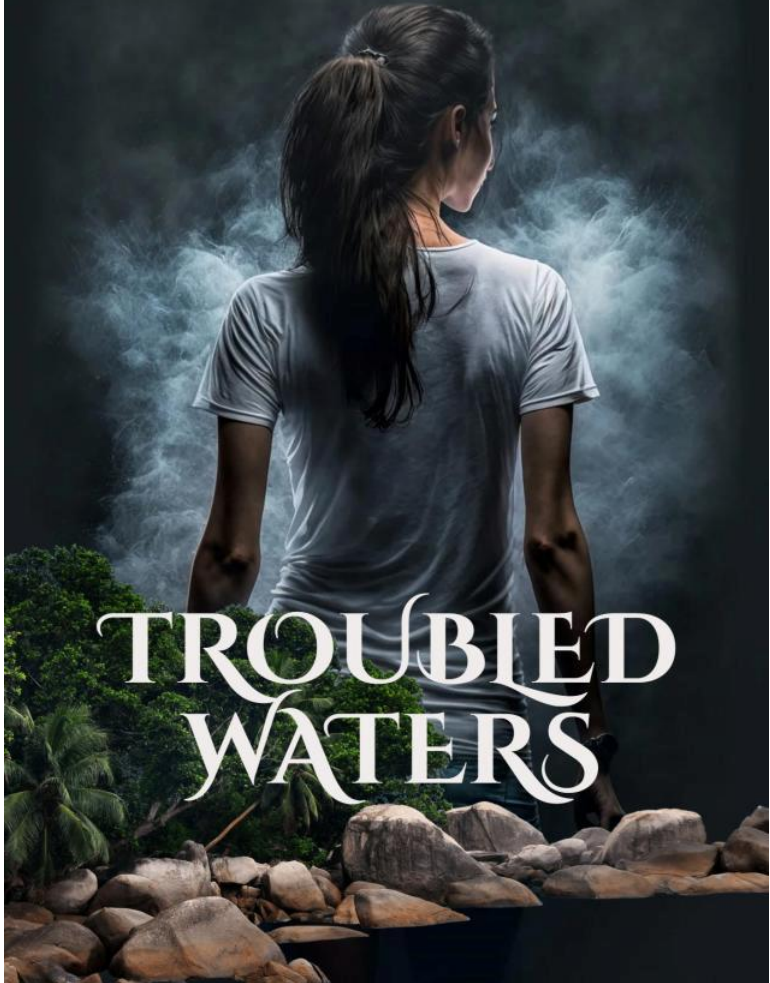


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #19



TROUBLED
WATERS

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Troubled Waters
by
Angela White

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Troubled Waters

One Of Mine

Old Times

Deep Breath

In The Eye

Bait Ball

Munching

No Connection

Do It Anyway

We Had Some Issues

Consider It Done

Close

Our Tolling Bell

The shards of hell
Oh, wrath
You fell!

My wayward wonder
The sky's darkness
We ponder.

Endless myriads of silver
A star falls
Oh he, a giver!

The wish you make
I hear
And ruthlessly break.

Haunting sounds
Of days gone
The circle come 'round!

I weep and yearn
The sun lights my face
I burn.

Darkness calls to like
We flee for safety
A lightning strike!

Our tolling bell
Heaven?
No. Hell.

Chapter One
Six Of Those

1

“**T**his is the last of it, Boss. Everything else has been taken below.” Wade offered Angela a hand out of the RIB. She had refused to leave the beach until everyone else was on the submarine. She’d come over with the last bit of gear and two tense Eagles.

Those two Eagles hurried to unload the boat so it could be deflated and stored.

Angela stepped onto the submarine. “Don’t deflate it yet.”

“Why? Did you forget something?” Wade peered toward the shoreline, where Tilly’s people were piling into the sandy buses they’d found to transport them to the nearest city; they were going to claim a new home now. It made Wade anxious for them. Setting up a settlement in these conditions was no easy feat.

Angela turned to face the man now climbing out of the submarine. “No, but I was hoping it wouldn’t go this way.”

Saul was carrying a single bag in his hand, and he had a backpack over his shoulder.

Saul spotted her and lifted his chin against her disapproval. “We are not going with you, mate.”

Angela was dismayed to see the entire sub crew climb out of the hatch behind him, but she wasn’t surprised.

The crew members shaded their eyes from the bright sun. They had been inside the submarine for a long time. All of them were carrying bags. Many were wearing heavy coats even though the weather was warm. They didn’t want to leave the Safe Haven gear behind.

“I’d like to know why. Not many refugees give up a place in my camp.”

Saul’s red curls blew wildly in the warm breeze as he snorted. “I’m tired of being told what to do. I want a warm body next to me and solid ground under my feet for a while.”

Angela waved a hand. “Safe Haven has single women.”

Saul stared at her knowingly. “But you’re not going back to Safe Haven yet, are you?”

“No.” Angela started to mention the women who had been taken below.

Saul cut her off. “I don’t want Reicher’s rejects!”

Angela spotted Marc coming up the ladder. She doubted his presence would help things. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

She knew Tilly would be thrilled to have Saul and his crew in their group, but Safe Haven needed his experience. Despite not liking the man very

much, he wasn't bad. If possible, she needed to convince him to come along.

Saul sneered. "You can't buy me, lass! This is my homeland. This is where I belong. You'll have to find someone else. Unless *you* want to convince me again..."

Wade and Marc both frowned.

Before either of them could threaten Saul or try to make a deal that wasn't going to work, Angela put out her hand. "Thank you for all your help. I wish you nothing but the best."

The sub crew was relieved that she wasn't going to force them to stay.

Saul was surprised. He hadn't expected her to let him go so easily. For a brief moment, he regretted his choice and considered making a different one.

Angela went around him. "It's done. Take the RIB and enjoy your time with Tilly and her group. I'm sure they'll be grateful to use you."

Saul realized she was right. Tilly and Trevor were just as likely to overuse him as Angela would have been. *But I'll still be in my homeland.* Saul proceeded toward the RIB, waving his crew along. "Let's get to shore before those buses leave."

Angela stopped near Marc, but she didn't watch Saul leave like he was doing. She ran through the options. Without an experienced captain, they were all in danger. Angela looked down the ladder into the sub.

Ray was standing there. "I'll do my best, Boss."

Angela returned his smile. “That’s all I’ve ever asked.”

Ray returned to the bridge and tried not to have a panic attack.

Angela glanced at Marc.

Marc reluctantly agreed. “I can try to help.”

Wade joined them. “Do you want me to go along and bring the RIB back?” They only had a few of them.

“No. Saul may decide not to stay with Tilly’s group. I would rather that he had other options. He’s not a bad man, even though he’s leaving us in the lurch.”

Saul heard that as he climbed into the RIB, but he didn’t respond. She was right. It was done. He was staying here; Safe Haven would continue on their perilous adventures without him.

Saul helped the loyal sub crew into the RIB. He was glad they had all chosen to come along. Even the happy whore was here, though he doubted her life would be the same. Tilly would expect her to work upright for her meals.

Angela carefully descended the ladder, holding tight so she didn’t slip on the damp rails. She could hear mumbling and muttering echoing throughout the cramped submarine. As she reached the bottom, she waved at Trent. “There’s a hatch in the floor near the bridge. Get it open and then clear the bottom level.”

A small wave of relief went through everyone who heard her as they realized the sub was bigger

than just this one level they were all currently occupying.

Angela had pulled the information from the submarine crew who had been glad they didn't have to keep the bottom half clean, too. It even had a full-size mess. There hadn't been any need to use it before. Now, they needed the space.

Wade came down the ladder next, leaving Marc topside by himself. He sensed the man needed a moment alone. "Where do you want me?"

Angela gestured toward the bridge. "Complete your daily call to Amy and let them know the mission was a success."

Wade grinned sheepishly. "I thought we got that by you."

Angela snorted but didn't rub it in. There was little that she missed these days. It was exhausting and extremely useful. *If that ever changes, we're probably screwed.*

Wade went to the bridge and opened the door carefully. He didn't let Dog out even though the wolf was whining for it. Dog wanted to be reunited with Marc, but Angela had decided not to allow that to happen until the mission team had been given time to unwind from this run. Many of them had been abused by Reicher's hounds. No one was sure how it would go.

"Welcome aboard. I missed you."

Wade snickered at the joke. "You awake enough for this?"

“I’m all good.” Ray was alert enough for duty, unlike some of their weaker members, who were yawning and rubbing their eyes. Everyone would sleep hard tonight.

Ray motioned at the radio and then went to the small drink center that was still fully stocked. Saul had left the bridge in a good state. There was a little dust on the equipment, but that was it. Everything else was neat and clean, though the hint of body odor was lingering.

Wade sat in the captain’s chair and picked up the headset. “Come in, Safe Haven.”

The radio immediately crackled back. “This is Safe Haven. Go on with your message, Wade.”

Wade frowned. They weren’t supposed to use names over the radio, but Daryl didn’t know that. Wade was surprised that Daryl was the one manning the radio, considering everything going on with his wife and the fact that he was one fifth of leadership now. “The mission was a success. We have retrieved the mission team.”

Wade flinched at the loud cheer that immediately came over the radio. It was obvious the entire camp had been listening for good news. He had to wait for the noise to clear before continuing.

Daryl knew what Wade wanted. “She’s doing a little better every day. She said to tell you to be careful and come home soon.”

Everyone listening was pleased to hear that Samantha was doing better. It sounded like things

were fine at home. The same couldn't be said of the mission team.

Wade was relieved. "Tell her I will and I love her. Is Amy around?"

The radio cleared with a little girl's excited voice. "Are you coming home now, Daddy Wade?"

Wade was sorry that he couldn't tell her yes. "Not yet, Sweetheart. Take care of your mom for me. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I will. Bye-bye!"

Daryl took back over the radio. "Is there anything else?"

"Negative. We'll check in with you soon and keep you posted."

Daryl grinned into the radio. "Just stay away from the Bermuda Triangle, okay? That's the last thing we need right now."

Wade laughed. "We're nowhere near that. Wade, out."

Wade replaced the headset and looked over at Ray.

Ray was frowning. "There are six of those triangle spots scattered around the world, right?"

Wade shrugged. "You're the captain, not me."

The two men switched places.

Dog watched them impatiently from under the counter behind the heavy steel door.

Ray sat and waited nervously for orders.

Wade was eager for it. They had rescued their missing men and disposed of another evil tyrant.

The sooner they got out of here and made it to the recovery location Angela had chosen, the better.

The radios on both of their belts lit up with Angela's calm voice. "Saul preprogrammed coordinates into the autopilot. As soon as Marc comes down, get us moving. I'd like to be there by nightfall."

Ray began adjusting controls nervously, hoping nothing went wrong.

Wade used his body as a block to keep Dog in as he left.

Dog huffed angrily and went back to his spot under the counter.

Wade went to the topside ladder and waited for Marc to come down so he could close the hatch.

On top of the submarine, Marc observed the shoreline, but he wasn't seeing Tilly's group or Saul and the sub crew as they flew toward the beach. He was staring at the debris-filled water and the light smoke still coming from the destroyed entrance of the lab.

He contemplated his time under the water in small, jerky replays that brought up ugly emotions. *I'm broken now. Angela says she and Adrian can put me back together, but I don't believe that. I'm only going with them because it's expected and because I do love her. I don't think I'll be able to make it for long. At some point, I'm going to be just another ghost wandering the wastelands, hunting for what I've lost.*

Adrian nodded to Wade and quickly climbed the topside ladder. He made noise as he approached Marc so he didn't startle the desolate man.

Marc felt Adrian join him. Animosity wasn't the first thing that came to his mind this time.

The warm breeze ruffled their hair and brought the heavy scent of salt to their noses. For Adrian, it was a common feeling and smell. For Marc, it was almost new. He had either been in the sub or the lab for months. The sights and smells of nature were welcome, but also strange. It would take him time to readjust to being in the outside world again.

The same was true of the entire mission team. All of them had stared at the ocean and the beach while waiting for their turn to be transported to the submarine.

Marc swept Adrian's Eagle gear, feeling out of place in the comfortable clothes from the lab. He assumed Angela would have all of them change and shower at some point. Part of him was looking forward to it. The other half didn't want to let go of the comfortable clothing. "When do you want to start?"

It was more proof of how broken Marc was now. In the past, he never would have agreed to allow Adrian to help him without a long, drawn-out fight. Adrian sent a wave of calm, but he didn't use overwhelming force. He knew Marc and the others couldn't handle that. "How about right now? We'll find an empty room and a beer."

Marc hadn't been drunk since before this run. It suddenly sounded very good. He walked toward the hatch.

Adrian took one last glance at the shoreline, where his son was now helping Saul and the sub crew out of the RIB. Then he followed Marc. It wasn't his destiny to stay here and interfere with Gordon's parents. *It's my duty to help the mission team and I'm going to do that. It's always been my job in Safe Haven. I'm very, very good at it.*

Wade waited for Marc and Adrian to come down, and then closed and sealed the hatch. He keyed the radio on his belt. "We're all set here, Ray."

A few seconds later, the intercom system activated throughout the submarine. "Prepare for departure. I guess that means hold onto something in case I screw up."

Ray's honesty and nervousness didn't bother any of them after what they'd already gone through. Complete confidence would have been a lie. That would have bothered everyone. The only person who could get away with it was Angela. From her, it was expected.

On the shore, Gordon grabbed Saul's hand to help him out of the RIB.

Saul had been scanning the boy's thoughts. He was the only other descendant here, and Saul didn't like what he had picked up. He opened his mouth to start protesting the change in the natural order.

Gordon locked Saul's gifts. Then he used the memory modification he had copied from Angela. He didn't want a descendant rival in their group. *I'm the alpha dog here.*

Saul stared blankly, not sure what he had been about to say.

Gordon studied the submarine crew and was relieved to determine they were all normals. He didn't dig into their thoughts. There wasn't time for it right now. He needed to get his group under cover.

The submarine crew hadn't noticed anything wrong. They waited for orders.

Gordon smiled calmly. "Hurry up and get on the bus. You don't want to be left behind."

The sub crew hurried that way.

"Thanks." Saul followed them, not sure what had just happened.

"It's my honor." Gordon took a minute to watch the submarine as it began to glide through the choppy water. Then he got on the bus, proud of himself for handling the first real challenge to the new world order that Angela was establishing. He was already eager to see her again at the final battle where they would officially take over everything. *Nothing can stop us now.*

2

"It even has a medical bay. Awesome!" Harry entered the small medical compartment and began exploring the cabinets and shelves.

The medical bay was stocked with copies of most of the equipment that they had used in Reicher's lab. Most of it had been untouched since before the war. The packages were dusty and wrinkled.

The bay held two exam tables, a partition on ceiling rollers that could be pulled over to provide privacy between the two tables, and a chair in each corner, along with one rolling stool for the doctor on duty. The rear of the room held a doorway that led to a small isolation compartment where Gus had been taken.

To Harry, it felt cramped after the empty rooms they had used in the lab. He began planning how he wanted to reorganize it.

For Shawn, it reminded him of his old life and provided comfort. In the old world, medical procedures had been done on willing patients, not screaming captives.

"Keep going." Angela motioned Kenn and the military men to continue the tour of this bottom level. She stayed in the entrance, observing Harry.

Harry didn't care. He was thrilled to find a fully outfitted medical center on the submarine. When he'd first boarded this vessel, he had been depressed by the small area. Finding out there was a second floor was good; discovering the medical bay gave him an immediate mood boost.

"Would you like to get started right away?"

Harry nodded at Angela. “Give me about half an hour to get things sorted and set, and then you can send them in.”

“Does it matter what order?”

“No. I can pretty much handle whatever problems they have.”

Angela took a moment while he was distracted to examine his thoughts. She didn't like invading anyone's privacy, but it was important to make sure he was stable enough to carry out the medical exams.

Harry waved her off. “I'm fine right now. As long as you keep me busy, it shouldn't be a problem.”

Angela was relieved to hear that and even more relieved to see his thoughts matched his words. “I'd like you to avoid using magic in some of these cases. Our medics won't always be able to handle it with gifts. We have to be able to cover it the old-fashioned way, too.”

Now Harry did pause. He looked at her suspiciously. “You're going to curtail my freedom right away.”

Angela didn't lie. “I have to, Harry. You may not be able to see it from where you're at, but from where I'm standing, things have gone too fast. If I don't slow it down, you're going to burn up upon reentry.”

Unlike some of the other mission men, Harry didn't have a new distrust toward Angela. He had

always believed that she had the best interests of everyone at heart. “I’ll try.”

Angela smiled brightly. “I don’t mean you can’t use your new gifts at all. Some of the injuries we have can’t be healed quickly by normal means. I have no problem with you using magic for those.”

Harry’s mood immediately improved again. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Let me know if you two need something that isn’t already in here and I’ll dig through the supplies and send it in.” Angela gave Shawn a comforting smile and then left.

Shawn joined Harry in exploring the medical bay. “Do you think she means it?”

Harry tried to be positive. “We’ve always been able to trust her. Everything she’s done has produced good results for Safe Haven.”

Shawn thought about Missy.

Harry scowled. “That part of your life is over. Try to move on. I need you more than she does.”

Angela continued down the hallway even though she’d caught that. Shawn’s adjustment would be different than Harry’s, but it wasn’t the right time to deal with that yet.

Ahead of her, a large group was gathered around the one Navy man out of Kenn’s group. He was giving them a tour of the sub and filling them in on what each space was used for. Angela listened intently, memorizing it.

“This is the laundry compartment. Behind this, are pumps and another ladder up to the hatch that

leads to the top of the submarine. Behind that are areas that you all want to avoid. It's the nuclear reactor, ballast tanks, auxiliary equipment spaces, turbines and generators, and other stuff like that.”

Angela planned to explore all of those areas when there was more time. She was curious if they were all stocked like the medical bay was. She also wanted to know how much total room they had, and if the equipment was better than what they were enjoying on the cruise ship. The Adrianna used fuel for power. This submarine had a nuclear reactor. It would still be running long after she and everyone else here was gone. It was one of the huge advantages of nuclear power. The disadvantage was the possibility of something going wrong with it. “All of those areas are off limits.”

The Navy man, Thomas, looked over and saw her in the rear of the group.

Thomas lifted a brow.

Angela didn't want to take over the tour. “You're doing fine. Keep going.”

Thomas was in great shape. During the lab rescue, Angela had noticed the workout equipment. It was obvious that Thomas had taken advantage of it. He was muscular, with slightly curly reddish blond hair that framed a pale face, but his most striking feature was his vivid green eyes that observed everything intently. She had little doubt those mesmerizing orbs were collecting and hiding secrets.

Thomas directed them to the other side of the submarine, where several doorways were waiting. “This leads into the crew bunks. There are storage spaces, lockers, and bathrooms in there. We call those the head.” He went to the next entrance. “This is the mess. We call it the galley. There are also dry and cold storage areas, and a food preparation compartment. We’ll use this area a heap as soon as your boss picks a cooking crew.”

Kenn made a face. “None of it will be as good as what we had on the bottom level of the lab. Don’t expect that.”

The reminder of their captivity wasn’t welcome. The mood dropped.

Angela didn’t try to improve it. She wasn’t going to comfort them or distract them every time negative thoughts came up. That wasn’t the best way to help them recover.

Thomas continued the tour, taking them up the narrow hallway toward the front of the submarine. “This is where the officer berthing is located. There’s no reason for the captains to be in a bedroll on the floor like you were doing above us. Officers berthing is outfitted with nice beds, storage areas, and private heads.”

Angela didn’t tell him she preferred to keep her crew together. Now that there were so many people on the submarine, she may want to use the officers’ quarters for those who needed privacy. It was likely that couples would be assigned to these areas, but she hadn’t made up her mind yet.

“This ladder goes to the long room next to the bridge. It’s called the control room or the attack center.” Thomas went up the ladder, expecting people to follow him.

The other military men did. Everyone else waited for Angela.

Angela motioned toward the crew residence area. “Everyone can use the bunks or they can stay on the top level for tonight.”

People in the group went into the bunk room to claim a spot.

The Navy man came back down the ladder as he realized he had lost most of his audience.

Angela shifted closer. “Tom, right?”

The man held out a hand. “Thomas Jackson, but everyone called me Bear.”

She shook with him and let go. “I’m Angela. I assume you already know that.”

“Yes.” Thomas automatically straightened under her firm gaze. It was obvious that she was the boss even without the introduction. “If there’s a job you need filled on the sub, I might be able to do it. I served on a battleship for most of my time, but I’m familiar with this vessel.”

“Do you know how to sail it?”

Thomas wished he could give a different answer. “Sorry. That wasn’t my job.”

“What was?”

“I repaired engines.”

Angela smiled. “We always need engineers in Safe Haven. I’m sure we’ll be able to find work for you.”

Thomas felt her digging into his mind. He didn’t resist. It had happened regularly in Reicher’s lab.

Angela didn’t find anything that concerned her. That was a relief. There was still a weeding process that would have to be done for everyone she had brought out of there, though. “They may have questions.”

Thomas got the hint. He joined the others in the bunk room.

Kenn came out of there and stopped near her.

Angela denied him. “I’m not ready for that conversation.”

Kenn wasn’t ready for it either, but the longer they waited, the guiltier he would feel about the way he had treated Tonya. “Is there something you’d like me to be doing right now?”

Angela could tell he was already getting restless. “Why don’t you and Thomas figure out how to get a meal going in the mess?”

Kenn wasn’t excited by the chore, but it was something to keep him busy for now. He went that way without pushing her.

Angela stayed there for another moment, listening to people pick their bunks and exchange meaningless conversation that wouldn’t lead to arguments or tense moments. Everyone was walking on eggshells to keep from upsetting any of the mission team or the new people.

Unlike the land camp, it wasn't possible to put the new refugees into a quarantine zone. Having them all together was going to be a challenge. *But I'm ready for it. As far as I'm concerned, showing them how to get along with each other will be the easy part.*

Angela studied the dark doorways that led to the rear of the submarine. If anything went wrong with the nuclear reactor or the generators, they would have to abandon the sub. None of them had experience with that and she didn't want to try learning on the job. Messing around with nuclear fire wasn't a good idea. Angela made a mental note to have that entrance blocked off. Curious kids and bored adults might lead to more trouble than they were able to handle.

Angela keyed the radio on her belt. "Charlie, please escort all mothers and their children to the medical bay in 30 minutes."

"Copy."

Angela used the radio again. "The next appointments for the medical bay after that will be all of the other children. Anyone under the age of 18 must have a medical exam *tonight*. There will be *no* exceptions."

Angela climbed the ladder, confident that Kenn and the others would keep things calm down here. She could feel the unrest on the level above her. That's where she needed to be.

The next few days and weeks would keep her busy and offer challenges that she hadn't faced in

Safe Haven, but she was confident she would be able to get them through it. The only two men she wasn't sure they could help were Marc and Biff. One of those men was broken and doubting if he wanted to survive at all. The other was terrified to live. If Adrian couldn't help them, they might both still be lost.

Angela proceeded toward the rear compartment on the top level, where Adrian and Marc were now talking. She wanted to listen for a few minutes and determine how it was going. If Adrian was making any progress at all, she planned to send Biff in to join them for the next session.

This recovery period would include a lot of therapy moments. Adrian would need to use all of his skills to pull the men through this first painful stage. *I told him not to hold back. I hope he remembers that.*

Chapter Two
Just Walk Away

1

Adrian handed Marc a beer. “Do you remember doing this in Ciemus?”

Marc snorted bitterly. “I remember you making a lot of promises and not following through on any of them.”

Adrian went on as if Marc hadn’t spoken. “It seems like we do one of these sit-down talks every few months.”

Again, Marc let his resentment be known. “Yes, but only one of us ever gets anything from it.”

Adrian fingered his swollen eye. “Yeah, you do usually get to beat on me.”

Marc scanned Adrian’s black eye, wishing he had been the one to give it to him. “I didn’t do that.”

“I was making a point.” Adrian studied Marc’s bloodshot eyes and full beard. He had seen Marc upset a few other times, but nothing even came close to what he was viewing now. Marc was a mess, mentally and physically. He also smelled bad. None of it surprised Adrian. What did surprise him was that Marc wasn’t disfigured in any way, like the other team members. He assumed Marc was feeling

guilty over that as well, but it wasn't what they were going to discuss today.

Adrian took a beer for himself and then joined Marc at the small table. They were in the rear storage cubby with the door left open a little. "Let's begin."

Marc felt the old hatred return in full. It was ugly. "This sucks. You're the last person I should be talking to about my problems. You're the cause of it all!"

Adrian refused to accept that. "You got to marry her. She's carrying your baby. I'm still banished. Tell me again how everything went wrong for you."

Marc flushed. He tried to think of something snotty, but it wasn't worth the fight anymore. Despite everything Adrian had just said, Adrian had won and he knew it.

Adrian grunted. "That's not the least bit true. If I had won, you'd be dead, and *I'd* be married to her."

Marc drank some of his beer. When Adrian had first suggested it, Marc had hoped this would help him, but all of his old hatred was still there, waiting to rise up and spew out of his mouth to ruin what little future he had left in Safe Haven.

Adrian gave Marc a minute to get himself under control. He scanned their surroundings instead of jumping into Marc's thoughts.

The storage area was small, with fully stocked shelves built into three of the four walls that went from the floor to the ceiling. Many of those shelves

were holding items Safe Haven needed, like powdered milk barrels, bags of instant potato flakes, and jugs of water. Adrian knew Angela was looking forward to getting it all back to their island.

The rest of the storage room was empty except for a small folding table with two chairs and a lot of dust. It was obvious this cubby hadn't been used by the mission team or the rescue team. The table and chairs had been brought in a few minutes ago, at Adrian's request.

Before they arrived, Angela had told him to start therapy sessions right away. This was the best location he'd found. Adrian hadn't known about the bottom level of the submarine, but it wouldn't have made a difference. Most of these talks would make the mission men uncomfortable. It would be better that they were on the top floor, away from everyone else.

Adrian opened his beer and set it on the table. He studied Marc openly now, seeing wide cracks, self-doubt, and tons of guilt that would have to be shoveled out like manure. "I'm glad you survived."

Marc snorted. "I'll bet you are."

"I am. Some of us weren't sure that she was going to come after you guys at all. We know now she had to act that way so Reicher couldn't get in front of her, but it still placed a lot of doubt in our minds. A few of the dumber people even thought she was replacing you with one of the eager young bucks in camp."

Marc's head snapped up, eyes blazing. "Who? I'll rip their guts out!"

Adrian chuckled. "That's the side of yourself you need to hold onto. It will help you get through this."

Marc's depression returned just as fast. "This is the side of me that makes her hate me. Stop lying. She's never considered anyone else."

That was absolutely true, no matter how hard others had tried. "Since you know that, why did you allow Kendle to come between you?"

Marc was trapped by that question. In the past, he'd told everyone he thought Adrian was replacing him and he had claimed Kendle so he wouldn't be alone after that happened. Now, it was obvious that he'd lied.

Adrian waited, again giving Marc time to collect his thoughts. He expected the man to lie again, but he was hoping to get the truth out of him at some point. Only the truth would set Marc free from that ghost.

Marc suddenly wished he hadn't agreed to a therapy session. "I don't want to do this."

Adrian wasn't discouraged. Facing mistakes of this magnitude was hard for anyone, but for someone with an ego like Marc's, it was actually painful. "Shall I guess and you can tell me if I'm right?"

"No."

Adrian went on as if Marc hadn't refused. "Being with Angela is hard. She wants the best from

everyone around her, including her mate. It crushes your pride and your self-confidence to be with someone like that. You chose Kendle because in that way, she was the exact opposite of Angela. You didn't have to give her your best. You could be whoever you wanted to when you woke up that morning and Kendle was fine with it. You didn't pick her to ease your broken heart. You picked her because you were considering ending things with Angela for someone who was easier to handle, easier to manipulate."

With every word, Marc's shame grew. It was obvious that Adrian knew exactly why he had created a bond with Kendle. Marc could deny it, but that would never change the truth. "Does she know?"

Adrian quickly nodded. "I figured it out a few weeks ago. I'll bet Angela's known since it happened. Her biggest gift is understanding what makes people tick."

Marc contemplated Thalia at that moment. Reicher's daughter had also known what made humanity tick, but much like Angela, she had expected the best out of them every day. If she had been more like Kendle, Reicher's plan might have worked.

Adrian wasn't surprised by that mental admission either. Marc had been hunting for an escape from his relationship with Angela since they were kids. "She'll let you go if that's what you want. You know that."

Marc did. Angela would always sacrifice herself for someone else's happiness. It was part of what had made it so easy to walk away from her each time.

"*Is that what you want?*" Adrian was relieved that his voice didn't sound eager at all. If Marc did that, Adrian planned to fight for Angela with every breath in his body, but only in that circumstance. *I refuse to interfere this time.*

Marc caught all of that, but the usual anger didn't appear. This time, it was mostly confusion. "I don't want that, most of the time. Sometimes, I can't help it."

"That's during moments when we're in the middle of a heated battle and she's in charge, right?"

Marc nodded, voice breaking. "She's so good at it! I can't keep up with that day in and day out. Maybe you're good enough to tolerate it, but the rest of us mere mortals have weaknesses that you and she apparently don't."

Adrian chuckled softly. "You'd be surprised by how much doubt both of us carry over the decisions we've made and how we follow through with our plans no matter what."

Marc shrugged. It didn't matter if Angela doubted herself. What mattered was that he couldn't live up to her expectations of him.

"It seems to me that the only way you can be happy with her is if she's not in leadership, so that she doesn't expect as much out of you. And you know that's not what she wants, so you're torn

between the two and constantly ripping yourself, and her, apart over a choice that you can't make."

Marc drank a little more of his beer instead of answering. He didn't know what to say or how to erase the shame he felt from that.

"I assume you're aware that your choices during this run have officially removed any chance you had of leadership in her camp?"

Marc forced himself to be honest. "Some of that was intentional."

"Because you believe if you're just a camp member, maybe then you can save your marriage."

"Yes." Marc stared at him in misery. "Will that work?"

Adrian felt great sympathy for Marc. He wanted to tell the man that was a solution, but he couldn't. "You two will always know why you're just a camp member. Over time, she'll develop bitterness about it because she needs you to help her lead Safe Haven. Her unhappiness over your choices will make her pick between you and leadership."

"She'll pick me." Marc was certain of that.

"Of course, she will. We've seen that pattern repeat with her continuously. She even left Safe Haven to come find you after you chose to be with Kendle rather than to face your responsibilities with her. And you already know that choice will crush her even if it wouldn't destroy Safe Haven, which it will."

Marc slammed his hand on the table, rattling both bottles. Beer sloshed over. “I know that! Give me a solution!”

Adrian didn’t hold back. “I see three possible solutions. The first one is that you do what you’re considering. You become an average camp member and stay out of her way during the leadership moments so you don’t have to challenge her or feel guilty for your choices. That one will end in her giving up leadership and eventually a divorce because she can’t handle it. She knows she was born for that job. If you take that away from her, it will bring you both misery.” Adrian took a quick sip of his beer to wet his dry throat. This wasn’t an easy conversation for either one of them.

“Your second choice is actually harder. You can tell her the truth about why you picked Kendle, face her nonjudgmental sadness, and then tell her you’re leaving Safe Haven because you can’t handle her being in charge. That decision will also crush her, though it will take a lot longer. I don’t recommend it.”

Marc had already gone over those choices. He was hoping Adrian could give him a solution they could all live with. “What’s the third choice?”

“You live up to the expectations. You’re under the impression that it’s her expectations that are too hard, but it’s *you* who has the issues, not her. You think you have to be perfect to be the mate of someone like her, but that’s not true. As long as you try hard in your duties and stop usurping her

choices, she'll be perfectly happy with it. You have to accept your limitations and stop pushing yourself over them."

"Only part of that is true, but even if all of it were, how in the hell do I do that? She's better than me on every level. How am I supposed to live with that! I'm a man. I'm supposed to be the leader!"

Adrian was pleased that they had made it this far in with only one conversation. Adrian had thought it would take longer to get Marc to face that part of himself. "Every time you start to feel ashamed or embarrassed or even jealous, walk away. You don't contradict her, and you don't argue with her. Walk away and come find me. We'll have a conversation, much like this one, where I gently, if I can, help you see that it's *your* issue and not hers."

"I wish I could believe that."

"You will in time. If I'm not around, then you'll do this for yourself. You don't have to feel bad about who you are or who you were. Safe Haven was made for second chances; it's a place where we can erase our past and become better. I've helped hundreds of lost souls find their way, Marc. If you let me, I'll do the same for you. None of the past matters anymore. I usually say only survival does, but we both know that's not true. Having honor is a huge part of being an Eagle. You feel like you have to compete when anyone does better than you at a job, but especially when it's a female. The old world encouraged that behavior. They told you that was

what made you a man, but you've been torn about that your entire life because you've never believed it. You knew it wasn't true. You knew that wasn't fair, it wasn't right. But you still based your entire life on it, and now you're having to fight with yourself to change. Everyone I've helped has gone through the same process. You're no better, or worse, than anyone else in Safe Haven, including Angie. We're all here because we needed a second chance."

Marc's emotions were getting the better of him. He wiped away the tears that were forming. "I don't know if I can do any of that."

Adrian continued to be supportive and helpful. It was what Marc needed for this first session. Other talks might not be as mild. "Some people can't. You have the options we talked about. There are also other ways, like becoming a den mother instead of an Eagle. The important thing for you to remember is that you don't have to make a choice yet. No one is asking you to do that. The only thing you have to do right now is try to figure out what will make Marc happy. Don't think about Angela or your children. Just consider what you want from your future. Once you can settle that into a few sentences for me, we'll go from there. I'll do my best to help you find happiness."

Marc slowly agreed. "I can do that much."

"Awesome." Adrian jokingly flashed his wrist, where a watch was no longer resting. "Sorry though,

your time is up for the day. Please pay the receptionist on your way out.”

Marc laughed.

The woman standing outside the door listening to them also smiled, but she didn't make a noise to give away her presence. She didn't want Marc to know she had been listening to his therapy session.

Angela heard raised voices down the hall and went that way, feeling a little better. With enough time, Adrian could help anyone. That was his gift.

2

“You have to follow orders.”

“Slam you!”

“You're not the boss here. We don't have to do anything you say.”

Angela paused outside the theater compartment. Cate and Cody were trying to get the new children to go take a shower and change into clean clothes. Almost all of those kids were descendants. It wasn't going well.

She glanced in, evaluating the situation before entering.

The two dozen kids were wrinkled and sandy, with blood on their shoes from the trip out of the lab. They were also starting to stink. She definitely wanted them to shower and change.

She saw the older kids had claimed the couches. The younger kids were on the floor, between them

and the door. The older children were automatically using the younger kids as a defensive wall between them and anyone who came in. That bothered Angela. It was another hint of the trouble they might have while trying to undo Reicher's brainwashing.

"The alpha wants you to get ready for your medical exam." Cody didn't use his gifts against the new kids. He already knew that wasn't going to work. All it would do was trigger a magic fight.

Cate wanted to use her gifts, but Cody was standing in front of her, preventing it.

"Reicher only made us take a shower once a week."

"We already had a shower."

"I'm not wearing those duds."

"If you don't do what you're told, you'll get in trouble."

The new kids weren't bluffed by Cody's warning. They continued to argue instead of doing what they were told.

Angela put a hand on Cate and Cody's shoulders to get them to move aside. She entered and scanned the new kids.

Even one of her hardest glowers didn't get them to obey. They didn't have respect for her. She was certain if she brought Marc in that would change, but she wasn't going to rely on lab hierarchy.

The kids waited for a punishment, glaring back resentfully. None of them wanted to be on this submarine. Their lives in the lab had been easy as long as they followed orders.

“I’m not Reicher. I’m not going to torture you. What I will do is take away your gifts.” Angela did that immediately, not giving them time to fight. “I am the alpha. When you learn to respect that, you’ll get your gifts back. Until then, you’re all normals.”

Shouts of anger and fear filled the room. The children lunged to their feet and came toward her angrily.

Angela felt Marc and Adrian come down the hall, drawn by the chaos. She ignored them. “There are rules you have to follow. If you don’t, you’ll be normal forever.”

Angela remained immune to the shouts and threats, but the fear from some of the younger kids bothered her. She remained motionless on the outside and refused to let them know. This was part of why she hadn’t wanted to bring these kids along. Some of them would never change their mindsets. None of them knew the difference between right and wrong.

“Unlock me right now!”

“How can we guard you without gifts?”

“That’s not your job anymore. You get to be kids now. In time, you’ll all pick a job that you enjoy.”

Some of the younger kids were relieved by her answer. Only the older kids had protected Reicher. The younger kids had been bullied by the older kids for not being strong enough yet.

“You won’t be sacrificed for the adults in my camp.” Angela waved Adrian in. “This is your settling partner.”

The kids immediately resumed screaming and shouting. Some of them tossed items from the room toward Adrian.

Angela brought her shield up, dismayed.

“That’s a Mitchel! He’s not allowed around us!”

“Kill all Mitchels!”

Marc entered the room.

Silent obedience came immediately.

The kids had stayed together after being brought on board. They had chosen this room and hadn’t left it yet. Marc knew they had picked this area because it looked like one of the lounges from the lab. Long couches, small recliners, and a view screen on the wall were comforting to them. Marc refused to admit that it was also comforting to him. The lower they had gone in the lab, the more luxuries Reicher had provided. The movie nights had been especially welcome, for the distraction. Marc assumed the sailors who had once manned this submarine had felt the same way about this dusty theater. “Adrian will be your settling partner.”

None of the kids shouted at Marc, but it was obvious that they weren’t happy.

“Listen to him and do what he says, or I’ll remove you.”

Adrian was aware of the ugly glares. If not for Marc insisting, every one of these children would attack him. It was heartbreaking.

Marc motioned.

Adrian stepped forward to get started.

Marc and Angela listened for a minute as Adrian started retraining more of Safe Haven's orphans.

Adrian swept all of the kids, even the younger ones. "You were working for a bad man, in a bad place. You've done bad things. It's not your fault. Bad guys are sneaky. They often ask kids to do things that are wrong."

Adrian glanced toward Marc. "They often brainwash adults into doing their dirty work, as well. We won't hold that against you."

Marc nodded once in acknowledgement.

Adrian continued. "If a grownup tries to get you to do bad things again, say you will and then come tell Marc, okay? You can trust him to know what's right and what isn't."

Marc wasn't sure that was true anymore, but he gave the confused kids a smile. "I'll protect you with my life. It won't be bad for you in Safe Haven. All of us will see to that."

Adrian went to an empty chair in the corner. "I'd like to tell you a story about Safe Haven and how we survived the war. Would you like to hear it?"

All the kids wanted to, even those who acted the opposite. The older children hadn't gotten much outside information and the younger kids wanted to hear a story. Both groups were eager to please the boss while he was here watching them.

“Bad guys blew up a lot of the world and allowed other bad guys to steal kids from their families. It happened to almost everyone in our camp. You won’t be alone in that. We’ve all lost people we loved.”

Adrian’s words were already drawing in a few of the kids. They hadn’t been allowed to miss or mourn their friends and families while in the lab. They hadn’t been allowed to talk about the war at all. Doing it now was like having forbidden candy while no one was looking.

“We have a lot of orphans. We love them, like the caretakers love you.”

The kids had enjoyed being taken care of. The caretakers had often acted like parents. More of the kids settled down to listen to Adrian.

So did the adults.

Marc stayed, listening to Adrian’s words. After their conversation, listening to Adrian deal with the kids was almost magical. It was obvious why Adrian had been spared in a moment like this. No one else would be able to reach these kids the way he would; after enough time with them, they might even recover. *I understand why she let him live. This time, I agree with it.*

Angela slowly reached out and clasped hands with Marc. She didn’t say anything or send any thoughts. She just let her physical contact offer comfort.

Cate and Cody were still standing inside the theater, also listening and observing. They were

proud of Marc for seeing why Angela had banished Adrian but refused to kill him. All the children in Reicher's lab, and all the kids in Safe Haven, needed him desperately. He would be able to work his magic on some of the adults, but it was the future of the world that he was securing right now. These kids might go on to lead healthy, almost normal lives that would then guide their camp into a future that was better for everyone. It wasn't good enough to just fix the grownups. The kids would inherit everything one day. They had to be mentally sound enough to do that.

For Cate, it was a pivotal moment. Seeing how wild these kids were made her understand why she'd had to settle down, too. She was a lot better now, thanks to Angela's patience and love. She adored having a mother who cared for her.

Seeing how traumatized the adults were after time in Reicher's lab was also helpful to the twins. Over time, they might be able to forgive their own mother for not being strong enough as they watched Angela deal with Charlie, Marc, and leadership—all at the same time.

Cody had already figured out that Angela's love was helping his sister. The small amount of attention she had gotten from Marc had also helped. Cody hoped there would be more of that in the future. Cate needed firm guidance and the ethics and morals that Marc was known for. His screw-up with Kendle wouldn't be held against him by most people. In fact, it almost made him likable because

he was more approachable to them now that he had made a huge mistake. Before, Marc had seemed perfect and as he was figuring out, that was hard to live up to.

Marc caught all of that and stored it for later examination. At the moment, the contact with Angela was overwhelming his senses. “I missed you.”

Angela remained quiet and observant. She didn’t want to push him into a harder relationship yet. He’d had a good therapy session. She wanted it to last for a while.

Marc knew what she was doing. He assumed she’d been listening, but even if she hadn’t, she was smart enough to know the truth on her own. “I don’t want you to hold back because it’ll make me unhappy. Handle things the way you normally would, and I’ll deal with it.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Are you sure about that?”

Marc forced himself to nod.

Angela immediately stepped into his arms and sealed their lips.

Unexpected heat flew through the hallway, surrounding the couple and branching out into other compartments. The kids recoiled from it.

“Yuck!”

“Gross.”

The adults recognized it in relief. Everyone wanted Angela and Marc to reconcile. Safe Haven was always a better place when leadership was happy and satisfied.

Adrian hid his sadness and continued to work with the kids. He would always want Angela. There was no changing that, but he refused to act on it anymore. *I have my honor back. I'm not giving that up for her or anyone else.*

Marc and Angela didn't notice any of it. Locked in a hot embrace, all they were aware of was each other and how long they had been apart.

Angela reluctantly pulled away. She hadn't been this aroused in a long time, but she doubted he was ready to take things any farther.

Marc tugged her back into his arms. "Boy, are you wrong." He kissed her again.

Neither of them was happy when the radio on her belt crackled. "I'm picking up an SOS call, Boss."

Marc sighed against her lips. "I'd like to pick up here later, if you can schedule me in."

Angela chuckled. "I'd be happy to discuss that with you, Mr. Brady."

Marc gave her one of his special smiles. "Call me if you need me, *Mrs.* Brady."

Angela blushed happily. She went to Ray's location with a happier heart.

Marc stayed there and resumed listening to Adrian's words to the children. He'd never had a problem with the physical side of his relationship with Angela. Everything else was hard.

Listening to Adrian was a reminder that he didn't have to be perfect. Adrian certainly wasn't, and yet he had a set place in Safe Haven. *And she's*

not disappointed in him even though she is still angry about what he did. In time, she'll probably forgive him for his mistakes.

Instead of being furious about that like he usually was, Marc found he was relieved. *If she'll do that for Adrian, then I know she'll do that for me.*

Adrian gave Marc a pointed look. "Ray may need you, too."

Marc followed his wife without argument.

Adrian faced the curious, tense, angry kids alone. "Where were we?"

Chapter Three

I Drink

1

“**W**here are they?”

Ray pointed at the map as Angela took the empty seat next to him on the bridge.

Angela saw that Ray had been busy reorganizing. She didn't mind. He was going to be the main captain in here.

Dog came from under the counter and nudged Angela's hand for attention.

Dog was only being let out for bathroom breaks, but that wouldn't last much longer. He didn't like being caged any more than his owner did.

“I traced the location three times.” Ray pointed. “According to the coordinates, the boat is right there, but I haven't been able to pick it up on radar.”

“Are they still on the air?”

Ray activated the radio so she could hear it.

“Is anyone out there?! Please, someone answer me! I'm the only survivor. I need help!”

Angela listened to the man's panicked voice, trying to dig into his thoughts over the watery distance.

“Is anyone out there?! Please, someone answer me! I'm the only survivor. I need help!”

Ray lowered the volume. “It’s the same message over and over.”

“Have you tried to answer yet?”

“No, I wasn’t going to do that without your permission.”

“Try it now.” Angela hoped she would be able to get some of the person’s thoughts in case it was a trap.

Ray activated the radio. “Come in, lone survivor. We heard your call. Are you there?”

The static immediately cleared. The same panicked voice answered them right away. “Are you real?”

Ray grinned into the radio. “Real as rain. Give me your details, please.”

“There was a storm. Everyone else vanished. I think they were washed overboard. Are you sure you’re real? I don’t want any more trouble with ghosts.”

Now Ray frowned through the radio. “What ghosts?”

The man didn’t answer.

Ray looked at Angela, confused.

Angela gestured. “Keep going.”

Ray tried again, though he wasn’t sure what to say. “Are you there?”

“I’m here. I’m always here; every morning that I wake up, it’s just me. Nothing ever changes. I don’t know where I am! I miss my wife.”

Ray assumed the man was hallucinating. After a long time alone on the ocean, that was likely. “What’s your name?”

“My name? Um. I believe my name is Harvey.”

Angela was the one frowning now. “I am not getting anything at all from his thoughts. It’s like he’s not even there.”

Ray felt a cold chill. “I can go quiet, and we’ll skip his location.”

“No.” This was different than not accepting refugees from Tilly’s group. Angela couldn’t leave someone stranded on the ocean. Her guilt would never let her live with that. “Tell him we’re on the way.”

Ray wasn’t sure that was the best way to go, but he didn’t make the choices. He keyed the radio. “We’re coming to get you. Just sit tight and think good thoughts.”

“Thank you! I’ve been alone so long!”

Ray began to chat with the stranger to buy time.

Angela searched for the stranger’s thoughts and received absolutely nothing. She had never dealt with that before. Even their enemies had still registered on her magical grid when she hadn’t been able to get into their thoughts.

The door to the bridge opened behind them. Marc entered.

Dog rushed toward Marc in joy. He jumped up onto Marc’s stomach with his front paws, whimpering, whining, and rubbing his snout against

Marc's arm. *Missed you! Glad you're okay! Missed you!*

Marc chuckled as he hugged the wolf and then began to rub him all over like he used to do. "I missed you, too."

Marc hadn't been sure if his experiences with the hounds in Reicher's lab might have ruined this relationship for him. It was a relief to find out that he wasn't afraid of Dog at all. He had honestly missed his companionship. "How are you, boy? Tell me all about it."

Dog immediately began to whine as he enjoyed Marc's touch. *They wouldn't let me bring my gear!*

"I'm sorry that happened to you." Marc chuckled as the wolf continued to show his affection. He studied Angela. "Why are you keeping him in here?"

Biff came down the hall behind Marc. He opened the bridge door the rest of the way so he could see Angela. "What do you want me to do now, Boss?"

Before Angela could tell Marc to close the door, Biff spotted the wolf.

Everyone around them saw Biff's big body tense. A wave of fear crashed through his control and hit them all.

"Kill that hound!"

Biff's stone warrior appeared behind him. It stomped toward the bridge angrily, huge fists raising.

Dog growled lowly, fur rising. *What is that?!*

Marc put his body between Biff and Dog. “It’s just Dog. Stop it now!”

Biff’s fear prevented him from listening.

The stone warrior was a complete shock to everyone who saw it, except for Jayda.

Eagles drew their weapons while trying to convince themselves what they were seeing was real.

Doors slammed shut all through the submarine. The kids from the lab cowered in place or quickly hid.

Angela hurried around Marc and pushed Biff out of the bridge. She jerked the door shut right as his stone warrior reached them.

Huge fists began pounding on the steel door, demanding entrance.

Dog continued to growl.

Marc shouted at Biff again.

Out in the hallway, the appearance of Biff’s defender had interrupted everything that was going on. More people came to doorways or stepped out to discern what was happening.

As soon as they spotted the stone warrior, all of them backed away, hoping they weren’t the target.

Jayda was on duty over the bridge and Ray. She recognized Biff’s panic attack. She stepped by the pounding stone warrior as if it wasn’t there. She gently took Biff’s arm. “Pull it in now. You don’t need it here.”

It was easy to see that Biff was terrified. Jayda bonded with him immediately. She kept using a

calm tone instead of yelling like Marc and several of the others were still doing. “It’s okay now. I’m here with you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Her gentle words reassured Biff. *She sounds like Thalia, just nicer.*

“Pull it in now.”

The stone warrior vanished.

“Very good.” Jayda put her arm through his, smiling in approval. “Let’s go to the medical bay. It will help you to be around those you’ve already bonded with, at least for a few days, okay?”

Marc listened in surprise. *She has experience in crazy.*

People stared as Jayda led Biff by them without scolding him or seeming like she was afraid of the stone warrior that could have crushed her fragile body in one blow.

Biff began to calm; embarrassment took over next. “I’m sorry!”

Jayda led him toward the ladder. She could feel his tension and fear of her response. *He expects a punishment.* “I understand. Some things are just too terrifying to face alone.”

Biff relaxed. He let her take him into the medical bay, where Shawn and Harry were preparing for the medical exams. Both men had listened to the chaos without responding. They observed Jayda comforting Biff now in approval and a bit of longing. Both men wished she had been around while they were in the lab.

Jayda directed Biff to a chair in the corner. “Just hang out here until you feel better, okay?”

Biff felt exhaustion sneaking up on him. *This was a long run.* “Thank you for stopping me. I didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

Jayda patted his arm. “It’s my honor. Anytime you want to talk, come find me.”

Jayda went back to her post.

Trent was on duty on the bottom level. He stopped her at the ladder. “How did you know what he needed?”

Jayda shuddered lightly. “It’s what works for me when I see fire. I had to learn how to soothe myself. He won’t have to because he has us.”

2

In the medical bay, Harry and Shawn resumed preparing for the next medical exams.

Isabel came down the hall and stopped in the doorway. She hadn’t forgotten that she owed Harry a favor. “I can be a nurse for Safe Haven, if you want me to.”

The medical bay was getting dirty. Trash cans were starting to fill up and papers were all over the counter that needed to be sorted into files. Opened supply packages littered the floor. “I can also clean.”

Shawn frowned at her. “You can’t be trusted around our patients.”

Harry defended her. “She let Gus out of the jail. In time, she’ll be one of us. That’s what the boss wants.”

Charlie interrupted the argument. “That part of her life is over.” Charlie already knew what his mom wanted on that one. He’d caught it in her thoughts while they were still in the lab.

Charlie had come by to see if they were ready for the next patients, but the medics were still finishing the last batch. The mothers weren’t in good shape. The babies were fine, mostly, but the moms had needed a lot of minor care, like callous lotions, blood pressure medications, and vitamins to combat bone loss from being underwater so long.

Still sitting in the corner, Biff frowned. He didn’t like the idea of Isabel treating patients. He hadn’t forgotten that she and her sister had healed captives so they could go right back into Reicher’s cells.

Isabel scowled. “If I can’t be a medic, then what am I supposed to do in your camp?”

“You can help us defend it. My mom said for you to take care of your babies for now. When we start Eagle classes, she wants you in them.”

Shawn couldn’t argue with that. Training with the Eagles might bring out the best in Isabel, but it would definitely expose her if she was evil.

Harry pulled on a pair of gloves. “Her real age might be a problem. Do you see how much grayer she is now?”

Charlie opened her folder. “It doesn’t say how old you are.”

Isabel didn’t answer. She didn’t want to talk about age or looks. That hadn’t changed.

Shawn spilled her secret bitterly. “They were eating the dead to push back the aging process. She’s in her 50s.”

Charlie made a face. “We didn’t find a butchering floor.”

This time Harry revealed the secret. “The body chutes in the session rooms were made to cut things up and grind them into a slurry that got filtered and was sent through pipes to the cooks. The rest was flushed into the ocean daily.”

Shawn paused, turning toward him. “How do you know that?”

Harry shrugged. “It was Thalia’s last thought as I killed her. She assumed that’s what would happen to her.”

Shawn gave a small laugh. “In a way, it was.”

No one knew what to say to that.

Isabel slowly returned to the bunk room, where Grace was feeding her babies. Isabel’s milk had dried up, but the other mothers were used to being cows in Reicher’s twin farm.

Harry gestured. “Go find out if anyone up there needs a medic; we’ll be ready by the time you’re done. Call me if there’s something too big for you to handle.”

Charlie's stomach was rolling from the new information. He headed toward the ladder to the top deck.

Charlie saw Kenn coming down the hallway. He gave the man a sneer and went up the ladder.

Kenn stopped, surprised. He had already noticed Charlie's stiffness around Marc.

Kenn went over to Wade, who was doing a patrol of the entire sub. "What's his problem?"

"You want the long or the short?"

Kenn chuckled. "Whichever."

Wade kept walking, forcing Kenn to follow. "Things changed while you were gone. He had an affair with Monica, who left camp when Molly found out."

Kenn was shocked. "That doesn't sound like the kid I know."

"He has a man's troubles now. Charlie is trying to block out missing Tracy. He's pissed that Marc wanted to go back and erase him." Wade decided to keep going. Kenn had a right to know there was trouble on his home front. "He also let the new guy get into his head about you."

"Which new guy?"

"Tobias. He got into several minds."

Kenn caught the tone. "Tonya's, too?"

Wade didn't hold back. "He isn't the one you have to worry about, though. The other new man, Rico, was able to barter time to keep her from finding out that he's like us."

"For what purpose?"

Wade leered like men do. “So he can win her heart, of course. All the guys want Tonya now. She’s amazing.”

Kenn tensed. “And does she want them?”

Wade shrugged. “It’s hard to say. She told Tobias no flat out, but she seems to like Rico.”

One of Kenn’s military buddies had followed him. “Rico?”

Thomas had changed into the clothes he had been given. He didn’t have a weapon, however, and he didn’t look like an Eagle. Wade approved of that. The man wasn’t one of them yet. “Why?”

“Do you mean Rico Reicher?”

Wade had an instant flashback of figuring out Chad’s last name. “I don’t know. Rico hasn’t been added to the membership rolls yet.” Wade sent the military man a mental picture of Rico.

Thomas nodded. “That’s him. He went AWOL years ago. He hated the way his brother ran the lab. He said Carl was too soft.”

Wade was stunned. “Are you telling me we have Reicher’s brother in Safe Haven, without a guard?”

“It looks like it.”

Kenn gestured. “Let Jennifer know to lock him down and then slit his throat.”

Thomas added support for that. “You should. He’s worse than his brother.”

Kenn scowled. “How can he be worse?”

Thomas shrugged. “Carl Reicher was against sexual abuse in the lab for any reason. Rico was

punished for rape. He was only allowed to live because he was a family member.”

Kenn and Wade both took off up the ladder to the bridge. People quickly got out of the way.

The tension rose again, displeasing the rescue team. They knew the mission men weren't ready for more drama.

Both men entered the bridge and quickly closed the door.

“Ray’s already making the call.” Marc was still calming Dog, who didn’t understand why the others were afraid of him.

Kenn wasn’t. He reached over and stroked Dog’s ears, surprising them all.

Even Dog held still for the attention.

Kenn rolled his eyes at their surprise. “I know the difference between good and evil now.”

Charlie was standing nearby. “Yeah, now.” Charlie swept him and Marc in contempt, and then left the bridge since no one was hurt.

Charlie looked like an Eagle even though he wasn’t dressed in full gear. He carried himself differently than what Kenn was used to. *The boy is finally growing up.*

Kenn realized he hadn’t gotten an answer and repeated his question. “What is his problem?”

Ray gave him the truth. “Tobias reminded Charlie that all the men he admired have disappointed him, abused him, forgotten about him, or planned to remove him from existence through a time push.”

Marc winced. He had planned to make sure Angela didn't get pregnant until they were both older.

Ray finished it off even though he knew no one wanted to hear it. "At some point, that boy will demand justice from all of you. Get ready for it."

Angela didn't want Marc feeling worse than he already did. "Charlie has also been bonding with Adrian again and he's feeling bad for that."

Marc thought briefly of Tracy and then changed the subject. "Why isn't Safe Haven answering?"

The radio immediately lit up. "Safe Haven here. Go on with your message." Jennifer was connected to Ray through the hive and the radio. She'd been waiting for their drama to pause.

"You have a rat in the barn. His name is Rico."

Jennifer's calm voice came right back. "I already took away his gifts, at his request. He came clean right after you guys left."

Ray scowled. "Why didn't you execute him?"

"Because Safe Haven is a place of safety and of light, of duty and honor. It's a refuge for survivors. It is also a place of death and darkness, where murder and madness walk hand-in-hand."

There was silence as everyone considered her answer.

Jennifer sighed into the radio. "And also because I don't handle executions anymore. When the boss gets home, she'll decide what to do about it. Until then, Rico Reicher is a normal with a heavy

guard who won't hesitate to kill him if he steps out of line."

"Copy that."

Everyone was glad to find out that Jennifer wasn't taking chances with security. They also respected her for not taking advantage of her authority even though the man probably deserved it.

"I'm going to finish my rounds now." Wade was quickly out of sight.

"I'll go see how Thomas is doing with the food." Kenn grinned, still putting on a good act. "Lisa came in a little while ago to help. Hopefully that will allow it to be edible."

The others laughed.

Angela frowned. "Did you say Lisa is in the mess?"

Kenn nodded. "Why?"

Angela pushed by him, sending out a scan. "Because that means Greg is probably alone right now and that's dangerous. None of the mission team are allowed to be alone for a while, including you."

Angela hurried through the submarine, searching for Greg.

A wave of deep sadness and regret slapped her.

"Damn it!" Angela moved faster.

3

Greg held the knife loosely, staring at the gleaming blade. It would only take one quick jerk and then all of his mistakes would be over. No one

would be able to save him after a direct hit to the heart. Even Harry wasn't that talented.

Greg studied the mirror, hating the man he saw there.

He was standing in the farthest stall. He hoped no one coming in would find his body and be traumatized by it, especially the kids who were supposed to get showers.

Greg pulled off his eye patch and let it drop to the damp floor. He was standing with a towel around his waist as steam from the hot water floated through the room. It didn't cover enough of his reflection in the mirror, however. He could see the empty socket, but even worse was the eyeball that was still there. It glared back in hatred and insanity.

Mental cracks had opened during his time in the lab. *All those kids! And Drew...*

Greg's hand tightened around the knife.

"Greg."

Theo's voice behind him wasn't welcome. It also wasn't enough to make him drop or hide the knife. Greg didn't care who knew what he was doing. He just didn't want anyone to interfere.

Theo wasn't a descendant. He couldn't read Greg's mind, but in this case, he didn't need to. It was obvious what Greg was considering.

Instead of rushing forward and making the situation even more dangerous, Theo slowly entered and went to the shower next to Greg. He activated the water and adjusted the temperature to the way he liked it.

The shower was steamy and smelled a bit like mold. It needed a great cleaning that wouldn't happen until everyone on the submarine had taken a turn in here.

Greg glanced over, a little surprised that Theo hadn't rushed him.

Theo looked back in deep sympathy. *I almost understand why he's making this choice.*

Greg snorted softly. "You have no idea."

Theo took a towel from the shelf and put it over the shower bar. "Do you know about the explosion on our cruise ship?"

Greg nodded distractedly. "All of us got flashes when it happened."

"I was responsible for that. One careless mistake almost cost the lives of a dozen people, including Angela and her unborn baby."

Greg had seen Angela's hair was half gone and she had new scars, but he was wrapped tightly in his own misery. He hadn't realized how bad it had been. "She almost died?"

"A wire melted and caused a fire. It hit some oxygen tanks while we were trying to put it out. Angela was in the front line of that. So were Lisa and Jayda. That's why Jayda is so terrified of fire now." The same sadness and regret that Greg was carrying crossed over Theo's face. "I'll never be able to forgive myself for it. Everything they went through was my fault."

Greg reluctantly acknowledged that Theo was able to understand some of what he was feeling. In

a moment of self-defense, Greg reached out. “How do you live with it?”

Theo slid his shoes off and pushed them into the corner, out of the way of the water. “I almost couldn’t at first. I had a moment like you’re going through right now. In the end, I told myself that Safe Haven was full of people who had screwed up and that if they were strong enough to get past it, then I am, too.” Theo bent over to start removing his socks. “The rest of the time, I drink.”

Greg hadn’t known about any of this. He was distracted. The knife lowered.

Listening from out in the hallway, Angela held up a hand when Wade and Trent would have gone in. Theo was reaching Greg in ways that their violence couldn’t. As long as Theo continued to make progress, Angela didn’t want anyone to disturb them.

Wade and Trent stayed ready for the call. If Greg started to follow through, both men planned to rush him even if they were hurt in the process.

No one wondered where Greg had gotten the knife. His Eagle gear had been returned to him in a kit. All the mission team had been treated the same way.

Angela realized that had been a mistake. She should have removed all the weapons from their kits, but it was too late for that now. The mission team was armed.

Greg could feel the other witnesses now. It didn’t matter. “I’m not sure I’m strong enough.”

Theo understood completely. “That’s why I drink so much. I’m not sure if the boss knows that I have a problem, but it’s keeping me alive, and I guess my liver is a small price to pay for that.”

For a long moment, there was only the sound of the running water as the two men considered their mistakes and how hard it was to keep living with them.

Sounds from other parts of the submarine echoed now. One of those was amusement. The kids were on the way down. Something had been said that was making them laugh. The noise was an ugly reminder for Greg of what he’d done. “I killed them all.”

Theo knew it wasn’t as black-and-white as Greg was feeling. “Had you ever removed a minor before?”

Greg briefly ran through his career as an Eagle. “I had some assignments. But those were known problems.”

“The boss originally refused to bring all these kids with us. There had to be a reason for that.” Theo pulled his shirt off, but he kept it in his hand. “I assume we would have gotten removal orders for them.”

“Yes, you would have.” Angela stayed in the doorway. She gave Theo a subtle nod. “None of them could be saved, Greg. When I told you sinking this submarine would save hundreds of lives, I assumed those lives were worth saving. You already know from your time in the lab that some subjects

can't come back from what they've gone through. Everyone I left behind would have never fit into Safe Haven and in the end, I would have removed all of them. You took that burden off my hands with your choice. Please don't hate yourself for that. Hate me, like I told you to."

Greg rotated so he could see her. Honesty rolled out of his mouth against his will. "I'll never be able to hate you. You'll always have a place in my heart, even if it's a painful one. You should let me die."

Angela immediately shook her head. "I still need you. Don't puss out on me now."

Greg was startled into a laugh.

Trent was horrified. "I can't believe you just said that to him!"

Wade grinned. "Sometimes a man just needs to be called a pussy to remember that he isn't one."

Greg chuckled again; the knife lowered further.

Theo grabbed the dangling end of his shirt with his other hand and quickly whipped it forward in a wide circle.

It wrapped around the knife in Greg's hand.

Theo jerked it away, flinging the knife across the floor toward Angela.

Angela stomped on it with her boot, locking it in place against the floor.

Greg didn't seem to notice. He kept staring at her in regretful desire layered with madness.

Angela slid the knife behind her so Wade could pick it up. Then she made everyone nervous by stepping forward. She went to Greg with open arms.

“Please don’t do this again. I’ll always want you in Safe Haven. I could never hate you. You saved me from feeling this way. I owe you a huge debt.”

Greg wrapped his arms around her and bawled like a baby.

Angela held him tightly and cursed herself for sending him at all. She also cursed Reicher. *I do hope Joey is making sure you enjoy your stay in hell!*

The men in the hallway slowly entered the bathroom in case Greg snapped.

It wasn’t needed. Sadness and regret were all that Greg had left in him. At least that’s how it felt. He assumed at some point he might get angry, but that time wasn’t now.

Theo slid his shirt back on and shut off the water. It had been a great way to distract Greg so he could get the knife away from the distraught man. It had also been a moment of brutal honesty. He would be watched now, too.

Angela looked at Theo over Greg’s shoulder. “I don’t blame you for what happened. None of us do. Accidents and mistakes happen. They really are a normal part of life, and we can never completely get rid of them. Don’t give up on yourself and I won’t give up on you—on any of you. I mean that. You’re all Eagles in my army and I love you.”

Everyone listening, including those on different levels who had mentally tuned in to see what was happening, knew that was true. There wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to help them recover from

this run and from everything they had done since surviving the war. She was everything to them that Adrian had tried to be and failed at.

Chapter Four

I Have A Theory

1

“**I** think we’re here. Everyone hold on while I finish slowing this thing down.” The radio went quiet.

“He’s doing pretty well at handling this ship.” Kyle was impressed with Ray.

“I agree.” Losing Saul had been a blow, but Ray could cover most of what the Australian man had been doing. Angela was already feeling better about Ray being their main captain.

Zack and Trent also agreed, but they were more concerned about what was coming next. The four of them were all standing at the bottom of the ladder to the top side hatch. As soon as Ray finished stopping the submarine, they were going up to scan for the boat that he still couldn’t see on the radar.

They had been sailing for two hours. That time had been mostly quiet while people adjusted to this ride. Zack hoped that held throughout the entire trip. He wasn’t eager to get home yet, but he also wasn’t eager for action while they had the mission team along. Those men needed a long break, not another adventure.

Angela felt the movement stop under her feet. After weeks on the sub, she was learning to judge small things about it. The lack of movement wasn't always obvious unless you were looking for it.

Zack climbed the ladder and began opening the hatch.

Those on the top level of the submarine tensed at the noise. They knew that meant they had arrived somewhere. People peered out of doorways, dreading a call to duty.

Angela waved them off. "The mission team is on a break. Adrian is in charge. We'll be back shortly." She climbed the ladder before anyone could protest.

Now observing from the entrance of the small storage cubby, Marc held in a comment. He didn't want her off the ship without him, but he was in no condition to be part of a landing party yet. He gave Trent a hard look.

Trent nodded. He had already planned to protect Angela if anything happened, but it didn't hurt to give Marc a little reassurance. Moments like this would make the mission team feel like they weren't needed. Trent didn't want to encourage that, but he hoped it was the truth, despite some of their younger Eagles being along to gain experience.

Angela stopped on top of the submarine and moved to the side so she could get a clear view all the way around them. The ocean was flowing calmly while gently pushing the sub to the side. It made Angela wonder once again how ships were

able to stay in place with only an anchor against such a large body of water.

Kyle stood next to her and swept in the opposite direction, searching for a trap. He didn't like the coincidence of a call coming in right as they were leaving Australia.

Trent stood behind Angela and got ready to defend her. Like Kyle, he didn't believe in coincidences.

Zack was immediately distracted by the yacht.

The long racing ship was faded, with tattered sails clinging sadly to a wooden center mast with missing pieces. The white sail in front was intact, but almost yellowed completely from being in the sunlight. The black climbing poles were dented and bent. The boat itself appeared to be at least 40 feet long, but there were no signs of a skiff or a life raft.

Zack couldn't view the inside of the boat from where they were standing, but the ship itself didn't appear to have living quarters. That was a bad choice for anyone who had sailed away from a landmass in hopes of finding a better place to take shelter after the war. It was also possible that the person hadn't had another option. "That's vintage!"

Trent laughed. "Everything is vintage now."

Zack frowned. "No, I mean they didn't make those even before the war. It's really old."

Kyle gestured. "It's also damaged. I'm surprised it's still floating."

The three men waited for Angela's decision on whether or not they would try to board the antique sailing vessel.

Angela was searching for the owner of the boat. Her mental sweeps were picking up nothing... She detected a vague outline near the wheel that might have been a person, but the haze was hard to see through from here. The tall, slightly overweight brunette male shadow disappeared before she could lock onto him.

Kyle had also spotted the shadow. "Maybe they're hiding from us?"

Angela assumed Kyle wasn't picking up anything mentally either. "In this new world, that's probably the best way to meet new people—carefully and on your own terms."

All of the men agreed. Meeting new people had been encouraged in the old world. Now, it was often a death sentence.

"How are we getting aboard?" Trent eyed the distance nervously. After his ordeal in Port Stanley, Trent wasn't fond of the water anymore. Ray had stopped the submarine less than a quarter mile from the yacht, but that was still too far away. The ocean was more powerful than any swimmer. That was the reason so many vacationers at the beach had needed to be rescued when they were pulled out by the riptide.

"It will take me half an hour to inflate the RIB." Kyle didn't mention they were going through the

fuel for those RIBs too fast. Angela already knew that.

“I’m going to do something I’m not supposed to. Don’t tell on me.” Before any of the men could protest, Angela gathered energy and concentrated on the yacht that was listing heavily on the right side.

All three men observed in admiration as Angela used her gifts to pull the ship toward them. It was a slow process and draining, but it was still faster than using a RIB and it only wasted her energy instead of their fuel.

Trent grinned. “Will I be able to do that when you unlock me?”

Angela didn’t answer. She concentrated on getting the yacht close enough for them to attach a mooring line.

Zack and Kyle immediately scanned Trent in suspicion.

“You’re Invisible?” Zack had never suspected that.

Kyle had a more important question. “Why hasn’t she unlocked you yet? Did you do something wrong?”

Trent didn’t get defensive. “I don’t want to be unlocked. I need to learn how to handle myself as a normal first.”

Zack was satisfied. That was why he hadn’t immediately asked Angela to unlock him.

Kyle didn’t like it. It reminded him of how many of their enemies had infiltrated and put them

all through hell. He continued to study the man suspiciously.

Angela groaned and grunted in effort. “Get the hook!”

The three men hurried to the mooring line on the front of the submarine. The rough, heavy rope was soaked and abrasive against their hands. On the end of it was a metal hook that weighed 50 pounds and had to be balanced by all of them. The submarine didn’t have a cannon to shoot the hook over like everyone had seen in the movies. These lines had to be tossed by hand; it was awkward and difficult.

Angela couldn’t stop the yacht from bumping into the submarine. It was only moving at roughly one knot, but it still jarred all of them as it smacked into their ship. Complaints echoed from those below.

Kyle directed the hook carefully so that it didn’t damage the already battered yacht. He slid it down the inside of the yawl while Zack and Trent tied off the extra rope to keep it from going anywhere.

Angela studied the ship while getting her breath back. From a distance, the yacht had appeared much smaller. Right up against the submarine now, the yacht was long and wider than it had looked. It was also deeper than she had first thought and revealed a narrow set of steps that went into the berth where she assumed the survivor was hiding from them. She had come to the conclusion that the person was Invisible, like Trent. There was no other

explanation she could come up with for why she wasn't able to get into their thoughts at all.

The middle of the yacht had a sunroof with two broken windows and a cracked center mast that was likely to fall over at any point. The sail ropes were still wound around thick metal support poles that were shedding rust all over the ropes and the deck. It seemed sturdy enough to board.

Angela ignored her suddenly queasy stomach and signaled them forward.

Kyle led the way, stepping carefully onto the yacht. It bobbed heavily in the water under his feet and then rose right back up. He was relieved that it didn't list even further to the side. Hopefully that meant the damage underneath was light. He motioned toward Trent. "Stay there in case we need help getting back."

Trent didn't mind being left on the sub. *Something about this isn't right.* He didn't like the feeling it gave him to stare at the battered boat. *Bad things happened there.*

Angela and the others were aware of Trent's bad vibes as they boarded the yacht.

Kyle announced his presence with a firm tone. "We're from Safe Haven. You called us for help."

None of them picked up anything in response, not even waves of fear. It felt like the ship was deserted.

Kyle went down the steps first. He stopped at the bottom and did a long scan.

Once again, he didn't find signs of life. "This is Safe Haven. You called us for help. Come on out now."

When there wasn't an answer, Kyle went deeper into the ship.

Zack came down next. He was amazed by the ship. Vintage was an understatement. A quick glance showed old appliances and even older paneling and supplies. A rank odor hit him next. "What is that smell, and where is it coming from?"

Angela shrugged instead of telling Zack it was the smell of death. Tilly and all her group had been carrying that odor from spending so much time living in a tomb. She was a bit surprised that he didn't recognize it.

Zack followed Kyle, sniffing to locate the source.

Angela rotated at the bottom of the steps to clear the tiny front space that had two small windows covered in layers of filth and grit. It was so thick on the glass that she wasn't able to see through it. This front section held a small desk built into the wall and a small stool, but there was no radio. *How is that possible?*

Angela studied the paperwork laying around; it was extremely brittle and yellowed even though the sunlight couldn't penetrate down here. Everything in this compartment looked like it had been here for decades instead of a year and a half. Angela made a mental note to collect any logbooks that might be inside the small drawers.

She scanned the pictures on the wall next, matching the man in most of the photos to the shadow she had seen on the top deck, but none of them had any text to tell her who he was or when those photos had been taken. All she could tell from them was that the man had been a little overweight, married, and wealthy. The wedding ring on his finger was gold around diamonds, and his wife was wearing a fur coat.

Angela admired the chipped wood and gold paneling that still gleamed in places, proclaiming this a once expensive vessel. Tiny, filthy portholes near the ceiling on each wall gave enough light for her to see two bunkbed benches stacked on top of each other along one wall. On the other side was a vinyl bench she assumed folded out into a table. Photos on these walls were the same as in the front compartment, but they showed the man holding trophies that she assumed had been won in this vessel. It looked much the same in the photos as it did now—grainy, blurry, and old.

Zack came back through the ship. “There’s no one here. We can’t find anyone.”

He began opening cabinets and drawers, and lifting ragged vinyl mattresses to make sure no one was hiding inside any of those locations. Angela could hear Kyle doing the same in the rear compartment.

Angela stepped around Zack and went to join Kyle.

The rear berth was a small, narrow space that held a tiny cubby with an ancient rust-filled toilet. She wasn't sure exactly how bathrooms worked on any of their vessels, but this boat was so small that she doubted it had any real plumbing. The floor, however, was dry and dusty. The toilet obviously didn't drop straight into the ocean, otherwise it would have backed up into the ship and sunken it.

Kyle had knelt down to finger the dust covering the floor. "This looks like sand from a beach. How do you get sand inside a ship this far away from land?"

Angela didn't have an answer. She studied the small sink and racks of unbroken wineglasses above it. Everything was covered in dust and grit. Next to the sink was a deep freezer. She wanted to open it to verify no one was inside, but she was positive that Kyle had already done so. She could see his prints in the dust on it. "Was there anything in there?"

"The freezer and refrigerator are completely empty. Whoever outfitted this boat didn't have access to a generator or maybe enough fuel to run those items. Or maybe they couldn't find anything to put in them."

That didn't make sense to Angela. A boat on the ocean had access to fish. Not having enough fuel to run it did make sense, though. She turned back toward the middle compartment, where Zack was now exploring the vintage boat.

"Hang on, Boss." Kyle pointed at the cabinets. "You should check that out."

Angela opened the cabinet over the sink. It was completely full of canned goods and boxes.

She gently pulled one of the boxes out and stared at it in surprise. “They haven’t made these in a long time. The SamAndy Foods company went out of business 50 years ago.”

Kyle wasn’t done. “Look at the dates on the canned goods.”

Angela replaced the box and picked up a can with a faded label that swore low-moisture raisins were good for the heart. She immediately noticed the difference in the feel. It was a lot lighter and differently shaped than the canned goods she had bought before the war. The date stamp on it was barely legible. “Sell by July 5, 1961.”

A cold chill went over Angela’s neck.

“I have a theory.”

Angela was eager to hear anything that would help this make sense. “Okay.”

“Maybe someone was trying to get away from a nearby landmass and this was the only vessel they could find. There was no point in emptying it beforehand or maybe they didn’t have time. If they came from Australia, it would also explain all the sand and dust all over everything.”

Angela wanted to believe that theory. She reluctantly denied it. “Where would they have found a stocked vintage boat that hadn’t already been destroyed by the weather or the beach mobs?”

Kyle shrugged. “I said I had a theory, not a definite answer. Though we found a stocked cruise ship...”

“Fair enough.” Angela moved toward the steps. “I have a theory about where they went.”

Kyle followed her. “Hit me with it.”

“In the call, the man said he missed his wife. Maybe he went overboard searching for her.”

Kyle held in a shudder. “If that’s true, we made this stop for nothing.”

Angela quickly climbed the ladder. “Very likely, yes, but we’ll still hang out here for a little while, in case he gets lucky.”

Everything looked the same as they came back up from exploring the yacht, but it didn’t feel that way. There was a new tension in the light breeze that wasn’t welcome.

“I’ll take first watch if you like.”

“I would. Keep Trent out here with you. He needs to work on his fear of water.”

Trent heard that and flushed, but he didn’t argue.

Zack came up last. “What do you want to do with this boat?”

Angela carefully climbed over the hook. “There isn’t a reason to take it with us as damaged as it is. If it was in better shape, we could tow it.”

Zack understood that choice. “Maybe we should take it anyway. We might need it later. I might even be able to do some repairs on it, with the help of Kenn’s new Navy friend.”

Angela gave in reluctantly. “Fine. If the owner doesn’t show by morning, we’ll take it with us.” There was little danger of losing it since they had no plans to go fast or to go under the water. Saul had left instructions on how to dive, but Angela didn’t want to do that unless it was absolutely necessary. “Check for fuel tanks.”

“Yep.” Zack stopped near the hook and knelt as something shiny caught his attention. He picked it up, staring in surprise. “I think this is a piece of gold.”

None of the others were impressed with his find. They got back onto the submarine.

Zack stared. The shape was familiar, but he couldn’t place it. The gold nugget had obviously been reformed by human hands. “I guess we don’t need to collect this anymore.”

He still slid it into his pocket and then went to check the fuel tanks that were sitting near the mast at the rear of the yacht. This was a sailboat, but fuel was required to run the appliances.

Trent continued to stand watch as they got things set. His bad feeling grew stronger. *Something’s really not right here.*

He scanned the sky, where a bright green and gray cloud mass was slowly creeping toward them. “It looks like there’s a storm coming, Boss.”

Angela swept the distance. The cloud mass hadn’t been there when they first arrived, but it was only taking up a small portion of the sky at this point. She decided not to worry about it.

Kyle had another issue for her to cover. “What are we telling everyone about the call?”

Angela looked around. “We don’t need the mission team freaking out over any of this. Tell them we didn’t find anyone, which is true. Keep the rest to yourselves.”

Trent nodded.

Zack paid no attention. He was completely distracted now by exploring the top of the yacht.

“We’re an hour or so away from sunset. Get us set to spend the night here.”

Kyle held in a protest. As far as he was concerned, they needed to leave now.

Angela lifted a brow. “Do you have a reason to feel that way?”

Kyle reluctantly shook his head. “It’s nothing I can put my finger on.”

“Your upset stomach is so noted.” Angela grinned, trying to break the tension.

It made Kyle’s frown increase until his eyebrows came together. “Whatever you say, Boss.”

Angela sighed. She didn’t feel good about staying here either, but if the owner of the boat had gone overboard, she didn’t want to sail off and leave them. “If it was one of us stranded, we would want our rescuers to stick around for a little while, you know?”

“Sure.” Kyle pushed away the bad feeling. “We’ll handle things here. Good luck handling things down there.”

Angela chuckled as she descended the ladder, but she wasn't amused.

2

Wade met Angela at the bottom of the ladder. "They just sent word. Gus is waking up."

Angela headed toward the medical bay. "Update me."

Wade followed her. "The first round of medical exams are finished. Harry said they didn't find anything we need to worry about right now."

"All the kids are okay?"

Wade smiled. "Yes. Adrian even got them through their showers and into clean clothes, but they refused to go into the general bunks with everyone else. We're letting them stay in the theater, like you said."

"That's fine for now. Is Biff with Adrian?"

"Yes, and Marc too."

"Who's with the kids?"

"Believe it or not, Dog and Charlie. The kids don't have the same fear of canines that the adults do. As soon as they saw Dog, they started acting like kids again. Charlie's keeping me posted on things in there."

Angela went down the ladder to the bottom level. "Tell Ray to prep us for a small storm. Make sure we don't leave this spot."

"Did you guys find anyone on the yacht?"

“No, that’s why we’re staying overnight. We think they went overboard looking for others who were washed off their ship.”

Wade doubted they would surface again. The ocean was no place to go for a swim.

Angela agreed with that, but she didn’t say so. “Anything else?”

“They got food ready for everyone. Your portion is being kept warm, along with bowls for Zack, Kyle, and Trent.”

“Bring them in when the storm gets here, or when it gets dark—whichever one comes first.” Angela slowed as she approached the medical bay. She liked to listen before interfering. So far, that was a solid strategy with the mission team. “I want the doorway blocked off to the reactor and generators. You can pile the supplies there. It’s a good place for the stuff from the lab to be sorted, too.”

“You got it, Boss.” Wade left to handle those things.

Angela passed the small dry goods storage compartment with a fast glance inside that revealed Theo and Greg sitting at a small table. They were sharing a bottle of whiskey and a conversation. She didn’t order them to stop drinking, though she was certain she would have to make a call on it in the near future. Right now, both men needed the companionship with someone who understood what they were going through. Angela had her own moments of depression, but she doubted the men

would welcome her. Right now, they were both feeling like no one else understood them.

Angela entered the medical bay and went to the corner, out of the way. Harry and Shawn were in the middle of updating the files of the patients she had sent in earlier.

The bay was filthy now. Garbage had spilled over onto the tile floor. Stacks of papers and folders were all over the counters and trays, and the smell of the antiseptic from the thermometers was thick. It was obvious that this exam room had gotten a lot of use. Angela was surprised by it. She hadn't expected the men to get so much done in just a few hours.

Angela went to the small isolation area; she was able to hear the soft murmurs of conversation coming from it. She had asked Piper to stay with Gus until he woke up. Piper had been on duty over their captains and Angela. She was completely trusted, as was Erin, her neighbor from their Cayman Islands stop. They'd even guarded Tonya from a mob. Angela was thrilled with both of those women.

Angela peered in and saw Gus sitting up on the gurney. He had a bowl of food in his lap that he was consuming with gusto. Angela stayed there, listening.

Gus quickly swallowed the bite, fighting chills. "This is good!"

During his time in the lab, he had survived on ration bars that were given to the prisoners. He hadn't enjoyed the food the way the others had.

Piper scooped another bite from her own bowl. "It tastes like the old chicken soup that my mom used to make before she had her heart attack and couldn't spend time cooking anymore."

Gus groaned as his stomach cramped. "I ate too fast."

Piper took his mostly empty bowl when he held it out. She set it on the tray and then tugged his blanket up so that it covered his big, scarred shoulders. She could see him shivering. She put a hand on his cheek and quickly pulled away. "You're too hot!"

Gus groaned. "I don't feel well."

Piper consulted the notes Harry had sent in for her. "He says it's probably normal for you to have a reaction to the vaccine."

She picked up a small bottle from the tray and began measuring out a dose. "Some Tylenol should help you through."

Gus was suddenly exhausted. He leaned back and shut his lids. "Is it okay to mix it?"

Piper shrugged. "As far as we know. Harry looked through the medical books, but there wasn't much to find. The work being done in Reicher's lab was top-secret."

Gus took the dose of medication and then settled under the warm blanket. He was willing to trust Harry. Being out of the lab was a relief. It was also

great to not feel so angry. Being tired was wonderful in comparison to being out of control and dangerous all the time.

Piper noticed Angela.

Angela lifted a brow. *Are you ready for a break?*

“Nope.” Piper liked helping and there wasn’t much else she could do right now. It also kept her away from Dace. She enjoyed their relationship, but she didn’t want to rub it in to anyone else. Being on the submarine in such close quarters made it awkward for everyone during the moments where Dace wanted to be affectionate.

Angela scanned Gus and was thrilled to discover the lack of rage in his mind. It seemed like the vaccine was working. She didn’t like the side effects he was going through, however.

She joined Harry and Shawn at the counter. “Is it really normal for him to feel that way?” Her own medical knowledge was lacking in that area. Pharmaceutical companies had sent new drugs to the hospitals and the administrators had sent down the instructions for their use. Side effects had rarely been discussed.

Harry gave the same answer. “As far as I know. There’s not much literature on it.”

Shawn scowled. “That’s because the old government didn’t care if patients had reactions to their shots. They only cared about how much money they made for injecting all of us!”

“I assume you believe the shots were responsible for autism in kids?” Harry clearly didn’t feel that way.

Shawn slapped the folder onto the counter. “Yes! Giving a child 48 shots of chemicals before they reached the age of 10 was insane. All we had to do was compare that to the rise in autism rates. It matched perfectly!”

Harry glared. “Correlation does not equal causation. There were a lot of factors you’re not including in there, like diet, parental ages and habits, and environmental exposure to other toxins.”

“Bullshit! If you see someone drink from a well and then they fall over dead, it just makes sense to assume the water is poison.”

Harry was already tired of the subject. “Well, we are not like the old government. If we start using vaccines again and we see problems, then we’ll stop and do the research. We also won’t shame anyone for having a different theory and we won’t continue to use a product that hurts people. Happy now?”

“No!” Shawn immediately took the other side of the argument. “What happens if we have an outbreak that kills everyone?”

Harry smacked his folder against the counter this time. “Then I guess we’ll all die, won’t we?”

Angela slipped out of the medical bay before either of them could involve her in that argument. She wasn’t worried about the emotions either man was showing. There was a big difference between anger and passion.

She did have her own opinions and theories about the topic they were debating, but there was little use in wasting her time on it right now. Harry was right that they wouldn't keep using something that was hurting their citizens, but Shawn was also right in that correlation often *did* equal causation. The old-world governments hadn't cared and that's why they had stopped all research into any cause that might have made them shut down their programs.

They had claimed vaccines saved millions of lives and in most cases, that was true, but their unwillingness to admit that some vaccines were more harmful than helpful was one of the reasons so many citizens had distrusted the government. *I don't ever want things to be that way in Safe Haven. I want people to know that no matter what we're going through, I will try to protect each individual life as if it were my own. I don't believe that the good of the many should outweigh the good of the few. I love them all.*

Wade came back in time to catch that. He smiled. "Your belief that we're all important is part of what makes you such a great leader."

Angela returned his smile. "And your ability to know what a woman needs to hear is part of why all the men in my camp want to be like you."

It was a good moment for both of them. They hoped it would last through the coming storm and into the night.

