Half our time will be gone before daylight gets here. I think I can get us to the town that had all those car lots.”

“The one with the big yellow Hummer?”

“Yes.”

“Cool!”

Kendle and the others smiled tolerantly at Conner’s excitement, his crime and banishment forgotten, forgiven. He’d pulled his weight during their crisis. He was now an official Eagle rookie.

Kendle steered them down the dark highway, increasing her speed as the clear stretch opened up in front of them. When she flipped on her lights, Tommy did the same.

Confident he was following her alertly, Kendle flew north, praying the half a tank each that she’d been able to sneak out would be enough.

8

The trucks ran out of gas at almost the same time.

Tommy carefully pushed Kendle’s vehicle until his also began choking from sucking air instead of gas. As the engine died, Tommy glanced over his shoulder. “Everyone ready for a nice romantic walk?”

There were grumbles and laughs as they piled out, taking all the gear they'd stripped upon getting comfortable.

Kendle and Tommy took the lead, rifles out to make a good show for anyone who happened to be around. As dawn finally began to show, the team realized there was no one around here. The homes had been burnt to the ground, as well as the businesses.

"Not good." Ori was bringing up the rear. "Not good."

Ryan shushed him angrily, still upset that they had to bring another enemy into their camp. He agreed with many of the Eagles that people who had fought against them should be left to fend for themselves.

The march through the chilly morning fog wasn't a fun time, but it was better than being captives. Even Rita refused to let her worries ruin the fact that she was free. When the UN troops had come to her town, she'd been alone. Her husband was a truck driver. She hadn't seen him since before the bombs fell.

Kendle tried to hurry, needing to get them out of sight, needing to get them new transportation, but the sound of engines an hour after they abandoned the trucks left her no choice. Kendle ran for the nearest shelter. The barn was too obvious, but there were no other buildings in sight. She waved them all in, glad the babies weren't crying to make their hiding place even more obvious.

She and Carl slammed the heavy wooden doors; Tommy and Josh dropped the bar to secure them.

The engines grew louder... No one spoke as fear filled the musty shelter.

Kendle watched nervously, using a crack in the rotting boards to view the cars coming from the north.

“Not our guys.” Kendle spotted the two blue sports cars flying down the highway. She wanted to warn them what they were running into, but there was no time. The two cars, racing each other, were out of sight in seconds.

Kendle picked out big shapes under white tarps. The barn floor behind them was bare and huge. “See what’s in here.”

“Oww!”

“You okay?”

“My knee isn’t. I hit a tractor.”

“A tractor?” Kendle smiled. “Does it have gas?”

Tommy scanned. “There’s a cart attached to it.”

Scott groaned. “Not another cart. I still smell like the last one!”

Kendle laughed with them, tension broken. “Spread out, search for gas cans. We might get lucky and discover something usable.”

An hour later, they eased out of the barn, cart hitched to the tractor. It was cold and slow, but they were moving again and it wasn’t on foot.

Kendle consulted the map, pointing at the field. “That’s our road. They won’t even notice these

tracks with all the others out there. We'll take the first wheels we find and get gone."

Tommy steered them over the bumpy, frozen ground, rationing the fuel even though his nerves were shot. He expected to hear more engines at any point.

"A little quicker." Kendle felt it too. Dirce was close, hunting her as he'd promised.

Using the method Marc had taught her, and Adrian had practiced with her, Kendle shielded her group in the bubble and blocked off all mental communications. Nothing would get in or out to provide Dirce with a location. *Bye-bye, asshole. See you on the flipside.*

9

Dirce lost the connection all at once and knew what had happened. His gifts couldn't beat that, but he didn't need them to know the group would continue north, to the last known location of Safe Haven. Dirce narrowed his eyes. "Is that a...BMW?"

"Two of them, sir," his driver answered. "Blocking formation?"

Dirce shook his head. The vehicles were slowing down. "Curiosity kills most cats. Let's see if these will come to us. Flash our lights. Tell them we're friendly."

Across the divider, the two cars stopped, windows coming down as they communicated.

After a minute, the drivers agreed, both getting out and advancing across the median.

“Hey! Do you have any weapons for trade?”

“We’re from Safe Haven. We mean no harm.”

Dirce stepped from the truck, still bloody and battered from Kendle’s surprises. “We’d be happy to help you. Where is your camp?”

Seth realized the danger too late. He grabbed Becky’s arm, pulling her toward the shiny new cars, but a squad of troops in UN clothes rushed forward with dozens of guns.

Seth and Becky shared looks of regret and concern as they were shoved to their knees and handcuffed. They’d thought this was a convoy of citizens who had found military rides. They’d agreed to ask if there were any weapons they could buy. Both of them had been feeling guilty about leaving the camp surrounded by Mexicans.

The guards hauled the couple to their feet and shoved them toward Dirce, who was already digging into their minds. “Interesting.”

Becky saw Dirce’s expression light up as they came to rest on her stomach. Her arms crossed over her gut instinctively.

Dirce gestured for them to put the prisoners into the truck. A minute later, they were rolling again, searching. He’d run across two rats and where there were two, there were a dozen.

Dirce rolled by the barn without noticing the tracks in the field, as Kendle had predicted. Inside

the safety of his truck, he also didn't hear the engine of the tractor that carried his prey further away each second. But he felt it. The Black Widow had escaped his net.

Chapter Thirty

Fate's Way

1

“We have to stop.” Conner slowed down.

“What’s going on, kid?” Ben was in the passenger seat. Kendle had gotten them fresh wheels, picking two service vehicles that scavengers hadn’t searched for fuel. Then she’d collapsed in exhaustion. Her last order had been to keep traveling.

“There’s a storm coming. It may be snow.”

“I believe we should keep going.” Ryan swept Kendle’s sleeping features. “She said to.”

Scott was against it. “We can’t take these shuttle vans through a big storm. We’ll get stuck.”

Ben frowned. “Okay. Flash Tommy to pull over. We need to make this choice as a team.”

Ori and Rita took care of the infants and kept their mouths shut, but they both hoped the team kept going. They didn’t want to die out here.

It only took Ben the jog to Tommy’s window to understand that Conner’s guess on snow was accurate. The temperature had gone from mid-fifties to freezing and the wind was brutal.

“We’ve got sleet.” Tommy pointed it out as soon as Ben was within hearing distance. “Maybe we should hole up?”

Ben nodded, climbing into Tommy’s van. The wind was too strong to stand outside without thicker gear.

Josh pulled their maps from his kit. “We’re not far from the cabin we stayed in on the way down here. We have enough gas to reach, but it would be breaking an Eagle rule.”

“Never stay in the same place twice while on runs,” Carl echoed from their lessons.

“Other options?” Tommy knew there couldn’t be many. They’d chosen the cabin because it was in an isolated location where the smoke from their campfire wouldn’t show above the tall tree line.

“No. We’ll secure it twice as well as we did before.” Ben opened the door to groans as the icy wind flew in. “Straight there. We can’t waste the fuel on circling first.”

Tommy was glad Ben had agreed. When he’d seen the first layer of sleet on the windshield, he’d known they would be stopping soon. *Why did I know before him? And why did I wait until he came to the same conclusion?* Puzzling it out, Tommy let Conner pull around him to take the lead. He didn’t mind sharing command, especially on a trip like this one.

Conner eased the van to the off ramp, aware of sleet coming in thicker sheets now. It wasn’t sticking to the ground yet, but it was bad enough

that Conner glanced at Ben in the mirror. “I’m a rookie. Someone needs to take over for me.”

Impressed with the maturity, Ben denied him. “You’re an Eagle in your father’s army. Act like it.”

Proud and ashamed at the same time, Conner sped up a little and took his team to safety.

2

Kendle jerked awake as the engine shut off. “Gas! I’ll get us gas!”

“Easy.” Ben shifted in the seat next to her. “It’s snowing. We’re holing up. Come on.”

Kendle let Ben help her from the van, shivering as soon as the wind slammed into her thin jacket. They’d brought snow gear, but hadn’t had to use it before now.

Ben hurried her into the cabin as Tommy and the others secured it, their vehicles, and their supplies. This cabin sat down in a valley off a cliff that overlooked a formerly overpopulated town. Kendle had considered it a good den on their way down and she agreed it was the best option for their return trip. There was no way to know how long the snow would last. “Babies?”

“They’re fine.” Rita and Ori were still caring for them. “Very quiet. It’s like they know.”

Kendle didn’t offer information about the descendant children in Safe Haven and neither did the men. Ori and Rita weren’t trusted yet. That

would be made clear to Angela and Marc upon their arrival.

Ben led Kendle to the couch and helped her down. She was barely conscious. He covered her with his long jacket and dug out his sleeping bag. When he placed it on the floor next to the couch and then slid in, Kendle tried to stay alert. "What's up?"

Ben shrugged, groaning in enjoyment at the warmth. "You're injured. Tommy put me on duty over you. No better place than right here."

Kendle was too tired to argue. She let her eyes close, hoping the dreams would leave her alone at least until they returned to camp. She'd done well so far, but this trip had taken another heavy toll on her. "But I did it. I got them out and helped people. She has to forgive me now."

Ben frowned as he realized Kendle was trying to earn forgiveness for wanting Marc.

"No. For being a killer. I'm atoning." Kendle yawned. "She'll recognize that."

Ben was sent into deep contemplations at those words. He let her fall asleep without asking any of the questions he had about her and Marc, or about Market Town. It would wait.

Conner spread his sleeping bag out at the bottom of the couch. "Will she be okay?"

"I believe so." Ben watched Conner scan the rest of their settling group before getting into the bag. "You've done well, kid."

Conner didn't answer, but he did smile. He was too tired for more.

Ben realized he wasn't going to get the conversation he needed and forced himself to try sleeping as well. He hated to waste these bonding moments. Full Eagle teams always talked when the run was over.

Maybe it isn't over... His eyes flew open and stayed that way until snores sounded.

3

Tommy yawned in the darkness, rifle across his knees as he sat on the reading ledge in the window of the second floor. They'd agreed a guard wasn't needed, but Tommy hadn't been able to sleep without someone on duty.

"Damn," a voice stated from the stairs. "I came up to do that."

Tommy chuckled, sliding over. "There's room."

Ben placed his shoulder against Tommy's, following their training to share body heat in the cool cabin.

"Oh, yeah. That's good shit right there!"

Ben tried not to let his laughter roll down the stairs.

Tommy scanned the dark still life apocalypse scene below them, wondering if there was anyone around here trying to survive. Snow swept harshly against the glass as if to mock the thought. They'd only been here for a couple hours, but their tire tracks were already filled in. The two vans were behind the cabin, under the concealment of snowy

trees, but they were facing the street for a fast exit. Tommy hoped it wasn't needed. He was ready for a break without the fear of death or the chains of captivity. They all were.

"We shouldn't have gone back in."

"Maybe." Tommy shrugged. "But I've been considering this run. Wanna hear some crazy observations?"

Ben nodded. "Sure."

"This was an odd crew to send."

Ben thought about that. "We were set up to fail?"

Tommy glanced over his shoulder, toward the stairs. "I don't believe we failed."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. Just a sense of success when there shouldn't be one, I guess."

Ben grinned. "That's it! I feel like we won."

"We did, somehow."

"Angela will know." Ben was confident of that.

"She better, since she chose the people for this mission."

"It was the perfect crew for an exploratory of a town that she couldn't be certain about from a distance..."

"True. It was also a good trial run for taking the camp south."

"Yes."

But neither of those felt right to the two senior men. They spent the next hour trying to wade

through Angela's possible motives as snow built up along the window.

4

Kendle sat up on the couch, eyes still closed. "Yes, they're safe." She blinked rapidly, dreaming. "Soon. We're coming."

Kendle sucked in air in a great gasp and screamed as Ethan stabbed her in the stomach.

Tommy and Ben flew down the stairs to discover their group cringing from Kendle's hoarse shouts and swipes. She was standing on the couch, not seeing anyone.

Tommy approached her carefully, aware of babies crying and rookies flinching from their duty.

"Kendle!" Tommy roared her name, bringing the din to a halt for a brief second.

Kendle's eyes flew open. "What?"

The men breathed a sigh of relief as the two infants protested loudly. Rita hurried to soothe them.

Kendle glared at the people staring at her. "What?"

Tommy sighed. "Screaming. You."

Kendle grimaced. "Oh." She yawned, lowering her weapon. "Sorry."

Tommy sat on the couch and then lay down next to her, forcing her over.

Kendle put her weapon away. Embarrassed, she started to get down, but Tommy tugged her onto his chest. “Come on. They need sleep.”

Kendle flushed and stopped struggling. When he curled warm arms around her, pressing her ear to his chest where his heart thumped steadily, Kendle surrendered. She cuddled up to him gratefully and went back to sleep.

“Thanks.” Ben went back up to the window to resume keeping watch. They’d won something and he was happy they were only a week of travel from home, but the twitchy sensation kept him near the frosty glass. He would be better once the sun rose in another hour. Anyone could be sneaking up on them in this darkness and they wouldn’t know until it was too late.

5

“They’re close.” Dirce concentrated, catching waves of agony and insanity. Someone was dreaming...

“Up there.” Dirce pointed to the illuminated hill that was dotted with abandoned cars and snow. There was barely enough room for a truck to slide up that incline.

Nero, Dirce’s driver, did as he was told even though he hated traversing in this crazy American weather. Until he’d come to the United States, Nero had never observed snow, let alone driven through it in the dark.

Dirce, picking up every emotion of every living thing in a five-mile radius, leaned over. “If you wreck, I’ll eat your tongue.”

Nero grimaced and then steeled himself. “Well, I’ve been kissing ass for a long time, so don’t expect the taste to be good.”

Dirce was startled into laughter. “No, I won’t.”

The two men used the mirth to distract them from their concerns as Nero took them up the dark mountain. Their worries were very different, but in that moment, they were bonded.

Dirce realized he could use it to his advantage. He studied Nero. “You came here on Yuri’s team, as his protection.”

Nero nodded. “It got old.”

“Should I expect the same treatment?”

Nero shrugged. “Depends on you, like with Yuri. He stopped being a leader after Malia was killed. As long as you don’t change, we’re good.”

Dirce found himself liking the driver he’d grabbed from the chaos to follow Kendle. Dirce also understood that Nero was a good example of how all his troops were feeling right now. “What do you think we’re doing?”

Nero carefully took them around a winding curve, barely missing a beaten-up Volvo with stickers all over the bumpers. He didn’t try to read them. “We’re tracking the Safe Haven people to their lair.”

Dirce was satisfied with that answer, but he pressed anyway. “And if she gets away?”

“Then Safe Haven will know the UN is on American soil.” Nero glanced over. “Why hasn’t she called to her boss yet?”

Dirce frowned. “Because she knows we’re out here, waiting for it.”

“So they won’t call in, but they’ll lead us there?”

“She believes they can kill us if we follow them all the way to their camp.”

“Can they?” Nero asked tonelessly. All of his fear was currently being used on the narrow, snowy road.

“Yes. She and the boy alone could have laid waste to Market Town.”

“Then why didn’t she? Why only kill Yuri?”

“We made a deal.” Dirce kept explaining, not sure why he was bothering. “He betrayed her.”

“How?”

“He was supposed to support her.”

“He did.” Nero added it. “The cubby, weapons, protecting her while she slept.”

“He broke into the cubby searching for evidence. He told the guards to let Renda into his apartment. He kept Renda wound up so the Widow would make it her goal to kill our slave master. He earned every bite.”

Now Nero felt something—revulsion. “That woman is crazy.”

“Yes. She’s the next generation of patriot that must be removed. Yuri was right about that.”

Nero slowed, narrowing in on an oily spot under the edge of a thin snowdrift. "That looks fresh."

Dirce leaned out the window as Nero stopped by the stain. He shined his flashlight. "It is. Still warm enough to melt the snow landing on it."

Dirce rolled up the window, scanning the treetops and empty, looted cabins around them. "This is too obvious. Find the most isolated, hardest to reach building. That's where she'll be."

Nero obediently did as he was told. He had no problem with switching his loyalty from Yuri to Dirce. He'd wanted to be on this man's crew since he'd first met him.

"And why is that?" Dirce glared. "Easier to knife me?"

Nero snickered. "Yeah, but that's not my reasoning. Xavier did want it, though."

"Xavier told you to knife me?"

"He said to get rid of you in any way that I could."

"Why didn't you follow orders?"

"I had already met you." Nero grinned. "When you called Xavier in after the Widow left, I knew he wasn't coming out."