Neither of them thought it would.

Chapter Five
You Can Trust Me

1

“I’m ready to eat now. Keep an eye on things for me.”

“You got it.” Wade resumed his continuous rounds of the submarine. He was getting great exercise today. He had little doubt that he would sleep well when she finally pulled him off duty.

Angela went to the galley. It could easily hold more than 200 people at a time; only having a couple dozen in here made it look almost deserted.

Over the week they had spent traveling here, Angela had kept her crew busy with a basic clean of the top level. This bottom level needed the same attention. There was dust all over everything, including the round tables. Most people didn’t care, though a few of them had wiped off the surface before they sat with their trays and began to eat.

Angela saw the military men were still wearing the same clothes they had been in upon leaving the lab. Everyone else had showered and changed into the outfits Angela had brought along. Some of it didn’t fit right, but all of it was clean and none of it would remind them of their time in captivity. She needed to get the military men to do the same.

Looking at them was a reminder none of the mission team needed.

All of the military men were sitting together at a long table along the wall, except for Thomas, who was serving those in line at the counter. It smelled wonderful. Whatever the Navy man was cooking was making her stomach growl.

He looked happy to be here. The other military men didn't. They were studying everyone with sly gleams that implied they were thinking bad thoughts.

Angela scanned the room again and found the three subjects she had brought along sitting at a small table in the corner by themselves. Those men were gulping down the food so fast that they were gasping in air between bites. Their thin bodies were hard to look at. She assumed Reicher hadn't been feeding them for a reason, but she didn't know what it was yet.

Nearby, Goldie and Isabel were sharing a table and a meal but not talking. She doubted they had much to say to each other. Despite a common bond of wanting to save their children, they were different in almost every other way. Their biggest similarity at the moment was pain from their injuries. They were both scarred, beaten, and bruised.

Shawn, Harry, Biff, and Kenn were at a table together and they were talking. Their conversation echoed through the mess and brought comfort. They were discussing the positive results of the exams

that had been done today. It was a relief to find out none of them were carrying anything that could be spread to the rest of the people on this sub. No one had life-threatening injuries. Everyone would survive Reicher's reign.

Angela also spotted Harry's displeasure, though he was trying hard to hide it. He hadn't gotten to use his new gifts; it hadn't been needed.

She saw him twitch as she entered the food line. She knew that was a normal reaction, but she couldn't help feeling guilty over it.

Silence fell among the mission men as they watched Angela.

Everyone else continued what they'd been doing. Very few of them even noticed her arrival. It was a huge difference from the way she had always been greeted in Safe Haven. Angela wasn't sure if she liked it.

Thomas smiled at her and quickly retrieved the large bowl he had set aside. He put it on a tray and poured her a cup of milk. "I hope you like it."

Angela inhaled deeply. "If it tastes as good as it smells, I'll be stuffed when I waddle out of here."

Thomas grinned in pleasure. "Then I did it right."

Angela picked up her tray, eyeing the various containers on it. She wasn't keen on tasting most of them. She went to the long center table and sat. For a brief instant, it felt like she was at home.

Kenn got up and joined Angela, bringing his coffee mug. He sat across from her and stared.

Angela glared at him. “You’re not even going to let me eat?”

Kenn flushed. “I need to get this out of the way. It’s important.”

Angela sighed in resignation. “Fine. What’s on your mind?” She scooped a large bite of the chicken soup and began eating.

“Several things.” Kenn pushed the saltshaker closer to her. In his opinion, the soup needed it. “I’d like to talk about Tonya first.”

Angela was a little surprised he had chosen that conversation over the other desire flashing in his brain like a neon sign. She swallowed her bite and then picked up the saltshaker. He was right. It needed it. “I’ll support whatever decision she makes. If she decides to leave you, then you’ll have to learn to live with it. If you get out of hand, like you did with me, you’ll be removed. There is no other option.”

Kenn smiled in relief. “Thank you.”

Angela understood he was afraid of reverting to his old self. Despite everything he had done to her, she was sympathetic. “Tonya loves you. I doubt you have anything to worry about. Just continue being a good person and giving her the support that she needs, and everything should be fine.”

“I heard about Tobias and Rico.”

Angela scooped another bite as her stomach growled again. “When humans are lonely, outside attention is often welcome. When they’re not, it gets shut down on the spot. You’ve seen how it works.”

Kenn wasn't satisfied with that. "She was a cheater when we met. How do I know that won't continue?"

Angela snorted out hard laughter. "That's rich coming from you."

Kenn flushed. He was a cheater, not Tonya. The true concern flew out of his lips. "Would she be better off without me?"

Angela immediately nodded. "Of course. You're always going to be able to lead her into temptation because she loves you. If you stepped aside, she would become one of the most valued members of Safe Haven. We need her more than we've ever needed you."

Kenn tried not to be crushed. "I'll think about it."

After having been with Kenn for so long, Angela knew exactly how to handle him. He was the only member of the mission team she felt that way about. "You're still a selfish, conniving, self-serving son of a bitch, you know?"

Silence fell through the mess as her words echoed. The military men looked over in surprise.

Kenn's face tightened. "Yes, I do!" It was a struggle to hold onto his calm demeanor.

Angela pushed harder. "Why are you pretending like everything's fine? Is that the old Kenn trying to get out again?"

Kenn quickly denied that. "I just don't want to freak out like everyone else is doing."

Angela's voice hardened. "I've never known you to be afraid of anything, Grunt. What the hell is your problem?!"

Kenn's control over his emotions failed. Shockingly, tears filled his eyes. He didn't say anything, but the sight of his misery rolling down his cheeks proved he was traumatized.

Angela felt bad for doing it, but it was necessary. She continued to use a hard voice with him because that was the only thing Kenn had ever responded to. "You're going to recover. I have faith that you can do it. Remember who you are and where you came from, and spend time with Adrian. That's an order. You may not like what he has to say, but it will help."

Kenn was relieved. He also hated her for being able to ignore his pain. He deserved that and more for the way he had treated her and Charlie, but it was still hard to handle.

Angela refused to show more sympathy to him. If she did, he would take it as an opening for a future that they would never have. It would also send him back into the mental state that was allowing him to deny he had been severely abused in Reicher's lab. For Kenn to be able to get over this, he had to face all of it.

Kenn wiped his face, aware of everyone in the mess observing him in surprise. He was always a hardass; these emotions were unexpected. "I don't want to stop scroll diving."

This was the conversation that Angela had been dreading. She didn't want him to stop scroll diving either. The information he would bring back would be amazing and invaluable. "It comes at too high of a cost. When you're down there, you don't care about anything else. You ignored Tonya's misery and you were willing to seduce away one of my camp members to come and be a captive in the lab so you could continue your research. I can't allow that, Kenn. You have to stop now, or I'll lock you up."

Kenn knew she meant locking his gifts and not physically. He still pushed up from the table with an ugly glare.

Angela's orbs turned bright red. "Don't make me kill you. You already know I want to. I've wanted to for a long time. If you break our truce, I will."

In a physical fight, Kenn had no doubt about being able to beat her. He'd done it many times before. Her training in Safe Haven meant nothing compared to his size and skills. Her gifts, however, were unmatched. He reluctantly sat back down.

Angela resumed eating, waiting for him to say the magic words.

Kenn suddenly understood what she wanted. He balked mentally, but in the end, there wasn't a choice. "What if I only do it when you say I can?"

Angela acted as if she was just now considering that idea, when in fact, it was what she had been

pushing for. “If I could trust you to keep your word on that, I would consider it.”

Kenn immediately brightened. “I’ll only go in when you tell me to, I promise. You can trust me.”

Angela didn’t snort or ridicule him this time. She’d gotten what she needed. Now it was time to be nice. “I’ll let you know in a few days. Until then, leave it alone. Show me you’re strong enough to do it and I’ll be a lot more likely to agree.”

Kenn swallowed a protest. He wanted to go to his bunk and dive right now. “I’ll try hard.”

Angela gave him a small smile. “Good. Now go away so I can finish eating.”

Kenn left the table, but he didn’t leave the mess. He wasn’t sure he could trust himself if he was alone. He went back to the table with Biff and the two medics and tried not to think about how much he wanted to be lost in his brain.

Angela felt the other military men wondering why Kenn tolerated her leadership. A couple of them even sent him mental support for a takeover.

Angela let it go. *I’ll fry them later.*

Silence fell as more people entered the mess. Then the hoots and catcalls started.

The women cringed from the loud, crude comments. It reminded them of the riot in the lab where many of their fellow breeders had been attacked and then removed. They hurried to the counter for trays.

The military men continued to make inappropriate comments.

Angela sighed. *Maybe I should fry them now. I'll handle it.* Kenn went to the table and opened fire with his mind.

Military men froze or groaned in pain. They didn't fight back.

It told Angela they were used to being corrected that way. She was a bit surprised they were tolerating the punishment from Kenn, though. She assumed he had become their leader while he was in the lab.

She got up and left, taking her bowl of soup along. *I don't want to treat my subjects that way. I use pain for control in rare situations. I can't let that become the norm.*

Behind her, the new refugees approved of Kenn's tactics.

The Safe Haven people observed in concern. Like Angela, they didn't agree with that control method.

Angela went to the bunk room next. She stopped in the doorway as usual, scanning before entering.

The bunk area was able to hold twice the amount of people as the galley. A few of these dusty beds already held someone's gear or kit, but most of them were empty. It was eerie to her that all the beds were still neatly made with a blanket rolled at the bottom, near a small footlocker. The submarine had once held hundreds of men and women serving in the military. She doubted any of them were still alive.

Cody handed another piece of tape to Cate. “We’re almost finished.”

Cate and Cody were once again dressed identically. If not for Cate’s hair being shorter, it would have been difficult to tell them apart. In the future, Angela expected the twins to use that to their advantage. She hoped it would only be to play pranks, and not for nefarious purposes.

Angela saw their crayon drawings all over the walls and bunks. She took another bite of her cooling soup as she studied them. She barely understood the shapes and symbols. *I need to learn that language.*

Cody took the last drawing over to the center row of bunks. “Which one is yours?”

Angela hadn’t chosen a bed yet. She swallowed the bite. “You pick it.”

Cody put the picture on the bars of a center bunk.

Cate taped it into place.

Angela concentrated. “Nightmare wards?”

Cody nodded. “Everyone will get good sleep tonight.”

Angela scooped another bite. “How long will they last?”

Cate came over to her. “A few weeks. Then we’ll have to do new ones.”

Angela quickly shoved the bite into Cate’s mouth.

Cody laughed. “She knows you didn’t eat yet.”

Cate chewed and swallowed, making a face.
“Chicken. Yuck!”

Angela laughed with Cody, but it did concern her a little that Cate didn't seem to enjoy any meat. She needed the protein.

“I miss hotdogs.”

Angela put the bowl into Cody's hands. “Finish that. Get her to take a few bites.” Angela got her notebook out and began making notes. She was certain they could figure out how to make hotdogs. It would just take some research and some work.

Cate ducked so Cody had to take the next bite. She reached out and rubbed Angela's belly bump. “How's the baby?”

Angela tensed. “No contact yet... It's a bit early.”

Cody immediately scanned her for problems.

Angela waited with her heart in her throat.

“Nothing wrong that I can see.” Cody gave her a stern look. “Go see Harry.”

Cate's mouth opened to echo that order.

Cody shoved a bite in.

Angela snickered. “Good job.”

Cate made another face, but she ate it.

Cody motioned toward the door with the empty spoon.

Angela reluctantly gave in. If the news was bad, she would be crushed once again. *But I'll handle it better because I'm not really bonded to it this time. I've protected my sanity.*

Cody took a bite, then handed the mostly empty bowl to Cate. He studied the bunks, searching for any areas they'd missed.

Cate made herself eat the rest of the food. Her new mommy wanted it and Cate wanted her new mommy to be happy.

Cody nodded. "So do I. We have to help her keep the baby. If it dies, we might lose her."

"Why?"

"She's acting like it doesn't matter, but it's the most important thing in the world."

"Because of Sarah?"

"Yes." Cody smiled. "We'll love her and teach her to be kind. The Creator will be happy when he returns."

"What if she's mean?"

Cody began gathering the garbage. "We can't let that happen. She'll be stronger than us. If she's mean, she might destroy the rest of the world."

"Then no mommy again?"

"Exactly."

2

Dog fell in as Angela walked through the submarine.

Dog was putting on weight from lack of exercise. The small paunch hanging from his stomach was a sign that being cooped up in the submarine wasn't good for him. Angela was looking forward to reaching their destination so he

could run free again. She reached down and rubbed his ears. “It’s good to have you back on duty.”

I’m staying away from the others.

“Good. I’m sorry they’re scared of you. We have to give them time to adjust.”

Dog looked up at her in concern. *What if they don’t?*

Angela had already considered that possibility and refused to accept it. “They will. We just have to remind them that you’re one of us.”

Dog was satisfied with that explanation. He stayed next to her, big head swinging back and forth in search of threats. *Why don’t you have a guard right now?*

Angela chuckled pointedly. “I do. Some of the others just may not like who it is.”

Dog dropped back a little as she reached the medical bay. He could hear people inside.

“Damn.” Angela wasn’t happy to find Harry and Shawn back here already.

The medical bay smelled like antiseptic again. Many of the folders and files had been put away and the trash was bagged up. It needed to be taken to the incinerator, but she didn’t want most of the crew near that area yet. It was still a bad reminder of everything they had gone through during their cruise to the island.

Harry waved her in. “What can I do for you, Boss?”

Angela stayed in the doorway. She thought fast. “Dog needs a checkup.”

Dog looked up at her in surprise. *What did I do to you?*

Shawn and Harry spotted the wolf behind her at the same time. It didn't affect Shawn as badly. He feared the hounds they had faced in Reicher's lab, but he knew Dog wasn't a threat to them. He still scowled deeply. "Get him out of here!"

Angela studied Harry's reaction. His whole body had tensed, and his hands were clenching into fists. He was in the middle of gathering energy for a vicious defense. "Stop. Think. Don't let the fear control you."

Harry lifted his deformed hand and clenched the remaining fingers. He didn't rant at her or make threats. He didn't need to. He kept gathering energy for a nasty spell that would kill the wolf with one shot.

Angela brought up her shield to cover herself and Dog. She didn't leave, however. She had thought of a way to get Harry through his fear a little easier than with some of the others. "You have a lot of new gifts. Are any of them the x-rays, like Morgan can do?"

Harry didn't want to hurt Dog. He fought the fear. "I hadn't gotten that far yet."

Angela was impressed by how Harry was controlling himself. His entire brain was screaming at him to do something before he was attacked again. "Do I have to hurt you for you to be able to make an advancement?"

Harry was distracted a little more. “I don’t know. I’ve been considering that a lot, but I haven’t come up with an answer.”

Angela forced a hard tone. “What if I threaten you with removing your ability to do any of it? Would that be enough?”

Harry’s fear switched targets. “Don’t shut me down, Boss! Please!”

Angela slowly lowered her shield. “I want you to make sure his insides are okay.”

Harry looked at Dog again. The fear returned, but it couldn’t match the worry about not being able to use his gifts anymore. He concentrated from where he was standing.

Dog sat next to Angela and waited patiently. He had faith that she would bring her shield up in time if Harry’s fear got the best of him. As long as it didn’t, Dog was fine with being a test subject. *If this works, no more probing!*

Angela chuckled softly. “For both of us.” She didn’t want an invasive medical exam either.

In the small rear room, Biff came to the door. When they had returned from the mess, he’d gone in to sit with Gus, but the sick man was sleeping now, and Piper had gone to get food. Biff studied Dog from the entrance, also fighting his fear. *I know that’s Dog. I know he won’t hurt me. I also want him dead. How do I get over that?*

All of the alert descendants in the room caught that.

Biff was horribly embarrassed about his earlier outburst, but he didn't think he could control himself right now either. He went back in with Gus and sat in the chair where he couldn't see Dog at all.

Angela was pleased that Biff had managed to do that much without striking out. "You're all doing an amazing job. I mean it."

Harry glowered. "That isn't helping me."

Angela shrugged. "You're going to have to figure out how to do it without abuse at some point."

Harry's concentration broke. He sighed. "It's not going to work."

Angela looked at the wolf. "You do it." She gestured toward Harry.

Dog whined. *They're already scared of me.*

"I know. That's why it will work. At least something good will come out of it."

Dog pawed the ground in frustration. *I don't want to do this!* A low growl came out of his throat.

Biff immediately stood up.

Shawn shifted between Biff and Dog. He understood what Angela was trying to do.

Harry's fear took over. It pushed him through the mental door where he was able to access the new ability. Immediately distracted, he opened the gift in his mind and began scanning the wolf from ears to tail.

Angela started to rub Dog's fur again. "Thank you."

Dog pulled away angrily. *Do it yourself next time!*

“Not unless I absolutely have to.”

Harry smiled. “There’s nothing wrong with him that I can see.”

Dog turned his tail toward Angela. *She’s the one who needs the exam. She lied to you.*

Now Angela looked down in wounded surprise. “That was mean!”

Dog padded off with his ears up and his tail down. *Now you know how it feels.*

Biff and everyone else relaxed as soon as the wolf was out of sight. Harry even gave a small chuckle. “So, you’re next, huh?”

Angela reluctantly entered. “I haven’t felt any movement yet and my stomach is staying upset. I’m sure it’s all normal.”

Harry gathered more energy and scanned her for problems. A huge smile stayed on his face. *I learned a new gift and I didn’t lose any body parts or my mind. This is awesome!*

Marc appeared behind Angela. She felt him arrive, though he didn’t speak or interrupt them.

Tension refilled the medical bay as Harry’s smile faded.

Angela braced for bad news.

Marc put a hand on her shoulder to offer comfort.

“It’s a girl.” Harry forced himself to continue. “Mothers usually can’t feel the movement until the fourth month, so you are a little early...”

Angela could tell there was more by his tone. “But?”

Harry met her eye. “But the baby isn’t moving at all. I couldn’t detect a heartbeat.” Harry hurried to offer platitudes as sadness crossed her face. “It was my first time using this gift. I may have overlooked things. Let me do a normal exam.”

“I’ll come back to you in a couple of weeks for that, sooner if something changes. Keep working with the new gift so you get better at it.” Angela stepped by Marc and continued down the hall. “I’ll be around.”

Marc watched her shoulders for signs that she was crying, but there wasn’t any. He also didn’t feel any sadness or depression. It was almost like she didn’t care.

Marc recognized the defense mechanism. It reminded him strongly of being in the lab. All of them had developed defenses to keep from facing the horror. He suddenly felt closer to her than he had since the rescue. *Maybe she can understand.*

Harry looked over at Marc. “But can she help us?”

Marc sighed deeply. “That has not been revealed.”

Chapter Six

Nothing Else Will Work

1

“**T**he storm is almost here. Should I call the boss?”

“No.” The clouds were thick and puffy, with gray edges surrounding the green in ominous protection. Kyle studied the calm water under that angry sky. “There’s no need to alarm anyone. It looks like it’s just in the air.”

“Okay.” Trent had never seen a storm that didn’t reach the ground. The greenish mass was nearly over top of them now, but it was having absolutely no effect on the ocean. Peaceful waves were lapping softly at both vessels.

Zack was aboard the submarine now, but his mind stayed on the yacht. *If I didn’t know any better, I would swear it had been out here for decades.*

Trent kept an eye on the storm. He didn’t discern any lightning and he didn’t hear any thunder as it approached. It also didn’t look like there was any rain falling, though the breeze had picked up noticeably.

Kyle listened too, but he didn’t hear anything that implied this was a thunderstorm. He attributed

that to being on the ocean and away from buildings. The wind didn't have to squeeze through anything out here, so it didn't make as much noise. "I don't understand why we can't see it on the radar."

Trent rubbed his arms. It felt as though someone had tossed sand all over him. It was an uncomfortable sensation. "Maybe Saul disabled the radar so we can't keep track of him if he leaves Tilly's group."

That made sense to Kyle. He let that go as an odd tingling went through his teeth. He ran his tongue along his gums, trying to erase the feeling.

The hair on Zack's arms stood up. He rubbed them uneasily as the green cloud swallowed the front of the submarine.

Kyle's nose began to burn as the cloud neared his location. He went toward the hatch. "Let's get below."

All three men moved fast, stomachs tightening. Whatever was in the cloud wasn't good. They felt that clearly.

Kyle held the hatch as the other two went down the ladder. While he waited, he scanned what he could see of the yacht through the clouds.

The shadow of the brunette man reappeared. It waved wildly.

Even without sound, Kyle knew what that meant, but it was too late to heed the warning. The best he could do was get under cover.

The shadow vanished into the green clouds.

Kyle hurried down into the submarine and shut the hatch. Then he locked it.

Zack and Trent were waiting for him at the bottom of the ladder. The three men exchanged nervous glances. They were relieved to be inside the sub, but they were concerned about what damage, if any, the storm might do to it.

Tension began spreading through the submarine. People stopped talking and eating, looking around for the source.

Kyle pointed at his watch.

Zack and Trent saw the dials swinging wildly. Then the watch stopped.

Kyle glanced at the wall clock and found the same thing. All the hands and counters had stopped. "That's odd."

"Maybe it's a magnetic storm?" Zack had read a story about that a long time ago.

"Then it might affect other parts of this ship." Trent went to the bridge to check in with Ray. He was eager to have an opinion from someone who hadn't been up there.

Zack shrugged it off as the tingling faded. "I'm going to the mess. You coming?"

"In a minute." Kyle swept the other panels and dials in the hall, but he didn't know enough about submarines to tell if anything was different. *But something changed for us. I felt it.*

Angela came up the ladder from the second level. She spotted Kyle and joined him. She didn't

Speak, though. She was tracking the weird feeling she'd gotten.

Kyle scanned her thoughts for trouble. He found her concern for the baby, but not much else.

He tried to relax. If something went wrong with the sub, they had RIBs and a few other inflatable boats that could be towed. They also weren't that far from Australia yet. *We can always go back.*

Angela caught that and shivered. She went by him to check on the bridge.

Kyle suddenly wished they'd stayed the night with Tilly and her group.

Angela stopped.

Kyle waited for her choice, willing her to follow through on the thought she'd just had about turning the sub around.

Angela hesitantly chose to stay here tonight and continue on to their location in the morning. "We're Eagles. We're not afraid of ghosts."

Kyle shrugged off his bad feeling, but he couldn't help a parting blow. "That's because we haven't had to face them until now."

Angela winced. He was right.

Kyle headed toward the mess for coffee and a check in with the other Eagles on duty.

Angela resumed her walk to the bridge, but she was suddenly sure that she'd made the wrong choice. *We shouldn't have answered that radio call. Whatever happens from here will be a direct result of that.*

Ray looked up as Angela entered the bridge. “I felt it too, but nothing’s wrong here. In fact, the radar started working. I can see the ship next to us now.” He pointed.

Angela studied the tiny green circle that indicated the yacht. “All electronics have some sort of issues these days. Maybe it was a glitch.”

Ray’s eyes were red from weariness and puffy from being rubbed repeatedly. He was slouched in the chair, fighting to stay awake. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“What about the storm?” Trent was also standing outside the bridge.

Ray shrugged. “You said it’s in the sky. Maybe the radar isn’t able to pick it up. The Adrianna doesn’t always record banks of fog that move in either.”

Trent had to accept that because there wasn’t another answer. He looked at Angela. “Where do you want me, Boss?”

Angela got her notebook out and flipped to the page where she had preplanned schedules for the first few days after the rescue. “You can be off now. I’d like to have you on continuous rounds of the ship come daylight.”

“You got it. I’m going to get some food and then some sleep.” Trent’s voice implied he was looking forward to both of those.

Angela understood. All of the rescue team was tired. They had been awake since dawn. It was sunset now. In that time, they had infiltrated

Reicher's lab, rescued their missing team, sorted through multiple levels of supplies, loaded and transported those supplies, and then dealt with the mission team on the sub. "You need to sleep, too."

Ray nodded at her. "As long as we're staying right here for the night, you probably don't need to have anyone on the bridge. Saul set the alarms so that it will go over the intercom if there is a problem."

Angela didn't agree to that. "Are you able to get some soothing muzak going?"

Ray grinned. "Already thought of that." He hit a few buttons on the console in front of him.

Soft instrumental music began coming through the speakers throughout the submarine.

Angela ignored the few moans and groans from those who didn't like muzak. The rescue team needed to be able to rest. In order for that to happen, the mission team needed to sleep. She didn't know what their schedules had been like, but she doubted they were on normal routines for rest or anything else. In Reicher's lab, there hadn't been a reason for it. Being underwater had kept them from seeing sunsets or sunrises. She assumed all of their circadian rhythms were out of whack. "Marc is going to take a shift in here. As soon as he shows up, go get some food and some sleep. I'd like you back as soon as you're able to handle a full shift."

Ray started to answer and was interrupted by a long yawn.

Angela consulted her notebook and mentally connected to a few of her people. *I need you to take first watch over the ship.*

Cate, Cody, Wade, Zack, Kyle, and Dace all answered her—many of them at the same time, but Angela was able to separate it and know who had acknowledged the order. The hive brain was in full effect right now, but the mission team wasn't connected. Reicher had broken that with his torture and sleep deprivation in their first weeks. Over the next few days, Angela planned to reconnect all of them to the hive. She wanted to do it right now so she could keep track of their minds, but many of them were too traumatized to tolerate that many voices in their brain at once.

Marc came down the hallway and joined them on the bridge. “Go get some sleep.”

Ray got up and left without argument. He felt like he'd been awake for days. He hadn't done as much physical labor as the rest of the rescue team, but the mental stress of making sure he didn't screw up manning the submarine had worn him out.

Marc's eyes were also red and puffy, but it wasn't from being tired or from being rubbed. Marc was haunted. *And maybe a little drunk from his conversation with Adrian.* Angela wasn't worried about him being able to man the submarine in that condition. Having something to do might distract him from his other issues.

Marc took Ray's warm seat and scanned the radar, then the console. “You should sleep too.”

“I’m too wound up. I’ll go to bed when Ray comes back on duty, probably.”

Marc didn’t argue with her. He also didn’t push her about the medical exam and what Harry had discovered. When she was ready to talk about it, she would.

Angela slowly leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Then she left the bridge. She didn’t want to linger and make Marc think she was checking up on him. Out of all the mission team members, he was the least traumatized by everything that had happened in the lab. Marc’s mental chaos had happened before his captivity.

Angela did a fast walk-through of the top level, noting where everyone was at. The muzak playing over the radio was already having an effect on some of the new people. The kids in the theater were climbing into the sleeping bags Charlie was handing out. Several of the caretakers had come by to check on them. The women had also given the theater a basic clean-up. It looked and smelled a lot better now.

In the rear storage cubby, Biff was in the chair across from Adrian, but he was leaned back and his eyes were shut. Adrian was also yawning and wiping his face. When he put his cheek on the table for a fast nap, Angela headed to the second level of the submarine. She hoped things were going as well down there.

She immediately found the group of military men coming through the hallway behind Kenn.

None of them looked at her as they entered the bunk compartment and began picking beds.

Angela got Kenn's attention. "Don't let them touch any of the drawings."

"I won't." Kenn waited for her to scold him over how he had punished them.

Angela went by him without responding. She wasn't going to scold him for doing one of her least liked chores.

Angela passed the medical bay, where Harry and Shawn were cleaning up. Gus was fully asleep and Piper was in the chair next to his bed. Angela was confident that area was secure, but there were still a few people she needed to track down.

Angela traced Lisa because Greg wasn't connected to the hive. She found the couple in the officers' quarters. They were snuggled together on the plush bed in the first room.

The officer area was as nice as Thomas had implied. Angela wished she could assign everyone a night in here so they all got a chance to enjoy some of the old-world comforts. The large beds had better blankets and pillows and even small lights on the headboards for reading at night. The private toilets were spotless except for a little dust, and they even held half used rolls of toilet paper that made Angela's heart hurt.

It was funny how a roll of toilet paper could remind her of the old world, but it did every time she used the bathroom. Back then, they had taken it for granted. In this world, toilet paper was a luxury

in most situations. She didn't even want to consider what a lot of survivors were doing for a substitute.

Lisa looked up as Angela came to the entrance. "Is everything okay?"

Angela nodded but she didn't speak. Greg was sleeping in Lisa's arms. She doubted it would be restful, however. There were no drawings in here to keep away his nightmares.

Lisa tightened her arms around Greg. Finding out he had almost taken his life had shocked her and hurt her. *I'm never leaving him alone again.*

Normally, Angela would have mentioned that Eagles need space, but in this case, she agreed completely. She gave Lisa a small smile and then continued into the next room that held another living setup for officers.

She found gear on two of the beds and identified it as belonging to Dace and Piper on one, with Trent and Jayda's on the other.

Angela approved of the couples separating themselves. As long as the others didn't feel left out, she wouldn't interfere with that choice.

The sound of a bottle hitting the floor echoed, making her twitch.

My last target. Angela entered the rear officer compartment.

Theo staggered and put his hand on the wall to keep from falling. The whiskey bottle had dropped and rolled across the floor, leaving a small trail of pungent liquid. Other than those few drops, the bottle was empty.

Theo knew Angela was there, but it was too late to stop being drunk now. He stumbled toward the bed and hit it with his knees. He fell face down onto the dusty mattress, groaning.

Angela sent out a mental call.

A minute later, Adrian came in.

Adrian evaluated the situation quickly and sighed. He had just gotten Biff to sleep; he had hoped to rest himself now, but that obviously wasn't going to happen. "I'll see what I can do. When Biff wakes up, he'll be alone and that probably isn't a good idea."

"I'll take your spot at the table."

Adrian entered and sat in the chair next to the bed. He glared at Theo. "Are you sober enough to talk?"

Theo groaned again, slapping the bed. "I can't get drunk enough!"

Angela left them alone. If anyone could get through to Theo, it would be Adrian. Despite all of his faults, the blond man was incredibly good at reaching inside people and ripping their guts out until the only thing that was left was the desire to change so that pain would go away. In Theo's case, it was exactly what he needed.

Biff didn't budge as Angela entered the warm storage cubby. She hoped his sleep was restful. The sight of his burn scars were a fresh source of guilt, but she refused to dwell on it. Like the others, Biff had made many sacrifices to ensure the future of Safe Haven, though he didn't understand that yet. In

the future, all of these men would be considered heroes for what they'd gone through.

Angela sat in Adrian's seat. She put her arms on the table and rested her cheek on them. She doubted she would be able to sleep yet, but it was important that she rested while things were calm.

Less than a minute later, she was snoring softly.

2

"Quiet! You'll wake her up."

"Sorry."

Angela didn't lift her head from her arms as she was jerked out of a sound, uncomfortable sleep by a banging noise that echoed up from the galley.

The muzak was still playing, but it didn't matter. Things were no longer calm.

At the table across from her, Biff had also woken. He did a quick look around and then leaned back and resumed snoozing.

Angela listened to the hive first. Everyone who was on duty was awake, but they were stationary. None of them were doing continuous rounds. *I forgot to assign someone to that. Damn it!*

Angela scanned the rest of the submarine next. She didn't like what she found.

Kenn was in his bunk, and he was scroll diving.

The military men had gotten drunk and passed out in their bunks. Kenn had kept them under control until they fell asleep. She was happy about

that, but his inability to stop scroll diving even for one day was a huge problem.

Greg was still in the bed with Lisa, but he was dimension hunting. Greg was being careful not to wake Lisa with his exploration, but he was endangering himself as well as her. She was trying to dream walk to find him. She knew he was doing something he wasn't supposed to be. If she managed to join him in that other dimension as a normal, Lisa would have no defense and Angela doubted that Greg was strong enough to protect them both.

Shawn was in his bunk, blinking. She could feel Shawn's shudders as he explored mental possibilities that most people would be terrified of. He was blinking in the bunk next to Kenn without much pause. She could feel him getting deeper with every second.

Harry was roaming the quiet submarine, taking energy without permission.

The energy thefts were going unnoticed. Harry was using his Eagle training to sneak through the submarine, and he was only targeting people who were asleep and hadn't been part of the mission team. He was using that energy to refuel himself, and to power his new gifts. As soon as he drew enough energy, he was using the x-ray ability to examine the person he'd taken the energy from, searching for injuries or defects that he might be able to heal.

In another time, Angela might have been okay with that, but he was doing it without permission and that was forbidden for their kind.

The three subjects she had saved were rummaging through the mess for more food. She felt bad for the three starving men, but she couldn't allow that behavior to continue. Rationing was important after an apocalypse anyway, but this was 16 months later and food was getting hard to come by for everyone.

She had left strict orders with Jennifer and the other co-leaders of Safe Haven on that topic. Everyone would get fed, just not as much as they wanted at every meal. She had also ordered Jennifer to do a weekly buffet that did allow them seconds and even thirds if they wanted it. That would help keep people calm about the food situation until they could do their first camp whale hunt.

Angela's stomach rolled at the thought of eating whale, but she doubted it would matter once it was cooked and on her plate.

“Do you want me to handle some of that?”

Angela wasn't surprised to find Adrian standing watch outside the door. She assumed Theo had passed out. “No.”

“It'll be hours before Theo wakes up.” Adrian had come right back up here. He didn't want her unprotected, especially while she was sleeping.

Angela wiped her eyes and stretched. She ran through her options mentally.

Marc came down the hallway. “I was getting foggy. I need to move around.”

Angela worked on a solution. “I could put them to sleep for a while and hope some of their addiction fades.”

Marc grimaced. “You have to treat us like Reicher did. If you can’t, then kill us and save us all the pain. Nothing else will work.”

Angela’s face hardened. She stood and left without responding.

Marc watched her stiff shoulders go down the hallway. “Do you think she can do it?”

Adrian snorted. “I think we’ll need to watch her and make sure she *stops* doing it.”

Angela paused in the middle of the submarine. She gathered a massive amount of energy and then flung it out in every direction to capture each person who was breaking a rule. She sent pain in thick waves that drew screams and pleas for mercy.

People jerked awake all over the submarine. They tried to comfort the upset mission men, but they were ignored as Angela continued to send wave after wave of agony.

Angela communicated through the pain. “I’ll lock every one of you. You won’t be able to use your gifts at all. I’ll make you normal forever!”

More pleas and cries echoed through the submarine. There was no worse threat.

Angela sent out another wave of pain. When she finally stopped, many of the mission men were on

their knees and crying. “If you make me do this again, you’ll regret it. Don’t push me!”

Angela broke the connection and stomped toward the bathroom.

Rescue team members scowled at Angela as she went by, not understanding why she was punishing the mission team. A few of them mentally compared her to the evil man they had just ended.

Angela kept her face turned away so none of the disapproving people could see she was crying. She hated being mean even though she was good at it. *I don’t ever want to do that again.*

But I will.

Chapter Seven

Whatever You Say

1

“I can take over if you want.” Ray swept the small radio room near the bridge where Angela was unrolling her sleeping bag.

“You can sleep for a few more hours if you want to.”

“I got eight hours. I’m good.” Ray had already gone by the mess and scrounged a quick meal of leftover soup. He’d also taken a shower. He was awake and ready for duty now that dawn was approaching.

“Fine. Let Marc know he’s off duty.”

“I will. How soon do you want to leave?”

“Probably not until around eight or 9 o’clock. Everyone is really out now. If we can sleep in, that will be a good thing.”

“You got it.” Ray headed to the bridge.

Angela finished putting out her sleeping bag. She had chosen not to bed down in the bunk room for several reasons. The biggest one was that she didn’t like sleeping in a bed anymore. Being on their cruise ship had softened her and that was dangerous during an apocalypse.

Marc came to the doorway and swept the small radio room where she had chosen to spend the night.

Angela gestured. "I left space for your bedroll."

Marc went to get it. Most of the supplies from the lab and the Safe Haven stocks were piled in front of the entrance to the nuclear reactor and the generators. Marc knew she wanted those rear compartments to stay blocked off. He had been tempted earlier to spend time sorting through those supplies, but he hadn't for that reason.

Angela quickly performed her nightly rituals and then settled onto her sleeping bag with her notebook, a pen, and a canteen of cold tea. Thomas had prepared a lot of drinks to be ready for morning. Angela didn't know how well the powdered orange juice would go over, but she was glad to have it. Juice was something Safe Haven hadn't enjoyed in a long time. They hadn't had any fresh fruit in months. She was hoping to find some place with healthy orchards, but it was unlikely. They needed to start growing fruits and vegetables as soon as possible.

She had left information on how and where to do that in her leadership notebooks, but she didn't know if Jennifer and the others would get to that while she was gone. The fact that it was the end of the growing season in their hemisphere would definitely interfere with any crops they tried to plant right now.

Marc came in. He hesitated, though. "Should I keep some space between us?"

Angela snorted. “I think we’ve had enough of that, don’t you?”

Marc chuckled. He put his bedroll next to hers.

They were both struck by the light tension. It was a reminder of their trip across America to join Safe Haven. Many of those nights had been spent sitting on their bedrolls while trying to ignore the attraction that had been growing. They were married now, but after being apart for two months, the feeling was much the same.

Angela finished putting updates into the notebook and then set it aside. As Marc sat on the bedroll next to her, she could feel him wondering how close she wanted to get tonight. The kiss earlier had stirred him up.

Angela didn’t want him to be uncomfortable, so she got it out of the way. “I’d like to sleep with you.”

Marc grinned. “You’re always welcome in my bed, baby.”

Angela laughed softly. Then she clarified. “No sex yet.”

“Because we’ve been apart so long, and you want to rebuild that bond first?”

Angela snorted again. “No, I’d like to jump on and ride you for a few hours, but it’s not good for me right now. We won’t be having sex until after the delivery...or the miscarriage.”

Marc felt bad that he hadn’t asked how she had been feeling. It had been a surprise to find out her

medical state, but he should have at least asked her if she was okay before then.

“Don’t stress yourself out.” Angela knew that he cared for her. With everything he had been going through, she didn’t expect him to be a devoted mate immediately upon rescue.

Angela laid down.

Marc slid in behind her and put their bodies together. “This feels nice.”

Angela snuggled against him. “Mmm.”

Marc gently slid a hand onto her stomach. “I missed you.”

Angela’s stomach flipped over in immediate protest. She barely managed to scramble out of the sleeping bag and reach the bathroom before vomiting.

Marc sat up. “The baby doesn’t like me.”

He didn’t believe there was a problem with her pregnancy. He had already decided that Harry’s lack of familiarity with his new gift had prevented him from picking up the baby’s heartbeat. *But if the baby doesn’t like me, that’s a problem and I don’t know what to do about it.*

2

Angela’s stomach settled as soon as she emptied it. She quickly brushed her teeth and went back to the radio room. “It’s been upset a lot. Don’t take it personally.”

Marc caught her thoughts of vomiting nearly every day. He didn't scold her for not taking better care of herself. He doubted pregnancy gave her an option; he had never been around a woman for the duration. He just hoped it was normal for her to be sick so much.

Angela laid back down in the sleeping bag.

Marc wanted to snuggle against her again, but he didn't want a repeated rejection.

Angela took his hand and put it over her stomach. "This is Marc. He's your daddy."

A blue spark flew from her stomach and went up his arm.

Angela's stomach settled the rest of the way.

Marc smiled in relief. It was a good moment.

"That figures." Charlie was observing them from the doorway. He had just completed a round of the ship and was about to go to bed himself. Seeing her and Marc have a good moment angered him. "You're always letting these men off the hook. I hate that!"

Angela frowned at him. "Go spend some time with Adrian."

"No."

"That's an order, Charlie."

Charlie made a face. "I'm not an Eagle. I don't have to follow orders."

Cody came down the hallway, drawn by the disruptive waves the small family was sending out. He stopped next to Charlie and stared at him.

Marc saw Cody's eyes light up bright blue.

Charlie's angry expression faded. "I'm going to spend time with Adrian, if that's okay?"

Angela smiled. "That's a great idea."

"Cool. I'm going to bed now." Charlie moved off down the submarine.

Marc was confused. "What was that?"

"Cody's new gift." Angela gestured. "You can spend the night here if you want."

Cody immediately climbed into the sleeping bag with her.

Marc didn't see Cate. "Where's your sister?"

"She's playing with the ghosts right now."

Marc didn't like the sound of that. He went to check on the little girl.

Cody let Angela put her arms around him. "She's sleeping in the theater with the other kids. I think she's having a bad dream."

"Marc will help her." Angela tugged the blanket over Cody shoulders. "Don't do that again around Marc or the others. They won't understand."

Cody yawned. "Whatever you say, Mommy."

Angela held the boy close. For that moment, they were both happy.

Marc had stopped outside the door to listen. He knew there was more going on than what they were telling him. Their short conversation didn't explain things. It also didn't make him angry.

He was glad that Angela and Cody were getting close. Cody's new gift might cause problems, so Marc was okay with her giving that advice. He

trusted Angela to do the right thing where his kids were concerned.

Marc went to find Cate, hoping Cody was wrong about her having a bad dream. Marc knew how damaging they could be. He'd had way too many of those during his time in the lab, but also before then.

Marc went to the theater room. He saw Cate had a couch to herself. She was muttering in her sleep, proving Cody right.

Cate jerked awake. Her wild eyes went over the dim theater and found Marc in the entrance. She held out her arms.

Marc picked the girl up and carried her back to the radio room. He covered her with his sleeping bag and then laid down next to her.

The girl curled against Angela's warmth and went back to sleep.

Marc observed the trio for a long time before joining them.

3

“We're opening the hatch now, Boss.”

Angela was rolling up her sleeping bag. She hadn't slept long, but it had been peaceful with Marc finally back at her side and the twins between them. She keyed the radio on her belt. “Copy that.”

Kyle unlocked the hatch and pushed it open. A beautiful blue sky greeted him.

Trent and Zack followed Kyle up the ladder. All three men stood on top of the submarine and did a sweep in every direction.

The storm was gone. The morning was bright, showing a warm day ahead.

Trent detected movement in the water. “Look. Dolphins.”

He and Kyle studied the sleek gray animals in the bright light. Neither of them had ever seen a dolphin in real life, other than in zoos.

There were also a lot of fish near the top of the water. They seem to be investigating the submarine.

Zack scanned in the other direction.

The yacht immediately caught his attention. It was no longer listing to the right. In fact, it no longer appeared to have any damage at all. *How is that possible?*

Zack shifted closer to get a better look.

Something poked him in the leg.

He dug in his pocket and pulled out the piece of gold that he had taken from the ship yesterday.

Zack made a face. There was a gray tooth attached to it. “Yuck!”

He threw it overboard in disgust. “How did I miss that?”

Kyle and Trent were still mesmerized by the sea life around the submarine.

Zack assumed it was from being tired after the run. “What are we doing?” He was suddenly anxious to get moving.

Kyle came over to examine the yacht. He also noticed it seemed brighter and in better condition. Like Zack, he preferred to believe it had been that way all along. All of them had been sleep deprived yesterday. “We need to get the tow line attached.” It was obvious that the yacht was in good enough condition to take along.

Trent lingered, watching a dolphin. It was nudging the side of the submarine now. The sky was crystal clear, and the water was clean. He didn’t discern garbage or any clouds in the sky. Trent looked behind them, but he wasn’t able to get a glimpse of the storm. *This is all hinky.*

Zack and Kyle both nodded.

Kyle shook it off. “Let’s get the tow line attached and get the hell out of here.”

“How long until we get to the new location?”

Trent shrugged at Zack. “A few hours, I think.” He saw the yacht and tensed. “Wasn’t that in rough shape yesterday?”

Kyle and Zack refused to answer.

Trent decided not to dwell on it. “Where are we going?”

“Howland Island.”

Trent brightened at Kyle’s answer. “Hey, isn’t that where Amelia Ehrhardt was going when she disappeared?”

“Yes, and we’re going to do the same for a while.” Angela came up the ladder and joined them, still adjusting her gear. Marc was taking Cate and

Cody to the mess for breakfast. “Is everyone ready to go?”

All three men quickly nodded.

Angela caught sight of the yacht. A deep frown planted itself across her forehead.

All three men waited for her to say something, hoping that she could explain what had happened.

“I’ve changed my mind. Leave it here.” Angela didn’t like any of this. Not being able to quickly find an explanation was giving her the creeps. “Unhook it and get below. We leave in 10 minutes.”

Angela quickly went back down the ladder. “I never should have answered that call, especially since the damn yacht didn’t have a radio to call us on in the first place.”

People going by were curious about her mutters, but they didn’t ask. The smell of fresh food was wafting through the submarine, drawing attention from everyone.

Angela went to the bridge and took the seat next to Ray. She scanned the radar and saw the yacht was still showing up. “It’s time to go.”

Ray had everything ready. He began activating the large military vessel.

Angela dwelled on the condition of the yacht. *I was on that ship yesterday. I catch more details than most of the souls left on this planet; I didn’t overlook that. What the hell is going on?*

Ray picked up her thoughts, but he didn’t spend time trying to figure it out. “That one is all on you, Boss. I have other things to work on.”

On top of the submarine, Kyle and Trent came down the ladder.

Zack was the last one. He started to pull the hatch shut and then stopped, drawn.

The yacht was already slowly drifting away from the submarine now that it was no longer connected by the mooring line. As Zack watched, fuzzy shapes began to appear.

He detected five shadows that slowly became clear. Their old-style clothing drew his attention first. The bathing suits were like something from the 50s, including pantaloons on both plump females. Their shiny jewelry sparkled in the bright sunlight, indicating wealth. The largest man among them wore a business suit, and was holding a glass that Zack assumed contained an alcoholic beverage. All five shadowy forms looked directly at him and waved cheerfully.

Zack automatically put a hand up to wave back and then stopped himself. *I'm seeing ghosts, like those from the warehouse floor of that lab.* He fought a cold chill.

As the yacht went out of view, Zack caught a glimpse of the name on the rear of the ship. *Revonoc.*

Zack immediately made the connection.

Harvey Conover had been a talented sailor, the Commodore of the Cruising Club of America, and

a famous, wealthy publisher from New York. He had taken the Revonoc out for a sail from Key West to Miami with his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and a young man who was a friend of the family. They were never seen again.

No wreckage and debris had been found, other than the dinghy from the ship that had washed ashore 80 miles north of Miami. Everyone had assumed they sailed through a surprise hurricane that had devastated surrounding land masses during that same week, but no proof had ever been found.

Zack knew about it because of the research one of his sons had done for a school project about the Bermuda triangle. *But we're nowhere near that location.*

Zack felt another chill climb his spine. He quickly closed the hatch and locked it, then descended the ladder. *It might be time for me to join Theo in a drinking binge.*

5

Angela entered the mess.

Silence fell; people rotated toward her in apprehension.

Angela decided she liked it better the other way. It wasn't good to have people fear her. Most of those now watching her walk toward the counter were expecting something bad.

Thomas gave her a respectful nod instead of a welcoming smile this time. "Food?"

“Coffee.”

Thomas quickly got her a travel mug, hoping she would leave with it. The mood was plummeting with every second.

Angela took the mug to the center table, but she didn't sit. She opened her notebook and sipped her coffee.

Conversations did not resume. Everyone waited for her to say something about what had happened overnight.

Angela refused to apologize. They had pushed her into reacting. She cleared her throat. “I have assignments for the day.”

Some of the mission team perked up, hoping she would put them to work in the ways they wanted. Everyone else frowned, not wanting to work at all.

“The medical bay is resuming exams. If you haven't had one yet, go there in the next hour and get an appointment.” She gave Harry a stern glance. “Normal methods.”

Harry reluctantly accepted the order. After the pain waves she had sent out last night, he wasn't going to disobey her.

“After you get an appointment at the medical bay, stop by the storage cubby and get an appointment from Adrian for a therapy session.”

Adrian was sleeping, but she had little doubt he would wake as soon as his body told him the submarine had stopped. She planned to keep him busy. She needed him to determine the level of mental stability of everyone on the ship, including

herself. “After you get a therapy appointment, pick a room here on the bottom level and spend an hour cleaning. I want this entire vessel shipshape by the time we go to bed tonight. Do not enter the off-limits areas.”

To stop the inevitable questions, Angela gave them some basic information. “We’ll be arriving in about three hours. A small team will disembark first and set up a base camp. Once that camp is set up, a second crew will disembark to cover security posts. Once that is in place, everyone else who wants to can come over, providing they spend an hour collecting supplies and helping set things up. If you don’t want to work there, you can stay and clean here.”

No one argued. For many of those from the lab, the idea of being allowed to do what they wanted after only a brief hour of work was odd and appealing.

“I want everyone showered and changed. All gear and clothes you brought from the lab need to be disposed of before the sun sets tonight. Same goes for anything you brought along. There is no unauthorized lab equipment allowed.”

Now there were a few mutters. Some of them had rummaged through parts of the lab and taken whatever they wanted. Everyone else assumed Angela was talking about taking their weapons.

Angela was, but not because it was dangerous for them to have those items. She needed a full inventory of everything they had now so it could be

put to use. “We’ve never been to this island. I don’t have much information on it. We’ll explore together before anyone is welcome to wander around. Once it’s cleared, there will be a set schedule for all of the things you’re going to be doing today and then a few others. Anyone who doesn’t follow the schedule will be locked down or locked up, depending upon which will be more effective. You will be allowed freedom; you will not roam free. There’s a big difference.”

She didn’t tell them it would be impossible to keep everyone alive without doing it that way. Angela had decided explaining herself to most of these people was a waste of time until she broke the hold Reicher still had over them. They were used to getting orders and following them. There was no reason to change that yet. “There is only one entertainment area on this ship. The kids have taken over it.”

Angela gave those children a firm look. They were all sitting together at three tables near the counter. “You will take your gear to the bunk room today. I want that theater open for everyone’s use. We’ll make a fair schedule, so half the time adult movies are shown and the rest of the time it will be material that is appropriate for children. If you want permission to be in there during adult times, come talk to me about it.”

The older children were encouraged that she might allow them more freedom than the younger kids.

The adults were happy that they were going to get time in the theater. Watching movies was something most of the captives in the lab had enjoyed. The tension in the mess went down a notch.

Angela immediately brought it back up. “The events of last night will not be repeated. After sleeping on it for a few hours, I’ve concluded that I can’t trust any of you.”

She held up her hand to stop the protests from some of the Safe Haven people. She wasn’t talking about them. They would figure that out. “Some of you will be locked from sunset to sunrise, starting right now.” Angela waved a hand and locked her specific targets.

“No!”

“Give it!”

“Make her stop!”

She raised her voice to be heard over the cries and threats. “If you need them for a duty, I’ll unlock you at the start of your shift and lock you at the end of it.”

“For how long?” Harry was horrified. He was already missing his gifts and he’d only been locked for thirty seconds.

“For as long as it takes. I want to be able to trust you. Prove to me that I can, and all these restrictions will go away. Push me like you did last night by using your gifts in an unauthorized manner and I’ll take them away permanently.” Angela took her mug and left the mess.

Complaints, insults, and threats followed her.

Angela wasn't intimidated. She had strong enough gifts to do battle with all of them at the same time if it was needed. She was just saddened that locking them was necessary. She hoped everyone who was now commiserating with the other locked refugees around them would understand why she had chosen to do things this way. *I also hope they don't need their gifts at all while I'm sleeping.*

It was a risk she had to take, however. As soon as she went to sleep, they would break the rules again and this time, there might be a riot because they knew what punishment was coming. *I don't want to kill any of them.*

Angela contemplated some of the military men and amended that. "Okay, I don't want to kill *most* of them."

Angela marched through the submarine, locking the gifts of everyone she encountered that couldn't be trusted.

By the time she finished, there wasn't an area of the submarine that didn't hold a resentful person wishing that she would just disappear.

Chapter Eight

I Always Need You

1

Angela was aware of the unhappiness still running through the submarine three hours later. She held her chin up and strolled by without acknowledging their ugly thoughts. She was doing what she felt was best. They would accept it in time.

The new people didn't understand that she had the best interests of everyone at heart. That would change as they got to know her. Until then, they were confused and feeling singled out because not everyone had been locked, like Marc and Goldie.

Angela went to the medical bay. Harry and Shawn were there; they were just as unhappy as everyone else not to be able to access their gifts.

There was a line of military men outside the door. Angela went by them with a cool, evaluating stare. "I'll need a security team later. Would any of you like to volunteer?"

Spirits immediately lifted in most of those men. Now that they weren't able to scroll dive, they needed to stay busy until the alcohol was brought out again.

One of the braver men spoke up. "Will we be unlocked for that duty?"

“Yes, and then relocked after your shift is over.”

The military men didn't argue.

She heard them all thinking about taking off on their own as soon as she gave them their gifts back.

If they had been on another land mass, that might have been possible, but Angela couldn't allow it here. This island wasn't good for long-term survival. She could let them go here, but it would just be to die and her conscience wouldn't allow that. “I can take it back, you know.”

The braver man frowned. “So you're not going to unlock us for duty?”

Angela smiled coldly. “I meant sparing your lives at all. If you challenge me, that gift will be revoked.” She entered the medical bay, leaving a tense silence in her wake.

Angela joined Harry and Shawn at the counter. She quickly unlocked one of them. “Use your new x-ray gift and finish making sure no one has problems.”

Harry smiled happily at the reversal of her earlier order. “Thank you.”

Shawn stared at the floor as she focused on him. “I'm sorry. It's very...”

“Addictive?”

Shawn sighed deeply. “Blinking should have cost me my life several times in the lab. If not for Harry, it would have.”

Angela wasn't surprised by that revelation. She also didn't have a solution yet. “I hope you understand why I'm handling things this way.” It

was a small concession that the others weren't going to get from her.

Both men nodded. It was obvious that Reicher's control methods had been necessary, at least for them.

Angela gave an order in Eagle code.

Both men nodded again. She wanted them to examine the new people for more than just physical issues. If they found anything, it would be put in their file so she could handle it later.

Angela scanned the rear room, where Gus was awake and watching her. He was alone while Jayda got a shower and ate. "How are you feeling today?"

Gus told the truth. "Like shit. Like the worst shit I've ever taken."

Angela chuckled at the description. "Thank you for that."

Gus stared at her. "I'm not angry anymore."

A cloud went over his face. "I mean I am, just not with the uncontrollable rage. I think the vaccine worked."

"I'm glad. We have enough of it to treat everyone in Safe Haven. I also hope we can copy it and make more. There are a lot of survivors in other places that could use the help." Angela was only sorry that there hadn't been more of it to bring along.

Adrian had told her he took a few other vials, but she hadn't looked through them yet. She wanted to have Tonya move them to her lab and then compare them to the textbooks to verify what they

were before letting anyone take anything created by Reicher's scientists. The rage vaccine had been an emergency, which was the only way Angela was comfortable with using unknown old-world chemicals. Despite Harry's advancements, they didn't know how to cure poisoning in someone else. *Yet.*

Harry nodded in acknowledgment of that silent goal.

Gus could feel Angela exploring his brain for cracks. He didn't resist. He was grateful that she hadn't locked his gifts along with the others, though he was curious about why.

"I don't believe you're a danger to anyone or to yourself." Angela gave him a hard look. "That may change when we go home."

Gus scowled deeply. "I don't want to go home. I don't want to be around them at all."

"I understand why you feel that way, but it's not reasonable. I can send you out on runs, and some of them may be like this one, but at some point, you're going to have to face Brittani and Daryl."

"Brittani killed Trinity because I felt something for her."

"Trinity died while trying to murder someone. It actually had nothing to do with you at all."

Gus had heard that story, but he wasn't sure he could believe it even now when Angela was showing him replays of what had happened that night.

"I want you to spend time in therapy sessions."

Gus had already expected that. “I hope it helps.”

He did. He wanted to be able to go back to Safe Haven, spend time with Bernice and her daughter, and be happy. None of that was possible unless he could let go of his animosity toward Brittani.

Angela smiled at him. “As soon as you feel better, I’ll put you to work.”

Gus was relieved. “Harry says I should be good to go in another day.” Gus gestured at the woman entering the medical bay. “Jayda said she’ll play chess with me when she has time, and I can read books. I’ll be okay for a little while.”

“Will *you* be okay, Jayda?”

Put on the spot by the boss, Jayda ridiculed herself. “As long as I don’t have to deal with fire, I’m 5-by.”

Angela didn’t want to tell Jayda openly that she had to attend therapy sessions. It would embarrass the woman. Angela used a different approach. “I’d like to have you on the security team later.”

Jayda ran a hand over her short, spiked hair. “I’ll be there.”

Angela was content that things were covered for this area. She still stopped next to Harry for a quick warning. She leaned in close so those waiting outside didn’t hear her. “Deaths caused in self-defense will not be punished.”

It sounded so much like Reicher that Harry was comforted. “I’ll handle it exactly the way it deserves.” If anyone tried to take over while Angela

was on the island, they would be met with total force. Harry wouldn't hesitate now.

Angela studied Shawn for a minute. His depressed demeanor bothered her more than she could express. She tried to come up with something she could say that would lift his spirits, but nothing came to mind.

Shawn knew. He gave her a weak smile and then turned toward the door. "Who's first out there?"

Angela left as the first military man entered. Therapy sessions would work on most of the mission team, but Shawn had deeper issues that simple conversations with Adrian wouldn't solve. *He'll need one-on-one time with me once we get things settled.*

Angela quickly scribbled that in her notebook and then continued to her next stop. She wanted everything covered before she left the submarine. She probably wouldn't be back until sunset, if then. She was hoping to get things set up quickly enough that everyone who wanted to was able to spend the night on land. *Which means I need the man with the strongest sleep spell to knock them all out before he comes over.*

Angela went to find Marc.

His gifts were stronger and new power was still appearing in evolutions of his normal spells, but the ability to copy any gift successfully was Marc's biggest advancement so far. Only a handful of

descendants could do that and Marc was now among them. *Like father, like son.*

2

The therapy cubby didn't have a line waiting when she arrived, but it was still full for such a small space. Cate, Cody, and Adrian were reorganizing things to fit a larger table and a small drink station. Talking made people thirsty.

Kyle was also standing nearby. He was waiting for her.

Angela handled the therapy setup first. "The kids are going to be healing cracks without your patients knowing it. You'll need to make an excuse for why they're in here with you. After they've sealed the person's cracks, you can send them out into the hall to wait if the topics are graphic, but again, you'll have to find an excuse for it."

Adrian shoved the sturdier table into place and wiped sweat off his brow. "We already have that covered. The kids are my gophers for the day."

Angela wasn't sure why therapy sessions would need gophers, but she didn't ask or argue. She trusted Adrian to handle this on his own. "If you find cracks the twins can't heal, or other issues I need to handle, put it in their folder. Make sure they don't suspect what you're doing, or we might have a mutiny on our hands before I get back."

Cody and Adrian both snorted at the same time. It was obvious they thought they could handle any problems that might arise.

Angela believed that, but it paid to be careful. “Make sure none of them are alone with any of the women or kids. Take frequent breaks and do complete walk-throughs to support the Eagles on duty. Some of these refugees have learned a lot of sneaky behavior from Reicher. They all have to be watched carefully.”

“Cate is going to cover some of that.” Adrian quickly explained before Angela or Kyle could protest. “She’s going to be the Hall Monitor. Reicher’s lab didn’t have one, but most government facilities did. They wandered the complex with multiple shields up and delivered punishments to anyone who didn’t get to their area fast enough. It won’t take long for the new people to recognize what she’s doing and stay out of her way.”

Cody put one of the chairs in place. “They’re already scared of her. They know Reicher sent her away so she didn’t kill him. They assume her gifts are greater than his were. No one on this ship will challenge her.”

Angela was relieved to hear that. She was also saddened by it. Cate had spent time in multiple government labs, under multiple evil rulers. It was amazing that the girl had managed to remain good for so long.

Adrian caught her eyes. He flashed a memory.

All twins are born with one good and one on the edge of going bad. All twins are born with one locked and one unlocked. If one twin is unable to be corrupted in the lab, it means their counterpart has probably already gone bad.

Adrian looked at Cody.

Cody smiled up at him coldly. “You’re wrong. You should be used to that feeling by now.”

Angela laughed, but she took the warning to heart. She had plans to put Cody in an extreme position of authority. There was no way that could happen if he went bad. Right now, he might be walking parts of that line, but all of them were. She had every faith that being surrounded by good people would help him turn out the way they needed him to.

Angela finally focused on Kyle. “I’ll want you, Trent, and Zack for the first run over to set up a base camp. I should be ready in about 15 minutes.”

Kyle yawned. He hadn’t been awake long. “Who else is going?” He didn’t think that was enough hands to get a base camp set up.

“Myself, and a couple of others I haven’t told yet.”

Kyle keyed his radio. “Trent and Zack to the top hatch.”

“You got it.”

“On my way.”

Angela locked eyes with Kyle. “Spend a minute in here with the kids so they can heal your cracks, then join us up top if it doesn’t knock you out.” He

was a hybrid, so she wasn't sure how it would affect him.

Kyle dropped a hand to his gun holster. "Not on your life." He quickly walked away.

Adrian watched Kyle leave in concern. "He won't be able to handle it alone for long."

Angela already knew. "We'll force it when we have to."

Anything else Adrian was going to say was interrupted by the arrival of his first therapy patient.

Thomas smiled as he entered. "I'm ready for you to pick my brain."

Angela caught his attention. "You'll be leaving with me on the first base camp RIB, if you can get through this session."

Thomas quickly went to the chair across from Adrian and sat down. "Make it fast, will you? I have duty waiting."

Adrian chuckled. "If that's the way you want it." He immediately dug into the man's mind, while yanking on his emotions. "Why did you tolerate staying in Reicher's lab? Are you an evil piece of shit that we need to remove?"

Angela tugged the door shut as she left. Adrian was giving Thomas the hard treatment because he was already sure the man was good.

Angela hoped that was true. A Navy engineer was incredibly valuable, considering they were on a submarine in the middle of an ocean, but she wasn't going to be fooled. Thomas would get this fast

session and then she would work on him on the island to make sure he wasn't hiding anything.

Each person who came over would get the same treatment. Angela wasn't taking chances anymore. *Safe Haven has limited room and I'm now very picky about who gets those spots.*

3

Dog came down the hallway as Angela neared the bridge. They eyed each other resentfully for a moment.

Dog gave in first. *I want to go with you.*

Angela sighed. "I need you here to guard our Captain. You can come over at sunset if we have everything settled by then."

Dog understood even though he didn't like her decision. He let out a whine of resignation.

Angela knelt in front of him. "I'm sorry."

Dog understood she was apologizing for what had happened in the medical bay. It was rare for him to get an apology from a human. It dissolved his anger. He came forward and licked her cheek.

Biff came out of the bathroom in time to see it.

Biff's stone warrior appeared in front of him an instant later. It began pounding toward them, drawing attention from everyone.

"Control yourself!" Angela brought up her shield around Dog, who quickly retreated as the fur all over his body lifted.

Biff realized he was overreacting again. He concentrated.

The stone warrior vanished.

Angela stood up, lowering her shield. “Very good.”

Biff turned red. He was embarrassed again. *I hate that feeling!*

Angela was sympathetic. She was also impressed that he had gotten himself under control so fast. “Would you like to volunteer for base camp duty?”

Biff and everyone else who heard her offer was surprised.

“Do you want me on labor chores?” Biff didn’t mind. He was just glad to be allowed to go.

“No. You’ll be my personal protection.”

Biff was thrilled. “It would be my honor.” To show that he was in control of himself, Biff looked at Dog. “Sorry, man. It was a long, hard run.”

Dog had gotten two apologies in less than five minutes from humans. His emotions came out in a fast wag of his tail. *No worries. Keep her safe.* Dog trotted down the hallway.

Biff forced himself to hold still and breathe normally as the wolf neared him.

Dog instinctively understood what Biff needed. He stopped next to the man and looked up. *You can touch me.*

Biff forced himself to reach out with his scarred hand. He watched himself touch Dog’s big head in

surprised pleasure. He quickly pulled back before he got more emotional.

Dog rubbed against Biff's leg as he continued toward the bridge.

Biff felt a smile crease his lips. "That went well."

"I think so, too. Go get your gear and be ready to roll."

Biff reached into his pocket and pulled out the map. "I don't want to take a chance on losing this." He handed it to Angela and quickly left before he could ask when she was going to make him a descendant.

Angela was touched by his faith in her. She was also encouraged by his behavior. Biff was deeply scarred both mentally and physically, but he was already starting to recover. Angela wished she could say the same about all of the mission team, but it would take a lot more time for most of them.

Angela entered the bridge, letting Dog in with her. Then she shut and locked the door.

Ray swiveled his chair toward her and waited for instructions. He was a little nervous about being on the submarine with all these new refugees while she was gone.

"Biff's defender wasn't able to get through the door yesterday. It's thick steel and the lock is almost unbreakable. You'll be safe in here; just don't open it." Her voice hardened. "Not even for Marc."

Ray agreed with that order even though he was surprised to get it. He quickly moved on. "The

island is showing up on the radar. I think you were right about it being a glitch.”

Angela scanned the radar. The yacht was also still there, though it was nearing the edge of the screen now. Ray had given it a name that sent chills over her spine again. *Ghost Ship 1*.

“Can I check in with home today?”

Angela was grateful for the distraction. “Yes, but wait for Wade.”

Knock-knock!

They both jumped.

“It’s Wade. I believe you called me?”

Ray and Angela both laughed as she let him in.

Ray spoke the order before she could give it. “I’ll remember to lock it as soon as Wade leaves.”

“Good.” She slipped out and then waited for Wade to lock the door. She doubted there would be problems while she was gone, but it didn’t hurt to be careful. Marc would understand why the bridge had to stay locked.

Angela went to the bunk area. It was her last stop.

The kids, caretakers, and mothers paused what they were doing and looked up as she entered the large area.

Angela did a fast sweep to make sure everything was okay. Everyone in here had passed the medical tests yesterday. They all knew they needed to have a therapy session today. “Be careful while I’m gone.”

They had all survived the riots in the lab. They made quick promises to follow that order.

“Marc has point duty. He’ll kill for you if needed, but only call him if you want that to happen because he won’t hold back.”

Encouraged by her protective behavior, a few of the kids who had taken over the theater came toward her.

“Will you let us have our gifts back soon?”

“We want to be on guard duty.”

“We’ll do what you say now. We promise!”

Angela picked two of the older children and unlocked them. “I want you to guard Marc. Don’t let him know you’re there. This is top-secret.”

The caretakers and mothers weren’t surprised. Reicher had often employed children for the same purposes.

The two older boys she picked immediately brought up shields and vanished from sight.

Angela felt them leave even though she couldn’t see them. There was no way Marc wouldn’t notice them, but it was good practice for the kids and a distraction to keep them out of trouble.

She studied the other hopeful children. “I’ll find work for some of you over the next few weeks. I’m not going to unlock you while I’m off the submarine, though. Later, we can talk about free time where you aren’t locked, as long as you do what you’re told. No more arguing with the adults. I also don’t want you to pick on the younger kids anymore. Safe Haven is a place for second chances.

This is the time to be nice and treat them like family. If you can't do that, I'll never unlock you."

"We'll do it, Alpha."

"We'll do whatever you want!"

Angela was satisfied. She turned toward the door and found Charlie standing there.

Charlie had heard everything. "Why?"

Angela shrugged. "The Eagles need new recruits, and these kids already have the basic experience. If I don't give them jobs, they'll be filled with resentment and challenge me at every turn."

Charlie flushed at her pointed tone, but he refused to apologize.

Angela took pity on him. "Do you want to come over with the security team and provide medical care if it's needed?"

"Yes." Charlie had been dreading staying on the submarine all day.

"Go pass a therapy session and you can." She walked off before he could start yelling.

Charlie understood he didn't have a choice. He stomped up to the therapy cubby and got into the line that was starting to grow.

Angela consulted her notebook for a moment to make sure she had covered everything. She was almost certain she had, but she still didn't like the idea of leaving so many people on the submarine.

Marc joined her in the hallway. "I'll keep things under control. Adrian and the twins will help. It'll be fine. Go do what you need to do."

Angela slipped into his arms and rested her cheek against his. Sparks flew between the couple and reminded them again of how long they had been apart.

Marc leaned down and gently kissed her.

For that brief moment, everything else was forgotten. All he could think about was her. *Angie!*

Angela enjoyed the moment. She wished they could stay that way longer, but there was work to be done. She slowly stepped back. “Call me if you need me.”

“I always need you.”

Angela chuckled.

Marc let her get out of sight. Then he rotated to face the empty hall. “If there is a problem, I don’t want you two to get involved. The only thing you’re allowed to do is to keep a shield up around all three of us. Is that understood?!”

The kids she had sent to protect him didn’t answer, but they were shocked that Marc knew they were there.

Marc didn’t force them to reveal themselves. He secretly liked the idea of having invisible protectors. It was impossible not to have a sense of importance from it. *And now I understand how Reicher felt. I don’t like it one bit!*

Marc allowed the 12-year-old and 13-year-old boys to follow him as he went to start his first complete walk-through. Theo would be waking from his drinking binge soon and Marc wanted to have a few four-letter words with him.

Dace lowered his shield as Marc got out of sight. It took a lot of energy to keep an invisible shield up, especially around someone as powerful as Marc. Angela had assigned him an hour ago. The kids hadn't noticed him at all.

Dace took a minute to catch his breath and allow his energy level to come back up. Then he quickly dimmed himself again inside his shield and followed Marc and his other protectors into the officers' quarters.

Angela wasn't taking any chances on Marc's safety or control of this vessel. Dace agreed completely. He was also thrilled to be given a duty that made him feel like a secret agent. *This is a new gift and I'm going to get very good at it. In time, Angela might not even know when I'm watching her.*

Chapter Nine

Howland Island

[0°48'25.84"N](#) [176°36'59.48"W](#)

1

Howland Island was small. Kyle hadn't realized how small until they were getting into the RIB. He could view the ocean on both sides of the cucumber shaped landmass. "Is that smaller than Pitcairn?"

"No idea." Angela hadn't been able to find any details on Howland in the books they'd brought along.

"I bet it is." Zack scanned the narrow front and pulled up the small radar outline he'd glimpsed earlier. "It's an oval ring that's half beach and half rocky grass. In terms of actual landmass, it has to be smaller."

Trent shrugged. "Just means we'll be able to clear it faster."

Everyone hoped that was true. Despite the mild temperature and calm breeze, they knew they would be pouring sweat shortly. They were all wearing full Eagle gear and carrying heavy kits. Once they started traveling, every step would feel like five. None of them were used to exploring anymore.

“That surf looks rough.” Biff held on tightly to the raft handle and swept the shoreline apprehensively.

“It is.” Kyle sped them up. He’d learned how to make rough landings since reaching this hemisphere, but it still made his stomach harden into a knot. There was always a chance that they would hit the waves wrong and flip.

Kyle held his breath and steered by instinct. The RIB bounced over the rough waves that were foaming all around the pointed end of the island.

The RIB landed in calmer water; Kyle quickly throttled down and drew in air.

Angela detected shallow water under them and realized the rough breakers were a natural barrier. She saw the island through the shallows. It quickly rose up to meet them as the boat slowed.

Kyle stopped the boat with a harsh jerk as they reached the beach. Sand flew up with the water.

“Nice.”

Kyle snorted. “That’s all I get after not killing us?”

Angela laughed.

Kyle grinned.

Trent tried not to gag.

Biff puked over the side of the boat.

Zack rolled his eyes. “Well, we’re here.”

Kyle stood and offered a hand to Angela. If it had been anyone else, including Jennifer, he would have argued against her coming because of the belly

bump. Since it was Angela, Kyle was relieved. *We'll all come back from this run.*

Angela fought her emotions at the faith he was showing. Kyle was definitely one of hers. "You'll do your therapy sessions with me."

Kyle had been hoping that would happen. He didn't want to bare his soul to Adrian.

Angela stepped onto the beach and paused right there to begin her sweeps.

Kyle took charge of the others, directing them to pull the RIB up onto the shore away from the water. They staked it down but didn't deflate it.

Kyle gestured. "Get the tent set up first. All of our kits have parts of it. Let's get rolling."

Kyle had divided the heavier supplies between their kits to make it more manageable.

Angela was able to scan a quarter of the island from where they were. She spotted a few birds and a couple of brown mice, but nothing bigger. She went to help them get set up, confident there were no threats nearby.

Setting up the large tent wasn't as easy as it sounded and with just six people, it also went slowly. It was more than half an hour before the basic frame of the tent was up. All of them were covered in sweat and grit from the breeze blowing sand in their direction by the time it was done.

Angela denied Kyle when he would have started pulling out the canvas cover. "We can leave that for the next team. I want us to get some fishing lines in

now and then both water purification setups running.”

Thomas approved of the choices, but he was curious why she was doing it. “There’s enough food on the submarine to last for a month and it automatically filters the sea water.”

Angela began pulling fishing gear from her kit. “We don’t have enough fuel to make continuous trips in the RIBs for a week and that surf is way too rough to try paddling. We’ll need to have food and fresh water sources set up over here. The sooner we get started, the more supplies we’ll have to rely on later.”

She also didn’t know what this island would be like after dark. It was possible that they wouldn’t be able to spend even a single night here due to weather or wildlife, but Angela wanted to make sure things were covered if they were able to.

“That makes sense to me.” Thomas began digging through his kit. Kyle had handed it to him as they left the submarine. Thomas didn’t know what was in it.

“What do you want to use as bait?” Biff already had his gear out and was unrolling small amounts of fishing line. It would be attached to steel rods that they would drive into the ground near the water line. He’d gotten good at that while helping the fishing crew on Pitcairn.

Angela held up a small jar of fake bait. “When you open it, keep your face turned away. It stinks.”

Most of the men had a crude thought, but they didn't let it pass through their lips.

Angela chuckled anyway, catching the images. *That's why I can't be a lesbian.* Despite having one, she had no desire to find out what it tasted like.

Now the men laughed as they caught her thought.

Biff felt left out. He was the only one along who wasn't a descendant, other than Trent, but Trent was easily able to keep up with what was going on because he was hooked into the hive. Angela had connected him even though he was Invisible. It didn't allow him to pick up everything that was being thought, but he got enough of it to contribute to most of their conversations.

Biff went to the RIB and hefted out the small generator they had brought along. He set it where the beach met the thin green and yellow grass. Then he went back to the RIB for the collapsible barrels that would hold the water they purified. From there, it was a simple matter of weighing down and connecting the hoses to the filtration machine they had brought from the lab. He had it ready to go within a few minutes.

Angela gestured. "Get it running. Then stand guard in case the noise draws something."

Biff immediately brought out the stone warrior, then activated the generator and the filtration system.

It wasn't very noisy, but it still made all of them tense and pause what they were doing.

A few birds flew out of the thicker grass in the distance but other than that, there wasn't a reaction. The team got back to work.

Trent gathered the bowls they had brought along. He filled them with ocean water, trying not to collect any sand with it. Then he put an empty bowl inside each larger, full bowl and put plastic wrap overtop. He picked a few small pebbles from the beach and placed them in the centers of the plastic wrapped bowls. It would take a long time, but these do-it-yourself water filtration systems would provide more freshwater for them to drink and cook with. The sun beating down on this island would encourage the process.

Thomas didn't ask why they were using both methods. They had already told him they were low on fuel. He assumed that was the same fuel that the generator was using, meaning it would stop providing power for the water filtration system at some point.

Thomas enjoyed how it felt to be out of the lab. The sun was brighter and warmer than he had remembered; sweat was rolling down his spine and into the crack of his ass. Despite being a little uncomfortable, he was happy. *Freedom is amazing.*

Angela caught that but didn't respond. Freedom also came with a lot of responsibility that many people couldn't handle. She was concerned about how the rest of the refugees on the submarine would react once they got over here. They wouldn't be able to do much work after dark. That would leave a lot

of time for drinking and bad thoughts. She expected the first night here to be rough on the security team.

The crew that came over next would provide protection until sunset. After that, she would have to pick a harder team that was able to keep people in line.

“There’s a lot of ocean life here.” Zack was thrilled by it. “I can’t wait to have fresh fish steak.”

The others chuckled and agreed. There was no garbage washing up or stuck in the sand so far as they’d seen. All of them were careful to gather their own trash and put it into their kits so they didn’t change the natural environment.

“Once you’re finished with the fishing lines, go a hundred yards in and pick up any firewood you find.” Angela wiped her hands in the sand and then rinsed them in the water. Then she immediately traveled toward the grass to do her own search for wood. They would need a lot of it for campfires.

Biff followed her. He was very conscious of his job right now.

The others finished what they were doing and then took a different path into the grass to search for wood.

There wasn’t much to find. Their fast sweeps were revealing a thicket of trees near the center of the island, but that was it.

“We have trash we can bring over.”

Angela didn’t agree to that. She didn’t want to burn garbage in campfires. It released toxic fumes that were bad for them and for the environment, but

it was also likely that some of the trash would fall overboard or blow away while it was waiting to be used. Garbage also burned too quickly and didn't provide much light or heat. If they couldn't find fallen wood, they might take down a couple of trees for tonight, but then they would have to use lanterns and other alternative light sources for the rest of their stay. She wasn't going to wipe out all the trees on this island.

Ten minutes later, they had gathered a pile of half damp logs and twigs that had clearly been brought in by high tides or storms. None of it had come from this island.

Angela wasn't worried about that right now. They had found enough to get through until dawn. She checked the first barrel of filtered water; it was almost full. "Turn off the generator. It's time to do some exploring." It would be reactivated when they were here to watch over it.

All of the men were willing. Now that the basic chores had been done, it was time to find out if they were alone on this island. All of them were certain they were, but it still needed to be cleared.

Angela led them out with a hand on her holster and a slightly upset stomach.

They had been walking for 15 minutes without seeing anything except low growing vines and crabgrass that was slowly taking over the island. They couldn't see the submarine from where they were now. That made all of them nervous.

Everyone came over to where Kyle was standing.

"It looks like the remains of a wall."

The 3-foot-wide collection of gray, cemented stones was only a few inches tall. The sand and crabgrass were covering the ruins.

The settlement wall stretched for about 100 feet and then disappeared into the sand that was lining this side of the shore. Angela led them along the wall toward the water.

She immediately found a small area where boats could be brought in without having to jump the rough surf. It was on the west side of the island. The submarine was sitting on the east side.

"Look!" Trent pointed.

Everyone saw the wreckage of a structure. It was about 10 feet high, with tall, rounded walls that were covered in dark debris. The ground all around the structure was also littered in thick chunks of it and the grass was nonexistent. It had been burnt away in a large circle.

"That looks like it was blown up."

Thomas excitedly walked toward it. "That's a day beacon!"

Biff followed on Angela's heels as they all approached the crumbling structure. "What's a day beacon?"

"It's a small navigational landmark built in the shape of a lighthouse but it's unlit. You can usually view it from sea. Those black stripes painted on the top tell sailors their location." Thomas knelt by some of the wreckage. "I think this is Earhart Light."

He ran his hand along the crumbling sandstone. "They built this about a year after she went missing. There should also be three runways and some ruins from the Howland Naval Air Station that was here for a little while."

"So they built a lighthouse for her years after she went missing?" Trent was feeling very tired. After spending time on the submarine, his legs had gotten used to an easy ride. He assumed being back on their island would be much the same. He would have to readjust to the rougher landscape.

"These structures were built right after she failed to show up, except for the runways. Those were put in to accommodate her Lockheed model 10 Electra. Did you know they actually had hundreds of transmissions from her saying she was on an island?"

"No." It was well known that Amelia Earhart had vanished in 1937, but that was the extent of the details that most people had, including Angela.

"Everyone was told she went down in a storm, but searchers didn't find any wreckage." Thomas

tried to be fair. “It’s not like they had such a beautiful search and rescue capabilities back then, though.”

“Would the wreckage look like that?” Kyle pointed.

The shiny glints had caught Kyle’s attention.

Everyone went over to examine the long, oval fuselage from an old plane. It was gray and weathered from being exposed for a long time.

“No.” Thomas examined it. “During World War II, several pilots went down in this area. This looks like it’s from that generation of aircraft.”

“I see the shape of a runway.” Angela went closer to examine it. The long, grey stone matched the color of the rock wall from the settlement ruins, but it was completely flat underneath the crabgrass and weeds. It was only noticeable because of the different color. Everything else on the island was either green or light brown. She knelt to examine the construction.

“We could land a plane here if we cleared this.”

Kyle shrugged at Zack. “If we ever come back here, I doubt we’ll need an airplane.” As far as Kyle knew, Angela had no plans to colonize this location.

Everyone looked toward Angela, waiting to see where she wanted to go next. All of them were hot from the relentless sun, though a small eastward breeze was keeping it from being unbearable. The island itself only had one high point of about 20 feet above the ocean.

Biff gestured in surprise. “Is that a cat?”

Everyone stared as a full-grown male cat leapt onto the settlement wall and studied them resentfully.

The cat looked like any other stray. It had black stripes on the end of its gray tail and the tips of its ears. Its long whiskers twitched continuously as it scented the air and observed the new arrivals.

Before anyone could react, the cat took off after two Masked Boobie birds that had landed in the nearby sand. It chased them out of sight.

Angela took her notebook out. She made a quick entry about capturing the cat before they left. Tonya wanted new feline DNA. By luck, she might get it from this run.

“We haven’t found a fresh water source yet.” Kyle was considering the basic supplies they would need while they were here. “I’ve seen a few Pacific rats and places where we can harvest oysters, but that’s about it.”

Angela had already come to that conclusion. There were a lot of guano deposits, and while the excrement of all of the birds would be a great glue or fertilizer that they could take back to Pitcairn, the island didn’t have much else.

Still, she didn’t change her mind. They would collect any feral cats they found, along with some of the guano that was also good for gunpowder production, and they would try to enjoy their time here while everyone recovered. She could take them to another location, but it would probably have the same results and mean more time cooped up

together in the submarine. These men needed open air without walls or ceilings for a while.

On the plus side, there wasn't much happening on this island that would get people in trouble. They hadn't seen any snakes yet and there were only a small number of insects hovering around them despite everyone being covered in sweat from the harsh sun. It might not be the ideal vacation spot, but it would be fine for what they needed.

Angela turned toward the remaining section of the island. "Let's get this other side cleared and then we'll take a short break before we check out the center."

Everyone followed her without argument. So far, Howland Island was a disappointment on all levels.

Thomas was the only one who didn't feel that way. He had been in the lab so long that even a tiny island with a few ruins and a cat was exciting to him. *And who knows, maybe we'll find something on the south side.*

Angela caught that and hoped the man was wrong.

3

The south side of the island was empty of everything except for low-growing vines, and a rocky landscape that wouldn't give their legs a break despite not being very hilly. They reached the edge of the beach and quickly turned around. There

was nothing to see. Even the birds and rats weren't using this part of the island. It was isolated and depressing.

“Let's go to the center and take that break.” Her stomach was flipping from the heat. She needed to sit for a few minutes and cool off; the center was the only place with any shade.

The men trudged along behind her and next to her, no longer searching for threats. Biff had also put away his defender. They had covered the entire island, except for the center area that was visible long before they got arrived.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the trees. They were moving faster because they were eager for the break. It also drained their remaining energy. The team collapsed onto the ground beneath the small group of thin Kou trees. Everyone got out their canteens and sat there, cooling off.

The sound of birds calling and the surf rushing in lingered as they took their break. Not being able to see the submarine from where they were sitting was a source of tension all of them tried to ignore.

After a few minutes, the silence began to get to Angela. She decided it was a good time to handle one of the therapy moments that were on her list.

Angela took a drink from her canteen and then focused on Thomas. “So, what did Adrian find in your therapy session?”

Thomas had been expecting that question a heap sooner. He had an answer prepared. “I’m a sexist, egotistical sailor with mommy issues.”

Angela grunted. “Aren’t we all?”

Thomas laughed. Then he gave her the truth. “Adrian found a little resentment for female leadership and a lot of hatred for Reicher, but otherwise, I’m as normal as anyone can be with my history.”

Kyle looked over. “What history?”

Thomas leaned against a tree. “I’m a Navy brat. My parents got divorced not long after I hit my teen years. My grandfather was a pilot on the Enola Gay.”

Thomas waited for a moment to give them time to frown at him before continuing. “I was recruited by the CIA out of high school and spent five years spying on governments during my deployments. Then Reicher caught me. I’d been in that lab for about a decade.”

Zack couldn’t imagine that. “A decade without freedom...or sex?”

Thomas’s face tightened. “He bred the military men occasionally. I’m not an incel like Joseph was. I don’t hate women.” *But I have spent a lot of time Jerkin’ the Gherkin. It’ll be nice to have a steady woman.*

Angela took over the conversation. “But you do resent female leadership.”

“A bit.”

“Tell us why.”

“My grandmother disowned my mother for having half-breed children out of wedlock. My mother spent more time working than caring for her three half-breed kids after my father was killed in a factory accident. Soon after that, both of my younger brothers were killed in a gang fight. My older sister was a loner who abandoned the family as soon as she could. I haven’t had many *good* female role models.” Thomas studied Angela hopefully.

Angela snorted. “You still don’t.”

She could have pointed out that men hadn’t been good role models for him either, but Adrian would cover that in his therapy sessions. “You can trust me to do what’s best for the camp and for the future.”

“I don’t care about any of that.”

Everyone’s frowns grew deeper.

“What do you care about?” Trent hoped it was nothing bad. They needed good people to replenish the Eagles.

Thomas jerked his thumb toward the beach. “Those kids. They deserve better than a life as a spy or a gang banger.”

“I’ll make sure they have it. You can help us with that in time.”

“After I prove you can trust me?”

Angela locked eyes with him. “No, after you admit the truth about who you really are. Liars are not welcome in my camp.”

Thomas let out a sound of unwilling cooperation. “I’m a spy at heart. Reicher spent a heap of time trying to convert me, but it didn’t work. I’ll watch all of you; you’ll never be able to keep secrets from me.” Thomas tensed for a punishment. That admission in the lab had earned him a week in a cage with bread to eat once a day.

Kyle made a sound of derision. “Is that all?”

Thomas stared at him. “It’s a big deal. Reicher hates spies.”

Kyle quickly corrected the man. “Reicher’s dead. Safe Haven doesn’t care who you watch. We only care that you follow the rules.”

“I can do that.” Thomas decided to take another chance. “Are there are other spies in your camp?”

Kyle’s tone sharpened. “That’s none of your business.”

Thomas liked that answer. It implied Safe Haven had privacy. That was something he had sorely missed during his captivity. “I’ve never been able to be myself before.”

Kyle approved of the man and how he had been handling himself since being rescued. *There’s another convert for the dream.*

One of many. I’ll work on each of them as I get the time. Angela turned toward Biff and lifted a brow.

Biff grunted. “I’m not secretly a spy. I’m just terrified of everything that moves or breathes now. No biggie.”

Angela waited for a serious answer despite his attempt at levity.

Biff was confused and reluctant to bare his soul. “I don’t know what you want.”

Trent helped him out. “She’s giving you a chance to get things off your chest. If you have secrets, drop them on us now, let her make a choice, and be done with it.”

Biff grunted. “You already know my issue—fear. Once I get over that, I’ll be fine.”

Zack knew differently. “Then why were you always sucking up to Greg so much?”

“He saved my life.” Biff realized he would have to give them more details. He did it reluctantly. He didn’t like to talk about that time in his life. “Greg stopped me from jumping off the cruise ship.”

Angela didn’t want to ask, but she had to. “What caused you to want to take your life?”

Biff couldn’t stop the emotion from coming through his voice. “Because Sabrina died on the trip to our island.”

Angela and the others were shocked. They hadn’t known Biff and Sabrina were dating. Even during the illness, Biff hadn’t visited with her.

“She died so fast!” Biff barely stopped himself from crying. “I loved her. At the time, I didn’t think there would ever be anyone else for me. The idea of being alone and sad forever was hard to handle. Greg made me understand that as long as I’m an Eagle, I’ll never really be alone.”

Angela put a hand over his. “Greg was right. We’re a family, albeit an odd one. You’ll always have a place with us. Even when you don’t want it.”

Chapter Ten
A Different Diet

1

“You’ll always be one of us.”

“Thank you.” Greg wiped away the tears.

His session with Adrian was over; it had gone well, in Greg’s opinion. Adrian had been able to show him parts of the alternate future where he had agreed to sink the submarine and they had been forced to attack Reicher’s lab without the torpedoes. Many of the subjects had escaped and gone on to terrorize the surviving Australian population. A few of them had even tracked down Safe Haven and killed a lot of their people before finally being removed. Adrian hadn’t been able to pull it up in real time now that it was already over with, but they’d both seen enough to allow Greg to start accepting that his choice had been the right one.

Adrian had also caught small glimpses of other important moments while they explored the slippery timestream that didn’t want to be held onto. He hesitated for a moment and then decided it would be better if Greg knew. “Are you sure you want to settle down with Lisa?”

Greg wasn’t expecting the question. “What?”

“While you’re already sorting through so many areas of your life and deciding what will make you happy, this seems like a perfect time to evaluate your personal relationships as well.”

“What did you see that I didn’t?”

Adrian hedged. “She just might not have the same image of that future as you do.”

Greg shrugged. “I want some kids and some peace until we have to fight again.”

“Exactly.”

Greg’s confusion was evident in his voice. “I don’t understand.”

Adrian could have told Greg what he should do, but many of Safe Haven’s members were stubborn and refused to take advice about their personal lives. Charlie was a great example of that. If he had been shown the future with Tracy instead of just being warned about it, he might have made better choices. “Go watch Lisa for a little while. Listen to her. Then take some time to consider it before you talk to her.”

Greg was getting worried now. “Is it that bad?”

“Not for some people. For you, it could be damaging.”

Greg immediately began to brace against discovering something ugly about Lisa.

Adrian needed Greg to be distracted now so the healing process could continue to work, but he also wanted Greg to find true happiness. “You may even want to talk to Angela about her breeding tree before you make any big choices. Don’t be like

Shawn. Ask who you should approach and avoid some of that hell.”

Greg didn't argue. After what he had gone through, Adrian's advice seemed solid to him. He was no longer as hardheaded as he used to be. Greg stood and held out his hand. “Thank you.”

Adrian shook with him. “It's my honor.”

Greg left, shutting the door. There weren't many people in the hall now.

As soon as the door closed, Cody and Cate immediately sat up from their slumped positions in the corner chairs. They had been sending emotional control spells the entire time Greg was here, while gently digging into his mind to make sure he wasn't so damaged that he was a threat to anyone else.

They had appeared to be taking a nap; the kids really were tired, though. They'd done the same thing during each of the therapy sessions. They had now handled most of the military men; almost none of that was good.

One of the caretakers, who were rotating so they didn't leave the kids alone, had been evaluated and that one was good. They had also handed out appointments that would keep them busy for days.

Adrian swept the tired kids. “Go take a lunch break.”

Knock-knock! Charlie opened the door. “I'm next in line.”

The twins went by Charlie and proceeded to the ladder that would take them to the second level of the submarine. As they went, Cate brought up her

shield and glared at everyone with bright red orbs. She studied all the rooms as they went by, searching for problems.

Everyone who saw her locked down on their thoughts until she was gone.

Charlie sat in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “We don’t really have to do this. If you just clear me so I can go over with the next team, you can go to lunch, too.”

Adrian opened his notebook to the next page and wrote Charlie’s name. “So, why do you hate your mother?”

Charlie saw Adrian smile and understood the man was joking, but it was obvious that he wasn’t going to give out a free pass. Charlie settled back in the chair and forced himself to be patient. He did want to get off the submarine for a while.

Adrian studied the teenager. Charlie was no longer the timid boy who had come to Safe Haven with an abusive man and a missing mother. He was now the prodigal son who didn’t want that label. “What do you think it will take to make you happy?”

“I don’t have an answer for that.” Charlie wasn’t being a smart ass. He honestly didn’t know.

“Tell me about the last time you were happy.”

Charlie contemplated the consummation of his relationship with Tracy and flushed.

Adrian caught the images, but he didn’t scold the boy for feeling that way. As a man, Adrian

understood. “Our first time is always special. It’s not wrong to remember it with fondness.”

“It’s more than just the sex. She loved me then. Everything changed after we left the mountain.”

“Because she found out you got her pregnant on purpose so she wouldn’t leave you?”

Charlie nodded stiffly. He wasn’t proud of that decision now, but there was no way he could deny it. Everyone knew what he’d done.

“Tell me another time when you were happy.”

Charlie considered briefly and replayed the image of winning Tracy’s heart.

Adrian did swallow a scold this time. So far, all of Charlie’s happiness had come from convincing Tracy to be with him. “There has to be something else that drives a person. It can’t all be about conquests. I assume you know that.”

“Yes, but I’m not going to lie and pretend that being reunited with my dad was a high point. I can’t even say that being reunited with my mom was. Those first few months they were in *your* camp were tense and awkward.” Charlie shrugged bitterly. “Not much has changed for me. The months I had with Tracy were the best time for me after the war.”

“What about before the war?”

Charlie stiffened, remembering that life. The moments that stood out were ugly times of being beaten by Kenn or watching as Kenn beat his mother. The happy times were fading. “Maybe when I was a cadet. Some of our father-son

competition times were nice. Kenn and I both liked to win.”

It bothered Adrian that Charlie didn't have happy memories from his childhood either. It made it difficult to find a way to give the boy happiness now. When he'd said he didn't know, that was clearly the truth.

Charlie leaned forward before Adrian could try another way to get into his brain. “Will you look ahead for me?”

Adrian quickly denied that. “I'm not allowed.”

Charlie sneered. “Because my mom ordered you not to?”

“No, your *dad* did, months ago. He wants you to move on.”

Charlie's emotions broke open. “I can't! I need to know if my baby is alive!”

Adrian felt bad for him. Sadness over the pathetic childhood and bleak adulthood pushed Adrian into crossing a line. He hoped his punishment would be minor.

Charlie observed eagerly as Adrian entered the time stream, but he wasn't able to stay in the man's mind. He was quickly pushed out and had to sit there and wait while trying not to give it away to the other descendants who were linked into the hive.

Adrian strained to control the timestream. The images he witnessed were shocking and a bit frightening. *I never would have guessed that one.* He groaned lightly as the timestream fought against

him. He let it go, gasping in air. A yawn took over and brought tears to his eyes.

Charlie saw how tired Adrian was. “It’s okay. Maybe you can try again another time.”

Adrian didn’t make any promises. He drank some water and then tried to offer comfort. “Ease up on yourself. I’m sure things will be better in the future.”

Charlie immediately suspected Adrian had seen something. “How far into the future?”

“I can’t answer that.”

The door opened. Marc stood there, glaring. “I told you not to do that!”

Adrian yawned again. “I didn’t.”

Marc scanned Charlie and saw he didn’t know anything new. He could feel Adrian blocking the boy from his mind. “Keep it that way!”

The order had a double meaning, but Charlie only caught one of them. “Adrian said I’m clear. I just have the normal issues of any teenager.”

Adrian snorted. “He needs some time with his mom.”

“I’m off to get my gear.” Charlie left before Marc could yell at him for asking Adrian to break a rule.

Marc opened his mouth to threaten Adrian.

Adrian quickly gestured in Eagle code. *He’s listening.*

Marc glared and gestured back. *Later!*

Adrian sighed. “Until then, find the other nail in your shoe and send him in. He’s an hour late.”

“Who?”

“Theo. He’s drunk again already and forgot to set his alarm for this appointment.”

Marc stormed off. “Damn it!”

Adrian smiled in relief. Redirecting Marc to other targets was effective. *I hope I don’t run out of those before he corners me.*

Kenn tapped on the open door and came in. He was locked and missing his gifts desperately. “Can you squeeze me in?”

Adrian nodded tiredly. “Always. Have a seat.”

Kenn shut the door and joined him at the table.

2

Wade didn’t follow Marc as the man stormed down to the officer quarters on the bottom level. He had rounds to do, and he didn’t want to know who Marc was about to challenge. Wade had other things to worry about.

He and Ray hadn’t been able to get through to home. Ray was certain there was a storm between their locations that was preventing the call from going through. Wade hoped that was all it was. Not being able to check in with Amy was a dangerous distraction.

Wade glanced at the broken clock on the wall. His wristwatch had stopped working yesterday as well. He had no idea what time it was, but he assumed it was nearing lunch, judging from the smells that were wafting up from the mess. Some of

the military men had been drafted to make a meal. Wade hoped it was edible.

Wade's first stop on this round was the bunk area. The entire bottom level of the submarine was clean now. The kids had finished moving all their things down from the theater and were now getting washed up. Several of Safe Haven's people were in there with them.

Wade saw Greg standing in the doorway at the opposite end of the bunk room. Wade paused to scan. He didn't know what Greg was hunting for, but he assumed he would know it when he saw it.

Inside the room, the kids, mothers, and caretakers didn't notice the men in the doorways. The caretakers and mothers were working with the younger kids to get them ready to go eat. Lisa had volunteered to come in and help. She was surrounded by older kids who were refusing to do anything she told them to.

"You're a normal. All of this happened because of people like you."

Lisa didn't know what to say to that. The kids had been making mean comments since she arrived. She'd only been here for a few minutes, but she was already regretting offering to help. "Do any of you need help getting washed or finding your way to the mess?"

Kids sneered at her.

"You're not our mother."

"Oi. Stop acting like it."

“We know where the mess is, *Dummy*. We don’t need you.”

Lisa understood the kids were resentful because they had been given up by their mothers in the lab. She tried not to take it personally. “Well, I’m here if anyone needs help.”

The kids went around her with nasty glares and more snide comments.

Lisa scanned the small toilet in the bunk room while swallowing hurt feelings. She didn’t want to argue with the kids. They had been through enough. *But there’s no way I will want to adopt one of them or have any of my own. I can’t disappoint my kids if I don’t have any.*

Lisa held in a shudder as two of the descendant children glared harder at her. Their eyes were still able to turn red even though their gifts were locked. It was creepy. *I don’t feel safe around them.*

Lisa was shocked at her own revelation, but she had to follow through with it. *Do I mean the kids, or do I mean all descendants?*

Still observing her from the door, Greg waited tensely for that answer. There was no way he would be willing to give up being a hybrid. If she couldn’t get over her new fear of magic, their relationship was already doomed.

Lisa felt his tension. She turned around.

Greg recognized the fear on her face for what it was. *She’s scared of all of us. In time, she’ll join the other normals. We’ll need to modify her memory or send her away so she can’t stir up trouble.*

It was a heartbreaking realization.

Greg left.

Lisa didn't call him back.

Wade had seen it all; he was unhappy with Lisa. He didn't understand the irrational fear everyone had of magic users when all the magic users had done was protect the normals. Wade also walked away when she looked at him. He didn't have anything nice to say.

Wade went by the main bathroom, where he could hear Marc hissing angry words at someone he was holding under the cold water of the shower. Wade knew the water was cold because the person was complaining about it while trying not to drown.

Wade assumed it was Theo and approved. Theo hadn't gone through half of what the mission team had, but he wasn't holding up nearly as well. Some tough love might get through to him.

Wade saw the security team gathering gear from the supply piles. Charlie was there but not talking to anyone. Wade hoped a few hours on the island with his mom would improve his attitude.

Wade caught a flicker from the corner of his eye. He spun around and found Dace leaning against the wall near the bathroom, where Marc was.

Dace gave him a weak smile and then vanished from view.

Wade understood Dace was Marc's quiet protection and also approved of that. He moved on so that no one would pull it from his mind.

Isabel came into the hall as Wade went by. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure.” Wade noticed Goldie nearby and assumed they had been exploring together while the caretakers were watching their infants. Both of them were used to abuse, but even though Goldie’s injuries were obviously more serious, Isabel looked the roughest. *I think it’s the long gray streaks in her hair. It makes her look older.* “What can I do for you?”

Isabel kept her voice down. “Would your alpha consider changing our diets a little bit?”

“Not a chance. You’ll have to leave if you want to continue consuming forbidden food.” Wade was surprised that she had even asked.

Isabel was caught off guard by his answer. “I can leave?”

“Of course. You’re not our captive.”

Goldie frowned. “Please don’t. You’re the only friend I have here.”

Isabel was already considering it. “You could come with me.” She didn’t mind Goldie’s companionship. He was one of the few men on the submarine she wasn’t scared of yet.

Goldie made a face. “No, I can’t. Safe Haven is the only place where my kids can grow up with a good future. The rest of the world isn’t recovering at all. You know that as well as I do.”

Isabel realized he was right. They had been kept up to date on the rest of world by random explorers who had made the long trip to the lab. There wasn’t

any rebuilding happening anywhere. She gave Goldie a smile. “I guess I’ll stay in Safe Haven for now.”

“That’s wonderful, mate.” Goldie stepped closer and put a hand on her arm. “You’ll be happy with me.”

Isabel stiffened and shook off his touch. “We’re friends, and that’s it. After being Reicher’s brood mare for so long and then being Joseph’s punching bag, I don’t want to have sex or a relationship ever again.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“I mean it with all my heart.” Isabel walked away. As far as she was concerned, they weren’t even friends now.

Goldie looked at Wade for help. “I don’t understand.”

Wade didn’t have anything positive to say. “The best you can do is leave her alone and maybe she’ll accept your friendship again in the future.”

Wade doubted it, though. Isabel was at a point in her life where she was reevaluating everything. Like many of those on this submarine, she was coming to conclusions that she didn’t like, but she would follow through with because she knew that was what was best for her. “I suggest you try to make friends with someone else. She’s not interested.”

“Did you notice how they’re not interested in anything but food?”

Harry grunted at Shawn’s lowly spoken comment. The three starving subjects had opted to come in for their medical exams together. That wasn’t surprising, considering they were from the same wing. They had probably been together for a long time.

What was surprising was their condition. After two days of good meals, the men actually looked a little worse than they had upon being rescued.

Shawn began cleaning the mess from the exams. Harry was scanning the patients and then feeding that information to Shawn because Angela hadn’t unlocked him. Looking at their swollen stomachs and exposed rib cages while they put their clothes back on was disheartening to Shawn. *That’s what I see in the mirror.*

Harry compared their files again. There had to be an explanation for their condition.

One of the men sat down in the chair to put his shoes on. “Can we go eat now, please?”

Harry faced them. “Tell me a little more about your wing first.”

The man paused in putting on his shoes. Hatred crossed his face. “We were in the experimental wing. If Reicher wanted to study a disease, he gave it to one of us and then sent us to the medical bay daily.”

Harry frowned. “What kind of diseases?”

“AIDS, syphilis, some parasitic things I don’t know the name of.”

“That’s it!” Harry turned back to the folder and studied their symptoms again. “He gave them worms!”

Shawn was disgusted. “Isn’t that something animals get?”

“People get them too. That’s why there’s a human form of Ivermectin. Parasitic worms can be deadly. They take all the nutrients that a host needs; the host slowly starves to death no matter how much they eat.”

“That does match their symptoms.” Shawn went to the computer Kenn had set up an hour ago. “I’ll update their files.”

Shawn enjoyed using the computer. Cold, hard data appealed to him in many ways now.

Harry drew his remaining energy and sent it toward all three of the men. He didn’t know if he could heal that, but it was certainly worth a try.

Nothing happened.

Harry wasn’t disappointed. “We can handle that the normal way.” He went to the stack of books on the counter and began searching for the one he wanted. “I just need to figure out what dosage to give them.”

The three men didn’t seem to care. They kept looking toward the door and the stopped clock as their stomachs growled painfully.

Harry quickly found what he needed and then went to the medicine cabinet. The submarine was

nicely organized, like the lab had been. “You guys need to come here every twelve hours for a dose of this medicine and then go eat something.”

All of them liked hearing that. Being required to eat would make it easier to gorge themselves.

It took Harry a couple of minutes to prepare the medication. It wasn't commonly used, so they had plenty of it right now. They didn't have any Ivermectin onboard, so he'd chosen to go with Vermox. That one did have a few side effects, but those were minor in comparison to what the men were already dealing with. None of them had had a solid bowel movement in months. It was a wonder they had survived this long.

Harry handed a dose of medicine to each of the men and then got a bottle of water so they could take it. As soon as they were finished, he waved a hand. “Go eat.”

The men rushed out as if they were being chased.

Harry was glad of it this time. If they didn't take in enough food, the medication wouldn't be as effective. They were already dealing with the fact that all their meds were at least a year and a half old now, and some of them much more because they had been in stocks that were gathered before the war. Soon, a lot of their medications would be gone, and they would have to learn how to remake them.

“Is that our last appointment for a while?” Shawn found himself wanting to go join the men for

lunch. It bothered him that he looked the same as they did.

Harry started to answer and then rotated toward the doorway as he felt someone else arrive.

Cate entered the medical bay. She waved a hand that slammed the door behind her.

“What can we do for you, Sweetheart?” Harry liked having the girl roaming the hallways. As long as that was going on, none of the restless military men were going to cause problems.

“I’m here for personal reasons.”

Shawn and Harry both laughed at how serious she sounded.

Harry came over and knelt in front of her. “What can I do for you, Doll?”

Cate’s eyes lit up bright red. “Save Angela’s baby or I’ll fry you in your sleep.”

4

Isabel stepped aside to avoid the three thin men hurrying toward the mess. They went by her with skeleton hands holding their stomachs.

Isabel felt bad for them. She recognized them as Reicher’s rats. Everyone else in their testing wing had died long before Marc’s team had been brought in.

Isabel felt someone come up behind her. She rotated to tell Goldie to go away.

One of the military men grabbed her around the throat and pulled her into his big arms. He leered at her in anticipation.

The two military men with him tugged on his arm. "Not yet!"

"We have to get control of the sub first."

The man relaxed his grip on Isabel, but only a little. He raised his voice. "Get out here, Marc!"

Marc had already felt the disturbance. He let go of Theo and came to the hallway. A quick scan showed Isabel struggling in the grip of a madman. *Why do I feel like I've been here before?*

"Unlock us or we'll kill her!"

The military man tightened his grip around Isabel's arm again. "And then tell them to open the door to the bridge. We're taking over!"

Marc felt his child protectors wanting to handle it. "No."

The military men assumed he was talking to them. All of them reached out to do Isabel a minor injury so that he would be forced to agree.

Isabel screamed at the two punches and the hair pull.

Marc concentrated. *Dace, take the shot if you get it.* He'd known Dace was there all along.

Dace drew his gun quietly from his holster and got into position without being seen.

The man holding Isabel was aroused by her scream and struggles. He pulled her in closer, not caring that he needed to wait. It had been a long time since he was bred, and he'd always wanted Isabel.

The minute his lips touched hers, something changed for Isabel. Instead of overpowering fear, the same survival instinct that allowed her to fight Joseph flooded her body.

Isabel relaxed. She didn't kiss the man, but she let him think she was going to.

The military man drew back to view her face. "I know you liked that!"

Isabel's lips curved. "Ay. I like this a heap."

She lunged forward and sank her teeth into his neck where it met the shoulder. She ripped out a huge chunk of flesh, severing an artery.

Blood sprayed all over them both and began pattering to the floor as he screamed.

Dace opened fire. He became visible as he pulled the trigger.

The other two military men were killed instantly. Their bodies hit the floor while the first man was still staggering around with his hands over his new wound, trying to stop the blood loss.

Dace started to step over and put the man out of his misery.

Marc put a hand on Dace's arm to stop him. "Give it a minute."

Isabel lunged forward again and drove her teeth into the other side of the man's neck. She came away with another large chunk of flesh that she began to chew in pleasure.

Her hair immediately darkened into beautiful brown; the wrinkles on her face and hands firmed. Her spine straightened.

Drawn by the chaos, Wade stopped in the hall and stared in surprise. “I guess she got what she wanted.”

Chapter Eleven

The Ghosts Are Back

1

“**T**here’s trouble on the ship. I can feel it.”
Zack rubbed at an itchy spot on his wrist.

Angela and Kyle didn’t answer. They were already tracking the bad vibes.

Trent wiped sand from his shirt while mentally cursing the glaring heat. Still sitting under the trees, he was on watch duty even though there was nothing to see. Trent scratched his hand and tried not to get distracted.

In the bright light of day, the island was remarkably peaceful. Birds were swooping over the distant beach to collect the small fish being pushed toward shore with the tide. The colorful birds had avoided the humans so far. The scent of salt hung heavily in the air, smothering the smell of water. The entire island was ringed with salt deposits that Angela planned to collect and filter for use on Pitcairn.

“Should we go back and help?” Kyle stood and dusted dirt from his hands and clothes.

“It’ll be over before we can reach the beach.”
Angela knew Biff was once again feeling left out.

She linked to him mentally so he could observe what they were already seeing.

Biff was surprised when Isabel rescued herself. The gore didn't bother him. He also wasn't upset that she ate the pieces of flesh that she bit off. In Reicher's lab, it was common knowledge what was in the diet of the breeders. What bothered him was that she'd had to defend herself again. "She needs a protector."

Angela disconnected him with a sharp glare. "Don't chase that spark. It will only burn you both."

Biff glowered. "Because you've already matched her with someone who isn't damaged?"

Angela stood and wiped sand from her jeans. "No, because she's been a captive cow for most of her life. I want her to have real freedom now."

Biff and the others followed Angela as she headed back toward their base camp. "That doesn't mean she can't have a relationship."

"Yes, it does. She wants to be single and left alone. We're going to honor half of that."

Biff followed in silence for a few minutes, stewing. In the end, he couldn't resist. "Who would be my match?"

Angela kept walking. "Jayda."

Trent stiffened. "I'm dating Jayda."

Angela smiled coolly. "I've heard that rumor, too."

Neither man knew what to say.

"Boss?"

Angela stopped, drawn by the surprised dismay in Kyle's voice.

"We missed a building." Kyle pointed.

Zack scowled. "That's not possible. We already swept this entire island from the highest point."

"I know, but something's there just the same."

They all stared at the fuzzy shape of a small structure not far from where they were standing.

Biff tried not to overreact. "That's not possible."

Angela was tired of that phrase. Too many things had already happened that they couldn't explain.

"Maybe we're just seeing things." Biff brought his defender out.

Angela did a quick sweep of the team, but she didn't find anything wrong with them. She couldn't explain the appearance of the building even though they had been over that spot twice now. She slid a hand onto her holster. "Let's go check it out."

Kyle reached for his radio. "Do you want me to call over the security team?"

"Not yet. There's no reason to offer more possible victims."

Angela's words sent fresh adrenaline through the male bodies. All of them surrounded her with protection as they approached the structure that shouldn't be there.

Trent squinted. "I see someone."

"Shields down; weapons stay holstered."

No one liked that, but they obeyed Angela's orders. When dealing with new people, it was usually best not to reveal their gifts upon first contact.

Biff reluctantly drew in his defender. He only obeyed because the single shape in front of them was female and small. He didn't feel a threat from the lone woman.

Angela stayed ready to react, but she didn't feel a threat either. In fact, there was a sense of time speeding up as the woman looked up from her cooking rock and spotted them.

The woman glared. "Don't blow your wig. Just more ghosts." She resumed flipping the cooking oysters.

Angela and the others were only a little confused. In another time, they might have been thrown off by being called ghosts, but they were slowly getting used to that mystery themselves.

Angela advanced, studying the woman, her shelter, and her cooking setup. All of it was ingenious.

The cooking rock was long and wide, and obviously dug up from the shoreline. The double row of oysters on it smelled good. Angela assumed the woman was making so much at one time because the sun would only heat the rock enough for cooking once a day. She probably snacked on the leftovers the rest of the time. Oysters wouldn't normally stay good so long, but the woman was

sprinkling them with generous amounts of salt that she'd clearly strained from ocean water.

Kyle nodded toward the woman's rock shelter. It was four feet high and easily six feet wide. He wondered how long it had taken her to build it.

The woven-vine blanket and woven-vine pillow stuffed with crab grass were clever, but the rock, sand, and vine-crafted water purification setup was amazing. An old war helmet was catching the slowly dripping liquid to provide her a steady source of fresh water.

She's smart. Angela scanned the woman again and saw her shirt and pants were also mostly woven vines with a few patches of leather and silk left. She was barefoot, with pilots' goggles pushed up to hold the unruly brown hair that flowed down her back like a waterfall and reached her knees.

Angela immediately began planning to take the castaway with them when they left. Anyone this smart needed to be put to good use.

"There's a grave." Zack looked toward it, not pointing. Eagle training told them not to make a lot of movements around the mentally unstable, and it was clear to him the woman was that. She was muttering to herself and even stomping her feet in the sand.

"Kiss off! No more ghosts!"

Angela kept her distance. "We're really here. Can we help you?"

The woman's eyes flew open. "Ghosts don't flap gums!"

Angela smiled. “We’re from Safe Haven. We’d like to help you.”

The woman turned toward them. Her face blanked for a few seconds, then lit up. “I’m rescued?”

Trent smiled at her. “Yes, ma’am.”

The woman shrieked and danced around in joy. “No more ghosts!”

“She’s been here a long time.” Zack could tell from her clothes but also from the solid piles of waste that took up a long stretch of the grassy area behind her rock shelter. “A castaway?”

Trent nodded. “It’s happened before. I remember a story about a guy who was on one of these deserted islands for five years before being rescued.”

Biff read the small driftwood cross carving.

Nan.

He couldn’t tell if that had been a man or a woman. Biff was sad that she’d lost her only companion, though. He stepped forward, holding out a hand. “I’m Biff. It’s nice to meet you.”

The woman jerked. “No, Biff. No touch me!”

Biff stopped as his team frowned at him. “Sorry, ma’am.”

His respectful tone brought a grin from her. Yellow teeth glared, but they were all there. “Be nice. Eat oysters.”

Biff scanned the cooking food. If it made her feel better to share a meal, he didn’t have a problem

with that. Biff chose the smallest one and picked it up.

“Damn!” He juggled the steaming food between both hands. He hadn’t expected it to be so hot.

The woman scowled. “Cursing!”

Biff shoved the oyster into his mouth and grabbed his canteen for a drink to cool it off. As he began to chew, his smile returned. It was good for being cooked on a rock.

The woman splayed her hands toward the rest of the team.

Everyone but Angela took an oyster so as not to upset the woman. Angela already knew her stomach couldn’t handle it. “We’re from Safe Haven. I’m Angela.”

The woman paused. Her mouth opened, but she hesitated. She slowly shook her head. “Don’t know my name anymore.”

Angela sent a small wave of calm and swallowed a yawn. “Can I look for you?”

“Ghost?”

“No.”

The woman shuddered. “Do it quick, mind you.”

Angela entered the woman’s thoughts gently, but there was nothing there other than her survival methods.

Angela searched for an open mental door and didn’t find one.

A brief flash of a plane crashing flew by and was gone faster than Angela could grab. She withdrew.

The woman pointed at the calm ocean. “Damn ghosts.”

Biff grinned. “Cursing!”

The woman giggled.

Angela liked her attitude. “Will you let my medics try to find out who you are?”

“Surely.” The woman knelt by her rock and began collecting the oysters. “We have food. Come get it!”

Angela and her team scanned for any other people they’d missed.

The cat came flying across the sand. It went right by them and wound around the woman’s legs, croaking out a sound that was half hiss and half growl.

The woman tossed two hot oysters toward her shelter.

The cat dove after them.

The woman went to a hole nearby and dropped in the food. She didn’t seem to notice how hot it was. Angela saw red marks appear on her deeply scarred arms.

The woman tugged a small, heavy plane part over the hole. “Too lazy to dig it up.”

They understood she meant the cat.

Kyle grunted. “What do you want us to do, Boss?” This situation was different than most he’d been in.

Angela keyed the mike on her belt. There was only one thing they could do at this point. “Marc, send over the security team. We’re ready for them now.”

2

“They found someone!” Jayda was thrilled to be part of the security team that was on the way over to the island.

Kenn ignored her excitement. He was holding tight to the RIB and trying not to feel the water that was hitting all of them. *I hate water now!*

Everyone else in the RIB had already noticed. The unknown woman was stomping in the surf with a sharp stick, presumably fishing. It was obvious from her appearance that she’d been here a long time.

The boat bounced skillfully over the dangerous surf and then slowed as it approached the beach. Wade was becoming as skilled at it as Kyle was. They had used the RIBs more on this run than at any other time since the war.

Charlie was first out of the boat. He marched through the surf and went straight to his mother. “Dad said you need a medic.”

“Update me first.”

Charlie assumed it wasn’t an emergency. “Three of the military men are dead. Isabel is in isolation. We weren’t sure what to do with her.”

Charlie was certain Angela already knew most of what had happened.

“Tell your dad not to keep her away from her kids.”

Charlie sent that mentally, then frowned. “Are you sending me back with updates?”

“No. Just using up that extra energy.”

Charlie saw the men who had come with her were busy collecting and dumping filtered water into storage containers to make space for the next load when it was ready. Biff stood nearby, scanning everything for problems.

“Updates...” Angela was getting tired. She wasn’t able to take a nap right now, but it was the only thing she wanted.

Charlie felt his mom evaluating his stress level. There wasn’t much to find. *I’m getting through it.* In time, he might not even hate himself as much. *I’ll always wonder about the baby, though.* “Everything else is fine on the sub. The mess is being cleaned; the twins are roaming and threatening as needed. Everyone is quiet.”

Angela was relieved to hear that, but she was furious that the military men had waited for her to leave before causing trouble. “How many are on my removal list now?”

Charlie made a face. “Dad says there are five. He’ll handle it after you allow the next group to come over for the night.”

Angela didn’t ask for those names or reasons. She trusted Harry’s recommendations, Adrian’s

notes, and Marc's final call. Those three men knew evil too well.

Trent helped Kenn and three military men pull the RIB up on to the shoreline where it wouldn't be lost.

The three military men hurried toward Angela while Kenn stayed with Trent.

Charlie rotated and brought his shield up over her. He glared at them. "What do you guys want?!"

All three men stopped. They faced Angela in fear.

"We didn't know that was going to happen. We don't believe in hurting women."

"Ay! We don't want problems with you."

"Please don't blame us for what the others did."

Angela could feel their genuine fear that she was going to hold them responsible for the attempted mutiny. She wanted to assure them that wasn't the case, but she didn't trust them yet. She pointed instead. "Help collect the clean water and reset the fishing lines. Stay busy and don't give me a reason to doubt you."

All three men hurried off to do what they'd been told.

Angela and Charlie studied the men, searching for problems and lies.

Trent gave Kenn a small smile. "It's good to see you out and about."

Kenn put his back to the ocean and tried to pretend it wasn't there, taunting him. "Where do you need me?"

It was the response of an Eagle, but Trent felt the difference. He motioned toward Angela. “She didn’t give me assignments for you guys yet.”

Kenn went to Angela, along with Jayda, Theo, and Goldie.

Goldie was unhappy. He had wanted to stay on the submarine with his children, but Marc had insisted. Goldie hadn’t been told why. He was worried that he was being removed.

Theo assumed he was coming over to work so he couldn’t drink anymore right now. He didn’t care. He was still drunk from earlier. Marc’s cold shower hadn’t sobered him up much.

Erin and Jayda felt like they were being given a chance to see if the small amount of Eagle training they’d received before leaving Safe Haven had been effective.

Angela handled all of them once. “We need a security perimeter set around this base camp. A lot of us are going to spend the night here. I want you to observe for a while and then make notes about anything we need to handle. Go now.”

All of them, including Goldie, moved away without asking any questions. Angela’s tone wasn’t friendly.

Angela lifted a brow toward Charlie.

Charlie understood she wanted his opinion. He kept his voice down. “I think all of them have problems. It’s going to take a lot of work, but most of them will be okay.”

Wade joined her, but he didn't ask what she wanted him to do. He was on guard duty over the boss for the moment. Wade was certain he would soon be ferrying people from the sub to this island, however.

That made Charlie feel better. Even though Biff had his stone defender out to guard the area, it was better for the boss to have a personal guard.

"I want you to oversee getting things set up for tonight."

Charlie didn't mind. "Anything specific?"

"I made some notes." Angela tore the page out and handed it to him. "It will be important for them to have an area away from everyone else. Make sure you follow my instructions on that. For everything else, use your best judgment."

Charlie began scanning her notes. He immediately approved of the chairs near the surf while the men enjoyed the campfire and the company. "Dad will like this. He was just thinking about fishing."

Angela was glad.

"No!"

The loud scream startled all of them. They quickly spun around to find the mystery woman on her knees in the surf.

She was stabbing something with her stick and screaming. The water around her began to turn red.

Angela pounded through the water, throwing up sprays of damp sand. Salt splattered her skin and stuck.

Charlie got there first.

Biff barely kept his stone warrior from charging through the crowd to help the woman. It wasn't needed here. Nature wasn't something he could punch his way through for a win.

"I forgot! I forgot!" The woman stabbed the long mako shark again.

It let go of her leg. More blood gushed into the water.

Charlie sent healing power as he and Kyle dragged her out of the surf.

Adrian added his energy to Charlie's when the boy's orbs began to visibly weaken. They were all tired.

"Get it! Shake a leg!" The woman continued to shout and wave.

Trent hurriedly grabbed the dying shark by the tail and dragged it onto the beach so it wouldn't be lost in the tide. It was amazing to him that the woman was injured and in pain but still concerned about a food source. It was more proof that she was a castaway.

In the chaos, Trent didn't remember his fear of the water at all.

Charlie was able to heal her, but it drained his energy. As the puncture wounds filled in and then vanished, he staggered backward.

Kenn was there to give Charlie a canteen of water and put a hand on his arm to keep him from falling. He let go quickly. Kenn wanted to act like a

father to the teenager now. He couldn't help it, but he already knew it wasn't allowed.

The woman ran hands over her healed leg and stared at Charlie in gratitude and shock. "Ghost?"

Charlie smiled. "Descendant."

"Is Nature attacking us again?" Kyle had been worried about that since they left Safe Haven.

Wade shrugged. "It's the natural order. Sharks believe everything in the water belongs to them."

Charlie nodded tiredly. "Plus, we have a deal with the ocean, so it can't be intentional."

A large bird flew out of the grass and dove directly into Charlie's face. The talon was an inch from his eye when Kenn punched it, knocking it to the ground.

More birds flew from the thicker grass and attacked the team.

Gunshots began to ring out.

"Watch your line of fire!"

"Holster those guns!" Kyle grabbed the air horn from his belt and hit the button.

The rest of the birds immediately flew away from the jarring noise.

Wade swept the mildly injured but completely shocked people and let out a resigned sigh. "Obviously, I was wrong."

"We have to be extra careful now that Nature has figured out we left our island." Angela gestured.

Charlie and the others helped the new woman into the tent; one of them quickly unfolded a camping chair for her.

Everyone else began putting the heavy canvas cover on the tent to provide shade and a little protection.

The remaining military men hurried over to help.

Angela staggered, suddenly exhausted. “I used too much energy today.”

She slid to her knees a few seconds later as her legs gave out. “Kyle has point.”

She slid onto the warm sand with a groan. She didn’t pass out, but it was close.

Biff and the others got her up and into the half-covered tent.

“She didn’t drink enough water. She’s dehydrated.”

“Get some water in her while I recharge and then I’ll help her too.” Charlie began gathering energy.

“I’ve got this one.” Kenn put a hand on Angela’s arm and sent in healing energy. It was one of the few times she had allowed him to do that for her.

Angela recovered quickly. She forced out a smile of gratitude to Kenn, but she was glad when he moved his hand. She still didn’t like to be touched by him. “Someone get that shark. I’m hungry!”

People laughed with her because it was expected. None of them were amused.

The new woman's face went pale; her voice came out in a whisper. "The ghosts don't want you here."

Angela didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't answer at all.

Chapter Twelve

Don't Forget To Wash

1

“Anyone else who wants to go over to the island should go wait by the hatch. This is the last ride going over to the island tonight.” Marc walked through the bottom level of the submarine, checking on the mood, as well as the people.

There weren't many left on the ship now. Most of them had already been taken over to the island. Wade had been ferrying groups over for the last hour. He was a great wheelman who enjoyed fighting the rough breakers around the island. Marc found it comforting. Wade was a solid team member to have along for any run.

Marc stopped in the neat bunk area. The few people who were staying were in here, getting settled for the night. They had put together a quick meal and gotten everyone fed. The caretakers and mothers were all taking care of the babies and younger kids now. Everything seemed calm.

One of the mothers, Grace, came over to the entrance. “Is there anything you want us to do?”

“Just obey the rules and get some rest.”

Grace smiled tiredly. They had been caring for the kids all day, along with doing the cleaning the

alpha had ordered. In the lab, the mothers hadn't been required to do so much work. "Have fun, Mr. Brady."

"Thanks." Marc moved away with a frown. Angela was the alpha and everyone knew that, but the staff and residents from the lab insisted on treating him like he was the boss. At some point, that was going to cause problems. Marc was certain of it.

Erin came down the hallway with a kit over on shoulder and a smile on her face. "Everyone else is ready now."

Marc walked with her toward the ladder. "I'd like you to be Theo's partner tonight so he doesn't get as drunk as usual. He's already on the island, sobering up as we speak."

Erin didn't mind. She just didn't understand why Marc was handling it that way. "Why not cut him off?"

Marc gave the standard answer. "Cold turkey is dangerous in some addictions. Weaning works better."

Erin shrugged. She didn't have much experience with addictions.

Marc climbed the ladder to the first level.

People moved around and shifted gear impatiently as they waited for him.

Marc held up a finger as he went by. "Be right there."

Isabel looked up when Marc entered the theater. She felt him arrive.

It was another thing the mission team and lab staff had in common. They were acutely aware of him at any given time. “I want you to come over to the island.”

Isabel sat up in the recliner, frowning deeply. “I don’t want to leave my babies.”

Marc didn’t give her a choice. “The babies are fine. You’re not.”

Isabel’s face was starting to heal, but it was still rough. Marc wasn’t sure why Angela hadn’t ordered Harry to heal her and Goldie all the way, but he hadn’t asked. That wasn’t his job. “Have you ever been out of that lab?”

Isabel made a face. “My sister and I were born there. We weren’t allowed to leave.” They’d always talked about it, though. One of Sasha’s favorite daydreams had been to take a beach vacation.

Gus came down the hall.

Marc waved him over. “I want you to help Isabel onto the RIB and then stay with her until the boss gives you something else to do.”

Gus smiled at the battered medic. “Sure, just let me use the head first.”

Gus was feeling a lot better now. The vaccine had removed most of the rage. The small bits that were left seem to be fading steadily. The rest of his injuries were minor and healing. Harry had shoved him full of energy a few hours ago and told him to clear out of the med bay.

Isabel reluctantly rose from the recliner and went to join the others who were waiting by the

hatch. The babies were being fed right now. The caretakers had ordered her to go do something else. They said all mothers needed a break; Isabel had forced herself to go to the theater. The idea of spending the entire night on the island made her stomach twist.

Marc began directing people topside so they could be loaded into the RIB. He wanted this part done so he could join the rest of the team on the beach. He had heard enough from Wade during his trips to know that Angela had planned a nice evening for them.

Marc was looking forward to it. All of them needed to be distracted. It wasn't healthy to dwell in the worlds that Reicher had introduced.

Marc still felt like Angela should have removed them instead of letting them out, but two days of freedom had made him feel a little better. He didn't want to give credit to Adrian for the conversations he was having with the mission team, but those moments were helping. There was a long way to go before any of them would be able to say they had recovered, but at the moment, it seemed like that might be possible. It was more positive than what he'd felt upon leaving the lab.

Marc flinched away from the memory of Angela blowing up all the survivors. It hurt him to view her that way, but it also reminded him that it was his fault. Giving in to Reicher hadn't been the worst part. Volunteering to go there in the first place had been a mistake, but fighting Angela over the

submarine was a crime in Marc's opinion. *I still need to pay for that.*

2

Gus entered the bathroom and hurried to the first stall. He was eager to be off the ship and back on steady land again. He had never adjusted to being underwater while in the lab. He didn't fear water as much as Kenn did, but he still didn't like it. A few days on the island sounded wonderful to him, even without any of the luxuries like a toilet.

Gus put his kit by his feet and quickly did his business.

The main door opened.

Gus listened for footsteps to determine who they were and where they were going. If somebody was taking a dump, he needed to hurry so he didn't have to smell it.

Small taps on the floor came closer. They went to the stall next to his.

Gus paused, confused.

Groans and more light taps on the floor drew his attention. Gus zipped up, frowning. The noises weren't normal.

A low whine echoed through the bathroom.

Gus finally recognized the sounds. "Dog?"

I can't go if you talk to me.

"What?"

Shhh.

More taps echoed. Gus realized it was the sound of Dog's nails on the tile.

The sound of urinating echoed.

Gus could tell it was hitting the bowl. His eyebrows drew together. "Are you using the bathroom?"

What else would I be doing in here?

Gus flinched from the wolf's annoyed voice in his mind.

Can you pass over some toilet paper? This stall is empty.

Gus automatically took the extra roll from his side and slid it under the stall. Then he thought about it. *How is a wolf able to wipe its ass?*

What a rude question!

Gus backed out of the stall. He picked up his kit and went toward the door.

Don't forget to wash!

Again, Gus automatically went to the sink and washed his hands.

The toilet flushed.

Gus shut off the water. "I can't take this. I'm out."

He quickly left, shutting the door behind him.

Erin looked over from where she was standing at the bottom of the topside hatch. The line was moving slowly. "What's going on in there?"

Gus joined her. "I honestly have no idea how to answer that question."

3

“I’m staying here tonight.”

Marc frowned at Adrian. “What?”

Adrian surveyed the happy souls on the nearby island without revealing how much he wanted to be with them. “You guys can all use a night without me around.”

Marc denied that. “Greg needs an escort. Get him and your ass on that island right now.”

Adrian glanced down the hall at Greg. The man was standing with his back to a corner and his arms crossed over his chest. His one eye was swinging anxiously from person to person, expecting trouble.

Greg didn’t respond to any of the people wondering if he was okay.

His gun was on his hip and his knife back was in his sheath. It made them nervous; they watched him closely to make sure there wasn’t going to be a repeat.

Cate and Cody also waited nearby. They were anxious to get going, but they knew not to interrupt Marc.

Adrian frowned. “You don’t need me to babysit.”

Marc insisted. “She’ll need you tonight when things get stupid.”

“Do you think you guys will have trouble?”

Marc contemplated last night and sighed. “Why take the chance?”

Adrian didn’t like it when Marc was upset. “Angela has you covered; don’t stress over it.”

“Get Greg and get in the RIB.” Marc’s tone said not to keep arguing.

Adrian grinned. “I really do want to go.”

Cate stomped off toward the ladder. Her orbs were bright red.

Adrian followed.

“What’s her problem?”

Cody looked up at his father. “She doesn’t want Angela and Adrian to spend time together, but she wants to spend time with Adrian herself. She’s confused right now.”

Marc grunted. “It’s okay for both of you to spend time with him. I’m not jealous.”

Cody didn’t say Marc should be. He didn’t like it when Marc was upset either.

Marc lowered his voice. “Would you like to tell me about your new gift?”

Cody smiled brightly. “Let’s go have some fun.” He followed his sister toward the ladder.

Marc chuckled. “That’s definitely my son.”

Marc climbed the ladder and looked back down through the hatch.

Zack peered up at him.

Zack was on point tonight, along with a few others from the Safe Haven rescue team. He hadn’t been back onboard long, but he was already working.

Zack straightened his gun belt over an upset stomach. He was glad he wasn’t going to land. He

wanted to stay close to a toilet. “We have our shields up. Do it now.”

Wait for me! Dog came flying up the hallway with a piece of toilet paper stuck to his tail. Because the ladders were slightly slanted, Dog was having no problems reaching each level of the submarine. He scrambled up and hurried toward the RIB.

Marc grabbed the paper from Dog’s tail as he went by. He dropped it through the hatch so Zack could dispose of it.

Zack jumped out of the way. “Don’t drop your shit on me!”

Both men chuckled.

Zack sensed Marc was waiting for reassurance. He tapped the radio on his belt. “If there’s a problem, you’ll know about it.”

“If there’s a problem, handle it.”

“Like you would?”

“No, like Angela would want you to.” Marc drew a blast of energy and fired.

His sleep spell swarmed through the submarine and immediately began making people feel tired. Ten minutes from now, all of them except the guards and the captain would be sleeping.

“Make sure Ray gets out of the bridge for a few minutes at some point.”

Zack fought a yawn. Marc’s gifts were strong; he had felt the spell through his shield. “Lots of coffee and walk the captain—you got it.” He moved out of view.

In the sealed bridge, Ray was happy that he'd gotten them here in one piece. His nerves had been taut the entire time. Spending the evening doing nothing but relaxing sounded good to him. The smell of Saul had finally cleared out, turning the small space into a sanctuary.

Ray got a book from his kit and pushed off his boots. "This is the life."

Marc went to the RIB and helped Dog in.

Members of the mission team tensed as the wolf went to the center of the boat and stood there.

Marc didn't remind them that Dog was harmless to his friends. *Every man has to conquer his own fears. There's only so much help that others can give.*

The descendants caught Marc's contemplation and agreed. The road to recovery was rocky for all of them, but it was a road and they were going to walk it.

Wade saw the tension of the mission team. He connected to the wolf. *It would be a good time for you to say or do something sweet and uplifting.*

Dog thought about it for a minute.

Then he began to sing. *We're off to see the wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz! Because because because because...*

Dog looked around. *Come on! Sing it with me! Because of the wonderful things he does!*

Men groaned and snickered.

“Great. That song will be stuck in my brain the rest of the night.”

Wade grinned at Dog. *Perfect.*

Dog bobbed his head. *That’s me!*

Laughter filled the RIB and kept them from being stressed as Wade jumped the breakers and took them to the island.

4

Angela met the RIB as they pulled it onto the shore. She helped people out, feeling better than she had earlier. She had convinced them it was probably normal for her since she had already been having problems. The last pregnancies hadn’t gone easy on her either.

Angela directed Isabel toward the tent. “Take breaks and drink water. You’ll need it because you’re not used to this environment.”

Gus remembered his assignment from Marc and went with her.

Angela began to hand out chores.

Next to her, Trent recorded them in his notebook. She had drafted him as her right hand for this. Charlie was busy making rounds of everyone who was here to make sure they were handling the heat. It was finally cooling off now. Trent hoped for a pleasant evening.

Dace and the others went to carry out the chores she assigned. A lot of filtered water and fish had already been collected. It was amazing how fast the

lines were filling up. The surf was full of ocean life, and they were eager to taste most of it.

Adrian and Marc waited for her to give them a chore.

Angela pointed toward the tent. “We have a mystery guest. I’d like you and Greg to talk to her.”

Adrian and Greg went that way.

Marc was curious. “Why them?”

Angela smiled. “Because Adrian is good with females and Greg is great at seeing things the rest of us can’t, right?”

Marc didn’t argue.

Angela looked at Dog. “Go explore and report back. After that, your time is your own.”

The wolf took off down the beach, not slowing his roll even though mission men tensed and some of them reached for weapons. He trusted them to get control of themselves before they hurt him.

Marc and Angela observed that for a moment. It was encouraging to see Shawn and Harry reach a reluctant hand out to let the wolf sniff them. It was a relief when Biff kept his stone defender in place instead of sending it out for an attack.

Angela gestured. “Have a meal, fish in the incoming tide for a bit, and relax.”

“And then what?” Marc wasn’t as eager anymore now that he was here. It was reminding him of Pitcairn Island and removing Kendle.

“Then we’ll make some magic.”

Marc wasn’t sure exactly how she meant that, but he suspected they were going to be allowed to

use their gifts. Mood improving, Marc joined the men around the small fire.

The sun was sinking faster now, bringing relief from the bright heat that had been beating on them all day. Everyone was relieved. They didn't get this much heat on Pitcairn. They weren't used to it.

Marc counted nine chairs. He assumed one was for each mission man and the others were for her and Adrian. He didn't know how well it would go with her joining them. All of the team and the staff viewing him as the boss were likely to give her problems if she tried to interfere with their gifts.

"Let her handle it, mate." Thomas joined Marc as he came over to the chairs.

Marc realized one of those seats was for the Navy man. He also understood the other military men had not been invited.

He scanned and found them helping with cooking and other chores.

For a moment, Marc was struck by how calm things seemed. Kids were running around, laughing and playing in the sand. The smell of food searing on a portable grill was wafting through the salty breeze, making stomachs growl. A small radio had even been brought over, treating them to soft rock tunes that had been new when Marc was a kid. It would have been easy to be deceived.

But Marc wasn't. He scanned again.

This time, he detected a camp full of madness and murderers. Jennifer's description over the radio immediately came to mind.

“Safe Haven is a place of safety and of light, of duty and honor. It’s a refuge for survivors. It is also a place of death and darkness, where murder and madness walk hand-in-hand.”

Marc agreed with every word of that. *We’re about as dangerous as you can get without being evil.*

Thomas sat next to Marc, making some of the team frown. “Try not to see it that way.”

Marc took the beer he was handed and opened it. “How should I see it?”

“As an evolution for your camp. Some of the advances you made in that lab will allow them a different life and more happiness, but also freedom. That’s something many of us have never really had.”

Marc was able to accept that. He held up his beer.

Thomas clinked his bottle against Marc’s and then drank. It was a good moment between strangers.

Angela waited until all of the mission men except for Greg were seated around Marc and busy baiting their lines to start fishing. Then she went to see if Adrian and Greg were able to help the mystery woman. It was bothering Angela that she couldn’t figure out a way to get into the woman’s mind.

Adrian heard Angela enter the tent; he gave her the update with an uneasily feeling. “Her brain is

gone, like a sand wall that's been crumbling in the wind."

"Are you sure?" Angela had caught a few brief flashes from the woman earlier.

Greg scratched his chin. He was suddenly tired of having a beard. *I'm allowed to shave now.* "No, but I'll keep working on it." Greg had also caught small flashes of a plane crash.

"It's dark now. You will sleep." The woman lay down right where she was and shut her eyes.

Greg shrugged. "I can try again in the morning."

Angela nodded. "How old do you think she is?"

Adrian and Greg studied the woman again, searching for wrinkles, gray hair, or other signs of age. They didn't find much.

"In her 30s, I would guess."

Greg agreed with that. "Not over 40, though."

"Thank you both. Go to the fire. Get a chair and a fishing pole." Angela went to the cooks to see if they needed any assistance. It was three of the military men, Theo, and herself handling this meal. She and Theo had already been digging into the military men—one with magic and the other with conversation. Angela resumed that as she joined them.

Angela smiled as one of the men tasted the food in front of her. She knew they weren't a threat in that way, but she didn't mind them verifying it. "I'll hand those out."

The military men began filling bowls so Angela could deliver them.

Angela did another fast look to make sure everyone was distracted. Then she pulled a small vial from her pocket and began tapping it over the bowls of fish chowder. Then she delivered them.

“Did you see that?”

Kyle nodded at Jayda’s question and scratched his arm. “She knows what she’s doing.”

He swept the refugees suspiciously, glaring at some of them. It would be a long time before they earned his trust.

Kyle saw the cat in the distance. He wondered how long it would be before Dog noticed.

Jayda assumed she wasn’t supposed to ask what was in the vial, so she didn’t, but she stewed on it. She watched Angela take the bowls to the other military men who were collecting the latest batch of filtered water.

“Think about something else.” Kyle frowned at her.

Jayda realized she might be giving away something the boss was trying to do in secret. She turned her back and studied the ocean, where it was getting hard to see the submarine now that the sun was sinking. Everyone here was stuck until morning. There was no way Angela was going to risk anyone’s life by sending them back in the dark in a RIB. Jumping over that reef was hard enough to do when it was light out.

Kyle also put his back to the boss, but only because Wade was keeping an eye on Angela. Kyle took that moment to do a sweep of the mission men.

A few of them were trying to crack jokes while working baiting their hooks, but none of it felt right to Kyle. *Maybe it's the heavy beards they all have.*

Kyle doubted it was that simple, but seeing so much fur on those familiar faces was a little unsettling. He assumed they hadn't been given razors in the lab, otherwise they would have shaved. He knew half of those men didn't like having a beard. *Or at least, they hadn't before this run.*

It was impossible to know how many things had changed in their brains over the last eight weeks. All that mattered was that they recovered. *If they decide to keep the beards, I'll adjust.*

Dog trotted by Kyle's place on guard duty. *I won't. They all look like giant cats.*

Kyle chuckled. "Why is that a problem?"

Dog stuck his nose in the air. *They can't be cats. None of them will lick me.*

Fresh laughter echoed over the area and soothed more of the tension.

Kyle hoped that mood lasted all night. It was exactly what they needed.

Dog's fur was covered in a fine layer of sand and his tail held clumps of damp dirt. He'd been all over the island twice now. *There's nothing here.*

Angela knew, but having it verified by an animal this time was more proof. *Nothing we've seen here is real.*

Angela didn't know what was going on, but something had changed and it wasn't for the better. Time felt different. It was dangerous. The warning howled through the rough surf and the warm breeze that blew her hair around. *We can't stay here long.*

5

Near the fire, Cate studied Adrian without coming closer.

Adrian felt the girl's attention. He gestured in Eagle code.

Cate smiled and ran off.

"What did you tell her?" Thomas wasn't good with Eagle code yet, though he did know the basics.

"That I'd be free later."

Thomas frowned. "You spend time with Marc's kids?"

Adrian snorted. "I spend time with everyone. It's my job."

Thomas assumed the little girl was also traumatized. "What happened to her?"

Marc glared at Adrian.

Adrian ignored the silent order to shut up. "She was born to a shitty mother and an absent father. Then the UN got ahold of her. Reicher was next, and then the IDC. She's had a rough life so far."

Thomas felt bad for the girl. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes. Stay away from her. She still wants revenge." Marc decided he didn't like the island.

The noises were too soft, too serene. Nothing in his brain was at peace right now. The noises were incompatible. *I hope we don't stay here long.*

Greg stewed on the mystery woman, ignoring the others. Something about her mind wasn't right and it didn't come just from being a castaway.

Greg rubbed grit from his eye patch and then replaced it. He spotted Lisa, but he didn't call her over.

Lisa knew she was being watched. She didn't glance around to discover who it was. She had stayed away from the men and the kids today, but she'd helped keep their camp running. She was splattered from hair to boots with bits of fish and salt. The soreness from a full day felt good.

Dace circled around to cover an open security spot while studying the darkness for threats. It was a perfect time for Nature to try something.

Dace had already found himself getting bored on this run. He'd come through his first two moments of action without any glory or fame, though he did have a faint tracheotomy scar from the explosion. Cody's magic had healed almost all of his burn marks.

The second moment, rescuing their men, had been great, but it hadn't lasted long. He now wanted one of those private runs the boss had mentioned for those who were restless. If not for spending time with Piper, he would have already stirred up his own action. *It's been a while since I was in a kai lesson or a matchup...*

Dace tried to control himself as he went by the mission men.

Kenn ignored Dace's foolish eagerness. Rookies always had to learn the hard way. He swept the tent where several people were resting. Kenn contemplated Charlie's attitude since the rescue, but there was little he could do to ease the boy's hatred.

Kenn rubbed his beard, feeling salt crystals. He'd always been an outdoor person, but the time in the lab may have changed that. *I need a shower and a recliner for a few hours.*

The men who caught that all nodded in agreement.

Gus heard it, but he didn't understand the attraction.

You weren't in the lounges. Kenn felt bad that Gus had been in a cell for almost the entire time. *I'm sorry.*

Don't be. I'm good. Gus didn't consider himself as scarred as the others and that cell time was the reason why.

Gus wiped sweat from his brow. He found himself missing the cool night breezes of the tiny jungle area on their island. Pitcairn was a lot more hospitable than Howland Island.

The others ignored his contemplations of home. None of them were ready to face that yet.

But all of them noticed their mental connection. They weren't linked into Angela's hive anymore; they had their own.

Chapter Thirteen

We Are Doing This

1

“It’s almost midnight.” Jayda judged it by the position of the moon.

“Yep.” Kyle was also able to tell the time by looking at the sky. None of their watches were working. When he had asked Wade about it, Wade had shrugged and said time was different now. Kyle had to accept that answer. When they got home, he planned to ask Jennifer about it.

Kyle motioned the military men to collect the next batch of water and fish from the lines. Despite the large collection throughout the day, they were already running low again. It made Kyle even more grateful for the Adrianna. It filtered the ocean water and allowed for deeper fishing to catch larger prey.

Jayda continued to observe the dozen people around the campfire by the water. Something was going on.

Biff nodded politely as her gaze came to him.

Nearby, Trent stiffened.

Jayda turned back to Kyle. “They’re both watching me, intently.”

“You noticed that, too?”

Jayda rolled her eyes. “Funny. What’s going on?”

Kyle considered it for a moment. This morning’s revelations had been entertaining, but he wasn’t sure if the boss wanted them known yet.

Jayda’s concern grew. “The boss knows? What did I do wrong? Am I in trouble?”

Kyle realized he would have to give her an answer. He put his back to the campfire so he couldn’t view Angela’s displeasure.

He could still feel it. He was supposed to get permission in moments like this, but he was tired and there was no way Jayda wouldn’t find out because of how the men were acting. “During a break today, Biff asked the boss who his match was.”

Jayda stiffened. “What kind of match?”

“Girlfriend, wife, soulmate.”

Jayda quickly looked away. “What does that have to do with me?”

Kyle gave her a lifted brow and a curled lip.

Jayda flushed. “Me? She said me?”

Kyle could tell she hadn’t entertained that possibility, but Jayda was moving through the men in camp at a quick rate; she was starting to get a bad reputation. It wouldn’t hinder her efforts to be an Eagle or camp member, but as a mate, it would definitely take away points from her compatibility score.

Jayda fingered her small tracheotomy scar. It was one of the few signs left of the explosion,

beyond her short hair and the terror. “What did Trent say?”

“He said you two are a couple.”

Jayda slowly answered, “We are...sort of.”

“How can you *sort of* be a couple?”

“We jumped in quickly. There hasn’t been a lot of discussion.”

“Ah.”

Jayda’s voice rose. “What does that mean?”

“What exactly would you like me to say?”

Jayda crossed her arms over her chest and turned in the opposite direction. “Whatever.”

Kyle chuckled lightly at the Eagle answer. Then he took pity on her. “You should be careful. Both of those men are dangerous in their own ways. You might destroy a friendship, or a team, if you play around.”

Kyle walked away to do a patrol as Jayda spun around to argue with him. Kyle wasn’t in the mood to hear it and he also didn’t want to draw attention to their conversation. At some point, Jayda would have to figure out what she wanted from her relationships and then stick to one. *If she doesn’t, she could end up alone.*

Jayda caught that. It immediately bothered her. Until this moment, she hadn’t considered what it would be like to not have a mate in the future. If Kyle was right, she was narrowing her choices so fast that she was shrinking the field to nothing. *But I’m not happy yet!*

Kyle was still in her thoughts. *Then you need to figure out what will give you that, but do it quickly. You're running out of time with the men who are worth a shit.*

Jayda didn't like the blunt truth, but now that it had been pointed out, she could see it in the slightly contemptuous glances of the other males around them. It wasn't coming from the guys who had been in the lab. It was coming from members of the rescue team. They were giving the same sneers to Trent, who now bore the stigma of breaking up a happy couple.

Jayda decided she could handle one part of that and give them both a little relief. She looked over her shoulder and waited for Biff to glance at her again. As their eyes connected, she gave a firm headshake. *I have a man.*

Biff wasn't upset. He resumed his conversation with Greg. Now that they were out of the lab, it was okay for the two men to resume their friendship.

Jayda was instantly disappointed. She asked herself a hard question. *Am I upset that there isn't going to be a fight over me?*

Cody walked by her. He was also doing rounds. "Yes, you were, but you stopped yourself." He smiled at her. "Everyone gets bored and scared sometimes. Why would you be any different?"

Jayda stared after the boy as he literally followed in Kyle's footsteps. She was ashamed that she'd been caught. She was also relieved that Cody wasn't angry. She owed Cody for helping save her

life after the explosion, but it was more than that. Unlike a lot of the other Eagles, Jayda had figured out what was going on with Marc's son. He was being trained in secret by Angela from a young age to take over leadership, so he wouldn't have the flaws that her other possible heirs had.

After hearing some of the lab stories, it was impossible for Jayda to resist comparing Angela to Reicher. *She's so much like him that it's scary.*

Angela caught that as she came from the portable bathroom they had placed in a small tent. She went to wash her hands off in the surf. She didn't scold Jayda. She also didn't dwell on it.

Angela didn't want anyone to know she was listening to their thoughts. It wasn't just Jayda's. Angela was listening to everyone. The worst thoughts were coming from the mission team. That wasn't a surprise. The next worst ones were coming from the mystery woman in the tent; she was having a nightmare. That was awful and fascinating. The woman was already linked into their hive.

Kyle met Angela at the front of the tent. He had just figured that out. "Is it a problem?"

Angela shrugged. "I think it means she's a descendant. Maybe her demon fled when her plane crashed."

That sounded reasonable to Kyle. He'd already heard stories about things like that happening.

Kyle yawned. He hoped Angela sent him on a break soon. He planned to spend it sleeping. *With maybe a fast dream walk to make sure things are*

okay at home. “All shifts have checked in. You should settle down for the night.”

Angela snickered. All of the shifts that had reported consisted of those on duty right now—Kyle, Cody, and Jayda.

Kyle was glad to make her smile. He went to finish his rounds.

Angela waited for the young boy who was trailing Kyle as a training session. Cody was listening, too, and he was good at it. None of the others knew he was in their minds.

Cody frowned slightly. “Daddy knows.”

Angela was impressed by that. Marc had a new alertness about him that was attractive and needed. It would be a huge relief to not be the only one on duty scanning constantly. Even Jennifer wasn’t able to keep up with her on that one. *But then I don’t have a young child to care for.*

Cody sent a wave of good vibes and continued on his rounds.

Angela allowed his magic to make her feel better. With Cody, there was no reason to be defensive. He honestly wanted what was best for her.

Angela understood that was so he and his sister would finally have a real family, but that was a reasonable desire from any child. She didn’t have a problem with him getting personal gain from his actions. It was impossible for humanity to ignore how a choice might benefit them, even if that choice

was wrong. Acting on it was when the trouble started.

Angela watched him for a minute, wondering if he was scared at all. For being so young, he refused to show fear. *Like father, like son.*

Cody didn't mind the ghosts on the island. He'd been seeing things like that all his life. He just hadn't always been able to react to it. Now, he had gifts and they were strong. He wasn't scared of the dark anymore. He wasn't scared of almost anything.

His attention went to the man at the fire. *Except losing my dad again.*

Marc glanced over. *That won't happen.*

Cody smiled and resumed his rounds.

Angela went toward the fire tiredly. She had been on her feet for hours now.

She stopped behind Marc, where most of the men saw her coming, but she didn't interrupt the conversation that was currently taking place.

Thomas dropped his empty beer bottle next to his chair. "He wasn't able to open any of the gates?"

Kenn belched. "No. He never found a priest in the lab to bless the blade. There's no way he was able to open the gates without that."

Biff had been drawn into the topic even though he didn't like it. "Reicher didn't need to open the gates between dimensions."

Kenn frowned. "What?"

Biff waved a hand. "The war blew those gates open. He wanted to close them before too many creatures came through for us to handle."

Greg scowled toward Biff. “How do you know that?”

Biff immediately brought out his stone warrior and sent it over to stand next to Angela. “If the gates were closed, my defender wouldn’t be possible. Reality was breached.”

Everyone stared at it in renewed surprise. After not seeing it for hours, it was easy to forget that it existed.

Biff began to pull the stone fighter back in.

“Keep it out. You may need it for this session.”

Every mission man froze.

Angela went next to the fire, so she was in plain view of everyone. “In 10 minutes, we’re going to have a group session. *Don’t* ask me any questions yet.”

Marc opened his mouth to protest.

Adrian shook his head.

Marc dropped his chin, sighing. He forced out words. “Whatever you want, Boss.”

Most of the men around him stared in dismay. It was obvious that Marc was desperately broken. Every one of them suddenly wished Angela would glue him back together. Seeing him so subservient was upsetting and disheartening.

“Have faith, gentlemen.” Angela studied the calm ocean waves with her eyes. With her mind, she dug into their current thoughts and decided how to handle them based on what she found. If she wasn’t careful here, there wouldn’t be a next time. If she

did it right, they would be able to take the next steps toward recovery.

Ten minutes crawled by while the men all replayed their horrors, and their triumphs, during the last run.

2

“Is everyone ready?”

All the men tensed again as Angela faced them. They waited to see what she wanted them to do.

“Start by telling me what you did in the lab. You can give details if you want to. This will help us determine how to help you in your therapy sessions. If you’re not comfortable discussing it so openly, I understand. Just give me the basics.” Angela indicated Kenn and Thomas first. Then she unlocked them all.

Kenn made sure his voice was emotionless even though he was thrilled to have his gifts back. “We were scroll divers. We hunted through the Akashic field for information that’s been lost to humanity over time.”

Thomas added to that. “Kenn made serious advancements, as you know. The chart you have came from one of his sessions.”

Angela looked at Biff.

Biff was enjoying the quiet time with his team, but he hated the open air around them. He’d gotten used to having walls between him and the sound of the ocean. This session already wasn’t helping that

feeling. “They trained me to defend myself against descendants, using a different reality to bring up defenders that shouldn’t exist, but are nearly impossible to beat.”

A lot of the men nodded. Biff’s stone warrior was indeed hard to beat. None of them wanted to face it with normal defenses.

Angela lifted a brow at Harry.

Harry didn’t feel much different than he had while in the lab for that last two weeks. He worked hard during the day and got drunk at night so he couldn’t think about what was happening to him, what he was becoming. *I’m a monster-in-the-making.*

Angela waited patiently.

Harry wasn’t sure how to describe some of the things he’d done. He settled for keeping it simple. “I saved some lives, including my own, through means that shouldn’t be possible, even for our kind.”

Shawn frowned. “That’s an understatement.”

Angela stared at Shawn, giving him time to speak his mind.

Shawn had had a good day out here on the island, away from the medical bay that was a constant reminder. He wasn’t in the mood to discuss his mental issues. He gave Angela what he thought she wanted to hear. “I assisted Harry even though he didn’t really need it. His advances were amazing.”

Angela looked at Greg.

Greg glared at her through his one good eye. “I was sent into other dimensions to find a way to map them. I was able to return to the place you took me to, several times.” Greg contemplated the vision of the nuclear explosion. He was still confused by that. “I saw things that are supposed to happen but haven’t yet.”

Angela gestured at Marc.

Everyone rotated toward him, eager to see if he was going to participate, but also to hear the results. Marc’s sessions had been kept quiet in the lab; he hadn’t discussed it before now.

Marc still didn’t want to talk about it, but he doubted Angela would let it go. “I was in the Creation wing. They made me call the Creator. I didn’t get an answer.”

Angela suspected there was more to Marc’s story. She pushed lightly. “What *were* you able to accomplish in your sessions?”

Marc stared at the fire. “I was able to call Doug.”

Angela frowned while the others mumbled or muttered in surprise. “You called the Weigh Station?”

“I told him not to answer me again or any of the Eagles. You’re the only one who can make that call now.”

Angela was relieved. Even though the lab was gone, that information still needed to be guarded.

Thomas glanced around. “What’s a Weigh Station?”

“It’s where souls go to be judged, weighed, when we die.”

Thomas stared at Greg. “You’re kidding, right?”

No one answered him.

Angela focused on Gus. “I was told you were in training to be an enforcer.”

Gus shrugged. “They called it security training.”

“And did you use that training against your teammates?”

Gus flushed. “Yes.”

The mission team remembered that moment physically, but they didn’t hold it against Gus. He hadn’t been in his right mind at the time.

Angela stepped closer to Gus. “For this group session, you will be assuming the same position of authority. Can you handle that?”

Gus wanted to say no. Instead, he gave her the truth. “Yes.”

The men around him tensed again.

Angela pulled two small objects from her pocket and held them out to Gus.

All around them, men flinched; fear entered the night air.

Gus stared at the electric baton and the handheld flamethrower. It was obvious that Angela had brought them from the lab.

Gus slowly took both devices from her, reverting into a confused state that instantly sent him back to the warehouse floor.

“The goal is information about the map.” Angela took it from her pocket and handed it to Marc first. “I want you to reach the next location.”

Angela motioned to Jayda as she came by on rounds. “Join us for the session.”

Jayda scowled. “As what? Someone else to torture them?” Jayda had been listening to everything that was said. She was pissed.

Angela didn’t argue with the woman. “Stand by the fire and do what you’re told.”

Jayda went that way reluctantly. “I won’t hurt any of them. You can’t make me do that.”

Angela didn’t waste time offering reassurances. She addressed the group again. “This was your next goal in the lab. I read it in Reicher’s log.” Angela had only gotten through some of that log and nothing from the thumb drive yet, but this stage in Reicher’s plans had been clear.

Jayda stood near the fire and tried not to think about how easy it would be to get burnt.

Marc passed the map on to Thomas. “What exactly do you want us to do?”

“Work together and find information. Or a gate. Then enter it.” Angela controlled her guts. Her stomach was always upset now. She’d gone through it before, but not as bad. She felt like she could throw up on command.

“I don’t understand.” Gus didn’t look at the map when it came around. “What exactly are we supposed to do?”

“I want you to go to Heaven, without being dead or being summoned.”

Harry frowned this time. “How?”

“Dream walk together. It’s the one thing Reicher wouldn’t try because it’s so dangerous.” Angela held up a hand to stop more questions or protests. “Get organized and get ready. Your session starts in five minutes.”

Jayda shifted closer to the anxious men. “Are they okay enough to do this?”

A log in the fire popped.

Jayda flinched as the spark hit her shirt.

The damp material extinguished the heat instantly.

Jayda swallowed a scream and continued to slap it just to be sure.

Angela put a hand on Jayda’s wrist.

Jayda calmed. “Thank you.”

Angela smiled and let go. “Resume your post.”

Jayda tried to keep ahold of the calmness that Angela had delivered with a weak charm. She hated feeling out of control.

She also didn’t repeat her question. *I’m not okay enough for what I’m doing. They’re worse.*

Angela walked away to give them privacy to discuss the goal. She didn’t join Kyle or Wade. Both of those males were upset that she was doing things this way. *You guys don’t understand how important this is.*

Kyle was monitoring her thoughts. *Important to you or important to us?*

Both. Angela went to the water barrel and got a small ladle, hoping a drink would calm her stomach. She was nervous about the session, too, though she was trying not to show it.

Back at the fire, the men had already started discussing it. They were scared, but also excited.

“I don’t want to be put to sleep.” Gus hated that.

Thomas glanced around. “Are we allowed to say no?”

Marc nodded. “With her, we have free will.”

Harry sighed. “That makes it harder.”

The other men agreed. Then they looked at Gus.

Gus reluctantly hit the button to make the baton crackle. “We *are* doing this.”

Fear and determination settled into the men around the fire. They were going to follow Angela’s orders.

Angela went into the large tent and stood next to Isabel for a quick check in. *How are things, Ray?*

Ray answered immediately. *Just fine here, Boss. Everyone is sleeping except for the guards. We’re doing rounds and listening to you guys in disbelief.*

Angela chuckled. *Copy. Out.*

Isabel looked at Angela. “Reicher had planned for Gus to be on our security team.”

“I know.” Angela had pulled that from Reicher’s chaotic contemplations before the twins killed him.

Isabel had stayed away from everyone today, but especially the five men from Kenn’s wing.

She'd sat under the cover of the tent and observed everything. It was a heap to process at one time, considering the environment. She'd never felt sand before now. She didn't like it. "Gus will need something else during his off time or he'll start to like it too much. That happened with all of our security people."

Angela had been studying Isabel all day. It was clear that the woman knew how to deal with personnel. "Safe Haven needs you, if you can give up your old diet."

Isabel contemplated how much she had enjoyed the two bites she'd gotten earlier. "It would have to be one hell of a position."

"It is. Go without that diet for a week and I'll offer you the perfect job."

Isabel clenched her fists. "I don't think I can."

"Do you want a hint to help pull you through?"

"Yes, please." Isabel already knew if she refused to at least try, she would be removed. She didn't have to be a descendant to read the minds around her on this topic. They were all disgusted by cannibalism.

"It involves a breeding tree that needs hundreds of branches and someone who understands people to help me match up those breeding pairs."

Isabel shivered in the cooler breeze. "I'd be a caretaker?"

"I thought the caretakers just took care of the mothers and babies?"

Isabel denied that. “Reicher often took their suggestions for matches. The caretakers studied the offspring and the mothers to determine the best possible combinations to give him the gifts he wanted in the children. Our lab had everything you can imagine, from mind reading to control over nature.” Isabel studied the sand around them and held in a shudder. She knew being outside was good for her, but she didn’t like it.

Angela was encouraged. “Go without for a week and you’ll have that job in my camp. You and your children will be safe and taken care of. In time, you’ll even be happy.”

“Can you promise that?”

“Yes, I can. I’m the alpha.”

Isabel needed something to believe in. She gave a reluctant agreement. “I’ll try my hardest.”

“That’s all I ask.” Angela scanned the mystery woman and saw that she was sleeping deeply. She didn’t appear to be having a nightmare now.

Angela scanned the other cots. Not many people were sleeping even though they were tired.

Piper rolled over and tried to go to sleep. It felt odd not to be curled around Dace. They’d gotten close on this run. She wasn’t ready for that to end. *I hope he feels the same way.*

Angela went by her while holding her tongue on that subject. She saw Lisa and smiled at the woman.

Lisa missed it. She had spotted the cat, but she didn’t mention it. The dark island was creepy. Knowing the cat was nearby gave an odd comfort

that she wanted to hold onto. If she told the others, the attention might scare it off.

Angela swept the fire quickly, looking at Adrian.

Adrian missed it. He didn't like the island in the daytime or the night. It was small and sounded odd. He kept seeing shadows that weren't there and catching smells they weren't creating. *Our mystery woman is right—there are ghosts here and they're as restless as we are. That might be a bad combination.*

Angela did a final sweep, looking for the child not doing rounds, sleeping, or sitting near a lantern.

Cate ran down the beach, ignoring the ghosts trying to get her attention. She returned to the faint light of their camp in relief. She'd often dreamed of running free, but not at night. *Never at night.*

Dog had been following her. He came from the shadows and sat next to Marc's chair.

Marc automatically put a hand on the wolf's shoulder, seeking and giving comfort.

Biff, Gus, and Harry observed in less suspicion and fear this time. Dog was slowly wearing them down by being himself.

Angela left the tent and approached the men at the fire. "It's time to roll."

Chapter Fourteen
You May Pass

1

“**G**et comfortable.” Angela pointed. “Cate, bring over the lay back chairs for those who don’t already have one.”

Most of the seats were already that type. Angela didn’t want people on the ground when she knocked them out for the session, where they were more vulnerable to nature. She also didn’t want them to unroll sleeping bags because the straight-up chairs were too uncomfortable to sleep in when they crashed afterward.

Cate struggled with the two chairs. They were almost as tall as she was.

Biff stood to go help the little girl.

Angela glared with red orbs. “Let her work! You just concentrate on your duty.”

Her harsh tone stopped Biff in his tracks. He reluctantly sat back in his chair while glowering resentfully.

Angela didn’t tell them she was getting Cate to work off her extra energy while gaining some muscle mass. The little girl would hear it and start resisting; she was very stubborn.

Thomas took one of the chairs from the girl with a smile. “Thank you.”

Cate shoved the other chair toward him, and ran off without answering. She still wasn’t comfortable around those she knew, let alone strangers.

The mission men tensed at the sound of heavy paws coming toward them.

“It’s just Dog.” Marc had already identified the sound. He drank his warm beer and swept the dark ocean. He knew the submarine was out there, but he was too tired to bring it up on his grid. His tracking gifts hadn’t worked correctly for a while now.

The wolf slid to a sandy stop close to the fire. *I saw a cat!*

Angela grinned at Dog. “It took you hours. What’s going on with you?”

Dog groaned. *My nose is on the blink.*

Shawn winced.

Angela caught it even though she wasn’t looking for it. “Did you make friends with the cat?”

Dog sank down next to the fire. *No. It refused to lick me!*

Laughter rang out from most of them.

“Maybe you should invite it for a meal.”

I already did.

Angela glanced around and found the small creeping shadow of a cat slinking around the edges of the big tent. She gestured at Kyle.

Kyle went into the stock area of the tent to make sure the cat wouldn’t be able to get into anything.

But if you don't feed it, it won't lick me! Dog groaned.

Angela chuckled again. "We'll have a snack in a little while. I'll make sure it gets something, but I'm not going to bargain for a tongue bath. That's gross."

Dog stood up and pranced toward the tent. *It's almost time to eat! Here, kitty kitty!*

The cat spotted Dog coming at a fast pace. The fur on its tail bushed out. A low growl echoed from its throat.

Come on, Kitty. I want to be friends. Dog ran faster, unable to control his excitement at finding a cat on the island.

The cat took off running.

Dog followed it, groaning again. *I just want you to lick me!*

They both vanished into the darkness.

Everyone was laughing. Angela signaled Adrian. *It's the perfect time.*

Adrian began gathering energy.

Half the team ducked or braced. The rest glared at him in anger.

Adrian fired the sleep spell before any of them could rise. "Sleep. Walk. Map."

All of the mission men settled back in their chairs obediently instead of dropping out instantly.

"That wasn't a very strong spell."

Adrian unhappily acknowledged Angela's observation. "I think it's because I'm tired. They may not be out for long." He had done a lot of

therapy sessions since the rescue, and he hadn't had a full night's sleep yet.

Angela didn't want to use her own energy to increase the strength of the spell. She decided to wait for them to fall out the rest of the way on their own.

She studied the big tent, where two dozen people were now sleeping, including Charlie. Bad dreams were starting to take over their minds, sending out uneasy waves.

Kyle quickly finished securing the food against the cat. The bad dreams were easy to pick up with him being so close. *I'll stay right here, Boss.*

Kyle scratched his arm as he swept the sleeping people. Even Trent and Wade were having bad dreams. Kyle connected gently to Trent. He was curious how much Trent was picking up while he was Invisible.

A giant green cloud making no noise was surrounding Trent.

Kyle withdrew. He itched his arm again.

Goldie had sat up on the cot while Angela and Isabel were talking. Anger over her rejection burned hotly, but he didn't dwell on it so as not to alarm his new hosts. Goldie had offered help today wherever it was needed, but he hadn't spoken to the Eagles unless he had to. *They all distrust me because of Cerise and Reicher.*

Kyle snorted. "You killed two people and helped lead the team into a trap. It isn't all Cerise and Reicher."

Goldie flushed and cleared his mind so he didn't think anything else that might anger the bloke. "What will she want me to do?"

Kyle looked at Angela this time. Goldie's fate hadn't been set. He needed permission for this one.

Angela nodded.

Goldie didn't pick up the thoughts even though she was clearly telling Kyle something. He wasn't connected to the Safe Haven hive yet and her mental shield was too strong for him to penetrate. He feared her. It was another commonality with Reicher that would keep him from challenging her openly or without a good reason.

Kyle relayed Angela's answer. "Become trustworthy as fast as you can."

"How?"

"Be helpful, be brave, and be open."

Goldie caught the pointed tone and made the connection. "I have to be linked into the hive."

"All descendants do or they can't stay with us."

Kyle hoped the man refused.

Goldie shrugged. "When do you want to do it?"

"Now." Kyle unlocked Goldie and then waited.

Goldie reluctantly gave the man what he was waiting for. "You have my permission."

Kyle ruthlessly dug in and began rooting through Goldie's mind.

Now standing in front of the tent, Cody stopped to do another sweep.

Cate joined him.

Cody didn't need to ask to know what Angela wanted. "Rotating sweeps."

Cate was full of nervous energy. She was glad to have an outlet for it.

The twins started the rotating patrol Jennifer had taught them before this run.

Bad dreams began to ease. Everyone immediately felt safer even though they didn't know why.

Lisa caught Cody's attention. "Can I help? Please?"

The twins welcomed her. Cate even took Lisa's hand as she joined them. "You don't have to be scared of us. You could become like us."

"No." Dace was on the cot next to the tent flap. He sat up. "She'll have to do something special for the boss to give her a gift like that."

Lisa frowned. "Special how?"

"Usually saving someone's life would guarantee a spot on an Eagle team. I would imagine it'll be much like that." Dace stood up, yawning.

Dace had woken a while ago. He felt rested and eager to have an adventure. He headed for the bathroom with a smile at everyone he saw.

Lisa made a face. "That's not normal."

Cody laughed. "Come on."

Lisa kept pace with the twins and considered the new information. After seeing what the mission team had gone through, she was having doubts about being an Eagle. Dealing with the angry descendant children from the lab had driven it in

that she might not be strong enough for the goals she had set for herself.

The orphan kids from the lab had played hard all day and fallen out quickly when Adrian called bedtime. There hadn't been trouble getting them to eat or go to bed. They were used to taking orders. Getting them to act like kids again was the challenge.

Cate's right. If I become like them, I don't ever have to be afraid again.

Cate let go of her. "Cody and I can help you with that."

Lisa didn't mind having Angela's kids in her brain. She didn't have anything to hide. "You have my permission, and my gratitude."

The twins got started. Scanning a normal for problems while doing rounds was easy for them. There was nothing going on right now that they couldn't handle.

Isabel joined Angela at the fire while surveying the sleeping men. She didn't speak first. She wasn't sure if that would be welcome, but she was also making sure that she was right before bringing up a topic that might get her shut out.

Angela felt the woman's uneasiness. "Is there a problem?"

Isabel forced herself to answer. "Do you know how to wake them up?"

"Why?" Adrian didn't trust Isabel yet. He assumed she was trying to interfere with the session.

“Because they didn’t go where you wanted them to.”

Adrian’s frown grew. “How do you know that?”

Isabel shifted closer to the fire, seeking its warmth. “Would Heaven produce fear like that?”

Adrian realized all of the mission men were reacting badly. They were shaking; hands were twitching. Their feet were rocking and their breath was coming fast.

Cate ran over to Marc and began tugging on his arm.

He didn’t respond.

Angela looked at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “I’ve never tried to wake someone up.”

“Well, we’re about to learn how.” Angela stepped toward Marc, gathering energy.

2

“We made a big mistake.” Greg retreated so his shoulders were touching those of the team. They were standing in a circle. “This isn’t Heaven.”

The other team members didn’t respond. They couldn’t. They were in shock at their surroundings.

Tall, red jagged cliffs spewing flames surrounded them in every direction. The small flat area where they were standing was bordered by rocks and unbelievable demons in the forms of their nightmares.

Marc saw the horned shape that he identified as Satan.

For Harry, it was the ghosts of the captives he hadn't been able to save during the three-prisoner push.

Biff saw more stone warriors and they were all larger than his.

Gus's vision showed him bright red balls of rage that leered at him while enjoying the scent of his fear.

Shawn recoiled from dead criminals who had been killed for hurting kids.

Thomas feared the snakes with more tongues than he could count.

All of the nightmares moved closer to the mission men while searching for weaknesses and tormenting them based on what they found.

"It's good to kill."

"Kids were made to be hurt."

"You should gun them all down."

Only Greg wasn't being tormented. He was able to view the ghosts for what they were—a defense system. "We tripped an alarm."

Some of the other men understood what he was saying and tried to pull out of the horror-induced paralysis that was keeping them in place.

The others continued to recoil from seeing their worst nightmares brought to life.

Greg tried to use their private hive connection.
Pay attention, Eagles!

More of the men snapped out of it.

Greg reached over and slapped Thomas on the back of the head. “Wake up!”

Thomas rotated defensively. He realized everyone was staring at him in disapproval.

He looked back and saw the snakes were still there, but they were smaller and didn’t appear as lifelike.

Greg ignored the fake demons. “I don’t think we should try to explore here. This zone is way above our level.”

“You lead the way out.” Because Greg hadn’t reacted like everyone else, it had reminded Marc that Greg was the dimension hunter in their group. They would rely on his skills for this run.

Greg considered using his gifts to wake everyone up. He realized he didn’t have them right now. “Can anyone use a spell?”

Everyone else tried and failed; they were also without their gifts.

“That’s not good.”

“Keep trying.”

“We just answered one of her questions.”

Shawn frowned at Biff. “What questions? The boss didn’t give us any before we left.”

“No, but we all know she’ll ask several when we get back. Her first one will probably be what did we see. The next one will be what did we do. We can conclusively tell her that magic doesn’t work in this dimension.”