"Would you have tried if Xavier had been stronger?" Dirce asked, tone becoming dangerous.

"Of course." Nero wasn't concerned. He knew who he was dealing with. The truth mattered more to a descendant than emotional ties that were usually useless in a battle. "I'm a hired gun. I do what I'm told."

“As long as you don’t have to risk your neck?”

“I like the risk. But I’m not going to die for nothing, you know? I have to get something out of it.” Nero steered up the hill at the next intersection, not consulting the ground or his boss. He’d been given an order on this hunt. It was the mental battle going on in Dirce’s mind that he had to be careful about. “I prefer to serve people with vision. You have big plans and I follow orders to the letter. We should get along well.”

Dirce chuckled, impressed with the man’s courage and honesty. “I’ll remember that.”

“Good; I just found them. Don’t forget that I like redheads.”

Dirce ignored the words to narrow in on a thin beam of light shining up from a valley between two jagged, snow-covered cliffs. There was a very narrow road leading down into that valley. It both looked and seemed extremely dangerous. He could sense the driver’s hesitation. This time, Dirce took heed of it. “Find a place to stash the trucks. We’ll go in on foot.”

Nero slowly reversed in the frozen front yard of a cabin that still had holiday lighting on the porch rail. He felt like death had just chosen to skip him.

6

“Put that fire out!” Ben flew down the stairs. His shout and heavy boots woke everyone in the cabin. “Put it out now!”

Kendle and Tommy jerked awake, almost falling off the narrow couch as Ben jumped over them to reach the fireplace.

“Who started a fire?” Tommy was shocked. “What dumbass did that?”

Ben shoved Ori away from the fireplace to fasten the flue and stomp on the flames. He’d been about to drift off when he’d thought the sun was up. When he’d glanced at the black sky, he had realized light was glowing from the first floor.

Scott hurried over to douse the fire with his canteen; others did the same, sending clouds of smoke rolling into the cabin. Coughing echoed loudly over the voices and babies crying.

“Get in the rear until it clears out!” Kendle kicked the locked barrier open when it wouldn’t budge. They’d assumed there were bodies in it, but Conner hadn’t sensed life inside, so they hadn’t forced it open last time.

Kendle scanned the secure room in relief, able to feel the nerves before a battle now settling onto her shoulders like a brutal, familiar vest. “Stay here. Don’t come out.”

She grabbed the arms of three men, pushing them into positions along the hall that led to the rear room. She didn’t try to explain yet, unable to get a clear breath through the smoke. She shut the door to keep the others from breathing as much of it, hoping they were sealed up tightly. It was probably about to get ugly.

“What is it?” Ben checked his gun, coughing.

“Dirce is here. I feel him.”

Ori had remained outside the room of his own volition. He came to Kendle. “He’ll burn it first. We should give up.”

Kendle stared at him, taking the precious time to dig into his mind. “...you son of a bitch.” Kendle pointed her gun at him. “He lit the fire on purpose. It wasn’t an accident.”

Now afraid of blowing Dirce’s plan, Ori quickly held up his hands. “No, I wouldn’t do that. We have a deal.”

“A deal you know I can’t keep my end of... You loved Renda and still helped me kill her. Why?”

“Because she was corrupt!” Ori spat suddenly, accent thickening with his anger. “All those men! She and Yuri enjoyed the slaves too much. There can’t be that type of open relation in the new world order.”

Kendle’s guts twisted. “New world order?”

Ori smiled as the rest of the men in the hall pointed their guns at him. “I covered my real thoughts so you couldn’t read me. You’re all going to die.”

“You first.” Kendle pulled the trigger.

7

“There’s the first shot. Care to make a wager, mate?”

“Against the Black Widow or for?”

“Against, of course. She’s got no chance with Dirce. He loves the snow.”

“Didn’t you see how quickly she won every fight? And she’s a descendant.”

“Dirce called her a healer. She’s harmless, and her partners are just normals.”

“If she’s harmless, how did she tear apart the three Iranians?”

“Wild dogs did that.”

“You’re bugger, mate. Renda said Ms. Roberts did it.”

“Renda was scared of the fight. She lied.”

In the backseat, behind the arguing guards on the vehicles, Becky and Seth shared a glance. They knew that name.

“Well, what about Yuri? His body looked like the dogs got in and we know it was Ms. Roberts in there alone because her men was in the hall, shooting at us.”

“She got lucky.”

“I don’t think so. She was covered in scars. A lot of people have tried to kill her.”

“Then we have a wager. I’ll take that humidor you love so much.”

The dickering went on in the front, but in the rear, Seth and Becky were now certain who Dirce’s target was. He’d left them here with two guards, taking a small force to capture someone. They’d hoped to escape while he was busy, but hearing who the UN was hunting changed those plans.

Seth nodded when Becky lifted a brow. *Do it.*

Given permission, Becky stared intently at the unsuspecting driver of the transport truck.

8

Dirce heard the truck moving over the snowy ground behind them and twisted around in surprise. Because it was Nero behind the wheel of the transport truck, Dirce waited until the vehicle was closer before he began gesturing. In the snow, there was no way the driver would be able to make out his gestures from this distance. Anyone else, Dirce would have ordered shot for blowing their cover.

Dirce assumed it was something important for Nero to risk blowing their ambush this way. If not, Nero would die right here.

Dirce heard the engine accelerate... His eyes widened, survival instinct kicking in. "Watch out!"

The transport truck barreled toward the huddled group of ambushers who had paused under the shield of the last tree before moving in on the cabin.

It ran them over and then reversed to lunge forward and do it again, hitting the dead and the wounded.

Dirce was frozen in disbelief. Nero's mind was blank, foreign... Being controlled!

I should have killed them! Dirce took off running as the truck swerved his way.

Kendle and the Eagles watched in nervous surprise as the troops below them were murdered by

their own driver. Their screams echoed up the valley and into the cliffs, causing fresh snowdrifts to shift.

Kendle kept her attention on Dirce as she and Ben lined up the rifles on the railing for Tommy and Scott. They were the best shooters on this mission team.

“I’m locked.” Tommy was lost in the groove of what he did best. “Here we go.” He lovingly pulled the trigger.

Dirce arched as the bullet slammed into his spine, flight halted. He fell forward into the snow as the truck reached him.

Some of the team glanced away from the impact, but not Kendle. She was waiting to be sure he was dead. “Reload.”

Tommy got set again, aware of Scott’s jealousy over the great shot through a snowstorm.

Scott took his place again, trying to smother the need to come out on top. He couldn’t help feeling it. He didn’t have to act on it.

“I see movement under the truck.” Josh was the spotter.

Kendle watched the tires on the truck spin in vain. “They’re done.”

Carl tensed. “Here come the survivors.”

The two dozen remaining UN troops flew toward the truck, presumably holding their fire because they didn’t know where Dirce was and didn’t want to hit him if he was only injured.

“Open fire!” Conner ordered from Kendle’s right. “We have people in that van!”

Kendle took the boy at his word. She tapped Tommy on the shoulder. “Do it.”

Gunfire rang across the mountain, mixed with screams and shouts for mercy. Slugs pinged off the truck, the trees, and the rocky ground as the Eagles tried to eliminate the rest of Dirce’s men.

Used to this type of fighting, the UN troops fled. They got under the concealment of the trees in small groups and running streaks, and then disappeared. The few men who were loyal to Dirce also ran, but not as far. They too wanted to see if their boss had survived.

Josh studied the scene. “Anyone got a grenade left?”

“We can’t do that.” Conner pulled on his gloves. “I told you; we have people down there.”

Kendle grunted. “Well, let’s go get them.”

“Who is it?” Tommy stayed next to Conner as most of them trotted down the slippery stairs and into the slushy, bloody, body-littered valley.

“I can’t tell. They have a strong mind, though.”

That could be about any of us. Kendle dropped to the rear of the group with Conner as they advanced on the truck that was idling but no longer spinning wheels. The shadows in the front seats weren’t moving.

Carl led the way. “Is that blood on the inside of the window?”

“That’s not good.” Ramer knew to stay a step back.

“You, in the van!” Tommy called loudly as they surrounded it, all scanning underneath for signs of Dirce. “Come out now!”

No noise or response came, causing the tension to thicken.

“Open it.” Ben motioned to Carl.

The former rookie ran forward eagerly and jerked the passenger door open.

Guns came up at the sight of the guard holding his own weapon.

“Put it down!”

“Drop it!”

“I’ll do what she tells me to do.” The UN man shuddered in terror. “Please don’t shoot anymore.”

“She, who?” Tommy saw the driver had been shot in the temple. He assumed by this passenger.

“The bitch Dirce grabbed outside Market Town. She’s in the back.” Patrick’s finger tightened on the trigger. “I’m sorry! Please don’t!”

Kendle stepped forward. “Let him go now. It’s over.”

There was a raw, primitive growl from the rear and then Patrick dropped the gun. It fell harmlessly into his lap, where Ben snatched it.

Tommy slid the door of the truck open.

Becky stared up in fear from beside Seth’s bloody body. “I think I killed him.”

Kendle hurried into the truck, seeing Seth’s injury was from being flung against the truck during

the troop chasing. “He’s just knocked out. We’ll get him in.”

“We’re staying here?” Ramer was surprised and disgusted.

“Oh, yeah.” Kendle helped Becky sit up, cutting her bonds. “Thanks.”

Becky helped the Eagles get Seth into the cabin.

In the distraction, the UN passenger took off running down the same path the others had taken. The few troops who had clustered under the trees followed him, realizing Dirce wasn’t coming.

Scott raised his rifle.

Kendle put a hand on his wrist. “Becky did enough to that one. Let him try to live with it.”

No one argued.

Kendle and Tommy, along with Ben and Ryan, scoured the ground around and under the van that they could reach. After half an hour and near frostbite on hands and faces, they were forced to accept that Dirce’s body wasn’t there.

“How did he survive that?” Ben was still shocked. “He was shot and ran over.”

“Maybe he has a healer too.” Kendle trudged to the cabin as the snow and wind increased. “Let’s get set to roll out the minute this storm breaks.”

“Do you think he’ll be back before then?”

Kendle shook her head at Carl’s concern. “No. We may not have killed him, but he’s injured. Like a wild animal, he’ll run for his den to nurse his

wounds and feel safe. He'll come for me when he can fight."

Knowing they were safe for a while let them all relax. When they finally settled down again hours later, everyone went to sleep, including Tommy and Ben. The sense that they were being protected was hard to ignore.

9

The elderly couple jerked awake as the door to their tiny cabin flew open, letting in snow and evil.

Dirce raised his gun to fire, but Nero's passenger beat him to it.

The couple tried to reach their weapons, not bothering with begging, but they stood no chance against the ready gun. Patrick was furious about falling victim to Becky's control, about being in the truck while Nero ran over their fellow troops. The fear and the rage wouldn't leave him alone. He kept pulling the trigger even after the click sounded.

"That's enough." Dirce placed a hand on Patrick's shaking wrist. He certainly understood the uncontrollable rage. "Take care of the bodies. Make a fire."

That sounded good to the terrorized man. He holstered and strode forward with no qualms, grabbing the bare feet of the female. He wished it was the redhead who'd stolen his mind.

Dirce went into the small kitchen and eased down onto the chair, grunting harshly at the pain in

his spine. He could feel the slug in there, pressing on his vital organs and nerve endings, but he was stronger than the shooter had given him credit for. He'd managed to bring up his shield before the truck struck, going dim. When the Widow and her team had left the scene, he'd crawled away.

"I've got the medical kit." Andrew came in, slapping the heavy case down on the Formica counter. "Do it in here?" He'd followed Patrick and found the boss.

Dirce stripped his coat, jacket, and shirts, revealing a tapered body that was out of place in the quaint kitchen.

"That's what saved you." Andrew scanned the wound in relief. "We weren't sure if you'd evolved again on us."

Dirce didn't respond to the man's emotions, but he did store them. "Give me something."

Andrew shot a generous painkiller into Dirce's tensed arm. "There ya go."

Dirce remained still as the medic worked on removing the bullet. He felt the pain and he worried over Andrew's shaking hands missing and getting one of his needed nerves, but the biggest issue in his thoughts was the Black Widow.

He'd underestimated her. He'd known Xavier and Yuri had, but he'd committed the same offense when he knew not to. It was humiliating.

Andrew was conscious of Dirce's rage growing as he worked. The medic quickly injected his boss with another dose of painkiller, hoping to calm him

down. They couldn't go anywhere in the snow without transportation, and half of their dozen survivors were injured. It would be days stuck here with Dirce in high alert mode if they didn't soothe him in as many ways as they could.

"Then find me some wheels before the madness finishes me off." Dirce was aware of the dangers that came with his condition, with his evolution. Choosing to embrace his dark half had resulted in a monster that had to be satisfied whenever the lock snapped on the cage.

"We'll cover it." Andrew dropped the slug onto the table.

Dirce grunted, feeling blood flowing down his spine, but only the warm sensation of it. He closed his eyes as the buzz from the medication took effect, making him dizzy. He felt the monster inside yawn, paused in building the rage. "That's better."

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief that let the other men know their boss was okay now. Dirce had only blown one mission with his temper, but it had been memorable. The Canadians still hadn't recovered.

Chapter Thirty-One

Giving Way

1

“**C**ome in, Safe Haven. This is mission team Freedom. Come in, base.”

The long pause after the call implied the tired voice didn’t expect an answer.

“Come in, Safe Haven.”

“Should we go home, man?” Kevin was in the passenger seat of the truck, ignoring the grumbling woman in the carefully stacked bed behind them. Jeff had devised a shelter for her and the wolves, made from tarps and boxes. Once an hour they opened the connecting window to give her warmth.

Sally tapped on the dirty glass. “It’s cold!”

“Take a bath.” Jeff still wasn’t happy to be responsible for Sally. It was better than being in that tomb, but not by much. “You stink.”

“Fuck you.”

“Go to hell.”

“At least it would be warm there!”

Kevin ignored the usual bickering between the two to repeat his concern. “We felt the quake, and they didn’t answer our calls either.”

Jeff’s lips twisted. He flipped off the radio.

“Come on, man. At least tell me what you’re thinking.” Kevin tried to stay calm so he could get what he wanted. “That’s Kendle calling. What if she found the boat?”

“Then Angela will take them south.”

“But there hasn’t been an answer since we left. We didn’t get a response after the quake.”

“Do you want me to stop somewhere so you can find wheels?”

Kevin realized Jeff didn’t care. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I do care!” Jeff smacked the wheel. “That’s why I can’t do it. Losing Crista and our child was enough!”

“You think they’re dead.”

Jeff nodded stiffly. “It’s been weeks since we’ve heard a single call from them...and that quake was ugly.”

Kevin nodded. The apartment building they’d taken shelter in had collapsed. They’d barely gotten out, losing most of their gear in the process.

“I can’t go back to bury them,” Jeff declared brokenly. “I won’t. Let them stay under the stone.” Jeff wasn’t going back to that graveyard just to verify what he already knew. *Safe Haven is gone.*

2

“Why aren’t they answering?” Josh was taking his shift on the hourly radio call Tommy had

ordered before claiming the couch. “Is something wrong?”

“Maybe they went quiet.” Ben shared a look with Tommy. They’d discussed it upon waking. They’d been the first of the team to rise, though the afternoon had been waning. All of them had been tired. Even Kendle was still asleep, along with Rita and the twins.

“Maybe.” Josh switched the channel again. “When was the last time anyone had contact with base?”

Team members around the table added it up.

“Not since before we hit Market Town.” Josh pulled it up in his memory. “Kendle had Conner check in with his dad.”

Everyone looked at Conner.

Conner shook his head, revealing what he hadn’t told them. “I’ve been trying since Kendle cut the deal with the town masters. She wanted to know how to handle them. We never got an answer.”

“She also had Rice’s brother, the baker, call on his illegal radio. He said no reply.” Rita joined them with a baby in each arm. “I found out from Ori. He was one of the guards assigned to keep track of her as soon as Xavier realized she was a magic user.”

“Xavier didn’t know.” Carl gestured at Kendle’s bruised, sliced skin. “He tortured her to prove she wasn’t.”

Tommy held out his chair for Rita, seeing the babies were both alert and appeared to be listening. “Start from the beginning.”

Rita explained her deal with Kendle, telling them how she had made the nails hollow to hold poison in a bubble of superglue. When she revealed how she'd been questioned by the bossy sentry, they learned that Xavier had been plotting to kill Yuri and Iram to take control of the market.

"But how do you know all of this?" Ben believed her, but he wanted proof anyway. "No offense, but you're just a nail tech."

Rita grinned at them, showing a huge difference from her sullen attitude of daily market grind. "I'm a descendant. I listen to every word and every thought that happens around me." She glanced down at the two children. "I don't usually talk to anyone about it. I wasn't allowed."

"You're the spy who was reporting to Dirce." Kendle joined them in the warm kitchen amid smiles and chair offers.

"Yes. How else would a female have a shop in the market?"

Kendle realized she had overlooked that. She contemplated the other female owner. "Sylvia?"

Rita pulled a face. "Bad one there. Never did like her. Too free with information. She ratted out the locals when they didn't pay their tabs."

"What was your bet with Yuri?" Tommy smiled at her. "He wouldn't tell anyone."

"Renda's death. If I lost, he was already getting Conner. If I won, he had to kill Xavier."

Rita frowned. "But Dirce killed Xavier."

“Yes.” Kendle smiled cruelly. “I almost miss Yuri a little. He was brilliant.” Kendle settled at the table, taking the cup of instant coffee. “How many descendants are in Market Town?”

Rita shrugged. “Just the four of us, as far as I know.”

“Four.” Kendle counted them. “You, Sylvia, Dirce... Who else?”

“Iram.”

Kendle blanched. “What type?”

“Iram is an Invisible. Or, at least, he was. When Dirce brought him here, his gifts evolved. He’s the best mental manipulator I’ve ever observed.” She nodded at Becky. “No offense. You’re young. You’ll get stronger.”

Seth slid an arm around Becky’s shoulders, wishing that wasn’t the case. It would bring more trouble.

Rita scowled at him. “You act like it’s all her. What about you?”

Seth grimaced in confusion and dread. “I’m not a descendant.”

Rita gaffed. “Of course, you are, boy. I know a levitator when I meet one.”

“Levitator?” Becky smiled, finally getting an answer to what she’d been sensing in her mate for months. “He...moves things?”

Rita grinned. “Wait till he learns to use it in the bedroom.”

Becky blushed as Seth flushed and the table laughed.

Seth accepted the slaps on the shoulder, the acceptance from his fellow Eagles, but in his heart, fear bloomed bright and strong. *I'm like them, like Becky. I might hurt people too.*

Becky's face cramped up. She left the room, shrugging off Seth's arm.

Rita snorted. "You people are new."

Kendle sighed. "Yeah, we are. Tell me about Dirce. I want everything you can think of."

Rita extended one of the infants. "You rock her. I've got him."

Kendle took the baby reluctantly, glad she'd been able to rescue them, but not caring beyond that until the girl opened her eyes. They were the exact shade as Angela and Marc's. "Oh, hell." Kendle stared at the baby, making the connections now. "We need to get home. Draft a team. Find us transportation."

The others didn't argue or ask more questions when Kendle showed them the baby's face.

"Well, that explains some things." Ben sighed resignedly. "And it raises a whole new set of questions. Someone get out there and get us wheels. I'm on the fuel crew."

Kendle handed the cooing girl back to Rita. "Guard those with your life. They just became the most valuable items we have."

Tommy joined Kendle in the small shed next to the cabin. Half of the team was out on the scavenging mission, searching for beans, bullets, and vehicles. Kendle had said she was going out to see if the shed held anything they needed, but it had been half an hour and she hadn't returned. "You okay?"

"Over here."

The shed was narrow, but long, running the length of the cabin.

Tommy found her on a dusty couch, laying there staring at the thin wooden beams and her own icy breath clouds. She was also sweating, telling him she'd done a fast, hard work out.

"What's up?" He sat next to her, letting their legs touch. It wasn't for the warmth.

"Not interested!"

"Liar." Tommy laughed, leaning against the musty cushion. "Man, this has been a long run."

"Yeah." Kendle sat up. "Hard to believe all the things I missed."

"No one gets everything. I personally believe we've done fine."

"Really?"

Her tone told Tommy she was worrying over the choices she'd made. "Sure. I'd be happy to have you as my XO again."

Kendle laughed at the joke. She'd been running this mission since they were carjacked.

Tommy tugged her over. "They're okay, you know."

Kendle didn't answer. She didn't know.

Neither did Tommy, but he had faith in Angela, especially now that he thought he knew the real reason for this run. "You'll see. Come on. Let's get in. Cold out here."

"Not me." Heat was baking off her skin.

Tommy flashed to Marc's advice before they'd left. "Let me know when it gets bad."

"Why? You think you can handle the fire now?"

Tommy grinned, pulling her to her feet. He leaned in close enough to kiss her. "Yes. Try me?"

Kendle was tempted. The heat always needed to be soothed now, but witnessing Dirce die, and not die, had reminded her of how strange they were. She turned from Tommy without answering. If she wanted real relief, she would have to pick someone who was like her. Normal men couldn't get her there.

Tommy felt the challenge even though nothing had been said. Plans began forming in his mind. He liked Kendle and didn't mind the thought of helping her, but his sexual skills were well known among Safe Haven's female population. His pride demanded that Kendle be made aware of it too.

4

"They took off."

Kendle peered up from the maps she and Josh were studying. "Who?"

“Seth and Becky. They grabbed their coats and flew out as soon as we came in from scavenging. We thought they wanted to be alone.” Ryan gestured. “But Carl found a note.”

Kendle took the paper as the rest of the team gathered around to listen.

“Becky hasn’t gotten an answer from Angela in weeks. Safe Haven doesn’t exist anymore. The Mexicans got into the mountain. We’re not going back. Good luck.”

Tense silence filled the room as Kendle considered the words. She understood the choice, but at the same time, she loathed it. Kendle crumbled the note and tossed it into the fire that they weren’t afraid to have burning now. “I have to know for sure. We leave at daylight.”

Eased, the team returned to sorting through the items they’d scavenged. Not going back wasn’t an option for these men.

Kendle was surprised to discover that it wasn’t for her either. She’d caught the Safe Haven infection. “Man, I hate it when this happens.”

5

Seth got into the small wagon he’d found with half a tank of gas. They would need to get lucky and find fuel to put in the tank after this was gone or the vehicle would be useless, but at least they would be away from here. “So where to?”

Becky thought of Dirce and Market Town, and then Kendle's team. "If they are alive, Angela will bring them south. Let's roll west."

"West?" He inserted the key that had been above the visor. "Why west?"

"I'm not certain. Just feels right."

Seth was glad when the engine came to life. He hadn't had to do much to the wagon. Older vehicles had been built to take abuse before they became a pile of junk. "You got it."

Becky watched the snowy cabin roll by, mind on the battle that might happen between their people and Dirce. If she began hearing calls that said their camp had survived, she might want to come back and help. To prevent that, she needed to get out of range.

Seth didn't catch the thoughts or plans in his mate's mind. He was busy trying not to flip the wagon down the slushy hill.

Becky allowed her heart to settle into a calmer rhythm as the mountain slowly released them. She wanted to get as far from here, as fast as possible. They'd broken the hold Adrian had placed over that cursed camp. She didn't want to be infected with the light again. It hurt too much whenever the bulbs popped. She couldn't take that disappointment anymore. She'd rather be dead than to believe in anyone ever again.

The CB crackled. "Come in, Safe Haven. This is mission team Freedom. Come in, base."

Becky reached over and switched it off, smiling brightly. “I think we need to replace this junker with matching Hummers this time.”

Seth chuckled. “I do like a tall ride.”

Becky blushed, leaning over. “Me too. Drive faster, baby. Momma’s gonna hum for you.”

6

It took Dirce three days to get back to Market Town. Finding transportation had been easy, as had scavenging fuel, but the bullet had damaged his spine enough that Andrew had insisted on two days’ rest. Faced with not being able to walk, Dirce had been forced to agree. His healer hadn’t been along for this hunt. Sylvia wouldn’t have survived the firefight anyway. She couldn’t take loud noises. At least this way, she would be able to take care of him when he made it back to base.

Andrew placed an arm around Dirce’s shoulder. “We’ll get you in and send for your woman.”

Dirce, in a lot of pain, tugged Andrew closer. “Will you help me with something else?”

Andrew heard the dangerous tone and knew what was coming, but he couldn’t escape Dirce’s grip as the man wrapped him up like a lover.

Dirce took the lifeforce eagerly, moaning at the pleasure, the evil fun of breaking rules. He reveled in it, not caring about the concerns of the witnesses. He wasn’t going to hobble into the market and reveal his injury, his vulnerability. He had enemies

here, and everywhere he went. Dirce never forgot that, even during the chaos.

Dirce shoved the body into the seat and climbed from the van without help. He flashed a finger at the locals who were now showing their displeasure about his survival. "Taxes are tripled!"

Fear flooded the disappointed locals, who ran to their shops to work. Triple taxes would cost almost everything they made daily.

Dirce gestured toward the slave rooms. "Get me a few of those. I want to be ready by daylight."

"To go where, sir?" one of his weary escorts inquired as two others trotted tiredly to the slave area.

"The airfield first." Dirce ripped a sign from the wall that warned against harboring magic users. "Then, we'll roll north."

"Frontal or ambush?" The guard took out his notebook. Jarvis knew what his job was and he'd always done it well enough that he couldn't be easily replaced. Andrew had forgotten to do that, but he'd also been too familiar with the boss, too jovial. Dirce didn't like amusement or happiness of any kind in his men.

"Both, if the Secretaries-General will send more troops. Ambush, if not."

"I'll get things drawn up to cover us." Jarvis opened the door to Xavier's apartment for Dirce to enter. Jarvis went to his own allocated cubby nearby, ignoring the glares of the locals and the groans of his troops when they saw him writing

down new orders. Jarvis was relieved they were going to Souther Field. The Secretaries-General would be waiting for them, wanting an explanation for everything that had happened, including the deaths of the three market masters they'd put into place. If Dirce could talk his way through that and still get out with clearance to chase Safe Haven, Jarvis planned to be ready with drawings and detailed notes. Dirce wouldn't be in a good mood when that meeting was over.

Dirce settled onto Xavier's bed as the door opened again. The guards shoved and dragged three tall women in, ignoring their fear and their pleas for freedom.

Dirce lifted a hand. "I need your love."

Sensual vibes floated through the room, drawing the females against their will. When an alpha called, everyone answered.

7

"Is everything ready?" Kendle joined Tommy in the cabin of the truck. They'd traveled for the last three days, only stopping this morning when they'd run out of fuel again. They had spent this morning draining lawnmowers and other small appliances to get half a tank for the cargo van Josh had found under a tarp behind a mechanic shop.

“All set for us to roll out again at dawn.” Tommy had come out here in the cold darkness to wait for her.

Kendle shut the door softly, hoping Rita had been able to get the kids to sleep. The twins had colic.

Kendle shuddered at a wave of pain and need.

The heat baking off her body was so thick that Tommy lowered his window. “You okay?”

“Are you really a camp provider?”

Tommy stared at the scarred island female in surprise, not certain how to answer.

“I’m sorry. Never mind.” Kendle looked over, orbs glowing. “I need to go out running for a bit.”

Tommy had been briefed for moments like these, but he’d honestly thought Marc was hazing him or testing his loyalty. He’d also heard the rumors about Kendle. He hadn’t seen a single sign of it until now. “You have to control it.”

Kendle’s hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. “You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then answer the question!”

Tommy began to understand why she’d asked as waves of need pierced his grief to tempt him with the one thing he enjoyed most in the world—pussy.

Kendle caught the thought. “Well, you’re shallow, aren’t ya?”

Tommy frowned. “I like to fuck. You like to eat people.”

“Do you?”

Tommy flushed scarlet, almost unable to believe this was her approach. *Has to be some kind of bad joke.*

Kendle moaned in frustration. She'd never felt heat like this, or such hatred. *I don't know what to do with it!*

Tommy ran through his reservations and found one. "Are we gonna hafta put you down some day over Marc?"

Kendle's heat increased with that name. She controlled herself by a hair. "I have to go." Kendle reached for the handle.

Tommy grabbed her by the other arm and jerked her over the seat. He held her close and tight, flipping the recline switch. She wasn't struggling yet, mostly because of surprise, but Tommy was certain that she would react soon and it might be ugly. He wrapped his legs around hers and waited, heart thumping wildly. If Marc was wrong, this would be bad.

Kendle had frozen. At first in fear, then in anger. When desire flooded, she snapped, lunging against her captor in violent jerks and shifts meant to dislodge him.

Tommy flipped them again so he was on top of her. Fiery heat smothered him in warning. She was about to use her gift. Tommy shifted again, this time to thrust between her legs. He was already hard.

Kendle shuddered in lust, body wracked with chills that sent sweet relief over her burning nerves. "Again!"

Tommy immediately stopped moving. “Now that I’ve got your attention, Ms. Roberts, I’d like to discuss an arrangement.”

Kendle opened her mouth to scream; his words penetrated. “I... What?”

Tommy smiled at her. “I’ll handle your needs. I can ease it for you, like I do for others in camp.”

Kendle struggled to think. “You’re answering my question.”

Tommy grinned at her haze. “Yes. I eat.”

Now Kendle went scarlet, half in embarrassment and half in need. “What do you want from me? I’m doing the best I can!”

“Answer my question.”

Kendle paused to run through it as the rage eased off a notch. “Uh, it was... No! I’ll leave before I hurt him.”

“And Angela?”

“I’ll slit her throat with my fingernails if I can get close enough!” Kendle stared in horror at the admission.

Tommy released her arms and adjusted so they were both more comfortable. When Kendle would have sat up, Tommy placed a hand on her chest.

Kendle arched into his touch.

Tommy gave her a light squeeze that returned both of them to the fiery heat of a moment before.

“Will you service me?” Her eyes faded to miserable blue. “I’ll pay whatever you want.”

Tommy slowly leaned down. “I don’t charge for doing what I love.” He nuzzled her neck softly,

voice deepening to a thick bass that revealed his own desires. “You have a beautiful body. I want to enjoy it.”

Kendle’s expression threatened anger, but Tommy shook his head. “I mean that. I’m gonna love every inch of Kendle Roberts, like I used to dream about when I saw you on TV.”

“You watched me?” She gasped as his hand tightened over her breast.

“Every show.” Tommy popped the buttons on her shirt. “Unhook your bra. I wanna kiss those.”

Kendle hesitated.

Tommy ripped it open, spilling out scarred breasts with misshapen nipples that withered under his intent gaze. “Don’t do that.” Tommy leaned forward to lick, groaning as lust hardened him into one long throb. He unsnapped his jeans. “Do this.”

He placed her hand where he wanted it, no longer concerned with anything except bringing them both as much ecstasy as he could. He unsnapped hers next, sliding her pants down.

Kendle shivered. *What am I doing?*

Tommy felt her tense in the wrong way. “Keep those eyes open! Feel *me!*” Tommy shoved forward to claim her body and her mouth.

Kendle cried out in pain and pleasure. Her body jerked wildly, kept in place by the weight of his now rotating hips. She arched as he mashed them perfectly, sent over the edge.

“That’s it. That’s good!” Tommy was unable to stop and wait like he was used to doing when he

served the camp's women. Kendle's body was an inferno of delicious sensations that was drawing him toward a rapid conclusion in the wrong place.

Respecting the courage that it had taken for him to insist, Kendle spread her legs wider. Luke had liked it when she did that.

Emboldened, Tommy slid an arm under her leg and tossed it over his shoulder, grunting in delight at the unrestricted access.

For an instant, Kendle was flashed to the cave. She felt smothered by his weight, his breath, his leering...but it wasn't Ethan. This was Tommy and even in his lust, he wasn't hurting her. In fact, it seemed as if he was holding back to keep from it. Testing that hypothesis, and her own courage, Kendle placed her other leg on his other shoulder. She was completely open and vulnerable to him. She hadn't been able to do this with Adrian.

"Oh, hell!" Tommy groaned. "Don't... You shouldn't... It's good. I got it."

His hips met hers with exactly the same force as before, despite the vein now popping out on his forehead.

Empathizing with always having to remain in control, Kendle pushed into his mind. Erotic images of her on her show were playing in a constant loop.

"What are you...?"

Kendle flipped the bolt on his control and left.

"Son of a!"

Kendle arched in invitation, body tightening.

Tommy growled, dropping on her heavily, shoving deep. “Damn you!”

He slammed in a few more times and then froze, spilling anger and bitterness about the ending.

Kendle waited for yelling or even violence, braced to take what she deserved for pushing him.

Tommy stayed where he was, trying to reason it out. He didn’t talk.

It made Kendle nervous. She shifted restlessly under him.