“Our magic, anyway.” Marc knew Angela was a lot stronger than they were.

Greg found footprints behind him. He began to track them, recognizing his own boots. “This is where we came in.”

The ignored ghosts flashed back to life.

Greg was forced to stop as they formed a line in front of him. The menace was too real for him to ignore this time. It was obvious they weren’t able to leave these apparitions behind. “Let us pass.”

Immediate anger flared out and struck Greg in the chest.

He staggered but didn’t fall. Spells and fire didn’t bother him as much anymore. “How do we pass?”

Silence fell.

“Watch your feet!” Thomas pointed.

Greg looked down and found a long red snake with rattles on its tail near his boot. It was unlike anything he had ever seen in their world.

The snake began to hiss.

Greg and the others understood most of the speech.

Give the right answersss and go. Give the wrong answersss and stay.

“Which one of us have to answer?”

All. The snake retreated. Firsst?

Greg lifted a finger. “I’m ready when you are.”

Greg’s cool Eagle attitude sent calmness through a lot of the group. They had all panicked upon waking in this awful place, except for Greg.

What do you sssee with your one eye?

Greg realized this may not be as easy as it had first sounded. "I don't understand the question."

He automatically tensed for a punishment. There had always been pain after he gave an answer like that in a lab session.

Tell me what you see! Power flew out of the snake and hit Greg again. This time it sank in; he was unable to fight it.

A nuclear explosion went off in Greg's mind. That vision of the future hadn't changed with Reicher's death. It was terrifying.

The snake rattled its tail. *You may pass.*

Greg figured out what was going on. "It's gathering information."

Marc stepped forward. "I have my guns. Let's kill it."

The snake hissed angrily. *That is your answer for everything. You belong down here with us!*

Marc drew his gun in a blur and fired three shots. All three slugs hit the snake and knocked it into the rocks.

Silence descended.

Everyone waited for a reaction.

When nothing happened, they nodded in approval and fell in behind Marc.

Marc motioned toward Greg.

Greg took the lead with a frown. Marc handled things differently than how Eagles were supposed to, but also differently than what a hero or a legend usually did. Greg wasn't sure that cold logic had any business being used in a place like this.

On the other hand, the snake was gone, and the path was cleared, so maybe Marc's way was the right way. Greg tried not to dwell on it as he got them moving again.

Without warning, the ground below them collapsed. Fiery flames shot up and began consuming the men.

"Come back!" Angela's furious voice broke through the newest defensive illusion.

All eight men snapped awake to find themselves in their chairs around the campfire.

Most of the men rubbed their hot arms or faces and were relieved not to discover any new burns.

In the tent, Wade bolted up from the cot. Angela's shout had cut through his attempts to dream walk home. He grabbed his hat and rushed toward her.

Angela nodded at Adrian. "Great job following them in."

Adrian sat on a stool and gasped in air. "It's my honor."

Cate crawled into Marc's lap as he woke. She hugged him tightly.

"That's enough for one night." Greg hoped Angela would agree.

All of the mission team nodded. They didn't want to make the mistake of going back there.

Angela didn't answer.

Marc controlled his breathing, but his mind ran wild. *Did that really happen? That can't be what*

happened. We're hallucinating or dreaming. It's not possible.

Marc spotted Biff's stone defender standing near Angela and tensed. *Neither is that, but I know it's there.* "Let's talk about what happened."

Cody kept watch over the distracted mission men and tried not to get emotional. Seeing his dad in danger was awful. *Next time, I'll go in after them.*

Charlie fell in to help cover the watch. *You can't go where they can.*

Why not?

You'll never get back out. You'd be too valuable as a hostage; the boss of that zone would show up. Don't ever get tricked into leaving this reality.

Angela caught that and approved. She also added it to her mental notes on Charlie. Her oldest child was picking up a lot more than he was letting on about. It was encouraging.

After he'd gotten off duty, Charlie had spent the rest of the day helping the orphan kids. He'd volunteered. The orphans had been hurt, abandoned, and forced to do things they didn't want to. Charlie had bonded with them hard, but not as one of them or even as a caretaker, to use Isabel's term. *I felt like a father. It's odd.*

Charlie contemplated helping the mystery woman and then being attacked himself. *It woke me up. I'm ready to help again.*

Charlie listened to the mission men for a minute, wondering if they were the reason why.

“Does anybody know what we did wrong?” Kenn knew he wouldn’t be able to resist going back there. He just wanted it to be his idea when it happened.

“We were too concerned about how morally wrong it is.” Harry dug his heel into the sand and watched the flames. Angela had limited them to two beers each. He wasn’t drunk enough to avoid the replays his brain was already starting. Losing his fingers and thumb was right below being poisoned. Any distraction was welcome. “I think we should go again—now.”

Gus controlled his fear and tried to act like it hadn’t bothered him. But it did. *I’ll have nightmares again from that quick trip.*

“I second that.” Shawn studied the stars and wished it was daylight so they would have work to do if Angela said no. Going to Hell wasn’t a big deal for him. He’d been there a lot since taking this run.

Marc tried not to get upset. He had been considering the moral implications of this session when Adrian had knocked them out. It was likely that his bad thoughts had steered them in a bad direction.

“There are no bad directions, only bad reactions.”

Marc was soothed by Angela’s words. So were the others.

Isabel stared at Angela. “You’re too much like Reicher.”

Most of the team rotated toward them. It was an automatic response to find out if the boss was pleased or angry.

“Thank you.” Angela gestured coldly at the men. “Continue.”

Chills went over the spines of the mission men. They immediately got back to work.

Marc’s brain was a mess, but he was trying to reassemble it, one trauma at a time. He’d chosen to start at the beginning and work his way through. Last night, he had gotten as far as his sister’s murder and then he’d frozen. After visiting Hell, Marc believed he could continue now.

Angela didn’t consider quitting despite the mistake. Like Reicher, she knew they had to experiment to achieve results.

Adrian studied her silently in disapproval. These weren’t the choices of the Angela he loved. The evil bitch that he and Marc both hated was running this show.

Lisa stared at Angela in shock. She’d never seen Angela treat hurting survivors this way. The boss was usually nice to everyone unless crossed. *I don’t understand.*

Angela refused to explain it. She turned an ear toward the other side of their camp and listened.

“Can I have another beer now?”

Erin checked her watch and then remembered it wasn’t working.

She and Theo were at a small folding table near the big tent. She'd kept him company all day and kept him mostly sober. He'd gone through his two beers right away. That was all worn off now and the man was green. Erin sighed. "Okay."

Theo grabbed a warm beer from the frayed carton and downed it in less than a minute.

He blew out a loud belch and grinned happily.

Erin grimaced and stood up. "I've had enough."

She walked away.

Theo didn't care. He waited for the effects of the alcohol to kick in.

Angela caught it all. She was proud of Erin for sticking it out all day. *But it didn't work.* All Theo had thought about was getting drunk. His perfect match was in his face for hours and he didn't see it.

"I can try again."

Angela denied that. "I have other plans for him now. You concentrate on the goal you were given."

Marc immediately resumed talking with his team.

Angela turned her back to them and tried not to cry. *I wanted him to be easier to work with; I didn't want him broken beyond repair.*

Marc winced. "I'll work on it."

She nodded without turning around. "So will I, with everything I have."

Chapter Fifteen
It Was My Idea

1

“That’s enough. Come back.”

The mission men returned immediately. They opened their eyes and sat up with mild groans and complaints about sore bodies.

Angela didn’t need an update this time. She’d made Adrian go with them into the other dimension, and stay connected to her for live information at the same time. The mission team had gone right back to Hell three times and explored the landscape around their entry point. Because they were still connected to this reality, getting them to come home each time they were attacked or endangered had been easy.

Angela forced herself to use Reicher’s training language. “You may all have 10 minutes of free time and then hit the rack.”

The men rose and headed toward the bathroom tent or the cooler of beer cans floating sadly in cool, dirty water. The ice they’d brought from the sub was fully melted now.

Adrian saw Wade was back on duty nearby. He was glad. He was too exhausted to talk and watch for problems right now.

“What did you get from that?”

Adrian lowered his voice. "It's backward."

"Have Kenn redo it." Angela was confused by how that had happened. Kenn hadn't been trying anything tricky to prevent Reicher from getting it. They had a detailed diagram; it wasn't in Kenn's handwriting. He'd found it. Whoever, or whatever, had made the map had intentionally drawn it backward.

Adrian gave another possibility. "Or maybe it's correct and our reality has flipped."

Angela smiled. "You are a genius."

Adrian stood straighter and refused to think about anything.

Angela rose from the stool.

Wade came over. He was ready with updates for her.

Angela motioned and got a drink from her warm canteen.

Adrian took over guard duty.

Wade checked his notes. "Kyle said Goldie's angry, but clear. He wants a guard on him...for a year."

Angela frowned. Kyle's suspicious nature was getting worse. "Use the normal times and procedures."

Wade checked that off. He'd already known what Angela would pick. "Kyle will link him into the hive shortly."

Angela was eager to discover if Kyle could do that. Most descendants didn't have that ability, but

Kyle was a hybrid. It was a test of his limits. “Next?”

Wade checked that off and drew an ‘lol’ next to it. He found it amusing that Kyle was still being tested for anything. “We told Isabel she should be sure she can do the job. It distracted her completely. She’s in the cot, awake, working on it. Expect a set of breeding names soon.” Wade smiled. “That’s it for new stuff. The old stuff hasn’t changed at all.”

Angela felt the misery behind his words. She couldn’t tell him why home wasn’t answering because she didn’t know. She used a distraction instead. “Adrian.”

Angela took over the guard post as Adrian turned toward Wade.

Wade was neat, standing tall, and fully geared in the proper attire. If not for those haunted eyes, he would have been the exact opposite of the mission men. Because of his mental pain, he fit right in with them. “You’ve done well on this run.”

Wade tensed. “What’s happening?”

Adrian didn’t draw it out. “You’re getting a promotion. If you want it.”

Wade grinned. “Cool. Hit me.”

“Right hand man.”

“Wait. Really?”

“Starting right now, you are the permanent XO for the leader of Safe Haven.”

Wade beamed. He stood stronger against the stiff breeze. “Thank you, Boss!”

“My honor, Wade.” Angela walked away before their sappy emotions made her cry.

Cate ran over for a hug. She was going to bed now.

Angela hugged her. “I thought you wanted time with Adrian.”

Cate frowned sleepily. “He’s too tired to kick his ass. It’s no fun.”

Angela realized they’d been doing cage matches instead of therapy. *That explains a lot.*

Marc caught it all. He scowled toward Adrian. *You let me believe she was bonding with you.*

Adrian shrugged. *She is.*

Marc realized it was the start of a fighting bond... “An Eagle bond.” Those were incredibly strong.

Adrian resumed guard duty over Angela while Wade took a minute to get set with the news that he was now second in command.

Right hand man automatically inherited control in emergencies or upon the sudden death of a leader. It should have gone to Kenn when Adrian almost died from his wounds in Little Rock. Kenn’s abusive nature had forced Adrian to use the leadership clause that said they could make one-time changes to any rule.

Angela had used hers in the mountain, where she’d let survivors die on their doorstep and even killed many of them herself. The moratorium she’d put on new refugees back then was still in effect. Only a few dozen lucky souls had been allowed in

since then. That didn't count Ciemus and the people-swap they'd done. There were still so many new refugees in camp from that stop that she hadn't learned all their names yet.

Wade caught up to her. "I have, Boss. Neil's working on it, too. No worries."

Angela smiled at more proof that she finally had the right person for the job. "Most of us will crash now. In five hours, wake the next shift. Take over at 6 hours or immediately if needed."

Wade copied her instructions. "Do you have a schedule made?" If not, he would ask Kyle.

Wade frowned suddenly. "Was Kyle in line for this job?"

"Of course."

Wade scanned for that man and found him barking at Goldie. "Is he upset that he didn't get it?"

"Hard to say since he doesn't know."

Wade stared at her in surprise. "But you tell Kyle everything."

"Usually." Angela smiled but it wasn't pleasant. "Get back to me with that answer."

Wade swallowed. "Okay."

Angela hid a laugh. She tore a sheet from her notebook and gave it to him. "Announce it openly. I'll cover the blast."

Wade skimmed the list and scowled. "You're kidding, right?"

"Openly, Wade. I don't want to handle 20 small explosions. I'm too tired for it."

Wade snapped his mouth shut. He gave Adrian a worried look as he went by.

Adrian already knew. "It was my idea."

Wade grunted. "Figures."

He went to where Kyle was about to link Goldie into the hive. "I need you for a minute."

Kyle waved Wade off. "She's just hazing you. I don't want the job."

Wade rolled his eyes. "It's not that, though funny ha-ha, you two."

Kyle held up a finger to Goldie and joined Wade by the flap of the tent. "What's up?"

Wade held out the schedule.

Kyle read it quickly. "I was there when he gave her that idea."

"And did you speak against it?"

"Yes. Do your new job, Eagle." Kyle went back to Goldie.

Wade reluctantly cleared his throat and moved into the open so everyone could see and hear him. "It's bedtime, folks, except for those on watch duty. If I call your name, you have the first shift." Wade caught Kenn's eye. "Point man."

Kenn's grin took over his entire face. "Boo-ya!"

Wade continued as people turned in surprise. "Harry, Biff, Gus, and Thomas have first watch."

Now the Safe Haven people stood and came forward. No one thought that was a good choice.

Wade finished before it all blew up. "The next shift will be Greg, Adrian, Marc, and Shawn, with Greg on point. Shifts are five hours."

Chaos erupted; Adrian shifted closer to Angela.

“You can’t do that.”

“Who made that schedule?”

“I’ll volunteer. Let the mission men rest.”

“They can’t go on duty already!” Lisa didn’t care that she was shouting at descendants or leadership. “They need to recover. Pick someone else!”

The mission men went still and quiet, and slightly fearful. In the lab, no one argued with Reicher’s choices. They all struggled to control their reactions so Angela wouldn’t change her mind. They were thrilled to be assigned to duty.

Angela caught it and acted like she hadn’t, but she was pleased. She had shifted their fear of Reicher onto herself now. Stage one of their recovery was in full swing.

The military men observed it all slyly. If Angela was so easily disrespected, maybe their comrades had been right to try and take over.

Kenn and Adrian both fired pain waves at the same time.

The military men fell, screaming apologies.

“That’s enough.” Angela’s calm, firm voice brought it all to a stop. “I’ve made the choices. Follow your orders.”

Kenn glared at the military men. “One more time and you’re gone.”

“We won’t!”

“I’m sorry!”

Kenn came to Angela. “You should kill them now.”

Adrian got ready to carry out that order if it was given.

“Follow through if you need to.” Angela yawned and ignored all the people now wanting to speak to her. She hurried to the rear of the bathroom tent and threw up.

Instant regret went through the protestors. Angela was having trouble with her pregnancy and she was still working. She didn’t need all this stress on top of it.

Shawn was impressed. “Well, that’s one way to get what you want.”

“What she needs.” Marc kept his voice down. “We’re light on guards. She has to use us.”

Greg realized that was correct. Kyle, Cody, and Jayda had covered it since sunset. Everyone else was on the sub or sleeping to be ready for a shift at daylight. “When did Safe Haven become so light on men?”

“When we survived radiation sickness, pirates, defections, and a UN invasion.” Marc went toward Angela. He motioned Harry along.

Harry went, but he didn’t think there was anything he could do yet. As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong. If the baby was dead, which would explain the lack of a heartbeat, her body would force a miscarriage soon. If it didn’t, they would have to remove it. Neither of those

scenarios were pretty; the issue couldn't be solved yet. "I wish Tobias was here."

Marc nodded. "Same."

Kenn heard them and tensed. He hadn't realized how important Tobias had become to their camp. *And he wants Tonya.*

Kenn again considered giving Tonya up for her own good. He'd been considering it since Angela's admission, but he still wanted to be with the fiery redhead. *I just wish she was a little less like herself now and a little more like who she was before.*

Marc met Kenn's eyes. *That's why they're pulling away from us. They know we want that, but they don't.*

Kenn sighed. *I don't know what to do.*

Marc didn't either.

Angela threw up again, making them all wince.

Adrian stated what most of the witnesses were thinking. "Maybe you should care more about her happiness and then it might spread to you." His eyes narrowed. "Or just give up so one of us can step in and do it for you."

Marc flipped Adrian the finger.

"Enough." Angela sucked in air and fought another heave.

The argument stopped.

Harry dug in his medical bag. "I can at least give you something to calm those guts."

Angela's stomach settled as Harry handed her a pill. She took it anyway.

Harry saw how tired she was. "Get her to bed."

Marc led her toward his beach chair.

Angela rinsed and spat a few times on the way.

When Marc leaned the chair back, Angela motioned. “You first.”

Marc smiled as he realized what she wanted. He got into the chair and opened his arms.

Angela crawled onto his chest and curled there, shivering. She was asleep a minute later.

“She sure is high-speed, low-drag.”

People chuckled at Thomas’s comment. Even the refugees noticed that about her.

“Hit the rack, folks.” Kenn had always loved being point man. This was no different. “No dream walking or diving. No blinking or exploring. Go to sleep so you can cover the next shift.”

Kyle finished his current chore. He connected Goldie to the hive.

Goldie groaned at the onslaught of mental voices. He held his ears. “Make it stop.”

People went quiet to give him a break, but they didn’t stop thinking. Goldie was forced to adjust.

Goldie tried to shake it off; he spotted Isabel staring at the military blokes. Her thoughtful expression angered him further.

Kyle looked at Isabel.

Isabel was ignoring them all in favor of studying them. She had an idea about one of the Safe Haven descendants, but she wasn’t finding a match among her teammates. Isabel had turned her attention to the lab captives, but she hadn’t gotten through all of them yet.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded quickly at Kyle. “Just making sure I can deliver what Angela wants.” Promising something without being able to give it had gotten a heap of people killed in Reicher’s lab.

Isabel’s concern was troubling to Kyle, but also well-founded. *Angela doesn’t like that either.*

2

Greg finished washing off in the surf. He rose and scanned, searching for Lisa.

Lisa felt his attention. She turned sadly, shaking her head.

Greg understood. It hadn’t been spoken yet, but they weren’t a couple anymore.

Greg was almost relieved. He was also a little hurt. *I haven’t done anything to deserve her fear.*

Lisa went to a cot in the big tent and tried to get comfortable. She didn’t understand why the lab kids had been able to bring this out in her, but she was sorry for it. *I really had no idea I felt this way.*

Greg went to the chairs around the fire and tried not to stare at Marc and Angie.

Marc shifted into a better position and shut his lids. “Maybe you should ask her who your match is.”

Greg agreed. “I might do that.”

“Good. Just don’t be upset if you get a name you don’t want to hear.”

Greg snickered. Biff and Trent were still eyeing each other and Jayda. “No worries. I can be happy with almost anyone now.”

Thomas took the chair next to Marc again. He tried to get comfortable through the loud ocean noises. “What happens to Lisa?”

Greg refused to consider it. “That’s the boss’s problem. I’m just one of the flock.”

Thomas yawned. “Are you bitter that she didn’t pick you for XO?”

“No.” Greg really wasn’t. “I’m bitter that I’m sleeping alone tonight when I haven’t done anything wrong, to her, to deserve it.”

Erin heard him from across the fire where she’d stopped to scan the ocean. She shifted toward him now, lips curving. “I was just thinking the same thing. You deserve a real woman.”

Greg studied her to determine if she was joking.

Erin shrugged, blushing. “I’ve always found you appealing.”

Greg just didn’t want the nightmares. He opened his arms.

Erin grinned. She came over and crawled up his big chest like Angela had done to Marc.

Greg felt magic swarm them. He rubbed her shoulders and enjoyed the contact as much as she did. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Lisa stared at them from the flap of the tent. “You little whore.” Her voice carried clearly.

Erin snuggled closer to Greg. “You might be scared of him, but I’m not.”

Lisa started to step forward.

Erin lifted her head and glared hotly. “You want a piece of me?!”

Lisa stopped as people rotated toward her from all over the base camp. She flushed and quickly went to her cot. “Whore!”

Erin settled into Greg’s arms. “I’ve been called worse by a lot better.”

The men chuckled.

Erin enjoyed the feeling of protection.

Lisa sulked over the choice she’d made.

The darkness crept closer, observing them all.

3

Here kitty, kitty! Dog followed the scent of the cat toward the mystery woman’s shelter. He stuck his nose in briefly and found it empty.

Dog had been tracking the cat for an hour now. Despite the island being so small, the cat was easily managing to stay ahead of him. *Here kitty, kitty!*

Dog spent a minute sniffing around the mystery woman’s homestead. He caught the odor of food under the ground, but he didn’t dig it up. He also didn’t disturb her water collection. Dog had already been given a bowl at the base camp. He wasn’t thirsty. He was lonely.

Dog’s ears laid back at the sound of the wind howling in off the ocean. The breeze was stiff

enough to ruffle his fur and make him turn away to avoid the small bits of salt and sand that were in it.

Dog put his nose back to the ground and resumed tracking his prey.

Around him, the utter darkness of the island rendered his other senses mostly useless. He was following smells and stumbling along the rocks of the unfamiliar location. It reminded Dog of the times he had been alone. It also brought to mind the adventure when he had taken a break from Safe Haven, but Dog didn't like to think of that now. He didn't like the feelings it brought up. *I miss my mate.*

Dog pushed those depressing emotions away and concentrated on the cat. *Here kitty, kitty!*

The wind ran over his back again, lifting his fur.

Something touched Dog on the tail.

He spun around, snapping.

There was nothing there.

Something touched him on the back.

Dog spun around again, getting nervous. He stumbled on the sharp rocks. Pain lanced through his paw.

Dog licked it and then looked around again for whoever had touched him.

A tall shadow appeared to his right.

Three more appeared to the left.

Tall and menacing, they began surrounding him, trying to push him toward the ocean.

Dog decided he'd had enough of the ghosts. He took off running back to the base camp as fast as he could go on his injured paw.

The light of the fire beckoned welcomingly. Dog hurried over to Marc's chair.

Marc's eyes opened. He slid a hand onto the upset wolf's shoulder.

Dog immediately began to calm.

"I see why you fought so hard in the lab now. You had a lot to live for."

With one hand on Dog and the other wrapped around Angela's waist, it was impossible for Marc to argue. He shut his eyes for a little more sleep before it was his turn to go on duty.

Thomas leaned closer and whispered, "I can get rid of him right now if you want me to."

Marc chuckled bitterly. "No, you can't."

Thomas was offended on Marc's behalf. "I've seen the way he watches her. I've seen the way he watches you. I could do it. Just give me the word."

Marc didn't answer.

Angela did. "Marc doesn't have the authority to give a removal order in this camp. You'd do well to remember that the chain of command is different out here."

Thomas flinched back in his chair. "Didn't know you were awake!"

"Clearly." Angela didn't follow up with another threat. The refugees from the lab viewed Marc as the boss so far. The only thing that would change it was a crisis moment and she wasn't going to wish for that just so they would give her the respect she

deserved. She had no doubt that fate and Nature would cover it if given enough time.

Marc kissed her cheek and slid his hand further around her to warm his fingers. The breeze coming in off the ocean was remarkably cool considering how hot it had been all day long.

Angela tensed.

Marc felt it and assumed he had moved too fast. “Sorry.”

“No, listen!”

Marc used his ears first, but he didn’t hear anything other than the wind and the soft crunch of rocky ground under the feet of the guards. He realized she meant mentally. He connected to her and immediately heard a steady beat that reminded him of being underwater in the lab.

“What is that?” Thomas was picking it up, too, through the private team connection.

Angela smiled as tears came. “It’s a heartbeat.”

Thomas and Marc began to celebrate, waking some of the others.

Angela cried in Marc’s arms, not caring who saw it. She could stop pretending she was carrying a dead baby around now. She’d been doing that as a defense, so she didn’t lose her mind if it turned out to be true. That could end now.

Marc’s hand pressed against her stomach. A grin lit up his face. “I felt something.”

Angela felt it, too. The small gas bubble sensation was proof of life.

The happy couple embraced, kissing and hugging in celebration that their offspring was alive.

Across the fire from them, Adrian kept his emotions to himself. He was thrilled for Angela and happy for Marc. The small amount of jealousy he was feeling was normal. *After all, I did guide him through it this time. It's almost like it's my baby, too.*

Adrian opened his eyes and pinned Thomas in place.

Thomas realized Adrian had heard his offer. He waited for a fight to start.

Adrian snorted softly. He used part of Erin's words to show his respect for her bravery. "I've survived worse attempts by better men than you. Mind your own secrets or you might be the one who gets removed."

Attention switched back to Thomas now, including Angela's.

Thomas quickly shut his eyes and tried to go to sleep.

Adrian fell out with a smile on his sexy lips.

Chapter Sixteen
And So It Begins

1

Biff snapped awake with a loud gasp. He looked around in terror. “Ghosts!”

Dog glanced up at the man. *It’s okay. They’re gone in the daytime.*

Biff saw the wolf was curled up on his boots. Instead of fear, he was relieved that Dog had been here to protect him.

Dog licked his sore paw.

Biff tried to get control of his breathing. The nightmare was fading fast. All he could remember was being surrounded by ghosts that wouldn’t let him get back to the ship. “And water. There was a lot of water.”

Next to Biff, Greg sat his chair up. He’d been trying to snooze since waking from his own nightmare, but Biff’s words were bringing too much awareness. “Fire was everywhere in mine.” The vision of the nuclear explosion was haunting Greg.

Biff wiped his face and also sat up. He scanned the other chairs and found them all empty. He and Greg were the only ones still here. Everyone else was in line for the bathroom tent or doing chores.

Biff noticed they were one short. “Our mystery guest is gone.”

Greg wiped sand from his arms. “She got up at dawn and left, muttering about the ghosts taking up too much space. We assume she went back to her camp.”

“I’m surprised the boss let her go.”

So was Greg, though he didn’t say so. “I’m sure we’ll check on her later.” Greg spotted Erin hauling in fishing lines. He hadn’t had a nightmare until she got up for her work shift.

“Are you and Erin a couple now?”

Greg snorted. “No idea.”

Biff chuckled. “Well as long as you know that you don’t know, then I guess you know enough.”

Greg laughed.

The sound traveled to both of the women who were keeping track of him.

Lisa stared at him in regret. In the light of day, it was clear that her fears were unfounded. Greg would never hurt her. *We could have worked it out about the kids.*

Erin studied Greg in desire. *I can’t wait until he’s well enough to claim physically.*

Greg blushed. “Okay.” He wasn’t used to being the object of someone’s sexual desires. The occasional service moment didn’t count.

His pleasure faded. “I need to make sure she doesn’t have unrealistic expectations.”

Biff slowly stood up. “Meaning you don’t want to be a couple?”

Greg sighed. "It's not that I don't want it. I just..."

"Don't believe you can commit the way a relationship needs?"

Greg grunted. "Exactly."

"I understand." Biff really did. He wanted a mate too, but after having his brain scrambled, he didn't think he could give enough of himself to make it work.

"The boss is hardly ever wrong." Greg found Angela helping the cooks with breakfast. "One out of a thousand isn't a bad record."

Biff knew Greg meant the deaths from the submarine, but he didn't count that as wrong. Biff still believed they should have sunk it and dealt with Reicher's lab the old-fashioned way.

He glanced around and found Jayda on guard duty right behind them. He froze as he realized she'd heard everything.

Jayda ignored them. She wasn't interested.

Greg snickered. "You both have a surprise coming. It should be fun to watch."

Biff wasn't bold enough to call Angela a liar, but he also didn't want to push Jayda, or anyone else, into doing something they didn't want. He knew what that was like. "We'll see."

Trent marched by on a patrol. "No, we won't see. Stay away from my woman!"

People turned toward him from every direction.

Biff controlled his anger and didn't bring out his stone defender.

Jayda flushed in embarrassment.

Dog glared up at Trent with angry golden eyes.
Stop being stupid.

Trent kept walking. He didn't care about their anger. "She's mine. I claimed her."

Jayda scowled. "What?"

Greg chuckled. "And so it begins."

Everyone else went back to what they'd been doing, but they kept an eye on Trent. If he started a fight with one of the mission men, he would be sent back to the sub to cool off.

Biff felt protected by that reaction. He also realized he still wasn't upset about the wolf laying on his feet. *Maybe I will recover in time.* It was a nice thought.

Jayda didn't want to feel anything for Biff, but his hope for a better future for himself was impossible to fight. "I hope you get better soon, too."

She turned in a new direction so she didn't have to look at Trent. His reaction had bothered her, a lot. *Now, I have to figure out why and what to do about it.*

"Boss!"

Everyone twitched at the shout.

Angela hurried into the sleeping tent. "What is it, Dace?"

"He won't wake up!" Dace shook the military man again.

The man slid heavily to the side of the chair.

Angela ran to him, using energy she couldn't spare.

Charlie gently pushed her aside and took over.

Harry pulled her to the rear of the growing crowd and went to help Charlie.

Dace stared around nervously. "I talked to them both last night. They were fine!"

The healers realized the man next to their patient was also unresponsive.

Adrian came through the crowd to help; so did Shawn and Cody.

"It's too late." Harry didn't waste his energy. When they were so far gone, he couldn't do anything for them. "This one's dead."

"Alfonso." Thomas supplied their names. "The blond is Raji."

Harry got out his notebook and wrote their names. He ran through possible innocent causes first.

Adrian pointed. "It's not innocent."

Harry detected the damp, red sand under the rear of both chairs and snapped that in place. "They were murdered."

Tension and fear ran through the witnesses.

The radio on Angela's belt lit up. "Do you need me over there?"

Angela answered Ray, "Not yet."

"Copy."

Angela listened for guilty thoughts from those around her, but she didn't hear anything.

“Get a tent put up for the bodies.” Wade handled it like he’d been trained to do in the Eagles. “Put a guard on it, then take pictures before you move them. Get exact positions in the chairs and the ground around them.”

Adrian and Kenn directed people out of the big tent so the investigation could begin.

Angela swept the crowd again. She saw Jayda frowning.

Angela went to her. “Do you know something?”

Jayda snorted. “No, but you do.” She kept her voice down. “You did something to their food last night.”

“It was to make them sleep so we weren’t in danger.”

Jayda did her duty even though she didn’t want to. “Maybe you used too much?”

“Unlikely. I’ve been doing it for decades.”

Angela’s eyes went to Kenn for a brief second.

Jayda assumed Angela had drugged Kenn in the past to avoid a beating for her or her son.

Angela finished it off. “Anyway, poison wouldn’t leave a wound. Where did the blood come from?”

Jayda realized she was wrong. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You saw something and you called me on it. That’s what an Eagle is supposed to do.”

Angela was suddenly exhausted again. “Are you ready for your next chore?”

Jayda assumed she wouldn’t like it, but there was no way she could refuse. “What’s up?”

“Our mystery woman left camp. I need to know if she did this. Find proof, then arrest her.”

“Find proof, then arrest. What if there’s no proof?”

“I’d still like you to bring her back here if she can be persuaded. If she’s not our killer, then she could become a victim.”

Jayda agreed with that. The mystery woman wasn’t stable. She needed to be protected. “We need to give her a name. Mystery woman doesn’t fit.”

Angela chuckled but she wasn’t amused. “Yes, it does. Go on now. Take some big, strong men with you.”

Jayda frowned. “I can handle one scarred castaway.”

“That’s what I thought, too.” Angela turned away. “Do as you’re told, and get back here by the time we serve the next meal.”

Given a short timeline, Jayda motioned to Trent, Gus, and Biff. She ignored the disapproval.

As they got out of hearing distance, Dace asked what most of them were wondering. “Did she just pick an enforcer and two Invisibles who dislike each other?”

Kyle laughed. “Yep.”

Dace didn’t understand. “Is she trying to cause drama, be distracted, and leave herself unprotected—all at the same time?”

Angela snickered. “Some people like to live dangerously.”

“It makes no sense.”

Kyle let Dace in on the issue. “She’s trying to pick her future. She can’t do that unless she makes comparisons.”

“Gus is her protection while she compares?”

“Not exactly.” Kyle’s grin widened. “He’s been on her mind since Brittani first introduced them. She stayed away to avoid drama.”

Angela chuckled. “Your words of being alone slapped her hard. She’s not worried about the drama now.”

Kyle bowed jokingly. “Your commands are my life.”

Angela’s humor fell as she swept the bodies Harry was about to photograph. “Find our killer and remove them.”

Kyle straightened eagerly. “Thank you.”

2

“Why did you pick him?!” Trent marched angrily next to Jayda. “Tell me the truth!”

Gus sneered at him. “Stop it.”

Trent ignored the man. He wasn’t scared of their enforcer. “Are you breaking up with me?!”

“No.” Jayda stopped as soon as she was confident that they were out of hearing range. “We all have fears we need to conquer. Maybe we can help each other.”

Trent didn’t believe her. “Where did this come from?”

“Kyle.”

All three men frowned.

“What?”

“Kyle said you should help us?”

Jayda realized she would have to explain. She did it angrily. “Kyle thinks my biggest issue to settle is having a mate in the future! It made me realize no one is taking me seriously as an Eagle.”

“So how will this help?” Biff already knew she hadn’t done it for the reasons people were considering. She’d made her feelings on him clear last night.

“Trent’s afraid of water. I hate fire. You’re scared of everything. It makes sense that we should help each other. Maybe we’ll even become a team. It will help all of us as Eagles.”

Gus slapped at a flying bug on his arm. “How do I fit in?”

Jayda didn’t beat around the bush. “You’re afraid of going bad and hurting those you love. It’s not much different than the rest of us. You’re afraid of your reactions.”

Trent hoped she wasn’t lying. “Why not the others? They all have fears, too.”

“Because we’re the ones who might not be able to beat it on our own.”

None of the men liked hearing that.

Jayda resumed their walk, letting them consider it. As she went, she scanned each of them for compatibility. Kyle wasn’t completely right; he also wasn’t completely wrong.

Biff switched topics. “Do you think our mystery woman killed those men?”

Jayda shook her head. “She’s not a killer. We’ll scan her to be sure, but I doubt she had anything to do with it.”

“Who *do* you think did it?”

Trent glowered at Biff. He didn’t even want the man to talk to Jayda now.

Jayda was saved an answer as the mystery woman came into view. “There she is.”

The woman was kneeling in the sand near the low tide on this opposite side of the island. She had a long metal staff with her that Jayda assumed was for defense against the ocean life. She didn’t seem to be bothered by the water even after being attacked by the shark yesterday. “I don’t see any blood.”

Trent tried to join the conversation so she was only talking to him and not Biff. “Maybe she washed it off.”

“I doubt that would be good enough. There was a lot of blood on the ground under those chairs. Her legs should be covered in it.” Gus had caught Angela’s tone. “The boss wants her back where we can keep an eye on her.”

Jayda nodded. “Agreed, but search for evidence anyway.”

The woman heard them coming and pointed. “Kiss off, ghosts!”

Jayda smiled. “We’re real. We’re here to rescue you, remember?”

“Okeydokey.” The woman added more cooked oysters to her stock. “After we eat.”

Jayda understood the woman’s routine was to cook early. She swept the small shelter from where they stood, wondering if they should explore her home.

Biff frowned. “I wish we knew her name.”

“Maybe there’s something inside her shelter that will have her name on it.” Jayda stepped that way.

“I’ll do it!” Trent hurried over.

Jayda remembered that she was the team leader. She was supposed to delegate jobs, not do them herself.

While they stood there, the descendants were able to pick up a few thoughts from the mystery woman, but none of it was clear or made sense.

All of them agreed with Angela’s theory on her being a descendant whose demon had fled. They were all curious about whether or not her gifts would return, though after so long, it seemed unlikely.

“I’m not finding much in here.”

Gus peered over Trent’s shoulder. “Is that a book in that garbage pile?” Gus pointed.

Trent reluctantly crawled deeper inside the woman’s shelter to retrieve it. They hadn’t explored her home upon first meeting the woman. It hadn’t occurred to them that she might have identification in there.

Trent handed the fragile book to Jayda.

Jayda brushed the dirt and debris off it. She fought a chill before she opened the relic. She didn't expect anything good to be inside.

Biff didn't like her nervousness. He brought out the stone warrior and began to sweep their surroundings.

Jayda felt better, but she didn't say so. She didn't want to upset Trent. She opened the book and began to read. "Logbook. First entry. It's July the 6th. I think I made it to Howland Island, but it's impossible to be sure. I've lost most of my equipment in the crash.

"I managed to splint my broken ankle using wreckage, but there is squat to burn for a signal fire. I only found one small grove of thin trees and I'm reluctant to scrag them. All the ruins on this island imply no one has been here in a long time.

"I'm not sure what caused me to crash. The green cloud I flew through wasn't even a thunderstorm. I still lost control and barely managed to bash this island instead of the open ocean. I've sent out a dozen calls for help so far, but I haven't gotten an answer. I'm going to continue to dry out the few items I've managed to k-ball and keep finding food and water. There isn't much here."

"Did she say green cloud?" Trent hoped he'd heard that wrong.

"Yes, why?"

Trent remembered that Angela had told them not to mention it to the rest of the team. He waved it off. "Don't worry about it. Go on."

Jayda continued to read. “Entry two. I found some oysters and I scragged a bird with a rock. I used dried driftwood to cook it, but it made me sick for days.

“I’ve been on this island for two weeks. I’ve sent out over 100 calls for help but haven’t gotten a single answer. The battery on the radio is dead now. I have no way to contact a rescue crew. I’ve been alone before on explorations, and I’m hard-boiled, but this doesn’t feel right. I think they have heard my calls; they’ve decided to leave me here because it’s an embarrassment to have a woman accomplish something that a man should have already done. I am so bent. You just wait until I get home!”

Jayda cleared her throat before continuing. “Entry three. A rugged body washed up on the beach. It was badly decayed, but I believe it was Nan, my copilot. I used rocks and gave him a burial, but I have to stay next to it or the mice and birds will uncover it and continue eating him.

“I’m very tired. I think it’s because my broken ankle is healing so slowly. I’m just glad that it is healing. Limping around this rock to collect oysters and filter water is strenuous.

“While I was digging Nan’s grave, I used the extra rocks to create a large SOS sign near an old runway. I haven’t seen or heard any planes since I bashed this island, literally, but surely someone will come by soon.

“It gets colder on this island at night, colder than I had expected. My clothes are already falling apart

in this harsh environment and I lost my gear in the crash. The driftwood is all gone now. I need to make a fire, but I'm still reluctant to cut down any of the trees. If there is a winter season here, they might save my life.

"I don't like darkness because of the ghosts. I'm already learning to sleep from sunset until just before dawn. That way, I only see them in my dreams."

Jayda paused to drink from her canteen. She held the book out to Gus.

Gus shook his head. "It's a woman's story being read by a woman. It makes it more realistic."

Trent barely kept himself from snapping at Gus. Trent didn't like being upset all the time. *I never should have come on this run.*

Jayda resumed reading. "I started building a cave out of rocks. I dig them from the shoreline when the tide goes out because it's easier than trying to unearth them from this wretched island. I also caught my first fish today by stabbing it with a piece of debris from my plane. Even raw, it was aces! I'm going to start fish-hunting every day. I don't have a way to cook, though one of the rocks I dug up is long and flat enough to make a grill. I just need to find a way to fuel it.

"I might have seen a cat last night. It might have just been one of the dingy ghosts. I'll hunt for it today while I collect oysters and carry water in an old helmet to be run through my rock filter. I'm building it as I go; it's only giving me a small

amount each day, but so far it's been enough to survive on. I'm still feeling weak and tired, but I don't think I'm losing any body mass yet.

"I wonder if they've forgotten about me by now. I've been on this island for a month. Any searches have been called off at this point. I'll cry myself to sleep tonight."

Jayda didn't want to read the rest of it. She handed the book to Gus, not giving him time to protest. She took a guard position.

Gus reluctantly found her place in the logbook and took over reading. "My memories are getting fuzzy. The ghosts have started following me into the daylight. I believe I'm going wacky. I once thrived on adventure, I think, but the steady grind of just food, water, and sleep is wearing me out. The only positive thing is that my ankle is better. I took off the brace today and was able to put weight on it.

"There is a cat on this island. He dug into the hole I made to store my oysters and gorged himself until he threw up. I chased him off with rocks. Now I have to dig a new hole and find a way to protect it from Mr. Sneaky."

Gus didn't want to keep reading either, but he wanted the information. He did a quick scan to discern if the woman was coming back yet and then continued. "My shelter is done. I fed the ghost cat so it will leave my oysters alone. What am I doing here?"

“I remember. I crashed here and they’ve left me to die. My name fades in and out some days. I’ve already lost my surname. Call me Mel.”

Everyone brightened a little at having discovered the woman’s name.

Gus realized there was only one small sheet of paper left in the logbook. He finished it with chills. “I haven’t been sane enough to write for a long time. This is probably going to be my last entry. I seem to still follow the routine of food, water, and sleep, but I think I should make a headstone today, just in case. I need help!”

Trent reluctantly held up a small item that he had retrieved along with the book. “It’s a half finished cross.” He’d acted like he hadn’t spotted the book because he’d seen the cross first and knew there was nothing good in it.

Horror went through the group as they realized the woman had been preparing for her death and then forgotten it.

“Here she comes.”

“I hope she doesn’t mind us reading her logbook.”

Before any of them could offer comfort to the woman quickly stomping toward them, a loud scream echoed across the island.

It wasn’t a scream of surprise or a scream of amusement from someone who’d been pranked. It was the bloodcurdling shriek of someone in pain.

The mission men had been hearing noises like that for the last eight weeks. Their blood ran cold.

Jayda, Trent, Gus, and Biff took off running toward their base camp.

Behind them, Mel grabbed the long metal rod she had used to splint her leg all those years ago and followed them.

Chapter Seventeen
It Doesn't Bounce

1

“Cauterize it!”

Shawn used his fire hand to seal the jagged wound on the woman's face. The caretaker had almost lost her eye. If not for Goldie stabbing the attacking bird, she would have.

Angela observed the medical team in fascination and anger. *I brought us here to get some peace and quiet.*

“That's not working out, is it?”

Angela snorted at Kenn's comment. They were all standing around the medics, observing and stewing.

Heavy footsteps pounded their way.

Descendants spun around, bringing up shields and drawing weapons.

Jayda slid to a halt at the instant wave of violence. She put a hand out to stop the others.

Biff almost couldn't. His stone warrior was leading the charge and eager to cause pain.

Trent understood. He stepped in front of Biff, forcing the man to stop. Then he turned his back so the stone warrior didn't rip his arms off.

Biff pulled it in before it could attack Trent. He gasped in air and scanned for the owner of the awful scream.

Gus slowed to a fast walk. “What happened?”

Angela and the others calmed, seeing it was their people returning. Angela also noticed the mystery woman behind them. She was glad the woman was unharmed.

“Bird attack.” Thomas pointed at the squawking, pecking bird at the edge of the crab grass. “The caretaker tried to steal an egg for breakfast.”

“She won’t do that again.” Harry checked the scar line to be sure Shawn had gotten it closed all the way. The three-inch-long wound had poured blood, but it hadn’t been as bad as it seemed. “She’ll be okay.”

The mystery woman marched toward the angry bird, lifting her metal pole.

“What’s she doing?”

“Get her away from there!”

“Leave her alone.” Angela watched the woman toss the metal spear in satisfaction and admiration.

The pole went straight into the heart of the dancing Boobie and killed it instantly.

The woman hurried forward as the other birds flew away. She began grabbing eggs. “Now we all have breakfast.”

Safe Haven people laughed.

Lab refugees stared in uneasy disapproval. In the lab, only Reicher had been allowed to kill.

Jayda joined Angela near the medics and the softly sobbing caretaker. “That’s Mel.”

She handed Angela the fragile book she’d retrieved from Gus during the run. His big hand had been crushing it.

Mel held up a handful of eggs. “Payback. Show ‘em who’s the boss and they stop.”

Wade grabbed an empty bucket. “Sounds good to me.” He and a few others went to help her.

“You leave some.” Mel pointed at the nests she’d already cleared. There were two eggs left in each one. “Have more later.”

The Eagles understood conservation. They were all impressed that she did, too.

Dog padded over and picked up the dead bird.

Mel grinned at him. “Nasty for us. You and Mr. Sneaky can have it.”

Dog whined a quick *thank you* and took off toward the trees. He’d figured out the cat lived there. It hid in the tangled roots or the weaker top branches and was almost impossible to see. Dog had finally sniffed it out this morning.

“That sucks. I was dreaming about a juicy drumstick.”

Mel laughed with Wade. “Same!”

Wade’s humor faded as he realized she’d probably gone longer without one than he had. Wade glanced at Angela. *Should we tell her about the war?*

Angela denied that. *Her brain is already confused. No need to add to it.*

Kenn glanced at the medics. “Maybe one of them can help her.”

Harry shrugged. “I can try, but I don’t know what I’m doing on that one.”

He and Shawn both brightened at the thought of being forced into a new advancement.

Angela scowled deeply. “Must you be abused?!”

Both medics nodded and dropped their eyes in shame.

Kenn motioned at their other medic. “Maybe he has something that will help her.”

Charlie stiffened. “What?”

Kenn fell silent as rage flew over the boy’s face.

“You just want to see what gifts I have!” Charlie kicked sand toward Kenn. “You’ve always wanted my gifts! Bastard!”

Thick silence fell over the base camp.

Kenn sighed. He turned away without responding. There was nothing he could say. *Maybe Marc has the right idea about leaving.*

Angela’s attention focused on Marc.

Marc began reeling in his line. He hadn’t moved from his chair.

People saw that and frowned at him.

Marc had used the chaotic moment to scan for the murderer, much like Kyle had done. “Did you get anything?”

Kyle shook his head. “No, but I only got through half my list.”

“Me, too. We’ll keep at it.”

“Yep.” Kyle went back to his investigation.

Marc began baiting his hook from the pile of fresh fish guts. He and Kyle had made the plan a short while ago. They hadn’t expected a distraction so soon.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Charlie sputtered, waving. “Or do something?!”

“That’s your mom’s job.”

“We need you, too!”

Marc glanced around. “For what?”

Charlie didn’t have an answer. But he did have anger. “Fuck both of you!” He stomped off.

Cate and Cody went with him.

Angela wanted Adrian to go, too, but he was busy helping the orphan kids. The small defense class had been going on for hours.

Adrian waved. “I could use some volunteers.”

Kenn immediately went that way.

So did Gus and Thomas. They wanted the kids to be safer.

Trent went too, but slowly. He wanted the distraction from the sound of the ocean, but there was also a chance that Jayda would like seeing him help the kids. *I don’t want any of my own, though.*

Greg caught that as he went to the bathroom tent. “You and Lisa might be a perfect couple. She’s scared of them, too.”

Trent frowned. “I’m not scared of kids.”

Greg didn’t argue. He’d caught the vibe from Lisa. He knew it when he felt it now.

Trent examined his feelings. *Am I afraid of our kids?* He swept the orphans.

His stomach tightened as he witnessed two of the older boys lifting shields against Adrian's mock attack. *I might be.*

Lisa had heard Greg's comment. She was embarrassed again, but she'd also made a connection that she now shared with Trent. "It's not just the kids."

Trent fit that into place sadly. The madman in Port Stanley had scarred him deeply. "I don't like magic."

No one was surprised by that. They'd been reminded that one of their kind had tortured Trent; the mission men bonded to him.

Lisa jogged off to catch up with Angela's kids.

Angela began kicking sand over the blood spots to soak them up. "So, who's ready for runny eggs and fish steaks?"

When no one answered, she followed Charlie and the twins. Despite the new tension, it was a good moment. Trent now understood why he really didn't want to be unlocked. *But you can't fight fate, my friend. I know. I've spent the apocalypse trying, and except for one rare success, it just doesn't work.*

2

Dog looked up as they approached. He licked his snout. *It's good!*

Angela grimaced at the feathers and guts strewn around the trees.

The twins hung back, providing protection and avoiding the gore.

Lisa stayed with the twins, trying to give Charlie time with his mom.

Charlie chuckled. "I see you got the cat to come by."

He lives here. Dog reached out and licked the cat.

The cat growled but it didn't stop tearing into what was left of the carcass.

Dog grinned. *He likes me.*

Charlie laughed again. "If you say so."

Dog began picking meat from one of the bones next to his paw.

Angela went by them and studied the largest tree. "Does that look like a water line to you?"

Charlie joined her. They both ignored the loud growling from the eating cat. "Yeah. Does that mean the ocean reached here at some point or was there a lake?"

"Could be either." Angela didn't want to say his first guess was more likely. "I wonder if Mel was here when that happened."

Charlie shrugged. "We could check her shelter for similar marks."

Angela acted like she hadn't come for that. She'd noticed the marks when they took a break at these trees on the first day here. "Good idea."

Charlie watched the cat try to duck Dog's wet tongue and still keep eating. The fur on its head was already soaked and sticking down like it had been shaved. "Go easy, Dog. A cat without fur would just be wrong."

Dog switched to licking his paw instead.

Angela swallowed a chuckle at her crude thought and went to Mel's campsite. She hunted for signs of high water, but she didn't see anything obvious.

Charlie followed her. "I had a crazy dream last night about those trees."

Angela swallowed a chill. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. We were in them, trying to avoid sharks. On land. Isn't that funny?"

"Yep." Angela kept her mind blank. He didn't need to know she'd had the same dream. "You can bend better than I can right now. Check out the inside." Angela examined the rock shelter's top and sides.

Charlie took a fast look inside the wide-based and narrow-topped shelter, then withdrew. "There might be one or two fading lines on it, but I'm not sure. It might just be the bird shit she used for glue."

"Ingenuous, wasn't it?"

Charlie nodded even though he found it gross. "We're taking her along when we leave, right?"

"Of course." Angela couldn't imagine leaving the woman here. "I just hope she wants to go."

So did Charlie. Drugging her and carrying her away wouldn't feel like a rescue.

Angela faced her son. “Would you like to talk to me about your anger issues and your need to run?”

Charlie had been expecting this. “I doubt it will do any good. Adrian and others have tried.”

Angela smiled. “They’re not your mom.”

“Why wait until now?”

Angela motioned toward the base camp they couldn’t see from here. “You’re challenging him openly. Things have changed again for you.”

“Is that bad?”

“Hard to tell yet.” Angela led him toward the crumbling remains of the day beacon. “They used to say what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger. I believe that, but I also believe we’d learn things without the pain. It doesn’t have to be ugly every single time we mature or grow wiser.”

“Agreed.” Charlie drank from his canteen and then held it out to her. “But it is, isn’t it?”

Angela refused to lie. “For me it has always been ugly. I’m hoping that can be changed for our younger generation.” Angela drank and handed it back. “You’ve learned an ugly lesson about free will, and about loss. I never wanted that for you.”

“I understand why you were against it now.” Charlie tried not to get angry. “Did you know all of it was going to happen?”

“There were flashes and moments I didn’t like, but if I’d known for sure how it would go, I would have tried harder to make you listen to me.”

Charlie sighed. "It wouldn't have mattered. I wanted her."

"Yes. And for a while, Tracy was yours. You were happy."

"But she wasn't."

"No. Now you know your partner has to be happy too or it won't work. When you try again, you'll have this experience to rely on."

Charlie made a face. "I'm not doing it again."

Angela held out her hand. "A quick view is all I can give. I'm really too tired for this."

Charlie couldn't help being curious. He touched her hand.

They both jerked as a nuclear explosion lit up the darkness in their minds.

Angela dropped her hand. "It's almost set to happen now."

"I don't understand. Reicher is gone. He can't order an attack and you would never do that."

"There are several possibilities."

"Like?"

"Like the refugees taking over the sub or Ray making a mistake during manning it. Accidents do happen. There are also nuclear facilities around the world that are no longer being taken care of." Angela didn't know what to do about that vision, but it had felt closer this time, more real. "Sorry. I was trying to show you holding an infant. I don't know who the mother is, but you seemed happy to be a father."

Charlie brightened. He did want that.

Angela didn't. "You're too young. *I'm* too young. Wait a while, huh?"

Charlie chuckled as he followed her back toward their camp. "I have no plans."

"Until the next Tracy comes along and then you'll make more plans than you can follow."

Charlie understood why she was bringing that up. "You'll help me this time?"

"Absolutely. You'll listen to me this time?"

Charlie grinned. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

3

"I can't scan the sub anymore."

Biff grunted and cast his line into the rougher part of the surf. His stone warrior was standing a few feet into that water, guarding against sharks and other predators while the mission men tried to relax and forget the newest screams.

The caretaker was fully healed and working, though she was watching the nesting birds closely.

The birds were pecking and clicking angrily over the loss of their eggs, but they were also avoiding the humans.

Gus tried again. "Can anyone read the sub from here?"

Greg wiped sand from his eyepatch and then replaced it. "I've never been able to."

"I could yesterday." Harry shut his eyes as something toyed with his line. "I've used a lot of

energy today.” His autopsy was complete. Later he would try to outline the entry wounds for matching them to a weapon.

“Angela’s covering it.” Shawn didn’t want to say that he couldn’t either. He’d tried a few times, but with no success. He wasn’t as strong as some of the others.

“She needs a break.” Kenn jerked his line and felt it snag something. “We should be helping out more.”

Most of the mission team agreed with that. The shifts overnight had gone well. The men focused on Marc to determine his feelings about it.

Marc put his fishing pole into the hole he’d dug for it. Then he concentrated. He was feeling foggy today. He would have to pay attention.

Everyone observed as Marc used his magic. Even staff members across the beach rotated toward him in nervous expectation.

Marc tossed out his tracking grid.

It became a sonic blast.

“Shit!” He tried to pull it back.

The blast formed a ring and flew toward the submarine. It hit the heavy ship with no visible damage.

Marc tensed again as it rebounded. It sank into his mind and revealed red dots moving all through the sub, except for a lone dot on the bridge. Marc quickly deciphered it. “They’re all fine. Ray’s fine.”

“That was amazing.” Biff leaned forward. “Can you do it again?”

“Let’s find out.” Marc gathered more energy for another throw.

The mission men congratulated him and encouraged him to keep going.

The other captives from the lab observed him in haunted dismay.

Isabel forced herself to resume observing the Safe Haven people so she had some matches to recommend. “At least it doesn’t bounce.”

The healed caretaker shivered, holding her cheek where a ghost pain was still aching. “Yet.”

4

Angela hurried to the bathroom tent as soon as she returned. She was barely inside before the vomit spewed from her mouth.

Marc looked at Harry. “You have to help her.”

“There’s not much I can do.”

Marc’s eyes narrowed. “I can make you.”

Harry frowned at him. “Your daughter threatened to fry me in my sleep. If that didn’t do it, your threats won’t work either.”

Marc calmed a bit. “Cate threatened you?”

“Me and Shawn both.”

Marc viewed the moment in their memories. He wasn’t sure what he should do about it.

“You told me the baby moved last night. That’s a good sign. And she’s not dropping weight or feeling bad, for the most part.” Harry shrugged. “We really have to just wait and see.”

Isabel had been listening. She offered comfort. “It’s common for breeders to get sick. It usually means the baby will be strong in one gift or have a heap of weaker gifts.”

Harry realized Isabel would be able to provide knowledge they didn’t have. “Neil will want all your information.”

“For what?”

“The books he’s writing.”

Angela recovered and staggered over to them. “The thumb drive will have information for those books, too.” She glanced at Isabel. “What helped those mothers?”

“Stomach calmatives, mostly. And heartburn powder. Other than that, changing their diet, which you won’t consider.”

“Is it dangerous for us to do nothing?”

Angela scowled at Harry. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t eat the dead!” She marched off.

Marc glared at Harry again.

Harry sighed. “I can’t speed up her pregnancy.”

Shawn had been working on the problem, too. “Can we heal the baby? Reicher ordered healing treatments for sick mothers sometimes. I read it on the computer files.”

Marc was certain Isabel would have the answer. “What happened in those cases?”

Isabel shrugged. “We found out that it locks the child and prevents it from gaining gifts. If you don’t want descendant kids, use magic on them in utero.”

“It’s time! Come and get it!”

People rose and went toward the cooks at Dace’s loud call.

Charlie was hungry. He joined his mom, who was standing in line for a plate.

Angela put an arm around his shoulders and leaned against him.

Their attention went to the orphan kids and their trainers at the same time.

Kenn was teaching them to deliver a painful hit and then run. It reminded Charlie and Angela of their old lives with him.

Charlie saw it differently this time, though. Being able to release his anger and not be hurt for it was allowing his mind to work through it. “He’s good with them.”

Angela was picking up the vibes from that session. “They’re not afraid of him at all.”

Charlie grunted. “Yeah.” He met her eye. “Tobias twisted me up before this run. I think he wants me to get rid of Kenn so Tonya will be single.”

“I think you’re right.” Angela kept watching Kenn.

“Should I?” Charlie was certain he could accomplish it and he did need a new goal.

“Not for that reason.”

Charlie considered it as the line moved. “Do you believe him? Has he really changed?”

Angela tensed. “I want to.”

“But?”

“But we were his targets for a long time. I doubt we’ll ever trust him again, no matter how many orphans he adopts.”

“Exactly.”

Angela’s stomach flipped again. She left the line. “Grab a plate and then give one of the guards some time off.”

“You got it.”

Angela quickly got out of sight so no one would see or hear her get sick while they were trying to eat.

Kenn had been listening to them. He let out a sigh of relief.

Next to him, Thomas had also been observing. “You’re scared of her, for real. Why?”

“Because she holds my life in her hands.”

“Huh. I guess she is like Reicher.”

Angela heaved. *I’m getting tired of that observation. I may have to do something about it soon.*

She rinsed and spat and rejoined the camp, but food was out of the question until her guts settled. She took a watch post and scanned the ocean with a frown on her face.

“We need to give Ray a break and a chance to come over. I’m going back.” Angela waited to see who wanted to go with her.

Several people got up and began collecting their gear.

“We’re also going to work on the constitutional documents.” She still didn’t believe Jennifer and the others would have time for it. *And I want to help make those laws.*

Gus lifted a brow. “Am I still on that council?”

“Of course.” Angela didn’t mind them knowing now. It had to come out at some point anyway. Protecting their anonymity was the least of her concerns right now. “Coming?”

Gus got up. “You know it.”

Most of the mission team stayed in the chairs with their fishing poles. They’d been fed first and they wanted to snooze while Eagles stood watch.

Angela approved. “Kyle is on point.”

She went to the RIB that Wade was checking for damage.

Marc waved at Adrian. “Guard duty.”

Adrian didn’t argue. He followed Angela to the RIB. Adrian had been avoiding her. He didn’t want anyone to think he was chasing her and he didn’t want to be tempted. She’d done another amazing job in destroying Reicher’s lab and taking over the UN, though. He still wanted to congratulate her.

Kenn waited until she was out of hearing range and the sound of the air pump was covering them.

“Have you made a choice? Is that why you’re putting them together again?”

“I want her protected.”

“And?” Kenn knew there was more.

Marc sighed deeply. “And I’m setting things up for us to leave in case I do go that way.”

Greg snorted harshly. “You aren’t running off and leaving her. We all know it.”

Thomas had other concerns. “I’d like to know why she’s leaving us here with a killer.”

The men frowned at him.

Thomas wasn’t intimidated. “I mean it. We all know Alfonso and Raji were murdered while we slept. Why is she leaving without handling that?”

“The new guy missed it.”

Marc grunted at Greg’s comment. Then he gave Thomas the answer. “She already knows who it is. There’s no need for her to stay and wait for the results of the investigation.”

Thomas scowled. “Then why isn’t she handling that? We could all be in danger!”

“We’re not or she would have.”

“I don’t get it.”

“She gave a removal order to the one man who won’t hesitate, no matter who it is.” Greg swept Kyle and got a nod of recognition. “It could be one of the orphans and he’d still handle it.”

Thomas didn’t know if he should be upset by that or relieved.

Greg grunted. “Neither. Just have respect and follow the rules. It could easily be your name on his list if you step over her lines.”

Chapter Eighteen
You Had No Right

1

“**W**e’ll be there soon.”

Ray snapped awake and fumbled for the radio.
“Copy.”

Ray rubbed his eyes. He was glad Angela’s call had woken him. “I was lost in the fog. There were ghosts all around me, but none of them could speak.” Ray shivered.

He got up and used the portable bathroom in the corner while trying to forget it. *It felt so real!*

Ray used hand sanitizer and then made himself a cup of coffee using the folding stove on the counter. He lit the white fuel tab carefully and stepped back as the bridge immediately began to warm.

Ray scanned the radar and found it empty. The yacht had moved out of range. He picked up the radio and tried to reach home for the tenth time already today. “Come in, Safe Haven.”

Ray no longer expected an answer. Something was wrong there. “Come in, Safe Haven. Is anyone listening?”

Ray replaced the mike and began his mini workout while the coffee water was heating. He

hated instant coffee; he always had, but it was almost all that was left now.

Tap-tap! “Are you alive in there?”

Ray chuckled. “I’m 5-by, Zack.”

“Awesome.”

“The boss is on the way.”

“I heard. We’re meeting the RIB.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

Ray studied the few monitors that were active. He found the new people cleaning and caring for each other. They were following every order they’d been given.

Despite that being good, it bothered Ray. “Maybe they’re scared, like Lisa is now. That would explain why they aren’t acting like they’re free.”

Ray made a personal connection. “Maybe that’s why Grant wants to be one of us. He feels defenseless.”

Ray got his coffee and sipped it while observing the refugees. He went over Grant’s behavior in dismay. Everything implied he was scared of magic. If that was the case, they had more trouble than Ray had first thought. “We can’t make them all like us. We have to find a way to co-exist.”

He sighed miserably. “Or we have to send them away for their own good and for ours. If Grant wants it because he’s scared of it, then we can’t get married. We can’t even be together anymore.”

“Open up.”

Ray unlocked the bridge door with a grin. “Do I get to go out and play now?”

Wade and Angela laughed.

Ray gave them a fast update. “Everything’s the same. No word from home.”

Wade’s worry increased. He hadn’t been able to reach them by dream walking either.

They all waited as the others went by. Wade had made three trips to bring back all the orphans, caretakers, subjects, and Eagles who were tired of the great outdoors.

Wade grunted as Theo came by. The man was shaking and twitching. He looked like one of the mission team now.

Theo hurried down to the second level. He was hoping he could snag a bottle of something stronger than beer while everyone was distracted.

The subjects and caretakers also proceeded to the second level. The dewormed men were a little better, but they still went straight to the mess to get another meal. All of them were glad to be back onboard and away from nature. They hadn’t known what they were missing while being in the lab. As far as they were concerned, freedom was overrated.

Isabel went by next, with Goldie on her heels.

“I’m sorry, really. Maybe we can still be friends. I promise I won’t pressure you.”

“I hear ya, mate.” Isabel hurried toward the babies. She didn’t care about Goldie. She just wanted to be with her kids.

Angela didn’t order Goldie to stay away from Isabel yet. When the woman needed support, though, she would get it.

“I had all the alcohol collected and locked in the mess.” Ray handed the key to Wade.

Wade chuckled. “Theo won’t like that.”

“Nope. But this ship is officially dry now.”

“When he starts causing trouble, put him to sleep. We’ll keep him that way for a day or two and let the addiction fade a little.” Angela made it an official order. “Wake him for food, water, showers, and medical checks—that’s it.”

Wade wondered if Angela would also use that approach on some of the mission men, but he didn’t ask as he wrote it down.

Ray smiled at Wade. “Congrats on the promotion, XO.”

Wade stored his book, beaming. “Thank you.”

“We’ll do the first document meeting in a few hours. Pass the word.” Angela stripped off her over shirt and then her heavy vest.

Wade’s eyes narrowed. He hadn’t even known she was wearing a vest. “Is there something I should know?”

“Yes, but we’ll cover it later.” Angela stretched happily in her tank top. The double vest setup was heavy.

“I can stay if there’s a problem.”

“No.” Wade gently tugged Ray toward the exit. “Go on now. I’ve got it covered.”

Ray did want an hour or two on the island. “I’ll be back on the first RIB.”

Wade snorted. “You’ll be piloting that RIB.”

“Awesome.” Ray hurried topside to get set. “I love playing Ferryman.”

That gave Angela a chill but she wasn’t sure why.

She keyed her radio. “Shift change in 30 minutes. Cody has point here. Dace has point on the island.” Angela quickly lowered the volume as Dace’s happy response blared across the airwaves.

Wade didn’t ask if that was a good idea. He’d shown a lack of faith last night by asking Kyle about her shift choices. He wasn’t going to do that again. *But I do wonder why she has a rookie on point.* Dace was good so far and he was well-liked for his great attitude, but he was still a rookie.

Angela didn’t mind Wade being careful, though she did resent his open questioning. She’d refused to say anything last night because it would have upset her stomach further. She couldn’t take it last night. Right now, her guts were finally calm and her mood was even. “Don’t do it again.”

Wade nodded. “My word, Boss.”

Angela smiled to make sure he knew she wasn’t angry. “Dace wanted an adventure, remember?”

Wade’s grin returned. “Can I assume he’s about to get what he wants?”

“Yes.” Her amusement faded. “But there’s always a cost in the end, you know?”

Wade thought about Samantha. “Who are we losing this time?”

Angela shrugged. “I didn’t see or feel a death, but I couldn’t narrow in for details.”

Wade started to ask how she was preparing for it. Then he realized she already had. “The kids are back on this sub—including all of yours. And you sent Adrian with them when he’s supposed to be guarding you.”

“I also brought back the caretakers and the new mothers. It’s all Eagles over there right now.”

“The new people aren’t Eagles.”

“Then why are their names on my sheet?”
Angela handed him the paper.

Wade laughed. She was still hazing him. He didn’t mind. If she hadn’t, he would have worried about keeping the job. She hadn’t hazed any of the others.

“I knew they weren’t going to last after only a day or two. You’re different.”

“How so?”

She gestured. “You’ve been doing the job for months without any of the credit that goes with it. I’m the one who overlooked it. And I’m sorry for that.”

Wade sensed there was more to it than just their friendship. “Because of some of the issues we’ve had?”

“Yes. If you’d been my right hand in those moments, I might not have missed the signs.”

“Would that have mattered to the deaths?”

Angela sighed unhappily. “At that moment, yes. Later, no. We’ve all seen how determined fate is when someone is marked.”

Wade contemplated Megan and Hannah. “I wish we could save them this time.”

Angela was also considering the two cursed women. “We’ll try. I’ve already made plans around it and then cancelled those plans in case fate is watching for that. I don’t know what else to do. If you come up with something…”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

“Perfect.” Angela waited.

“I need to get something off my chest.”

“It’s why I brought you along. Say it and let it go. It’s no sin.”

Wade drew in a calming breath. “I came on this run so I didn’t have to help Samantha recover. I don’t know how to deal with it.”

“When this run is over, you will.”

“She won’t need me then.”

“That’s the guilt talking. Samantha will always need you. The experience you’re gaining on this run will allow you to be there for her in the ways you couldn’t be before.”

“It’s wrong that I left her.”

“It’s also right. I need you, too, XO.”

Wade always felt better after talking to Angela. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Angela wiped her eyes. “Now get busy. I can’t take this mushy stuff.”

Wade laughed. “You got it.”

Angela settled in the chair on the left and loaded a specific file on the thumb drive.

Wade sat next to her and tried to call home.

Angela opened Reicher’s log and began reading.

“I inherited this position after a death battle with my twin brother, Oric. I had already defeated my stepbrother, Rico. There were other family members I also had to surpass over the years, but their names don’t matter. What does matter is that I won by killing. It set up a lifelong pattern that I have never broken.”

3

Goldie followed Isabel until she reached the bunk room. He scanned for witnesses and found too many. He smiled politely and went to the laundry compartment instead.

As soon as he was inside, Goldie locked the door and began stripping his stiff red pants and shirt. He tossed them into the first empty washer and set it on heavy duty. He dumped in a lot of powder and watched as the water began to fill it with red suds.

Then he hid his knife behind the washer.

Goldie wrapped a towel around his waist and hurried out to the storage area for dry duds. As he went, he muttered about being soaked from the ride back to the submarine.

People murmured back in sympathy and went about their own cleanup. They didn't like being wet either.

In the laundry room, bloody water filled the machine and was washed out.

4

“Is that everyone?”

Zack climbed into the RIB. “It’s just us going over.”

Ray felt bad for wasting the fuel. “Should we stay here?”

“We need the break. Let’s go.”

Ray grinned and throttled the engine.

Zack held on as Ray sped up and aimed for the roughest part of the breakers. Zack was feeling a lot better now that the diarrhea had passed. He was eager for some fun.

Ray jumped the breaker at high speed.

The RIB went airborne for a few seconds of exhilarating hangtime that drew attention from the teams on the island. They laughed and pointed as the RIB slapped down and shot forward.

Zack laughed. “This is almost as good as a matchup!”

Ray was missing that, too. He hadn't before, but being without that release for weeks was wearing him down.

“Do you think we can?”

Ray frowned. “We should have asked her before we left.”

Zack shrugged. “We’ll radio later for permission.”

“Rematch?”

Zack grinned harshly. “You know it!”

Ray snickered, but he sensed Zack was serious. *He doesn’t like it that the gay guy beat him.*

Zack grunted. “Just the guy, not the *gay* guy. What’s up with you?”

Ray sighed. He reduced their speed as the beach approached. “Some of the refugees found out my orientation. Apparently, being gay was a death offense in the labs.”

“Why do you care?”

Ray got ready to shut off the engine. “I was used to being in Safe Haven, where that shit doesn’t happen anymore. It made me defensive. Sorry, man.”

Zack didn’t know what it was like to be one of the few gays in their camp, but he did know what it was like to have a history that people didn’t like. “They’ll come around. You know.”

“Yeah. But it shouldn’t be that way.”

Zack agreed, but he was tired of hearing about it. After what the mission men had gone through, most of them had little to complain about. “People are flawed. They all have their own opinions and feelings on things, their own codes and routines that shape their actions and reactions. Right or wrong, it’s their mind. All you can do is show them that

you're like any other productive member of our new society. That worked for me."

Ray shut off the engine and let the tide carry the boat the rest of the way to the beach. "But I'm not like them. I can't produce children."

Zack snorted. "A lot of our men are sterile, but you actually can have kids. I'm certain that Angela would let you and Grant adopt some orphans."

"It's not the same thing."

Zack realized Ray was considering being a father. He tried to be helpful. "There might be ways for it to happen. If you can..."

"I've tried. I can't."

Zack thought of Kenn's stories from Little Rock. "Snake women don't count. You weren't willing."

Ray hadn't viewed it that way. He still denied the idea. "It's not right to take a kid from its mother."

"You could do it and let her keep it."

"No. If I fathered a baby, I would want to raise it."

"That does make things harder."

Ray swept the beach and found Kenn right away. He observed the Marine in barely hidden longing. "I'm all twisted again and I'm not even sure what caused it."

Zack placed it at that moment. "You're about to commit to a partner for life. It's scary. You're considering other options to get out of it."

Ray stared in surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’m facing the same choice. It’s why I came on this run.”

5

“So why are you avoiding me?”

Silence fell among the men around the burned down fire. They’d been here for hours now, joking, remembering, and pretending they weren’t damaged.

Ray saw Kenn was staring at him. “What?”

Kenn gestured. “You haven’t said two words to me since you sat down. Something’s obviously wrong. You usually talk my ear off.”

Ray flushed.

Everyone saw he was fighting the urge to say something that might anger Kenn.

Kenn knew. He wanted it over with. “Out with it.” Ray was one of his real friends. Kenn couldn’t change the past with Charlie and Angela, but he hadn’t done anything to offend Ray, as far as he knew.

Ray didn’t want to have this conversation at all, let alone in front of witnesses. He forced out a chuckle. “It’s all in your brain.”

The mission men frowned at him.

Ray quickly backtracked as he realized that was an insensitive thing to say. “Just a joke. But there’s nothing going on. We’re good.”

“Liar.”

Ray flushed darker. His anger rose. He controlled it, but not by much. “I said we’re good, Kenn. Stop pushing me.”

Erin came over with a fresh bucket of fish guts. She set it by the dead fire. “Ray got into an argument with Grant before we left.” She smiled at Ray. “Just say you’re sorry. I’m sure he’ll forgive you for whatever it was.”

“No, he won’t.”

“What did you do?” Erin hoped it was something simple. She liked Ray. She wanted him to be happy.

Ray picked up his beer. “I told him I had to come on this run. He didn’t want me to.”

“And that caused a fight?” Kenn was confused.

“Yes.”

“What does it have to do with me?”

Ray sighed. “The fight came when he asked me why it was so important and I said *you* needed my help.”

Erin drew in a sharp breath as the men around them tensed. “Ouch.”

Ray nodded. “I tried to take it back, but...”

Erin tried to find a good side. “Well...” She couldn’t.

“Exactly.” Ray leaned back in the chair. “That wasn’t the real cause, though. Grant asked me to talk to the boss about making him a descendant. I hesitated and then stalled. He felt it. The Kenn thing just tossed fuel on that fire.”

Kenn reached over and touched Ray's arm. "Thank you."

No one had expected that response.

Ray tried not to get emotional. "We're friends. It's what friends do."

Kenn was emotional. He wasn't attracted to Ray, but he did enjoy their friendship. It was one of the few he had. "So why did you stall?"

Ray was glad when Kenn let go. His touch was like fire even though there was no intent behind it. "He makes bad choices as a normal. What would he do with magic?"

Now the men around them understood. They all felt that way about the normals who wanted Angela to share her gifts. Even Shawn and Greg agreed it wasn't a good idea to make the normals like them.

Erin didn't need that for herself, but she knew a lot of the females in their camp wanted it. "Maybe you should just let the boss handle things."

"I would, but she might agree." Ray forced out the rest of the truth. "If Grant becomes like us, it will probably destroy our relationship."

"Why?" Erin didn't find anything about it that would interfere with the couple.

Kenn did. "Because Grant will find out how Ray really feels about me."

Ray grunted. "And it doesn't matter. You and I will only ever be friends, but Grant won't be able to deal with it."

Erin grinned at Kenn. "Are you sure there's no chance?"

The other men laughed and teased Kenn lightly. Kenn was smiling. "Sorry. I like holes, not poles."

Ray waved. "And that's never going to change, but Grant will overreact. We'll be fighting all the time until one of us breaks it off."

Erin reluctantly introduced some reality into Ray's dilemma. "It's not right to deny him on how he *might* react or what he *might* do. People are innocent until proven guilty."

Every mission man there shook his head.

Erin didn't know what to say. She looked at Greg for an explanation.

Greg gave it without scorn. "We've been denying refugees based on their thoughts all along. Actions matter, but so do their minds. If Ray says no, Angela won't agree. She even got Pam and Morgan's permission before sharing gifts with Shawn."

Shawn grunted. "And it was a bad idea."

Greg nodded. "Mine, too."

Erin studied Kyle as he directed Lisa in gutting a catch. "What about his? Was it a good thing?"

Greg told the truth as he saw it. "No. He did it so he could stay close to his mate. He didn't care about the future. Now he has mental cracks that he won't let the kids heal for the same reason."

Erin believed that was the truth. Everything Kyle did was to protect his relationship with Jennifer. "Does Angela know?"

“Angela knows everything.” Marc was tired of the conversation. “She’ll handle these things as they come up. Let it go.”

Ray and Kenn wanted to.

Erin was still confused about why Angela would share gifts if it was a bad idea. “Can she take it back?”

The two hybrids tensed. They didn’t know.

Erin looked at Kyle again. “I wonder if he knows.”

“Probably, but I wouldn’t ask him.” Ray liked Erin. Her bold honesty was good in a camp where everyone else kept awful secrets. He also admired her for being able to recover so well from the explosion. Erin had run in to fight the fire on the cruise ship. She’d paid for it with burnt plastic being blown into her arms, hands, neck, and face. Even her ears had taken hits. “He doesn’t like anything that might interfere with his marriage.”

“Or his place in camp.” Greg also liked Erin. He didn’t want her to get on Kyle’s bad side.

Erin understood what they were saying, but she wasn’t scared of Kyle. She glanced at Marc and then lifted her brow. “Kyle’s hiding something from you. That’s why he’s keeping his distance.”

“Don’t.”

“Stop.”

Erin ignored the protests of the men who were reading her mind. “He has the right to know.”

Marc braced. “Hit me with it.”

Erin spilled a camp secret without hesitating. “Kyle and Morgan made a deal with Adrian. They want him to take over the Eagles and lead us all in the final battle. You’ve been removed from both of those roles, but you haven’t been told because you’re fragile right now.”

Kyle glared over at her with bright red orbs. “Whore!”

Lisa nodded even though she didn’t know what Erin had done. “Told you.”

Erin lifted her chin. “Traitor!”

Kyle wasn’t used to being called on his mistakes. He especially wasn’t used to being called a traitor. His eyes faded into normal anger. “You had no right.”

Erin glared back this time. “No, *you* had no right. You waited until he left and then made deals with the devil. You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Kyle looked at Marc with regret starting to come into his expression.

Marc shrugged coldly. “We’ll talk about it later—in the cage.”

Chapter Nineteen
On The Rocks

1

Dog came over to Marc and dropped onto his sandy boots with a low grunt.

Marc drew comfort from the wolf. He denied the rage that wanted an outlet, but he wasn't able to ignore the feeling of betrayal. *I thought Kyle and I had become friends.*

"We are." Kyle stayed out of Marc's reach, but he still took the opportunity to explain. "You're just not the right man for the job."

"You're wrong. We're not friends." Marc swept his frowning men and sighed. "Team meeting, now."

The mission men came his way eagerly. They were all ready to hear his final choice.

Kyle took a step toward them.

Marc glowered at the mobster in contempt. "Come on over. I dare you."

Kyle stopped, flushing.

Thomas stood. "I'll go do a patrol." He didn't want to force his company on them.

"Stay here. You're one of us."

Thomas perked up at Marc's open declaration. "Nice."

The mission men and those from Safe Haven scowled or shook their heads. They didn't trust Thomas yet.

“Shouldn't we wait for Gus?” Greg wasn't as eager as the others to hear Marc's choice. He was already sure which way the wolfman would go.

“We'll fill him in later.” Marc quickly shut down the assumptions. “This isn't my final call on leaving. It's just a check in while we have a minute of privacy, and there's a minor issue that needs to be handled.”

Rescue team members took the hint and retreated to give the damaged men some space. None of them looked at Kyle or spoke to him. They still agreed that Marc shouldn't lead the Eagles or any future fights, but they didn't want to be targeted because of association. Marc's cage threat was taken seriously.

Shawn and Harry put their fishing poles down and waited for the meeting to start, but neither of them really cared since it wasn't the final call.

Shawn resumed thinking about blinking. The calm duty last night had kept him busy, but he wasn't occupied now and it was bothering him again.

Harry pondered a murderer in their midst who wasn't bleeding through on either hive connection. He found it fascinating how he could listen to the Safe Haven people and to his mission team, just on different mental channels. He hadn't learned to shut off either of them yet, but he knew it was possible.

Jeff had done it for months before he returned to them. *And then he left again. He knew he couldn't be happy in our camp.*

It hadn't come as a surprise about any of the people who'd abandoned Pitcairn while the mission team was gone. The shock had been finding out that Theo was also leaving when they got home. Harry had believed Theo was thrilled to be Angela's go-to guy. He hadn't known the man was getting burned out already.

Greg took the chair by Thomas and studied the Navy man. He'd never known Marc to accept another male so quickly. "Did you two have a moment in the lab?"

Thomas chuckled at the terminology. "Maybe he just knows I'm a sweetheart."

Greg laughed with the others, but he didn't accept that blow off. "What's up with you?"

Thomas wasn't going to spill his story again in front of everyone. "That information is classified."

Greg regarded Marc. "I assume you've been briefed?"

Marc drew his knife. "Nope."

Thomas tensed, watching the blade.

Marc began cutting off the longest parts of his beard.

Greg was distracted. "Good idea!"

"Yep. Time for it to go." Marc tossed a handful of his hair onto the sand.

Birds immediately took flight and headed for them.

“Ah, shit.”

“Get down!”

Kyle pulled his air horn and hoped it had something left in it.

Marc rolled out of the chair and came up on his feet with his knife in hand.

The birds landed on the hair and began fighting over the much-needed nesting material.

Marc laughed aloud.

Eagles relaxed and holstered various weapons.

Marc sliced off another chunk of his beard and held it tightly as the birds who weren't fighting shifted toward him. “Make them fight or make friends, team. Call it.”

“Fight!” Thomas was eager for action now that he was out of the lab.

“Friends,” Harry and Shawn answered at the same time. They were tired of bloodshed in any form.

“Fight.” Greg was still angry over the caretaker being attacked. He wanted the threats eliminated.

“Fight.” Kenn was upset over Charlie being attacked and he liked cockfights, as well as dog fights. It wasn't as good as being in the match himself, but it was close.

“Friends.” Biff didn't want to watch the birds kill each other over hair. He felt like death should always serve a purpose.

“I'm the tiebreaker.” Marc walked over to the nests in the grass and tossed the hair. “We'll try something new. We'll make friends.”

Most of the birds flew back, but they landed near their nests and began plucking strands without fighting each other.

Marc cut off more hair and then motioned. “Let’s make sure they have nests that will last for years.”

The mission men joined him happily. Even those who’d voted for the fighting were secretly relieved. Reicher would have gone the other way. It was more proof that they were really free and this wasn’t a dream; it was also encouraging that Marc wasn’t feeding his ugly side.

Marc grunted. “I’ll do enough of that in the cage.”

“Maybe we should clear it with the boss first.” Biff grabbed his shorter beard and cut off a patch.

Marc glared at Kyle, who was observing them in surprise and concern from near the big tent. “Rock off a ring.”

Kyle didn’t want to push Marc’s buttons, but he still refused. “The boss didn’t give orders for matches.”

“Does she have us on a work shift tonight?” Greg focused on Dace, who was on point.

Dace slowly shook his head. “She said to let you have the night to yourselves since we have enough rested manpower to cover it.”

The mission team tensed and then gave Kyle dirty looks. None of them wanted to go all night without a distraction. Each of them knew they

would end up breaking Angela's rules and get punished.

"Why didn't she lock us back up before she left?" Biff had just thought of that.

Harry tossed his hair toward a nest. "She wants to trust us."

Biff didn't think that was a good idea yet. "So it's a test to find out if we've recovered?"

Kenn snorted. "It's a test to see if we can be trusted."

Thomas didn't want to be locked again. "I'm not doing it unless she says we can."

He'd heard about the night-fights from Kenn and longed to be part of it. His disappointment was heavy, but his fear of being punished was stronger. In the lab, he hadn't been disciplined for years because he'd followed the rules after his conversion process.

"We can just do it now, while she's on the submarine." Ray didn't have the same fears as the mission men.

Zack nodded in agreement. "She might be mad, but we'll survive it."

Every mission man there winced, grimaced, or turned away. In the lab, that attitude had gotten people killed.

The radio on Dace's belt crackled loudly with Angela's calm voice. "Keep those matches under control or there won't be a session tomorrow for anyone."

Relief ran through the group. Mission men immediately checked to make sure no one was causing trouble.

Kyle hid his admiration. Unlike the others, he knew Angela was weaning them off of the torture motivations that Reicher had used. With a simple order, she had reminded them of what they wanted most and promised to give it to them if they didn't hurt themselves or kill anyone tonight. They'd become instant enforcers. There wouldn't be trouble now. *She's amazing.*

Jayda came closer. "Can I ask you a question?"

Kyle faced her stiffly. "Because it's what's best for our future."

Jayda waved him off. "I don't care about your obsessive need to pick our leaders and fire them when they disappoint you. I want to know why she had me join the session last night when I didn't do anything to help."

Kyle paused, thrown off by her bluntness.

Marc had been listening. He was tracking Kyle's thoughts now. "You stood by the fire for hours and only worried about us. You were there for *your* progress, not ours."

Jayda grinned, proud of herself. "Wow. I didn't even see that!"

Biff smiled at her. "Good work."

The other mission men nodded at her in recognition of the good progress. They knew how important those moments were when someone was trying to recover from a trauma or a tragedy.

Trent dumped a bucket of cleaned water into the barrel and then put the bucket back in the stack. He got her attention. “Can we talk?”

Jayda’s good moment vanished. Annoyance crossed her face. “You may not like what you hear.”

Trent nodded stiffly. “I assumed, but it needs to be said.”

“Okay.” Jayda followed him toward the grass for a little privacy.

Most of the mission men kept track of that. They were all curious if Angela was right about Biff and Jayda. After so much time around ugliness, the idea of watching a true love match unfold was a welcome change.

Marc stayed mentally with Kyle.

Greg glanced toward the fishing snares, where Lisa was checking them. “Maybe he’s right. We should just get it over with.”

Lisa felt his attention and knew what was coming. She pulled up the words she’d rehearsed while falling asleep.

Marc frowned. “I called a team meeting.”

Greg went toward Lisa, ignoring Marc.

Marc shrugged and resumed shaving. “You’re right. It can wait.”

Thomas laughed. Every minute out of that lab was getting better and better. *I’m free and there are good people around me. It’s all I ever wanted in companionship.*

Marc faced the Navy man. “Then stop spying on us for my wife. If you do it again, we’ll bury you right here on this beach and watch you drown.”

Thomas swallowed nervously. “I didn’t yet. But I won’t. My word.”

Marc hadn’t been sure. “When she asks for your observations, and she will, don’t lie and say you didn’t make any. She hates liars and so do the rest of us. Just tell her I said you’re not her spy—you’re mine.”

Now the mission men knew why Marc had been encouraging Thomas. They waited for the Navy man’s answer with glares to remind him that he’d been accepted into their team, their hive.

“I won’t willingly give her any information on any of you, unless you say I can.” Thomas hoped that was good enough. Angela was powerful. She could easily overpower him mentally and take the information.

“No, she can’t.” Marc gave him a defense. “Never without permission will stop her.”

Thomas made a face. “It didn’t stop Reicher.”

“That’s because Reicher had no ethics, morals, or compassion. My wife is different.”

Thomas decided to be honest. “Not from where I’m sitting.”

Marc gestured with his knife and then began lightly scraping at the shorter hairs on his cheek. “You don’t know her like we do.”