Tommy shrugged and began thrusting against her in a slow, steady motion that immediately began giving new life to his body. “Thank you.”

Glad he understood, Kendle smiled.

Tommy gasped at the sensation, at the beauty under her scars and violence. *She’s perfect.*

“Not even close.” Kendle pushed him off and rolled over.

Tommy grabbed her hip and slid in from behind.

Content, Kendle stayed still and let him have his moment. He’d given her relief. The least she could do was return the favor.

Observing the couple from the shadows, Conner also listened mentally. He had to hope she wouldn’t notice, but he needed that information. Kendle and Candy were a lot alike. If he could use that charm on Candy... Conner spun into the darkness, rebuking himself. *I’m not like my dad. I won’t blow my second chance. Candy can have Theo. I don’t need her.*

Conner went into the small farmhouse, where the comradery of his team surrounded him with support and caring. *This is all I've ever wanted. No one can match this feeling. I belong now. I'm happy.*

Inside, that cruel voice would have protested, but the teenager gently shut the cage. *Go to sleep now. I banish you.*

For how long? The demon struggled as he was forced into the small cell.

Conner rested his cheek against the chair. *As long as it takes for you to become good. Until you can do that, I don't need you anymore.*

The barrier to the mental cage slammed shut, blocking off the screams for mercy.

Conner sighed in relief, gesturing to Josh. "Let's play some cards. They're gonna be a while."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Which Way?

1

“**T**his is a bad idea.”

Kendle didn't respond to Scott's nervous comment. The marina was small and dark, and lined by a variety of boats. Many of them looked as though people had tried to live on them after the war.

Tommy didn't see anyone now. “Are we doing this?”

Kendle nodded. “We have two hours of gas left. We have to find something here.”

Conner frowned. “Can we wait for daylight? We're not alone.”

Kendle stilled. “What do you sense?”

“A small group. They're not awake, but they will be if we make any noise. I don't want to scan further and maybe alert anyone that we're here.”

Kendle scanned the boats. “Are they in one of those?”

Conner shrugged. “I'd have to track them. If they're like us, it will wake them up when I do it.”

Kendle was too tired to deal with their kind tonight. “We'll go in on foot, grab what we can and get gone.” Kendle glanced in the mirror at Scott and

the few others who had been chosen to stay with the vehicle and the twins. “You wait an hour and then you go. Get them as close to home as you can.”

Sitting behind the wheel, Scott nodded tensely. The van was long and black, but he couldn’t find much else good about it. The vehicle was loud and guzzled gas. They’d run low long before they’d estimated. “I don’t like this.”

Kendle sighed, zipping her jacket and then her coat. “Me either. Last chance for alternate suggestions.” Fuel was getting harder and harder to come by. In the next few months, horses would probably make a comeback, as would bicycles and jogging.

“Let’s get it done.” Tommy added support to her choice. She was a rookie being mentored and trained on this run, but she’d already earned a bump in rank as far as he was concerned.

Tommy directed Kendle as half of them climbed out of the vehicle. “Stay center of us.”

“I will.” Kendle wished there had been another option. She stayed in the middle of the six men as they walked through the darkness that surrounded the small parking area. The team traveled swiftly down the stairs and across the dock; the eerie sound of water lapping against warped wood mocked their bravery.

Tommy stopped part way down the dock and gestured two men to each side. The five boats right here appeared to be intact. Tommy shined his light

over more of them, not spotting people. He could almost feel them though.

Kendle kept her hip against Tommy's, shining her light in the opposite direction. They tried to watch all the ramps and stairs, but it was clear that they were in danger. The darkness held lethal combatants—not the least of which was Mother Nature. The wind stinging them right now would have their eyes blurring if not for their goggles.

The two Eagles on Kendle's side came straight back to them, gesturing. *Nothing we can use.*

The two men on Tommy's side were now kneeling near the rear of the lightly floating houseboat. Not wanting to be split up, Tommy waited for them even though they were short on time and the temperature was around freezing.

Josh and Ben refused to hurry. They'd been trained to be meticulous on missions or people died. They carefully examined the fuel canisters, surprised that there were three of them sitting out in the open. This boat was loaded with boxes and crates, all strategically located to keep an even balance. There were also suitcases visible through the window. Ryan grimaced. *Guess they didn't get out in time.*

Ben sent Eagle code, glad of the illumination from Tommy's flashlight. *Someone lives here.*

Ryan nodded, hating the guilt. They might be stealing from someone who was in the same dire condition they were.

But why leave it out in the open? Something isn't right about this. Ben sniffed the can and recoiled. It was definitely gasoline.

Ben hefted two of the cans as Ryan grabbed the third and brought up the rear with his gun in hand. This place felt hinky.

Kendle and the others were relieved to see the men carrying fuel. They were also surprised at how quick and easy this had been.

Let's go. Tommy motioned. He listened to the waves and soft bumping of the docked boats. He had goosebumps.

The team hurried across the dock and up the stairs, breaking into a fast trot as their vehicle came into view.

“Damn.”

“You have something of ours!” The tall man in front of their van pointed coldly. “You give it back and we’ll do the same.”

The Eagles immediately spread out into that dangerous V, guns coming up.

“Step away from the vehicle and put your weapons on the ground!” Ben was the center of the V.

The local standing by the driver’s window of their van had his gun against the glass. Two other men stood with their weapons pointed at the rear windows.

“Are we all going to die?” the leader asked calmly. “I offered you a way to save your lives.”

Kendle lowered her gun a little. “We didn’t know anyone was here. We need the fuel. Can we buy it?”

The leader scanned them, picking out their gear, their weapons. “Maybe. Three cans are worth the van.” Clyde and his boys were bundled from boots to ski masks, with only their red, raw facial skin showing. Tall and brunette, they might have been models before the end of the world. Now, they were scavengers like everyone else.

“We have a few rounds of ammo and a little food.” Kendle braced. “We’re from Safe Haven.”

Tommy and the others frowned at her disclosure, but the leader of the four men shook his head. “No one’s heard from them in a month. You’re lying.”

Kendle snorted. “I’m on the Safe Haven council. We will pay for the fuel.”

“How?” Clyde waved a covered hand. “You got nothing we need but that van.”

“Are you leaving?” Tommy had a bad feeling glowing brightly in his gut.

“Everyone is.” Clyde was suddenly exhausted. “Put the fuel down and get out of here.”

Ben and Ryan put the cans on the ground and followed Tommy away from them. As the two groups changed places with leery glances and light steps, all of them were relieved.

Once her people were safe, Kendle spoke with the leader, using the vehicle lights to study him. “Is there anything we can do to buy it?”

Clyde examined the woman, noting her scars and wild hair. He had already recognized her, but being a former TV star wasn't more valuable than being from Safe Haven now. All dynasties fell. It was the law of the land.

Kendle pushed into his thoughts carefully, needing something to bargain with. What she found made her shudder.

"Come on." Tommy put an arm around her shoulders to lead her to the van. "We'll keep searching."

Kendle let him guide her into the van without speaking, still digging into Clyde. She shuddered again.

Tommy only waited until they were all inside. "What is it? I saw your reaction. Tell me."

It reminded her so strongly of Marc that Kendle was shocked to discover tears behind her eyes. She shoved them away. "The Mexicans came through their hometown. These men are barely surviving. We have to keep going."

"So why are you whiter than the moon?" Ramer asked from the seat next to her.

"He saw them, so I could see them." Kendle glanced around at her men. "There were thousands."

"As in plural?"

Kendle nodded shakily at Ben's concern. "If they got into the mountain, Safe Haven might really be gone."

Tommy shut the door. "Get us out of here."

Scott shifted the van into drive, but rolled slowly, searching for fuel. As their driver, he was doubly conscious of how low the fuel line was on the dial in front of him. They were almost out of time.

“Where else?” Scott held an edge while Josh consulted the maps again.

“There’s a strip of businesses along the interstate, but there’s no way they’ll have anything left if thousands of troops went through there.”

Kendle gestured toward the junkyard that was across from the marina. “Think that’s been cleaned out?”

Tommy shrugged, pointing their driver toward it. “We’ll find out.”

“Do you think it belongs to those people we left?” Carl hadn’t liked sitting there waiting for the rest of the team with a gun to the glass by his ear.

“I’d say they’ve scavenged it, but they’re in the middle of leaving.” Kendle hoped she was right. “They were leaving at sunrise. It’s why the gas cans and crates were all in view.”

That answered a few of their questions, but as they rolled into the dark, creepy junkyard, they weren’t comforted. The locals were fleeing, which meant something bad was coming. Thousands of Mexican guerillas would definitely qualify. In a month, they could have looted Safe Haven and be on their journey home. Clyde’s mental timeline had been roughly thirty days ago.

The junkyard had the typical stacks of cars and the crushing machine, but it also boasted signs promising technology that outshined their neighbors. Kendle had no idea what that meant.

“What are we searching for in here?” Scott scanned for trouble. “They drain all the gas tanks before they bring these cars in.”

“Not all of them.” Kendle led the way. “The police don’t have the same rules as the public when they bring in wrecks. There are also operating equipment and employee vehicles.” Kendle was glad to observe no signs of people; this time, it felt that way. They drove around the recycling warehouse that still had shutters and broken doors that smacked their frames as the wind picked up.

“How do you want to handle this?”

Kendle grimaced at Ben’s question. “I almost got us killed over there. Someone else needs to...” Kendle trailed off as the men laughed. “What?”

“We’re Eagles. You saved our lives by negotiating.”

Kendle realized she’d underestimated her team. “We were caught off guard. I didn’t want to lose anyone.”

“We wouldn’t have.” Now that they were free, Tommy had his confidence back. “We’re trained to handle it when things go wrong a lot more than we are for when things go right, but we don’t like killing if we don’t have to. You did great.”

Kendle blushed at his warm tone. “Thanks.” She studied the employee parking lot across from a

crushing machine, using the spotlight on the van. “Keep going. There are scratch marks by the gas flaps on all these cars. They’ve been drained.”

Scott slowly took them around the winding dirt path, picking out tall shapes of smokestacks and another long warehouse.

“Nice!” Tommy grinned as he spotted the sign on the next building. “It’s a small refinery.”

“No way it hasn’t been cleaned out.” Kendle didn’t want them to get their hopes up.

“We can get it going and make our own fuel to get home.”

The team both liked and hated Tommy’s idea. It was safer to make it, but took more time. All of them wanted to be home.

Kendle shrugged. “Or we can take what those dying men have. We’ve lived through an apocalypse. It is survival out here.”

“We’re Eagles.”

Kendle smiled at Ryan’s words. “Yes, you are. Let’s learn how to make fuel and get a good night’s sleep. We’ve earned it.”

2

“I found some manuals.” Kendle came from the rear of the building that stank of awful chemicals even after all these months. “We’ll need to power this place, but I think we have the rest of it.”

The refinery was full of tall, metal tubs and vats, with robot arms and miles of piping and wires. It

reminded Tommy of the cave that Angela had chosen before their people had moved into it.

Knock-knock!

Kendle and the team froze at the light tapping...then drew their weapons.

Tommy moved into a good position behind the door. "Come in."

The door swung open to reveal the four men from the marina.

Before Tommy could order them to get lost, Kendle waved at the mess behind her. "Did you guys do this?"

The leader nodded, not entering. "We tried to make our own."

"No power?"

"Exactly." Clyde looked at her. "We're too short to reach our destination on those three cans."

"So you want to work together to get what you need?"

"Yes." Clyde was relieved no one was shooting yet.

Kendle frowned. "What changed your mind?"

"You said you're from Safe Haven." Clyde didn't meet her eye. "If they lived, we know they're a place we can trade with in the future."

It was a flimsy excuse, but it was clear the men wanted no problems, just fuel.

Kendle shrugged at Tommy's lifted brow. "I got nothing bad from him or his men."

"My sons." Clyde motioned the boys to come in and shut the door. "Lost their mom about six months

ago. Nothing to keep us here now except lack of transportation.”

Kendle and the others understood. If Safe Haven really was gone, they probably wouldn’t stay around that mountain either.

Ben lit the lantern and placed Rita along the wall that had no windows, helping her get settled with the babies and Conner, who was fighting a cold. His runny nose was worrisome to all of them. They only had Tylenol and morphine along.

Ben gave him the Tylenol.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” Conner sounded stuffed up even to himself.

“A few days.” Ben capped the bottle. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and roll out in two.”

Conner put his head down on the bedroll. “If I die, take me to my dad.”

Ben snickered. “You’re not going to die. Sleep for a while. When you get up, we’ll have hot soup.”

Ben joined Kendle and the new people as the rest of the Eagles secured the building and got set to spend the night. “You okay?”

“I’d be better if we could figure out how they powered this place.” Kendle picked up a blueprint.

Ben handed her a rolled up paper from the shelf by her knee. “You’ll want this one.”

Kendle unrolled the paper. She scanned the map key. “Hey! They had solar and wind power. Well, that’s interesting.”

“That makes it easier.”

Kendle was glad something about this trip might be easy. So far, nothing else had. “Good. Okay, well, we’ll get sleep and start working in the morning.”

Clyde didn’t want to wait. “Why not now?”

“Too many lights on without knowing what we’re doing.” Kendle stared pointedly. “I don’t want to be held up by...company.”

Clyde flushed.

Kendle gestured toward the opposite wall. “You guys can have that space. Please honor our hospitality. I don’t want to waste bullets on you.”

Clyde was just glad to be getting a night where he could sleep and not have one eye open while doing it. For some reason, he trusted these new people. “Getting soft.” When he’d been on the run from the law, he would have carjacked anyone, but twenty years of living his life right had changed him into a good person. “Probably gonna get me killed.”

3

“It has to be primed with gas? You’re kidding!”

The shed was built for the equipment it held, boasting shelves and hangers made in odd shapes and sizes. The wooden floor held footprints that were nearly filled with dust.

“We also have to fill up this generator.” Scott pointed to a chunk of hoses and metal in a shiny case. “It runs the windmill and the battery banks.”

Tommy saw the generator was an older model. “This is gonna make a lot of noise when we fire it up. Get some people on duty and I’ll help Ben handle this.”

Kendle moved toward the main building. They’d been thrilled to discover the generator shed right next to the windmill, but that was the extent of their happiness.

“We need two monkeys for guard duty.” Kendle chose the first two hands that went up, then joined Scott at the small desk where he was trying to decipher the chemicals they needed to add to the fuel mix during the refining process. He didn’t look thrilled.

“I have no idea what we’re doing.”

Kendle pointed toward the tank on the end that was one tab full, according to the measuring devices on the front. “I don’t believe we need to know how it works exactly. This all shut down when the power stopped. It was probably in the middle of a batch.”

“You think if we get the power on, it will resume like normal?”

“Yes. I hope we’ll only have to collect the fuel.”

“That would be great.”

“You found the generator shed?” Clyde looked up from the bedroll where he and his sons were still enjoying the warmth. He had woken when she’d come in, but he hadn’t heard her depart.

Kendle didn’t reply. She’d had time to consider things and now she wasn’t sure that making a deal with these locals was a good idea.

Clyde sensed her reluctance to talk and put his head back down. “Let me know when you’re doing it. The noise will bring problems, maybe. We’ll help if it does.”

Kendle opened her mouth to tell him to get ready, but a horrendous squealing filled the air.

Clyde’s lids popped open in dismay. “Now?”

Kendle grinned. “We’re go-getters, Clyde. The sun rose. That’s all we needed.”

Clyde rolled his eyes. “Sounds like Safe Haven shit to me.” He nudged his boys. “Come on, kiddies. The lady says we need to rise and shine.”

Kendle snickered as the boys rose, grumbling about slave drivers. “That was the last town we went through. They didn’t care for earlier risers there either. Must be why we made it out with our gear and our lives.”

Clyde flushed, but didn’t argue. The apocalypse had given everyone the license to sleep in. It just wasn’t wise to do so.

Kendle glanced around at her group. “Get ready for trouble.”

“How long to finish a batch once it’s started?”
Scott skimmed the papers.

“No idea. Might be days.”

“Days?”

“Days?”

Scott and Clyde’s voice merged to form one large whine.

Kendle grimaced. “That’s it! Get up and get to work! I want us gone.” She couldn’t let them get lazy or careless. It would kill them all.

“We need milk for the twins,” Rita called.

Kendle sighed. She’d known that, but hadn’t made plans for it yet. She looked at Clyde with a lifted brow.

Clyde shook his head. “Not in months. Milk products of any kind are high trade items. They go fast.”

Kendle considered her options. She gestured to Josh. “Find me a suburb near here.”