“I know you’re all scared of her.” Thomas kept going. “I’ve seen it and I heard the screams the other night.”

Marc nodded. “Like I said, she’s different.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

Thomas made a face as he got it. “You’re saying she’s doing all of this because she loves you.”

Each of the mission men nodded.

“Yes.”

“She does.”

“That’s exactly right.”

Thomas stopped arguing, but it was clear he didn’t get it.

Marc felt bad vibes and turned. He saw two couples who were at the end of their relationships.

Marc felt bad for all of them; he also didn’t want this front row seat to their drama. “Let’s start the meeting. Is the therapy helping any of you?”

“Just being around good people again is great. And Dog.” Biff smiled toward the wolf that was licking his paw determinedly.

“Same.” Harry refused to admit he enjoyed verbally sparring with Adrian.

Marc felt the same way. “I’m not sure beating on each other tonight is the right way to handle our recovery. It feels like we’re trying to take it out on each other.”

No one spoke.

The radio crackled with Adrian’s calm voice. “You are. You’re pissed at each other for not

stopping it, for not saving each other, and for being so damaged that you feel bad for being rescued. After the first few swings, those feelings will fade and you'll be past this first recovery stage."

Marc grabbed his radio angrily. "Stop listening to us!"

"No can do, Marcus. As your therapist, we'll have no secrets between us. I see everything."

"Wanna bet?" Marc sent a vicious spell toward the sub.

Tension filled the air as everyone waited to find out what he'd done.

The radio lit up with Adrian's resigned voice. "Very funny. Now give me back my sight."

Marc heard Adrian's terror under the tone. He found he didn't like it. "The bastard's always right. I hate that!" Marc tossed another spell and lifted Adrian's curse.

Marc became aware of the stares. Everyone was eyeing him nervously. He glanced around, not sure why they were upset. "What?"

"You blinded him." Thomas took an automatic step back.

"Just for a minute. I wasn't going to leave him that way." Marc resumed shaving.

Thomas put more space between them and tried not to dwell on the lab. That had been one of Joseph's favorite ways to punish new subjects. *He inherited it from his father.*

“We never agreed to be exclusive.”

“So you do want him!”

“No, but I don’t belong to you! Stop treating me like a piece of property!” Jayda stomped away.

Trent followed her. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“We’re not in high school. We’re not going steady.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Why are you pushing me?!”

“Because he’s better than I am!” Trent stopped when she did. His face was bright red.

Jayda stared at him in sympathy. “Because he’s a normal who can do magic.”

Trent’s voice lowered into misery. “I know I’m not as good as he is, but I care for you... I think I love you.”

Jayda was softened by his admission. She smiled. “I was thinking that, too, until you started acting all stupid.”

Trent grunted. “I’m a man. It’s what I do.”

Jayda chuckled. She motioned. “Let’s walk and talk, huh?”

Trent fell in on her right gratefully. “I really am sorry. I got jealous.”

“I noticed.”

“I can’t promise it won’t happen again.”

“Then we have a problem. Unless we make a commitment, I can do what I want. And even after

a commitment, I'm allowed to talk to who I want and work with people you don't like. Got it?"

Trent nodded. "But it's not that I don't like Biff. I actually respect him for surviving as a normal."

"You just don't want him around me."

"No."

"Because I might find out Angela's right about him being my match?"

Trent sighed. "She's never been wrong."

Jayda grunted. "There's a first time for everything."

Erin let Jayda and Trent go by before she did a new sweep of the beach. She didn't want to interrupt them.

She narrowed in on Greg and Lisa. *But I do want to eavesdrop on that couple.*

Erin hoped they were breaking up. She didn't wish bad things on Lisa, but she wanted Greg. *He's sexy, strong, sweet, and he's a survivor. Our kids will inherit a lot of good things from him.*

Zack paused by her on his rounds. "But will you?"

Erin frowned. "Will I what?"

"Will you pass anything good to your kids?"

Erin wasn't sure if she should be offended. "What do you want?!"

Zack liked her immediate challenge in response. She sounded like an Eagle. "I want to give you a warning. Ready?"

Erin remembered he was a senior Eagle. She forced a nod.

“Good.” Zack leaned in. “The boss wants you with Theo. Forget about Greg. He’s not your match.”

Erin recoiled. “That drunk? Are you kidding?”

“I didn’t hear it firsthand, but I believe the source.” Zack moved on, swallowing a smile. He loved helping Angela achieve her goals for their citizens.

“Damn.” Erin knew the source was Wade. She believed him, too. She respected him and Neil for being mature enough to make a three-way situation work without anyone getting stabbed, shot, or killed. Wade had no reason to lie or invent rumors.

Erin sighed. “What the hell am I going to do with a drunk weakling who failed at being an Eagle?”

Erin swept Greg again, lingering on his big arms. She’d enjoyed last night. *Maybe it’s just the warmth and not the man. But how can I tell for sure?*

Marc glanced at her from the grass, where he had finished shaving and was wiping loose hairs from his neck and shirt. “Remember your lessons on investigations—the top two guides.”

Erin pulled it right up. “Eagles gather detailed information quietly and compare before making any final choices. Eagles can be wrong because no one is perfect. Are you saying the boss is wrong?”

Marc chuckled. “You’re very fast. Are you sure you want Greg? He may resent you always being ahead of him mentally. I know.”

“Yes.” Erin felt bad for Marc. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Of course.” Marc expected to be told to try harder, that his love for Angela would get him through these dark days. He braced for it so he didn’t get upset.

“The next time Thomas offers to kill Adrian, tell him yes and provide the distraction for it. As long as Adrian’s alive, your marriage will always be on the rocks.”

3

“Are you listening to me?!”

Greg flinched at Lisa’s shout. He’d been tracking Erin. “I’m sorry.”

“I was saying I’m not sure we have a future together.”

Greg was disappointed that Erin was Theo’s match. *I enjoyed holding her last night.* “Can we just wait until I’ve recovered a little more?”

Lisa tried to be reasonable. “It won’t help you if I act like we have a future. I mean, we can still spend time together, but you said you want kids and I don’t—ever. That means we should start putting space between us.”

“Is there a chance you’ll change your mind?” Greg didn’t offer to make her a descendant, but his tone implied it.

Lisa slowly shook her head. “I don’t want that, Greg. I like me. I don’t want to be like you.”

“And you can’t accept it? I’ve never hurt you.”

“And I don’t believe you ever would.” She stared at the ground. “But I can’t stop feeling this way. I don’t even know what caused it.”

“You almost died in the explosion.” Greg had been thinking about it hard. “It made you see how dangerous the world is and how fast it can all end. You’re terrified of anything that might hurt you because you don’t want to die.”

The blunt answer made Lisa grimace. She held up a hand. “I can’t. I’m sorry.” She walked away.

Greg stayed where he was. He didn’t care enough about Lisa to follow her. He’d held onto her memory during his time in the lab because he hadn’t been able to hold onto Angela. He still couldn’t do that, but he was free now, so he didn’t need an anchor. “You’re single again, Lisa. Thank you for the time we had together.”

Lisa kept walking with a hand over her mouth to hold in the sobs at the public declaration. *He didn’t fight for me. I thought I meant more to him than that!*

Greg hated her pain, but he refused to act like he was invested emotionally when it simply wasn’t true.

His attention returned to Erin.

Erin stared back curiously.

Greg recognized her interest and shrugged. *Be sure. I'm broken and I may never be able to repair the damage. That's a lot of baggage for anyone to carry alongside me.*

Erin didn't answer. She just kept watching him.

"I'd like to finish that meeting now."

Marc's annoyed voice brought the mission men over to him.

Marc waved at Zack to join them.

Zack frowned as he came over. "Is there something you need help with?"

Marc waited for Zack to reach them. "I've called this meeting to determine two things. The first is that we're all starting to recover because of our sessions with Adrian and his advice. Does everyone agree?"

Most of the mission men nodded. It wasn't easy and it wasn't over by a long shot, but Adrian's talks were relieving the stress and explaining their reactions in ways that would let them move on in time.

Marc pounced. "The second item is that we're not being told everything." He glared at Zack.

Zack frowned. "What?"

"Something's going on and I want to know what it is."

Zack shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Marc gestured. “You’re all hiding something from us. What did Angela tell you to keep to yourself?”

Zack contemplated the yacht they’d left behind. “I’m sure she has a good reason for it. So, how does it feel to not have those beards?”

The mission men rubbed their freshly shaved faces, but they didn’t fall for his topic change. They looked to Marc, who was leading this charge.

Marc shrugged. “I guess we’ll also be talking about it later in the cage.”

Zack swallowed and retreated a step. “I can’t, man. You know how it works.”

“It’s true. They’re hiding something from us.” Shawn couldn’t take that. “Beat his ass, Marc.”

Marc’s hand went to his gun belt.

Zack brought up a shield.

Marc began removing his guns. “Get ready for it.”

Zack wasn’t sure if Marc was bluffing, but it didn’t matter. “You can’t beat it out of me. And Eagles don’t act this way!”

“They do when they’re tired of being lied to.” Kenn didn’t like going against Zack, but it was clear that Marc was right. “Just come clean and save yourself the blood loss.”

Zack looked at Kyle.

Marc’s anger grew. “He’s not the one you have to worry about!”

Kyle was tired of the drama and the threats. He keyed his radio. “Boss.”

Everyone stilled as they waited for Angela's response.

Angela's voice over the radio was angry. "Why does everyone wait for me to leave before starting shit? That's what cowards do!"

Marc flushed.

Kyle nodded.

Zack got out of Marc's reach.

The radio crackled again sharply. "We found a sailboat in bad shape that was in great shape when the storm was over. We're not sure if we were exposed to something that made us see things that weren't there. It's been days and we're all fine. Stand down!"

Marc refastened his gun belt without looking at any of them. "I may have overreacted."

Kenn shook his head. "You felt a lie and called her on it. You did the right thing."

"No, he should have done it to her face instead of starting trouble." Kyle glared at Marc. "Adrian told you not to challenge her, but you just couldn't resist."

Marc didn't deny it. "Stop treating us like we're too fragile for the truth."

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. "You want the truth? Fine. Here's some truth for you. I love Safe Haven. It's not just to keep my wife close. I want what's best for our people. All you want is to keep your wife and kill Adrian. You don't deserve leadership roles in our camp. I did the right thing by

making that deal.” Kyle lifted his chin. “And I’m not scared of you. I’ve lost fights before.”

Marc immediately felt better. *I guess I needed to be yelled at.* “Okay.” He went to his chair on the beach.

“What happened?” Thomas didn’t know all the details and secrets of their camp, but he knew Marc had just backed down.

“Marc got them to spill the secret they were keeping from us. It’s all he really wanted.” Greg started shaving and tossing the hair over the nests.

The birds were waiting patiently for each tossed handful now. The fighting was over.

“So he’s not going to kick Kyle’s ass tonight?”

Greg shook his head at Thomas. “He was bluffing to get what he wanted.”

Thomas grinned. “Well, it worked.”

“That’s because only someone with a death wish would get into a cage with Marc.”

“Why?”

Greg remembered Thomas hadn’t seen Marc in action yet. “Because he’s lethal; drawing blood isn’t enough to satisfy him.”

Biff resumed shaving. “I’m curious. What would Marc have done if we’d said the therapy wasn’t helping?”

Greg grunted. “Then he would have taken Thomas up on his offer. Adrian’s contributions are all that’s keeping him alive.”

Chapter Twenty

I Might Be Bad

1

“**T**his is some of the cruelest, harshest shit I’ve ever heard of.” Wade leaned back in his seat and rubbed his eyes. “Can we take a break?”

Angela closed the file willingly. “Can you believe he considered himself to be a good contribution to any society?”

“How could Reicher be so arrogant and uncaring after everything he went through? That’s more than just Stockholm Syndrome.”

“I agree. He became the very thing he loathed while going through it.”

“Is that what’s happening to Marc?”

Angela didn’t want to answer. She was just relieved that giving them easy duty last night had bought another day where she didn’t have to punish them. “Let’s go get some coffee and do a walkthrough.”

Wade didn’t ask again, but he was worried about the mission men.

They’d been on the bridge for hours, reading Reicher’s log. Wade didn’t know why Angela had rotated the screen so he could also view those ugly

words, but he wished she'd kept it to herself. *I'll never forget some of that.*

"That's why I had to share it. It was too much for me to carry alone." Angela now viewed the orphan kids differently as well. *I think I know how to handle them after reading that.*

"What about the mission team?"

Angela pulled on her vest, grunting. "We'll do the best we can. Just don't expect it to go quickly. It took Reicher eight weeks to crush them. It will be five times as long before they're recovered."

"They won't like hearing that."

"Then don't tell them."

Wade watched her pull on an over shirt to hide the vest. "We were only able to keep the storm and yacht details from them for a few days."

Angela shrugged. "I got one day longer than I expected."

"You knew Marc would react that way?" Wade frowned at himself. "Of course, you knew. So why didn't I know that you knew?"

"You're worried about home and easily distracted. It's understandable." Angela held up a hand before he could ask. "I honestly don't know. I'm not getting an answer either, but I trust Jennifer and the others. If they've gone quiet, it's for a good reason. Our calls might draw attention that they don't need."

"We should go home and make sure they're okay." Wade automatically checked his weapons

and gear. There was a feeling of being about to go into battle.

Angela sighed tiredly and smothered a yawn. “I want to, but if we do, we’ll lose the mission men. They’ll decide to leave us for good.”

“I don’t understand why.”

“They can’t take all those memories of who they were and the mistakes they made. They’ve been under extreme stress for months. They need this break.”

“You feel like you’re picking between them and Safe Haven.”

“I would be, and after sending them into that lab, I can’t pick the camp over them this time.” Angela controlled her emotions, but it still bled through her tone. “They gave up everything to end the UN’s control. They deserve my loyalty.”

“You could send some of us home in a RIB...”

She snorted. “Not a chance. You know those rigid inflatable boats can’t stand up to the swells of an ocean.”

Wade lost control of his emotions. “I need to know Sam’s safe!”

Angela put a hand on Wade’s big arm. “I’m sorry. No.”

She left the bridge with a nod to Gus, who had volunteered for duty over this corridor until it was time for the council meeting. “No one goes in until I return.”

Wade came out and shut the bridge door. He stayed on Angela's heels. "Please change your mind, Boss."

"I'm not letting you kill yourself any more than I would have let Greg do it. Both actions will have the same result."

"But—"

"No! You volunteered for this run and you're not leaving until it's over!"

Wade winced at her sharp tone. He fell silent and stayed close in case she needed something, but his heart wasn't in the job. It was with home.

Angela pointed as they reached the second level. "Go help with the kids."

Wade assumed it was a punishment. He sullenly went into the bunk room to assist with getting the kids ready for dinner.

Angela was glad when Wade obeyed. She already felt bad about not being able to reach home. She didn't need him to make it worse. *But helping these kids isn't a punishment, Wade. It's an honorable duty that will teach you enough compassion to carry you through Samantha's rough moments. If you can handle these kids, you can handle her.*

Wade nodded curtly.

Isabel came out of the busy bunk room. "I have some breeding names for you."

Angela took the paper without reading it. "I'll check this out later." She studied the woman. "How did you like your first full day on land?"

Isabel scowled. “Oi. I’m not a fan.” She paused, dismay coming over her face. “You’re not making me go back over there, are you?”

Angela chuckled. “No.”

“Good. I like being here with my kiddies.”

“How are they doing?”

“Beaut, actually. Thank you, mate.”

Angela motioned toward the mess. “Grab a meal with me?”

Isabel swept that entrance and saw several men going in. “I’d rather not.”

“You have to eat.”

Isabel shrugged. “I will when I’m hungry.” She returned to the bunk room.

Angela assumed that meant Isabel would go to the mess right before it was shut for the night and mostly empty. Angela understood. She had been raised on that fear and suffered through it for most of her life. *I’m going to help you get over it.*

Angela put the paper into her notebook and then went to the mess.

“Unlock it!”

Theo’s angry voice rushed out as she reached the door.

The Air Force man manning the serving line shook his head. “I can’t do that without permission.”

Theo punched the metal counter. “Open the cabinet!”

Adrian rose from his table. He’d been enjoying a quiet meal alone. The noise wasn’t welcome.

Wade came from the bunk room and followed Angela into the mess with a scowl and a scold ready for Theo.

“Open it. I need a drink!”

“No, you don’t.” Angela strode over to Theo, gathering energy.

Theo felt it coming and tried to duck.

Adrian and Wade hit him with a sleep spell at the same time as Angela.

Theo dropped to his knees but didn’t fall right out.

Angela frowned. “That should have taken him down instantly.”

Wade couldn’t come up with an explanation.

Adrian shrugged. “Maybe we’re all tired.”

Angela wasn’t sure that explained all of it. “Maybe it’s like Tobias said: the more we use our gifts, the weaker they become.”

Adrian couldn’t agree. “It’s always seemed like the opposite was true, at least for you.”

“Yeah.” Angela stored it as another mystery to figure out. “Get him into the medical bay.”

Adrian and Wade hefted Theo up and then dragged him out of the mess.

Angela shrugged coolly at all of the people observing in confusion. “He’s lucky to be alive.”

The lab people nodded quickly.

The Safe Haven citizens compared it to what the mission men were suffering and didn’t argue.

“Excuse me.”

Angela sighed. *Don't do it!* She rotated to face Grace. "Yes?"

Grace stepped closer. "I need a word."

Angela motioned toward the center table.

Grace shook her head. "Not where everyone can hear us, please."

Angela held in a shiver as the cold hand of fate brushed over her neck. She led the woman to a far corner of the mess.

Grace held out a glad hand. "I'd like to start by introducing myself, officially. I'm grateful to you for the rescue."

Angela didn't shake; she waited for the other shoe to drop.

Grace lowered her hand, where age spots were coming through now that her diet had changed. Madness crossed over her wrinkling face. "Do you know my last name?"

Angela shook her head, bracing. "No, but you look a bit like someone who once tried to kill me."

Grace paled.

Angela pushed. "You don't have to follow in the footsteps of your family. You were a loose end I couldn't reach until now, Grace, but I decided to spare you. You've been given a second chance."

Grace tried to fight her mental conditioning. "I don't want to..."

Angela realized the woman was going to lose the fight. She brought up a weak shield right as Grace pulled the butter knife from her pocket and stabbed forward.

Angela caught the knife in her shield and shoved it right back into her assassin.

Grace staggered, holding the knife handle. Blood trickled from between her fingers. “Babies!”

Angela nodded angrily as she lowered her shield. “I’ll raise them well. You can die now.”

Grace fell over. Blood began pooling around her body.

People had already been running toward them. They stopped in anger and surprise.

Angela turned away. “Now you all know why I’m wearing a vest.”

“Is it over?” Adrian had dropped Theo in the corridor and ran back.

Angela snorted. “Do you see me taking off the vest?”

“Who was she?” Wade had followed Adrian. “Why did she try to kill you? Are the normals panicking and restarting that crap again?”

“She was just a little upset that I killed her father during the battle at the International Detention Center.” Angela took a towel from the counter and began wiping off her bloody hands. “Her name was Grace Livingston.”

2

Piper didn’t like being on the submarine while most of their fighters were on the island. She didn’t like the way the sub swayed in the water and groaned occasionally. She didn’t like the odd pops

and the sweating walls from the temperature differences. But most of all, she hated the rear area on the second level.

Piper drew on her courage and entered that back corridor. They'd used the incinerator twice in the last 24-hours. It stank like old corpses down here now.

Piper hated those memories. Right after the war, every city and town had smelled this way, including her own. She'd barely survived those hard days. The odor was an ugly reminder that death was always one wrong choice or step away from all of them.

The dim corridor ended in the incinerator room.

Piper entered the reeking compartment and quickly swept the dark machine to be sure there wasn't a hotspot left from burning Grace's body.

The last hour had been quiet and tense as the Eagles waited for the next attack on the boss. The new people were scurrying around like mice, trying not to be seen at all. It was also uncomfortable on the first level, where the kids and caretakers were enjoying a movie in the theater. Everyone else was sleeping or on guard duty.

Piper wasn't upset that she'd been given duty instead of being invited to attend the law council meeting later. She didn't consider herself smart enough for that job. *But I do know wrong from right and I'm happy with that.*

Piper had never imagined herself as a soldier in anyone's army, but she loved it. Her place in Safe Haven meant more to her than she'd ever believed

possible. She hated the war, but she loved it that fate had delivered her to a place where she could sit or stand in safety.

Piper shuddered again at the acrid smell. “Mostly safe, anyway.” *And maybe someday, I’ll be one of the Runners in our camp who pushes us into acts of greatness.*

A shadow flinched as she walked by.

Piper’s hand slid to her gun; she turned while drawing in breath to shout for backup if it was needed.

Cody stepped out of the shadows and stared up at her with pale cheeks and sad eyes. “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

Piper let go of her holster. “What are you doing in here?”

Cody glanced at the incinerator. “Just looking.”

Piper frowned, heart still pounding. “At the body?”

Cody nodded.

“Why?”

Sadness rolled off the boy in thick waves. “She looked like my mom—my real mom.”

“Oh.” Piper began to calm down. “I’m sorry. I heard she passed away in the mountain.”

Cody was drawn to Piper’s good nature, and his guilt was eating him alive. “There was a quake...and a killer.”

Piper tried to remember the story but only pulled up the basics. “She fell off a ladder, right?”

Cody clenched his fists. “They want me to be a king.”

Piper was glad he’d switched topics. “You’ll probably be great at it.”

“I can’t.”

Piper assumed he was feeling overwhelmed to be without his mom while being trained for leadership by a step parent. “It’s hard, huh?”

Cody’s voice choked. “I’m not good enough to be a king.” Tears rolled over his cheeks. “I’m a bad boy.”

Piper’s concern brought her to his side. “What did you do?”

Cody shivered, whispering, “I asked the bad man to make her go away.”

Piper froze.

“And he did! Now I want her back and it’s too late!”

Piper automatically hugged the boy as he sobbed. Her mind flew over the implications. If people found out, Cody would never be accepted as a leader in their camp. He was only a little boy, but he would carry that stain forever. *It will destroy him and all the plans Angela’s made around him.*

Piper set the boy back and began wiping his face with the edge of her shirt. “You didn’t do it, Cody. The bad man told you a lie because he was a bad man.”

“That’s not what—”

“It *is* what happened!” Piper gave him a quick shake and then let go of his shoulders. “It didn’t happen. Do you hear me?”

Cody quickly nodded, feeling better even though he knew he shouldn’t be. “I’m so sorry!”

Piper wiped away his fresh tears. “So am I, but life doesn’t take it easy on people just because they’re young.” She knelt in front of him. “Listen, okay?”

Cody knew what she was going to say, but he still needed to hear it. “Okay.”

“Lock this up and forget it. Remember the good times with your mom and be glad that your life is better now.”

“I’ve been trying, but it’s so hard!”

Piper tried to think of a way to make it easier for him. The only thing she came up with was cruel. She used it anyway. “Do you want Cate to be kicked out with you?”

Cody stiffened. “Don’t tell!”

“I won’t, but if anyone else finds out, you’ll lose it all. Maybe Angela can find another boy to be the king, but Cate will pay for your mistake. They’ll shut her out and drive her away. You have to lock this up and forget it.”

“Someone else already knows.”

Piper stopped breathing. “Who?”

“My dad. I told him right after it happened.”

“What did he say?”

“That it was wrong and I have to try harder to be good.”

Cody's clean clothes and shiny shoes were a sign that he was in tight control of himself. Now Piper knew why he always looked like that. He was afraid to lose control again and make another mistake. "And have you?"

"Yes."

"Then let it go. You've made up for it."

"I can't make up for that! It's evil."

Piper hugged the boy again. "It's human nature, Cody."

"I might be bad, like Adrian worries about."

"Adrian said you were bad?"

"He thinks I might be."

Piper shrugged. "One big mistake doesn't always make us bad. You're sorry for it and you're being good now. Forgive yourself. From what I've heard, she wasn't worth it."

"What does that mean?"

"It means some lives are worth less than others."

"But why?"

"Because of the choices she made. As far as I'm concerned, fate decided it was time for your mom to pay for all those bad choices."

Cody liked talking to Piper. "Thank you."

Piper smiled. Then she remembered where they were. "Come on. Let's go check the mess. It's supposed to be closed now, so we should be able to grab a cookie."

Cody took her hand and let her lead him out of the darkness.

Goldie came out from behind the incinerator. He'd tossed his island clothes in with the body right after the guards had started it and left. He'd heard blood could still be found in clothes even after they were washed.

Goldie stared. "So the little boy king is a murderer. Good to know."

Piper felt eyes on them and kept walking. *That's not good.*

Cody didn't notice. He was still trying to shove that heavy coffin into his small mental crypt.

3

"We're going to spend some time talking now." Adrian sat at the table while rubbing his sore neck. "Take a seat."

Cate stomped over to the other chair and leaned on it, glaring. "You stopped too soon."

Adrian grimaced. "You hurt me too much."

Cate knew he wasn't faking. She'd gotten in several nasty blows. She was getting faster with her attacks and Adrian was slowing down. "Are you getting too old for this shit?"

Adrian laughed. "Yeah, maybe." The Lethal Weapon series had been playing in the theater last night. Everyone was using that line.

Cate slid into the chair and studied him sadly. "No one else will fight with me. Don't get old."

Adrian didn't know what to say. He was oddly touched and deeply concerned about her future in Safe Haven.

Adrian wondered if it bothered Angela to see Cate dirty, wrinkled, and wearing boy's clothes.

Cate made a face. "No dresses!"

Adrian snickered. "How about just something with a bow on it?"

"Damn."

Adrian chuckled again. Cate was cute and sweet when she wasn't kicking him in the balls.

Cate tensed at the sound of the new military men going by the therapy room. She didn't trust people anyway, but those men made her nervous.

Adrian wrote it down. He would deliver the notes to Angela later. "Your dad wants me to talk to you about something you said to Harry."

Cate tensed.

Adrian sighed. "You can't threaten people. It's not right, Cate."

"She can't lose that baby!"

Adrian recoiled from the unexpected shout.

Cate sat on her hands and tried not to get more upset.

Adrian added up the clues. "You're afraid she'll stop loving you if the baby dies."

Cate nodded sadly. "Cody told me; he's right. She'll break."

Adrian wasn't sure. Angela was stronger now. She might not shut down this time. He didn't make promises, though. "Angela wouldn't be happy about

you threatening Harry. You and Cody can get away with a lot, but not that. Don't do it again, okay?"

Cate glared without agreeing.

"If you do it again, Angela will find out and spank you."

Cate cringed this time. The thought of being disciplined by hand was terrifying.

Adrian didn't like bluffing the girl, but Cate was riding the line between good and bad. "We need you to try harder."

"Why?" Cate let out some more of her frustration. "Cody's the king, not me. I can do what I want. No one really cares."

Adrian's heart broke. He fought the urge to hug her. "I care. Marc cares. So do Angela and Cody. We all love you."

"You're just using me against my dad."

There's that brilliant Brady mind. Adrian shook his head. "It may feel that way because I have to hold back. You're not my daughter. I'm not allowed to treat you like it."

"Why not?" Cate knew Adrian was missing Conner. He loved his children deeply. "I can be special, too."

"You already are special." Adrian understood Cate needed more attention. "If your dad agrees, I'll train you like I did my daughter, but you won't like it most of the time. It's ugly."

Cate smiled at him. "I want that."

"Tell me why?"

Cate opened her mouth and broke his heart again. “You’ll do anything for your kids, even if it’s wrong. You love them first. I want that. So does Cody.”

“Marc and Angela love you first.”

“No. She loves being the alpha and he loves her. No real room for me.”

Adrian held a hand across the table. “Can I connect us?”

Cate needed to trust him to get what she wanted. She put her hand in his.

Adrian began showing her what his daughter had gone through during that training.

It took a long time; Cate held still and memorized every second of it. *That’s exactly what I need.*

It’s exactly what Adrian wanted. *I miss my daughter terribly.*

I can be her, for a little while.

Adrian shook his head. “No. You’ll always be Marc’s daughter, but it doesn’t mean we can’t be close. All we have to do is ask your dad and then keep him from killing me.”

Cate didn’t understand. “Why will he kill you?”

“Because he’ll have to compete with me for both of the females in his life now. It would just be easier to remove me.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Are You Happy Now?

1

“**T**he first match will start in 10 minutes. No betting!” Marc glowered at the small crowd standing around the rocked off ring they’d built near the roaring bonfire. “We’re not the UN. Betting on someone’s pain is wrong.”

The mission men nodded in agreement. The flashes of Safe Haven showing their true selves hadn’t been nearly as disturbing as watching them bet away their hard-earned possessions and valuable time just to see their friends hurt each other.

The Safe Haven people held in protests that Marc was skipping the chain of command. They all planned to mention it to the boss in the morning, though. It was almost midnight. Angela obviously wasn’t coming back over tonight.

“New people will go last and only against each other.” Marc ignored Thomas’s immediate whine. “Once you see us in action you’ll be glad.”

Kyle grunted. “One more time and then I have to step in.”

Marc also ignored Kyle’s warning. “These matches are give up or die. None of us want to hold back and we’re not going to. The bleed and out rule

is suspended.” Marc’s eyes lit up bright red as Kyle’s mouth opened. “The boss will probably overrule all of these choices for the next matchups. Enjoy it while you can.”

Kyle snapped his mouth shut, scowling. Marc was still openly going against Angela. *The talks with Adrian aren’t helping him.*

Marc sneered. “But they are. He’s showing me I might want my old life back—the one I had before he and my wife began dominating my every waking moment.”

Even Kenn was shocked. He stepped closer to Marc in concern. “Are you okay?”

Marc stared at Kenn. “I didn’t like you back then, but I didn’t hate you.”

Kenn smiled. “We had some fun together. I miss that.”

Marc glanced at his team. “There’s nothing to stop us from reclaiming our old lives. It won’t ever be the same; we can’t bring back those people and situations, but we can copy some of it and try to find peace without conforming to someone else’s morals and rules.”

Marc stepped into the ring. “This is the night we decide between our old lives and the existence we’ve had in Safe Haven.”

“Can’t we have parts of both?” Zack didn’t want to return to being an abusive mate, but he did miss the freedom of making his own choices. In Safe Haven, those at the top of the hive made the

decisions and everyone else enforced them or carried them out without question.

“Not that I’ve found and I’ve been searching for it since I joined.” Marc delivered more open honesty. “That’s why I’ve never really fit in. I don’t want to stop being who I was before. Except for a few flaws, I liked that man. I respected him and so did everyone else. It took me a long time to build that life. I don’t want to start over.”

Marc’s lean body stood more menacingly. His muscles appeared larger and his displeasure was more powerful. Most of them felt it and tried not to respond to his unconscious challenge.

“But why do you get that option when the rest of us don’t?” Greg entered the ring, surprising everyone. “The war ended those old lives. They have to be rebuilt. None of us came into the aftermath with what we had before.”

Marc realized he didn’t know much about Greg’s life before the war. It didn’t matter, though. Greg was considering the future. “She’ll never love you.”

Greg didn’t deny his heart. Marc was right—it was time to be honest and make the choices that mattered. “Yes, she will and you know it. It scared you so much that you lied about the sub so I would go against her. You know I’m not Adrian. I have a real shot.”

Marc’s hand went to his gun.
So did Greg’s.

“Easy.” Ray entered the ring and got between the two men. “Guns off.”

They did it at the same time, never looking away from their target.

Ray took the gun belts and then left the ring.

Marc sneered. “So what’s the plan? You kill me in this match and console the grieving widow?”

Greg chuckled. “Nope. I’m going to try my best to beat your ass and lose. She’ll get to see me all torn up, her poor one-eyed sacrifice, for days because I’m not going to let the medics heal me. It’ll all start right there.”

Marc winced. “You sneaky bastard.”

Greg rubbed his empty eye socket and then replaced the patch. He grinned at Marc’s wince. “Don’t be a baby.”

Marc studied his opponent in anger. “You did that so I’ll feel sorry for you.”

“Did it work?”

“Yes, you douche bag.”

Greg’s big arms flexed, drawing attention from men and women. None of them believed he would win, but he still had a better chance physically than most of them.

“You can back down; get out of the ring.”

Marc’s eyes lit up again; he couldn’t stop the rage. “I knew she’d make you come along when you defied her. You were supposed to die in that lab!”

Greg had already guessed that. He beckoned with both hands. “Well, here’s your second chance to put me down.”

Marc tried to find a win. “You can’t have her if you’re dead.”

“True, but you won’t get to keep her. She’ll divorce you for killing me.”

“And she’ll be miserable. Why would you do that?!”

“Because she deserves so much better than any of the balls who’ve had her, chased her, cornered her, tricked her! None of you honestly care about her!” Greg didn’t hold back. “She’s been pregnant three times in one year! You’re using her up, killing her. I have to get her away from you before she dies!”

The witnesses were in shock. They stared at Marc and Greg without knowing what to do or say.

Marc’s anger went down a notch. “We didn’t plan on this last time.”

“It doesn’t matter. The second time shouldn’t have happened. You knew she’d had a miscarriage during the war. You never care about her health or safety until after you’ve endangered it.” Greg was done talking. “Get out of the ring. Step aside and let a real man show you how to love that amazing woman.”

Marc’s pride wouldn’t allow it. He stepped forward, triggering the match.

2

“That’s enough!” Thomas was no longer eager for the action.

“Get him out of there!” Zack was horrified by the beating Marc was delivering.

Greg’s head slammed into Marc’s fist again and drew more shouts. Blood sprayed the rocks.

“He’s done!”

“Call it off!”

Ray entered the ring with his shield up. “Stop! Marc!”

Marc spun around with Greg’s blood dripping from both hands and speckled across every inch of his exposed skin. “He didn’t give!”

Ray went by Marc, lowering his shield. “Hard to give when you can’t talk.”

Ray grabbed Greg’s wrist and dragged him over the rocks. It was nicer than letting Marc help.

Greg groaned, coughing blood. “I didn’t give...”

“Yeah, you did.” The fight had ended 10 minutes ago as far as Ray was concerned. None of them had enjoyed watching Greg hurt himself on Marc’s anger.

Harry was there to meet them. His medical bag was open, but Harry tried his gifts first in case Greg had internal injuries.

Nothing happened.

Harry opened his medical bag. *I’m too tired. I’ll try again later.*

Greg spat blood and focused on them through his swelling face and blackened eyes. “You should see the other guy.”

Shawn began wiping blood from a gash on Greg's arm. He already had a dozen sutures ready. "We saw him. He looks good."

Greg fought the blurry vision and lancing pain in his brain. "I meant every word, Brady!"

Marc was still in the center of the ring. "I know you did."

"You didn't (spit) win this time."

Despite being the one standing, that was true. Marc couldn't help being impressed with Greg's stamina and determination. He was also worried. "Stay away from my wife."

"Fuck you."

Marc shook his head and left the ring. "Match two in five minutes."

He went toward the ocean to wash off some of Greg's blood. The man had gotten in a few hits, but Marc hadn't bled at all. *I'm faster, angrier, more deadly now. I had to stop myself from delivering killing blows.*

"But you did." Jayda smiled at him. "That's good, right?"

Marc realized she was his guard. He knelt to wash off. "What can I do for you?"

Jayda frowned. "Don't shut me out because you're having a bad moment. I need you."

That got Marc's attention. He straightened, wiping cold salt water from his arms. "I'm sorry. It's an automatic defense."

Jayda nodded. “Angela does the same thing. It’s one of those reactions you both have that makes other people sure you’re a perfect match.”

Marc sensed he wasn’t going to like the rest of what Jayda had to say. He sighed. “I know he’s right, but I’m not walking away.”

“Unless you decide to run.” Jayda was aware of the mission men waiting for Marc to make that choice.

He scowled. “What do you need?!”

Jayda swept the fire, where Trent was sitting with a bottle and a fishing pole. He had no desire to fight. “Tell me what you think about him.” Jayda had approached Marc because she needed complete honesty.

Marc gave it to her. “Trent’s immature compared to you. He’s also loyal and kind. You could do worse.”

“But...?”

“But he’s not your match. We’ve all thought that since finding out you two are...whatever you’re doing.”

“And Gus?”

Marc snorted harshly. “Will never get over Brittani, like I’ll never get over Angie.”

Jayda wasn’t surprised by that answer. “I know. It’s why I’ve never even flirted with him.”

“But you want to.”

“Sometimes. Maybe I’m just lonely and searching for someone who can take that away.”

Jayda glanced toward the cage, where Biff was about to face Kenn.

Biff had been considered a playboy before this run, but he no longer fit that title. He was too quiet, too sad, to be the woman-magnet he'd been before.

Jayda sighed. "I never viewed him that way until Angela mentioned it. Now I can't stop considering it."

Marc nodded to Dace as he went by on a patrol. Then he focused on Jayda. "Something occurred to me when I heard that rumor. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes. Please!" Jayda was too torn up to see it all. She knew she was missing something.

Marc kept his voice down. He didn't want to make Trent feel bad. "You might be just what Biff needs to help him to recover."

Jayda hadn't expected that. "You think I could help him?"

"Yes. He'll help you, too. Maybe at some point you can both forget how scared you are most of the time." Marc walked back toward the ring.

Jayda stared after him in surprise. *I thought I was hiding it.*

You can't hide terror from us, Jayda. We know how it looks, how it smells, how it slithers through your mind like a snake. We've been there. You'll never be able to hide it from us. Marc glanced over his shoulder. "And you don't have to. We understand."

3

Harry helped Greg sit up. His injuries weren't life-threatening, but he would definitely be pathetic for a few days. "Are you happy now?"

"Do I look it?"

Harry chuckled at Greg's distorted voice. "Yes, actually."

Greg grinned through the swelling, showing bloody teeth. "I am."

Shawn held out a painkiller. "Why?"

Harry answered while Greg swallowed the pill. "He made his intentions known. He doesn't have to hide who he is now or what he wants."

Shawn frowned. "But he's never going to get it. She only wants Marc."

"That doesn't matter." Harry drew energy again to try healing Greg's injuries.

Greg pushed away from the medic. "No."

Harry sighed. "Okay. Play it out to the end, but Shawn's right. You're never going to get what you want."

Greg staggered toward the fishing area. "I already got what I wanted. All I had to do was take a beating for it. After surviving the lab, this was easy."

Harry shrugged as Greg hacked up more blood and spit. "If you say so."

But he understood. Greg had survived Marc's beating and he still had his honor. Marc had lost

even though he won, because he let Greg push him into it.

“Did he have another option?” Shawn didn’t think so. It had been a direct challenge. He didn’t see how backing down would have helped Marc.

“We always have an option.” Harry deliberated those awful, wonderful moments in the lab. “But giving up comes hard to humanity. We’re wired to follow it through, even when we know we’re doomed to die.”

There was no arguing with that. Shawn began cleaning up the garbage from the packages. “Are you ready to fight for something that hard?”

Harry scanned the bloody ring and then the men in and around it. He slowly nodded. “But it’s not a woman that I want.”

Shawn lifted a brow. “What do you want enough to die for?”

Harry stood and wiped sand from his legs. “I need that rush from reaching new heights. When I can’t do that anymore, I’ll give up and let someone else take my place.”

Shawn sanitized his hands. “Who do you have to fight to get it?”

Harry didn’t hedge or change the topic like he might have done in the past. “Morgan.”

Shawn froze. “What?”

Harry knew it would get back to Morgan through Shawn. “Morgan is our main medic. He makes the medical choices. He has the job I want

and I'm going to challenge him for it as soon as we go home."

Shawn considered what that meant. "So you've decided not to run off with Marc?"

Harry gestured. "You saw him defend his current life. Marc can say he's thinking about leaving all he wants to, but actions speak louder. He's not abandoning Angela to any of the men who want her."

Shawn didn't like hearing that because it was true. "We could still go without him."

Harry shrugged. "You can, but not me. I belong in Safe Haven. My time in Reicher's lab proved that to me without a doubt. I want these gifts used for the greater good and Angela will do that."

"She wants us to stop."

Harry grunted. "Don't you ever believe that."

4

Biff saw the clouds cover the moon. It dimmed the natural light. He immediately contemplated the session room. *Dark skies, stars, and blood. Like now.*

"Why did you pick me?" Kenn handed his gun belt to Ray. "Do we have a problem that I don't know about?"

Biff hated Kenn's cocky stance, his sloppy Eagle gear, and his thick beard. He'd at least respected the old Kenn a little, though he'd been

rough on the rookies. This Kenn didn't care about anything but what was in his mind.

Biff also handed his gun to Ray. "I need to know if I can still do this. Who better to face than the asshole who trained me?"

Kenn's eyes narrowed. "So we do have a problem."

Biff leered, flexing his arms. "I'm just conquering a fear."

"I didn't know you felt that way."

Biff glared at Kenn. "We've all felt that way. You're too rough on the trainees. And you don't always play by the rules. What's not to like?"

Kenn grunted. "Whatever."

He took up a fighting stance while reminding himself that Biff wasn't a great fighter. Beating him would make Kenn look bad, like it had with Marc and Greg.

"Should I ask how happy your mate is, so you don't hold back?"

Kenn laughed. "Like you have a shot with Tonya."

Biff's face tightened. "She's a beautiful, valuable woman in our camp. She deserves better, too."

Kenn's anger rose, but he controlled himself. "You can't provoke me. I'm not Marc."

"No, you're a lot weaker." Biff took up their kai stance and smiled coldly. "Charlie asked me to tell you something."

Now Kenn's shame and anger rose up. He glowered. "Are you on his payroll?"

"I'm on his side." Biff ignored the disapproval and surprise from their witnesses. "He said don't get comfortable when we go home. He's going to do everything he can to get you banished. And I'm going to help him."

Biff advanced, hoping Kenn was caught off guard. He swung as hard as he could, trying to put the Marine down with one hit.

Kenn defended automatically and swung back, delivering a nasty blow.

Blood splattered the rocked ring again.

Harry sighed, reopening his medical bag tiredly. "You may be on his side, but it's not the winning team."

Everyone winced as Kenn's big fist slammed into Biff's face repeatedly. They didn't like it, but Biff had challenged Kenn to a fight that he couldn't win. Unlike with Marc and Greg, Biff didn't have enough support for a move like this to affect Kenn's place at all. The only one who could do that was Charlie. When the time came, he would have more support than he needed. Until then, Biff was being beaten on for nothing.

Lisa stood near the ring and forced herself to watch the fights. She wanted to go to Greg and make sure he was okay, but their relationship was over. All she could do was keep track of him and hope Harry had been able to help. Marc's beating had

been brutal. *I don't understand why we always have to fight.*

"It's human nature." Shawn moved closer so she could hear him over the shouting audience and grunting fighters. "We always have to know we're capable of survival. This is the only proof we can get most of the time."

Lisa frowned. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Neither does humanity."

Lisa chuckled. "Fair enough."

Shawn was starting to fill out now that he was getting regular meals. His face was still too thin, though. It was clear that he'd almost starved to death. *But I'm still scared of him because he's a descendant now.*

Shawn didn't enter her thoughts. He was aware of how she felt about magic. "Can I ask you something?"

Lisa already knew what he wanted. She shook her head. "I haven't been able to narrow it down. It might be because I almost died, like Greg said, but I think there's more to it."

"I have a theory."

Lisa fought not to smile. That was a common phrase in this group. "Let's hear it."

"You saw what we survived in the lab, at least enough of it to feel like you couldn't do that."

Lisa was barely breathing as her mind centered in on the problem. "No. I *know* I couldn't. It's not normal. None of you are."

"And that's bad, in your mind."

Lisa slowly nodded. “I was taught to fear and avoid things that were unnatural. I didn’t realize it until this run, but none of this is supposed to be happening. Can’t you feel how wrong it is to have magic? It shouldn’t exist.”

Shawn wasn’t offended, though he was glad most of the others hadn’t heard her. “Do you believe in evolution?”

“Of course. That’s what I told myself after the war, when your kind first appeared. It’s just evolution.”

“We were always there, Lisa. You just refused to see us for what we really were.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Maybe.” Shawn led her away from the ring so he didn’t have to strain to be heard. “Think of old news stories and how some of them were impossible to be true—like lifting cars off kids and surviving things most people couldn’t.”

Lisa came up with a few dusty examples. “That’s not enough. Please keep going.”

Shawn didn’t use the biblical evidence he’d heard from rumors. Tim and Angela had covered it, so Lisa already knew those. He used something a little closer to home. “The war was caused by people like Reicher. They refused to share the magic. After viewing the warehouse floor, is it so hard to believe they kept it a secret for personal use?”

That got through to Lisa, but not in the way Shawn had intended. *Reicher was a descendant.*

Their kind really did cause the war. It makes me even more sure about my choice. “No, it’s not hard at all to believe. Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Shawn sighed in annoyance. “But I’m not involved with what’s about to happen. I just now saw it coming or I would have warned you sooner.”

Lisa frowned, turning around. “What is it?”

Erin appeared in front of her. Erin’s fist swung forward. “I challenge you!”

Bam! Lisa stumbled and fell over the damp rocks.

“Match to Kenn!”

Lisa ignored the struggling males; she glared up at Erin while holding her stinging cheek. “Whore.”

“And that’s why, when you wonder later.” Erin stepped around her and went to the ring. She shoved Kenn as he tried to hit Biff’s bloody face again. “You won. Go scratch yourself now and throw shit around.”

Kenn paused, staring at her in shock. “What the hell?!”

Erin faced Lisa, not caring about the blood spots smearing onto her boots. “The whore is working. Get lost.”

Kenn was impressed with her courage. He held out a hand to Biff. “Friends?”

Biff grinned through the pain. “Sure.”

“Good.” Kenn drew back and hit Biff a last time, knocking the man into the dirt.

Kenn exited the ring and went to the beer cooler. He refused to scan the dark ocean, but there was no way he could avoid hearing it.

Ray and Zack quickly dragged Biff over to Harry.

Erin waited impatiently for Lisa to accept the challenge or back down. *Either way, Greg's mine after this. He'll never tolerate a coward as his mate and he can't have Angela.*

“Wait.” Thomas looked around. “All I have to do is hit someone and they have to fight me?”

Lisa stood up, glaring. “They can say no.”

Erin glared back. “Are you refusing to fight me?”

“Not on your life, *whore*.” Lisa wasn't scared to fight for what she wanted. She was frightened of anyone who had an advantage that she didn't.

Erin crouched and grinned. “Let's do this.”

Lisa stepped into the ring with a curt nod. “Remember that you started it.”

Erin laughed off a chill.

Lisa took up her kai stance and waited.

Erin advanced, ready for anything.

“Help!”

Dace's scream echoed through the crowd and brought everything to a halt.

“Help me!”

“Where is he?” Marc and the others tried to scan, but their gifts didn't work.

“Help!”

Lisa saw movement. She swung as she ran by Erin.

Erin hit the ground from the unexpected blow. She stayed there for a minute, trying to clear her vision as everyone else followed Lisa toward the dark beach. “I really should think these things through before I do them.”

Chapter Twenty-Two
Falling Hard

1

“Dace!”

“Where is he?”

“I’m not picking up his thoughts!”

“Does anyone see him?”

“I’m not getting any thoughts! My gifts are out!”

“Dace!”

Heavy footsteps pounded across the beach through the darkness. Everyone was following Lisa, hoping she had spotted Dace. His screams had stopped. They had no way to locate him now. The dim moon was only providing a grudging light. Even Dog was sniffing around the rocky ground, trying to catch a scent.

Lisa stopped near what she hoped was the right location. She scanned the ground for signs and found two terrified eyes looking back up at her. “Oh, my God! There he is!”

Lisa dropped to her knees and began digging the dirt away from Dace’s nose.

People hurried to help; those bringing up the rear flipped on flashlights. Descendants and normals crowded around the small area.

Erin slid a hand between the dirt and Dace's face to keep it from being sucked into his lungs when he inhaled.

Dace heaved in air gratefully. He hadn't been sure anyone had heard him.

"What happened?"

"I think he fell into an old tunnel or an underground structure."

"The dirt is starting to cave in on this side!" Kenn shoved himself backward so his weight would stop collapsing it. "Watch those edges!"

Dace took in deep breaths through his nose and tried not to panic. He knew that would make things harder on him and the rescuers.

Erin kept one hand in front of his nose and used her other hand to dig dirt from around his mouth while Lisa worked on clearing his neck.

Marc observed them in concern. "Something else is about to go wrong. I can feel it coming."

Every member of the mission team rotated to scan for problems.

"Shit." Shawn pointed. "The tide's coming in!"

Dace whimpered.

Lisa and Erin dug furiously with their bare hands.

Shawn tried to go by and help. Marc grabbed his arm and stopped him. "They have enough weight there already."

Marc didn't think Shawn would cause a collapse, but he wasn't sure if maybe Shawn would

collapse. His heart had to be weak right now. He didn't need to be straining physically.

Dog trotted over.

Marc gestured. "I need you on guard duty."

Dog limped off without a protest.

The next lightest man among them, Ray, eased in on his stomach and began helping the women dig.

"We'll never get him out of there in time." Marc looked toward the submarine, but he didn't have the energy to send a mental message across that distance. He used his radio. "We need oxygen tanks. ASAP!"

"We're already working on a RIB," Angela's voice came through the radio. She'd felt something go wrong. "It will take a while to inflate. There's only one way to get it to you faster."

Kyle headed for the RIB on the beach near the big tent. He had been maintaining it since they landed. It was ready to roll.

Thomas frowned. "You can't jump those breakers in the dark."

"Watch me." Kyle began shoving on the RIB. "Anyone want to risk their lives for a teammate? I need someone to hold the gear while I fly."

Kyle wasn't scared of the ocean in the dark, but he was afraid they were about to lose Dace. It would take too long to go to the sub and return. He doubted Dace would be alive when he got back.

Greg hurried over to the RIB. "Count me in."

Mel stayed near the big tent and observed them all worriedly. “The ghosts want your boy to live here forever.”

“Pull this dirt away.” Lisa shoved the gritty sand and dirt down her side. “It keeps falling back in.”

Kenn and the others began shifting the piles of sand away from the diggers.

Dace held his breath as dirt still dropped from the sides and covered his mouth again.

Erin shoved it away with her hand, clearing his nose again. “We need something to cover his face!”

“We emptied all those gas masks onto the sub!” Lisa shoved another pile of dirt down her side so the others could keep pulling it away.

“I still have mine!” Zack ran toward the big tent.

Dace fought the panic as the ground shifted all around him. *Sliding!*

“It’s moving!”

“Grab their legs!”

The ground collapsed beneath the diggers, dragging them down several inches and bringing screams.

The dirt cleared around Dace’s head and shoulders.

Ray and Lisa let go of his hair. It was all they’d been able to reach.

Marc came closer so he could grab one of them if needed. “Bring rope, Zack!”

Dace sucked in air and wiggled. “Get me out of here!”

The first wave of cold water rushed over the rescuers and gushed into the main hole, covering Dace up to his nose.

Ray shivered, still digging. “We are so screwed.”

Marc took over Dace’s job on point. “I want everyone accounted for, Kenn.”

“You got it.” Kenn was too heavy to help with the digging. He kept causing mini cave-ins that weren’t helping. Kenn took a fast look at Dace. “Hang in there, Eagle.”

Dace blinked in response. He was holding his breath again while the diggers tried to empty the water through a quickly etched drainage ditch.

Zack ran back and tossed the rope to Marc, who he trusted to use it correctly. He slid the mask to Erin. “You need to get it under his chin, but without an oxygen tank it will only keep the dirt out of his mouth. It won’t provide air.”

Erin knew, but they had to stop the water from covering Dace’s face. “I’ll slide it on. You and Ray dig deep, even if it slides, okay?”

Ray and Lisa nodded, arms already aching.

Dace tried to be still as they all came closer.

The ground shifted again; water rushed into the hole.

“Now!” Erin slid the mask into the water, using the momentum of nature against the dirt.

Ray and Lisa dug Dace’s neck free while Erin got the mask on him.

Dace held his breath tightly as the water slowly drained and uncovered his mouthpiece. He took tiny breaths at first, trying not to suck in the water remaining in the mask.

“Breathe deeper. Here comes another one.” Ray dug his hand down and managed to get it beneath Dace’s arm as the dirt fell and the water came in.

Behind them, a RIB sped through the darkness with two determined men onboard.

Marc stared at the dark ocean, but he couldn’t see the RIB. He hoped Kyle made it to the sub.

Marc paused, scowling. “And Greg. Greg’s going to the sub, with Angie.”

People frowned at him for caring about drama during a moment like this.

“Douche bag.” Marc got back to work. “Ray has an arm under Dace. Get these ropes around Ray’s legs. When he calls it, pull hard and firm. No jerks. We don’t want to break his ankles.”

“Can we use a shield around him?” Ray could feel his grip on Dace’s arm weakening as the ground shifted. It was almost like the dirt was pushing him away while pulling on Dace.

“Maybe. Does anyone have the energy to try?” Marc didn’t.

“No.”

“Hey! My gifts are out.”

“Did she lock us?”

“The boss wouldn’t leave us defenseless over here.” Ray was sure of that. “Something’s blocking us.”

“Wait.” Biff concentrated. He brought out his stone defender.

The ground immediately began to sink beneath it.

Biff grunted as he let go. “Too tired to keep it out for long anyway.”

None of them knew why they were so weak all of a sudden.

“We’ve been away from home for a long time.”

People nodded at Harry’s comment.

“Can you unlock me?” Trent hurried over to Marc. “Maybe I’ll be at full strength since I’ve never used any of it.”

Marc tried. And failed. He shook his head. “I’m out.”

Trent was glad despite wanting to help Dace. He still didn’t want to be unlocked.

“You’re not that heavy.” Zack pointed. “Slide in there and give someone a break.” Zack knew the arms of the diggers had to be hurting.

Trent carefully eased in to take Erin’s place.

Erin shook her head. “I’m good for a bit longer.”

“I’m not.” Ray relaxed his arms for a minute. “I’m going to try to pull him up again. Be ready to grab his arm if I can get it above the dirt.”

Trent got into position.

Eagles activated more flashlights and aimed them at the hole.

The glare was hard on Dace, but it helped the diggers to see the sharp rocks and thick dirt that was trying to steal their teammate.

Marc had another idea. “Help me build a wall so the tide goes around him!”

Marc and the mission men began digging up a sandy barrier between Dace and the incoming ocean a few feet away. It wouldn’t hold long, but it might buy enough time to dig him out.

Dace sucked in another fast breath and tried not to pass out as Ray pulled on his arm and the island pulled on his legs. “Trapped! Leg.”

“I need a cup or a bucket!” Lisa couldn’t keep the dirt from caving in around Dace’s chest.

Thomas ran toward their campsite to find something.

Mel began grabbing buckets and holding them out to Thomas. She wasn’t sure what else to do that would help. “Damn ghosts.”

“Bring two metal poles from the tent!” Shawn helped them tie the ropes around Erin’s ankles. “We can use the poles to brace him as soon as Ray pulls him up.”

“I can’t wait much longer.” Ray was horrified to find his strength fading so fast. “Hurry up, Thomas!”

Dace drew in another gulp of air, listening to the roar of the ocean as it rushed onto the beach. The small sand barrier wasn’t going to keep it back. Dace forced out fast words. “My feet are wet!”

Trent and Erin both tried to offer comfort.

“You’re going into shock. It’s normal to feel cold.”

“You might have pissed yourself. I know I might.”

Dace whimpered again as he stared at Lisa.

Lisa’s face froze in horror. “Water.”

Dace sucked in air and held it as tiny threads of salt water began beading around his neck.

“It went all the way through.” Lisa resumed digging. “There’s water under him!”

Everyone groaned or cursed. There was no way they could stop the tide, let alone the water under Dace from coming up through the hole.

Ray saw Thomas running toward them. “This is it. I’ll count to three. Pull on him anywhere you can reach.”

Dace braced for pain as the others took grips in his sandy hair.

Thomas slid the poles close enough for Trent to reach.

Ray stiffened. “It’s falling again. Pull him!”

Dace screamed as they all pulled.

Water gushed up from below, covering his face.

Lisa dove forward and covered his mouth with hers. She couldn’t think of anything else.

Ray had to let go. “He’s not moving!”

The water receded as his body plugged the hole again.

Lisa rose and breathed in deeply. “You’re okay. You’ll be okay.”

Her damp hair clung to her neck and shoulders. Dace concentrated on that instead of the panic in her

eyes that said they weren't going to get him out of here before he drowned.

Marc scanned the dangerous beach that was filling with foamy water. "We're out of time. We can't keep digging."

"Rocks are around my knee!" Dace gasped in air. "Foot!" He shivered through lips that were starting to turn blue. "Something bumped my foot. Something's down there!"

Dace's panic spread through his rescuers. All of them replayed Mel being attacked by the shark on their first day here.

"We can draw it away, maybe." Shawn drew his knife. "Kendle told us stories, remember? The sharks were drawn to her blood and urine."

Shawn sliced a shallow gash in his hand and let it drip into the incoming tide.

"Move away from him first!" Marc swept the dark ocean again, able to hear the engine of the RIB. "I have an idea."

Marc was known for his rescue plans. Those not keeping Dace's mouth uncovered moved his way.

"We're going to collapse it ourselves and yank them all out."

Jayda stared. "That's your idea?"

"I didn't say it was a good one."

Jayda snickered through the tension. "Fair enough. Let's get on it."

Marc pointed. "We're going to put a grenade in the sand a few feet from him. When it blows, the

sand will muffle the blast from him, but it will rattle the ground hard enough to cause a collapse.”

Thomas interrupted him. “I didn’t know grenades worked underwater.”

Shawn nodded. “This is sandy water, but grenades will work anywhere. They’re basically a waterproof container with an explosive inside.”

Thomas started to ask another question.

Kenn frowned at him. “Less talking.”

Thomas quieted, flushing.

Marc gestured. “I want half a dozen of us staked to the beach, right above the waterline. Ropes will be anchored to us and to the digging crew. We’ll vest-up those diggers and get a rope around Dace’s arm if nothing else.”

Ray was already trying to do that while Lisa and Erin kept Dace’s breathing path cleared.

“It might drop off into the ocean all the way up to the beach, but they’ll all be tied to us.” Marc uncoiled the rope. “We can reel them in as it collapses.”

Trent didn’t want the women that close to a grenade. “If we can get a tank on him, the diggers can just clear the area and collapse it.”

“I like that better, but we may not have time.” Marc knotted the rope to create grips for their wet hands. “Let’s get staked down and the rest of the ropes attached.”

“Who’s going to plant the pineapple and yank its top?” Jayda already knew she wouldn’t be chosen, so she didn’t volunteer. All the men here

were protective of females; she wasn't going to delay the plan by making a scene.

"I'll do it." Kenn forced himself to take the job. "Marc and I have done wet work before, literally and figuratively."

Marc studied him for a few seconds. Marines preferred to overcome their hang-ups and they were usually successful because of their determination. Kenn had that look. "You're The Man on this one."

Kenn straightened at the coveted title. He'd always loved getting that call when they'd served together. Kenn began stripping his heavier gear and his boots.

In the distance, a RIB roared as it jumped a rough breaker and then landed. The engine settled and faded.

Mel pointed. "Here it comes!"

A wall of water rolled over the beach.

"Cover his mouth!"

"He's under again!"

Erin dove forward this time and helped keep Dace alive.

Marc began preparing himself for failure. Dace might be the one to drown while they watched.

2

"Here they come." Angela and the others on top of the sub shined their flashlights to let Kyle know where they were. The sky and ocean around them were pitch black.

Kyle killed the engine and let the momentum carry the RIB the rest of the way. It bumped into the submarine a few seconds later, tossing him and Greg back in their seats.

“I might have misjudged a bit.” Kyle wiped salty water from his face so he could see to grab the rope Wade was throwing.

Greg helped him tie the rope to the rubber grips on the RIB.

“Stay where you are. We’re handing it down.” Angela held a light while the men loaded the RIB with multiple oxygen tanks and dive suits. “We added more rope and a few other things.” She tossed the kit to Greg.

Greg saw she had a guard, but he didn’t feel like she was safe. It was dark around the submarine and the ocean wasn’t calm. He forced himself not to mention it. He already knew his input wasn’t welcome.

“Wait! Don’t leave yet!”

Angela sighed as Piper’s panicked voice echoed through the hatch. She wasn’t sure Piper would be helpful.

Greg glanced up at her. “Moral support is always welcome when you believe you’re about to die.”

That said Dace was in serious trouble. Angela considered going over to help.

“Do you have your gifts?”

Angela shook her head at Kyle. “They went out a little bit ago. I thought I was the only one, so I didn’t say anything.”

Wade lowered the last oxygen tank to Kyle. “We all thought you locked us, so we didn’t mention it.”

Piper hurried by them and began climbing into the RIB. Her panicked sobs weren’t appreciated.

Greg settled Piper next to him and put an arm around her. “Hang on. There’s a madman behind the wheel.”

Kyle rolled his eyes.

Piper held on. “Good!”

Greg stared at Angela as Kyle untied the RIB.

Angela frowned at him. “That’s what happens when your mouth writes a check that your face has to cover—it bounces on you, repeatedly.”

Greg grinned through the pain and studied her until Kyle took them out of sight.

Adrian came up the ladder and joined Angela and Wade. He’d heard her words to Greg. “Marc will be thrilled that it didn’t work.”

Angela walked by him without responding.

Adrian studied her stiff shoulders as she went down the ladder. “Son of a bitch.”

Wade nodded. “She grimaced and flinched the entire time they were fighting. Greg’s a prodigy.”

“I wish I’d thought of it.”

Wade snorted, going to the ladder. “She’s seen Marc beat your ass and she didn’t care. The

difference is Greg is honestly a good man. You're not."

"Yeah." Adrian followed him. "Wait. How did you guys listen in on the fights without gifts? Mine have been out for an hour."

"Ours went out right as Dace started screaming for help. Whatever happened to him is connected to all of us."

Adrian pulled the hatch shut. "Nature again?"

"Maybe, but how is she able to control our gifts?"

"That's a great question. I have theories, but let me know when you come up with one that makes sense."

3

"We have to go now!" Lisa drew in air and went under the water as Erin came back up. They were alternating breathing for Dace, who was fully submerged and barely responding.

Ray lifted his chin above the water. "We're ready!"

Marc motioned at Kenn. "Do it."

"It worked."

Marc frowned at Thomas. "We haven't done it yet."

"No, I mean the blood." Thomas pointed.

A thick fin gleamed above the waterline just off the beach.

Terror ran through Biff. He brought out his stone defender to chase it off.

“No!”

The stone defender stomped heavily through the shallow water... The ground all around Dace collapsed the rest of the way.

Ray grabbed Trent and rolled, winding them up in the rope as he pushed toward the beach.

The rope around Dace’s arm sank beneath the water. It hadn’t been tied yet.

The Eagles yanked Erin clear and dragged her soaked body onto the dry shore.

The rope attached to Lisa flew out of Harry’s hands and vanished in the rush of water swirling into the hole.

“Where is she?”

“Pull Dace out!”

“Where’s the rope?!”

Chaos took over as the water swelled, knocking rescuers to their knees.

Biff’s warrior vanished. He hurried to help pull the ropes, moaning in shame. “No, no, no, no!”

“Where are they?!” Marc strode through the rushing knee-high waves toward the hole. He fell in and swam around to get his bearings. Then he dove, searching.

Kenn followed him, fighting his fear. *This is almost like my nightmare. The only difference was the daylight and we’re not all in here.*

The water pulled both men down quickly.

Flashlight beams began to penetrate the depths, providing meager light.

Kenn saw a shadow near them. He tapped Marc's arm and pointed.

The ocean began to calm over the hole. The rescuers waited anxiously, shivering in the cool breeze.

Trent and Ray untangled themselves and joined the others near the hole.

Erin let Harry cut her rope and then she also joined them.

No one spoke.

Under the water, the two Marines strained to haul the twisted rope bundle to the surface.

"There!" Ray dove in to help.

Trent followed, barely noticing his fear this time.

Kyle's RIB roared over the breakers and flew toward them. He already knew he was too late.

Marc broke the surface. He slung water from his face so he could see.

A hand went around his arm. Marc held tight to the twisting bundle as the Eagles pulled him toward the beach.

"There's Kenn!"

"Did they get them?"

Marc yanked the bundle above the water and pushed it at the watchers, who dragged it onto the beach.

Kenn and Marc crawled after them, hoping they'd gotten there in time.

Kyle beached the RIB nearby and killed the engine.

“Cut the ropes!”

“Be careful!”

Harry and Shawn shined their flashlights as Biff and Thomas cut away the tangled ropes.

Lisa coughed against Dace's cheek. “Okay...” She coughed again. “You're okay.”

Dace spat out salty water and tried to find enough air to speak. He nuzzled her cheek when he couldn't.

Lisa held onto him. “Me, too.”

“Didn't. Didn't leave me!”

Lisa kissed his cheek and drew in a deeper lungful of air against the pain. “My honor.”

Piper hurried out of the RIB and ran toward them. She arrived in time to see Lisa help Dace to his feet.

Then Dace kissed Lisa.

Piper froze, glaring. “Now who's the whore?!”

Mel cackled happily and went into the large tent. “Ghosts lost this time. Life is good.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
Where Was I?

1

“**I**’m sorry I can’t heal it.” Harry secured the tight wrap around Dace’s ankle with a metal clip. “But we can’t heal broken bones even with our gifts.” Harry brushed sand off his fresh, dry clothes.

The white shirt beneath his Eagle jacket made him stand out, but still identified him as a part of the Eagles. It was a perfect medic outfit. Shawn and Charlie were copying it. They clearly liked it, too.

So did Dace. It told him help was close by.

Dace’s ankle was swelling and turning colors, but the bone hadn’t broken through the skin and it was his only serious injury. His body was covered in scrapes and bruises from the rocks and gritty sand, however. It was obvious he’d come close to dying.

Dace had been given a painkiller and a lot of attention. He laid back in the cot. “I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

He didn’t sound like the adventurous Eagle they’d all come to tolerate for his great attitude.

Harry began putting the supplies and packages into his medical bag. “When we go to the sub, I’ll

put a cast on it. Try not to move it or put any pressure on it, okay?”

“Yep.” Dace kept trying to calm down. *I was sure I was going to die. I’ve never been so scared.*

“It’s normal. You toured Hell in half an hour.” Jayda paused by him on her rounds. “Hey! My gifts are back!”

All the descendants tried a harmless spell or mind-reading and grinned in delight when it worked. Everyone was back to normal.

Greg was also enjoying a painkiller. He looked at Marc, who he considered to be above average in intelligence. “What happened?”

Marc finished his mental scan of the submarine, checking on Angela and their kids. He faced Greg after he confirmed their safety. “Nature.”

“What?”

Marc let them all in on something only a few people had been told so far. “We’re a part of Nature. She has control over us, up to a point. Some of our gifts are open to her. Until now, we’ve been assuming it was only the main gifts, like fire and water control. Now we know it’s everything.”

Mutters met his announcement.

“Who’s we? Just you and Angela?” Greg assumed the boss knew everything.

“A few others, too—Adrian, Jennifer, Kyle.” Marc was too relieved to stay mad at Greg. *I hate being without my gifts. I’m still stunned by that change.* “Angela planned on locking some of us during the final battle.”

“She’ll have to lock us all, including herself.” Kyle was standing near Marc, providing a private guard now that Zack and Jayda had taken over rounds. “Your nuke idea might be the way to go.”

Marc had been thinking hard on that. He reluctantly shook his head. “I’m not sure about it anymore, especially after tonight. Nuclear energy is in the center, the core, of every atom. Atoms are the building blocks of all matter, which means it’s part of the natural order. Nature might be able to absorb it, or even turn it against us.”

“Wouldn’t that still hurt her, though?” Erin was in a cot nearby, but she wasn’t sleeping

“Maybe, but there would be fallout from it.” Lisa was also wired too tightly to consider sleeping. She shivered in the stronger breeze. She was soaked, but she didn’t go change yet. She didn’t want to get too far from Dace until he calmed down some more.

“Yes, but the planet cleans itself. She would recover.” Greg yawned. “We wouldn’t.”

Erin’s skin gleamed in the firelight, drawing Greg’s attention. The creamy color made him long for a cup of old-world coffee. *I took it just like that.*

Erin was just happy that Dace hadn’t drowned. She didn’t care that Dace only had gratitude for Lisa. *I have enough for both of us.*

Piper returned from the grill carrying a bowl and a cup. She put it next to Dace’s cot. “I heard Tim and Angela talking. They said the Creator has to

handle Nature, that we're just the bait to force that moment."

"That's not what they said exactly." Kyle didn't want anyone to think they could run away from the final battle. "The words *hope* and *maybe* were mentioned a lot. Angela's working on a plan and she always comes through, you know?"

"No lie. Her schemes have given us control of the world." Ray glanced toward the submarine. He was grateful the sun was finally rising. He didn't like being on land. "I mean, it's a dead world, but we do get to rebuild it in our image and not the ugly ones we all had before."

Marc was reminded again that all of Safe Haven's Eagles were here to fulfill their second chances in life. *We screwed up our old ones...* Marc knew where he went wrong, but not being able to change it had devastated his hope for the future. All he could do was fight and die in the final battle.

"So you're not leaving?" Dace had been keeping track of the conversation as a distraction against the sound of the ocean. While he was trapped, it had whispered insults and then screamed threats. He would never be able to hear water again without hearing that voice.

Marc let out a sound of misery. "We'll never be safe anywhere but our island. That means our children, our friends, our families, are basically prisoners in paradise. They'll never get to explore or return to America—ever." Marc's face became determined. "I agreed to come because I knew we

were going back to fix it at some point. All my mental issues aside, I can't run away from that. I didn't take those people out there just to abandon them."

Being without Angela while the action was happening had reminded Marc it would be that way every time something went wrong. Marc didn't want that responsibility. Angela did. So did Adrian. Marc no longer understood their need to be in control and he certainly didn't want their job.

"We could roam until that battle." Shawn wasn't keen on ever going home.

"No. I'm going to spend the time working with the boss on her plans." Marc focused on Kyle. "I'm not an Eagle anymore. I'm not leading that final battle. I'll be letting Angela use my military history to ensure a future where we can all stay or go in safety."

The copy of Adrian's words brought strong emotions.

Marc couldn't take that level of approval yet. He glared at Greg. "It will also give me more frustration to work off in the weekly matches."

Greg grinned. "The one-eyed sacrifice is always happy to be abused for a good cause."

Marc laughed. He couldn't help but admire Greg's spirit. "Eight weeks and counting, Eagle."

Greg's amusement fled. Deep regret took its place. "I've been punishing myself for a lot longer than that."

The bond between teammates strengthened.

“As have we all.” Marc watched Piper get Dace covered up. He’d refused the food and drink. Dace’s eyes kept going to Lisa and flinching away. His fear was obvious to Marc and the mission men. They were all lingering to give him a feeling of safety, but it wasn’t helping. “He shouldn’t be alone for a while.”

“I’ll stay by him.” Piper dropped down next to Dace and put her hand on his good leg. “How are you feeling?”

“Sleepy.” Dace yawned to prove it.

Harry smiled. “You’re crashing now after the shock. It’s fine.”

Piper tried to send healing energy. “I’m here. I’ve got you covered.”

Dace couldn’t help his reaction. He looked at Lisa.

Lisa blushed. “I’m not going anywhere. Rest.”

Dace settled back and allowed the drugs and exhaustion to pull him into dozing.

Piper’s face tightened. She stopped herself from yelling, but barely.

Lisa lifted her chin against the glare. “Should I have told him no?”

That brought guilt.

“Of course not.” Piper decided to get the coming moment out of the way. “Are you interested in my man?”

Lisa bristled. “No!”

“Good. I’d hate to have to do something about it.” Piper eyed Lisa’s fat lip and smirked.

Erin pushed up onto one arm and glared at Piper. Her wet curls dropped to the cot, dampening her blanket. “Would you be happier if we’d let him die?”

Piper flushed. Her brows curled inward. “No!”

“Good. Now shut up and let us sleep. We had a rough night while you were playing around on the sub.”

“Stop.” Dace wasn’t enjoying the bickering. “Let it go. Nothing’s changed.”

But it had and Dace knew it. He turned his head away from Lisa so he didn’t trigger another squall.

When it came to looks, Piper was hotter than Lisa, but Dace didn’t see that now. On the way to rescue the mission men, Dace had been proud of himself for landing an Eagle slot and a hot female that any man would die for. Now, he only saw the one who’d saved his life. *She didn’t let go of me even when it collapsed. She rolled that rope around us and held tight. I’ve never felt like this about anyone. I owe her my life.*

Jayda sighed. “More drama. Great.” She went to the bathroom tent, yawning. *Erin is right. It was a long night.*

“You’re off. Get some rest.” Marc took over Jayda’s rounds. He was too stressed to sleep. The conversation had reminded him that he’d failed in all of his plans. The final battle might bring the end of America and his entire family. *There has to be a way to defeat Nature.*

Like Kyle, Marc was sure that Angela would come up with a good strategy, but the odds were staggeringly against it being good enough. *I'm going to make an escape plan. If things go wrong, I'll get as many of them as I can back to Pitcairn.*

Those who caught that didn't say their deal would be over then and Nature would be able to reach the island, too. Marc was self-soothing. It was a good sign that he'd chosen to tell himself a lie over blowing up on someone again or running away. It was yet more proof that Reicher had changed him.

Ray studied Marc. His face was unbruised now and lean, but not thin. He was filling back out quickly and healing faster physically than the other mission men were. Ray didn't understand why, but he was curious about it. *Is it because he has Angela and his kids shoving in energy or is it because of his bloodline?*

Ray had changed into dry clothes and hung up his wet gear. He was drying off the rest of the way by the fire while ignoring his growing feeling that nights like this were going to become common again. *I got used to the peace in Safe Haven.*

Ray stared at the ocean in dislike. The waves were still rolling in. The beach was underwater and the foamy white waves were almost reaching the edge of the grass. He would never forget how this felt. The ocean was merciless and humans were fragile. Not having his gifts for that short time had hurt Ray. *I wasn't able to protect myself or my teammate. That sucked.*

Ray reluctantly began to reconsider his position on Grant's motivations. *This is an ugly feeling. He's not wrong to want an edge against it.*

"Kyle and I will start ferrying people to the sub soon." Ray wanted to get things settled so he could sleep. He'd come over for some downtime, but that hadn't worked out. *It was more peaceful on the bridge.* "We'll take Dace over first."

"No." Dace had been waiting for this moment. "I'm staying here. Just have them send over whatever supplies you need for the cast."

Harry frowned. "Why? We can't make you comfortable here."

Dace clenched his fists under the blanket. "I have to beat this fear. I can't do that if I go back."

As a medic, Harry had to protest. "You need that cast."

"And then I'd be sitting with the leg propped up, like I'm doing now, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Then let me work through this shit in my head. It's a lot worse than my ankle."

The mission men all agreed.

"We'll keep an eye on him."

"He's fine here."

"Agreed. Lisa has the first shift over him." Marc ignored the glare from Piper. He smiled at Mel, who was retying her vine-boots. "Are you ready to go?"

Mel gestured. "Why else am I getting gussied up? Let's make tracks!"

Marc laughed with her and the others while hiding his relief. Angela had told them Mel might not want to leave. He hadn't been looking forward to forcing the castaway off this ugly rock.

Piper saw how happy Dace was to have Lisa assigned as his guard. She stood and walked off without shouting at him like she wanted to. Dace had gone through a terrible survival moment. The last thing he needed was a rant. *But there's one coming later, baby!*

Biff came over and stared at Dace. Regret flowed out in thick waves.

Even during his own mental misery, Dace gawked at Biff's face. Without the beard, it was too easy to detect the fading bruises, the haunting horror in his eyes.

Dace swept the mission men and saw that was true of all of them. The team was covered in small pink scars and glaring white spots. There were needle holes still healing in their hands and arms, and they were thin. Those gaunt faces stared back in sympathy, shaming him. "It's nothing. Go on about your business."

"I can't." Biff was horrified that he'd almost gotten Dace killed. "I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven. Now let it go. It was nothing compared to what you all went through."

"One trauma is rarely easier than another." Harry did admire Dace for not wanting to steal the spotlight. "There's enough pain to go around."

Dace fought his emotions and tried to resume dozing.

“Have you noticed the boss only brought damaged people on this run?” Kenn stared at the blowing grass instead of the louder ocean. The wind had picked up a bit. Kenn assumed it would be humid when the sun was fully up.

“Dace wasn’t damaged.” Piper checked the filtered water for more barrels to switch out. “Neither was I.”

“You both are now, so his point stands.” Marc glanced around, searching for anyone else who’d been fine when they arrived here.

Troubled people stared back at him, wishing they could speak up and say they had been fine.

Marc was relieved that they couldn’t. It meant they might not be a target during the next action.

“What about those on the sub?” Zack contemplated Adrian. “They’re not all broken anymore.”

“Not true. Angela’s worried about the baby and clearly having trouble with it. Wade’s torn up over not being able to protect Samantha. And Adrian’s still mourning leadership and his mistakes.” Kyle dropped the load of items he and the others were still bringing from the flooded beach. “None of us are fine.”

Kenn was curious. “Did she do it on purpose?”

“She brought the best people for this job.” Kyle grunted. “So, yes.”

Kyle was relieved that they'd saved Dace. He hated how long it had taken to get to the sub and back. *We'll leave the oxygen tanks and suits here for now, and maybe Ray can bring the sub a little closer when he goes back.*

Ray nodded at him across the fire. He'd already added that to his list of suggestions for the boss.

Kyle lost his thought. He fought to get it back. *Where was I?*

Biff still felt bad for causing the collapse. "I really am sorry."

Kenn didn't leer or rub it in that Biff had made a huge mistake. He also didn't taunt Biff for losing their fight. Biff's words had bothered Kenn more than he was willing to admit. *I'm not as bad now, but he has every right to feel that way.*

Kenn rubbed his sore fist, where purple bruises had settled in like rings. *I wish he hadn't pushed, though. I haven't hit anything in months. I wasn't ready for the soreness.*

"I'm so sorry."

Kenn couldn't take Biff's misery. "I'm grateful for it. You kept me out of the water."

Biff saw Kenn shiver as the ocean grew louder. He didn't want to accept that, but it did make him feel a bit better. *I'll control myself more tightly now. I'll hold onto this feeling.*

Kenn nodded. "Same."

“Do you have a moment?”

Marc sighed as Piper joined him near the sinkhole. The tide was out now, allowing him to see straight down into the ocean. The oval hole was only about 10 feet wide, but the entire bottom had dropped out.

Piper’s pigtails bobbed in frustration. “Marc?!”

“What do you need?” He braced to listen to her whine about Dace’s new bond with Lisa.

“Can you give me a private line?”

Marc connected them, but it was a strain. His energy was fully charged, but the gifts were weak.

Piper began replaying her talk with Cody.

Marc’s concern switched targets immediately. He observed the moment in dismay and fear.

Piper felt it. *I’m not the problem. I felt someone listening to us. That secret isn’t going to hold. You might need to get Cody out of Safe Haven.*

“I’ll cover it. Thank you.”

Piper nodded stiffly and left him there.

Marc listened to the upset ocean for a minute. It almost sounded like someone growling. *The ocean isn’t happy that Dace lived.*

Marc saw a RIB coming toward them from the submarine. The wind had increased enough that it was carrying the sound away.

Charlie was in that boat, bringing over the supplies for Harry to do Dace’s cast. *All my kids are in danger again and I’m in no condition to protect them.*

Angela spoke up in his thoughts. *I'll handle it. Just finish sorting through your mind.*

Marc assumed she had a plan running. *Do you know who was listening?*

Yes. I've planned around it.

What if they talk before your plan takes effect?

No one on this crew would react. We all know Julia got what she deserved.

And the person isn't going back to Safe Haven with us?

No. Their days are short.

Marc was relieved. Stress rolled off his shoulders and then came right back. *Thank you...* Marc tried to find a way to bring up his fight with Greg.

Angela disconnected them.

Marc sighed. *That's what I thought.*

He returned to their new base camp and picked a cot. He was exhausted. Most of them were. "Naps all around, gentlemen."

Mission men went to their beds in relief. They'd just been waiting for Marc to make the call.

Trent was standing next to Kyle, waiting for the arriving RIB so they could help pull it above the beach.

Trent hadn't expected to be so calm after going through all this, but the sub was what bothered him. He didn't want to go back on it. *I need open air, even if it is surrounded by water.*

Trent's mind went to his actions. He'd faced his fears and done his part in the rescue. *And we did it all without magic.*

He sighed. *But that sure might have made things easier.* Trent had gotten used to magic saving them.

Kyle had listened to Marc and Angela's call without trouble, though he hadn't been able to get through Marc's private line with Piper. *I need to sleep soon.*

Trent turned to Kyle. "That's going to be a problem at some point."

"No, it won't. Marc doesn't want leadership. They're giving it to him automatically because the real leader is keeping his distance and giving them space."

Trent made a face. "You mean *she*."

"No, I don't."

Trent scowled, but he didn't argue. *I hope Angela knows what she's doing by letting Kyle make deals like this.*

Kyle grunted. "Letting me. Let's call it that."

Trent realized that made sense. The sooner Adrian was back in charge, the sooner Angela could leave that chore behind and try to have a normal life as just a camp member. Trent didn't want that, but he understood why she would.

Kyle snorted and went to meet the RIB. *Trent's a nice guy, but he's not that smart. Maybe he'll wise up when he's unlocked.*

Jayda had caught all of that. It bothered her that her boyfriend was considered dumb by their head

Eagle. Trent was better looking than half of the men here. He was kind and loyal, and clearly a little possessive, but none of that mattered. *He jumped right in there and risked his life to help Dace.* He was a good man and that mattered more to her than the other stuff.

The problem was that she agreed with Kyle. Trent should know Angela wasn't trying to give up leadership. She wanted to share it.

Angela was honoring her mentor by helping Adrian repair his image with the camp. *Honor means everything to her. Anyone who hasn't figured that out hasn't been paying attention.*

3

Charlie hurried to Harry with the bag of medical supplies. "I added a few extra items in case you need them."

Charlie was glad to get away from the sub and Theo for a while. The engineer was becoming more and more irate at being denied a drink. His shouts had been getting ugly. It was drawing attention from the new arrivals and making the rescue team sorry that Theo had been brought along.

"Thanks." Harry took the kit and went to Dace's cot. "You can assist. Shawn needs his nap."

Shawn and many of the mission team were resting.

"Cool." Charlie began opening packages and putting them on the empty cot next to Dace. "We

sedated Theo. The withdrawals are being rough on him.”

“Why not use a sleep spell?” Harry was a big fan of magic over drugs.

“We’re all too tired, even Mom.”

Harry didn’t comment. He stewed on not having his gifts last night. It hadn’t been for long, but it had felt like a punishment.

Marc watched them start on Dace’s cast from his own cot.

Charlie had changed into jeans and a plain white t-shirt. With a medical bag in hand, he appeared to be one of the adult medics. Marc was struck by how much he had changed since they’d been reunited after the war. *I love that boy.*

Marc wanted Charlie to have a great future that would make up for his awful childhood. He knew it didn’t work that way, but he still wanted it.

Charlie glanced around and saw Biff’s face clench in regret. Charlie knew something else had happened. Biff had been looking better until now. “What happened to him?”

Harry grunted. “He made a mistake and he’s beating himself up for it.”

Charlie frowned. “It looks like someone else beat him up for it, too.”

Harry didn’t answer.

Charlie pulled it from Biff’s thoughts. “No way.”

Harry sighed. “You need to stop encouraging us to fight for you until you’re ready to fight for yourself.”

Charlie barely heard that. He was replaying the fight.

Kenn stiffened as Charlie’s ugly glare landed on him. “He challenged me.”

“You could have said no!”

Kenn hadn’t gone to bed yet. He was helping dump cleaned water into their barrels. “No, I couldn’t.”

“Hey! That reminds me!” Thomas walked over to Kenn. “I forgot about something.”

Kenn lifted a brow. “You, too?”

Thomas nodded. “I challenge you!” He punched Kenn in the face, making his hand cramp.

Thomas grinned at the rush as Kenn staggered. “How do we tell the winner?”

“Like this.” Kenn fired back at full strength.

Thomas hit the ground and stayed there.

Kenn walked away. “You lost.”

Ray sniggered while the others went to help Thomas. “He was warned not to fight senior Eagles.”

Zack looked over from where he was refueling the RIB. “Are you still game?”

Ray shook his head. “Not after last night. Catch me next time?”

“Will do.” Zack was relieved. He was too tired for a match. *I’d probably lose again.*

Ray chuckled. “I was thinking the same thing!”

Zack snickered. Ray's confidence in himself was a balm after all the misery coming from the mission men.

"Take the bodies over last." Harry didn't want to keep the two corpses in the pup tent much longer. They were starting to stink.

"You can take them over now if you want. The sub already stinks from burning Grace's body. No one will notice it."

People stared at Charlie in surprise.

Dace sat up, wincing as he bumped his broken ankle against Harry's gentle hands. "What happened to Grace?"

Marc tensed. "You had a death on the sub?"

"None of you know what happened?" Charlie was more than surprised that Marc hadn't felt Angela being in danger again.

Piper also frowned. She hadn't mentioned it because she'd assumed everyone knew.

Marc looked at her. "What happened?"

"Grace tried to kill Angela." Piper shrugged. "It didn't work."

Marc sat up. "Who saved her?"

"She saved herself."

It was more encouragement for the mission men to do the same.

Marc tried not to get upset, but he felt bad for being over here fighting and not knowing that she'd needed help.

"She really didn't, though. She saw it coming and lured Grace away from everyone. She caught

the knife with her shield and ended another assassin.” Piper was always impressed with Angela’s ability to defend herself.

None of the men answered. Their feelings on protecting the boss weren’t going to change, no matter how well Angela was doing alone.

“Dog’s got company.” Lisa pointed, hoping it would ease some of the tension.

Dog limped into the base camp.

A few feet behind, the island cat trotted after him, letting out those odd half growls and half hisses.

Dog dropped down near the cot Marc had chosen.

The cat ignored the humans. It walked onto Dog’s neck and squatted there. Its sticky tongue began licking Dog’s sandy ear.

Laughter rolled through the camp from most of them.