Josh frowned. “You gonna walk?” They were using the last of their fuel to prime the generator.

“Yes. The closer the better.”

Josh poured over the maps, not sure why she wanted a suburb. “We have one about three miles to the east. Condos.”

“That’ll work.” She marched to the corner for her kit. “People relocated to the suburbs to raise a family. There should be formula and diapers in some of those homes. No one ever cleans it all out because no one’s needs are the same when they scavenge.”

Kendle was ready to leave in minutes. She stopped by the shed, where the generator was huffing and puffing in protest of the ten-month pause between shifts. “I’ll be back in about six hours. The twins need milk.”

Tommy shook his head. "I'm coming with you. We never forage alone."

"Can we do that? I wasn't sure about weakening the group here since we're making so much noise now."

Ben supported Tommy. "We don't go out alone. I'll cover things."

Tommy finished filling the generator with the can he was holding, then replaced the cap. "Six hours. Hold down the fort."

Ben snickered. "We'll have supper waiting, Pa."

Kendle and Tommy laughed as they strolled out, aware that none of them were amused. Being split up was dangerous.

"I'll be a minute getting my kit." Tommy jogged into the refinery, aware of Tyler and Josh now in the trees with rifles on their knees.

Kendle waited restlessly, hating this. She wanted to be back in Safe Haven. A team this size couldn't survive for long. Humans had to come together or they would die out.

4

"Why isn't this place looted?"

Kendle and Tommy were kneeling behind the tall, open iron gate of the complex. The homes were dirty, and there was debris on the tiny porches and balconies, but the doors were all fastened and most of the shades were drawn.

“Maybe there are people here. We should try somewhere else.”

“I agree.” Kendle backed away. “There are two more complexes like this near here.”

Tommy and Kendle jogged back toward the main road. They both hated being in the open, but running through yards was just as dangerous and much more time consuming.

“Do you think we’re crazy for passing up an almost sure deal?” Kendle stayed close as they reached the main road and hunkered down behind bushes to scan it.

“No. If they’ve survived as a community, we have no cause to steal from them. Eagles do the right thing.”

“Like with not killing Clyde and his sons for the three cans of gas last night?”

“Yes. We could have, and that might have even gotten us all the way home, but Adrian always told us one bad deed gets repaid with two.”

“Meaning we might have had something else go wrong before we could get there?”

“Exactly. They might also have had family that would have suffered with them being gone, maybe even died. We would have earned the bad karma from that. There are ripples to everything a person does. Eagles are trained to be conscious of that.”

Kendle was glad. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep if they had killed innocent people for any reason, let alone one as petty as cans of gas.

Tommy didn't see anything moving. The main street was lined in neatly planted rows of trees with bars around them and trash cans on either side. The iron light poles still boasted bits of faded tinsel that reminded them the war had come at Christmas time. Stores had been looted and windows were broken, but he assumed that was from the weather. A tree branch impaling the glass window of an appliance rental shop supported that theory. "You good for this?" Tommy hadn't forgotten she'd been injured to secure their freedom.

Kendle nodded, even though her legs and arms were aching. "You know it."

Tommy flashed his approval. "Come on."

Kendle followed him onto the main road, forcing her mind into that place where pain was just pain and not something debilitating. They needed milk. She would get it.

Tommy and Kendle approached the complex cautiously, happy to spot kicked in doors and spray painted graffiti that was so fresh it hadn't faded yet. The two suburbs were nearly identical with their matching brown and white condominiums and soccer vans displaying families of stick figures in the rear windows. Even the mailboxes and sheds were the same cheap, copied design that had taken over real estate offices and middle class lives.

"Much better." Tommy paused to give Kendle time to recover before they went in. Looted areas were the best places to search for odd, non-common items. Tommy doubted they would find canisters of

formula, but powdered milk was something people had used during camping trips and in diet combinations. In the past, the poorer populations had recognized the benefits of powdered products, but the middle classes had been catching on. The rich had also used some powdered items, but they'd been more able to afford to replace perishables. *Doesn't do much good for them now.* "Which one?"

Kendle drew in a breath and concentrated, trying not to be nervous about using her gifts in front of him. She pointed. "That one. There's something in there."

He led the way toward the middle row home. "How can you tell?"

"It's a signature in my mind. Like a heat source, but it's yellow."

Tommy shrugged, not understanding. "Okay. I'm first in. You watch my six."

Kendle kept her gun ready, but she didn't think they would need it. She'd scanned the entire street of homes. No one was here. Kendle wished she'd taken the time to do it last night and even as far back as right before Market Town. She'd been afraid to alienate the men on the mission team by trying to act like Angela or Jennifer. *That backfired. Acting like them is exactly what I should have been doing.*

Kendle went into full alert as she followed her partner into the condominium.

Tommy swept the tiled kitchen and hallway that were coated in filthy dishes and trash. It looked as

if it had been used for a flophouse. “Do you know which floor?”

“Low.” Kendle flipped on her light when he did. She pointed hers toward the ground so she didn’t blind him with glare from the mirrors and pictures they were passing. *Nice art collection.* She recognized some of the expensive knockoffs. She’d loved to visit museums on her downtime.

“Stairs here.” Tommy waved his light. “And a door at the bottom.”

“Why isn’t it kicked in?”

“We’ll find out.” He went down. “Stay there.”

Kendle waited as he examined the barrier.

“Looks like they tried to kick it in. Lot of scuff marks.” Tommy bumped it lightly with his shoulder and groaned. “Oh, yeah. That’s reinforced.”

“So there are probably bodies in there?”

“Yeah, that’s been the case whenever we’ve found one of these rooms. They locked themselves in to wait out the first couple weeks of chaos, but they did too good of a job on the seals and ran out of air.” Tommy tried to be quiet as he pulled the crowbar from his kit and got to work; the noises echoed loudly.

Tommy grunted in effort, prying with his legs... The door popped open, squeaking.

He peered in, gun changing places with the other tool. “Wow.”

Kendle braced. “Bodies?”

“Yeah, but it’s not as bad as some of them.”

“Then why the...” Kendle paused in the narrow doorway. “Is that cheese?”

“And it only has mold on the edges!” Tommy scanned the table. “There’s also wine.”

The wine room was small and rectangle, with two chairs and a serving tray between them. On the tray was a football sized block of cheese and a few empty cracker packs. The two wine glasses still held drops of the potent alcohol in the bottoms.

Kendle scanned the small space and found a short shelf that still had several bottles in the rack. She also spotted two bodies on the narrow couch and faded red sprays on the wall. “They didn’t run out of air.”

“No.” Tommy sighed. “They ran out of hope. Get those guns. We always resupply ourselves from the dead. It’s crazy not to. They don’t need it anymore.”

Kendle swallowed her revulsion to take the weapons lying in the laps of the skeletons that were too runny for her liking. She understood the cool conditions of the basement had preserved them, but it made her eager to go.

Tommy and Kendle filled their bags with wine and cheese, along with two of the corkscrews and a roll of summer sausage they found stuffed in the tiny cup cabinet on the wall. For a scavenging trip, the haul was great, but for what they needed, it wasn’t enough.

“Let’s check the shed.” Kendle slid her kit to the porch as they left the building. Despite the chill and the wind, she was glad to be outside.

Tommy popped the lock and opened the shed. It was neatly lined with all the equipment ground workers would have needed to care for the property. “Lawnmower...chainsaw...gas can!”

Thrilled over the find, he grabbed the can to verify it contained fuel.

“We’re good.” Tommy replaced the cap. “About half of what we need.”

“You want to drain these or search for more cans?” Kendle pointed toward the lawnmower and the chainsaw.

Tommy considered. “Let’s check other sheds. If we don’t find anything bigger, we’ll do the smaller tanks.”

It took them another hour to hunt up and drain enough gas to get them back to Safe Haven. The sun was high in the cloudy sky when Kendle pointed at the next street. “I see another yellow signature.”

Tommy led her across the yard of a farmhouse and into the parking lot of a small shopping strip. A daycare center was nestled in the rear corner.

“It’s been looted.”

“But these cars haven’t been.” She went to a red Toyota with shattered windows. “Let’s get these trunks open. Look for diaper bags.”

The cars in the parking lot were mostly minivans and wagons, all complete with dice and air

fresheners hanging from dusty mirrors. None of them were easy to open. Tommy had to resort to cracking the locks with a screwdriver.

“Yes!” Kendle grabbed the pink diaper bag, digging into it eagerly. “We have two cans of formula! Expires...in another year! We’re good!”

Kendle and Tommy quickly loaded up a few other items from the trunks. It would take them all of their remaining hour to reach the refinery and maybe a little more. Neither of them wanted to worry their teammates. Being apart was stressful enough. Being late was cruel.

5

“Do you hear that?”

Tommy nodded. It sounded like something with big machines was running. The echo was coming to them loud and clear.

“Sounds like they got it going.”

“That would be good for both groups.” Kendle tried to think good thoughts. “We can all go our separate ways with full tanks.”

“Will they?”

Kendle sighed. “I didn’t get anything bad, but in this world, that’s a hard question to answer.”

Tommy got his gun out again, fingers raw from having so much time off and then being at it again. “Go around the side. Let’s make sure we haven’t had any more company.”

Kendle hurried to the edge of the wide building as Tommy rushed toward the front. He didn't see the guards in the trees as he made it around the front, increasing the tension. "Hello inside!"

The lack of voices or greetings sent chills over Tommy. Following his instinct, he dove to the ground just as the bullets began to fly through the windows and door.

Slugs pinged off the wood and concrete as he crawled toward the ditch that ran along the road. Tommy flung himself down the small hill, relieved when he didn't sense pain from any injuries.

The gunfire didn't stop.

Tommy realized Kendle was being shot at now. He popped up in time to witness her jumping through the window.

Tommy sighed in admiration. *Damn, I like her.* He gained his feet and ran into the front entrance while everyone inside was hopefully distracted by her gutsy move.

Bang! Bang! Kendle drove the three women back. She didn't know who they were and she didn't care. She was tired of people holding her team hostage, threatening them. She wasn't negotiating this time.

Kendle angrily fired again, bullet smacking into the short female with the AK. The body hit a nearby shelf, midsection blooming red.

Tommy fired at the braided woman with the machete who lunged at Kendle, shooting her in the

shoulder. Shouting, she stumbled into Kendle, knocking them both to the ground.

Tommy wanted to make sure Kendle would be okay in the immediate struggle that ensued for the machete, but an older copy of the short woman jumped onto his back and slid her knife into his cheek.

“Ahhh!” Tommy slammed himself backwards into the desk and then the wall, dislodging his attacker. He spun around and punched her in the face as she lunged forward with the bloody butcher knife.

Knocked out, she dropped heavily onto the floor.

Tommy turned around to help Kendle.

Kendle swung the machete repeatedly, methodically hacking off limbs at the joints. Gore splattered across the window.

I think I'll wait 'til she feels like she's done. Tommy scanned the rest of the building that he could see, not finding their team. The gear was where they'd left it, and the refinery around them was loud with noise and movement from the big machines that could be hiding anyone still lurking. Tommy reloaded his gun and looked at Kendle, hoping she was ready.

Tommy's actions snapped Kendle into awareness. She dropped the bloody weapon, wiping an arm across her face so she could see through the blood.

Tommy waved her toward the rear, hoping she obeyed and didn't flip out on him.

Kendle forced herself to step over the mess to take the far aisle.

Tommy let out a breath and covered the opposite side.

Kendle spotted two big women standing in front of their bound men and Rita. She didn't see the twins at all.

We're under the carpet, a voice stated clearly in her mind. *They wanted us.*

How do they know about you? Kendle was only a little surprised that the kids were able to communicate this way at so young an age.

Market Town sent them.

I should have known. Kendle risked a quick peep around the corner to verify that Tommy was in place. She saw his fingers waving three...two...one...

Kendle stood up and strode forward, following their training for a situation like this one. Tommy was the top gunslinger in Safe Haven after their leaders. That made her the decoy. "Hey! I want my team. You have no idea what I've already done to keep them."

The women turned toward her, but didn't fire. They'd clearly been waiting for her to come.

"We got the men we wanted. We need the babies now and we'll go." The redhead who was the most wrinkled lifted a worn AK. "Where are they?"

Furious, Kendle didn't stop coming.

When the woman took aim on her, Kendle darted to the right; Tommy fired.

Kendle also fired, aiming for the remaining threat. She got the other female in the leg and fired again, double tapping. This time she hit the woman's chest. The gun dropped from her grip as she fell forward.

"Clear?"

"Clear."

"Is everyone okay?"

As Kendle and Tommy untied their people and then retrieved the babies, they scanned the mess and the running machinery.

"Where are Clyde and his sons?"

"They took off out the back when they saw the women coming in." Rita spat scornfully. "Didn't even warn us! We found out there was a problem when the front door opened."

Kendle knelt down by the chest-shot female who was gasping, and close to death. "Why did you attack us?"

"Slaves...babies."

"Did Dirce send you?"

"Our turn came...to serve the town."

Kendle considered healing the local, then decided not to. These big women with their jumpers and Carhartt coats were okay with slavery. They'd had their second chance after the war and blown it.

"Rice is...dead," the woman gasped out. "Dirce will come. Jerry told him...everything."

"Who is Jerry?" Tommy untied Carl.

“Jerry is Rice’s father-n-law.” Conner sucked in more air to talk with. “We were in the collateral room with him.”

Kendle shrugged. “I guess he didn’t like Rice sending his grandkids off with strangers. Too late to fix that now. He’ll have to come to Safe Haven if he really wants them.” Kendle looked around, dread forming a hard ball in the pit of her stomach. “Where are Tyler and Josh?”

Ryan didn’t meet her eye. “We haven’t seen them. There was a lot of gunfire when the gang first came in. We got separated in these aisles and ran out of ammunition.”

Kendle followed the others out to search for their missing men as a sense of failure settled onto her tired shoulders. *I got them killed. I don’t want to play this game anymore.*

6

Kendle glanced in the mirror, inspecting her team. Rita and the babies were out of her view in the rear of the van, hidden among various boxes and bags, but all of the team was in sight.

Those who survived. She saw it reflected in Tommy’s expression as they drove by the two crosses. They hadn’t been here when their men needed them. No one would forget this moment, this feeling of failure.

Kendle noted the injuries, the filthy, torn clothes, the hollow eyes and the cuts, the scrapes and bruises. This had been a rough trip.

“Everyone ready?” Kendle pulled out of the driveway of the refinery. They had a full tank and five extra cans from two days of struggling to figure out how it all worked. They could have had more, but this was enough to get them home and that had been the goal. “All set?”

“Yes.” Ben stared at the crosses in the mirror. “We can’t take any more of the wastelands right now. We want to go home.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Close

October 22nd

1

“**O**h, my God!”

Kendle and her team stood on the snowy ledge, using binoculars to view the mountain. They hadn’t been able to see anything in the darkness when they’d arrived. Forced to wait for dawn, the view was uglier than they’d imagined. The vultures circled and cried, fighting for scraps even though the field of bodies stretched for miles across the valley.

“Some of them are Mexican.” Tommy pointed through the late afternoon sunlight. “There are flags and vehicles.”

“Anything moving out there?” Ben was following their training to the letter. He was above Tommy in skills like this, so he was guiding him through the process. When it came to anything weapon related, those positions were reversed.

“Flies.” Tents flapped in the wind, sounding hollow, empty in the winter wind, and under that, was a low hum of insects. Kendle controlled her guts. Even this far up, the smell was enough to

choke her. Hundreds of bodies in various stages of decomposition littered the valley at the bottom of the mountain.

“What about corridors and roads?” Ben didn’t want to study it anymore. He’d been on duty when the sun rose. He’d stared at it for an hour before waking the others.

“They blew the tunnels or had cave-ins...” Tommy lifted the binoculars. “All the roads are gone!”

“Avalanche, I’d guess.” Ben sighed. “We have no clear route up or in?”

“There’s quake damage on the ground.” Tommy examined and relayed details. “A lot of it. Most of the tents are down and there are piles of rocks at the base... Wow. There are rocks everywhere. What do you suppose they planned to do with those?”

“There are also drifts in places between the destroyed tents.” Ben continued teaching even though he didn’t want to discuss it any more than he wanted to walk through it. “The sun melted some of it. They didn’t gather the rocks. The rocks were...deposited.”

“Holy shit!” Ramer was scowling. “That must have been some avalanche to deposit so much rock.”

“We felt the tremor the night before we left the refinery.” Ben put his gloves in his pocket. “It hit harder here.”