Marc frowned. “He doesn’t look that good.”

“You had him on patrols for the last six hours. He’s tired.” Lisa fought the urge to pet Dog and the cat. She didn’t want to get scratched.

The cat kept licking.

Dog’s ear was quickly soaked.

Dog ducked the next lick and regarded Charlie. He let out a huff. *You were right. It’s just too much tongue.*

Laughter rang out.

Erin snorted around her fat lip. “There’s no such thing.”

Greg heard that from the next cot over and smiled at her through his battered face. “I have my red wings.”

Erin blushed furiously, drawing more laughter from the witnesses and a fresh glare from Lisa.

Greg rolled over in his cot and went to sleep.

Lisa stomped off toward the bathroom tent.

Charlie thought of Theo and remained silent. There was no way Erin would pick Theo over Greg. *And I don't blame her. Greg is a great guy.*

Marc caught that and winced.

Chapter Twenty-Four
That's Powerful

1

“Can I put some Cortisone on that rash?”

Harry joined Kyle near the tent flap where he was on duty and about dead on his feet.

Kyle held out his arm and kept scanning the late afternoon environment. The sun wasn't as bright due to the light, fluffy clouds above them, though the breeze had increased enough to start blowing around the lighter trash. It was more pleasant than the last couple of days, but Kyle was too tired to enjoy it.

Harry rubbed in the white cream. “I guess you three touched something in the lab.”

Kyle looked at his arm. “We three?”

“Zack and Trent both have a rash on their arms, like yours. I assume you all touched something in the lab.”

Kyle shrugged absently. “Maybe.” He yawned.

Harry grimaced. “Stop it. I have three more appointments before I can crash.”

“Why not have Charlie do them?”

Harry capped the tube of Cortisone. “I'll sleep better if I do it.”

Kyle knew that was part of Harry's reaction to his mission. He couldn't stop pushing and using his new gifts, even now when he was exhausted. "Can I help you?"

Harry knew Kyle didn't mean that as in medical help. "Angela's trying some things. They might work."

"If she can't be stern enough..."

Harry considered the punishment she'd delivered without mercy. "She can."

He and Harry had been friends before Harry left for this run. Kyle went the other way. "How about some compassion from a fellow Eagle who needs his ear talked off so he can sleep?"

Harry remembered Kyle hadn't been able to contact his family for days. He nodded, glad for the offer. "I'll be half an hour more."

"I'll find a deck of cards and a table."

They both glanced over at the sound of someone getting out of their cot.

"I'm going for a walk." Greg headed off without waiting for the protests from the few guards who were guarding their sleeping people. It was too quiet, too peaceful. *I need to think and I can't do that anymore when I'm relaxed.*

Greg stayed above the beach line. He walked steadily, listening to the unhappy ocean. It quickly began to stress him out.

Greg sighed in relief. *Finally!*

He got out of sight, trying to work off the excess energy and the needs of his body. *I should have let Lisa offer me a service before we broke up.*

Greg felt bad for that, but his body's needs were riding him hard. He'd figured out it was natural biology. Being abused had reminded him of how much he missed things that felt good. It was normal that sex would come to mind. *I am a man.*

Greg spotted a female form ahead of him and slowed. His eyes went over her sexy body in longing while they were too far apart for her to detect it.

Erin's beauty winked at him in the dim sunlight, but he was drawn to her imperfections. As he got closer, he cleared his expression. Those burn scars on her arms held his attention. *She matches me and the others.*

Erin saw his attention. She wondered if he was repulsed by her war wounds. She wasn't scarred mentally from the explosion, but she was physically. *I need a man who isn't turned off by my flaws.*

Being around all these strong men was making her body send up signals that she needed some private time. Erin felt bad for viewing the mission men that way, but it was natural biology. *I am a woman.*

Before she'd decided to chase Greg, Erin had often fantasized about hiring him for a service, but she'd never gotten up the courage. *It's too bad he*

retired, but I'm also glad of it. I'd much rather make a commitment than a contract.

Greg stopped near her. He knew he shouldn't distract her from her rounds, but he did it anyway. "Got a minute?"

Erin knew she shouldn't let him distract her from her rounds, but she did it anyway. "Always. What's up?"

"I wanted to thank you for the other night." His eyes darkened and his tone lowered. "It helped me get through a few hours without a nightmare. I'm grateful."

Erin studied his swollen face and tried to decide if it was too soon to hit on him while they were alone.

Greg chuckled lowly. "I'm not that broken."

Erin's chocolate eyes sparkled. "How about I kiss you with my fat lip and try to make it a little better?"

Greg liked her boldness. He nodded, but he stayed still, letting her make the first contact.

Erin appreciated him trying not to scare her. She slid forward and pushed her lips against his.

Need flooded Greg in a thick wave that stiffened him in seconds. He tried not to react yet, giving her time to adjust to his feel, but it was difficult. He wanted to wrap her up and explore her mouth.

Erin put her arms around his neck, entering his personal space. She pressed against his body and felt that iron bar.

She smiled against his lips.

Greg followed his rules for a service with a new woman. “You can walk away anytime you want to. I’ll never mention this to anyone.”

Erin rested her cheek against his and enjoyed the chills. “As soon as you let yourself go, I’ll be lost. Just don’t take me to that edge and leave me there.”

Greg growled in need. “You’ll cum on me twice before I finish wherever you want!”

Erin kissed him again.

Greg gave her what he sensed she needed the most. He dropped to his knees and began kissing her through her clothes.

Erin quickly moved those clothes as desire lit up her nerve endings.

Greg slid her panties down, licking softly as he groaned in need.

Erin was stunned to feel a climax already rising. His tongue against her hot skin was incredible.

“Right there... Yeah, yeah. Right there!” Erin tensed in ecstasy as Greg’s tongue swirled over her clit again and sent her over the edge. His follow-up suckling drew wave after wave of pleasure as she held onto his tense shoulders.

Greg shuddered with her, feeling it as though he was receiving it. Their linked minds spasmed together.

Erin slowly withdrew her nails from his skin, moaning.

Greg eased off so she didn't get sore before they were done. He cleaned his face on his arm and stood up.

Erin turned around and braced against the inside wall of the day beacon. Three walls gave them a semblance of privacy as Greg slid in close and guided his hard dick into her. He pushed gently, sucking in air through clenched teeth. *It's never felt this good.*

Erin wiggled against him to add to his enjoyment. Her respect for Greg had already gone up. Very few men she'd known would have started with lip service. She was delighted.

Greg leaned against her shoulder and rocked slowly. He groaned lowly as she spread her legs wider.

Erin wrapped one leg around his and pulled him in closer, deeper.

Greg held her hips and stopped. He'd always prided himself on his control, but it had been months and she was perfectly wrapped around him now. His head throbbed painfully, deliciously.

"Ready for number two?" Greg withdrew and then tugged her around to face him.

Erin smiled. "One is fine if you'd like to go ahead."

He dipped his mouth to her neck and slid between her long legs. "We made a deal." He thrust forward without entering, rubbing her nub while his hands played over her nipples, bringing her back to life.

Erin arched as he pinched her harder. His grip on her tightened and his thrusts sharpened.

Erin moaned. *How does he know?!*

Greg chuckled against her neck. “Can I spank you, Erin?”

She shivered and nodded quickly.

“Do you have a safe word?”

She moaned again.

Greg enjoyed the chills her pleasure was still sending to him. “Good enough.” He cupped her cheek and then squeezed.

Erin’s grip on his shoulders tightened again as she leaned into his thrusts and his hands. “Right there...”

Greg stiffened further. He tilted his hips so he was still rubbing her clit and also going into her a little bit on each push forward.

Then he slapped her ass hard enough to make it echo.

Erin arched again, groaning.

Greg timed the slaps with his thrusts and tried not to cum in her yet.

Erin cried out as her orgasm flew up and snatched her breath away.

Greg penetrated her deeper, and slapped her cheek one more time.

Erin shuddered and whimpered. The spasms were almost painful. *This is the best sex I’ve ever had. There’s no doubt.*

Greg pulled out and stroked himself while watching his hands rub her scarred breasts. He

wanted to keep going, but he also wanted something she might not be into. “Will you lean against me? I want your *back*.”

Erin nodded again. She didn’t have the breath to speak with yet.

Greg rotated them so he was against the wall. He turned her around and shifted into position as she leaned back on him, facing away.

Greg gasped in her ear as he pushed into her sweet body.

Erin spasmed again, now feeling his pleasure like it was her own.

Greg thrust twice and then let go, flooding her in hard jerks that dragged moans from his lips.

Erin leaned back against him fully as he softened and slipped out. She didn’t talk. She hoped he wouldn’t either. She just wanted to enjoy the sensations before life got in the way again.

Greg didn’t want to interrupt the amazing flow of feelings being shared between them. He hadn’t felt this safe since the war. *And even then, I got this feeling from hookers and lonely ladies in the community. This is better because Erin means it.*

Greg reluctantly compared it to his few nights with Lisa.

Erin stirred against him. “It’s rude to think about your ex while our cum is drying to your penis.”

Greg jerked, surprised and amused. “You’re one of us!”

Erin grinned. “My mental shield is my only gift so far. I’ve been working it out every day.”

Greg leaned back so he could view her face. *She's beautiful...and flawed.* Her scars were more obvious at this distance. "Don't hide those spots with makeup. You earned them."

Erin kissed his bruised cheek, softly. *Thank you. It's my honor.* Greg slowly began separating them. "I'm sorry. There's a rock trying to cut my spine open."

Erin stood and started dressing. She sensed him pulling away. A lot of women would have rushed in now and assumed, begged, or manipulated him for a relationship confirmation. Erin wasn't like that. *I can walk away from anyone. I know. I've done it.*

Greg fastened his pants and let his heart do the talking. "I'll never stop wanting her. It's not fair to anyone who needs me to love them like they deserve."

Erin shook sand from her hair. "It's not right to try to change people. You either accept them as they are or walk away."

Greg delivered another negative. "I'm not staying in Safe Haven."

Erin smiled at him. "Awesome."

Greg didn't invade her thoughts, but he was curious about her motivation.

Erin snapped her bra into place and glanced around for her shirt. "I want kids, but not until after that final battle. It's not right to birth a baby and drop it on someone else."

Greg realized they were negotiating. He went all in. "I doubt many of us will survive that final battle.

Can you compromise on the kids part? I want to make sure my bloodline has a chance to go on even if I don't."

Erin hadn't considered it that way. "Maybe. You'd want them now?"

"No, not until I'm recovered enough to be a good dad."

Erin knew that wouldn't be anytime soon. "We can work that out, I think." She bent over to tug on her shoes, *before* pulling up her pants.

Greg groaned. "That is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Erin laughed, straightening. "We'll work on your nicknames."

Greg snickered, stepping closer now that he was fully dressed. "Thank you for this. I feel a little more like myself now."

Erin kissed his lips, quick and hard. She stepped back. "It was my pleasure."

She'd never been with a man who could back up his boasting.

Greg wished he could give her more. "Maybe in time, I won't be so obsessed with *things* I can never have."

Erin chuckled at the wording, but her voice was sad. "It's better if you don't change, Greg. I like it how it is right now. Don't give me a reason to walk away."

Greg had to ask. "Why are you okay with this setup?"

Erin tugged on her shirt and faced him as she buttoned it. “Because I get bored so easy! I’ve walked away from more relationships than you’ve had brief encounters. If you’re obsessing about someone else, then I’ll be challenged to keep fighting for you. If you fall in love with me, we’re probably doomed.”

3

“I have two messages for you.”

Marc scowled at Charlie. “And you just remembered them? It’s been half a day!”

Charlie had been busy making rounds, treating minor injuries with bandages and ointments, and observing the island. The birds were calmer and the fish were practically jumping onto the snare lines. If not for the cloudy sky and sad people, it would have been beautiful. Because of those things, Charlie had stayed quiet and watched for more trouble. “Both of them asked me to wait until you’d had some sleep.”

Marc grunted as he sat up. He’d slept for six hours straight this time. It was the most sleep he’d gotten since the rescue. “Always protecting the fragile tiger.”

Charlie winced at the sarcasm. “We’re not sure how to treat any of you.”

Marc’s anger faded. “What are your messages?”

Charlie eyed the grenades on Marc’s belt. He was the only team member who’d felt the need to

take it that far when he filled his tool belt. It made Charlie think of the oral explosion he might be about to trigger. “Mom wants a list of who’s going off on their own and who’s coming back to Safe Haven with us.”

Marc had expected that one. “Ask each of us before you go and take the list back to her.”

“I will. The other message is actually a question, but before I ask it, I want to give you my thoughts. Okay?”

Marc nodded in annoyance, but he was surprised that Charlie had agreed to talk on someone’s behalf. He was curious who it was.

“Adrian’s session are helping, and not just with you guys. Everyone on the sub is feeling a little better.”

Marc realized the message was from Adrian. “What rule does he want to break now?”

“The one where you let him train Cate...using the lab methods.”

Marc snorted out harsh laughter. “Not a chance!”

Charlie tried again. “Not *all* of the lab methods. He wants to train her like he did his daughter.”

From what Marc knew, Adrian’s daughter was the only Mitchel on the planet with honor. Marc still wasn’t looking forward to ever meeting her. He’d had enough of Mitchels. “No.”

Charlie confided in Marc reluctantly. “She needs this, dad. He can pull Cate back from that edge and keep her from turning out like us.”

It bothered Marc that Charlie saw himself that way. “There’s still time for you to change those issues and become a good man.”

Charlie smiled. “Right back at you.”

Marc chuckled. He didn’t want to agree to anything that involved Adrian, but he honestly didn’t know how to help Cate beyond being her example of what not to do. “I’ll think about it, but I doubt I’ll agree.”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m surprised you agreed to consider it, so it’s all good. You always find out you were wrong in the end.”

Charlie walked away.

Marc stared after the teenager, stung.

“And there’s another reason I don’t want kids.” Trent stopped by Marc to find out if he had anything he needed done before they returned the sub.

“Yeah, they can be little shitheads at times.”

Trent snickered. “True, but I meant the brains. Kids grow up to be smarter than their parents. Who wants that?”

Marc’s amusement echoed across the camp and began waking the others who were snoozing in the tent. Marc’s happy sounds made them want to join the living so they too could make happy sounds.

Charlie got his notebook out and tried to decide who to ask first.

Marc got it rolling. “Tell her I’m not ready to go home yet, but when she has to, I’ll be at her side.”

Trent smiled in relief as their witnesses murmured or blew out their own relieved breaths. “She’ll be thrilled.”

Marc caught sight of the couple coming toward camp and sighed. “I wish I could say she’ll get that answer from all of us, but I can’t.”

Trent followed his line of sight. “You want Greg to stay?”

Marc stood and stretched. “No, but she’ll always feel like she pushed him out with this run. It’s yet another hurdle for me to jump.”

Trent felt bad for Marc. He tried to offer comfort that he himself would never take. “It’s not wrong to want to be happy. If that means you can’t stay, we’ll all understand it, even if we don’t agree.”

Marc shook his head. “All I’ve done since the rescue is consider what will make me happy. Every one of those scenarios included her. Greg’s right—I’m selfish. I can’t give her up to a more deserving man. God help us all, I’m staying.”

Erin and Greg entered camp without touching or sharing happy glances, but their minds were full of what had happened.

The other descendants rotated toward them in surprise.

“She’s a descendant!”

“I told you. She’s got too many balls not to be one of us!”

Shawn stared at Greg. *I’ll never know that feeling again.*

He turned away before anyone could pick up on his self-indulgence. He didn't want their pity or their contempt.

The descendants welcomed Erin into the group. When Kyle linked her into the hive, it was easy to see she wasn't hiding anything. Erin was one of them.

Lisa's face tightened. *She's like them. That figures.*

Lisa knew what had happened. Erin was wearing a familiar glow.

Lisa wanted to be upset, but last night had been too liberating for her to willingly go back down that rabbit hole. She went about her chores without glaring. *I really have recovered another step.*

Lisa left the big tent and went to check on the fishing lines.

Dace stared as she went by his cot.

Marc picked up his canteen. "She wasn't the only one who helped you."

Dace shuddered. "I know, but when the fear slaps me, I see her face. I feel her warm lips keeping me alive."

"Erin breathed for you, too."

"And maybe I'd feel this way if she'd been down there with me when it all fell through but she wasn't. It was Lisa and she never let go of me, man. That's powerful."

Marc understood. He didn't push again.

Harry came over. “I’m on downtime in a few minutes. Before I go back, I need something handled.”

Harry was ready to be back on the submarine for all the conveniences. *I don’t like the great outdoors anymore and it has little to do with the run. I miss the equipment.*

Marc straightened his gun belt. “You have the bags and tags ready?”

Harry held up both items and nodded toward Shawn, who was behind him. “We’re ready.”

Marc whistled loudly.

Heads snapped in his direction. People woke with a jerk, scanning for the problem.

“All knives need to be handed over to the Eagles who are coming around now. All sizes and types...”
Marc lifted a brow.

Harry nodded and moved off to start collecting the blades.

Marc drew his two knives and held them out to Shawn. “Do mine first.” He wanted to set a good example.

Tension flew through the base camp.

Their radios crackled with Wade’s firm voice. “By order of the boss, everyone will turn over all knives in their possession. Eagles are coming to collect them. Do not leave your current location until you have surrendered your knives.”

Four hours later, their radios crackled again, this time with Angela's voice instead of Wade's.

"The last RIBs are being sent over. If you're coming to the sub, be on one of those boats or you're staying on the island overnight."

Angela's call sent fresh tension through the group that was still here. People glanced around to find out who was staying and who was going.

Harry made the choice for several of them. "I want Dace taken to the sub."

Harry was too tired to use his x-ray gift to make sure the ankle was set correctly. He needed the machine in the med bay. "I'll go with him. I'll need Charlie so I can complete the rest of the exams we scheduled."

Marc began pointing. "Get Dace into the RIB and stay with him."

Dace knew not to argue this time. He'd been given the entire day here, medicated, and it hadn't changed anything. He swallowed his protests and let Charlie help him up.

Dace didn't want to be on a little boat. He didn't mind the submarine, but he eyed the RIB in trepidation. If he went overboard, he wouldn't be able to swim with the heavy cast on his leg.

He looked around.

Piper hated his fear. Dace wasn't classically handsome. His chin was too pointy and his ears were too big, but he was perfect to Piper. She'd been thrilled when he asked her to dinner. The difference in Dace now was awkward, uncomfortable. His

confidence had been shattered and a scared man had taken his place. He might never resume his Eagle duties. She motioned at Lisa. “Go with him.”

Lisa fingered her sore lip in hesitation. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. He needs you.” Piper went to the opposite RIB.

Lisa went to Dace.

Dace smiled. “You know, when I said you’d have to save a life to be like us, I didn’t mean mine.”

Lisa chuckled, but his comment hurt her. She didn’t see Dace as a threat despite his gifts. “I was confused. Next time, I’ll let you fall.”

She was clearly joking, but Dace couldn’t take it. He pushed away from Charlie and almost fell into her arms. “Never let go!”

Before she could do more than balance them, Dace slipped a hand behind her neck and pulled her in for a kiss.

Bright blue sparks flew between the pair.

“That’s the soulmate sign.” Piper was crushed. She stared at them as deep sadness filled her heart. *He was never meant for me.*

Dace was lost in desire. He didn’t care who saw them.

Lisa held onto Dace and fought the flashes of doing this last night. The kiss was nice and she felt the sparks that said he could be important to her, but his fast moves had brought back her fear. *He can read my mind and use his gifts on me. This isn’t real.*

She shoved him and swung.

Dace fell against Charlie from her slap.

“Don’t ever touch me again!”

Dace stayed down. “You said you were recovered.”

“I’ve also changed.” Lisa softened a little. “I hate magic now. I can’t be with a magic user ever again. Your kind caused the end of the world and you’re all following a magic user who wants total global control. Angela is dangerous and unstable.”

Instead of being mad, they were all sympathetic, including Marc. “She isn’t recovered.”

Thomas recognized the moment. He spoke gently so as not to restart the throbbing in his jaw from Kenn’s single hit. “She’s in the paranoia stage.”

Biff frowned at the term. “The what?”

Thomas explained. “It’s terror first, then relief, then confusion, paranoia, and anger.”

Charlie still had his notebook out. He wrote it down. “What comes next?”

“Acceptance of mistakes and conclusions, or suicide. That pattern in the lab never changed once.”

Charlie wrote that in his notes and then went to each mission man for their answer.

Harry knelt to wrap Dace’s new cast in a plastic bag so it didn’t get wet. “I’m staying and fighting for what I want the most.”

Charlie recorded it word-for-word, then regarded Shawn.

Shawn slowly shook his head. “I can’t go home and pretend I’m fine. I just can’t.”

Charlie hoped his mom would be able to help Shawn find some happiness, even if it wasn't in their camp.

Kenn was relieved by Marc's choice. He was also disappointed by it. Despite Marc's threat in the lab, Kenn wasn't worried about Marc killing him if he went rogue. Marc would need a right hand out in the apocalyptic wastelands and who better than the man who wouldn't hold him back in any way?

Marc snapped back angrily. "That's part of what swayed me. I don't want to be like you. I have ethics!"

Kenn lifted his chin. "I'm doing the right thing for a change. Tell Tonya I'll love her from a distance so she can be better off."

Charlie and the others were surprised. They'd expected Kenn to return to his woman, since he'd fought for her last night.

Charlie focused on Biff.

Biff grinned. "I'm staying—preferably with his wife!"

Kenn grimaced.

Everyone else laughed or ignored it in favor of waiting for the next choice.

"I'm leaving as soon as the boss says it's okay." Greg kissed Erin's cheek and went to help get Dace into the RIB.

"That's everyone." Charlie glanced around. "Gus decided to leave, too. Will you guys stay together?"

His mom hadn't asked that, but Charlie knew she wanted to know.

Greg shrugged. "We'll have to get back to you on that one, kid. Too much company might not be good for the trips we're about to take."

Charlie paused. "What trips? We don't have any other runs planned."

Greg didn't answer, but all of the mission men nodded. There were still personal demons to fight and bad guys to remove, no matter where they ended up.

Charlie almost wished he could go with them.

"Why can't you?" Biff liked Charlie. He wouldn't mind having the teenager along.

People all over camp frowned at Biff as Kenn gave that answer. "It would destroy his mom. She can't handle losing her kids. He has to stay or we might not have a camp to even visit in the future."

Charlie snorted. "She'd get along fine without me."

Marc listened to the ocean. He smelled the heavier salt in the air. He concentrated on the environment and not his fear of being unable to tolerate the choice he'd made. "You've got a lot to learn. Do it at your mom's side and save the roaming for when she's gone."

Marc immediately cursed himself for saying that.

Charlie's brows came together. His voice dropped into that dangerous tone he'd inherited. "What do you mean *when she's gone*?"

Marc was forced to give the truth so Charlie didn't dig around in his mind. "She doesn't think she's going to survive that final battle. Spend time with her while you can, boy. We both need to. She's not going to be around to love us in that future."

Still lying near the beach, Dog slowly pushed to his feet, whimpering. He looked for Marc.

The cat jumped onto Dog's back and held on.

Marc looked over in concern. "Dog?"

The cat growled.

Dog took a single step and fell over in the sand.

"Dog!"

All the wolf could do was whimper as pain seared his leg and his vision blurred. *I might be dying.*

People ran toward the fallen animal. Harry and Marc reached him first.

Dog threw up on their boots.

The cat attacked Marc.

Behind them, island ghosts observed in satisfaction.

Chapter Twenty-Five
I'm Slipping

1

“**T**hat’s everyone, Boss.” Ray finished tying the RIB to the sub, then joined her on the deck. He got his notebook out as she asked the next question.

“Who all stayed on the island?”

“Marc, Kenn, Greg, Erin, Biff, Thomas, Shawn, Kyle, Wade, two of the caretakers, a mother, and one of the military men. One day, I’ll learn all their names.” Ray stored his notes on it and scanned the boss.

Angela had her hair in a long braid again and pulled to the side to cover the parts that had been burnt away. The style made her seem younger. It also confused Ray as the gray in that braid stood out in the fading sunlight.

Angela didn’t like it that there were so few guards staying on the island, but she didn’t send anyone else over.

“Let me out of here!”

Ray looked around at the angry shout.

Angela forced a smile. “Theo doesn’t like being in the brig.”

Ray knew it was unhealthy to keep sedating him or hitting him with sleep spells. He needed to detox

on his own. "I'll stop by there later and try to talk to him if you want."

"No. Adrian's going to handle it." Angela swept the people descending into the sub. Jayda appeared to be more at peace, but Piper was glaring at Lisa and Mel looked extremely nervous to be surrounded by the ocean.

"How's Dog?"

Angela frowned. "Stable, Harry says. He found an injury on Dog's paw that's infected."

"He'll be okay, right?"

Angela tried not to show how worried she was. "Of course. It might be a long night, though."

Ray chose to believe her. He yawned tiredly. "Let me get a few hours of sleep and then I'll help wherever you need me."

"I need you on the bridge, trying to contact home. You can sleep in there between calls."

That told Ray she was getting worried too. "Have you picked up anything?"

Angela shook her head. "It's like they're not even there."

Ray hated how that made him feel. He'd been fighting the bad vibes so far, but Angela confessing her concern would make that impossible now. "How soon can we go?"

Angela scanned the beach, where a large bonfire made from damaged gear and a single island tree was starting to burn brightly against the setting sun. "At least a few more days."

Ray tried to find some positive news. “It’s good that they’ve all made their choices, right?”

“Yes, but anything can still happen.” Angela still had hope. “Some of them may change their minds.”

“Open this cell!”

Angela hated it that Theo was so upset, but Adrian was busy working with several caretakers at once. He had therapy sessions scheduled for the rest of the evening, and then he was on guard duty until dawn. When he got up tomorrow, he only had a free hour and then more sessions were scheduled. *And he’ll spend that free hour with Cate.*

Angela went around the line that was still waiting for Dace to get down the ladder. “Let’s take the rear entrance.”

Ray followed her to the hatch at the rear of the sub that most people didn’t know existed. He held the hatch while she went down the ladder, then he followed Angela into the warm sub.

Ray spotted Gus waiting for her and approved. Gus towered over most of the others on the submarine. His size would hopefully discourage anyone who wanted to cause problems for the boss.

Ray headed for the bridge. Now that Angela had put her worry into the open, alarm bells were ringing in his mind. *It’s like they’re not even there.*

Angela smiled at Gus and headed for the bottom level. As soon as she handled a couple of things, she needed to go to the control room to get ready for the next council meeting. They’d done solid work

yesterday. Now they needed to finalize those choices so they could move on. The pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness wasn't simple to define, but they had to do better than those who'd drafted these documents before them. The future depended on it.

Angela felt the hive light up with whispers and disapproval. She centered on the island.

"We'll do it in an hour. Wait for her to be busy."

"Why don't we ask her if it's okay?"

"What if she says no?"

"We do it anyway."

"And get punished. We'll do it and then say we believed it was okay."

Angela keyed her radio. "We'll be doing tonight's session together, gentlemen. Wait for me."

Gus frowned. "But the last RIB already ran."

Angela nodded. "I'll dream walk. Make sure you wake me gently if there's trouble."

Angela listened to Marc again.

"Let's get in there as soon as it gets dark. She didn't say where we had to wait."

Angela grunted in annoyance. "Next time, I'll be more specific."

Gus didn't want her to be stressed. "Reicher would punish them and regain control."

"Reicher's goals were different than mine. I want them to regain their independence. I just don't

want them to hurt themselves or anyone else while they're doing it.”

As they walked by, Angela saw Jayda give Gus a curious look, but Gus wasn't paying attention to her.

Angela was glad the breeding tree pushes were slowly taking effect. The Lisa and Dace kiss, and the Greg and Erin sex were a surprise, but there was no reason to deny biology in these matters. Nature was making her own matches. Angela wasn't going to interfere with it. Finding out Erin was a descendant had been a surprise, however, but a happy one. Angela had already been keeping track of her. “Are all the knives locked up?”

“Yes. Harry's starting on the entry wound comparisons.”

Angela knew that wasn't going to be successful yet. “We'll do another search of the sub tonight.”

Gus frowned. “Did we miss somewhere?” Gus had been part of that team. They'd also searched the new refugees.

Angela sighed. “The killer knows we're actively investigating. It's unlikely they just handed over the proof of their crime.”

“Okay.”

“I may ask you to leave the council meeting early and help the guards with that search. I have a session, so I'll be busy.”

“No problem.”

Angela's jeans and tank top were normal for her, but not for the new people. They stared at her

bare, scarred skin in concern and surprise as she went by. They also eyed her vest. She wasn't hiding it now.

Gus glared at some of them before resuming their conversation. "A session?"

"With the mission men."

"Oh. Okay." Gus didn't mind the cramped quarters or the narrow hallways of the submarine. They were worlds better than that tiny cage where he'd spent the last month of his life. He frowned. *What was she saying to me?*

"Are you all right?"

Gus nodded. "Just tired, Boss."

"Understandable." But Angela wasn't sure why that would affect his memory about something they'd just discussed. "Get an appointment with the medics tomorrow."

Gus didn't argue. He wasn't feeling himself yet, though he was still relieved not to be so angry. Now he couldn't seem to keep track of his thoughts.

Angela went down the ladder and entered the bunk room. It was almost empty while people helped bring Dace and the others onboard, unloaded gear, and listened to his story of survival.

Angela spotted Isabel putting away her clean clothes.

Isabel's age was showing again in the start of papery skin on her arms and thicker wrinkles around her lips, but Angela didn't ask how she was doing in her battle with that forbidden diet. As far as anyone knew, Isabel wasn't missing it. *The*

distraction worked. Now I'll give her a burning desire.

Angela swept the man standing nearby.

Goldie took the hint. He brought up a mental shield and left before Angela could tell him to get out. He was trying hard not to draw her attention.

Goldie had switched to the clothes they'd provided. He hoped the mission men had forgotten how much he enjoyed his bright, showy duds. They were gone now, but he still didn't want anyone asking questions about it.

Angela watched Goldie with narrowed eyes until he was out of sight.

Goldie didn't care what was happening on the island. He cared that Isabel was being given special attention from the boss. That was something else he could use. All he had to do was get Isabel to trust him. With her injuries healing well, he hoped she would get over her fear soon. If not, he would have to arrange some alone time. A few spells and charms would help her see they were meant to be together forever. *I'll kill her before I let someone else be matched with her.*

Isabel waited for him to be gone before speaking, but she nodded to Angela in relief. Goldie was still hounding her for a friendship. She didn't want to be cruel to him, but he was starting to scare her.

“What about magic use or magic users? Does that scare you?”

Isabel considered the question for a moment. Like when dealing with Reicher, she made sure her answer was true before giving it. “Not most of the time. And even then, it’s more envy than fear. I wish I was like you.”

Angela studied her. “Are you Invisible?”

Isabel shook her head. “Reicher checked for that in all the staff.” She held in a shiver. “He popped the ones he found.”

Angela thought about Biff. “What happened to the ones he couldn’t pop?”

“They were removed so he couldn’t be surprised later.”

“How did he do it?”

“Torture.” Isabel scanned Gus. “No one can stand up to that.”

Gus nodded at her. He knew she felt bad for what they’d gone through. He hadn’t considered that she’d been tortured, beyond Joseph’s attack, but finding out differently didn’t increase his sympathy. It couldn’t. He already felt as bad for the staff as he could.

“I’m sorry about Grace.” Isabel resumed storing her duds. “She helped me sneak in to see my kiddies once. I thought she was nice.”

“She was, but her conditioning was stronger than her basic traits.” Angela had hoped Grace might recover. “I tried to help her and she hesitated. It actually gave me hope for the others.”

“Thank you.”

Angela sensed it was a good time to bring up the past. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

Isabel’s sadness covered her like a cloak. “She would have liked you. Sasha was beaut at seeing what’s inside people.”

“She helped us secure something valuable at the end. I’d like to repay that by making sure you have a great life in my camp.”

Isabel thought about being with her kids. “You don’t realize it, but you already have. I love those babies. This feeling is so strong! I never believed it would be this way.”

“And the other kids that you abandoned to Reicher in relief?”

Gus winced.

Isabel cringed away from Angela. She knew what that tone meant. *She’ll never forgive me.*

“It’s not my place to forgive you. Answer the question.”

Isabel tried not to cry. “I hate myself, I hate Reicher, I hate that lab. I want them back!”

Angela nodded. “That’s what you’re atoning for. Don’t hide it or lie about it. Helping Reicher wasn’t right, but letting him have your kids was completely wrong. Do you see the difference?”

“Ay.” Isabel wasn’t sure what would happen now. Angela would never trust her or like her.

“Not true. I already like you and I owe your sister a debt. In time, we may even be friends. I understand everyone in that lab was forced, starved, beaten, and brainwashed.” Angela heard people

coming toward the bunks. She finished the mini-therapy session. "I'd like you to sit in on the council meeting that we're about to hold. You're not part of it, but you're a witness, and maybe a clerk if your training goes well."

Isabel was surprised. "I was told only Eagles can be in there."

"Only Eagles can be on the council. If you decide you want a slot, you'll need to sign up and work for it."

Isabel had been considering her future in Safe Haven. "I do want to be an Eagle. I'm not afraid to fight."

"Against a man?"

Isabel thought of Joseph, then showed her intelligence. "If I become an Eagle, that fear will go away."

No, it just dulls it enough so that it doesn't control your reactions. Angela didn't say so. "We would love for you to join the Eagles. What a great idea!"

Gus swallowed a snort. Angela was good at her job. Isabel would believe it had been her idea, but Angela had started planning it as soon as Isabel killed Reicher's mother.

"Can I sign up now?"

Angela nodded. "There are some interviews from senior people first. I can get that rolling for you. The actual sign-up and training have to wait until we go home."

"I've never had a home."

Angela smiled warmly at the woman. “You do now. Treat it with honor and it will always be there for you.”

Angela left the bunk room as people carried Dace by. He would be sharing the medical bay with Dog, who’d been brought back to the sub in the first trip.

Gus held out a hand to Isabel. “We’ll get this over with quickly.”

Isabel realized the first interview was happening right now. She forgot her fear of Gus as a bloke. It was replaced by fear of him as a member of Safe Haven who would soon know every bad thing she’d ever done. *It’s impossible to hide things from a descendant.*

Gus wished that was true. Hiding things from their kind appeared to be something everyone excelled at. It made him dig in harder so he didn’t miss anything important. “Tell me why you want to be an Eagle and don’t lie. If you do, I’ll know.”

2

Zack yawned and tried not to scratch his arm as he patrolled the halls and listened to people. He was observing everyone and reporting it all at the end of each shift. So far, there wasn’t much to tell the boss about the topics she wanted covered. As per usual in a Safe Haven group, it was hard to keep a secret for long.

Jayda had volunteered to help the guards keep track of everyone. She leaned toward Zack. “Why did she give Theo a drunk and disorderly charge if he’s not drunk?”

Zack hadn’t been awake long. He’d come back to the sub for a shower and some sleep, but it hadn’t been restful. He’d risen early and volunteered for guard duty. He wasn’t in a great mood. “He must be. The boss doesn’t invent crimes.”

Jayda flushed at Zack’s tone. “I’m sure you’re right.”

She stayed near him, waiting for the brief moment when he would answer her question. Jayda hadn’t liked the way the Eagles lied and covered for their leaders at first. She still disapproved of it, but she’d been around them long enough now to know there was always a good reason. *It’s just not always legal.*

“Until that document is finished, yes, it is.” Zack leaned against the wall and filled her in as the last of the arrivals emptied from the hallway. “Pop quiz, Rookie. Ready?”

Jayda nodded, eager for the new challenge. She was good at these.

“Why would someone give a lesser charge than what the person could receive?”

Jayda frowned. “Biases, being paid off, being part of the crime...and because they don’t think the person deserves a harsher sentence.”

“Very good.” Zack waited for her to get it instead of explaining those details like he might

have done with many of the other rookies. Jayda's mind was quick. He enjoyed seeing that proof.

"Why? Am I in trouble?"

Zack didn't respond.

Jayda shrugged. "You could have just said drunk and disorderly carries less punishment than sober and disorderly."

Zack grinned. "You're up for a promotion. The word came down. Are you interested?"

"Of course." Jayda didn't care what the bump was. She wanted it.

"You've been doing a great job. That's why I need you to go get changed, get fed, and then get yourself to the council room."

"I'm guarding the boss while she's at her meeting?" Jayda grinned. "Awesome!"

Zack hated the people who'd made her feel like she had to beam over a crumb. *We'll return her self-confidence and then she'll go farther than she ever dreamed.* "No, Jayda. You're part of the law council now. You're going to help decide the future for everyone."

Jayda burst into tears.

Zack frowned as people came back into the hall to find out what was going on. "I wasn't expecting that reaction. Can I try again with different words?"

Jayda laughed through her tears.

Zack understood she was emotional. Now that it had been made obvious, he could tell by her comfy clothes and lack of makeup that she was having her monthlies. *I'm slipping.*

Jayda was also surprised by his lack of attention to detail. She assumed it was because he was worried about home. “Thank you!” She wiped her face and waited for instructions.

Zack stared at her. “I just told you to get changed, eat, and head there.”

Jayda smiled absently. “You did? Okay. Sorry. I’m going.” She walked away with her chin up and tears rolling over her cheeks.

Zack knew he should do something now, but he couldn’t remember what it was. “Oh, well. If it was important, I’m sure I already covered it.”

3

“Let me out of here.”

Angela sat on the stool across from Theo’s cell.

The bruises on Theo’s face were almost gone, but his bloodshot eyes said the healing nose wasn’t his problem.

Theo hated her cool, calm air. He glowered. “Our laws don’t allow for this!”

“How was your therapy session?”

Theo snorted harshly. “I walked out. Adrian has no idea what I’m going through.”

“I was thinking about people we’ve lost, while we were taking you to the medical bay.” Angela frowned. “You know, after Grace tried to kill me.”

Theo didn’t care. “You survived it.”

“Yes. Yes, I did.” Angela examined his body. Theo had started to let himself go again. “When we

let Ramer out, he went straight to his stash and used it up until he was dead.”

Theo grimaced. “I can’t do that. Alcohol isn’t hard drugs.”

“It gives the victims a similar reaction.”

“I don’t have a stash!”

“You have a temper I didn’t suspect.” Angela got her notebook out. “You’ve been officially charged. I’m sorry there’s no lawyer here to handle your defense. I’ll be serving in that capacity until we get home. Your trial will be postponed until then.” She clicked her pen. “How do you plea to the charges against you?”

“You can’t do this!”

“Not guilty it is.” Angela wrote it down. “Is there anything you’d like to add to your possible defense?”

Theo began to realize she was serious. “You’re going to keep me in here until we go home.”

Angela sighed. “I don’t want to. I’d like to release you and let this be forgotten. By the time we get home, everyone will be willing to drop the charges and you’ll be off the hook because we can see how hard you’re fighting the addiction that has taken over your life.”

Theo felt shame. He also felt nauseous and angry. “I won’t promise to leave it alone.”

“Because you can’t.”

“No.”

“I respect that. I hope you understand why I’m handling things this way.”

“Let me out!”

Angela controlled her anger. She did feel bad for him. “In a week or so, most of it will be out of your system and we’ll talk about the conditions of your release.”

“No! I want out now!” Theo rattled the cell again.

Angela fired a weak sleep spell.

Theo fell over like she’d shot him.

Angela was grateful. “You wanted out. Now you are.”

Angela fought the feeling of missing something. She knew she wasn’t covering everything, but her mind didn’t want to stay clear. The fog was lingering on her every thought, her every emotion. *I need to see Harry about this. It’s getting worse.*

She finished making notes on Theo’s case, then waved at Gus, who had caught up to her. “Tell the guards not to leave him alone. When he wakes up, make it clear that I’m out of patience with him.”

Gus scanned the drunk in dislike. “He asked earlier to be allowed to leave us.”

“And now he’s been charged with crimes, so that can’t happen until after his trial.”

“You really are keeping him a prisoner.”

“Yes. Theo needs our help. If we let him go, he’ll do exactly what any of the mission men will—drink himself to death and it will happen quickly. I can’t let him go. I don’t want him to die.”

“Is everyone ready?”

Council members nodded at Angela’s question. Isabel stayed still and quiet.

“We have a new clerk, Isabel. And Jayda is joining us as a full member.”

The others offered congratulations to the two women.

“We’re going to work on the right to life first.” Angela opened her notebook to the correct page as people stiffened. Some of those topics would be uncomfortable and maybe even cause fights. “We will get to abortion, incest, rape, and whether a pregnancy will mean a double charge for some crimes, but not tonight.”

They were all relieved to hear that. There was an uneasy peace on the sub right now and no one wanted that to change.

Angela got her pen ready. “Tonight, we’re going to discuss capital crimes. Are we keeping, adjusting, or outlawing the death penalty?”

Most of the council members contemplated Reicher and were glad that Angela’s choices there had come before this moment. They didn’t want Reicher to be in a cell with three hots and a cot. They were relieved that he was dead. None of them considered that it had been intentional.

The guards outside heard it and knew that’s why Angela had waited. It was also why she’d handled Joel first. She didn’t want them spending life in prison. She’d decided to remove them. A death

penalty ban would have interfered, so it hadn't been brought up until now.

The guards agreed completely. Evil people didn't deserve the right to life. They'd forfeited that by being evil.

The guards were also happy she was handling this now. They assumed it meant all of their big foes were gone.

Angela caught their relief and wished that was the truth. *There will always be bad guys we have to handle.*

She kept her mental shield up. *If I need to find a loophole in those cases, I will. Evil will never be given a life sentence while I'm in charge.* "I think we should keep the death penalty, and expand it to include rape and child abuse. Let's hear your thoughts on that."

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'm Sorry For Your Pain

1

“**G**oodnight.” Angela waited for the others to exit the control room before shutting off the light and closing the door. They’d covered enough for her to be happy with the progress. They hadn’t made any final decisions, however. They’d agreed that many of those choices needed to go through a public vote. *And I’ll sway that, too. I’ll do whatever it takes to fix the mistakes of the old world.*

Angela saw Harry waiting in the hall for her, next to her guard.

Zack went toward the ladder to give them privacy even though he already knew what Harry was going to say.

Angela delayed that update because people were still in the hallway around them. “How’s Dog?”

Harry sighed. “No change. I have him sedated and I’m using a powerful antibiotic, but the infection isn’t responding yet.”

Harry hated it that the wolf was injured, but he was enjoying using his skills on an animal. “I could be our vet, too, if we need one.”

“We will. What about our growling guest?”

Harry chuckled. “Mr. Sneaky has also been sedated and checked out. He’s in a cage on the floor near Dog so they can see each other.”

“Good.” Angela waited for the people to go by. “Update me.”

Harry held out a drawing and a printed picture of the entry wounds. “No match.”

Angela wasn’t surprised. “We’re doing another search soon. For tonight, you can join us for the session or you can join Ray on the bridge. He has some footage ready to be viewed.”

Harry stored the papers. “Bridge. What am I searching for?”

“A knife being hidden. It’s here somewhere.”

Harry wasn’t sure about that. “They might have tossed it on a trip from the island.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. With so many people going back and forth, it would have drawn attention. I believe we’ll find it under a mattress or in a locker.”

Harry was too tired to keep pretending. “Why are we going through this when you already know who the killer is?”

Angela reminded him of the basic rules. “Because that’s how our criminal system works. We find proof, arrest, then set up a trial. We don’t grab them and put a bullet in their brain.”

Harry flushed. That’s exactly what he’d been thinking.

Angela knew. “Innocent until, and unless, proven guilty is a bedrock that I won’t ever change. We need to see them do it or have proof.”

“When are we going to use magic to get that proof?”

Angela admired his intelligence and agreed with his frustration over normal laws. “As soon as we finish convincing everyone to vote for it, of course.”

Harry was a full convert now about using magic in whatever capacity they needed. “Is there anything I can do to help that along?”

“Yes. Let people hear you grumbling about killers going free because the normals are scared of magic. That’ll be a good start.”

“I can do that easily. I mean it.”

“I know.”

Harry accepted that they weren’t going to be able to use magic on this case. “What if we don’t find the knife?”

Angela’s voice cooled. “Then we’ll get a confession. We already have the right bait.”

Harry shrugged. “You’re the boss.”

He went to the ladder. “I hope Ray doesn’t mind the company.”

Angela liked it that Harry was more concerned with catching their killer than joining the session with the other mission men. “You’re going to recover, Harry, and become our most valuable tool in the justice box.”

Harry grunted. “How is a coroner a valuable tool? Anyone can dissect a body.”

“But not many of them will have your drive to give justice to the dead.”

Harry enjoyed her confidence. “I will find them.”

“I believe you. Happy hunting.” Angela spotted Mel going into the bunk room and followed. She wanted to be sure the new women weren’t having any trouble.

Angela scanned the caretakers first and found content women doing what they did best—taking care of the kids in their care. The females knew how to get the kids to obey and they were firm in using those threats.

Angela wasn’t upset that they were invoking Marc’s anger and not hers. She was just glad someone else got to hold that spot in their minds for now. She hated having children afraid of her. It hurt deep in her heart.

The caretakers were also doing a good job with the four mothers that Angela had accepted. They were currently making sure those mothers were changing diapers correctly. The cloth catch-alls were getting a lot more use now that the mothers were being fed a different diet.

Physically, the females all looked like they had upon being rescued; mentally, they were counting their good fortune that she’d brought them along. All their fears of being hurt for working for Reicher had been unfounded.

Mel went to her bunk in the far corner and climbed into it while grinning. “Better than rocks!”

People laughed with her as they settled in for bed.

“No dingy ghosts either!” Mel pulled the blanket over her legs and grinned at everyone. “Sleep good, Haven.”

“Right back at you, Mel.”

“Same to you.”

“Good night, Mel.” Angela switched off the main light, leaving the hallway illumination. She was glad Mel was being welcomed. They may never know for sure who she was or how she’d come to be stranded on Howland Island, but they could at least make sure she had a good future.

Zack fell in with Angela and waited for any orders or updates she might have. He didn’t have any for her. Nothing had changed or happened during her council meeting. People were on their best behavior while she was close by.

Angela sighed. *And that’s the real power my successor has to have. Without fear, we have no reason to obey the rules.*

Angela stopped in the med bay entrance. She scanned the sleeping wolf, and the cat that was starting to stir. Then she smiled at Dace. “How are you feeling?”

“Not good to be honest.” Dace looked over her shoulder, searching for Lisa.

Angela entered and shut the door while Zack waited in the hall. “Lisa’s not out there. She has work to do.”

Angela saw panic come into Dace’s eyes.

Dace tried to be strong in front of the boss, but his mouth opened anyway. “I need her!”

“No, you need to regain control of yourself.”

Dace fought the anger and the urge to strike out. “Why did you let us go there?!”

Angela braced. “Get the poison out. Go on.”

“Did you know this would happen? Did you?!”

“You came along for the action, Eagle, but you never considered that it could happen to you.”

“It shouldn’t have!” Dace drew in a deep breath. “I didn’t do anything wrong to cause it.”

Angela winced. Therapy sessions weren’t just hard on the patient. “I believe you. We’re all targets, Dace. Nature wants us gone.”

Dace was horrified to feel tears running over his cheeks. “It’s not right. They never should have gone through that. Why did you send them in there?!”

Angela realized Dace was absorbing emotions from the mission men and holding onto them. He was scared that it would happen to him at some point and he wouldn’t survive. “Why do you think I sent them into the lab?”

“You’re power-hungry and using the excuse of world peace to get more control!”

“Very close.” Angela stared at him. “It’s not an excuse. I *will* give us peace.”

Her tone faded into sadness. “But I can’t make everyone safe. Bad things happen to good people. I can’t stop that. I can’t promise it won’t happen to you again.”

Dace shuddered. “I want Lisa.”

“No, you want a lifeline against death, but it can’t work that way. You have to do this on your own.”

“I can’t...” Dace scrubbed his cheeks. “I can’t stop seeing the warehouse floor. When the island fell around me, I thought, this must be what it felt like in those cages!” Dace sobbed.

Angela went over and hugged him. Dace had a big heart and a wonderful attitude, but he couldn’t handle the pain of others and still function. *He’s blessed that way.*

Dace snorted against her shoulder.

Angela used the blanket to wipe her eyes and then his. Their tears mingled.

Dace felt better having someone so close. He knew that was a problem, but he didn’t know how to fight it.

“You have to face it and slowly gain ground.” Angela shared one of her terrors. “When I was young, I dreamed about the world ending. I couldn’t stop it. Millions of innocent people died, and I knew it was going to happen.”

She gently brushed Dace’s hair off his forehead with her damaged hand. “They never would have believed me back then. Now, when I speak, my words are taken literally and I’m building a future where our kind will always have a voice. But I still feel the same terror and helplessness as I did the first time I had that dream. It didn’t go away. I didn’t forget it. I just stopped giving it power over me.

There's already so much I can't control that losing control of myself is not an option."

Until I snap for good. Angela forced a thin smile. "But that's what final battles are for, right?"

Dace made a connection he never would have without being able to read her tone. Wade's classes were working. "On purpose, right? So you can't be our dictator, either."

"Yes." Angela leaned forward and kissed Dace's forehead. "Sleep..."

Dace's body relaxed. He went into the darkness without fighting it like he'd been doing.

Angela stared at him in sadness and regret. "You're another good soul I've hurt on my way to building perfection. After hundreds of these, why would I want to live with this pain of watching you guys try to recover from it?"

Angela stood up. She muttered lowly, using the last of her energy to tamper with the memories of the last few minutes. No one could ever know what she had planned for herself. "And they won't."

Angela shoved the misery into her mental cemetery and plastered a calm smile onto her quivering lips. "It's time to go for a long walk through a damp dream."

2

Lisa came down the ladder with a bounce and a firm landing. She was using the submarine as a

home gym whenever she had to traverse the narrow passages.

She turned toward the showers and stopped. Piper was standing outside the medical bay.

Piper heard the noise. She rotated, hand dropping to her holster.

“I’m just going to the shower.” Lisa was in a better mood now. She didn’t feel like listening to Piper rant.

Piper turned back toward the medical bay. She was watching Dace sleep.

Lisa didn’t want to seem uncaring. “How are they?”

“No change in Dog yet. Harry was by for a check in a little while ago. The cat is trying to claw its way through that plastic cage.” Piper huffed lightly. “And Zack said the boss let Dace scream at her. Then he cried and fell asleep.”

Lisa snorted. “Sounds like my first date.”

Piper chuckled against her will. “Sounds bad.”

Lisa joined Piper so she could take a fast peek through the window. “He was a momma’s boy and I liked rollercoasters and beer. We weren’t a good match.”

“Rule one: never take a first date to an amusement park.” Piper sighed. “But you and Dace *are* a good match. We all saw the sparks. I know what that means.”

Lisa refused to accept it. “I’m leaving as soon as we get home, if not sooner. He’s all yours.”

Piper frowned. “He’ll never be mine again.”

Lisa wondered how upset Piper really was over that, but she didn't ask. They weren't friends. "I'm sure he'll get over it. Just give him some time. And I'll stay away from him. As you saw, I'm not interested."

"Liar." Piper didn't say it angrily. She took away Lisa's ability to keep pretending that she hadn't felt something, too. "Eagles aren't supposed to lie unless the boss approves it."

Lisa grunted. "I'm leaving soon. The rest is on you."

Piper's lids narrowed. "You had Greg and let him go too easily. You could climb the Eagle ranks—you're good enough. And now you could have Dace. Why are you really leaving?"

Lisa didn't mean to answer with the truth; it came out on its own. "Reicher."

Piper instantly understood. "But Angela isn't like that. None of them are. You're letting him ruin your life and you weren't even locked in there."

Lisa knew. "It doesn't change how I feel when I see magic. If I stay in Safe Haven, I'll just stir up trouble and end up getting removed. I'm doing what's best for me and for the camp."

Lisa went toward the showers. "Tell Dace I do *not* want to see him. There's nothing to talk about. And then do yourself a favor, Piper, and count how many normals died on this trip compared to their kind. You're not safe here, either."

Piper stared. Lisa's words were proof of her claim. She was already stirring up trouble.

Piper turned back to the window, but she didn't see Dace this time. She counted the two bodies they'd brought back from the island, and she counted Grace. She also counted the two military men who'd attacked Isabel, but her mind lingered on the four rookies who'd been sent with the mission team. Not one of them had made it out of that lab alive and no one appeared to care. *Except Lisa. She noticed it because she's protecting our kind.*

Piper suddenly wanted a seat on the law council so she could take up that sword when Lisa left. "We don't have to fight the descendants, but we do need laws to protect us from them. She's right about that."

Lingering in the dark mess, Goldie added that to the many things he'd seen and heard since being rescued. Safe Haven wasn't nearly the perfect parade of people they'd all heard about. *And I can use that, too. All I need is a partner in crime to take the blame for whatever I do next.*

3

"Is anyone getting through this time?" Angela let go of the mental attempt. She didn't have the strength to hold it any longer.

Marc had been trying at the same time. "No."

So had Biff. "It's all foggy."

Greg also let go. "Not even a flash."

Angela stayed in the center of the mission men while banks of gray clouds rolled over her boots and muffled the noises around them. “One of you will have to try again. I’m on watch duty this time.”

“I’ll try it.” Kenn concentrated and reached out, searching.

Angela waited nervously with the others, guarding Kenn’s mind as he dream walked toward home. They’d been trying this for hours. It wasn’t working, but she wanted to keep trying in case someone was able to get through the block.

“Are we blocked, though?” Marc hadn’t felt a barrier.

“I’m not sure.” Angela scanned in a new direction. This mental plane was odd and mostly unexplored. “It’s like we’re dialing and there’s no line in. It’s not even ringing.”

Greg didn’t look at Angela. “Why would Jennifer go quiet to this extent?”

Biff tensed. “Maybe trackers are there.”

Angela shrugged. “Maybe. I assume she would just fry them. She’s stronger than I am.”

The mission men found that hard to believe.

Angela studied the foggy landscape that didn’t allow them to see anything else. Even the sky here was covered in fog. There was no penetrating it visually, but she could normally navigate it mentally.

Marc brought up something more dangerous. “Maybe they had another outbreak and had to evacuate.”

Angela was hoping for something less deadly. “They might just all be locked. If the normals were giving them trouble, Jennifer might have shut everyone down to quell the riots.”

“All of those are possible, but it honestly doesn’t feel like it.” Biff had only recently learned to dream walk, but he’d gotten home several times while in the lab. “I could see the island from a distance. It looked normal, but I didn’t see our docks or boats.”

“They left.” Kenn let go of the empty mental connection. “That’s the only reason our boats would be gone.”

Greg already knew the answer, but he asked anyway. “Did you get anything?”

Kenn shook his head. “No. Just a flash of the island without the ships, like Biff saw. I think they left for some reason.”

Greg scowled. “Did they return to America without us?”

Marc shook his head. “They wouldn’t.”

“They might be coming to help us.” Thomas didn’t know them well enough to make a better guess.

“There were hundreds of people on that island when we left. They didn’t all come searching for us and they didn’t all leave.” Angela was suddenly sure it wasn’t any of the possibilities they had suggested. “Keep trying. Someone has to be there.”

Angela and the mission men kept working through the night.

No one was able to make contact.

“It’s almost like they aren’t even there.”

4

“Will you tell us a story?”

Trent had been helping with the orphans since coming back onto the sub, but his mind was on Jayda.

Jayda was strong, smart, and a beauty in Trent’s opinion. He’d been shocked when she responded to his flirting. *I don’t want to give her up. It hasn’t even been a month! I’m just getting to know her.*

“Give us a story, mate!”

Trent forced himself to pay attention. “What kind of story?”

The little girl yawned widely. “Happy.”

Trent couldn’t refuse. The orphaned kids weren’t acting as rebellious now. Lisa had tried to help them before they’d had a few days of adjustment time. Trent felt bad for them being raised in that hell and it showed. “Let me think of one. Hang on.”

Trent scanned the other guards in the bunk room and found them watching him eagerly. He understood they were in the mood for a story, too. Trent tried to come up with something happy, short, and good for kids. “Uh...”

“Tell us the dog one, from the Englands.”

“From the...” Trent got it. “Oh, you mean 101 Dalmatians.” It was set in London.

The girl nodded sleepily. “We like the puppies.”

“Me, too.” Trent grew curious. “Who told you stories in the lab?”

“Mr. Reicher was lonely some nights. He snuck in and told us about OZ on the rainbow and the Alice dreams. We all like the dogs the most.”

Because their parents never gave up on them. Trent bonded with the kids. He cleared his throat and tried to keep it from his voice. “There was once a very smart dog named Pongo and his kind pet, Roger...”

Standing outside the door, Jayda listened to Trent entertain the kids with growing guilt over the way she’d been treating him. She was impressed that Trent had been willing to become one of them to help Dace, but she was also relieved that he hadn’t been unlocked during the chaos. He would have read her mind and been hurt. *He’s such a good guy. Why can’t I just be happy with him?*

Jayda walked down the hall. She didn’t know what she was doing yet, but it was almost certain that she and Trent weren’t going to stay together. *I could probably help him with his fear of magic and he would probably help me with my fear of men. We might even settle down and discover that we want kids. So why can’t I do that? There’s nothing wrong with settling for peace.*

Jayda swept the med bay and the woman still standing vigil by the door. She went by without speaking to Piper.

Piper was aware of an Eagle going by on rounds. It made her feel safer.

Jayda caught that. It added to her turmoil. Safe Haven was a good place where she could work her way up the ranks and be whatever she wanted. Even without a mate, she would be well-liked and have trustworthy friends. And at some point, Angela would probably push her toward Biff.

Jayda fought the curl of interest in her stomach. She needed to keep a clear head.

If she left Angela's protection, all the evils of the world would press in on her no matter where she went. Jayda knew the wastelands would be a rough life that would use her up and make her hate herself because of the things she would be forced to do to survive. Safe Haven was infinitely better in comparison.

So why haven't I been satisfied? I found the one group left on this planet who will treat me fairly and always welcome me. Why isn't it enough?

Jayda saw Gus go into the laundry compartment with two other Eagles.

Her heart jumped. Gus had shaved while he was in the rear room of the medical bay. He now had a light layer of scruff that was appealing.

That's why.

It wasn't the attraction, though. And it wasn't because Gus would be a good dad and a hardworking husband, though he would. It was a longing to be with her own kind. *I left my people behind. And they need help. I can feel it.*

Jayda waited for the usual shame that accompanied thoughts like that. She knew it was wrong.

“Not really.”

Jayda jumped and spun around.

Adrian had come down to help Gus and the others search this bottom level again for the missing knife.

Jayda was horrified that she'd been caught. “I don't mean that the way it sounded.”

“I don't think it sounded bad.” Adrian stopped near her and kept her facing away from the room that was about to be searched. “In fact, I respect it.”

Jayda frowned. “Why?”

“Because it's normal. We all want to know that we're not alone, that we're not the last. We want to help others like ourselves.” Adrian smiled. “Give yourself a break. There's nothing wrong with loving who you are or wanting others like you to do well. It's only a problem when you believe yours are better or if you think yours should be the only ones allowed.”

“Allowed to do what?”

“To live, to exist, to be happy, to go, to stay—all of it.”

Jayda smiled. Adrian was easy to talk to most of the time. “Thank you.”

Adrian kept her attention on him. “It seems to me that you're not really interested in any of the relationship stuff, like love and commitments. All I've picked up is your fear of being alone.”

Jayda sighed. “Kyle said that and it stuck. I can’t make it go away now.” She stared at the long, jagged red stain on Adrian’s arm. The outcast mark was glaringly obvious under the lights on this submarine.

Adrian didn’t get distracted. “A lot of us worry over being alone, but your mind is using it as an excuse to cover the loneliness for your friends, your family. You’re missing your old life, Jayda.”

“Yes! That’s it exactly.”

Adrian studied her. “Did you get a chance to mourn your old life after the war?”

Jayda considered it. “I thought I had, but this fits too well. I miss it.”

Adrian drilled down to the main problem. “You’re disappointed that Marc didn’t go through with reversing time.”

“No! I...” Jayda swallowed the thick lump of sadness in her throat. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry for your pain.” Adrian held out a hand. “Show me? I’d love to see your family.”

Jayda immediately connected them and began replaying parts of her life.

Adrian observed it with attention to detail. Angela wanted Jayda to stay in the Eagles and Adrian was determined to make sure that happened.

In the laundry compartment, Zack helped Gus slide out the first washer while listening to Adrian and Jayda. *He really is good with people. We’re right to want him back in charge of the Eagles.*

“Yep.” Gus shined his light behind the dusty appliance and found a murder weapon. “We’ve got it. Call the new coroner.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Sloppy Seconds

1

Angela yawned as she came out of the radio cubby where she was spending her sleep shifts. It had been a long night of unsuccessful dream walking with the mission men; the rest hadn't been restful.

“Hi!”

Angela flinched at the loud, cheerful voice. Lisa was standing right outside the door.

Lisa sniggered. “Sorry.”

Angela recovered, but it didn't help her mood. “Good morning.”

“Yeah.”

Angela sighed in annoyance. She hadn't even gotten a chance to use the bathroom yet. *I should have let Gus do a double on guard duty like he wanted to.* “I assume you need something?”

Lisa nodded. “I'd like to talk to you about being a descendant.”

Angela headed toward the head. “Are you ready to join us?”

“No.” Lisa followed. “I want to know if there's a way you can prevent that from ever happening.”

Angela sighed. “You're not staying with us.”

“No. I know deep down that you love normals and I believe you’ll try to keep them alive, but in the end, we’re two different species.” Lisa tried to be nice about it. “We just don’t belong together.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I’d hoped Dace might be able to change your mind.” Angela smiled coolly. “That’s why I’m assigning you as his guard for the next week.”

Lisa had expected Angela to try something, though not this. “It won’t work. The best you can get from that is he’ll give up his gifts for me.”

Angela shrugged. “If that’s what it takes to keep you with us willingly, I’d agree.”

Lisa stopped, surprised. “You don’t want him as a descendant?”

Angela paused even though she really needed to pee. “I do. I just want you as one of our members more. Which brings us to another topic. Will you join the law council until you go? I want to be sure the normals are fully represented in some of the things we’re discussing.”

Lisa was stunned. “Are you sure? I’m not staying. I mean that.”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’d be honored.”

“Excellent. We’re convening in a few hours for our next session. Meet us in the control room.”

Lisa couldn’t help feeling proud. “I will. Thank you.”

Angela hurried into the bathroom, feeling like her bladder might burst from the pressure of her

growing abdomen. “It’s still better than throwing up every morning.”

Lisa hurried down the ladder. “And there’s another reason I don’t want kids. The list just keeps growing.”

2

“Food’s ready in the galley, people. Go on and get it.”

Angela was waiting for Harry as he came out of the bridge at the radio call for breakfast.

Ray locked the door as Harry left. He planned to sleep for 50 minutes out of each hour and spend the other 10 calling home. Council meetings held no interest for Ray.

Harry stopped by Angela. “I got about halfway through the footage, but I’m too blurry to keep going. No change in Dog yet, but he isn’t worse either, so that’s something. Dace is doing great, all things considered.” Harry had made hourly trips to check on them and give his eyes a break. There were a lot of cameras covering this sub.

Angela yawned. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you in six hours and you can get back to it.”

“Sounds good.” Harry didn’t feel bad for missing the session last night. Finding their killer was more important. He did want to hear how it had gone, and *where* they’d gone, but not until he got some sleep and then found a murderer.

“Sweet dreams.”

Harry snorted and walked away. Sweet dreams were for people who hadn't been in Reicher's lab. Everyone else was just happy to sleep without waking up screaming. "Damn normals will get everyone hurt. We need to be allowed to use magic to find out who killed two of us!"

Angela was pleased as people overheard him and immediately began gossiping about it. That would work over time, unlike her other issue, which was a priority. She had no explanation for why their gifts were weak and their spells weren't lasting. Something was going on with their demons, too. No one had made direct contact in days.

Angela went to the therapy cubby to check in with Adrian. He'd been avoiding her, for which she was grateful, but it was time to find out if he knew what was going on with their gifts.

I don't. And I'm busy!

Angela flinched from his tense voice in her mind. She forced herself to keep walking, once again surprised by the immediate reaction to his displeasure. *He's doing that on purpose, to make me afraid and push me away.*

Almost anything that kept them apart was good. But I want to know what he's busy with. There was excitement under his fake anger and when Adrian gets excited, bad things can happen.

Adrian knew Angela was listening, but he didn't get distracted from his therapy session. "Do you want Cody to be the king?"

Cate nodded quickly. “He thinks he’s bad, but he’s really good or he wouldn’t care.” Cate was sitting across from Adrian, recovering from their match where he’d stood still and defended himself with just his legs.

“Being a king is dangerous.” Adrian brought up stories where leaders had been assassinated or betrayed by those who supposedly loved them.

Cate studied the replays intently. This was her first real training session. She wanted to make sure Adrian would keep doing it.

“A king can be great and people will still want him dead.” Adrian lowered his voice. “Cody needs a warrior to protect him. Not many child rulers survive.”

Cate’s quick mind began considering what that would be like.

“A body man is a warrior. They keep a king or a leader alive. They make sure the food isn’t poisoned. They fight off attackers. They’re the eyes and ears of a kingdom. A body man makes sure the kingdom continues to have peace.” Adrian smiled knowingly. “They’re also loved by the king forever, for doing that duty. No matter who else the king cares for, he secretly loves his body man the most.”

Cate leaned against the chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not sold.”

Adrian hid a grin. *She is a lot like Alexa.*

His amusement faded. That made sense since they’d both been in the labs. “It will make your dad proud of you, Cate.”

That worked.

Adrian saw it sink into her brain and catch fire. *Perfect.* “Other people will want your job. If they get it, they’ll be closer to the king than you or your dad. Cody’s body man should be a family member who loves him.”

Cate pointed.

Adrian was thrilled that the girl knew he loved Cody, that he loved all kids like family, but he shook his head. “I’m too old or I’d do it in a heartbeat. It has to be someone who can keep up with him.”

“I don’t like to kill.” Cate spilled a secret. “Joel pushed me hard, but it didn’t work.”

“And since then?”

Cate considered her time in Safe Haven. “I killed pirates because they were going to hurt my dad.”

“And your new mommy?”

Cate nodded. “I don’t feel bad for it.”

“Why not?”

“I was defending my family...” Cate got it this time. She fell quiet, thinking about it.

“You’ve learned it’s not always wrong to kill, but you’re not a killer. Now you know the difference.”

“Yes.” Cate felt relieved. She’d worried over it after that battle, but she hadn’t talked to anyone in case she was right to worry.

Adrian touched on another concern he knew they shared. “The body man has another job. He

keeps the king from killing unless the person deserves it, and even then, the king doesn't do it himself—the body man handles it. The king is never allowed to be stained in the blood of his people. Do you know what that would mean?"

Cate nodded again. "Killing would be my job..."
"And?"

"I might be able to keep Cody from going bad."
Adrian nodded. "Very good."

Cate straightened at his praise and waited for the next moment where she could earn that feeling.

Adrian cursed himself for agreeing to train her. *She's too much like Alexa. This is going to hurt me a lot more than it will her.*

Cate grinned, cruelly. "That's what will get my daddy to agree."

Adrian sighed. "Checkmate."

The door opened. Angela glared at both of them. "Marc didn't agree to this yet."

Cate smiled confidently. "He didn't forbid it."

Adrian tried not to laugh and make things worse. Cate did have her father's courage and his brains. *If she was five years older, she would be the perfect companion for my daughter's quest.*

Angela was angry that people knowingly breaking the rules. "You both have guard duty... for the next 10 hours. Get on it!"

Cate's lower lip quivered. "But—"

"No." Adrian stood up. "We knew we weren't supposed to do it. We were caught. Now we accept the punishment."

Cate glared at him for a minute. Then she saw his hand code and quickly got up. "I'll patrol the second level." She hurried off down the hall.

Angela turned. "Cate?"

Cate stopped and rotated with a wide, innocent smile. "Yes, Mommy?"

Adrian and Angela both hid amusement this time.

Angela swept Cate's bruised arms and legs, and her torn, dirty clothes. "Go eat before you start your punishment."

Adrian gave Cate a pointed glance over Angela's shoulder.

Cate stomped her foot. "One damn bow and that's it!" She marched off toward the ladder.

Adrian laughed and refused to look at Angela.

Angela had also caught his deception. "If Marc says no, you won't be able to shut her down now."

"He'll agree." Adrian didn't promise not to work on her training while they were doing their punishment. "I'm going to give him something he wants but doesn't know how to get on his own."

"What?"

"Adoration from his daughter."

Angela approved. "I'll float you around today between therapy sessions. Make her lessons short and okay for public consumption."

Adrian refused to smile. "I will."

Angela frowned at all his new bruises, but she didn't comment on them. As was usual for her

camp, most of them were bruised and sore. “What’s the problem with our gifts?”

“I told you, I don’t know anything!” Adrian tried to make his voice menacing. “You doled out a punishment, now leave me alone.”

Angela’s lids narrowed. “Stop.”

That was enough to break Adrian’s vow to make her fear him. He just couldn’t do it.

“Give me whatever answer you’re hiding because you think it will stress me.”

Adrian pushed in his chair and stared at the floor. “I don’t have an explanation. I’ve never gone through this before.” He forced out more truth. “I’m a little worried. Please don’t leave the sub for a while.”

That was what Angela had expected, but it did add more stress. “I’m staying here for now, I promise. But I’m giving the mission men two more days on land and then I’ll call a meeting so we can work on it. I expect the vote to be that we go home and find out if it recharges us.”

“Recharges!” Adrian was glad to have a possible reason for it, though it didn’t fit perfectly. He replayed her words. “They won’t be ready to go home so soon.”

His therapy moments were going well, though he hadn’t worked with the mission men directly in a couple of days. He was getting through the submarine group first, while Marc and his team stewed on what he’d told them upon their arrival

here. *And it's not enough. They all need more time and care.*

"I know, but two more days of recovery will save a few of them. I don't want to abandon the rest, but we both know they're not staying with us." Sadness came off her in thick waves. "They chose to forgo my protection. Now, I have to look after the camp that has remained loyal to the dream."

Adrian's love for her welled in his throat. Adrian bit his tongue to stop it from pouring out.

Angela glowered with real anger. "And stop trying to scare me off. I don't need the reminder to keep my distance. That's *your* issue. It's cruel to take it out on me."

Adrian was humbled and ashamed. "I'm sorry."

Angela sighed. She hated calling him on anything, but she loathed mentioning this topic. He'd hit two buttons at once. "Make sure you eat, too, *before* you start working."

"I will." Adrian took shallow breaths as the draft from so many people moving through the submarine brought up the smell of burnt flesh. They'd disposed of the two murder victims as soon as they were brought onboard. Adrian felt bad that they hadn't had some type of service.

So did Angela. She stayed in the doorway, absorbing a moment of being alone with her mentor. *I'm missing Marc again.*

Adrian didn't like it that the mission men were staying on the island tonight after what had

happened to Dace. *Please behave yourselves, guys. Don't add to the tension.*

No one liked knowing there was a killer among them. People were starting to eye each other suspiciously and make indirect comments. If the mission men had more trouble, it would add fuel to that fire.

Adrian kept contemplating random issues and complaints while refusing to look at Angela. *It's my honor, damn it! I need that.*

Angela snorted and walked away.

Adrian was grateful.

3

“Who do you think it is?”

“It has to be one of the normals. Why else would they be against us using magic to find the killer?”

“I heard they found the murder weapon last night.”

“They did. It was shoved behind a washer.”

“So all we have to do is find out who didn't turn in a knife, right? Then we throw them to the sharks.”

“It's not that easy. We're using the old laws. They might not be executed.”

“I want those laws changed.”

Angela walked by the gossiping Eagles with her tray. *So do I.* She didn't add or subtract anything. She kept her eyes on the center table.

The Eagles didn't like being ignored. The gossip got louder.

Angela hid her satisfaction and sat at the center table, where Cate was picking at her food.

Cody came over from the line with Charlie. They both had toast and tea.

Angela chuckled. “That’s been my breakfast for the last month.” She actually felt good today. *The first trimester is over. Thank God!*

Charlie spotted Mel and waved her over. “Sit with us.” He was helping her settle in during the daytime, between his other duties.

Mel brought her tray over. She was all grins and waves of happiness. “These ghosts are keen. Won’t want to go.”

Angela noticed Mel had a backpack on. She assumed it contained her handmade clothes and anything else she’d brought from the island. “Was she searched?”

Charlie nodded. “No knife.”

“I meant for identification or anything that could tell us who she is.”

“No ID, pictures, or papers other than her logbook.” Charlie stirred his tea. “I’ve been working on her mentally, but there’s not much in there. I’ve seen a plane crash and a lot of shadows that are probably the ghosts she keeps talking about.”

Charlie slid down to clear space for the island woman. “Mom, can I talk to you about the final battle?”

Cate and Cody picked up Charlie’s concerns and turned hurt, accusing eyes on Angela.

Angela had tensed. She now swallowed her bite of toast and smiled calmly. “What about it?”

Charlie heard the tone and knew she was hiding something. “He’s right. You’ve got some kamikaze plan.”

Angela dipped her toast into her mug. “Your dad is in a bad place right now. He’s reading a lot more into words and tones than he should be.”

Charlie couldn’t let this go so easily. “Are you saying he’s wrong or he’s lying?”

“He believes what he’s saying.” Angela nodded toward the doorway. “Your dad’s in the paranoia stage, too. Everything looks ugly when you’re in a bad place.”

Charlie saw Dace enter the mess.

Dace was on new crutches and not doing well. He was going too fast and slipping each time he swung himself forward.

Lisa hurried in behind him and grabbed his arm as he swung again. “Go slower!”

Dace laughed loudly, but it didn’t sound like he was having fun. “You should have seen me as a teenager.”

Lisa huffed. “I don’t want to see you now.”

She’d resorted to being rude, but Dace wasn’t getting the hint.

Dace swung forward again without watching where he was going.

Lisa pulled him away from the line of people waiting for coffee, barely catching him before he fell over.

“Fun!” Dace laughed again.

Lisa assumed he was doing this to force her into contact with him and his sexy body.

Dace hoped she didn't see how scared he was. Acting stupid was better than everyone thinking he was a blubbering coward.

Lisa felt someone come up behind them. She let go of Dace and shoved him toward one of the booths while drawing her gun. “Down!”

Gus froze.

Lisa's finger tightened on the trigger.

Dace fell against the booth and rolled onto the bench, screaming.

Eagles stepped toward them.

Angela sighed. “Like I said, paranoia. Things that are normal suddenly seem dangerous and feel like a threat.”

Lisa realized Angela was talking about her. She slowly put her gun away.

Gus went to collect his travel mug. “I hope you get decaf.”

Light chuckles broke some of the tension.

Lisa went to help Dace, who had stopped shouting but was still whimpering. Lisa shrugged, using the moment. “I told you to leave me alone.”

Dace fought the pain. “This will just bring us closer together.”

Piper was on duty over the mess. She stepped forward angrily. *He's humiliating me!*

Adrian scowled at her as he entered. “You're on duty, Eagle!”

Put on the spot, Piper was forced to pick between the Eagles and her relationship.

“Which one do you want and which one do you need?”

Piper realized she wanted the slot more than the man. She stayed on duty.

Adrian nodded. “You just cemented your place with the Eagles.”

Piper was thrilled; she was also sad and angry.

Dace missed all of it. He only had eyes for Lisa.

Everyone looked over as more people came into the mess. This time, it was the caretakers, orphans, and their Safe Haven helpers. Except for Trent, all of them had been assigned. Trent had volunteered.

Angela was delighted that he was bonding with the kids. Trent was on the verge of finding his place in their society. It might not be the norm, but it would be good for him and great for their kids and camp.

Trent helped the younger kids at the end of the line get a tray, being sure they picked healthier choices along with those that tasted good to them. Telling the kids stories last night had woken his fatherly side. *I wasn't sure about kids before, but I've changed my mind. At some point, I'll want to be a father.*

Trent smiled at the little boy by his side. *I'm going to adopt. I don't need to have my own. All these kids right here need my love.*

Those who caught Trent's thoughts approved. Their respect for him grew.

Angela glanced over to find out if his girlfriend understood how special Trent was.

Jayda was studying Gus as he filled his travel mug. She hadn't even noticed Trent was here.

Angela sighed as Trent also saw who she was watching. "It's not a good meal unless we have a little drama to go with it."

Charlie laughed.

Cate put a hand on Angela's wrist.

Angela smiled at the girl. "Drink your milk."

Cate made a face and then did as she was told.

They all watched Trent walk over to Jayda's table.

Trent waited for Jayda to notice him.

Jayda twitched at the sight of Trent suddenly standing by her side. "Hi! I didn't know you were here."

"Clearly." Trent didn't get mean, but his voice was carved in stone. "We're no longer a couple, Jayda. You're single now. Go chase Gus or Biff or anyone you want. I'm done being disrespected."

Jayda flushed bright red as Trent returned to the kids.

Gus looked over in surprise. *Jayda's been eyeing me?*

Angela observed it all in hidden satisfaction. Jayda was special to her future plans. She needed a mate who could match her and Trent wasn't it. In fact, when this run was over, Trent wouldn't even be an Eagle anymore.

"He'll be a den mother."

Angela nodded at Cody's guess. "He'll love them the way I love you and your sister." Angela looked at Cate.

Cate froze. "It was an accident, honest."

They saw she was dropping her meat onto the floor.

Charlie and Cody snickered.

Angela didn't have the heart to scold her. "At least drink the rest of your milk. Monster."

Cate giggled and picked up her cup. That old insult had become a loving endearment from her new mother.

Angela knew. *That's why I use it that way.*

Jayda left her table and then left the mess. Her thoughts were full of anger and blame that was all directed at herself. As she went by Trent, she forced out an apology. "You deserve better. Be happy."

Trent nodded at her and resumed helping the kids.

Jayda held in her tears until she was in the hallway. Then they flowed over her cheeks like a waterfall. *I just lost another chunk of my honor. Damn me!*

The Eagles felt bad for her, but there was nothing they could do to help. She had to fix this one on her own.

Piper decided Trent had the right idea. She whistled, not leaving her post.

The loud noise got attention from everyone, including Dace.

Dace felt it coming. All at once, he saw how he'd been treating her, how he'd humiliated her and betrayed her trust. He opened his mouth to stop her, to beg her not to do it.

"Too late." Lisa knew that look. Piper was pissed.

Piper blew him out of the water. "We're done, Dace. I can't be with a cheater."

That reputation settled around Dace's neck. He hung his head in shame. "Can we talk in private about this?"

"There's no need. I see who you want more." Piper lifted her chin. "But I don't do sloppy seconds. I'm worth more than that."

Angela nodded in satisfaction. *Yes, you are.*

All four females on this run who were sorting out their love lives were special. Jayda, Erin, Lisa, and Piper were all going to be on a team together in the future. *Work it out now, ladies. Eagle runs don't need this drama.*

Charlie chuckled. "Then why do we always get it?"

Angela let out a sigh. "Because we're human, I suppose. If we were perfect, none of this would be our reality." She smiled uneasily at Mel and finished eating her soggy toast.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Troubled Waters

1

“**G**ood morning.”

Theo groaned as he sat up on the cot. He held his aching head.

Zack rose from his stool and went to the small coffee maker that the caretakers had set up in the hallway. He poured two mugs and returned to the brig. “Here.”

Theo forced himself to get up and take one of the mugs. He fought his rolling stomach to take a sip.

Zack stretched his arms, rotating the hot cup as he did so. *I need a real workout soon.*

The submarine had a tiny gym, but few of them were using it yet. Zack had decided to spend some off time there. He didn’t like it that sitting for an hour was making him sore.

“In two minutes, we’re going to have a talk. Do your business.” Zack retreated into the hall to give Theo privacy to use the bathroom in his cell.

Zack watched people going by as they started their daily chores and shifts. The drama from the mess was already spreading. Zack listened to the gossip with half an ear. The other stayed turned

toward the cell. He didn't believe Theo was dangerous, but he wasn't taking a chance on it.

Zack was looking forward to this shift being over. Angela had invited him to join the council meeting that was happening in about an hour. Zack wanted that position more than he was able to express. It meant everything to him that Angela trusted him enough to give him a chance to shape their laws.

The brig toilet flushed.

Zack waited another minute, then went back in.

Theo drank more of the coffee and tried to brace for another lecture that wouldn't help him. *I need a drink!*

Zack scratched his arm. "You need a run."

Theo looked at him through blurry eyes. "Why would a run help me?"

"It would remind you of what we're fighting for."

Theo grunted. "World peace and all. Yeah, yeah." Theo had woken bitter. He didn't try to temper it. "Go pedal that shit to someone who doesn't know how badly it stinks."

Zack chuckled without humor. "I can see this conversation is going to go well."

"Just get it over with and then leave me alone."

Zack motioned with his mug. "The boss has restarted the constitutional document meetings. Did you know?"

“Yes.” Theo didn’t care about making the laws. He drained his cup, hoping the caffeine buzz would help.

“Would you like to guess what topic they covered last night?”

Theo tensed. “What?”

“Criminals and punishments. Now why do you think she would cover that now, when there are so many other more important issues?”

Theo paled. “Because of me.”

It was really because they were about to catch a killer, but Zack was using it to help Theo see how near he was to that line. “Your charges are minor. Angela gave you the least of what she could have. She wants you to recover and be happy, but you’re fighting her every step of the way. You have to stop.”

“I can’t!” Theo threw his empty cup at the bars.

The cup cracked and bounced on the tile.

Zack was glad for the specially made gear on this sub. There was less of a mess to clean up. “We’re all losing patience with you. Those minor charges will still earn you serious jail time if we’re all feeling this way when we go home. The boss isn’t going to tolerate your behavior anymore. She’s out of patience.”

“Drop me off somewhere. I want to leave.”

“And that would have been possible *before* you acted so stupid. Now, you have charges to face.”

Theo realized he was trapped. He tried to stop the tears, but they dripped stubbornly down his cheeks. “I want to go back.”

Zack stared in dismay. “Marc didn’t reset time. That’s why you’re a mess.”

“I used the Eagles as a distraction for a while. Then I used Debra. When it didn’t last, I used my body. None of it worked.” Tears rushed down Theo’s face. “I want my old life back!”

It bothered Zack to keep finding more people who were crushed by Marc’s failure. He scowled deeply. “That’s never going to happen. Our old lives are dead and no amount of drinking will bring them back. You have to bury the past, Theo, or it will take the only thing you have left—your life.”

2

“We spent time on life and liberty last night and this morning. We mostly agree, and we’ll come to compromises on the few areas where we don’t. On the ones where we can’t, the camp will make the choice. This morning, I’d like to work on the pursuit of happiness.” Angela glanced around the table. “Life and liberty are definite declarations that we’ve been able to define. The pursuit of happiness is vague and dependent on the individual, not the collective.”

Angela took a sip of her tea and continued. “When one of those pursuits slap against the first two, we’ll figure out where the line is and make only

the laws that pertain to it and are necessary. We're not anarchists who feel there shouldn't be any laws. We know society needs some basic rules to keep the peace. It's not giving up liberty. It's being smart. With no law against murder or kidnapping, you can't have life and liberty."

"So the pursuit of happiness should be absolute, except when it hits the first two." Lisa was already enjoying being here. The right to make their laws was tempting, as Angela had known it would be. This was being followed with a guard shift over the hall outside the medical bay, where she and Dace would see each other every time she peered in to check on him. Lisa wasn't going to let it change her mind about leaving.

Angela shrugged. "Maybe. I've been working hard on this one for months. I'd like to get us started by covering everything that doesn't work or can't be covered. It'll go faster if you toss items at me and I shoot them down. But it can't be absolute. There are always exceptions."

Zack frowned. "Like what?"

"A society that has no laws about working will never grow. Trash will gather on the streets. People will defecate wherever they want." Angela made a face. "Outbreaks will become common. Medical care won't recover, and so on."

Jayda tried to be the voice of reason. "But we've done that one and it doesn't work. People weren't so much lazy before as they were unwilling to give up the best years of their life to a job they hated."

Angela agreed. “So how do we handle it?”

Gus didn’t want to force citizens to do anything. “We let them volunteer.”

“Okay. But what if no one shows up?” Angela waited for his answer.

Gus didn’t want to follow that any further. “They will.”

Angela’s voice hardened. “But what if they don’t? The founding fathers didn’t cover enough of the what-ifs and look what happened.”

Silence went around the table.

Angela held in her displeasure. “One possible choice is to ask for volunteers and hope. Clearly, I won’t agree with that. What else?”

Angela motioned Isabel to write down her choice.

Isabel was wearing the probationary Eagle outfit that had been given to her this morning. She’d passed the two interviews Angela had arranged. There would be more of those in the future, but for right now, Isabel was a rookie Eagle.

Isabel had expected to be intimidated by the company in here, but she was handling it fine so far. All she had to do was record the important parts and make notes on anything extra Angela sent to her mentally. She was enjoying the work.

Zack tapped the notepad with his pen. “I need to know if we’re going to use money or some type of a barter system before I can give ideas.”

Jayda frowned. “Money sucked. Some citizens could eat well and some couldn’t? Some people

could buy a car while others took two buses every day? Not every poor person deserved to be poor.”

Lisa nodded. “None of them did if we consider the old saying about money being the root of all evil.”

Angela understood their point. “It’s not, but it did screw up our freedom. We went from being ruled by a king to being ruled by how much money we could earn. We just traded masters.”

Zack shook his head. “Capitalism had still given us more advancements and periods of peace than any other system. But I agree we need something better.”

“It’s always been just that, right?” Lisa wasn’t sure.

“Yes. We took what we wanted when we were cavemen. We eventually figured out trading was better. Trading then turned into actual coins. There were a lot of stages along the ride, including working for food and shelter, but that’s the basics.” Angela sipped her tea again.

“So we want to be able to let people walk into a shop and get what they need without money. The requirement can be they have to work a shift a week, or a shift a month once our population grows.” Zack believed that was a fair trade.

Gus scowled. “But it still takes away their freedom. They’re once again dependent on a job to survive.”