Tommy handed the binoculars to Kendle, unable to endure more of the scene. “I vote we do some testing first.”

“What makes you say that?” She studied the place where the entrance was supposed to be. The map Angela had provided was specific about where to be when they returned.

“The birds haven’t gotten to all the bodies.” Tommy’s mutter hid his need to gag. “Check out the skin.”

It took Kendle several minutes to locate a body that hadn’t been pecked or chewed on. When she did, stomach boiling, she noted the sores on the woman’s hands and arms. “That’s what we had on the boat! That’s the sickness I had!”

“We have a counter in our gear.” Ryan remembered hoping they didn’t have to use it while on this run. He’d never thought it was for their return to Safe Haven.

Tommy gestured. “Let’s get back inside until we know what the levels are out here.”

The team followed him into the cave, trying not to dwell on what this felt like, but the sense of being in a graveyard was too obvious to miss.

2

“What happens if we get there and Safe Haven is gone? Chances are good they didn’t survive the earthquake. We haven’t heard a single response out of them.”

Dirce glanced up with an expression of arrogant contempt, pinning Jarvis in place. “Just because I haven’t recorded descendant vibrations, doesn’t mean I haven’t picked any up. You would do well to follow orders and leave the thinking to those who know how to do it.”

Jarvis’s lips disappeared into his face. He spun around and tossed himself into the copilot’s chair.

Satisfied he’d put the man into his place, Dirce decided it would be a good idea to let the man in a little. “Descendants are able to open private lines. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of practice, but there are confirmed instances of the Safe Haven group being able to communicate without being registered. The only way to track the calls is when they connect through someone’s dreams. That’s how I knew where the Black Widow was going. That’s how I know someone in that mountain survived.”

Jarvis pulled up the map of the mountain they were using, trying to ignore his bodily needs. Dirce had pushed them hard to get here, refusing to stop for things like meals and bathroom breaks. As a result, everyone was uncomfortable and grumpy. However, the explanation calmed Jarvis a bit. It had angered him that Dirce had been sleeping so much with such a large battle ahead of them, but he understood the descendant had been doing recon. It was often hard to tell what Dirce was doing until it was done. “Why are you here? What’s your motivation for being thousands of miles away from

home, risking your life for people who are probably dead?”

Surprised at the questions, Dirce turned away from the monitors to regard his newest second-in-command. “The human race is supposed to conquer. Where else should I be?”

Jarvis wasn’t certain how to respond to that, so he went with honesty. “Assholes like you have destroyed the world.”

Instead of being angry, Dirce chuckled. “You have no idea.”

Jarvis hated sitting still. Their convoy was rolling into position now, but with two thousand troops in position, it would be another day and a half before they were ready to begin the battle.

Jarvis had a sudden sense that he shouldn’t be here for the battle. *Maybe I won’t be.*

Dirce caught the thought, but he wasn’t worried about being betrayed. Jarvis was the type to find something else to do during the main battle that would ensure his own survival. Dirce respected that.

3

“High.” Tommy held up the counter so everyone could view the reading. “But not enough to kill them all like that unless they’ve been here a long time.”

“Does that mean the levels are dropping?” Kendle was stirring a pot of oatmeal that no one had the stomach to eat. This cave was short and wide,

with stone ledges that appeared to have been cut into shelves, but there hadn't been signs of inhabitants. Kendle had approved it after a sweep. They'd parked a mile away and hiked in through the darkness, something she never wanted to do again.

"Maybe." Ben marked the numbers in his notebook. "I vote we wait until it's at a safe level before we try to locate a way in."

"Are we going to?" Ramer's expression was grim.

"What do you mean?" Scott clenched a fist, glaring. "'Cause if you mean we don't go in at all and bugout instead, I'll punch you in your mouth!"

Ramer didn't answer, but all of them felt his reluctance. No one wanted to spend a week digging into a rotting tomb.

Tommy lifted a brow at Kendle.

She sighed. "We'll wait. How long are we set for?"

"A week." Ryan paused. "More if we ration."

"We'll scavenge as soon as the levels are down."

No one answered Tommy's comment, all thinking of what that would be like. The bodies would have food and gear they could collect while trying not to get sick from any of the various health concerns in that valley.

Kendle glanced around, sensing their need, their grim outlook for the future. *What would Angela do here?* Kendle dug through her memories.

Well, she's always been a bitch to me when I was at my lowest and I'm still alive. Kendle stood up. "You're Eagles. Act like it."

Kendle marched away before any of them could pick out her doubts about their future. They would discover it together over the next few days or weeks. Until then, she would try to have faith that such a cruel leader was strong enough to keep her camp alive even under these impossible conditions. *Don't let me down, Angie. I'm almost out of tricks to keep my team alive.*

4

"There are refugees alive down there. They were under tarps!"

Scott's call brought Kendle's team to the entrance where they took turns looking through the peephole. On the ledges around Safe Haven's blocked passages, refugees were coming out to forage while the late afternoon sun was out. It was clear that most of the few hundred scattered people were too ill to make it out of the valley.

Kendle's stomach dropped. "They aren't doing well. We should wait."

"It's been three days." Carl glared from his bedroll. "The levels are almost twice as low as yesterday. The counter manual even says we can stand limited exposure at these rates."

Kendle studied the tired, sad faces that had endured the last trio of sunrises with her. “We’ll vote.”

There were enough relieved nods that Kendle knew which way it would go. “I say we find out. Half of us.”

“Agreed.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

The vote was close enough that Kendle worried about it causing a fight. She’d already gotten two of them killed. She didn’t want to add to that total.

Tommy gave her a questioning glance.

Kendle straighten her shoulders. “Those who voted yes will leave at dawn. The rest will stay here until the levels are lower or until they decide to find another shelter.” Kendle looked at the twins in Rita’s lap. “You’ll care for them?”

“I’ll get them a good home before I die.” Rita wheezed and then coughed. She still had the cold.

Kendle gestured at the rear of the cave, where they had tarps that kept them warm most of the time. Today’s temperatures had been good enough that they’d all enjoyed having the flap over the cave open for half an hour. “Get some more sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

Kendle edged closer to Tommy's heat without waking him, unable to sleep longer. The dread was thick in her gut. She had little faith the inside of that mountain would be any different than the outside.

Sighing, Kendle gave up the fight and rose. She tiptoed through the mass of bodies that kept the cave warm enough to sweat some nights, and took up a place near the flap. She pried open the hole they'd cut and taped for viewing, hoping to view some tiny flicker in the darkness to convince her it was worth the risk. Climbing that mountain would be dangerous, but they also had to locate a way in. She didn't believe they could do either with the gear they had.

Kendle peered through the hole. "There's a light."

Kendle's whisper came through as a distorted muffle of sleepy haze.

"Did she say there's a light?"

"She saw something?"

Eagles flew from warm spots, tugging on jackets and boots.

Kendle stepped aside for Tommy to view, praying that she really had observed a light, though she knew that she had.

"Top of the peak, to the right." Tommy spun away from the flap. "Someone's alive in there!"

Scott held up a hand. "Listen!"

Low rumbling echoed, causing everyone to tense.

“Quake?” Carl glanced around as the vibrations continued.

“No.” Kendle had felt plenty of earthquakes while growing up. “The rocks are sliding.”

Men started to exit the cave, but Tommy blocked the exit. “Coats!”

The team hurried to get into their gear.

Choosing to stay in this time and observe from here, Ramer kept them informed. “The light’s getting brighter... More rocks are shifting... There’s a hole!”

The team went out, sharing the night vision monoculars they had.

“It’s them! They’re digging out!” Tommy handed Kendle his monocular. “They survived!”

“All of them?”

Her toneless question brought the happiness to a halt as they took turns observing the yellow digger clawing through the mountain. As each scoop of earth was brutally plowed aside, the mood grew thicker. They’d had deaths. It was logical that Safe Haven would have suffered the same.

The sky lightened as the machinery rumbled, engines ringing across the valley that separated them. The dirt slid faster as two diggers cleared, widening the exit.

The dozers shut off suddenly, leaving an ugly silence. Lights behind the hole became brighter... Four shadows appeared.

Ramer squinted. “Who is that?”

Ben struggled to get a better view. "I can't tell with those spotlights glaring, but refugees are climbing up there."

"That's half of the council." Kendle was able to feel them.

"Which half?" Conner was trying to read them.

"Stop." Kendle waved at Conner. "We don't know if they're on alert or not. They might not know we're here."

Conner stopped. He hadn't thought of that, but she was right. Most descendants couldn't read through the stone or ground, so they might know someone was out here, but not who it was and think it was a threat.

"Switch on a radio." Tommy gestured. "Hurry. I think we're being signaled."

Kendle frowned. "Can you tell who it is yet?"

"No. They're staying behind the lights. Too much glare for features."

"Male or female?"

"Both. Two of each."

"Could be anyone." She knelt down in the flap, cold.

Ryan switched on his radio so they could listen. As soon as he turned it to their common channel, they heard the clicking.

"That's our code." Ben waved. "Get a paper."

It took the team a few minutes to translate the code coming over the radio. It repeated three times before going silent.

Scott, who had gotten the last of it on the final transmission, blew out a sigh of relief. He grinned sheepishly at Tommy. “I’ve gotten rusty.”

Tommy chuckled. “Yeah, we all have. Get that decoded so we can send an answer. They’ll expect it fast if they’re trying to verify who we are.”

Scott and Ben got on it together as they’d done many times on runs.

Ben hated to deliver the message. “It says stay here. Not safe.”

Kendle scowled. “That’s it?”

Scott shrugged, also disappointed. “Just to be quiet.”

Kendle grunted as the men around her groaned. “I guess we’re waiting again.”

Tommy motioned people in and re-secured the flap. It was getting cold anyway.

“We just got orders in Eagle code.” Ben brought it up as Tommy had the same thought. “I believe we’re the surprise force the bad guys aren’t expecting.”

“Wouldn’t the bad guys have seen us arrive?” Ramer was worried.

“Not if they aren’t here yet.” Tommy was considering all sides.

Kendle scanned her team. They weren’t going to be much of a powerhouse like they were now. Low on food and ammo, out of fuel and missing two men, they were barely surviving themselves. “She must be desperate if we’re the heroes. And if Angela’s desperate, magic is needed.” She looked

at Conner, who was recovering from his cold. "If we stuff you with energy, can you fight?"

"I'll fight anyway!" The boy was furious. "That's my dad in there!" *And Candy.*

Kendle swept the Eagles who weren't tensing like she'd expected. "Can you guys help us get ready to do this?"

Tommy nodded. "We've been waiting for you to ask or let us know you needed it."

"I didn't so far, but I don't know what we're facing here."

"We don't mind." Ben smiled. "Angela sent us cookies after we helped her this way."

Kendle laughed. "I have a jar of peanut butter stashed in the mountain. Adrian has it."

Ryan brightened. "First one to reach Adrian gets to have the burnt ones!"

"No, I want those." Tommy rose to Ryan's challenge. "Li always saves them for me."

"So that's where the crusts keep going!" Scott's comment brought fresh laughter.

Kendle joined in their amusement, but her boiling stomach and sweaty spine warned of danger. She had no idea what it was, but the sensation was so ugly that she shivered. Death was coming.

"You okay?" Tommy took her hand to give her his energy.

"No." Kendle frowned. "Don't make any noise. We're not alone."

The team hurried to peek through the flap.

Tommy leaned down. "Take what you need."

Kendle drew hard and fast, heart thumping. The wave of darkness sweeping over her heart was cold and hot at the same time. Her eyes shut as the barrier to the future swung open.

“Hey, are—”

“Don’t.” Ben stopped Ramer from touching her. “She’s busy.”

Ramer realized she was using her gift to search and retreated, observing in fascination. They hadn’t viewed signs of her power or Conner’s on this trip.

Kendle released Tommy, standing. “Hang on.” She went to her smaller kit, the one she used the least. In the bottom, she found the book she’d been reading before they’d been carjacked. She flashed the title at them. “Angela sent this with me.”

Tommy began chuckling, as did Ben.

Ramer joined them. “What?”

“She sent the equipment with us.” Tommy pointed to where their heavier gear was stacked. “There are five rappelling kits in there and a lot of rope.”

Kendle breathed a sigh of relief and then tensed again. “Get the lights out. Something’s coming.”

“Lights went out over there too.” Ben was observing from the flap.

“What’s going on?” Rita was burping one baby while the other slept near her leg.

“Shh...” Kendle concentrated, trying to make them all dim.

Conner, realizing what she was doing, added his power to hers. A brief blue glow went over the cave and then everything went dark.

“Shh... Easy.” Kendle soothed her team. “That’s just us. Be still.”

The team waited in stiff silence in the chilly cave.

Kendle heard it first.

Conner tensed a second later. “What is it?”

“Trucks.” Kendle paled. “A lot of trucks...”

The UN rolled into the valley in full force, crushing the dead under their wheels as they forged their own road through the refugee camps. The convoy was so long the end kept rolling long after Dirce ordered his vehicle to halt. The trucks and tanks rolled through streets and yards without consideration for what stood in their way; the UN logo flashed a warning of who they were.

The front vehicle stopped at the bottom of the hill, where the gaping hole in the mountain was obvious.

“We’re screwed.”

Kendle ignored Carl’s comment as they watched the convoy continue to enter the valley, large wheels crushing bones and ice. The bodies didn’t make them stop or even pause. She tried to count the troops, but couldn’t. Carl was right. They were screwed.

Kendle winced as a bullhorn began to echo through the darkness.

“Come out with your hands up. We have you surrounded!”

Why does that sound like a cheesy line from an old movie? Kendle listened for a response.

“I repeat, come out with your hands up. You are all being detained.”

“Detained?” Kendle’s brow puckered. “Detained?”

“Dirce.” Rita breathed in a lung of raspy air, clutching the babies. “He’s here.”

Kendle grunted in acceptance of what had to happen next. She released the dim mode for a brief instant so she could see where everyone was. “If anyone moves, they might die. Please don’t even breathe if you can help it.” Before anyone could ask questions, she blanketed them in darkness again. “Dirce has been here for days. He saw us come out. I think that’s why he’s rolling in now.”

Tommy went on full alert. “He sent troops up here?”

Kendle set the book near her feet, wishing she’d been able to use the information in it, but this was going to happen faster than Angela had anticipated.

“What should I do?” Conner joined her. He could see everyone’s heat signature like his dad had once said he would be able to do.

“When I start firing, you do the same and don’t stop until they’re dead.”

“I don’t have any mags.”

“We’ll be using magic, Conner. We have to kill these roaches, right now, before Safe Haven

surrenders to save us. Dirce is telling Angela he'll blow up this cave."

"Can he reach here?" Ramer was scared. This cave was a death trap if one of the tanks fired on them.

"I think so." Tommy had to force himself not to try to see through the shroud of darkness that Kendle had cast over them. "What should we do?"

"Just don't move." Kendle was gathering energy to handle whatever was coming. "You'll be able to see again, but if you get out of place, you'll screw me up."

"We won't." Tommy was used to working like this with Angela. He was also too drained to get upset. He couldn't wait to sleep without so much stress on his mind and heart.

Kendle and Conner went to the flap, zipping jackets. As they stepped from the cave, the lights came on for everyone. They stayed frozen, listening intently...

"Get in there!"

Kendle was shoved into the cave by three tall peacekeepers in black and tan uniforms. They had weapons the team would have recognized from the market if the lanterns had been lit.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she was shoved. "Stop! Be still!"

"Get the kids." Jarvis was in charge, but the climb up here had worn him out. He wasn't used to this much hunting for their prey. He'd hoped to attack this small team during the chaos, but the

woman descendant had come out and spotted them getting into position, forcing him to act now. “If you use magic on us, we’ll kill those babies.”

“No need.” Kendle snatched the knife from her boot and threw it at the soldier who was leaning down to pick up the baby.

He staggered, falling on top of the bundle.

The babies began to cry.

Rita flew toward the kids.

“No!”

“Don’t move!”

Rita grunted heavily, also falling on top of the kids as Kendle’s second knife sank into her chest.

Kendle threw again; her last blade stuck in Jarvis’s throat.

She and Tommy grabbed the third soldier as he tried to draw his gun. Climbing up a mountain was a serious disadvantage. He’d needed both hands free and hadn’t bothered to draw until now.

Kendle swung them toward the flap, not giving Tommy a chance to protest as she shoved them through the flap and heaved the struggling soldier toward the edge.

Tommy helped her.

Together, they pushed him off.

The man’s screams echoed down to Dirce, who glanced up in resignation. “Figures. Never send boys to do a man’s job.”

Dirce climbed the ladder of his tank and popped the hatch. “Line it up. Blow the Black Widow out of there.”

“What about my grandbabies?!” Jerry and Dirce had been commanded to collect them.

Dirce paused. “Fine. Aim at the other side. Blow her friends and family out of the mountain.”

Jerry grinned as he told the tank driver. He loved watching stuff explode. It didn’t matter what it was.

“They’re firing on Safe Haven!” Tommy lifted his rifle. “We have to stop them!”

It was too late. The tank fired, blasting directly into the gaping hole.

The mountain thundered, shaking, sliding, and exploding.

The team watched in horror as a chunk of the mountain slid down to bury the new exit. A huge dust wave coated the scene, hiding it from view.

Dirce was pelted with rocks and debris he didn’t flinch from the way his men did. He took the bullhorn his new man held out. “This is the UN. We are here to liberate your children and reeducate your population. Surrender or we will fire again.”

Kendle’s team listened to the demands in horror and anger. It was unbelievable that this was happening.

“We will not spare you if you resist!” The bullhorn blared with Dirce’s heavy accent. “Come out now, if you can.”

“Here we go.” Kendle knelt by Rita’s body, shoving away the guilt. “We should stay in, maybe behind that ledge.”

Kendle and Carl retrieved the startled children; everyone crammed into the rear of the cave, hoping it was out of range.

“Are we still supposed to be the heroes?” Conner was confused.

“I don’t believe that’s the plan now.” Kendle admitted her failure. “I screwed it up by letting Dirce know we were here. She had to switch.”

“She?” Ben frowned. “You mean Angela?”

“Of course.” Kendle handed the baby boy to Carl. “She picked our gear. She knew we’d be trapped here and need the book on rappelling so we could get down.”

Ryan waved. “But we have the path we came over to get here.”

“I’m not sure we will after this is all over.” Kendle began gathering energy again. “I think the shooting has just begun.”

“So what do we do now?” Ben was pissed. “Sit here and get shot at?”

“I couldn’t view beyond this point.” Kendle’s voice revealed her frustration. “I say we stick with our previous orders to stay here and be ready.”

“If Safe Haven knew this was coming, they weren’t near the entrance when he fired. Dirce can

shoot all he wants.” Ryan gestured again. “He won’t reach them.”

“He *can* reach us.” Ramer was the twitchiest member of their team. “Maybe we should bugout while we can.”

The radio that had gone silent clicked a few times and then went dead again.

Kendle exchanged glances with the team. “That means an hour, right?”

“Yes.” Tommy had translated it. “Be ready in one hour.”

Carl scowled. “Ready for what?”

Kendle sank down to rest, leaning against the cold wall. “The conclusion, of course. One hour from now, all hell will break loose. That’s when we’ll find out who lived and who didn’t.”

Scott took the spot by Kendle. “Will *we* survive the fight?”

She shrugged, leaning against his heat. “As usual, that has not been revealed.”

The End of Book 7

What would you like to do now?



[The next book in this series](#)

[Deleted Scenes](#)

[Audio](#)

[Print](#)

[Note from author](#)

[Book 8 Sample](#)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#)

Would you like to be notified when I have a new release? [Take this link to my website](#) to pick the option that works best for you! No email address required.

Deleted Scenes

“Let me speak to the witch.”

Adrian’s demand surprised them both.

Angela shrugged. The witch had plenty of heat for him.

Adrian braced. “Will you go away, so we can talk in private?”

“Yes.” Angela didn’t blink, making him wonder if she’d been expecting it.

“No. But there’s nothing she can do either. I’m being punished. It’s what I deserve.”

“Chauncey’s wrong!” Adrian tried anger. “Why are you letting him trick you?”

Angela didn’t respond. She curled into a ball in the witch’s dank cell as the mental barrier closed.

Adrian stared at the crimson orbs now glowering resentfully, not sure where to begin. He couldn’t care less about her whining or her accusations. He needed information.

The witch knew he wanted to help her host, but the rage at his betrayal was too great to ignore. She forced herself to settle for glaring. It was the best she could do.

“I can’t give her what she asked for.” Adrian chose to be quick and blunt. “Marc will never agree to try.”

“He might now.” The witch pouted. “If you asked him the right way.”

“He’ll say it’s too dangerous for her. He won’t do it.”

“But you will, right?” the demon accused hatefully.

“To bring her around? You bet your tight, sexy ass.”

“That won’t work on me!” The witch sent out a fire blast.

Adrian caught it and tossed it back. Angela couldn’t spare the energy. “Yes, it will and that’s why you’re pissed. You still want me.”

The witch lunged forward, putting her demon face inches from his. “Slam you!”

Adrian kissed her, but not in the fiery passion that they’d shared before. He placed a loving kiss on her scaly lips. “I am sorry.”

The witch jerked as if stung, returning to her place in Angela’s mind. “Bastard.”

“Always.” Adrian waited for a moment, and then asked the question that mattered most. “Is the doctor right? Will it kill her to have another baby?”

“With the right care, miracles are possible.” The witch peered through the foggy barrier to the future. She studied the carvings and elemental formations that spiraled toward Angela’s demise. All souls had the same curve at the end that was supposed to slingshot them into a repetition of their previous lives. When the person finally achieved their goals, the curve straightened out, supposedly, leading them home to the Maker. The witch had never witnessed that phenomenon.

“What do you mean by the right care?”

“Get her and the camp out of here. These mountains are cursed.”

“Because of the refugees she eliminated or the radiation clouds that are coming?”

“Because this is a flow point for evil.” The witch tried to explain it in a way he could understand. “Your jet...swim? It carries more than rain. All the negative feelings it picks up are deposited here. Bet you didn’t know that when you picked this rocky burial ground.”

“No, I didn’t. Before, I thought the mountains would be good for us.”

“And when you realized the number of catastrophes that would converge here?”

Adrian sighed heavily. “I decided it was perfect. It would force the camp to understand we have to leave our homeland.”

“You made that choice without knowing how awful it would be.”

“Yes...but I wouldn’t change that choice, even if I could. We have to go.”

“You’ve been on that trip since it all happened because you saw something else. What did you witness that convinced you to sacrifice your children?”

Adrian winced, but didn’t deny it. He studied the beautiful face with the demon’s fire lighting it. “It’s not what I saw. It’s what I know. Biological agents were released during the war. I hoped being

in the stone would protect us, but it took too long to get here. *I* took too long.”

“Agents?”

“It was important that the population wasn’t smart enough to immediately rebuild. If the survivors were busy fighting everyone they came into contact with, rebuilding efforts would fall apart. In case that wasn’t enough, biological warfare was chosen to infect massive numbers. Remember all the medical commercials with effects that included dementia, suicide, or violence? That data came from clinical testing of chemicals on unsuspecting populations—many times as a new medication. The tiny things they cure are actually the side effects of the weapon.”

“You were part of this?”

“I reached my limit during the Gulf War, when we were sent in to test things on any troops we encountered—theirs or ours. I’d had enough when I got lost after a run and found an entire village that had been murdered. I recognized the cause of death because I was infecting people with weaker doses of it.”

“You’re a carrier of disease!”

“No.” Adrian shook his head. “We used dispersing devices. The government was testing ways to kill off the human population. We wanted to have descendants in control openly.”

“Because advanced societies will never accept magic.” The witch shuddered. “See magic, get the fire.”

“Except, we aren’t afraid of fire anymore,” Adrian gently reminded the demon. “Are we?”

“No. Now, we love it as another needed tool.”

“These chemicals were supposed to gradually change a population into chaos, so that magic users could come forward and save mankind, be accepted.”

“This wasn’t a government plan. This was from someone like you, someone who believes he’s helping humanity, while obliterating it.”

“My father worked on it while he was governor of Arkansas. This has been in the works for thirty-five years.”

“Your father destroyed the world.”

“And gave us a chance to come back in control of it. Between the descendants who want power, and the government officials desperate to stay in power, the herds are in grave danger. It may seem as though there are a lot of us here, but we’re the minority of our kind. Most descendants love my father’s plan.”

“And you?”

Adrian snorted. “I love Angie. I love my fellow Americans, my Eagles. I loathe my evil side more than your host does.”

“Prove that and regain your honor with me!”

“How?”

“Agree to Marc’s deal and uphold your end, no matter what. Give them the peace they deserve.”

Adrian knew better than to blindly agree, but it wasn’t something he could promise anyway. “I won’t ever give up on Angie, no matter how many

times she trades me for our people. In fact, each time she does it, I respect her more, need her more. Go away? Never!”

Angela snapped back, fury blazing, but his words couldn’t be denied. She hadn’t chosen Marc over Adrian. She’d chosen Safe Haven. They would have their leader. She would have another chance at a child... Angela’s heart broke all over again; she shoved herself into the grayness to keep from melting down. She had a few more weeks to get through and then none of it would matter. Marc didn’t know the time line was shorter than he’d estimated. He thought he had a year to bring her around, but her rule was over now.

Adrian stewed on the information, wondering if she’d let him know how long so he might have time to stop it. After examining the clues, he understood that wasn’t the case. She was telling him he didn’t have a year to become Marc’s Mr. Perfect if he wanted to be back in control of Safe Haven. He had mere weeks.

“Marc once told me you two were childhood sweethearts.” Adrian wanted to be selfish and use this time to advance his bond, but it was obvious that Angela was bad off. She deserved to be with Marc, though it wasn’t what would give her the elusive happiness humans were always searching for. At this point, Adrian didn’t believe he could either. Maybe a combo of the two of them, like Neil and Jeremy, but they all knew there was no way it would ever be peaceful. Adrian wasn’t sure what

she needed. Until he was and he knew he could provide it, she should stay with Marc.

“You know, all my life, people have planned my future as if I didn’t exist. I think I’m done with that.”

When she turned away and tugged the blankets up, Adrian sighed. He was going to push now and duck if needed. “He said you grew up together. Same small town and all that.”

Angela’s grunt wasn’t encouraging. Adrian tried again, pushing a little harder. “He also said he taught you to give a blow job?”

Angela’s form went rigid; Adrian prepared to duck.

“So?”

Adrian grinned. “Just wondering what else he taught you. That was a question you avoided when you first joined my refugee camp.”

“I didn’t trust you yet.”

“You do now.”

Silence.

“Please?”

“Why?”

“I’m bored.”

Angela snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Is it something awful?”

“To me, it was. He taught me that men leave. That’s what you guys do.”

Adrian never would have guessed at her hidden bitterness over something that had happened so long ago. Did Marc know?

Angela shrugged. "It doesn't matter. He can't change the truth any more than you can. Now let me be."

Adrian refused with his own snort. "What else did he teach you?"

Angela felt the tears welling again, but she was helpless to stop them. Her emotions were in control, not her mind. "To love him."

Adrian swallowed his jealousy to help her. "And?"

"That...I could only trust me." Angela looked up with horrible clarity. "I never have, you know. Trusted another person since him. I can't."

Adrian nodded. Now they were getting deep enough to maybe honestly help her. "You should tell him that."

"I've already told him he's forgiven, that we were kids. I meant it."

"Doesn't sound like you've let it go."

"Letting it go and forgiving are two totally different things. It's cause and effect. I don't hate him or blame him anymore, but I have no trust for my fellowman."

"And that made it easy to kill."

"Yes. My lack of compassion allowed me to murder."

"And if you'd had compassion?"

"Safe Haven would have been lost."

Adrian sent sympathy. "It's hard, what we do. Those choices are so terrible that we can't forgive ourselves afterwards."

“No.”

“I understand. You’ve seen me at a low point. I didn’t know how I could continue after everything I’d done.”

“Same.”

“But I did. Because my job wasn’t finished yet. Neither is yours.”

“We’ve been over this.” Angela knew she needed these talks, but it didn’t make them any easier or more welcome.

“Not really. So far, you’ve deflected and misdirected each time we’ve gotten close to the worst of your chaos. When you can admit the last part, you can begin healing.”

“I don’t deserve to heal!” Hot tears burnt a path down her raw skin. “I deserve to die!”

Adrian leaned against the cave wall in satisfaction. “Keep going.”

“I got her killed! So many deaths to defeat Donner. I’m awful. Marc should kill me!”

“And?”

Angela tensed in heavy pain. “And I’m sorry...but I’d do it again.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because Safe Haven survived. I would give up anyone for them!” Angela collapsed in tears.

Adrian left her alone. He was always impressed with her strength, but more, with her refusal to lie to herself at moments like this. She wasn’t excusing it, only admitting it. She was a true leader. He was

honored to have been her mentor. Now, she would mentor him.

“Or we’ll die together.” Angela’s witch glared at him.

Adrian closed his eyes, not responding. At some point, he would have to make a truce with that one. For right now, he would try not to antagonize the demon. Angela had enough power now to kill a person without raising a hand. It was amazing. When the ocean became its usual wild self, this council would be able to handle most of it because she was along. The rest would be up to fate. If he was meant to reach the island, he would. If not, at least some of them would because he and others had seen Eagles on that island. Either way, their people would be safe there for a while.

“And after that?” the witch demanded angrily. “Will you be dead, finally?”

Adrian reflected on the deal Marc had offered and on the one that he had made with Angela. Then, he thought about his own desires. “Be gone, witch. She’s too tired for you right now.”

The demon burst into harsh laughter that rang in Adrian’s mind as she faded. Marc thought he hated enough to kill, but he had nothing on Angela’s demon. If she ever turned the witch loose, Adrian would be gone in seconds. He was at the top of her list, and rightly so. Betraying a descendant was unforgivable.

Deleted Scene #2

Explicit

“Can I rub you to sleep?” Yuri had answered all of her questions and then some.

Weary, Kendle nodded. She’d known this moment would come. Now that it was here, there was no anger or revulsion, only a thick heat that needed to be satisfied one way or the other.

Yuri joined her on the bed, bringing a fresh bottle of oil. He got settled with a leg on each side of her, hardness pressing into her cheek.

Kendle closed her eyes as his knowing hands began to spread the oil over her skin. As he reached forward to get her shoulders, that hardness thrust against her cheeks, bringing light gasps from the man on top of her.

Kendle obliged him by lifting her top half when his hands came up, allowing him to cup her breasts through the bra. She waited to experience rage or fear, but there was still only heat. Now certain that it wasn’t against her will, Kendle rested her cheek on the soft pillow.

Yuri rubbed her for a long time, sticking to areas that would allow her to drowse. She hadn’t arched into his touch when he’d tried, telling him she probably would give him what he wanted, but she would be tense and ruin the mood for him. He waited, patiently, rubbing her to sleep.

When her breathing finally evened out, Yuri let his hands live out the one fantasy he'd been using since his teens. Observing his brother and his girlfriend acting as if she was asleep had damaged him so that only that scenario played in his mind during sex. Now that Kendle was asleep, he could live out his dream.

Yuri stretched to rub her shoulders, thrusting lightly into the bare crack of her ass. While rubbing, he'd moved her underwear into that scented heaven, exposing both globes. He humped them slowly now, trying to control his breathing. When she didn't resist, he dropped the pretense and braced himself with an arm on each side of her lean hips.

Yuri bounced her a little harder, ready to stop if she woke, but there was no resistance. He kept going. Her underwear slid down slowly, pulled by his single finger to keep from disturbing her. As they went down far enough to show the treasure underneath, Yuri groaned lowly. It was wet and pink. He hardened further, breath shortening.

Yuri rose up, positioning by guess as he braced himself. "Tell me now."

Kendle sighed. But she didn't speak.

Yuri slowly pressed his dick against her hot, damp pussy, groaning again. He pushed forward, sliding into her. "Thank you, thank you."

Kendle held still as he pulled out and then pushed right back in, deeper this time. She started to slide a hand under her hip, hoping to enjoy it, but

she was pulled over with a quick movement that put Yuri's head between her legs.

He licked, softly.

She shuddered, violently.

The night passed.

Deleted Scene #3

“What happened?”

Kyle smiled down at her. “I took longer than I thought. You fell asleep.”

Jennifer stretched, naked under the blanket. Tension flooded the air as she remembered why she didn’t have a nightgown on.

Kyle fastened the thin door to the chamber. It was supposed to be for council members who were on long shifts and needed a moment away from the relentless demands of the camp.

Fresh from a shower, Kyle was dismayed to discover himself too tired to run through the mental plans he’d made for this moment. Not wanting to ruin it, he settled into the small chair by the cot to take off his boots. “I know you’ve made up your mind, but we’re both beat. Can we do this in the morning?”