Lisa sighed. “I guess we can’t let them volunteer. It might work for the fun chores and the

easier stuff, but it won't give us the best person for the harder jobs."

Jayda had an idea. "What if no one has to work? Magic can get things done."

Gus smiled at her. "That would give magic a purpose and settle the normals. They'll love us because they won't have to work."

Angela had to wait for the others to finish their protests before she could speak. "We want one set of laws for everyone. We can't make half our population work and not the rest. Who else has something we can pick apart?" She waited patiently, hoping one of them would find something she'd missed.

Zack said what the others didn't want to hear. "It has to be a mandatory time they put in toward the community or we might as well keep the system we had. We can't give them complete freedom from work."

Angela also hated that choice; there wasn't a better option. "But we can give them choices that past governments took away. Let's guarantee a small piece of land they can farm, so if they refuse to do it this way, they have another choice. I won't tolerate homelessness anymore."

Zack led them into another issue they needed to resolve. "Which brings up yet another layer of government control. When we allot land, we could do lotteries for locations and such, but how do we oversee those eventual millions of homesteads? There will be laws they have to follow. One

example would be they can't dump waste just anywhere or use explosives without knowing what they're doing."

Gus scowled again. "Why not? It's their life to give."

"An explosion might catch a neighbor's land on fire and kill them." Jayda pointed at the ledger, where Isabel was recording their conclusions. "The landowners have to have rules that protect the first two rights of everyone else."

Gus leaned back in his chair. "So there's really no possible way to have true freedom and a thriving society."

Angela sighed. "I'm searching for a way to make that happen, but it's at odds. Society works best when citizens participate. If they don't, society stagnates."

Lisa swallowed the last of her tea. "What's the result of that?"

"Stagnation? Within a couple of generations, we're down to living until about 50 and birth rates slow even more than they already have. Then it will drop by about 5 years and 5% every decade until society eventually collapses. Our need for each other is tied to how we build and fix when we come together with common goals and common sense. We were designed for this right here."

Angela sighed. They'd only been in here for an hour, but that didn't matter to her bladder. "It's break time. Let's stretch, walk, maybe snack, and then keep bending our minds. The future of

humanity depends on what we're doing here. I don't want a numb ass or a full bladder to interfere. Get up and move around."

Angela was the first one out the door and the first one to enter the bathroom, making them all laugh.

3

As the others went into the hallway, Zack and Gus lingered in the control room. The men had become friends since leaving Australia.

Zack waited until they were alone. "I've been thinking a lot about Kendle and the Garden of Eden."

Gus frowned. "How are those two connected?"

"What if she was there?"

Gus knew Zack didn't mean it literally. "There were only two people, according to the Bible."

Zack countered that. "There were three, according to our new text." They'd all read the descendant history book now.

Gus leaned against the wall to stretch his spine. "Okay. So?"

"What if the translation isn't literal? Fiction writers added, twisted, and embellished real life stories all the time. If we hadn't been told the Bible was literal, could we view it as a work of literature that was recording laws as they were made, with a twist?"

“I don’t believe so, but say it’s true. What does it change?”

Zack waved a hand. “Everything. We read about Nature infiltrating the garden with animals. At the end, she used one that could speak. But what if it wasn’t an animal?”

Gus ran through the possible new characters but didn’t find the answer. “Who?”

“Marc’s twin.”

Gus stared in shock. He’d forgotten about that. “But if Marc had a twin in this life, wouldn’t he have had a twin in every life?”

“I think so. It makes sense in a couple of ways. The natural design rarely puts threes together. It’s pairs or herds, or a single couple trying to go it alone.”

“There are alternate relationships in our camp.”

“Peaceful?” Wade’s relationship might be an exception to that rule, but it was too soon for Zack to be sure.

Gus hesitated. No, most throuples were not peaceful. Safe Haven had several of those going and most of them were happy. It was rare, but they were also young relationships. The test of time would tell on those. “Some species might be designed for that setup.”

“True, but if you were creating humanity, would you only give them one female and two males in each garden?”

Gus finally got it. “No. I might do the opposite, but it makes more sense to place two pairs and have

the mothers work and breed together while the men work and fight together to feed and protect everyone.”

“Exactly. On trips *out* of the garden. We were meant to explore. The garden was a nursery for the women and kids.”

“Like the island will be for Safe Haven.”

Zack laughed. “Not if the fairer sex has their way.”

Gus focused on the main topic so he didn’t get confused. “Marc’s twin was meant for Adrian?”

Zack shrugged. “I believe it was supposed to be willing for all of them. But when the other woman figured out neither man wanted her, she became bitter.”

“And helped Nature corrupt Eve.”

“Yes. I’ve been observing the female interactions in camp, like Wade told us to do. When one female does something, the others follow. It’s exactly like the men. So the snake told Eve she’d had a forbidden apple...”

Gus snorted. “There wasn’t a snake.” He’d never believed that.

“Maybe the other woman was the snake, but I don’t think it was an apple, either.”

Gus tried to keep up through the brain fog. “I’ve heard about the bestiality theory.”

“And?”

“And I don’t buy it.” Gus’s eyes blazed for a brief second. “I wouldn’t pick an animal over Angela and no one else would either!”

“Same. I believe the apple was murder.”

“What?”

“We were told Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because of something Eve did.”

“And we found out it was Adam’s anger that got them banished.”

“Right. We assumed he murdered Elliot. Why else was he never mentioned?”

“So where does the other woman come in?”

“She convinced Adam to do it. And then Eve got rid of her.”

Both men considered how ruthless Angela was. Kendle was gone. Marc had done it, but Angela had let it happen or maybe even set it up. Both men were sure of that.

Gus slowly nodded. “Maybe. What does it mean?”

“It means all the members of the garden were corrupted.” Angela had been listening mentally as she came back from the bathroom. They’d caught her attention by staying behind. “That’s why humanity can’t be peaceful. All of our lines are flawed.”

Zack contemplated Reicher’s words about that mysterious child named Sarah. “Is Cody an exception to that rule?”

Angela shook her head. “Sadly, no.”

Gus glanced at her belly bump. “What about that one?”

Angela walked away without answering. She was impressed by their intelligence once again, but

she didn't want to say her unborn child might be the most evil girl to ever walk the earth. There was no way to know yet.

Angela rubbed her stomach and went to the small mess on the sub. "Let's get you something to eat, huh?"

Her stomach flipped. A cold chill went through her chest.

Angela rubbed her stomach again. "I'll love you no matter what."

Her guts settled.

She spotted Adrian ahead of her and felt her stomach tense again. "Damn it."

Adrian came from his post by the mess entrance. He'd caught it all. "Something's not right with you."

Angela snorted bitterly. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Your emotions are changing too rapidly." He forced out the words. "That baby is a problem."

Angela smiled sweetly. Her orbs lit up bright red. "You didn't see that. You don't remember this conversation. Resume your post."

Adrian blinked, dazed. He struggled to remember what they were talking about.

Angela watched him return to his place on guard duty. Then she went into the mostly empty mess for a bite to eat.

Gus had followed her. *Should I tell someone?*

Cody came from the bunk room. "Hiya."

Cody was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved button-down shirt that made him appear a lot older than he was. Gus wondered whose idea it had been. Most kids his age weren't so careful with their appearance. "Hello."

Cody took Gus's hand and tugged. "Listen."

Gus blinked, dazed.

Cody whispered again, then let go.

Gus moved on, trying to remember what he'd been doing. *I think I was on a patrol.*

Cody joined Angela in the mess.

Angela held out a cup of powdered milk. "Nice copy."

Cody beamed. He drank the milk and enjoyed her warmth.

Cate was already at a small table in the corner, but her mood wasn't good despite getting to abuse Adrian. Cate was glad that Marc had chosen to stay, but she was hurt and angry that he'd considered leaving them at all.

Cate reached down to scratch her ankle through the frilly socks she'd let Adrian talk her into wearing.

Angela and Cody joined her at the table.

None of them spoke. They didn't need to. Protecting the pregnancy was a common goal for all of them. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with the new baby.

The radio on Angela's belt crackled with Ray's concerned voice. "Boss, we've got a storm on the radar."

Angela knew it wasn't just a normal storm by his worried call. "Be there shortly."

"Copy."

Angela finished scarfing down the snack before going to the bridge.

Cate and Cody stayed behind. They weren't allowed to touch anything on the bridge. It was a boring room for them.

Angela smiled at people as she went by, trying to send out calmness to counteract the tension Ray's call had caused. *There's another one who can't take Mitch's place on the radio.*

Angela entered the bridge.

Ray leaned aside so she could view the radar screen.

Angela tensed. "What the fuck is that?!"

Ray nodded. "Exactly."

The green and red mass didn't have a shape, but it was enormous. It covered the entire bottom half of the monitor.

"It started coming in about an hour ago. I kept waiting for the end to appear." Ray didn't want to say he was foggy and had overlooked it.

The storm was covering hundreds of miles and it was coming straight for them. Angela keyed her radio. "I want everyone back onboard right now, Marc. Move your asses!"

Marc didn't answer.

Neither did any of the guards on the island with him.

Ray didn't want her to be mad. "That's why I made an open call."

Angela patted Ray's shoulder. "Sorry."

He shrugged off her apology. "I know I'm not as good as Mitch. I'm not trying to be."

"Let me know if you want that training."

Ray did, but he knew his limitations. "No, you're right. I can't take his place, but I'll let you know if I find someone who can."

"Perfect." Angela loved working with Ray. His calm, reasonable attitude was the exact opposite of most of his teammates.

Ray scanned the radar again. "Are we going to outrun it?"

"No. Prepare for a dive."

Ray swallowed his fear. It would be his first time.

"You'll do fine." Angela keyed her mike again. "All activities are cancelled for this evening. Adrian, I want everyone accounted for within the next half hour."

"I'm on it."

Angela went to the ladder and climbed it to stand on top of the sub. Wind blew her hair around while angry waves splashed salty water over her boots.

In the distance, a greenish gray mass was coming their way at terrifying speed. "I've never seen anything like that."

Zack was already standing on top of the sub, scanning the coming storm. His voice deepened into fear and dread. “I have—once.”

“What was it?”

“A level 5 hurricane named Katrina that killed thousands and sent thirty-foot waves across every landmass it hit.” He looked over, unable to control the fear. “Get them back onboard, Boss. Or we’ll lose them all this time. It’s moving faster every second.”

Angela immediately went to the waiting RIB. “Come on. Let’s go get our people.”

Zack stayed on her heels as she jumped into the wet boat and fired up the engine.

All around the ship, troubled waters bumped against it in warning.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

One Of Mine

1

“**N**o!” Adrian flew up the ladder. “Don’t take her over!”

Adrian hit the top of the submarine and ran as fast as he could on the slippery surface, but it was too late. Zack had already headed for the island. “Damn you, Zack!”

Charlie, Cate, and Cody had followed Adrian. They all watched the RIB near the rough breakers in horror.

“Bring her back!” Adrian realized shouting was all he could do. His gifts were out again.

Charlie keyed his radio, but he already knew Zack couldn’t hear them through this wind. “Bring her back, Zack!”

There wasn’t an answer; the RIB didn’t change directions.

“Why are you yelling?” Cate was scared, but she didn’t know why she should be.

Cody hugged his sister to comfort her and himself. “Nature got her off the boat.”

“Zack knows better than that!” Adrian had felt her leave the sub. “Why did she go? She knows it’s not safe for her over there!”

“That’s why she’s been staying on the boat?”

Adrian nodded at Charlie. “We told everyone the mission men needed some space, and they do, but it was mostly to protect her.”

Adrian had understood they were targets again as soon as the first bird attack happened. “She promised she wouldn’t leave the sub!”

Charlie pointed. “They’re at the breakers.”

All four of them held their breath as the bouncing RIB hit the first breaker and sailed into the air.

2

Zack cursed himself as the RIB slapped down and Angela’s light body slid toward the water. He reached out with his free hand and jerked her back into the boat by her arm.

Angela found a wet grip on the handle with one hand and held tight to Zack’s arm with the other. *This was a bad idea.*

Zack let out a noise of concern. *I don’t want to do that again!* But he didn’t have a choice.

The ocean roiled all around them, pushing on the small boat. Zack throttled to full power to get over the last breaker.

Angela slid to the side again as the boat lifted; her fingers slipped off the handle. She locked her feet around Zack’s leg and held on to him tightly.

Water gushed over the sides as the boat landed, soaking them and filling the RIB with one tall wave.

Zack had to use both hands to steer now and hold on himself. He curled his leg in and trapped Angela's soaked body between his knees.

Wind gusted harshly against them, lifting the front of the RIB.

Zack steered onto the flooded beach and then into the muddy grass, killing the engine at the last second.

Angela rolled through the water in the RIB and kept going, rolling out into ankle deep mud that tried to pull her boots off. The wind blew salty water into her face as it started to rain. *We're in deep shit this time.*

Kyle hurried to meet them with dawning dismay coming over his expression. *How did I let this sneak up on us?* He had no idea what he'd been doing for the last few hours.

Angela ran toward the group that was standing beneath the useless protection of the large tent. "Get in the boat! Get in the boat!"

She grabbed one of the caretakers, while Zack handed over control of the RIB over to Kyle.

Kyle helped Zack flip the boat to empty the water. They righted it quickly and began helping the frightened people into it. There was no need to push it into the rough water first. The ocean was coming up fast. By the time they got everyone in, the water would be high enough to let him restart the engine and head back.

Angela shoved Erin toward the boat. "I need you on the sub!"

Erin let Angela and Greg put her into the RIB, heart pounding as she woke up. “What’s happening?”

“Nature’s visiting!” Angela got the other caretaker and a dazed military man stumbling toward the RIB. She splashed back through the fast-rising water to the big tent. “Greg! Shawn!”

The mission men didn’t argue. They also didn’t hurry.

Angela recognized they were having a mental moment, but there wasn’t time to handle it. “If you’re awake, take someone to the boat and hold onto them!”

Erin helped Shawn sit down in the cold, wet boat. “I’ve got you.”

Kyle did the same for one of the shivering caretakers. He was strong enough to hold onto her light form and still steer the RIB, like Zack had tried to do with Angela. They would have more weight for this run. Hopefully, that would keep the ocean from knocking them around as much.

Marc stared at Angela’s soaked form as she guided more people toward the RIB. “Where are we going?”

Kenn pointed at the ocean. “There’s a sub out here. We’re being rescued.”

The mission men in the tent cheered. The heavy wind was blowing stuff around; they knew they needed a sturdier shelter, but they didn’t understand much else.

“That’s all I can fit in this trip!” Kyle waved.
“Get in, Boss!”

Angela wiped rain from her face. “Take them to the sub!”

They were only running one RIB at a time to conserve fuel. They couldn’t take everyone in one run and the ocean wasn’t going to allow them a second trip. Kyle cursed himself again for going foggy while on duty. “Get in!”

Angela shook her head. “I’m not leaving them. Get those people back!”

Kyle stared at her as the water lifted the RIB despite the weight. The ocean was coming in fast and hard, rushing up the beach without pause.

Angela motioned in Eagle code. *Lock it down.*

Kyle slowly nodded. “I won’t let them off the sub.”

“Keep them together, Eagle. You have point.” Angela ran toward the tent to get out of the rain that was now driving into their faces.

Kyle fired up the engine and steered the boat around. “Hold on to everyone!”

Angela ducked into the tent and scanned the men who were left.

Marc and Kenn were watching her, but their eyes were glassy. They clearly didn’t understand the danger. *That explains why Marc didn’t return to the sub with Dog.*

Biff and Thomas were pointing at the RIB and laughing.

“That looks like fun.”

“I’m next!”

Wade came over to Angela. “I can’t keep a thought. Hit me!”

Angela drew back and slapped Wade, hard.

Wade blinked. Awareness began seeping into his face. “Thank you...” He blinked and rubbed his cheek. “I’m awake now.”

Angela rotated toward the others.

They all flinched away from her.

Angela missed her gifts desperately. “We have to wake them up!”

Wade shook off more of his fog. “What do you want me to do?”

The rain hadn’t helped the men who’d been standing on the beach, and Angela couldn’t bring herself to slap the males observing her in fear. Reicher’s methods were too harsh. She also didn’t think it would work on them. They were used to being hit.

She concentrated on Marc instead. “Marine! Snap-to!”

Kenn and Marc automatically squared their shoulders and waited for orders.

“You’re about to fail your run!”

Angela’s shout dug into their brains and pulled the plug on the fog.

Kenn snapped out of it first. He paled as he spotted the water pushing toward them. “Are we still in Hell?”

Angela snorted as she reached out for Marc. “Hell isn’t this wet.”

Marc stared at her as she shook him. *I know her. That's...that's...* “Angela.”

Angela shoved him toward Wade. “Don’t let him go back to sleep!”

Thomas was the only one left. Angela handled him like the other military men. “Heave-to, sailor! Your station is flooding!”

Thomas blinked. Then blinked again. Awareness of his surroundings brought fear to his brain. “Who let in all this water? It’ll sink the sub.”

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. “Get over here! Help me gather this stuff!”

“Where are we going?” Marc wasn’t fully awake, but he was getting there.

“Mel’s camp. It’s the highest point on this island. Grab everything you can. We won’t have time for a second trip.”

The panic in her voice was starting to get through. Men swept the ocean and the sub in concern.

“He jumped the breaker!” Wade pointed. “Kyle jumped the breaker with all those people. It’s a new record!”

Eagles cheered as they continued to gather what she pointed at.

Angela took deep breaths and hoped they kept waking or she would never be able to save them all.

Water sloshed over her boots and into the tent, lifting the lighter gear.

Angela hurried. *I might not be able to save any of us.*

Angela heard the tent flapping in the growing wind... “Take down the tent!”

Her mind began snapping ideas into place. “Bring the poles, too. We need it all!”

Men went to do that while exchanging confused looks.

Angela ran to the heavy toolbox. “Hammers. Hammers.”

She pulled out a claw hammer and a sledge hammer and shoved them into her deep inside jacket pockets. “We need two big rocks we can use for hammers!”

Wade scanned the ground around them. “What are we building?”

“I’ll explain as we do it.” Angela didn’t want to waste time talking. The water was coming faster. “Wade!”

“What? Did I do something wrong?” He stared at her in confusion.

“Think about Samantha!” Angela grabbed a water bucket and one of the lids.

“Samantha...” Wade’s mind clicked on. Fear began to replace the confusion. “Boss?”

“Get two rocks for hammers!”

Wade quickly spotted what she wanted and began digging them up with his hands. “What’s happening to us?”

“I wish I knew.” Angela grabbed Wade’s tool belt and clicked the snap. She dropped it into the bucket and fastened the lid. Then she used rope

from the tent to tie the bucket to Wade's wrist. "Don't lose that!"

She was having to shout over the growing wind and roar of the ocean now.

Wade put the two rocks on top of the bucket and then lifted it. His mind continued to wake as he took in their environment.

"Duck!"

Wade crouched at her shout.

A folding chair went sailing by them and plunged into the water covering the beach.

"Kenn, carry those oxygen tanks!" Angela was grateful they'd brought them over and hadn't used them. "How long will that last us?"

Kenn wasn't sure. "A couple hours each, maybe."

Thomas was horrified. "That's not long enough!"

"I know. I'm working on it. Kenn, get those tanks!"

Kenn picked up the tanks and the wetsuits, working on autopilot. He didn't hurry.

Angela marched over and slapped him. "Wake up!"

Kenn blinked. A frown came over his face. "You hit me."

"Welcome to that feeling." Angela pulled on his arm. "Head for the trees. Go!"

Kenn stumbled and caught himself. "Stop yelling. You always yell..." Kenn came to all at

once. He looked around in terror. “Water everywhere.”

Angela shoved Wade toward Kenn. “Go! Get to those trees!”

Kenn took off running. Wade followed.

Angela remembered her dream and Charlie’s nightmare. She went faster, helping the men take down the tent.

Marc automatically rolled the canvas as they pulled it down. His mind fought to clear itself. *We’re in danger. Someone’s yelling. It might be my Drill Sergeant. I’d better hurry up or my ass is grass.*

Angela pushed Marc toward the trees. “Follow your men, Grunt!”

Marc stumbled off, splashing through the water that was up to their ankles now.

Zack pulled the tent poles free and handed them to Thomas. Both of them were fully awake and working instead of asking questions that no one could answer.

Angela grabbed one of the collapsible water barrels, but she couldn’t carry it.

Marc saw her problem and ran back. He shoved the lighter tent canvas into her arms and carried the water barrel.

Angela was grateful. She also grabbed some of the floating items before they were washed away, and then followed her team toward the trees.

She glanced over her shoulder in time to see the submarine vanish behind a geyser of water as

another thick wave crashed. “Come on, Ray. Get that ship under the surface!”

Thomas also looked back. “What about us?”

“We’ll do what we always have—survive.”

Thomas splashed along next to her. “My gifts are out again.”

“Same.” Angela plowed through the swirling water. She didn’t have an answer for it. The twins had recharged her this morning, so that theory was out. “I want you, Zack, and Kenn in those wetsuits. Wade and Marc don’t get one.”

Angela hated to take the other one for herself, but she was the lightest here, even though she was pregnant. She needed the protection. “We’ll keep Wade and Marc between us.” She hoped it would be enough. She was out of options and almost out of time.

Thomas began to comprehend what she had in mind. “Where do you want the tanks?”

“In the trees. We’ll share the hoses. Find me some goggles or glasses in the kits you’re all wearing.”

“Will do.”

Angela swung around and immediately shoved Thomas aside.

A bag of gear flew by, just missing them both.

Thomas recovered and stopped himself from falling into the water. He grinned at her. “It’s just another fine Navy day!”

Angela had to laugh. “I knew you were one of my Eagles. I love it when you guys prove me right.”

Thomas absorbed the feeling.

Angela grabbed his arm and kept him moving as she realized he wasn't fully awake either. "Come on!"

"Whatever you want, Boss." Thomas was sold.

"I want you to hurry!"

"You got it."

3

"Hurry up!" Adrian grabbed arms and hands to pull dazed people from the RIB. "Get out!"

Kyle and Zack helped too, but they also watched the water rise. It was lapping over the top of the submarine now, soaking them all even more. The ride had been wild and wet. The ocean had reached a deadly point. They couldn't go back.

Kyle began deflating the RIB as soon as it was empty.

"No! Stop!" Adrian grabbed Kyle's arm.

Kyle shoved him away roughly. "You can't leave!"

"We have to go get her!"

Kyle motioned in Eagle code.

Adrian fought the arms that pulled him away from Kyle.

Kyle tried to hurry with the RIB as the others fought the wind to reach the ladder. The rising water was bumping the deflating boat roughly, trying to steal it from his wet hands.

"We have to go back!"

Greg dragged Adrian toward the hatch, following orders automatically. “Do your job!”

Adrian jerked away; a thick wave sloshed over the submarine and knocked him to his knees.

People slid out with the water as it retreated.

“Grab them!” Kyle let go of the RIB and snagged Erin’s arm as she slid by him.

Greg slipped over the sub and managed to get a grip on the RIB.

The deflated RIB began to sink in the harsh waves.

Adrian dove after Greg and got a hold of his arm. He pulled hard, leaning against the wind.

Kyle pushed Erin toward the hatch and helped Adrian haul Greg in. “Is that everyone?”

Shawn pulled Biff toward the hatch. “We’ve got ‘em all! Come on!”

Everyone fought the wind and waves to get down into the sub.

Inside the submarine, the warning alarm was blaring as Ray prepared to take them under the water. It couldn’t drown out Adrian’s furious shouts. “You should have gone back!”

“Shut up!” Kyle was sick of it. “Do your job, damn it! We need you!”

Adrian’s mind let that sink in this time. He came down the ladder ahead of the mobster, holding in another shout.

Kyle shut the hatch. “Count off!”

Adrian scanned the line of survivors. “We’re just short six. They’re on the island!”

Kyle locked the hatch. “Tell Ray to go!”

“Go where?” Adrian fought the fog.

“She told him to dive. We’re waiting it out right here, just lower.” Charlie tried to send calm waves to Adrian, but he didn’t have his gifts. “Shit! I hate being powerless!”

Adrian swallowed his panic as the submarine was jarred by another rough wave; he glowered at Kyle. “I’ll never let this go.”

Kyle swallowed his own fear and glared back. “Neither will I!”

Adrian turned away before he could continue the fight. He swept the anxious people and pulled on his skills as a leader. “Hold onto something while we go down! Brace the kids! Watch out for falling objects!”

Kyle went toward the bridge. He couldn’t call Ray. His radio was drenched and useless, and his gifts were out.

Cate and Cody came running through the crowd, shoving people out of their way as they zeroed in on Kyle.

Zack stepped in front of the kids and swung them both into his arms. He tolerated their shouts and beating arms, but he didn’t let them attack Kyle.

Adrian waved at Charlie. “Get them working.”

Charlie immediately followed his orders.

All around them, Eagles recognized the moment. Adrian was back in charge, if only for this ugly moment.

Charlie stayed out of reach of the twins and said the one thing guaranteed to get their attention. “I need your help to save them.”

The twins stilled, waiting.

Charlie motioned toward the therapy cubby. “Come with me. It’s for your ears only.”

Adrian didn’t know if Charlie really had an idea, but he suddenly hoped so. *Because I’ve got nothing.*

He glared at Kyle’s back as the mobster entered the bridge. *If she dies, so will you!*

4

Kyle didn’t hear the threat, but he felt it. He stared at Ray in open remorse. “If we don’t get them back, kill me so Adrian can’t.” If Angela died, Adrian would make him suffer more than the mission men had during their time in the lab.

“What’s going on out there?”

Kyle locked the bridge door. “Just another day in the life, you know?”

Neither man answered.

Harry was watching the camera tapes again. Kyle spotted a piece of paper with a handwritten note on it.

Looking for whoever hid a knife.

“Are you okay?”

Harry nodded. “Looking for a knife someone hid.”

Kyle’s concern grew. “Ray, we need to go. It’s too rough to stay on the surface.”

Ray stared at him blankly. "I'm too drunk to drive."

"Drunk?" Kyle realized both men were suffering from whatever had dazed them all on the island. "Snap out of it! We need you."

Ray got up and went to the coffee maker. "Do you want a cup?"

Kyle scowled. "Think, Ray! You have to dive!"

Ray poured a cup of hot water and sipped it without the coffee grounds. He made a face. "That's way too weak."

Kyle took the mug from him and sat it down. He pulled Ray over to the chair. "Get this submarine under the water!"

Ray smiled. "It's a submarine! I was wondering where we were."

Kyle realized this was going to take stronger methods. He got in Ray's face. "Wake up!"

Ray recoiled. "Brush your teeth!"

Kyle shook Ray by his shoulders. "Grant! Safe Haven! Angela!"

Ray blinked a few times. "I love charades."

Kyle let go. "What wakes a man up no matter what else is happening?"

Harry didn't glance away from the slowly rolling video footage. "Sex."

Kyle groaned. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this."

Kyle put a hand on Ray's scruffy cheek. "You're a big, strong man, Ray and I want you! I dream about kissing you...and stuff."

Harry's head slowly rotated toward them.

Kyle leaned in. "I want you to buff my beanie or bump my hump or whatever the hell you call it. I need you to be my man and make me feel...man things."

Harry cleared his throat. "I should leave you two alone."

"This isn't working." Kyle retreated and tried to come up with something else.

"I'd like to respond to that hot mess."

Kyle's head snapped up. "Ray?"

Ray made a face. "First, I'd like to say I'm flattered, really. Second, I'm so turned off now that I think I'm straight. Please don't ever do that again."

Kyle grinned in relief at Ray's joke. "When did you wake up?"

"During the buffing."

Kyle groaned loudly. "I was trying to wake you up. Please forget I said any of that."

"I will." Ray took his seat.

Harry snickered. "I won't. We'll be talking about your beanie-buffing for years to come."

Kyle unlocked the door and left, slamming it behind him.

Chapter Thirty
Old Times

1

The dive went well.

Ray was proud of himself for following the instructions correctly. He was also concerned about the foggy cloud that kept coming over his mind. It was making it hard for him to remember what he was supposed to do next.

Ray didn't call Kyle back. *I can do this. I'm the captain!*

Ray scribbled another note and quickly taped it on the active radar screen.

The bridge was warm and smelled like an upset stomach. Ray didn't know which one of them it was coming from, but he hoped it stopped soon. There was nowhere for the odor to go.

Harry leaned over the counter with his chin resting on both hands, continuously scanning the monitor for his target.

“What was I supposed to do?” Ray focused on the other notes he had written. He found one with a big star next to it and hoped that was the correct one. “Set the autopilot as soon as the dive ends.”

Ray shook his head to clear it. “Now how do I set the autopilot?”

The next note grabbed his eye. “Follow the instructions on the monitor.”

Ray scanned the monitor and found step-by-step instructions for resetting the autopilot. He breathed a sigh of relief and began following them.

The submarine settled heavily in the water, but it had stopped swaying and groaning. They were deep enough that the worst of the hurricane overtop of them wouldn't affect their vessel.

The same couldn't be said for the island. The radar screen was showing a fast rise in sea level that was terrifying. Ray hoped they had gotten everyone off the island, but he didn't have his gifts to ask the hive and he didn't want to stop following the instructions until he reached the note that said he was done. Ray remembered writing that one, though he couldn't recall anything that had come before it.

Next to Ray, Harry kept watching the footage while occasionally glancing at his own written note. *I'm looking for a knife hider.*

The next frame clicked and showed Goldie removing a knife from his belt.

Harry sat up straighter. “Is that it?”

He'd been here for a total of 14 hours over the last two days. He was ready to be done.

Goldie slid the knife behind the washer.

Harry clapped as he stood up. “That's it!”

He paused the video and went to the door. “Come lock this door behind me, Ray.”

Ray automatically got up and locked the bridge as Harry left. Then he stopped. “What am I supposed to do now?”

Ray spotted the coffee mugs. “That’ll help me remember!”

He went over to prepare a cup.

Messages began popping up on the monitor behind him, waiting for him to take the next step.

Ray didn’t notice.

2

Harry listened for the click. As soon as he knew the bridge door was locked, he went to the guard post. “I need to talk to the point man.”

Jayda had volunteered for duty here so she could avoid the drama happening on the lower levels. “The boss left instructions for you.”

Jayda was in full Eagle gear and appeared to be completely alert. That was comforting to Harry. *Because I’m not, at all.*

Jayda handed Harry the note from Angela.

Announce it openly and get them on the move. Do not use their name. We have more than one problem that you’ll be flushing out. Get help and get going, Eagle!

Harry shoved the paper into his pocket, delighted at the freedom of leading the next step in this investigation. He keyed the radio on his belt. “I need some volunteers to help me round up our

killer. I found the footage we need for a trial. Now we'll make the arrest. Meet me by the mess."

Tension ran through the sub.

Jayda smiled at Harry. "Don't forget that we would like a confession if possible."

Harry shrugged. "I don't hand out the torture in this camp. I do, however, receive it."

Harry realized that wasn't as funny as he had intended it to be. "Sorry. It sounded better in my head."

Jayda still chuckled. It was wonderful that Harry had recovered enough to be able to joke about something so awful. "Here comes some of your volunteers. Happy hunting."

Harry saw the rookies and grinned. "Just like old times."

3

"This is just like old times." Shawn smiled at Adrian as they guided injured people down the ladder. The ocean and then the dive had knocked some of them around a bit.

Adrian snorted, but he didn't respond. He didn't have the extra breath to spare. Getting Biff down all of the ladders had been difficult. What made it even harder was that all of the people from the island were acting strangely. None of them appeared to realize what was going on or how much danger they were all in.

Uninjured people were also walking around them and going to the medical bay or the mess on their own, where one of the remaining military men, the Air Force guy, was working a shift to keep everybody supplied with food and coffee. Adrian didn't know where the other two military men were. *Gotta learn their damn names at some point.*

Even though they had a few injuries from it, Adrian was thrilled that Ray had completed the dive without crashing the sub. A lot of people had been tossed around, but no one had been seriously hurt as far as he could tell. Adrian was grateful, seeing as how both of their senior medics were out of commission.

Harry was on the hunt for a killer; Adrian knew that order had come directly from Angela and he wasn't going to overrule it. Shawn was helping him get people to the med bay, but he was just as spacey as everyone else. Adrian didn't know what had happened on the island, but it was spreading. He was even more terrified for Angela than he had been before.

"I'm going to go help Harry." Lisa went by before Adrian could remind her that she was supposed to be on duty down here right now. She'd had enough of Dace's pushy, disrespectful behavior, but she was more worried about the rumors going around. People believed the murderer had been allowed to go free this long because the normals were afraid to let the Eagles use magic to catch the bad guy.

Lisa had been on the cruise ship during the riots, when the normals had almost taken over the ship and gotten themselves killed for it. Lisa didn't want a repeat. It was important to get this killer locked up as soon as possible so those rumors would fade away.

It will help our reputation if a normal is the one to catch them. Lisa hoped to be there when that happened.

Erin kissed Greg on the cheek and then followed Lisa. "Wait for me."

Erin wasn't worried about their reputation, but she did want the killer locked up. They had enough stress with the boss being trapped on a flooding island without letting a killer run free.

Adrian saw Lisa and Erin had both bandaged the small scrapes and cuts they had gotten during the dive. Both of those females were an asset to any Eagle team. They were also foggy, but didn't recognize it. Adrian did. Neither of them were begging forgiveness for leaving Angela over there or attacking Kyle for allowing it.

"Cool area." Trent stared into the bunk room. "What's it used for?"

Adrian sighed. "This sucks."

Adrian motioned at Piper as she came from the bathroom. "We need more space in the medical bay. Help Shawn get some chairs set up in there."

Piper was happy to help. It would give her something to do beyond second-guessing the choice she'd made by breaking up with Dace. It would also

make her uncomfortable to be around him while she carried in those chairs. *And maybe I deserve that. I'm not sure yet.*

Adrian helped Biff to the first bench in the medical bay. *Piper's another one who needs some therapy. The boss sure picked a hell of a crew for this run.*

Adrian looked around for anyone who was alert enough to help or not already doing something.

Greg was in a corner down the hall, with his arms folded while he observed everyone suspiciously. It reminded Adrian of Greg's first day out of the lab, but he didn't have time to handle that right now.

Adrian glanced around for anyone else.

Cate and Cody were standing a few feet away, waving at him.

Adrian frowned. "I thought you guys were helping Charlie with an idea."

The twins vanished.

Adrian blinked. *Whatever they caught on the island is definitely spreading.*

Adrian keyed his radio. "I need someone to do a patrol of the sub. Is anyone awake enough for it?"

Isabel came from the bunk room. "I can do that."

Adrian didn't like the idea of sending a rookie out alone. "Take Greg with you for protection." He didn't have another option.

Greg straightened. "Who am I killing?"

Adrian pointed. "Anyone she tells you to."

Isabel was wearing her temporary Eagle gear. Adrian liked the way it looked on her. *Now we'll find out if she has the attitude to go with that outfit.*

Greg smiled at Isabel. "Just aim me and pull the trigger."

Isabel strolled down the hall, lifting her chin. "Let's get this done."

Greg followed her, hands automatically resting on the drenched holsters of his gun belt. He hadn't changed clothes yet. He didn't seem to realize that he was wet.

Adrian shook his head. *That might be a recipe for disaster.* He didn't have time to worry about it.

"Have a seat." Piper guided Biff to the chair she'd set up, while listening to everything and ignoring Dace as he watched them all in confusion. Being under the ocean was a little spooky. Being without the boss was making that feeling worse.

"Shawn, can you take care of Biff's leg first?"

Being back on the submarine was helping Shawn. He went over to the computer and activated it without a problem. "I'll try. I just have one question."

Adrian lifted a brow. "What?"

"Which one is Biff?"

Adrian let out another long-suffering sigh. "Keep waking up, Eagle. I need you."

Ancient magic floated through the room and sank into all of them.

Shawn tensed in fear. "How long was I out this time?"

Biff shuddered. "I have the same question."

Adrian was relieved and also upset. "I'm not completely sure. A day, maybe."

Both mission men touched themselves and scanned for new injuries.

Adrian knew that reaction too well. "You're both fine. There's nothing new except Biff fell and banged up his ankle."

Shawn immediately went over to attend the injury.

Adrian stored their reactions. He planned to try that on the other dazed people as he ran into them, but he couldn't leave the medical bay yet. He needed to make sure Shawn was fully awake and going to stay that way. A foggy medic was bad for everyone. *And Kyle has point. She didn't give it to me.*

Adrian scanned Dace, who was watching them in confused silence and then turned his attention to the wolf that was lying motionless on the flat table a few feet away. There was a cat sleeping happily on top of him.

Adrian frowned. "Wasn't the cat isolated in a cage?"

Biff pointed. "Is that it?"

They all looked over to see the small plastic carrier had been cracked where it met the frame. It had been done from the inside.

Adrian chuckled. "If we could learn how to do that, maybe we could sleep on Dog, too."

The men chuckled.

Piper rolled her eyes and waited for Adrian to make things better. She'd heard he was an amazing leader, but she hadn't seen any proof of that.

Dog didn't budge even though they were making a lot of noise.

The cat on his back jerked awake and growled in warning for them to stay away.

"Try to find some food for both of them when things settle down." Adrian gestured toward Dace. "Get him to talk about his fear if you can. I won't have time to work on him tonight."

Shawn nodded. "We'll handle Dace. You handle the camp."

Adrian tried to fight how good that felt and failed. "You know it."

Footsteps came hurrying down the hall.

Adrian tensed. He already knew it wasn't good news.

Isabel came in with Greg close behind her. "The brig's empty."

Adrian scowled. "You're joking."

Isabel gave him a scornful look. "You left an engineer alone in a cell in a small room where everything was in reach. You didn't take away his belt, and you didn't search his pockets. How long did you think you could keep that bloke in there with a substandard setup?"

Adrian was shocked into laughter. "The boss knew you were one of us right off, didn't she?"

Isabel didn't know what that meant. She gave him a scornful snort and then turned around. "We'll finish the patrol."

Isabel was proud of herself for how well she was handling her first duty. *I can do this!*

Isabel ran into Greg and bounced off his hard body. She landed on her butt on the floor.

Adrian tried not to laugh. "Stop acting like us. We're professional idiots. You can't do what we do."

Isabel picked herself up and lifted her chin against the embarrassment. "Yet."

Adrian nodded. "Welcome to the Eagles."

4

"He saw us."

Charlie nodded. "Now we need to rest and recharge for a bit; then we can try reaching out to Mom and Marc."

The twins didn't want to rest yet. Doing an awake dream walk was exciting to them because it was new. So far, only a couple of descendants in their camp could project themselves.

Charlie knew they all needed a break. It didn't take magic to dream walk, but the extreme amount of concentration required to do it while awake was quickly using up his energy. He wanted to save that for an attempt to reach their parents.

The therapy cubby hadn't been used much today. Everyone was busy helping someone or

trying to find a way to save their stranded people. So was Charlie, just not in the physical sense. He was also keeping the twins distracted so they couldn't add to the problems or be hurt while everything was happening. *My mom would want me to make sure they're safe.*

“Are we the only ones who can do this?”

Charlie shook his head at Cody. “I copied it right before we left. I was hoping I would be able to use it to track Tracy while we traveled, but it doesn't work for that.”

Charlie's obvious sadness was another distraction for the twins. They felt bad for him because he was lonely.

Charlie didn't want their sympathy. He switched topics. “Are you guys happy about the coming baby?”

Both twins nodded vigorously but didn't offer any details.

Charlie found that odd, but he didn't push them. He didn't feel like he had enough life experience yet to offer therapy sessions like Adrian was doing. The quick moment of talking to Jayda about her fear after the explosion had been a necessity. No one else had been free to handle it right then. “I am, too. I know it will make my mom happy.”

Charlie did want that for her, no matter what she chose in the end with Marc. Losing two babies had changed her as much as leadership had. The difference was that leadership was good for her, while losing the babies had almost killed her.

Cate tried not to get impatient. Adrian had made it clear that was a problem she would have to conquer if she wanted to be Cody's body man. She was already practicing it. "People are acting weird. Cody should stay here with us until the alpha returns."

Charlie didn't have a problem with it, except he felt bad that he wasn't out there assisting Adrian and Kyle. "None of us are leaving this room until after they have the killer locked up."

The door opened, making them jump.

Isabel scanned all of them and then centered on the twins. "Where are you two supposed to be right now?"

Before Charlie could answer, Cate jumped up and placed her body between Isabel and her brother. "Get out."

"Cate!" Charlie was surprised by her aggressive reaction.

Cate didn't give Isabel time to say anything else. "You're from the lab. You stay away from my brother!"

Isabel didn't like being talked to that way by a child, but she recognized the little girl as Angela's daughter. *That explains why she's so wild.* "It's almost time for the kids to wash up and eat."

Cate didn't like any of people from the lab. "My brother is going to be your king. He'll eat when he wants to. Get out!"

Isabel stared in shock.

Charlie forced a smile. “They’re role-playing some castle stuff. I’ll make sure they get to the mess in a bit.”

“Okay.” Isabel pulled the door shut. She turned around and bumped into Greg again.

Greg caught her by the arm this time before she could fall. “We have to stop meeting this way.”

Isabel chuckled, but she wasn’t amused. “Why don’t you go back down and help Adrian? I’m fine. There’s nothing happening up here.”

Greg shrugged. “You’re the boss.”

He went to the ladder.

Isabel went to the next room, but her mind stayed on the little girl’s words. *So they’re setting that kid up to be a king. I wonder what makes him so special.*

Inside the therapy cubby, Charlie groaned. “That’s not good.”

Cate came back to the chair and sat down. “Why not?”

Cody was the one who answered. “Because the alpha didn’t want anyone else to know about that yet. It will cause problems.”

Charlie nodded. “We need to ease them into it. If we go too fast, that idea might die before it even has a chance to live.”

Cate shrugged. “Too late now.”

It's time to go to the source. Kyle entered the tiny workout cubby and approached the lone woman who was using the manual treadmill. He was tired of spacing out in the middle of working. *I want answers.*

Mel grinned at him and held on tightly. She was running too fast for the machine to stay smooth. “Loads of fun on this vessel.”

Kyle chuckled. “Sure.” With two long braids and dressed in sweats, Mel looked like any of the women on this sub now. *But she doesn't feel like one of us. She's different.*

He sat on the empty weight bench next to her. He held out the tattered logbook.

Mel stopped running, eyes darkening. “I know that.”

She stepped neatly off the treadmill and took the book.

Kyle observed her face; alertness came over her expression. She grew older right before his eyes. In seconds, he was seeing a hunched woman with wrinkled skin and age lines.

Kyle leaned away from her. He didn't know if it was really happening or if he was seeing things again.

“My gramps gave it to me before he died. He was wealthy, you know.” Mel flipped the tattered book over. “Guess that's why this lasted through my crash.”

Kyle didn't know how long she might stay alert. He began digging for information. "What's happening to everyone?"

Mel opened the book and began reading the notes. "I was so hopeful when I wrote these!"

A tear squeezed from her ancient eye. "They left me to die, you know."

Kyle got a chill and forced out the question he was stewing on. "Are we dead, Mel?"

Kyle had developed that theory a short time ago. It explained everything.

Mel stopped reading. "Might be. Think I am."

Kyle refused to give into panic. "Tell me about the ghosts."

Kyle had viewed several of those since leaving Australia, as had other people. He needed to know if it was really happening or if they just needed a lot of mental help.

"We're in limbo. The longer we're here, the more we fade." Mel's attention returned to the book in her hand. Her face brightened and became young again as he watched. "My gramps gave me this!"

"Yeah." Kyle realized she was back in the daze.

The fog, he amended. "Mel?"

She ignored him. "We moved around a lot, but after my gramps passed, my mom inherited his coin and things changed. I went to the best schools, ate the best grub, and I was allowed to explore things that were unheard of for a woman. I even owned my own plane. How's that for scrappy?!"

He sighed. "It's great." Kyle stood up. "Stay here for a while, okay? The sub's got some issues."

"Surely." She bobbed her head. "Bum a pen?"

Kyle gave her one of his many pens and left her there. *That wasn't helpful.*

It had also been creepy. Her words about being dead and in limbo weren't what he'd been hoping for. *I like it better when she's zoned out.*

Fog immediately took over Kyle's mind again. He wandered toward the bunk room without a thought in his head.

In the distance, Nature laughed as she continued to direct the storm straight at them. *Now, we're having some fun!*

Chapter Thirty-One
Deep Breath

1

“**G**et those vests on while you work!”

Angela held onto Marc’s hammering rock while he put his vest on. Then she determinedly plowed through the knee-high water to reach the next man. All of them were hammering in tent poles around the base of the trees.

“Make sure your pants are inside those boots!” The thought of something swimming up the inside of her clothes was horrifying.

Zack scratched his forearm and then shoved it through the vest while Angela strapped it in place. He tried to enjoy the cold water against his simmering skin.

Zack had felt the fever getting worse as they came over in the RIB, but it was too late to mention it then. *And I’m not going to mention it now. We’re too busy.*

Zack swung the rock until his arm was aching. Then he switched to the other arm and tried to keep applying same amount of force. The hard ground beneath them didn’t want to give at all. This wasn’t a prime location for building.

Next to Zack, Wade also hammered in a post while comparing this to some of his other runs. Even though this was one of the deadliest situations he had ever been in, he still didn't wish that it was Adrian here with them instead. Angela would do everything she could to keep them alive.

Something smacked into Wade's leg.

Wade grabbed the pole to keep from falling. It didn't feel like a serious injury so he kept working. They were running out of time.

Angela estimated how much rope she needed and began uncoiling it from the kit she was wearing. They had taken a few minutes to organize, including giving her all the rope. While they were building, she would secure all of them to the trees.

Kenn could feel the panic building in his brain. He swept the trees where their oxygen tanks were tied to the branches. As he watched, a bird let go of the top branch and flew off angrily. All of the eggs and nests were gone, washed away by the furious waves. Kenn now knew why the birds were so aggressive. Each time there was a big storm, they lost everything.

If I get out of this, I may feel the same way. Kenn was ashamed of himself for putting scroll diving and going rogue in the wastelands ahead of Tonya. *She earned my loyalty more than once, but she never got it.*

"This is the storm surge, right?" Kenn redirected his thoughts so he didn't lose his mind as the cold water continued to rise up his body.

Thomas brought the sledgehammer down as hard as he could. “Yes.”

Kenn used his rock rapidly and repeatedly on the pole. “How long will it last?”

“At least a few hours.” Thomas kept hammering as Angela came around and attached ropes to his belt loops, ankles, and another one to his wrist. He kept driving the pole into the island rock as she secured the ends of those ropes to the trees.

It made Kenn feel a little better to know this might all be over in a few hours. He had been under the impression that hurricanes usually lasted for days.

“It depends on how big they are, too.” It wasn’t the first hurricane Marc had been through, but it would be the first one he had weathered without a shelter. “Just don’t start pissing your pants.”

The men shared a chuckle and kept working.

Angela frowned. *Piss.* “Everyone needs to use the bathroom right now.” She immediately let her bladder go. “Then you have to hold it until this is over or it might draw problems that we can’t handle.”

All of the men followed her train of thought and then flinched away from it.

“Kendle told us they were drawn to blood and urine.”

All of them did their business while continuing to work. If not for such a bad situation, it might have been funny.

Thomas listened to their banter and followed their instructions, pulling strength from his teammates. Even though his heart was pounding in his chest, it was still better than being locked in the lab. *At least I'll die a free man.*

Thomas spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. He saw a school of panicked fish reach the surface and then dive back under the rough waves near the flooded beach. He wasn't sure if that was normal behavior because he'd never been trapped by an incoming hurricane. *But I think it means they're upset.*

Angela continued to secure the ropes. She was attaching each of them to the person on either side by ankles and wrists, with a lot of slack. They were going to be back-to-back on either side of the trees, facing away from each other so they could guard all directions. Angela hoped they didn't need to. Anything that came after them in the water was probably going to win because humans didn't belong here, and they had never trained for this. *But we'll go down with a fight.*

Marc felt her tension. He swung the hammer. *Ding!* “Kenn and I have been through something like this. *You can piss your pants if you want to.*”

Genuine amusement went through the group this time.

Angela grimaced at a stomach cramp. *I never should have had that extra cup of coffee this morning.*

A new wall of water rushed toward them and brought it up to their thighs.

Angela finished attaching ropes and helping the men get their vests on. Wade and Marc, because they didn't have wetsuits, had been given all the extra clothes out of the kits that Thomas had sorted. Everyone had a pair of goggles around their necks and pockets stuffed with gear, though most of that wouldn't work until it dried out. She didn't know how long they might be on the island after the water receded. She had brought anything she believed they might need.

The current became stronger. Angela slipped.

Zack grabbed her arm and hauled her back in, much like he had while they were in the RIB.

Zack pushed her toward the trees. "We're all tied down. Stay in the middle."

"Are these in deep enough?" Kenn wasn't making any more progress no matter how hard he hit the pole.

Marc scanned the next incoming wave. "It'll have to be. We're out of time."

Marc reached over and began tying the one loose rope to a pole. It was Angela's.

Marc was impressed. The setup might be enough to save their lives. It was a smart, resourceful idea that he would never forget.

Marc scanned the sky where ugly, unformed clouds with black edges were pushing in on them. *It won't be much longer.*

Angela and Zack began pulling down the canvas that was wrapped around each pole in a continuous bow-like shape that would give them a little bit of protection. It already was, really. The water was full of debris that was swirling around everywhere.

They'd pulled the bottom parts of those panels down upon winding it around the poles when they were halfway finished. Now that those poles were fully in the ground, the tent panels were sinking, providing more protection. Zack and Angela were now pulling the canvas around to provide a second, higher layer.

"If the water goes higher than these trees, we could have problems from above." Angela pointed at the spiky branches waving in the stiff breeze. "Watch these trees; we need to know if they go under water."

If they didn't, it would be a gift that they could climb up and get to the surface.

Angela secured herself to the trees, and then to the person next to her.

Marc tugged on her ropes a few times to make sure they were tight.

Angela smiled at him.

Marc saw the fear she was hiding so well. He tugged her toward him for a wet kiss and hug. "I love you, Baby-cakes."

"That's my Brady." Angela kissed him back and then let go. "Get those tanks ready for me."

Marc waded over to the four oxygen tanks they had tied to the trunks right above the barrel of fresh

water. It was the most important part of their gear. The tanks had stayed between them where they could all protect them while working.

Icy cold water smacked Angela in the spine and splashed up, soaking her head and neck. “Oh!”

The water level rose to their waist this time. It went up to Angela’s chest.

Thomas tried to offer some comfort. “This water is rising fast and that implies a smaller storm. The bigger ones usually take a lot longer to arrive and to go.”

That was good news, but adrenaline levels were still climbing. No one would be able to relax until this was over. Angela was glad. The men were staying awake without needing help because of it.

Angela slipped again, falling against Zack.

Zack caught her with his sore arm this time and flinched at the pain.

Angela saw an ugly rash going from his wrist to his elbow. It was bright red all around tiny bumps that had orange centers. She scanned Zack’s pale face and red cheeks and groaned. “You’re sick.”

Zack shivered in the cold water. “I’m good, Boss. Keep rolling.”

Angela had also tied medical kits onto each of their belts while they worked. She used one leg and the force of the water to hop into the trees so her waist was above the incoming waves. She quickly dug out a dose of antibiotics. “Open up!”

Zack dry-swallowed the pill without a problem, though he didn't have any faith that it would work. "We never should have stopped for that call."

The other people didn't know what he was talking about.

Angela immediately nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"Here comes another one." Kenn shuddered in dread as the wave barreled toward them.

"Remember your training. All of you have been under the water before. You'll do fine. Tug on the rope if you have a problem. Treat any injuries as best you can. I don't know how many of the supplies will work properly, but use them anyway and we'll sort it all out when we get back to the sub."

Angela's firm tone told them she believed they were going to survive this. Most of the men assumed she had already foreseen it and knew they would.

Angela was terrified that this on-the-fly plan wasn't going to be enough. "We're about to be on Nature's turf, gentlemen. We don't have a deal with the Ocean King anymore. Remember to keep a knife in hand."

"What about our guns?" Wade hated the feeling of being swallowed by the ocean.

Marc shook his head. "Some will fire and some won't. Depend on your knife."

Thomas was treading water now. "Do we have enough air?"

“If we don’t have enough in the tanks to get us through until the storm surge is down, we will float at the top of the water like worms on hooks.” Angela grinned at them. “I know I’ve always wondered what a worm goes through.”

No one laughed this time. A new wall of water was coming in that was about to take it up to the chests of the men and maybe over Angela’s head if she came down out of the trees.

“I can’t do this.” Kenn had been putting on a good act, but the higher the water got, the more he stressed. “You have to call a RIB.”

Angela tried to offer comfort. “You can do this. I believe in you.”

“I don’t give a damn what you believe. I can’t do this!”

Angela didn’t have time to be gentle. “You always were a coward! That’s why I really left you!”

Anger filled Kenn’s face, pushing out the fear.

Angela kicked water toward him. “Suck it up!”

“Fuck you!”

Angela laughed. Then she pointed. “Stay alive. that’s an order.”

All of the men followed her line of sight.

Not far enough away in the distance, tall thin fins sliced through the water.

“Is that a shark?” Zack forgot how to breathe.

Thomas swallowed salty spit. “*Sharks*, plural. I count three.”

Balls drew up; fresh adrenaline flooded them in another thick wave at the same time as the ocean.

Angela clapped her hands together to get their attention.

All the men regarded her in fear.

Angela didn't hide her own terror this time. She told them the only thing that might work on herself. "We didn't come this far just to end up as fish food. Remember your training and the things I've told you. A few hours from now, this will be over and we'll be legends among the Eagles."

Angela prepared to enter the water. "As soon as it reaches your neck, kneel down and start using the oxygen tanks. Marc will tap you on the shoulder when it's your turn."

The next wall of water rushed in, sweeping all of the men off their feet.

Angela took in a deep breath and looked upward through the driving rain that had just restarted. "We could really use some help, Doug."

She jumped into the water and joined her men.

Thomas had spent more time in the water than any of his current teammates. He righted himself and took his place with his spine against the trees like Angela had demonstrated earlier. He exhaled slowly through his nose while waiting for his turn on the respirator. His heart was beating furiously in his chest, but his mind was under control. *For now. It depends on how long we have to be down here.*

Thomas had done well in all of the underwater training, but that had been controlled simulations, and then he had been inside the safety of multiple vessels over his career. He had never faced the ocean without a defense. *This is not making me all warm and fuzzy.*

Zack held onto his rope and fought the current as he tried to gain his feet and get into his spot. He was already grateful for the poles they had pounded in. He used the one closest to him, along with the tent canvas, to push himself forward.

The rocks and grass slid beneath his feet but didn't collapse, allowing him to reach the trees.

Zack quickly grabbed the hose Marc was holding out to refill his lungs. They were already aching. His time on the warehouse wall before they left America had scarred him—inside and out. Zack wasn't sure how long he would be able to handle this.

He was also determined to survive it. *This is nothing compared to the lab run. This is nothing compared to the lab run.*

Zack repeated that to himself as he took over control of the air tank on his side. *If the mission men can do this, so can I.*

Wade had fallen and slid under the edge of the canvas. He used a tight grip on the rough material to pull himself onto the correct side of their small shelter. He then took a few seconds to tug the tent canvas down to prevent himself from sliding back through if he fell again.

Zack handed him the oxygen hose.

Wade inhaled gratefully while trying not to think about rescuing Samantha. When he'd helped Neil pull her out of the ocean, he'd never considered that he would be in that situation again. *Yet here I am.*

Kenn shivered in the cold water. His head rotated continuously, along with his body, which tangled two of his ropes. He made himself swim back the other way to untangle them. His mind wasn't in the action; it was on his nightmare. *All we need now are the sharks.*

Marc held the hose out to Kenn. They would use up the oxygen faster this way, but they had four tanks and each tank would normally last one person almost two hours. As long as things went well, they would still have oxygen left when the storm had passed, which would get them through waiting on the water to go down.

A fast glance through the murky waves told Angela they had done a good job. The white panels of the tent were illuminating the small area and clearly showing her five teammates. She pulled her knife and tugged on the ropes to get their attention.

All of the men remembered they were supposed to have their knives in hand at this point.

They pulled their blades and got their goggles in place between breaths from the air hoses. It wasn't pleasant to have the water above their heads, but it wasn't as oppressive as some of them had expected it to be. The worst part was the temperature. It was

already too cold for the human body to tolerate very long. Four of them had wetsuits on, but even that might not be enough to outlast the storm.

Angela reminded herself of her words to the team. *Fate will provide. I've done the best I could. And if fate decides I don't have anything else to contribute, then to hell with her. That bitch doesn't rule me either.*

Angela felt the first pull on the rope around her wrist. As she turned around, a diluted red substance floated by her hand. *That's blood.*

She swam around in a circle, grateful she had left plenty of slack on the ropes.

Thomas and the others pointed at Wade.

Wade let go of the oxygen hose Zack was in charge of for their side. He pointed at his leg.

Angela activated her waterproof flashlight, hoping it worked. Just because something said it was waterproof, that didn't mean it was true. *We should have tested these long before now.*

A thin beam of light illuminated a gash across Wade's thigh that was leaking blood into the water.

Angela's heart pounded. *Here we go.*

Marc kept a hold of the rope around Angela's ankle as she swam through the trees toward Wade. He carefully inhaled oxygen from the hose and held his breath while passing the respirator to Kenn. Marc wanted to turn on his waterproof flashlight as well, but they only had two of them. He forced himself to wait and pay attention to the vibrations of Angela's rope while scanning the angry water for

problems. The tent canvas was catching some of the light to provide a small circle of sight, but it wasn't going to last. The storm would be fully over them soon.

Angela awkwardly ripped open a waterproof bandage while cursing herself again for never testing their supplies in water. That would be one of the first orders she gave to Tonya and Morgan as soon as they got home.

Wade held his breath in and held his pants open so Angela could place the long bandage over his injury. He remembered being hit by debris, but he hadn't thought it was a problem.

Zack shoved the oxygen hose toward Angela's mouth. He was trying to keep track of everyone to make sure they all got a full breath twice every minute. It would be less than they needed, but it would be enough for them to survive on.

Angela placed a second bandage over Wade's injury, hoping that would block more of the blood. The waterproof bandage was sealing around the edges, but there was a pocket of air in the middle that might still put off a scent.

Angela fastened her first aid kit and then pulled Wade's pants over the bandages. That would have to be enough. On the plus side, the water was salty enough that the wound wasn't likely to get infected.

Wade gave her a thumbs up and took the oxygen hose.

Angela carefully pushed herself backward through the trees to resume her spot.

The rope around her other wrist immediately began pulling.

Angela swam around again and found Marc holding onto Kenn's ankle. Kenn was halfway up the trees, arms and legs kicking and paddling frantically. *Panic attack.*

Angela sheathed her knife. She pushed off from the trees and tried to go with the flow of the water to reach Kenn.

It was hard. At the tree line, they were already easily 10 feet below the surface, and it was a lot calmer. Up here at the top of the water, things were rough. Small pieces of debris smacked into her and spun away as she forced her body toward Kenn.

Marc let go of Kenn's leg as Angela reached him. He grabbed for Angela's rope and waited for the tug to pull them back down. Kenn had cut one of his ropes while Angela was handling Wade's injury.

Angela and Kenn broke the surface at the same time. She held on to his big shoulder and rested her head against his cheek. "It's okay. You're okay." She drew in deep breaths of air while he did the same.

Kenn was horrified by his lack of control. He was also terrified. "Just kill me now! Don't hurt me anymore!"

A tiny part of Angela was extremely satisfied to hear her tormentor finally be in the place where she had spent so many years.

Angela quickly pushed that away. *That's not the kind of person I want to be. I don't enjoy the pain of others even when they deserve it.* “You can do this, Kenn.”

“No!” Kenn gasped in air as a wave crashed next to them. Their ropes would only allow them to reach the surface for a few more minutes if the water kept rising.

Another wave crashed overtop of them, stealing their breath and forcing them under.

They bobbed to the surface, gasping in air.

Angela didn't have time to come up with a plan that would spare either one of them. “Let's make a deal. You keep Marc alive, and I won't kill you.”

Kenn immediately grabbed onto any hope that he would come out of this alive. “Give me your word!”

Angela kissed his cold, wet cheek. “I swear I will slit your throat while you sleep if you let Marc die. Now get back down there and save him!”

Angela tugged with her foot.

Marc immediately began reeling her down.

Angela held onto Kenn so he was forced to come with her. “Deep breath!”

She stayed locked in eye-to-eye combat with him as they both inhaled and went back beneath the angry ocean.

Marc pulled her down and then ducked under Kenn's rope so the Marine could return to his spot.

Angela now knew putting Kenn on the end had been a bad idea.

The rope on Angela's arm tugged again.

Angela slowly let out her breath and held out a hand for the oxygen hose as she rotated to see what new hell was reaching them.

Thomas and Zack were tugging frantically.

Angela's heart dropped into her stomach as she pulled her knife back out. Long, thick forms were appearing in the shadows on the outside of the tent canvas. *I was wrong. I don't want to be normal. I want my gifts back!*

Nature sent stronger wind gusts into the storm and then settled back to watch her biggest enemies die together. *When you're gone, it's over. Humanity will never win a war against me without you two there to lead it.*

Chapter Thirty-Two
In The Eye

1

Goldie came from the empty theater as Isabel went by. “Hi!”

Isabel jumped. *Damn.*

Goldie laughed at her discomfort. “Sorry.”

Isabel went around him, wishing she’d kept Greg with her. “I’m busy.”

Goldie scowled and followed. “I just want to talk to you!”

“I can’t. I’m on duty. Catch up with me later.”

Goldie grinned coldly as madness swarmed his mind. “I’ve caught up with you right now.”

The hallway was empty. Isabel didn’t see anyone who could offer assistance. She would have to handle this on her own. “Leave me alone.”

Isabel went to the rear storage compartment to check on the caretakers who were staying busy by organizing the next load of supplies that were needed to restock other areas of the sub.

The caretakers looked up in relief as they spotted Isabel. They’d chosen to stay in here out of the way, but being alone during this storm was unnerving. They were glad to see one of their own from the lab.

Goldie glared at them as he came in right behind Isabel. “Oi! Keep working!”

The women obeyed, but they watched him in disapproval.

Goldie stayed on Isabel’s heels, herding her toward an empty corner. “Why did they let you do rounds? Are you on their council? Why can’t we be friends?”

Isabel was fed up with being hounded. The moment he’d had with Gus hadn’t stopped Goldie’s bad behavior, only slowed it. “Leave. Me. Alone!”

Goldie stepped closer, bumping her with his chest. “Make me.”

Isabel’s first reaction was fear. A surprised tear rolled over her cheek.

Goldie chest bumped her again. He couldn’t stop the rage from filling his mind with images of her bleeding in payment for ignoring him. “You’re going to listen to me!”

Isabel held in more tears as Joseph’s face flashed in her mind. *I’m going to get hurt again.* She was starting to hate men because of that. “Why are you doing this?!”

She tried to go around him.

Goldie grabbed her arm and shoved her against the wall. “I’m talking to you!”

“Stop!”

One of the kids they were training for protection duty, Bret, came in to see who was yelling. He spotted Goldie and Isabel.

Bret looked like any of the other young guards in Safe Haven. His clothes and jacket were the same. His tool belt was the same. He wasn't. His cool air said he was levels above their junior Eagles.

Goldie didn't notice. The rage had taken over his mind.

“Let me go!”

“Stop shouting!” *Slap!* Goldie drew back to hit her again.

Isabel kned him in the groin and threw a punch. Goldie barely noticed. *Slap!*

The caretakers stayed behind the shelves now and waited for the discipline moment to be over.

Bret deliberated on the scene. *What would Reicher do?*

There was no doubt. *Kill him.*

But what would the new alpha want me to do?

The answer was the same.

Bret ran forward while drawing his knife. He spun the blade around like he'd been taught by Marc two days earlier.

Thud!

Goldie froze. His face lost awareness. He sank to the floor in a fluid movement.

The boy sheathed his knife and smiled at Isabel and the caretakers.

“What's going on in here?!” Harry had heard the noise as he came up the ladder. He'd searched the bottom level first, but hadn't found the killer. He rushed in and stopped, shocked. “You caught him!”

Isabel held her cheek, where Goldie's handprint was stinging its way into her memory. "Bret stopped him."

The boy went by Harry, nodding calmly.

"Wait." Harry motioned. "Escort your protective to the medical bay."

"I'm fine. I'll finish my rounds." Isabel stepped over Goldie while glaring at the cowering women who hadn't helped her.

In the lab, those females had also been passive, though she did have hope that once they joined the Eagles that would change. Isabel already knew from her time recording notes during the council meetings that Angela was planning on it.

I wonder if I can help that along. Isabel looked at the caretakers pointedly. "A little kid saved your asses."

One of the caretakers scowled. "You mean he saved *your* ass. Goldie wasn't after us."

Isabel turned haughty contempt on all of them. "You were witnesses. Do you think he was going to let you live after he killed me?"

Dismay crossed all their faces.

Isabel drove it in. "If I were you, I would act a little more like me and a lot less like you, or maybe Safe Haven will get rid of you because you can't do the right thing."

Harry nodded in approval. "She's not wrong. Why don't you all go help her patrol the hall up here? In times of crisis, all of our citizens volunteer for whatever we need."

The caretakers left the supplies and slowly followed Isabel out. The lab was gone; they couldn't afford to anger their new hosts.

Harry waited until they were gone. Then he slid both hands beneath Goldie's big body and began lifting the man up. "It's time to get that confession the boss wants."

More footsteps echoed.

"We'll help you." Two of the remaining military men came in to help.

"Where do you want him?"

Harry chose a place no one else wanted to be. "The incinerator room."

The military men exchanged looks, but obeyed. They'd had odder orders.

Harry hurried them through the hall, down the rear ladder, and into that stinking compartment. They didn't run into anyone. The halls were empty now.

Harry was glad of it. No one needed to see them carrying a body.

He lowered Goldie's torso and rotated to feel for the light switch.

Thud!

Harry fell forward without a pause, hitting the door as he went down.

The tallest military man knelt near Harry. "Can we use him?"

The shorter man shook his head. "It has to be a girl. They won't care about a broken medic."

“Then we should kill him. If he wakes up, he’ll give us away.”

“We might need him as a live shield. Just tie him up and gag him for now.”

The military men were dressed like Eagles. They’d taken the outfits from the dwindling supply piles in the lower corridor. They were welcome everywhere while dressed this way.

The shorter man studied their partner in crime. “What about Goldie?” He hadn’t woken yet, though they could see he was breathing.

“Leave him, too.”

“Leaving witnesses is a bad idea.”

“Neither of them saw us with him.”

“We made a deal with Goldie to take this sub!”

“Exactly. As long as we give him the woman he wants, he’ll be fine that we didn’t wait. He has no loyalty to these odd people.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Then we’ll remove him.”

“Maybe we should wait until he wakes up. It’ll be easier with three of us.”

“No. The Eagles don’t have their gifts right now. We heard them say it. Now’s the time.”

“You’re right. I’m all in.”

“Good. We’ll do this now or die trying. They destroyed the lab, our home. They have to pay for that.”

“I can take over point.”

Adrian looked over in relief. “Where have you been?”

Kyle entered the medical bay and scanned the injured people. “Gathering information. Where did these injuries come from?”

Adrian didn’t feel like explaining again what had happened. He assumed Kyle had blanked out for a while. It was happening to everyone.

Shawn injected Dog’s IV with another dose of antibiotics. “We need Harry. Dog’s getting worse and I don’t know how to help him.”

Adrian reached for his radio. “Harry, we need you in the medical bay!”

“Do you feel that?” Shawn looked around. “It feels like the submarine’s moving.”

All of them felt it this time. The submarine was still sinking in the water.

Adrian keyed his radio again. “Ray, is everything okay up there? We need to know where Harry is. Check the monitors.”

Ray didn’t answer.

Kyle tried this time. “Ray, answer your radio?!”

Crash!

The sound of glass breaking nearby made them all tense.

Adrian had a good idea of what had caused that sound. His frustration grew. “Get to the bridge and check the tapes. Find Harry. I’ll handle our latest issue. Just make sure our captain is awake before you leave him alone again.”

“Damn it!” Kyle quickly left.

Adrian gestured toward Shawn. “When Piper gets back, have her stay and help you with some of this stuff.”

He and Piper had helped Shawn tend the patients. Then he’d sent Piper to find Gus. Gus was the guard on the brig, but he was also missing.

Adrian assumed Gus was wandering around in a daze, but he wanted to be sure. There was always a chance that Gus was injured and needed help. The sense of time running out for someone was becoming clear in Adrian’s mind even though he didn’t have his gifts.

The halls were empty as Adrian went through, and silent other than the creaking groans of the submarine as it continued to slowly sink into the ocean. It was an eerie sound and feeling that Adrian didn’t care for. *I may never get back on a boat after this.*

He rolled his eyes at himself and hurried toward the sound of someone breaking into a locked cabinet in the mess.

Theo groaned as Adrian hurried in. “Go away!”

Adrian pulled a tool from his belt that Angela had insisted on, but he had refused to use. *Once again, she was right.* “Put that bottle down.”

The mess was dark and deserted except for them. They were between meals right now; no one had the stomach for it with so much stress burning in their guts.

Theo had bruises and scratches on his hands that told Adrian he had clawed items into reach before breaking them and using them to pick the brig lock.

Theo tilted up the bottle that he had taken from the cabinet. The whiskey burnt a fiery path down his throat and into his stomach, making him cough.

Adrian hit Theo with the electric baton at the lowest strength.

Electricity flew through Theo's arm. He fell forward into the smashed cabinet, screaming. The bottle dropped onto the floor mat and rolled, leaving a trail of whiskey among the glass shards.

Adrian shocked Theo again, and then again. He didn't enjoy it.

Theo curled up on the floor. He didn't care about the glass; he didn't fight back. "Keep going!"

Adrian realized Theo was at the point where he wanted to die because he couldn't fight his addiction. Adrian shocked him again, cursing Reicher for showing them this method of gaining control over someone who was out of control. "You will do as you're told!"

"No!"

Adrian shocked him again. This wasn't the time for mercy.

The pain was worse than Theo had imagined. "Stop now!"

Adrian shocked him again.

Theo began begging for him to stop. The alcohol was forgotten about. The craving had been replaced with pain.

Adrian shut off the baton but kept it in his hand.
“Get up.”

Theo pushed up onto shaking legs. His mind immediately registered the drink he’d taken and began giving him the rush he was craving.

“Pick it, Eagle—death or recovery.”

Theo couldn’t make the right choice. He loved the way the alcohol took away his fear and guilt.
“Just kill me.”

Adrian was ashamed that he hadn’t done a better job of helping his Eagles. Once he’d been banished, he had only cared about himself and that hadn’t been fair to any of the people he’d left behind. He still wasn’t able to be merciful. He hit the button on the baton, making it crackle.

Theo flinched, arms coming up in defense.
“Please, don’t!”

Adrian remembered an ugly teaching moment from his time in the labs. He had hesitated to use it on Mitch, back when he was in charge of Safe Haven, but like with Mitch, Theo wasn’t going to be able to recover on his own. He needed some tough love. “Get the bottle you dropped. For every drink, I’m going to hurt you. By the time this is over, you won’t be able to stand the smell of any alcohol, let alone the taste.”

Theo hurried toward the bottle. “You can’t break me!”

Adrian sighed deeply. “Yes, I can and I’m going to.”

Theo clutched the bottle with both hands. For one instant, he was fully aware. “If this doesn’t work, promise you’ll kill me.”

Adrian advanced while activating the baton. “Deal.”

Theo’s screams echoed through the submarine and brought an even thicker silence to all the halls. It was obvious that someone was in danger, but no one felt like they should go help. Even those on patrol duty avoided the mess. Most of their minds were too foggy to comprehend that it was the right thing to do. They just couldn’t remember.

3

“I forgot again.”

Ray felt the submarine shudder... Then the lights went out. *That’s not good.*

Bang! Bang! “Open this door, Ray!”

Ray automatically activated the flashlight on his tool belt. “Who is it?”

The submarine creaked and popped around him, tilting in the water as it continued to sink.

The backup power activated, bathing the corridors in dim red light.

“Open this door, Ray! It’s Kyle.”

Ray went to the door. “What’s the magic word?”

Kyle was out of patience. “Open this fucking door!”

Ray unlocked it. “That’s the one.”

Kyle pushed his way into the bridge. Noise was coming from all over the submarine now as it tilted. “What’s wrong? How do we fix it?”

Ray looked at him in confusion. “Fix what?”

Kyle realized Ray had zoned out again. He shined his light around the bridge, hoping something was still working. He immediately saw dozens of squares of paper taped all over the monitors, buttons, and consoles.

Kyle read some of them and realized they were in Ray’s handwriting. They appeared to be instructions.

Kyle spotted a note with the number 1 on it. *Only let in Kyle, Adrian, or Angela. Ask them for the magic word.*

And under that was: *open this fucking door or any version thereof.*

Kyle began organizing the numbers in the corners of the notes while keeping track of Ray.

The sub began to sink faster.

Kyle switched into speed reading mode.

4

“That’s California.” Charlie could still see the explosion in his mind. They hadn’t made contact with Angela or Marc yet, but they had witnessed the end of the recovering world.

The candle on the small table illuminated the entire room. The light didn’t have much space to fill.

Charlie kept an eye on it to be sure nothing caught fire as it slid around with the unnatural motion of the submarine. He didn't have a lantern, but he'd taken a few mostly useless tea light candles from the supplies this morning. He'd planned to make s'mores for the orphans after lunch.

Outside the therapy cubby, ugly noises and groans were echoing that made him anxious for Angela to return. Being without her reassuring presence was something he didn't have to experience very often; Charlie didn't like it.

"Now we can tell them where the explosion happens." Cody yawned even though he was scared. They were using a lot of energy to do this.

Charlie knew that wasn't enough. "We need to know why and how it happens."

Cody showed a hint of why he'd been chosen for such an important destiny. "We need to get someone to scroll dive, in secret."

Charlie didn't bat an eyelash at the suggestion of breaking his mom's rules. "Wouldn't a Blinker be better?"

Cate didn't wait for them to compare the two. "Let's use both."

Charlie shrugged. "Okay. I'll talk to Shawn the next time we're on duty together."

Cate yawned this time. "I'll ask Kenn."

Charlie scowled. "Why, Kenn?"

Cate held onto the table as the sub tilted further. "He owes me one."

“For what?” Charlie didn’t know that Cate and Kenn had a relationship at all.

“For letting him live.”

5

“We’re in the eye of the storm now.”

Lisa nodded at Erin’s quiet comment. Harry had split up the searchers and assigned them to a level so they could trap Goldie, who was obviously evading them. He’d put her and Erin together and then taken everyone else down to the second level.

Lisa assumed Harry had left them up here together so they would be safer. Isabel and the caretakers were also up here, checking on the compartments and people without talking to anyone.

Lisa expected to hear Goldie’s capture at any point. He had to be on the bottom level. They’d searched this top floor enough to know he wasn’t up here.

The soft red light from the backup power flickered occasionally throughout the sub. The red lights felt odd after having electricity again for so long. Lisa knew Ray and Kyle were working on the problem. That was holding back the panic of the passengers so far, mostly because water wasn’t coming in. If that changed, there would probably be a riot while they all drowned.

Erin checked the theater again in a quick glance that showed several kids sleeping in recliners who

should have been in the bunk room. She didn't think they were asleep, though. They were pretending nothing was wrong, so they didn't get upset.

She recognized the coping method. A lot of the mission men had talked about enjoying time in the lounges in Reicher's lab. Erin knew it was the only time they'd felt safe while there.

Lisa opened the small hall pantry and scanned it with her flashlight.

A translucent form appeared in front of her.

Lisa grabbed for her gun.

Erin grabbed Lisa's cool wrist before she could pull her weapon. "It's okay. Whatever you're seeing is not there."

Lisa stared at the ghost. Her voice came out in a whisper. "You don't see it?"

Erin flinched as she spotted the ghost with short braids and ancient clothes. "Great. I've caught the island sickness."

The radio on her belt crackled, making both of them jump.

"I'm still waiting on an update!"

Adrian had been making that call on the radio for the last five minutes, but no one was answering him. Not even the other searchers were checking in. Lisa decided the situation on the sub was more important than a sad ghost that didn't feel like a threat. She shut the pantry and went to the next room.

Erin shrugged and followed her. At this point, she didn't know what to make of the situation. She

was just following a senior Eagle, though that was only by a short amount of time. Their rivalry had been put aside.

Lisa stopped by the therapy cubby and put her ear to the door. She could hear the soft murmur of conversation inside.

That was enough for her. If Charlie and the twins were having trouble, they would let someone know or there would be more noise.

Footsteps behind them made both women turn around. Erin's hand also dropped to her gun this time.

Jayda stopped, glaring at both of them. "Get yourselves under control!"

Her harsh tone helped them a little. Both women were glad to have another Eagle up here, even if Jayda was a rookie, too.

"This is why Harry left you guys up here with me. You're too jumpy to be part of a trap team." Jayda returned to the bridge door, where she was on duty. She assumed that was also why she had been assigned up here, though she wasn't positive. Making sure the captain was safe was an important duty. *And it's not like something bad couldn't happen on this level, too.*

One of the military men came up the ladder in a hurry. Panic flowed from his voice and body language. "They need help down there!"

Jayda automatically went toward the ladder to the second level. "What happened?"

The military man grabbed her around the neck as she went by and pulled her against his body. He slid her gun from her holster and put it against her back. “We decided to take over.”

He dragged her over to the bridge and kicked it harshly with his foot. “Open this door or I’ll snap her neck!”

Jayda shuddered. *I really don’t like being right anymore.*

Chapter Thirty-Three

Bait Ball

1

It was getting colder.

Angela rubbed her arms through her soggy jacket and exhaled through her stinging nose. Salt had gotten into her nostril and was causing her to itch and burn. She rubbed at it, but that only brought in more salt.

Angela turned to view the rest of the team. They'd been under the water for an hour now. She didn't have a working watch, but her mind said they'd passed the sixty-minute mark.

Marc held out the hose as tiny air bubbles came from his nose.

Angela breathed in through the water-filled respirator carefully. There was a trick to putting it over her face, then letting the air push out the water around the edges. Breathing in before that was dangerous. She and Zack had had coughing fits that forced them above the rough waves, but the water was too high for their ropes to reach the surface now.

Behind her, Wade, Zack, and Thomas rotated tiredly and waited for the end of this nightmare.

They were all getting sleepy. The adrenaline had faded and the crash was here.

Kenn gave her a thumbs up over Marc's shoulder. He was doing okay, though he'd started to get a chill. Kenn was proud of the way he was handling this newest torture that life was putting him through. He was tempted to believe it was karma, but good people were down here with him, ruling out that explanation for why he was once again in serious danger.

I should have stayed with Tonya and our son. Kenn's mind went to that boy in fondness. Loving someone was still new to him.

Incoming waves were softly rocking them all back and forth down here. It wasn't as gentle near the surface. They could see debris crashing through the waves near the top of the trees.

Kenn braced his weight on his other foot, like he'd done on the warehouse floor. His body was sore, and getting worse, but he was okay so far. Standing against the water wasn't easy, but the tent canvas made it possible.

The storm was directly over them now and blocking out all the light. If not for Angela's dimming flashlight, they would be in total darkness. Because she'd made a deal with him, Kenn was staying in control of his mind. He'd spent the last hour planning things he could say to Tonya that might earn some forgiveness. *Not that I deserve it.*

Kenn scanned Marc and wondered how he was doing mentally. *I miss my gifts so much!*

Marc wasn't breaking yet. His time in the lab had prepped him for this. When he'd found out the lab was underwater, he'd begun expecting water sessions. *I didn't expect it after we were rescued, though.*

Marc wondered briefly if Angela had foreseen this and quickly ruled it out. She would endanger them in a heartbeat if it served a purpose. This didn't.

It bothered him that Nature had caught Angela off guard. *She's getting tired.* He'd seen leaders in the service reach that point and lose entire squads.

But I doubt she'll let it go that far. Angela had been self-correcting all along. He was sure she would keep doing so.

Marc turned toward her and got a worried smile.

Angela now understood how the mission men could return so mentally damaged. Her brain was frying in her skull from trying to find a way out of this nightmare. *I can't believe I've put them through so much. Control of the world isn't worth all the pain I've caused.*

But the alternative was to let the world restart based on the old rules that had destroyed them all. She didn't have other options. No one else was strong enough to redirect the course of human history. *I just have to carry this guilt until the final battle and then I can let go of it.*

Angela narrowed in on Marc's blue lips. He was red eyed from the salt and huddled against the trees. *He's too cold.*

Angela motioned to Kenn. *You have point.*

Kenn nodded as he exhaled soft bubbles.

Angela shoved herself through the water and slid into Marc's arms. She molded her heat to his frame and began rubbing his arms.

Marc did the same for her, hoping the movement would warm them both. *I haven't been this cold since we were in the mountain.*

Angela wiggled against him, determined to get some heat going.

Marc doubted it would work right now.

His body ignored his mind and began hardening. Wonderful heat began flowing through his groin.

Marc smiled at her. *Nice jump start.*

Angela kept rubbing, also warming herself. Even while in danger, she was attracted to Marc. *Nothing can dampen our fire except words. Maybe we should just never talk again and things will be perfect.*

Angela snorted mentally at herself and took the next breath through the hose.

The rope on her wrist began tugging.

I was almost happy for a minute, she thought bitterly. *We can't have that.*

A wide, roughly shaped, shiny ball circled above them and dipped lower.

Thomas pointed at it.

Angela was glad it wasn't anything bad... Her relief faded as it continued to twist and turn toward

them. If it didn't change direction, they were about to be in the middle of that churning mass.

Angela's brain kicked into overdrive. *That's a bait ball. Shit!*

Angela grabbed the ropes and yanked hard to get attention. She waved them down in the dimming glare of her flashlight.

The men crouched, knives in hand.

The bait ball flashed around in dizzying circles, settling directly over top of them. Loose fish swam furiously around their heads and chests, seeking shelter.

A menacing shadow dove by Angela. Huge jaws snapped a mouthful of the bait ball and swam off.

Angela pissed herself.

Marc pushed her down and leaned over her, searching for the predator. He assumed it was a shark, but he hadn't gotten a clear view. It was moving too fast and it was impossible to see more than a few feet around them.

The bait ball sank lower.

Thomas cringed to the right.

A quick blur shoved by, hitting his arm and knocking him into Wade.

Wade caught him and pulled them both to the ground, dropping his knife. He wrapped his leg around the tree and refused to let go of the respirator.

Thomas's breath flew out with his scream.

Jagged teeth lunged for his head.

Wade instinctively knocked a tank into the shark with his free hand.

The shark snapped down and shook its huge head, breaking tree branches as it thrashed. It swam off with a prize.

The bait ball reformed, higher, and began to drift away with the current.

Wade pushed the hose against Thomas's mouth and got the Navy man breathing again.

Next to them, Zack swam in half circles and tried not to get lost in morbidity. He'd been in too many dangerous situations since the war. *I might need a break after this run.*

Zack had looked down on the Eagles who did that, including Neil, but he was starting to understand. *The mind can only take so much stress before it snaps.*

Zack didn't want to go crazy. He sent his mind to happier moments, like playing football with his sons and having sex with Allison.

Marc handed Zack their hose for a quick draw and then pushed it back against Angie's lips. He kept searching for the shark as he activated another oxygen tank. The shark had ripped one of them free, but they still had three.

Thomas stayed down, holding onto a tree trunk against the force of the water. He remained there while waiting for his squeezing heart to ease. *I was safer in the lab.*

Wade kept passing the hose, but he also looked for his knife. He had two more, but they were

smaller. Wade had never felt so isolated and helpless. His Eagle runs hadn't prepared him for this. *We need a lot of new lessons.*

Wade wanted to follow that thought so he could get lost in training plans and forget where he was for a little while, but he didn't allow it. This was a deadly place.

A glint drew his eye. Wade handed the hose to Zack and dove down to retrieve his knife.

The shark sailed by his head, missing.

Thomas and Zack swung their knives, stabbing without real force because of the resistance from the water.

One of them jabbed a gill; the shark darted off above the tent canvas. Thin trickles of blood settled into the water and were washed away with the current.

All of them fell into survival mode, rotating with knives out and terror in their minds.

Long minutes passed.

Something hit the canvas next to Kenn and shoved it forward.

Kenn stared at the wreckage in confusion. It looked like a plane.

Just a wing. He ducked in slow motion as the ocean lifted the heavy plane part and spun it over their shelter.

The wing smacked into the pole by Thomas and ripped it halfway out of the ground.

More debris hit the canvas and spun in the water. Some of it flew into their base camp and hit the cowering team.

They huddled at the base of the trees, hanging onto the scratchy branches and the air hoses.

Angela flinched back as a large slab of wood landed against the tarp by her leg. The dim flashlight revealed letters on it.

Revonoc.

Angela blinked and the letters were gone.

The debris rolled along the island rocks and vanished into the murky depths.

Wade saw it, too. *We're hallucinating.* He tugged the rope and motioned in Eagle code. *Check the air!*

Marc pushed over to the remaining tanks in time to see one of the dials drop into the red. It would be out of air in a few minutes. *I stand corrected. We're down to two.*

Zack knew he was seeing things that weren't there. Carl had died next to him on the warehouse wall. He couldn't be here, but Zack was staring at the spikes that had been driven into Carl's hands. *I remember how loud he screamed when they did that to him. And then it was my turn.* He still bore those scars.

Zack felt the rope tug; he almost couldn't look away from Carl's floating corpse.

Angela reached out and pinched Zack as hard as she could on his arm.

Zack jumped and rotated toward her.

Angela scowled, hands jerking in code. *Stay with me!*

Zack rubbed his arm. *She left a welt!*

Angela rotated toward the rest of the team to check on them.

She found all of them sinking into their minds to avoid facing the situation. She'd expected it from the mission men, but it was a shock to find Wade joining them.