Jennifer nodded in relief. She felt sore all over and a bit queasy from skipping dinner.

“You sure?” His eyes darkened at the sight of her bare shoulders and wild hair.

Jennifer flushed. “Yes, please. Hand me my gown?”

“Will you leave it off?”

Cheeks turning scarlet, she did. It was a good way to ease into things. It was also a bit awkward

and embarrassing as he stripped down to his boxers and slid in with her.

The narrow cot only allowed them to be on their sides. When Kyle gently rolled her to face the wall, Jennifer felt terror rush over her mind.

Kyle felt her freeze and sighed unhappily. He slowly placed his back to her and felt the tension break. Still aroused by the sensation, Kyle smothered the need to hold her. The trekking they'd done today had worn him out.

Kyle's body was a warm comfort to relax against. Jennifer sighed in pleasure. "Thank you."

Kyle grunted, already drifting. "My honor."

Jennifer smiled, shifting a little to enjoy his heat more fully. She really was a lucky girl. She had the best man in this camp.

Deleted Scene #4

“Grab that dog!”

Tonya knelt down and picked up the cute puppy as Jennifer ran into the lab. “Oh, good! You got him before anything was broken.”

Tonya gave the squirming pup to the teenager and went to the small deep sink to wash her hands. “No problem. Still in training?”

“Yes.” Jennifer spotted the cat too late. The dog leapt from her arms and chased the thin cat from the lab and down the tunnel.

Jennifer sighed tiredly. “I’m sorry.”

Tonya shrugged. “Cats and dogs aren’t friends by nature. They may adjust as long as she doesn’t scratch his eyes out.” Tonya gestured toward the bubbling and boiling beakers. “She’s already got a big strike against her survival.”

Jennifer realized the cat was ill. She glanced down at the book Tonya had opened on the desk. “Cannabis Oil Concentrates in the Use of an Effective Cancer Treatment. Wow. Nice.”

Tonya smiled. “Thanks. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Jennifer spent a moment scanning the redhead’s mind to check for trouble, but she didn’t need to dig far to see that Tonya was doing this from the good of her heart. “Can I help?”

“I don’t think so. This stuff has to cook for a long time. I’ll be here all night.”

Jennifer moved toward the exit. “I’ll send you some coffee.”

“That would be great!”

Jennifer tiredly tracked her puppy to the ladder, following the noise. When she got there, she was glad to see the cat climbing the ladder. It was slow, but successful, disappearing over the edge of the hole.

The cat, Maybelle, stumbled down the cold stone and wandered into the living quarters. She twined around the legs of Samantha, who was sitting on a stool next to Cynthia.

Sam smoothed Cynthia’s wild hair down and tugged the blanket up to her shoulders. She’d been here for half an hour, but the reporter hadn’t spoken once despite her eyes staying wide open. “I’ll come visit you tomorrow. Keep fighting. This mountain sickness can’t be worse than facing down Cesar.”

Sam stood up.

Cynthia’s hand wrapped around her wrist, focusing with ugly intensity. “Tell him I’m calling in my marker.”

“Your what?”

Cynthia let go. “Tell them both they owe me for her life. I’m calling in the marker.”

“What do you want?”

“Freedom. I want out of here, alive.”

“We all want that.”

Cynthia's expression blazed with diluted madness. "They're going to kill me."

Sam began to say that was the mountain sickness messing with Cynthia's mind, but the cat ran across the floor and tripped Stanley. He fell awkwardly, slamming into Daryl, who had been making his cot.

Daryl landed on the floor as Stanley landed in his bed.

Daryl glared up at the klutz. "Should I read you a story?"

Stanley struggled from the bed, tipping it over. As the cot collapsed on Daryl's leg, the cat trotted from the chamber with its tail up.

Samantha joined in the laughter, forgetting Cynthia's words. When she looked down again, the reporter was asleep.

Sam left the living area, and moved into the corridor. She felt her stomach drop as she saw Neil coming toward her.

"What is it?"

"We need you to run the weather post for the next shift."

"Okay. Wait. Jeremy has it right now."

Neil leaned down. "Jeremy threw up all over the bathroom stall and called off."

"Mountain sickness?"

Neil shook his head. "I need to tell you something. Please try not to be mad."

Place a Review

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

Bone Dust

If Alexa Mitchel and her crew of hardened gunfighters complete their quest, they'll earn a chance to heal the rift in reality. If they fail, the monsters will be here to stay and humans will become the myth.

[Bone Dust Page](#)

Note From The Author

Reader: How can you leave it there?!

Writer: Before you use the pitchforks on me, please know I intend to travel back in time a little and show you what happened in the mountain.

Reader: So Safe Haven does survive the quake?

Writer: That has not been revealed.

Have a wonderful week, world, and watch your six!

Angela

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

Book 8



[Dearly Departed](#)

1

“We will have the witch!”

Some of Mikel’s men cheered. The rest were dead or screaming for help.

Inside the mountain, shouts began to fade into groans and tears...and then silence.

“Why is it so quiet now?” Tracy wiped away tears as she and Charlie burrowed deeper under the clothes pile.

“The smoke.” Charlie kept digging downward. He was trying to reach the bottom with his feet. The ledge had broken off and slid during the quake, but he didn’t know how far it had fallen or how they had landed. For all he knew, they were dangling. The darkness was smothering. He couldn’t even smell anything but laundry—some of it cleaned, most of it not.

“We have to help them!” Tracy cried harder, but she didn’t resist when Charlie pulled her boot, dragging her down.

Around them, the laundry was moving. The Indians had joined the teen as the cave fell apart, but there hadn’t been time to formulate a plan.

Natoli stayed on Tracy’s right as Charlie took them through the maze of laundry and stone. His men surrounded the couple, as he’d instructed them to do before they’d rejoined Safe Haven. Marc had told Natoli of his fears for the future, of the deaths and lives that had been promised. Natoli had vowed to protect Marc’s heart so that warrior could fight for all people. Natoli was fulfilling that vow.

Charlie was just glad they weren’t alone. He was in the lead for the first time and it was terrifying.

Charlie stopped as his foot hit something hard, hands fumbling for the light on his belt. He tried not to think about everything that might be on top of

them or how hard it was to breathe down here. They had survived the quake. That had been his only goal when he'd brought Tracy to the laundry area. Now, he had to keep them alive in the aftermath.

Around them, others were coming to the same realizations. Through the broken stone and shifting dangers, battered survivors began to emerge.

2

Adrian groaned as the weight shifted off his shoulder. The pain in that arm was bad enough to convince him that he was alive, but there was too much debris on him to move. Adrian remembered shoving Marc forward and the ceiling collapsing on them, but nothing else. He assumed he'd been knocked out. The buzzing ears and roiling guts supported that theory. He groaned again.

"I heard someone!"

Adrian kept his eyes closed as more debris was cleared from his body. He hurt everywhere. Sharp rocks were digging into his arms and legs, and there was a warm heat from below making him sweat. *That's a body. I'm not sure if it's breathing.*

"It's Adrian! Grab that end. Lift on three. Ready?"

Adrian screamed as the weight increased and then it was gone. He coughed as smoke and dust rushed into his lungs, and then screamed again as he was dragged free of the rubble by his arms. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating.

As his own cry faded, Adrian could hear others begging for help, but not as many as there should be. He struggled to clear his mind, dazed. Something crawled across his bad hand and scurried into the darkness. Adrian felt it as a vague sensation dulled by the stabbing throbs in his arm and shoulder.

“There’s another body here! Keep digging!”

Adrian was left alone as rescuers ran back to the debris pile. He stilled, listening to coughs and shouts, to tears and groans. *Light by a lot*, he thought, ears buzzing in loud confusion.

There’s a fire! Angela thundered. *Get up!* She and Cody were trapped in the storage chamber on the same level as Adrian, but the fire was more important.

Adrian shoved into a sitting position, arm useless except in the flaring, ugly pain that came each time he tried to move it.

Dislocated. Angela didn’t sense anything else wrong with him that was serious, but the arm was enough to keep him from helping. *You can’t climb like that. Damn!*

Adrian forced his hurting body to stand on legs that shook, scanning the new, more dangerous environment. *There!* He stumbled over rocks, bodies, and wooden beams, lurching toward the entrance to the tunnel where he’d been camped in exile before the Mexicans found it.

This will hurt. Adrian clenched his teeth. *Go away.*

He felt Angela withdraw as he lurched forward. Adrian slammed his shoulder into the unmovable wall and popped the humerus back into the glenoid.

“What is he doing?” Theo had paused in shifting a large stone, drawn by Adrian’s chilling shout.

“Fixing himself.” Greg’s tone matched the roughness of the debris he flung aside. “I see a Colt. This is Marc!”

The digging resumed with more energy.

Adrian fumbled for the light on his belt. He shined it upward with his good hand, blinking at the waves of falling dust. The sight was so awful that Adrian needed the throbbing shoulder, along with every cut and bruise, to prove this was happening. Safe Haven had been destroyed.

They’ll all be dead if you don’t get that fire out!

Adrian staggered backward and fell, startled at Angela’s mental shout. He groaned, trying to focus. *Everything is so blurry...*

Hurry!

Give me a minute!

We don’t have it. Smoke has already reached the top floor. Everyone up there is dying. Can’t you feel them?

Adrian managed to get on his feet, but his flashlight had rolled too close to a crevice for him to reach it without his balance. He staggered toward the ladder instead, blinking in dull comprehension. The ladder was there. Bodies were hanging from it, sprawled below it... He stiffened in pain and then puked.

Breathe. Breathe. Angela shoved deep into his mind, to where their connection was glowing brightly. *You can do this. I believe in you. I always have. Now, hurry!*

Adrian wiped his mouth on his gritty sleeve and began to climb the ladder. The pain became a way to stay alert as he fought bodies for space while trying not to inhale the smoke wafting down.

Adrian reached the next level and yanked his shirt up, wishing he had time to stop and wet his bandana. Then he remembered he had been getting ready for bed and didn't have it. All he had was his jeans, boots, jacket, and belts—tool and gun. Those last two he even slept with. *Good thing*, he praised, taking out his spare flashlight. After this, he was down to the headlamp. He didn't want to try using it yet. The buttons were little and his hands were shaking. He might drop it. That would be worse than the dim illumination from his small flashlight.

Far above, Adrian saw a shadow illuminated by an orange glow. The man hefted himself onto the level with the fire and vanished. Adrian realized Angela was telling others of the problem and directing them too.

“Right behind you!” The wood vibrated as Greg climbed the ladder. Theo and Debra were taking care of Marc, but so far, there were no other survivors on the bottom level. Angela was telling Greg about kids trapped by a mess fire; he was determined to save everyone he could.

“Adrian!” Kyle shouted from his right. “Can you tie off this rope?”

Adrian missed the rope that Kyle threw, but it caught on wooden debris, allowing him to fumble for the end of it. As he tied it to the sturdiest thing he could find—a heavy-duty hitch that had been used to tie up their larger animals for milking—fresh screams sounded from above them.

“Going up!” Adrian winced at the awful pain, cradling his head. His hands came away bloody, but there wasn’t time to worry over it. He climbed as Kyle anchored the rope to the other end of the ledge and began inching Jennifer across the gap. There was a very narrow ledge, but no room to even glance down or they would throw themselves off balance. Hopefully the rope would keep them from falling.

Greg spotted a familiar red canister under the debris. He dug it out, ecstatic to locate a second extinguisher below it. Lungs starting to hurt, Greg used the rope from his belt to tie them together. The panic from the level above him increased while he worked.

“We need more hands in the mess!”

“We need something to put out the fire!”

“Where are all the extinguishers?!”

“I found two!” Greg pulled himself up the ladder, extinguishers clanking together against his chest. He’d tied them on like a necklace.

Adrian took one and put it inside his tucked-in shirt so he had both hands free.

Greg did the same and followed. Both men were aware of heavy coughing, but the lack of people helping worried them more. In a camp of over five hundred, only having a dozen workers active was horrifying.

“Someone got a light on.” Greg was sweating so much that his shirt was soaked.

Adrian grunted. “It’s not a light.” The climb was clearing the mental fog and sending in misery. There were bodies on every floor he’d reached so far. *How many have we lost?*

Greg climbed faster as he understood what Adrian meant. The top levels were bright, meaning it was a large blaze. *Two extinguishers won’t be enough.* Greg pulled himself onto what remained of the security and medical level. He shined his light right and left, spotting a few survivors on both sides. None of them appeared to need immediate help.

The two men hurried to the next ladder. Half of it was gone, but there was a rope hanging down from where someone else had already climbed up.

“That was Adrian and Greg!” Morgan had stood up when the flashlights shined through the dusty residence tunnel. “They’re going to the fire.” Morgan and Kenn had been together when the floor fell out, taking friends with it.

“Good.” Kenn tied the rope to his waist and then to the outcropping that had split and started the huge crevice. He was glad he’d been on duty and was wearing full gear. “We can’t reach them that way. We have to go down and get over to the ladder.”

Morgan knew he was right. The tiny ledge on either side wasn't going to hold their weight, and there was no way they could jump the 20-foot gap in the middle.

Next to them, Neil was still staring at the hole where Jeremy had jumped. He hadn't moved yet.

Kenn nudged Neil's shoulder. "We're going down there. You want one?"

Neil took the unused rope, but only held it. The gears in his mind had ground to a slow crawl.

Kenn tied it to Neil and then to a different outcropping that he hoped would hold. He understood Neil's dazed response. If not for hearing Tonya's voice in the medical bay, Kenn might have been experiencing the same emotion. He held great sympathy for Neil.

Neil followed Kenn to the edge of the gap, but he didn't go first. He squatted at a pile of rubble and began digging through it, hoping he had the right place. They'd kept medical supplies on every level, but this floor had also held the medical bay, so the majority of their stock was here somewhere.

"Come on." Kenn lowered himself into the hole with hands that protested the lack of gloves. *Got softer.* Kenn reached down with his leg to find a place that might support his weight. He found something that felt sturdy and tested it.

Kenn hefted himself up as the hard object rocked and vanished, breathing rough.

A shattering crash brought Neil to the hole. "Be careful!"

Nose burning from all the smoke, Kenn nodded toward the rope he had tied off for Neil. "I was able to see down five foot. It's clear. I'm dropping."

Neil had found the shelf of medical kits. He slung two of them around his neck, then shined the light as Kenn began to descend, using his own rope. It would have been incredible to watch if not for the situation.

"Okay. Come on down."

Now that he'd observed how it was done, Neil tried to copy it. He lowered himself, arms straining. Sweat broke out on his neck from the heat as his lower body descended into the cool darkness to search for solid ground. He hadn't realized it was hot and bright up there. Down here, it was pitch black and cool. *And quiet.* His ears were working overtime as his headlamp flickered off bodies, rubble, equipment that was mangled, and shards of thick plastic that had been crushed. *Water tanks.* His heart pounded.

Kenn had stopped a bit below, feet crunching. "Careful man, it's a maze."

Neil's foot hit crushed plastic and slipped.

Kenn grabbed his arm, guiding him down. He didn't tell Neil what he'd seen. The man would view it for himself any second now.

Neil's light blurred as he caught his balance, but it was enough to show him the entire rubble field was made up of those huge plastic shards. Across the glittery field of danger, Samantha sat with her knees to her chest. Neil thought he could hear her

breathing, but he wasn't sure. She was covered in dust and dark shadows.

Kenn took Neil's arm before he shined the light on her. "Easy man. If she gets up to run to us, it might all fall."

Neil blanched, lowering his light.

Kenn lowered his voice. "She won't want to leave the body. You'll have to make her."

Neil shined his light on Samantha anyway, mind blanking. *Body?*

Neil hadn't seen Jeremy at first because his body was covered in blood, blending in with the broken cave walls. Jeremy had landed on one of the plastic tanks. He was still hanging there. *Oh, God!*

"Neil?"

Neil swallowed his horror. "Don't move, Sam! Please, don't move!"

"He knew this mountain would kill him." Sam choked up. "And I made him come here!"

Samantha's sobs were a torment to the men, but all they could do was listen and curse fate. Without help and equipment, they couldn't reach her.

Kenn, aware of Morgan joining them, stepped and then slid toward the only exit he could view with his light. It was also lined in plastic shards, but most of them had been crushed and were covered in large pieces of debris Kenn identified as stone from the radio room. It had been darker than the outer walls.

Now flying through ways to rescue Samantha, Neil was barely aware they'd left.

Across the dark, bloody debris field, Samantha continued to cry.



[Dearly Departed](#)
Book 8