It wasn't hard to guess what Wade's mind was showing him. Samantha's abuse had scarred Wade deeply.

Angela jerked his rope, making it drag against his hand.

Wade came out of the daze and exhaled. His mind was starting to blur.

Thomas shoved the respirator into Wade's hand.

Wade remembered he needed to breathe.

Angela was suddenly very worried about her team. *I'm useless without my gifts.*

Pain shot into Wade's arm. He jerked, looking down.

Something long and greenish black was winding up his hand. Blood floated into the water.

Wade stabbed it, shrieking. The air hose fell out of his mouth.

Kenn shoved his big body through the trees and grabbed Wade's wrist. *Stop!*

Wade jerked free and stabbed at his arm again.

Kenn flipped his knife neatly in the water, marveling at how easy it was, then hit Wade in the forehead with the handle, lightly.

This pain was different; it cleared Wade's panic.

Kenn used his knife to carefully pry the eel from Wade's arm.

The eel hissed at them, sending angry bubbles their way. Then it floated to the rocky ground and slithered under the tarp.

Zack put the oxygen hose to Wade's lips.

Marc did the same for Kenn, who was trying to get his medical kit open. Blood was flowing heavily from Wade's arm.

Angela shined the light and tried to watch all directions for more trouble. *I need real light!*

As if in answer, the sun broke through the storm above them and illuminated their entire base camp.

Ah, shit. Angela began jerking the ropes.

Shadows crawled and slithered beneath the tarp in droves, pushing the canvas up and cutting it in places. The tarp began to pull on the poles, wiggling them loose.

Up! Angela pointed at the trees and then climbed one of the thinner branches, leaving the sturdier trunks for the heavier men.

Marc stomped on a crab and stumbled from the pain. The shell was harder than his soaked boot.

The crab snapped at him with razor pinchers.

Marc used the current to carry him into the trees. He offered hands to the other men.

More blood floated by them.

Kenn wrapped the thin bandage around Wade's arm again, concentrating where the injury was the deepest. The eel had tried to burrow into his arm like it was a rock cave.

Kenn pushed Wade into the trees and then joined him.

Zack held out a hand to Thomas.

Thomas stomped near an eel to keep it from climbing his leg. He took Zack's hand and clung to it as the force of the water suddenly shifted against them.

Thomas hadn't gone through any hard sessions in the lab for years. Suddenly being back in hell was taking a hard toll on him. It reminded him of the four mandatory training sessions he'd survived in the Helo Dunker. The large metal drum was supposed to simulate being in a crashed helicopter, upside down, while still buckled in. Two of those runs had been blindfolded. It felt a lot like that now as the storm continued to block out the light. *I need this to be over soon.*

Thomas exhaled, fighting another deep chill. He was cold, as they all were, but this chill came from his mind. *Something bad is coming for us. I can feel it.*

2

The sun broke through again.

Angela peered at the water at the top of the trees.
Is it coming down yet?

Her lungs burned as she swam toward the surface to see if their ropes would reach it. They'd been down here at least another hour.

Angela was jerked to a stop just inches below the waterline.

Marc hauled her back by her ankle rope, furious that she would try that. He tugged her into his arms and rotated her so Kenn could put the respirator in her mouth.

Angela fought not to cough as her lungs stung and pinched. She took in air slowly and tried not to pass out.

Marc held her close, soaking in the warmth from her body.

Angela passed the hose and gestured. *Water stopped rising.*

Relief went through all of them as they spread that message of hope. Their torment was halfway over.

Marc hated it that he couldn't get her out of this situation. Her small shivers and winces came through clearly while he held her. *She's suffering with us this time. I love her for that.*

Marc sighed mentally as she passed him the hose. *I also hate it. She's the leader. She's not supposed to be going through this.*

Angela rested her cheek on his big shoulder and allowed her mind a minute of pretending they weren't in grave danger. She was so tired! *If I could just sleep for a few minutes...*

Marc held her back and shook his head when she peered up at him.

Angela nodded at the silent order to stay awake. She reluctantly left his arms.

Marc's attitude had already been undergoing a change. Watching his wife tolerate this miserable moment helped that along. *She's been doing this the whole time.*

He ran a soft hand over her shorter hair. *And she did suffer while we were gone.*

She'd been shot, stabbed, hunted, blown up, beaten, and strangled, and she still hadn't given up on them, on him. Marc's heart filled with relief and then peace. *She's a great leader. I never really saw that before.*

Angela swam around to scan a different direction so she wasn't tempted to crawl back into his arms. *I don't know how much more of this I can take. And if I'm feeling this way, how are my men doing?*

All of them were watching her. They each forced out a smile to let her know they were okay.

Angela fought the tears. Crying in her goggles wasn't a good idea. *Even if I die down here, it was worth it to not leave them alone this time, including the new guy.*

Angela glanced over at Thomas right as something grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him out of the trees.

Knives flashed in the water; blood gushed out.

Thomas yanked his leg free, screaming around the respirator.

Zack shoved Thomas behind him, tangling their ropes.

Kenn stabbed with as much force as he could muster under the water. His blade pierced the blue and red tentacle.

The sea creature faded away and then vanished into the current.

What the hell was that?!

Angela shook her head at Wade's frantic hand code question. She didn't know. She unzipped her medical pouch with cold fingers that didn't want to work correctly.

Marc passed the supplies to Zack and Thomas, who had smaller medical kits than she did.

They got a bandage around Thomas's leg, but all of them were disappointed with the supplies. The bandages were coming loose in the salty water. Their spirits were improving, however. The storm was moving on, the water had stopped rising, and they were handling their own even though they had injuries. It made them feel good to know they were strong enough to do this.

A long, thick shape came over top of the canvas on Marc's side.

Marc instinctively ducked and pulled Angela down with him.

The huge shark rotated, hitting them with its tail as it dove toward the men on the other side.

Wade stabbed at the shark's eyes, seeing gashes from where it had already been hit. *That's the same one!*

The shark snapped at Zack, grazing his arm.

Thomas shoved Zack out of the way and plunged his knife into the shark's gills.

The shark groaned lowly and flinched away. Its tail smacked all of the men on that side, producing welts and bruises across their legs, arms, and stomachs.

They all watched the predator swim above them in a wide circle. It obviously wasn't leaving.

Marc climbed higher up on the trees and drew one of his colts.

Angela hoped that worked. She also cursed herself for getting foggy and not checking on the weather sooner. *This is all my fault.*

Marc tried to account for the resistance of the water as he opened fire.

The first bullet stopped a few feet away and was pulled off by the current.

The rest of the bullets flew through the water and hit the shark in four places.

The shark's blood blocked the dim sunlight for a few seconds.

Direct hit!

The shark darted off, trailing thick red liquid that said it had sustained a serious injury.

Marc holstered without the usual rush. *I guess hearing it matters.* The gunshot noise had been completely muffled by the water.

Thomas stilled as chills went over his body. He felt death diving toward him. *Please forgive me my mistakes...* He swung around, slashing out with his knife. *But I'm not ready to die yet!*

The bleeding shark dove down and grabbed Thomas's leg.

His silent screams and blood filled the water.

His knife went into the shark's eye.

The shark let go of him, but it lunged around, still searching for a meal.

Thomas was in full panic mode. He sawed at the ropes binding him in place while the others tried to get a bandage around his arm or stabbed at the determined shark.

No! Grab him! Angela pushed through the trees to keep Thomas there.

Her rope tangled on the branches this time, stopping her short.

No! Angela screamed mentally as Thomas cut the last rope.

The shark bit through Zack's knife; it dropped to the ground in two pieces.

Thomas began swimming toward the surface.

The shark felt the vibration. It darted up and grabbed Thomas's uninjured leg.

No!

Help him!

No!

Thomas held onto the shark's tail, screaming and stabbing at its belly as it carried him off.

A thick gush of blood trailed through the water and faded.

Angela sawed at her ankle rope, crying into her goggles. *No!*

Marc grabbed her around the waist and held on with his cold hands splayed protectively over her warm belly.

Kenn and the others inhaled through the hoses and waited for the shark to return.

The water lightened around them.

The shark didn't come back.

Neither did Thomas.

The cut ropes and ripped canvas floated in the water, drawing their attention again and again.

Angela couldn't sob like she needed to or she wouldn't be able to breathe. She inhaled when Marc put the hose to her lips, but her goggles filled with tears.

Kenn's heart thumped as he discerned more movement on the other side of the ripped canvas.

Angela saw the teary shadow of a little girl hovering by the canvas. It blinked out as she stared in surprise. *That was Cate!*

Kenn tugged on the ropes.

The others looked over and followed his pointing finger.

Five long, thick shadows swam straight toward them.

Those aren't sharks. Marc slid Angela behind him and drew his other gun.

The small pod of killer whales didn't slow as they focused on the blood in the water.

Marc got ready to go down fighting. *This can't get any worse.*

The oxygen tank they were using began to sputter. It was out of air.

Marc groaned. *I'm sorry!*

Angela's flashlight went out. The battery was dead.

God, help us.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Munching

1

“**O**pen this door or I’ll snap her neck!”

Kyle kept reading the handwritten notes. He still hadn’t gotten to the end. Ray had made notes about everything from running the sub to his opinions on the new people.

Ray shined his flashlight toward the door. “What should we do?”

Kyle grunted angrily. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“We let her die.”

Ray was horrified. “You can’t mean that.”

“But I do. The Eagles out there will handle the problem at some point.”

“What if they’re too late?”

Kyle knew Ray was already on the verge of opening the door. He sighed. “If we give in, those bastards will control the sub. We’d be giving them nuclear power, Ray. They’ll also kill all of us, except the women and kids, of course. It’ll be a lot worse than one death.”

Ray understood that was logical. “But it’s wrong. We need to help her!”

“We need to get the main power on and get this clump of bolts back to the surface, or we’ll all die anyway. Come help me!”

Ray reluctantly joined Kyle in front of the dark monitors. “What do you want me to do?”

“Find the note that shows me the end of your instructions.”

Ray scanned the papers with a frown. “Why don’t we have power?”

Kyle sighed deeply. “Concentrate, Ray. I need you.”

Ray blinked. His mind filled with memories. Then the fog pushed them away. “Who’s Ray?”

Kyle jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Make us some coffee.”

Ray went over to the small drink center. “You know, we’re not actually supposed to use an open flame on the submarine right now. Saul said it can be dangerous after a dive.”

“Because of the fumes?” Kyle asked distractedly.

“No, because of the way he set things up. After a dive, this sub automatically goes quiet and the fire suppression systems won’t work until we bring it all back online.”

Kyle didn’t spin around and spook Ray. He kept his voice calm. “Bringing it all online sounds hard.”

Ray shrugged. “Not really. All we have to do is hit the big square button next to the power switch. I did the other steps earlier. The sub pretty much does the rest itself.”

Kyle found that button and held his breath.
“Ray, say something sweet and uplifting.”
“Why do you keep calling me Ray?”
“Close enough.” Kyle pushed the button.

2

“Open this door or she dies!”
“Stay back!”

Gus stopped at the top of the ladder. He’d come running when the power went out. The soft red glow of the backup lights showed him Jayda struggling against her captor, while the other military man held a gun on the people who’d already been up here.

Gus saw two rookie Eagles among the new arrivals. Isabel was wearing an Eagle outfit, but Gus didn’t consider her one of the fighters yet. She hadn’t gone through any training. Lisa and Erin were also in that group, but they had puzzled expressions that said they didn’t understand what was happening. *They won’t be any help.*

Gus looked down the ladder and found the corridor below him empty. *Where is everyone?*

“Open this door!” The shorter man was getting impatient. “Why aren’t they coming out to save her?”

The taller man holding Jayda rubbed against her warm body. “Maybe they’ve spaced out.”

Jayda kept trying to pry his arm from her neck, but she didn’t make sudden moves. He had her gun

and there were a lot of people in this hall who might be hit by a stray bullet.

“Maybe.” Front man leered at the scared caretakers who had stopped in a group along one wall. “They’re all about not hurting women here, but they’ll let her die to keep control.”

The taller man struggling with Jayda tired of her fighting. He tightened his arm around her neck until she was barely breathing. “I bet they won’t watch her being abused.”

Jayda’s stomach tightened.

Gus stepped forward.

Shorter man advanced with his gun swinging toward Gus’s head. “Give me a reason!”

Gus stopped. He was armed, and trained, but he was also still a little dazed and not wearing a vest. Rushing the man was out of the question.

Short man gestured with his gun. “Go on and make her scream. That’ll get the door open.”

Gus was suddenly afraid the man was right. Ray was in there and Ray was kind. He wouldn’t be able to tolerate violence against a female.

The submarine vibrated around them. It came to life in stages; power flowed through the ship, activating lights, the life support system, and locks first.

Short man lifted his free hand against the sudden glare of bright lights.

Gus lunged, using his arm to deflect the automatic trigger pull.

The bullet slammed into the floor by Gus’s foot.

Screams rang through the cold air.

Gus slammed his skull into short man's skull, taking him to the floor in a fast drop.

Gus turned and glared at the man holding Jayda. "You're about to die."

"I'll take her with me!"

Gus stopped, waiting for another good moment.

Isabel marched forward. "Hey!"

Tall man's gun rotated...

Gus jumped him, arm going against the gun again to deflect any bullets.

Jayda's captor went with Gus's force and shoved out of the spin.

Gus hit the bridge door with his face and staggered. Blood ran down his head from the impact.

Jayda's captor put the unfired gun to her head. "Stay back!"

Jayda stopped struggling, but she was furious. "If I had my gifts right now, I'd fry you alive and tell Isabel to have dinner!" She stared at Isabel pointedly.

Isabel didn't need Eagle training to understand. She looked up at the small camera above the bridge. "It's too bright."

"Get over there!" Jayda's captor shoved Gus toward the ladder.

Gus tripped over the hole and landed on his knees next to it.

"Let her go." Isabel moved to the right, drawing the tall man's attention. She went to Gus and put her

hand over the thin gash in his head to stem the blood.

The lone mutineer leaned against the bridge door and kept his gun against Jayda's head. "Make them open up!"

"They won't. You'll have to kill us all." Isabel shrugged. "Or you could surrender and maybe just get banished instead of removed."

"Shut up!"

Isabel kept her hand over Gus's wound and switched tactics. "I know the door code."

Everyone tensed, including the caretakers. The gunfire had woken several of them from the fog. They wanted to help, but they didn't know how. They didn't even have vests on.

"Give me the code!"

"Don't do it!" Jayda played along. They were using the manual lock. There wasn't a code set up right now.

Isabel let go of Gus. "I want shared control. I get half of everything."

The tall man agreed right away. He needed a partner and there was no guarantee he would let Goldie live for long. "Deal. Open it."

Isabel wiped the blood down her pants to dry her hand. "I'm not coming over there, mate. I'll tell you and you can enter it."

The mutineer scowled. "It's a trick!"

Isabel rolled her eyes. "Have your captive do it, then."

Jayda's captor retreated until they were next to the control pad. "What's the code?"

"Six 1s." Isabel looked at the caretakers, hoping they would support her when she triggered the action.

"That's too easy. You're lying!"

Isabel quickly invented an excuse. "Saul changed it because he believed the Safe Haven people were too dumb to remember something more complicated."

Tall man eased his grip on Jayda's throat a little. He shook her. "You enter it!"

Jayda gasped in air and coughed. "No!"

"Do it!"

"Never!" Jayda didn't know what Isabel was trying to do here, but it was the answer she would have given anyway.

He slammed her shoulder against the wall by the control pad. "Do it!"

"No!"

"I'll do it!" Isabel marched toward them. "Never seen a bigger coward in my life!"

Tall man pulled Jayda back while Isabel went to the console.

Isabel reached for the buttons. "Don't let Gus sneak up on us, mate."

The mutineer turned to verify that it wasn't already happening.

Isabel drew in a deep breath. "Now."

The lights went out.

Isabel attacked.

A bullet hit the wall, bringing shouts.
Then the top level filled with screams.
“Don’t eat me! Don’t eat me!”

On the bridge, Kyle didn’t want to turn those lights back on. *I know who won. I don’t need to see it.*

3

Jayda braced herself. “We could use some light now.” The glow from the bottom level wasn’t enough to see what was happening.

I know, though. Isabel jumped on him and bit his neck. I grabbed the gun. I rolled away while the caretakers fell on top of him. Then they all started biting.

The light switched on.

Gus turned his head and threw up. He didn’t know if it was from the blow to his head, or the sight of Isabel and the caretakers. *They’re munching on some grindage.*

He heaved again.

Jayda steeled her stomach, but she would never forget the sight. “Stop.”

Isabel held up a finger. She swallowed quickly and took one more large bite. Blood squirted.

The caretakers followed her lead.

The man’s body twitched; he felt it, but he couldn’t scream anymore as he bled out.

Jayda gagged.

Kyle opened the bridge door. Blood was coming in under it, freaking out Ray.

Ray hurried to put the towel from the drink center over the frame. “Gross.”

Jayda nodded coolly at Kyle. He’d been busy fixing their ride, and he had Eagle regulations to follow, but she still resented him for not trying to save her.

Kyle was used to that reaction. All the rookies went through it when they realized they really were putting their lives on the line for this camp. “I need someone to hunt a killer.”

Isabel and the caretakers all hurried to their feet. They swiped bloody sleeves over their faces and waited for orders.

Kyle almost couldn’t look at them, but it wasn’t because of the gore. It reminded him of past battles where Angela and Jennifer had bathed in the blood of their enemies. *These women are going to follow in those big footsteps.* “Harry found footage of Goldie hiding the knife. He went to arrest the man and hasn’t been seen since.”

Isabel’s hand came up to her bruised cheek, smearing more blood over it. “Goldie’s the killer?” She was suddenly eager to see him again.

Kyle felt that. “Let me be clear: Harry’s life matters to your future in this camp. If he gets hit, or bit, in your crossfire, I’ll toss you overboard.”

Isabel scowled at the threat. Blood ran down her chin. “That’s not a camp rule, mate.”

“Neither is eating your enemy. Get to it!” Kyle’s shout was a surprise to him as well.

Isabel and the women scurried around him, avoiding the blood so their feet weren’t slippery on the ladder. Everyone on this sub had learned that lesson weeks ago.

Lisa and Erin started to follow the group, but they both stopped at the bottom of the ladder and stared around in confusion.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to turn them loose?” Jayda didn’t. She rubbed her neck and swallowed to ease some of the discomfort. Her throat was burning.

“No, but it’s the natural progression of an apocalyptic society.” Kyle returned to the bridge.

Jayda took gear from her kit so she could bandage Gus’s head. “You okay?”

Gus snorted, then winced. “My vision’s okay and I don’t feel like I’m going to pass out. So, no.”

Jayda chuckled with him and knelt between the blood spots to do triage.

“Thank you.”

Jayda laughed as she opened packages and set them on his leg so they didn’t get contaminated. “I should be saying that to you.”

Gus let her tend his wounds. He called out to Kyle, “Is the storm still going on up there?” He could feel the submarine ascending now.

Kyle followed the note instructions on how to activate the radar. “Stand by for that answer.”

Ray stared at the bloody mess. “I don’t like the new carpeting.”

Kyle sighed while the others chuckled or stared. “Ray’s a little dazed right now.”

“A lot of people are.” Jayda had planned to report it and forgot. “Is anyone in control down there?”

“No.” Gus remembered not to shake his head. “We were searching with Harry and then he wandered off. We kept going, but all of us were forgetting what we were doing. We decided to go find a senior Eagle to report it. That’s all I remember until I heard them trying to get the bridge open.”

Jayda needed to keep talking so she didn’t stare at the bite marks all over the corpse. “I’ve noticed something about these moments.”

Kyle grunted. “That we don’t have as many as we used to?”

“Yes, actually. And it’s great.”

“Agreed. What did you notice?”

Jayda gestured. “The boss doesn’t give them a job.”

Kyle looked over. “What?”

“When we get new refugees, whoever doesn’t get a job right away might be a threat.”

Gus frowned. “I don’t understand the connection.”

Kyle did. He’d known it for a while. He was pleased that Jayda had caught on. “She gives them free time to screw up.”

“I get it now.” Gus grimaced. “My dad called it giving me rope to hang myself with. I’ve always hated that phrase.”

Kyle nodded. “But it’s accurate. Angela lets them have plenty of time to get into trouble and then she removes them.”

Jayda smiled. “It’s almost like she knows how it’s going to end.”

They all laughed awkwardly. That might not be the case this time. The odds on that team surviving the hurricane out in the open were zero. So it was possible.

A scream echoed up from the bottom level.

Everyone winced.

“I think they found him.” Gus hoped that was the only noise from it.

That reminded Jayda of her question. “You said it’s a natural progression. What does that mean?”

The radar lit up, interrupting them again. Kyle peered at the screen as the dial rotated. “It’s past us!”

Gus breathed a sigh of relief. “Awesome.”

“That’s great.” Jayda started cleaning up the unused medical supplies. “How long will it take for the water to go down?”

Kyle shrugged. “No idea. I’m hoping for a call from the boss.”

Jayda frowned. “Our gifts are out. How can the boss call?”

“I saw her follow her training and cover communication as soon as she hit the beach.”

Jayda and Gus were encouraged.

Kyle finally focused on Jayda's question. "When authority stops providing protection, people will take matters into their own hands. Many of those groups will be too small to do much beyond clearing their own street or town, but if the movement grows, you'll get one of the most feared forms of policing. It's almost worse than Martial Law because it has no rules and no ruler."

Jayda fought a chill. "I know what you're talking about. It's right above a lynch mob and right below a riot."

Kyle nodded. "Safe Haven now has the first group of vigilantes. If that movement expands to our main camp, it will change things for all of us."

"For the better?" Gus was always willing to improve things.

Kyle shrugged. "Only if the boss can keep it under control."

"What about you or Adrian?"

Kyle snorted. "Not a chance. And if we lose the boss here, I guarantee it will happen."

"It might restart the normals war." Jayda felt bad for them. She didn't want to kill them.

Kyle denied that. "It won't be descendants against normals. It will be the camp against the Eagles and leadership. People aren't going to suffer an apocalypse and then allow those in charge to fail again but still keep running things. We've already been through that. It doesn't work."

A door opened at the end of the hallway. Charlie, along with Cate and Cody, peered out cautiously. “Is it over yet?”

Kyle understood Charlie had protected the twins during the chaos. He didn’t know if the teenager had received orders from Angela to do that, but Kyle was grateful to find out the twins were unharmed. “This part of it is.”

Charlie and the twins stared at the mess, but they didn’t come out of the therapy room.

Jayda looked over at them. “Have you heard anything from your mom?”

Charlie shook his head. “Not since we saw her on our last check.”

“You made contact?”

“Are they okay?”

Charlie tried to stay positive. “They were having some problems, but everyone was alive.”

Kyle motioned the other two to be quiet so he could get the information he needed. “How long ago?”

Charlie tried to estimate it. “It was a little bit after Harry called for searchers, but a lot before Isabel ate the tall guy.”

Jayda and Gus flinched even though the mess was directly at their feet.

Kyle chuckled. He appreciated humor in a moment like this.

Jayda thought of something. “Wait. How were you able to reach Angela without your gifts?”

Cody smiled. “Who said I don’t have my gifts?”

The adults scowled at the children.

“You could’ve helped us at any point!”

“It would have been nice to have some magic a little while ago.”

Cody gestured calmly toward the gory floor.

“You had all the help you needed.”

The adults didn’t know what to say.

Charlie gently pushed the twins back inside the cubby. “I’ll let you know if we hear anything.”

He shut the door. The loud click echoed through the quiet hall.

Gus fought through his headache to make a shocking connection. “Nature wasn’t Sarah’s mother.”

Jayda frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Family lines.”

“What?”

“We all know Cody is special. We’ve all noticed it.”

Kyle and Jayda nodded. That was obvious after even a basic interaction.

“And we’re all hearing the rumors about Sarah. We’re assuming she was the Creator’s child with Nature.”

Kyle swept Ray to make sure he hadn’t fallen back into the fog.

Ray stared back over his coffee mug. “What do you need, Hump-bumper?”

Kyle shook his head in resignation and regarded Gus. “What makes you think she isn’t?”

Gus gestured toward the therapy door. “Gifts are out for everybody, including all three family lines from the garden. But not Cody. If that was Nature’s line, she would be able to shut him off, too. We were told the Creator walked the earth with a girl named Sarah. I think that was his daughter...with a normal.”

Everyone jumped as the radio on Kyle’s belt crackled.

“They found Harry. They brought him into the medical bay.”

Kyle shook off the chill to answer Shawn’s call. “I’ll be there shortly.”

Kyle glanced around and then shook his head. There was no point in giving a cleanup order yet because there was no one to give it to. Jayda would stay here with Gus and they would guard the bridge until someone could be found to relieve them. “Don’t let Ray shut the door unless you’re in there with him.”

“You got it.”

In the therapy room, Cate smiled at Cody. “They didn’t have a problem with it. Their minds went straight to how useful you’ll be in the final battle.”

Cody was cautious. “We still have to go slow.”

Charlie knew his mom would be pleased. “Yes, but you’re doing a great job so far.”

Cody's eyes lit up ice blue for a moment and then returned to their normal color. "Right back at you."

Chapter Thirty-Five
No Connection

1

“Do you have time for an update?”

Shawn nodded at Kyle as he entered the medical bay. “The best news is Dog. He’s finally responding to the antibiotics.” Shawn rubbed Dog’s side and then went to check on Harry.

The senior medic was in the next bed. Harry hadn’t woken yet, but his vital signs were good. “They just knocked him out. I found a nasty bump on his head.”

Kyle made notes in his book.

“I sent the new rookies to the shower after they carried Harry in here.” Shawn refused to think about what those women had looked like. “Piper’s standing guard for them, but now that Goldie and his partners in crime have been...bled, I don’t expect more trouble.”

A loud scream echoed through the hallway.

Kyle frowned. Adrian was still convincing Theo that he didn’t want to drink anymore. The sound of it was ugly. “Go on.”

“I’ve seen to all the patients. It was all minor, including Gus’s wound. Just don’t let him go to sleep for a few hours.” Shawn had gone up to check

on Gus a few minutes ago while Greg watched over the medical bay. “That’s a hell of a mess up there.”

Kyle nodded. “I sent Biff and Trent to help.”

“And I’d like to, but I can’t get up the ladder.”

Kyle and Shawn twitched and spun around to see Trent leaning against the doorframe.

“I’m sick or something.” Trent held onto the wall and tried not to fall over.

Kyle and Shawn hurried over to help him.

“Damn, he’s burning up!” Shawn began checking for injuries. He saw Trent’s arm. The rash was the oddest color he’d ever seen. “This isn’t right.”

Kyle glanced at his own arm and found his rash almost gone. Kyle checked his skin and was relieved that it was cool. *Maybe it didn’t affect me as strongly because I’m a hybrid.* “We got these the day we stopped for the distress call.” Kyle didn’t mention the green cloud.

Shawn compared the two rashes. “Did you put anything on yours?”

“Just some Cortisone. But it looks like he’s been scratching. I rubbed mine through my jacket so it didn’t spread.”

“Maybe activity wakes it up.” Shawn shrugged. “Let’s get him into the rear room so I can isolate him.”

They helped Trent into the empty bed.

The submarine lurched forward, front end first as it continued to ascend toward the surface of the water.

New shouts echoed from people who had been jarred or banged into things.

Theo screamed again.

Kyle grunted. "Just like old times."

Shawn shrugged. "It's still better than where we were for those eight weeks."

Kyle wasn't going to argue with that. "What can I do to help you?"

Shawn went to get an IV bag and needle so he could start treating Trent. "I need a cold shower. I'm starting to get foggy again."

"I'll find someone to sit in here for you." Kyle cursed Nature for locking their gifts when they needed them the most.

Trent settled back on the bed. "Is the boss back?"

"No." Kyle went to the hallway and scanned for anyone who wasn't busy.

Lisa and Erin were still trying to wake up, but they both felt his need and came over to volunteer for whatever he needed.

"Keep Shawn awake and try to help out in here." Kyle went to the mess as another scream rang out. He was sick of that sound. *If Theo hasn't learned his lesson by now, he's never going to.*

2

"Again!" Theo took a fast drink and braced.

Adrian hit the button with a sore thumb and a hardening heart. He was sympathetic, but he was

also losing patience. Addictions weren't easy to fight. He just needed Theo to at least try.

Theo belched out heartburn and pain. "Again!"

Adrian had been using the electric baton on its lowest level. He increased it and zapped the drunk engineer.

Theo's shriek hurt Adrian. So he hit him again and then again, not giving him time to drink. "Say you're done! Say it!"

Theo cried and kept a tight grip on the bottle.

Adrian increased the power to full strength.

Kyle walked in right as Adrian put the electric baton against Theo's balls.

The bottle fell, shattering.

Theo curled up and screamed. Then he pissed himself.

Before Kyle could interfere, Adrian spun around and hit Kyle in the arm.

Kyle dropped to his knees, literally shocked but also mentally stunned by the blow. He'd never felt anything like that.

Adrian was proud of Kyle for not screaming. "Go to Cody and let him heal those cracks. Do it right now or you're out of my army!"

Kyle rose to his feet with furious tears in his eyes. His hands clenched into tight fists.

Adrian glowered. "Now, Eagle!"

Kyle rotated toward the door, but he glared over his shoulder. "You'll pay for this."

"I already am." Adrian rotated and hit Theo again.

Theo cried out and pissed a little more.

Adrian couldn't hit him again. He stared in angry frustration, trying to come up with a better way to handle it.

"You'll only have to do this one more time." The boy in the shadows of the mess came from behind the counter, where he'd been observing and offering advice. "That last hit will be remembered."

Adrian shut off the baton and went to the counter as if he didn't care that Theo was sobbing while lying in his own urine.

The boy sat on the stool next to Adrian. He offered Adrian a cookie that he'd swiped.

Adrian ate it to keep from spewing his bitterness and guilt. He hated hurting his men. *That's why I always let Kenn do it.*

"My dad loathed you."

Adrian snorted at the common comment. "Everyone's dad loathes me, Bret."

"They all want to be like you. It's their own failures."

Adrian knew, but it still felt good to hear it. He tried to return the favor. "Angela trusts you or you wouldn't be allowed so much freedom. Good job assimilating."

Bret repaid that kindness with brutal truth. "They're never going to let you have leadership back, no matter what you do. It will never be enough."

Instead of getting angry, Adrian reached out. "What should I do?"

Bret shrugged. “It depends on who you want to be when you grow up.”

Adrian refused to laugh. The topic was too serious. “I want to be a good person who’s loved and followed again.”

Bret studied him for a long minute.

Adrian tried not to squirm. The boy had his father’s intense gaze. It was familiar and uncomfortable.

Bret finally reached a decision. “Be everything to them but refuse to claim any of it. Give up everything to them and they’ll remember you when it’s time.”

Adrian smiled. “Thank you.”

Bret rose from the stool as Theo finally stopped crying. Low whimpers were coming from his throat now. “Why did my dad hate you?”

“Because he might not be your dad.” Adrian ran a hand over the boy’s blond hair and stood. “Keep up the good work, Bret.”

The boy shied away from him. “I can’t take it when you’re nice. Be yourself.”

Adrian shook his head. “This is who I am now. You’ll adjust, like everyone else from that damn lab.”

The boy showed a moment of weakness, something he never would have done before now. “What if I don’t? What if I always feel this way?”

Adrian recognized the moment. “I’ll get you some time with the alpha here. She’ll help you more than I can.”

“How?”

“She’ll teach you how to love and be loved.”

Bret snorted. “I don’t want that. Love is just a weakness that can be used against me.”

Adrian nodded. “It’s also an amazing gift that heals your heart. Don’t shut us out, son. You need us as much as we need you.”

3

“Are you okay?”

“What’s going on?”

Kyle stomped by the bridge guards and went to the therapy cubby. He jerked the door open and then keyed his radio. “Adrian has point!”

Kyle went in and slammed the door.

Jayda and Gus exchanged a worried look.

Ray came to the bridge doorway. “I’m ready to take us up the rest of the way. Kyle organized the notes, and I’m a little better now.”

Jayda nodded. “Go ahead, but go slow and if you start feeling foggy, call me in to help you.”

“I will.” Ray went to the console and started following his written instructions.

Their radios lit up with Adrian’s calm voice. “I have some late afternoon updates and instructions for you, Safe Haven. Please pay attention.”

People went quiet and still all over the ship. For some of them, hearing Adrian in control was a good moment. For the others, it was an instant flashback

to the months they'd spent right after the war, when Adrian had been everything to them.

"I need everyone who isn't on duty to come to the second level. We have a couple of injured people who need to be in the medical bay. Bring them with you. We're about to fully surface; the storm is gone. We hope to have word on our missing team shortly."

The ship came alive with movement and conversation at all the good news.

Adrian called again. "Ray, we need some noise. I never want to hear muzak again. Try to find something that might trigger memories."

"You got it, Boss."

Adrian was smiling through the radio as he continued. "I'll be sending up a cleaning crew. No one else should leave the bunk room until I clear it. I want a full count of all people, injuries, messes, and problems in five minutes, Eagles. I'll send someone to you for that information. Do not leave your posts."

The submarine bobbed heavily, rattling them again.

Adrian cut through the noise with his calm words. "We'll feel that for a few more hours as the ocean settles. Stay calm. Do your jobs."

Ray activated the speakers as soon as he was sure Adrian was done. The Star-Spangled Banner floated through the submarine.

Those who were already awake waited tensely to find out if Adrian's idea would work. They needed the rest of the Eagles to pull out of the fog.

Gus was eager to go find their missing people. He didn't care about music. He fingered the bandage Shawn had put on his head. "Can we go up now and look for Angela?"

Jayda shook her head. "We wait for the point man to call it in a moment like this."

She was only a little surprised that Gus had suggested it. He knew the rules, but he'd taken a nasty hit. His thoughts were probably still shaken up.

The door to the therapy cubby opened. Charlie looked around. "Can anyone help me get Kyle down to the bunk room?"

"I can." Gus was feeling better, though he had a headache now.

"I've got it. You guard the bridge." Jayda went to Kyle and began lifting him onto her shoulder. He was breathing, but not awake or moving.

Charlie held Kyle's legs and helped her carry the mobster toward the hatch.

"Don't drop him." Jayda had Charlie go first so he could keep holding Kyle's legs.

Gus came over to help them. It was a three-person job.

Ray observed from the bridge, frowning as fog tried to take over his brain again. The anthem was great, but he was honestly sleepy now.

Cody walked over and stood by the bridge to guard it while the adults were busy.

Cate stayed at the little table and kept trying to reach Angela. *I want my mommy!*

4

Biff had been told to come and help on the top level, but he hadn't made it. He'd roamed the lower level for the last hour. The music had started waking him and reminded him what he was supposed to be doing. He waited for Jayda to get down the ladder with her burden.

Biff reached out. "I'll take him."

He easily put Kyle's unconscious body onto his back and went to the bunk room.

Jayda followed in case he needed a door opened or something moved off a bunk. Biff's battered face implied he might need assistance, too.

Biff took Kyle through the crowded entrance and carefully put him on his bed. Then he rotated and faced Jayda. "Gus is never going to get over Brittani. You'll always be his second choice. You deserve better."

Jayda put her hand on her hip. "And I guess you're the better choice, right?"

Biff walked by her. "Nope. I don't want sloppy seconds either."

Jayda flushed.

Biff laughed silently. Waking from the fog to find out how lonely and unsatisfied he was had

forced a change. *Wade taught us how to get a woman's attention. We start by making it clear that we don't want it in any way except that which complements our honor.*

Biff stopped and glanced back. He let Jayda see how interested he was. He also sent out a sexual vibe that he hoped he got right. Wade hadn't been able to teach that one clearly because it was so complicated.

Jayda's body lit up. Her nipples hardened and heat tingled her core. She studied him with more interest than she'd had before. *Angela's never been wrong...*

Biff saluted her arrogantly and went up to the top level.

Jayda snickered. "Round one goes to the magical normal."

5

I know that song! Greg had been sitting on his bunk for hours, listening to conversations and not understanding any of them. The fog had been too thick to fight through.

The anthem reached a crescendo. Greg began to hum along.

Others in the bunk room did the same. Most of them were just as foggy as Greg was.

The noise swelled with the music. And then words came with their memories.

"Oh, say, does that..."

Adrian paused outside the bunk room, overcome with emotion. He swallowed his tears and spent a few seconds missing his homeland. *I haven't forgotten about you. We'll return soon and fix you up better than new.*

Adrian continued up the ladder and joined the guards by the open bridge.

A few people were starting to clean up the stinking mess now. Adrian stepped carefully over the blood and popped the top side hatch.

He glanced around and found everyone staring back with the same fear. He couldn't force out words that he didn't feel. He opened the hatch and hurried up the ladder.

The top of the submarine was wet and slick, forcing Adrian and the others to be careful where they placed their feet. The wind was calmer, but they still held onto the support poles as they all scanned the rough waves for signs of land and life.

"I see trees!" Greg had followed them up. The anthem was still playing in his head, but it was competing with terror. Now that he mostly remembered who he was and what was happening, all he could think about was Angela. "I can't believe we left her there."

Neither could Adrian. He was still furious about it. Kyle's baton shock had been partially because of that, though Adrian did hope the twins had been able to heal his cracks.

“It’s just trees. I don’t see anyone in them!” Charlie had also come up, with Cody on his heels. “Where are they?!”

“Look, whales!” Cody pointed.

The black and white bodies swam quickly through the waves in front of the sub.

Greg paled. “Those are killer whales.”

“Orcas. They’re hunting something.” Adrian’s stomach dropped. “Shit.”

Three tall, thin fins sliced through the water ahead of the whales.

Charlie’s voice broke. “Are those sharks?!”

Greg scanned the trees. “Where are they?”

“Angela would have secured them to something.” Adrian was certain of it.

Greg adjusted his eye patch. “We need to get over to those trees.”

Adrian denied that. “We have to let the water go down some more. It’s still too rough.” Water was hitting the sub and throwing up large sprays. A RIB in these waves would be easily flipped.

“Go get my mom!”

Adrian reached out to comfort Charlie.

Charlie jerked away, orbs lighting up bright red. “I want my mom!”

Pain and relief went through the descendants. Gifts began returning, slamming into them unexpectedly. Evolutions came as the hive activated.

But the alpha didn’t connect.

6

Jayda returned to her post over the bridge. She wanted to go up and help them search for Angela and their missing men, but she was still on duty over Ray.

Biff was also on duty over the bridge. He gestured. “Gus needs to go to the medical bay. Take a short break and help him down there.”

Jayda and Gus both recognized the moment. Biff was pushing them together so she could have what she believed she wanted.

Jayda was still interested in Gus. She moved toward him, stepping over the fresh bleach spots where the bodies had been. The sub was back at full power now and the messes were being cleaned up.

Gus had heard the rumors and tried to consider a life with Jayda, but it had ended in a vision of Brittani. He slowly shook his aching head. “I can do it alone.”

Jayda heard the double meaning. She stopped, respecting his wishes. “If you change your mind...”

“I won’t.” Gus went down the ladder to the med bay.

Jayda looked at Biff to see if he was still interested.

Biff checked on Ray, who was humming along with the music now, then walked the hall. “I meant what I said. I’m better than someone’s second choice.”

Jayda understood, but she couldn't control how she felt. "Gus is right. Maybe we'll do it alone for a while and see what happens."

"As you wish." Biff checked on Cate and returned to the bridge. He was proud of himself for being able to step up right now even though he was still fighting the fear in his mind. It made him feel good to think that this was a real sign of recovery starting. He was fighting hard to get his life back.

It also made him feel good to glance over and be able to see his soul mate. Jayda didn't want him yet, but Biff had faith that Angela was right. It would happen and he would be happy again.

Jayda felt him still stealing looks at her. She ignored how good it made her feel, how her body lit up and her ego swelled. *Alone for a while, Jayda.*

Biff hid a smirk. Wade's methods were unbeatable. *I owe him a beer when this plays out.*

Biff thought about what Wade might be going through right now and changed his mind. *I'll get him sloppy drunk and hold him while he cries. I know he'd do it for me.*

Chapter Thirty-Six
Do It Anyway

1

The water began to drop faster.

It revealed more of the trees and then lowered further, showing the top of Erhardt Light. The charred structure hadn't changed at all. It had been built to withstand the weather.

Birds flew in and landed in some of the branches. It was another sign that the storm was over. Debris floated on the calmer waves and settled around the island as the water continued to flow back out to sea where it belonged.

Near the trees, a shredded panel of tent canvas floated on the surface, along with cut ropes.

Angela and her team felt the shift in the water.

She made them wait even though their final oxygen tank was in the red. She hoped none of their injuries were life-threatening. They hadn't had time to treat these newest wounds yet.

A killer whale raced by, hunting a target.

Two more orcas swam around their shelter and followed their leader.

Shark fins rose above the waves nearby.

The orcas attacked in a pack, knocking one of the sharks out of the water. It dropped back heavily and began to sink.

One orca latched onto the stunned shark while the other two ripped it open to reach the fatty liver they craved.

More blood flowed through the waves.

The water dropped another foot in seconds, emptying out as the hurricane pulled the water away from them to swallow some other landmass.

Marc and the others watched the killer whales and hoped that hunt stayed away from them this time. It hadn't so far, which had led to several injuries. The orcas didn't care that humans were in the crossfire. Being caught between two super predators hadn't been fun.

Kenn held onto Wade and rubbed the freezing man's arms with tightly wrinkled fingers. He and Zack were right behind Marc and Angela. She'd moved them a short time ago, putting the trees to all their backs and creating a warmth bubble around the two men without wetsuits. They were only tied to the trees now, giving them just one rope to cut.

Wade ignored the pain in his arm. It had stopped bleeding. That was all he cared about.

All of them were cold, exhausted, and feeling the lack of oxygen from sharing the hose for a fast inhale. Their lungs ached and their eyes burned as they watched for the threats to come back their way.

The water dropped again, bringing it below their heads.

Angela crouched, refusing to let her guard down while so many threats were so close. The water was still deep enough for any of them to be attacked.

Her team followed her lead, groaning into the water as their bodies popped and throbbed.

Angela saw the floating canvas and refused to cry again. Her sore eyes couldn't take it. *I'm so sorry, Thomas.*

Angela felt the water drain another foot. Even kneeling, it was down to her head. She reluctantly stood and broke the surface.

All of them rose and drew fresh air into aching lungs. Coughs echoed loudly in their water-logged ears.

Heavy vests dropped into the ankle-deep water in relief. The vests had helped keep them near the bottom, but it was a burden now that they couldn't handle. The weight was making it too hard to breathe.

It was still dangerous. Angela didn't let them cut the ropes yet. As the waves drained off the island, they were pulling out debris and broken branches. It would be easy to lose someone else even though the action was over. The ocean was a determined force.

A stiff breeze blew over their pruned, bruised skin, bringing goosebumps. Zack tilted his head to the side to let the water drain from his ears. His teeth began to chatter.

They had waterproofed fire supplies in the kits that were tied to them, but they didn't have anything dry to burn.

Angela awkwardly unzipped her pouch with hurting hands. “O-okay?”

She frowned at her rough voice and tried again. “Is everyone okay?”

All the men nodded even though blood was flowing again from their injuries now that they were above the waterline.

Angela felt something coming. “Look out!”

Debris popped up between them. Blood followed it, turning the water red.

“Is that a hand?!” Zack jumped back.

Angela reached down and clasped it in relief. “Help me!”

She pulled the bloody man above the water.

“Thomas!” Kenn hurried to help, scanning him for missing body parts. The blood had to be coming from somewhere.

“How is he alive?” Wade was stunned.

Kenn held Thomas up so Angela could see through the knee-high water.

Angela ran hands along his bloody body and found multiple wounds. “I need your belts!”

None of them had expected to see Thomas again. The moment was surreal as they tugged off their belts and held them out.

Angela cinched Marc’s belt around Thomas’s right leg while again cursing Nature for removing her gifts. His injuries were severe and she didn’t have her fire hand to seal the wounds. “Find the bucket. Call a RIB!”

Thomas shivered and shuddered as he gasped in air and coughed it back out. “Shark!”

“I need more tape!” They were out of bandages. Angela wound the last of her tape around his left thigh, where a jagged bite had severed part of the leg. A little higher or lower and he would have already bled to death.

“Shark!”

“It’s okay. We’ve got you.” Kenn didn’t know what else to say.

“Shark!” Thomas made his bloody, gashed hand work and pointed.

They all flinched at the sight of a tall, thin fin breaking the water less than twenty feet away.

The Eagles had already emptied their guns during the orca hunt. They were all out of ammunition.

“Pull him up!”

“Use your knives!”

“Kill that fucking thing!” Angela kept working on Thomas’s wounds, shaking with fury. *You can’t have him!*

The shark flew toward them in response.

2

On the submarine, they saw the team.

Adrian pointed. “There they are.”

“I see the boss!” Greg grinned in relief that quickly faded. “Is that a shark?!”

“Oh, God!”

“Help them!”

Adrian was too far away to bring up a shield around any of them, and he couldn't use a spell because it would hit Angela and the team, too. “Get a RIB!”

Adrian and Greg ran toward the RIB compartment, slipping and sliding.

Everyone else observed the scene in helpless horror. There was nothing they could do from here.

Adrian concentrated, trying to open a connection to Angela. *Maybe I can force her gifts to pop back in.* It was obvious that she didn't have them or she would be shielding them herself.

Greg was already trying that, but it wasn't working. *Please save her, God. Please save her.*

Adrian took up that plea as he worked.

“Can you make that shot?”

Adrian shook his head. “There's no way to get them out of the line of fire. The wind's still gusting too much.” He also doubted a rifle slug would help. Shark skin was thick.

Shouts and a scream floated over the water, making their skin crawl and their frustration grow.

The two men started inflating the boat, but neither of them believed they would get there in time to make a difference. Despite being less than a mile away, Angela and her team were still on their own.

“We better take a couple of pineapples for those orcas. Bullets aren't going to stop them.”

Adrian nodded. “Agreed, but you’re staying here. Get things organized.”

Greg paused. “I’m going with you!”

“There’s not enough room. I’ll take Lisa. She’s small and scrappy; she can help me get them in the boat.”

Greg wanted to argue, but he knew Adrian was right. Another scream floated over the water. *That’s Angela.* “Hurry up!”

Adrian was already working as fast as he could. “I need someone who’s awake and senior to get things ready for our return. That’s you.”

“I’ll cover it.”

Adrian understood what Greg was feeling. “I’ll bring her back. I’ll get them *all* back.”

Lisa had followed them up as the fog faded from her mind. She began fastening down her gear. She expected a wild ride. “I have a full medical box in my kit.”

It was on her shoulders. She didn’t go anywhere without it. The explosion had taught her a lot of tough lessons.

Adrian activated the automatic air pump. “Good. Grab a lifejacket and remember to hold on tight. If you fall out, the splashing might trigger those orcas.”

Lisa shuddered. “If that happens, shoot me.”

Adrian frowned as he attached the engine to the RIB. “Same.”

3

Angela felt death sneer over her shoulder. She rotated, squeezing Thomas between her and Wade.

She immediately stabbed out with her knife while Marc and Kenn did the same.

Zack splashed into the fray and hammered his blade into the shark's head.

The shark snapped and lunged wildly as the water went down further, trapping it. Its remaining black eye focused on Thomas with fierce intensity.

Angela went for that eye.

Marc went for the gills.

Zack and Wade impaled its head again.

And the shark still kept thrashing, trying to get to Thomas.

The pod of orcas swam across the beach, where the water was still deep enough for them. They called angrily and bumped into the rocky bottom to show their displeasure.

The shark thrashed wildly, snapping. The water was going down, limiting its movement, but not fast enough.

Angela saw the grenades on Marc's belt.

Angela grabbed one and pulled the pin. "Over here, big boy!"

She stuck her foot out.

"No!" Marc tried to get between them.

Kenn shoved Marc out of the way and dropped into the water.

The shark lunged forward.

“Down!” Angela tossed the grenade into its opening mouth and then turned to cover Thomas from the blast.

The shark lunged forward and clamped down on her leg.

Angela’s scream echoed all the way to the submarine.

The shark exploded with the grenade, taking the brunt of the blast. Gore and water spewed out in every direction.

Warm flesh slid down Angela’s back and fell into the water. She was covered in a layer of blood and guts all over her back and legs.

Angela fell to her knees as blood flowed from her leg; both ears throbbed fiercely from the force of the blast.

Thomas stared at her as the chaos went on around him and blood dripped from his many injuries. He was stunned to be alive.

Angela swallowed the next scream as Marc grabbed her leg and slapped his hand over the wound.

Zack splashed around for the white bucket. It had floated to the end of its rope during the fight they’d had before the water went down.

Marc concentrated. *Come get us, Adrian!*

He knew it would still be a bit. It took a while to inflate a RIB. “I need my gifts, damn it!”

Nature scoffed in his mind.

“No time!” Angela ignored her own injury. She grabbed a warm pile of shark gore and began

stuffing it into the holes in Thomas's legs. "Pack those wounds!"

Marc held the gouge in her leg together with one hand and scooped gore with the other. "Will this work?"

"No idea." Angela stuffed in more slippery shark remains, stopping the open bleeding. "Pack it in tight."

Water dripped from her hair. She shoved it away in annoyance, smearing blood across her face.

Angela winced as Marc worked on her leg, but she didn't stop trying to save Thomas.

"Wrap it with your wet clothes!" Angela packed in more shark meat with stiff fingers. "Strip! I want to see those bare asses!"

Being drenched in this wind wasn't good for them after being so cold for hours. "Use those wet clothes to tie the wounds after you pack them!"

Zack pried open the bucket and took out the radio. As soon as he switched it on, it lit up.

"We're coming to get you! Hold on!"

"Tell them we need blankets and sutures!" Angela tied the shirt as tightly as she could get it.

Marc handed her his extra shirt and resumed packing bloody shark flesh into her leg. The shark had taken a large chunk out of her, but it wasn't as deep as he'd first thought.

"Blanket, sutures, and a ride, please." Zack cleared his rough throat. "The sooner the better."

Cheers echoed in the background of Adrian's answer. "We'll be there in 15 minutes."

“Will that be soon enough?” Wade had finished packing his minor injury and was stripping. He handed each dripping piece of clothing to Angela or Marc.

“It will have to be.” Angela tied off Thomas’s other leg and leaned on her knee. She was hurting all over, but her heart was lightening. The blood loss was slowing and Thomas was still awake. She smiled at him. “I always heard you Navy men were bad asses. Now I know it.”

Thomas shivered and grimaced in response, but he didn’t look away from her.

Marc finished tying the shirt around Angela’s lower leg. He pulled it tight enough to make her groan. “Sorry.”

“No, that’s the right way.” She nodded to Kenn. “Keep him upright and awake.”

Kenn and Wade held Thomas between them. Blood trickled down both of his legs, but it was light and watery. All of them were relieved when the improvised treatment held.

Angela let Marc help her up. Like with Thomas, blood ran down her leg. She shivered in the breeze. “Get this wetsuit off of me.” Her fingers were gory and stiff from being so cold.

Marc helped her undress. For a change, he didn’t notice or care when the other men glanced at her scarred skin and quickly looked away. All he cared about was getting her to the submarine so their medics could help her.

Angela kept her wet bra and underwear on. She glared at the dim sunlight. “How about a little warmth?!”

The sun slid behind a cloud and vanished.

Angela sighed. “That is not what I asked for.”

Marc wrapped her in his arms and held her against his bare chest.

All of them were in their boxers now, except for Thomas, who was barely clothed at all. His gear was shredded and hanging from him like dead skin.

Angela needed the distraction. “Get an update.”

Zack made the call through chattering teeth. “The B-boss w-would like an update.”

Adrian came right back with a short list of what he knew she would want the most. “The killers are gone and everyone is accounted for. We had a few issues. The worst one is Trent. He has a fever and a nasty rash that hasn’t responded to any medicine Shawn tried.”

Angela wondered why Harry wasn’t covering the medial problem.

Zack checked on his own rash and found it almost gone. His fever was also down. “Boss?”

Angela nodded. “Saltwater.”

Zack keyed the mike. “Immerse it in saltwater for a few hours.”

“Copy. The RIB’s almost ready.” Adrian tried to send comfort. “We’ll be there soon.”

“It d-does seem to be a nice day for a b-boat ride.”

Adrian chuckled tensely at Zack’s calm attitude.

Angela sighed. “Give him an update before he begs.”

Zack frowned but obeyed. “We have a lot of injuries. Only T-Thomas and the boss are in danger, I think. Hurry up with those b-blankets.”

“You got it.”

Zack stored the radio in the bucket so it would stay dry.

The water was around their ankles now, revealing fish and sea creatures that had been caught on land.

“Leave them be.” Angela felt their need to take revenge on those creatures for what they’d faced under the water. “They were just following Nature’s design. Be mad at her.”

Kenn’s voice was cold. “I am.”

All the men nodded, even Thomas.

Angela rubbed his slashed, lightly bleeding hands. “If you tell us now, you can skip the therapy session later.”

Thomas jerked his hurting head back and forth. He didn’t want to talk about what he’d just gone through. *But I’ll never forget it.* Mel’s little shelter had saved his life. “Get bent.”

Angela laughed, but his response hurt her deeply. *I’ve scarred another one. I’ll never escape this feeling.*

Thomas didn’t have his gifts, but he knew what she was thinking. He forced out words through the shivers and the pain. “It’s what an alpha does.”

He managed a smile for her this time. “I’m alive. Let it go.”

Angela nodded, but she would never be able to do that. *It’s just not who I am.*

The sound of a RIB flying toward them brought relief to everyone. They hadn’t come out unscathed, but they had survived.

4

“Get some gurneys up here.” Greg had called Eagles up for instructions. He wasn’t leaving the top of the sub until Angela was back. “We’ll need blood. Have Shawn find out what the blood types are for all of them and find donors. We don’t have a stock.”

Jayda wrote it down. “We will after this.”

“Yep.” Greg watched the rescue RIB reach the beach that was finally clearing of ocean water. The entire island looked different.

Rocks, seaweed, and debris littered the landmass, along with ocean life that had been trapped and was running out of air. There were crabs, jellyfish, and even eels slithering along the rocks. Their base camp had been completely wiped out. Not a single stick of it remained.

“Get clothes gathered and clear the showers. They’ll all want to spend time in the hot water getting cleaned up.” Greg wasn’t totally sure on that one, but it was still best to be prepared. “We don’t have enough space for all of them in the medical

bay. Clear a corner of the bunk room and make it a medical zone. Partition it off and get supplies in there.”

Greg waved her off to get started.

He watched Adrian reach the injured team and start helping them toward the RIB, where Lisa was staking it against the tide that was due to come in soon. Greg didn't know how long it would take for regular tides to reassert themselves; he approved of their caution.

Greg sent his mind back to the other preparations he needed to cover. He waved Erin over. “Gather updates for the boss. She'll probably want those while the medics are working on her. And find out if Harry's awake enough to help yet. Thomas looks bad. We'll need all the help we can get; ask the new arrivals if they have any medical training.”

“What about Isabel?”

Greg tensed. Then he slowly nodded. “She can help. Make sure someone keeps an eye on her, though.”

“I will. Anything else for me?” Erin was eager to go get those things covered.

“Probably. Come see me after you handle all that.”

“Will do.”

Greg kept watching the rescue RIB, but his mind was flying over the next stages. He could almost feel Angela staring at him across the distance, willing him to get it all covered. “Home.”

Greg sighed. “We haven’t heard from home. She’s going to head us there.”

Greg turned to see who else was nearby to run a message.

Charlie stepped forward quickly. He’d remained on the sub to help and to watch over the twins because it’s what his mom would have wanted. He was done going against her wishes. He hoped his dad was, too, after this. “What do you need?”

Greg didn’t want to say it, but he knew the order would come. “Tell Ray to get ready to take us back to Pitcairn.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Do it anyway.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

We Had Some Issues

1

“**W**hy don’t we have our gifts back yet?”

“I don’t know.” Angela waited at the top of the ladder while the rest of her team went down. They had taken Thomas first.

All around her, Safe Haven people and the new refugees were digging into their minds and memories. They were wincing, groaning, staring, and pointing in shock and concern as the team came onboard.

Angela wanted her gifts at that moment just to defend her exhausted brain. She had secrets in there that she didn’t want anyone to know, let alone everyone. She also didn’t need them to know how badly she was hurting. *It’s nothing compared to what my team is feeling.*

Adrian brought his shield up around Angela so no one could get through. Then he sent a wave of pain relief. He wasn’t strong enough to heal her or the others, but he was hitting them with what he had to lessen their discomfort.

Angela gave him a tired smile of gratitude and then slid down the ladder. She staggered as she hit the last rung.

Marc had waited at the bottom for her after helping them get Thomas down. He caught her, then supported her weight as she limped toward the next ladder while trying to keep people from crowding them. They were even trying to touch her through Adrian's shield.

"The alpha's hurt!"

"They're all back!"

"Help the alpha!"

"Make a hole!" Adrian glared, forcing people to move back, but they didn't leave the hallway.

They had brought Thomas through the rear hatch, but there was a line waiting here now to greet the battered team, as well as everyone who was already on duty. Adrian regretted not telling Greg to block off this hall. It was loud and hard to get through.

Angela wanted a full update, but she was too tired. They hadn't been off the ship for long in the grand scheme of things. It had only been about six hours. *It felt like days.*

The smell of bleach hit her nose. The Australian national anthem hit her ears. Angela looked at Adrian in confusion.

Adrian shrugged while clearing a path through the curious, staring people. "We had some issues. I'll fill you in when you're ready."

People all around them began speaking anyway, wanting Angela to know what they had gone through while she was missing.

Marc and Adrian both glared, causing silence to fall in their part of the line.

Angela didn't overrule them. She needed a break before she would be ready to resume leadership. As far she could tell, Kyle and Adrian had handled whatever issues they'd had. "Adrian will keep point."

Adrian straightened proudly. "Jayda and Biff will keep duty over the bridge."

Biff had his stone warrior standing in front of that open door. The bridge was as secure as it could be.

Adrian pointed at Greg, who was standing next to the second ladder. "Piggyback her down to the bunk room."

Greg turned and knelt.

Marc didn't let Angela protest. He gently tugged her forward and helped her get settled on Greg's back. He trusted the man to get her down the ladder safely.

Marc wanted to do it himself, but all of his injuries were starting to give him problems. He wasn't sure he could carry her. He felt much like he had after his first day on the warehouse floor. He expected tomorrow's weakness and discomfort to be worse.

Angela held tight to Greg. As they neared the bottom, she rested her head on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Greg held onto her good leg on one side and her hip on the other as he stepped off the ladder and went toward the bunk room. “It’s my honor.”

There wasn’t an attraction for him, even though he was aware of it waiting in the wings. He just wanted to get her to the medics so they could verify her health. Greg hadn’t seen her this tired since the radiation sickness that had killed so many of their citizens. *But that took days and she was only gone for hours!*

Cate and Cody came through the line, pushing and shoving where it was needed. They surrounded Greg and cleared a path to the medical area.

“Move it or lose it!”

“Let her through!”

Greg gently let Angela down and then stayed close to guard her. Marc and Adrian were still fighting through the crowd in the hallway behind them.

Cate and Cody flew to Angela as soon as she touched the floor. “Mommy!”

Marc was happy for them. His kids needed that bond and Angela needed that love.

Angela held onto them and tried not to cry. She spotted Charlie over their shoulders and smiled at him. “Hi.”

Charlie grinned. “You look like shit, *Mommy.*”

Angela laughed with him. “You always know what I need to hear.”

The twins began drawing energy to heal her.

“No. Help Harry with Thomas. He needs it more than I do.”

The twins immediately obeyed. They needed an outlet for all of the nervous tension that had built up while their parents were missing.

The bunk room had been cleared on one side. Six gurneys were waiting there, along with a small stack of supplies that had been brought in. More were on the way. Greg felt like he had done a good job of preparing, but Shawn and Harry would need more items from the medical bay. Greg was sure Adrian would draft volunteers out of the crowd shortly for it.

The public side of the bunkhouse was filling with gawkers and well-wishers who'd been ordered to stay out of the way. Some of them smiled and waved at the team members, while others gestured in Eagle code.

The team ignored them for now. They had bigger concerns than telling the rookies what had happened.

On the medical side of the bunk room, Harry was already working on Thomas. Shawn had gotten blood donors lined up. Those men and women were currently sitting in chairs along the wall with IV tubes running from their arms. Harry was doing direct transfusions on Thomas because he had lost so much blood. It was a miracle that he was alive at all.

Harry pried open the shirt around Thomas's right leg and stared in disgusted surprise. "What the hell is that smell?"

Mel viewed the gore and cackled. "Aces! Never thought to do that!"

Harry grinned at her. Mel was spunky, and cute in his opinion. "We say that a lot in this camp. Our boss is special that way."

Mel noticed his interest and began studying him intently from her bunk.

Harry blushed and got back to work.

The witnesses laughed and enjoyed the good moment while ignoring the smells from the team that were turning their stomachs. The odors were rough.

Zack was on the gurney next to Thomas, covered in a warm blanket while he waited for his turn. "We did the best we could with what we had to work with."

"I can understand, but this still requires an explanation." Harry began pulling out the stinking, gory shark guts and dropping them into the waste pail next to his boots.

Zack shrugged tiredly. "The boss decided Thomas needed to get closer to nature."

All of the team snickered, including Thomas. He'd been sedated lightly and wasn't feeling much physically now. Mentally, he was a wreck.

Harry didn't want to waste his gifts on reading their minds to find out what had happened. He pursed his lips and continued to pull the nasty

packing out of Thomas's leg. The smell was awful and growing worse as he uncovered the injury.

"How bad is it, Doc?" Thomas kept staring at Angela, hoping that would help him focus. He was exhausted but afraid to go to sleep without knowing how severely he was hurt.

"Give me a minute." Harry packed gauze into the wound that was now bleeding freely. Then he removed the bloody belt.

Thomas fought the flashes of holding his vest over the entrance of Mel's rock shelter with his boots, while the shark tried to get in and he tried to get enough oxygen from the air pocket at the top.

The shark had left when the water started receding. Thomas had believed it was safe to rejoin his team then, but the shark had been waiting for him. If not for the hunting orcas, the shark would have gotten him. Even uninjured, he wouldn't have been able to outswim it.

People were wincing as they tracked Thomas's mental replays and saw the shark snapping at his bleeding legs while two killer whales swam in for a meal.

Harry studied the jagged bite marks. "You may have saved his life the second time with this mess."

Thomas was relieved.

Harry didn't add to it. There were still a lot of things that could go wrong. He didn't want to give false hope, but the wounds weren't gushing blood and Thomas was still alert, though pale. That meant the bite hadn't severed an artery. If it had, Thomas

would have died immediately following the attack. It was obvious from the wounds that they had been sustained hours ago.

Unlike the others, Harry didn't want to know how that was possible. *I have my own nightmares. I don't need to add his to it.*

Shawn finished threading the sutures and then gestured at Wade. "Let's get that arm cleaned out and Isabel will sew it up."

Shawn was waiting on the numbing agent to take full effect on Zack before he cauterized the long slice across his stomach. It was only seeping tiny blood drops, telling Shawn it was trying to clot, so he hadn't used his gifts. It had seemed cruel to add fire when Zack had just been tortured by water.

Wade sat in a chair and tugged the warm blanket closer. They'd all been covered with blankets as soon as they came out of the RIB, but Wade was looking forward to a hot shower and clean clothes. It felt odd to be naked except for his boxers and a blanket in front of so many people.

Shawn examined the wound. "This isn't a shark bite."

"We had more than one type of combatant this time."

Harry and Shawn both winced at Wade's flippant comment.

Marc led Angela over to a chair. He wrapped his blanket around her shoulders and then handed her another one in case she wanted to cover more of herself. Then he sat in the chair next to her to wait

for his turn. All of them had minor injuries that needed to be tended.

Over in the corner, Kyle appeared to be resting comfortably. Because he hadn't woken up despite all the noise, Angela knew something had happened with him. Adrian would update her later. Because he hadn't mentioned it yet, she assumed it wasn't serious. If it was, everyone around them would already be directing her attention to it or thinking about it.

Cate and Cody stood next to Thomas and waited for Harry's call to use their healing power.

Harry dumped another handful of gore into the waste basket and looked over at Angela. "Was this your idea?"

Angela nodded. "I couldn't think of anything else that would fill in the holes without gaps."

"It's genius. The flesh squeezed in and sealed itself into the wound. We should ask Tonya to experiment on it when we get home. Maybe we could use something like this in place of gauze when it runs out."

Kenn tensed at the name and then again as Charlie came in and stood next to him. Kenn glanced up at the teenager in apprehension.

Charlie stared at Kenn in resignation. He slowly reached out and put his hand on Kenn's shoulder.

Kenn sighed in relief as the pain from his minor injuries faded and the wounds began healing. He fought back unfamiliar and unwelcome emotions. "Thanks."

“I didn’t do it for you.” Charlie went to his dad.

Kenn understood Charlie had done it to ease his mom’s guilt. Angela was staring around at all of them in regret.

Kenn decided not to be offended this time. He was too tired for it.

“Does everyone else have their gifts back?”

Adrian nodded at Marc. “It happened about an hour ago.”

Adrian didn’t mention how worried he was that Angela and the five men still didn’t. He had no idea what to do about it. He had never experienced a time when descendant gifts had been locked unless it was intentional or they were in the middle of an evolution.

Greg brought a mug of coffee over and gave it to Angela. “We had just made it out of the lab. It was a big moment, even though there wasn’t as much fighting as usual. I’ll bet they’re undergoing an evolution.”

It was a plausible and almost exciting explanation.

Angela wasn’t certain she agreed, but she didn’t say so. She was too tired to follow that conversation. She leaned her head against Marc’s arm. *We’re all here. We’re alive.*

Charlie healed most of Marc’s injuries and then approached his mom.

Angela shook her head. “Do the rest of them first.”

Charlie didn't argue even though it was likely to drain him. Cate and Cody were healthy and full of energy, like the other descendants on the sub. Charlie just wanted her guilt to go away. It was flashing in her mind brighter than anything else. He hated it that she felt bad for something that hadn't been under her control.

"But it was. I didn't watch the weather and Nature almost took another cut." Angela sat up as she realized she'd caught his thought; a smile came across her face. "It's back."

Marc and the rest of the team tried to use their gifts and found that they could.

A cheer went through the submarine as Angela connected to the hive.

Angela immediately felt the new strength of her army. Evolutions had come with the return of their gifts.

The injured team was more powerful, too, but it didn't soothe them the way they had believed it would while they were under the water. It could happen again at any point.

We can't depend on magic anymore.

All of the team members nodded at Wade. They would have to make other plans.

Angela began working on that silently.

Marc felt it when Angela began resuming leadership, though it was only mentally. Instead of the usual jealousy and disrespect, Marc felt relieved. He wanted her back in leadership where she belonged. He just hoped Adrian and the others

would give her a little time to recover from what they'd just gone through.

Marc looked at Angela's leg and saw it was bleeding again. He didn't like it that she was going last, but he respected her for it. A good leader never sought care before their team. "How is he?"

Harry had finished cleaning out the shark mess from Thomas's other leg. "He's going to need a lot of stitches and the twins are going to drain themselves filling him up. I'm going to use magic and normal care. He'll be scarred, and walking will be difficult, but he'll live."

Thomas smiled in relief and finally shut his eyes.

Charlie went to Zack, yawning. "Let's see that gut cut."

Zack laughed and moved the blanket. The drugs were working well now. He didn't feel anything.

Marc motioned toward Greg. "Help her."

Greg put a hand out and waited for Angela to touch him.

Bright blue sparks floated through the air from the contact and then turned red as both people denied the connection. Healing orbs began sinking into her.

"Don't we need to clean it out first?" Charlie didn't like the idea of not doing that.

"Too late." Marc smiled as her wound formed a thick scab while they watched. "Maybe she'll develop the powers of a shark."

Angela and the rest of the team snickered.

The witnesses made faces at him for being insensitive. They didn't understand that laughter was an Eagle way of dealing with this because they couldn't change it.

"Use your fire hand to follow my scalpel." Harry got Shawn ready, then gestured at the twins. "As soon as he cauterizes it, I want you to heal it."

Harry had discovered that a combination of healing orbs with medical magic were better for injuries than just doing one or the other. *It was another lesson I learned during my time in Reicher's lab.*

Marc nodded. They'd all learned valuable lessons there.

Marc was reading people eagerly and not just to get caught up. He'd missed his gifts. He was tracking thoughts from their witnesses, as well as reading Adrian's mind about things that had happened while they were gone. "Will it work with Theo?"

Adrian gave him a pointed look. "You tell me."

Marc sighed. "It will, but you'll have to do it at least once more."

"I already planned on it." Adrian smiled at Cate, who was watching him.

Cate smiled back.

Marc noticed Cate was wearing a red bow in her hair, but he didn't mention it. He wasn't sure what had triggered that change and he didn't want to discourage it. Cate was kind. She just hadn't been allowed to show it during her life so far.

Marc decided to get that drama out of the way. “You can train her.”

Adrian was surprised. He lifted a brow. “Why the change of heart?” He’d fully expected Marc’s final choice to be no.

“I’ve been trying to give her a normal childhood.” Marc sighed. “But she’s not normal. None of us are.”

“Very true, but that’s not always a bad thing.”

“Agreed.”

Cate and Cody finished with Thomas’s worst leg and then waited for Harry to start working on the other one.

Harry shook his head. “I’m running an experiment. We’re not going to use magic on that one at all. I want to see which method produces the best results.”

Angela looked over at him.

Harry stiffened. He met her eye and waited to be overruled.

Marc knew what was coming. He didn’t want to hear it. He regarded Charlie. “How about helping me get a shower and then we’ll all go watch a movie while your mom handles things?”

Charlie smiled. “Absolutely.”

Adrian watched them go. He was proud of Marc. *That family might finally find some happiness.*

Harry was still waiting for Angela’s choice.

Angela nodded stiffly. “24-hours.”

Harry smiled happily. “I only need 12. If he’s not showing an improvement by then, I’ll call the twins back in.”

Angela leaned her head against the chair and let herself doze.

Wade was now being tended by Isabel, who was putting a bandage over the five sutures she had put in his arm. He got Adrian’s attention so he was distracted from the pain. He’d refused a pill. “Can I join some of your sessions? I want to learn how to be a therapist.”

Adrian frowned. “Are you giving up the Eagles?”

Wade shook his head. “I’m just expanding my skills. I want to be able to teach the rookies how to help each other stay sane on runs like this, and like the one the mission men were on.”

Adrian approved. “I’ll let you know when my next appointments are scheduled.”

Piper stood near Isabel and tried not to get bored. Isabel wasn’t a threat as long as you weren’t committing a crime. The same was true of the sleeping caretakers that people kept staring at. The caretakers had crashed as soon as word came on Angela. They’d been up for a long time. People were staring at them because they all appeared at least two decades younger. All five women were youthful again. It was making people consider that diet.

Piper had already made notes about it for her nightly report. Angela would have to nip that in the bud and soon.

A group of the orphan kids entered and made their way over to the team. They used their gifts to provide pain relief since they didn't have healing powers. They had been used for this in the lab, as well as for protective duties.

Angela glanced over at the doorway, where Bret was watching. Reicher's son was dangerous. If not for his age, which she had guessed to be around twelve, he might have inherited control of the lab.

Bret nodded at her and then left. He didn't want a bond with the new alpha. *I just wanted to see if the team was okay.*

Adrian noticed. Angela's natural charm was already working on the boy.

Angela felt herself falling asleep. She had to handle one more thing first. She forced her weary lids open and focused on Adrian. "Lock us down and get us the hell away from Howland Island. Do it right now."

Adrian called Ray on the radio.

Angela drifted off, confident that Adrian would handle things while she recovered. *I can't believe I'm still alive.*

Nature growled unhappily in the wind. *Neither can I!*

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Consider It Done

1

Angela jerked awake. The shark in her nightmare faded angrily.

Angela opened her eyes in relief. *It's okay. We made it back.*

The bunk room was dim. Snores and restless mutters echoed, telling her everyone else was asleep. She judged it to be after midnight. *I was out for a while.*

Angela turned her head and winced at the soreness. She saw Marc sleeping on her right. The twins were both in the bunk with him, creating an amusing dogpile that warmed her heart.

Marc looked a lot better. She hoped his sleep was restful and without the bad dreams that had haunted her.

A loud snore echoed from the bunk on her left. Angela looked over and saw Thomas.

She immediately knew Adrian had ordered them to put Thomas next to her, so she would be able to see him as soon as she woke up. It wasn't to add to her guilt, though it did. It was to let her know he was alive.

Angela felt horrible for everything he had gone through, just like she felt terrible about everything all of her army had suffered. *But this is a fight for survival to the end. None of us are going to come out undamaged. The Apocalypse doesn't work that way.* She was tired of reminding herself of that.

Angela slowly sat up on the bunk and evaluated her condition. Her ankle was throbbing, along with her arms, shoulders, feet, neck, and sides. The only thing that wasn't hurting was her head and she was grateful. It was hard to think around a headache.

Angela turned toward the doorway, where bright light was floating in from the hallway.

Adrian was standing there. He held up a mug and a baggie.

Angela smiled.

Adrian had been standing there, watching her sleep. When she'd lost the baby in the mountain, Angela had almost given up leadership and her life. When bad things happened now, he no longer doubted she would resume her position. He had complete faith that she would continue to lead them all the way to that final battle. *I'm going to find a solution for that. I'm never going to let you give up.*

Angela eased out of the bunk carefully, not putting full weight on her leg. If she overused it too soon, the wound would open back up. Magic healing wasn't perfect.

Angela stepped out into the hallway so their conversation, and her munching, didn't wake anyone.

Adrian handed her the mug first and then opened the baggie and held it for her so she could fish out pieces of the stale cookies.

The smell of bleach was still hanging heavily in the air as she entered the hallway. She hated that odor. Every time the acid scent hit her nose, she contemplated death. That would never change now.

Angela limped toward the bathroom.

Adrian started to use his gifts to give her another healing session.

Angela held up a hand. "I'm fine."

Adrian didn't know why she wanted to feel the lingering effects, but he didn't argue. He was just glad she was back.

Angela sat the mug on the bathroom counter while she did her business. She hated the smell of herself. *I need a shower.*

Angela sipped on the coffee while she removed the clothes Harry had helped her put on after he tended her leg. She still had the nasty bra and underwear on under them. "Got a robe?"

"One minute."

Angela carefully pried off the stiff, reeking underclothes and then stood there, eyeing her belly in the mirror. She'd gotten bigger over just the last day. *That's a good sign.*

She put both hands on her stomach and waited, but she didn't feel anything.

Angela wasn't worried this time. She took the robe that Adrian extended through the door without looking at her. She slid it on and tied it shut while

inhaling deeply. It smelled like clean, fresh laundry, giving off the impression that everything was fine. As far as she knew, it was, but she didn't feel that way. There were a lot of things they didn't have an explanation for. Until she did, it would bother her.

Angela tugged the robe closer and stepped carefully out into the hall with her mug. Pain flew through her leg.

Adrian hated it that she wouldn't let him heal her. He wanted to offer her a pain pill, but Harry had mentioned it might be bad for the baby. He had no choice but to let her suffer.

"Give me your arm and take me on an update tour. That'll ease my mental pain."

Adrian held his arm out in surprise. She rarely ever initiated contact between them.

Angela held onto his arm and breathed in his scent. She didn't allow her mind to take things any further than the relief of being close to him. "Update me on everything."

Adrian knew what she wanted to hear first. "Trent is already better. The saltwater is having a great effect. How did you know that would work?"

"Zack had a rash, too. It faded while we were swimming."

"Swimming?"

Angela shrugged. "It sounds better than being hunted by a shark. I think it was a relative of JAWS. That damn thing wanted Thomas like he was chocolate."

Adrian winced.

Angela sipped her coffee, ate a cookie, and waited.

Adrian forced himself to continue without the rant about her breaking her promise not to leave the sub. “Dace’s ankle is doing well. It’s setting nicely, according to Harry. Dog is also doing better. We’re keeping an eye on Gus’s head. He took a nasty hit during the action with the military men. As I’m sure you know by now, they tried to take over the submarine.”

Angela stopped in the doorway of the mess. She smelled bleach and lifted a brow.

Adrian tried not to think about those details. He didn’t want to see her condemnation. “Theo had a special therapy session in here. We cleaned up afterward.”

Angela didn’t ask for information. She was certain she would hear about it later through the gossip vine.

The music coming over the speakers switched to the American national anthem, making her heart hurt a little. “Where’s my muzak?”

Adrian faked a shudder. “Gone. We’re alternating national anthems in an attempt to keep everyone awake. We’re all still having the fog spells. I didn’t know what else to do for it.”

“I’ll start working on that shortly.”

Adrian wanted to tell her to take time and heal up first, but having people forget who they were and what they were doing was dangerous in many ways. They needed to figure out what was causing it and

then fix it. “Kyle hasn’t woken yet. Cate and Cody healed his cracks while you were gone.”

Angela caught the note of guilt in Adrian’s voice. She connected it to the mess in the mess. “I assume you convinced him using the same method you used on Theo?”

Adrian enjoyed more proof of her intelligence. He never doubted anymore, but he would always enjoy seeing it. “Kyle took one hit and an ugly threat. He’s not nearly as hardheaded as Theo.”

Angela chuckled softly so it didn’t echo and wake anyone up. “Do you know what time it is?”

Adrian had been keeping track of that since their watches stopped working. “It’s 1:00 a.m. You were out for about seven hours.”

Angela shifted more weight off of her bad leg to ease the fire that was brewing in it. “Keep going.”

“Ray posted notes when he went foggy. I’d like to give him a promotion for that at some point. Without it, we might have sunk to the bottom of the ocean.”

Angela nodded. “I’m waiting for Ray to make a final choice on a personal issue and then I’m going to give him his own team.”

Adrian approved. Ray was dependable in every way. Adrian didn’t know what the personal issue was, but he was certain Ray would make the right choice. “Even though he’s back to work, we’re still keeping an eye on Harry, too. He was knocked out during the mutiny. We also had a problem getting

the bridge open when Ray went foggy. I'm having them leave it open."

"Any word from home?"

Adrian shook his head. "No, and we've been calling them hourly." Adrian braced for the order he was expecting.

Angela didn't give it. "Finish the updates."

Adrian held out the baggie for her to get another cookie. She needed the sugar. "We're planning a big breakfast. That should keep everyone occupied for a couple of hours and then we'll have to get schedules ready. None of us had time to cover it."

Angela would have been surprised if they had.

"I need your choices on two issues. They were too big for me to handle without talking to you first."

Angela already knew the first one. "Until the remaining military man screws up, leave him alone."

Adrian lifted a brow. "No job, though, right?"

"No."

Adrian didn't like that decision, but he also believed in innocent until proven guilty as much as she did. "My other issue is what to do with our crazy cannibals."

Adrian used that word intentionally because it was going around the submarine. The refugees from the lab didn't seem to care; the Safe Haven people were horrified and expecting leadership to do something about it.

Angela swallowed the bite of cookie. “Isabel is an unofficial Eagle. Make it official.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Adrian would never have allowed someone so mentally unstable to join his army.

“I’m dead serious. I also want it known that a normal saved the submarine.”

Adrian frowned. “That’s not exactly true.”

Angela leaned her head against his arm. “Okay, a *group* of normals.”

Adrian was unable to fight the good vibes from having her so close. “Fine. But why support anything the normals are doing after accusing them of causing problems?”

“Because their pride will let them see they made a big mistake in shunning our magic. Once it becomes clear that we need them to step up and do a lot more work if we’re not going to be able to use our gifts, they’ll change their minds. This can be used as a perfect example of what that will be like for them.”

Adrian laughed. “You are so sneaky!”

A low growl echoed by their feet.

Angela sniggered, straightening. “No, that’s Sneaky.”

The cat glared up at her and let out another hissing growl.

Angela sighed. “Okay. But just this once. I can’t be tracking pussy through the halls. I don’t swing that way.”

Adrian laughed again. It was great to have her back.

The gray feline stared at them resentfully and flinched as they moved forward. It took them straight to the medical bay.

The cat jumped up on the metal table where Dog was sitting up, looking for them expectantly.

Dog's fur was shiny and freshly brushed. Judging from the smell, he'd also gotten a flea bath. Angela mentally applauded their decision to do that while Dog wasn't able to resist. He hated physical care of any kind. She fully expected him to leave the medical bay as soon as he was able, even if Harry said it was too soon.

Dog wasn't able to jump off the table with his hurt paw. *It's about time!*

Angela put a hand on her hip. "Did you just message me, with a cat?"

Dog whined. *Yes, and it took too long. I need an upgrade.*

Angela snorted. "And what would that be? A squirrel? A horse?"

Dog whined again as the cat jumped onto his back and began purr clawing him. *I was thinking about the crocs. They're nice as long as they're not hungry.*

Adrian gently patted Angela's stomach as she chuckled. "Sounds like the boss."

Angela's amusement echoed through the hallway.

2

In the bunk room, Thomas's eyes opened. He looked around, searching for Angela.

Marc had also woken and noticed her gone. Her laughter allowed him to relax.

Thomas was weak, but he was more alert now, and his pulse was steady. He was already on the mend, thanks to multiple healing sessions. "You're a lucky man."

Marc had heard that many times before, but he'd always received it sarcastically. This time, he nodded. "I am."

Thomas looked over to tell Marc he had changed his mind.

Marc already knew. "You're hers now. I get it."

Thomas felt bad for it. "Sorry, man."

Marc shook his head. "Don't be. I completely understand."

The team around them had also woken at the sound of Angela's mirth. They were still paying close attention to her out of the need for survival; her laughter said things were okay, they'd met that goal.

Angela came back down the hall while Adrian helped Dog off the medical table. She leaned against the doorframe and sipped her coffee.

All of them were aware that she was there. It didn't matter. Anything they had to say didn't need to be hidden anymore.

The submarine was resting calmly in the water. There were only the normal groans and pops that they had all adjusted to during this run. The vibe wasn't peaceful, however. Everyone wanted to know why their gifts had gone out and why Safe Haven wasn't answering their calls. Now that the team had been rescued, they were worrying about home.

Wade had waited as long as he was going to. "We have to go home. We can't get through, and that hurricane is headed straight for them."

Zack nodded. "I agree."

"So do I." Kenn was eager to hold his son and hug his fiancé, if she would let him.

"We can come right back out if we want to, but we have to make sure they're all okay."

The entire mission team agreed with Greg.

Kenn looked over at Angela. "I've changed my mind. I'm not giving her up."

Angela smiled at him. "I was rooting for you to make the right choice."

Kenn had to ask. "What would have happened if I had gone the other way?"

Angela's voice turned cold. "You would have died within six months. Going rogue in the wastelands isn't an easy thing to do, even for a group of Eagles."

Dog limped in and came to Marc. He rested his head on Marc's arm and let out a noise of enjoyment as Marc rubbed his ears.

The cat lingered around Angela's boots. It didn't trust the men enough to come in yet or to leave Dog alone with them.

Marc felt bad that he had forgotten about Dog while he was on the island.

Everyone was having moments like that as their memories returned and they realized they hadn't been there for someone who needed them.

Dog had known something was wrong with Marc, but the infection in his paw from the rock cut had quickly produced a fever and rendered him incapable of doing anything but sleeping. He barely remembered the ride to the submarine. He wasn't holding a grudge.

Angela was relieved that everyone had come through alive. She wasn't giving herself credit for that, though. She still felt like it had been her fault for not noticing the storm before it had gotten so close.

None of the team wanted her to feel that way, especially Thomas. All of them opened their mouths to deny her that guilt and mental pain.

Angela walked out of the bunk room.

A few seconds later, radios lit up all through the submarine. "Are you there, Ray?"

"What can I do for you on this sunny evening, Boss?"

Angela didn't laugh. "You can get me home as fast as this ship will allow."

"Consider it done."

3

Angela went to the brig while she had a minute without Adrian or anyone else over her shoulder. Theo was sleeping on a cot inside the cell that wasn't locked. His drunken snores were loud.

Angela stepped in and used a memory modification charm.

“That isn't going to hold him for long.”

Angela ran a hand over Theo's brow. She didn't like the pain of any of her people. “No, but it will give him time to dry out. I want him taken to the medical bay. Tell him he was ill.”

Bret dropped his shield. The boy sat on a stool in the corner where he was able to see her and the exit. “It will also spare him another session with Adrian.”

“Exactly.”

“Reicher would never permit his emotions to interfere with a goal.”

Angela came out of the cell. “I'm not Reicher.”

Bret smiled at her. “I'm glad.”

Angela studied him. “You've done a great job while I was gone. I'm proud of you, Bret.”

The boy grimaced and then forced himself to accept her praise. “You're right. You're not at all like Reicher.” Reicher had never once complimented him for anything he'd done. It was a big adjustment.

Angela went over to the boy, but stopped herself from hugging him. He wasn't ready for full-on

physical contact yet. She settled for running a hand over his forehead and brushing his hair back.

Bret wasn't immune to her pull any more than anyone else was. He instinctively leaned into her caress.

Angela retreated before she gave into the urge to hug him anyway. "Give me a few minutes."

Bret frowned at her. "You can't be without a guard. Adrian's right."

Adrian had instructed Bret to be Angela's private security now whether she wanted it or not.

"Charlie's coming in. He'll protect me."

Bret was used to fighting the other children for his place in the lab. He immediately got mean. "That weakling can't even protect himself."

Angela didn't get mad. "Charlie is stronger than all of us in ways."

"How so?"

Charlie stepped into the brig. He wasn't mad either. "Because I'm not corrupt yet. I'm just a normal teenager. That's more dangerous than all the magic spells combined."

Angela chuckled. "Agreed."

"I'll wait for you in the hallway." It was the only concession Bret was willing to make.

Angela didn't argue. Bret was going to be privy to any number of secrets in Safe Haven, thanks to his new job.

Charlie came over and gave her a quick hug. Then he whispered, "I need to talk to you about something."

Angela gestured. “Go ahead.”

Charlie frowned as he realized Bret was being allowed to listen. “We saw something while we were trying to contact you.”

He sent the image to her, hoping Bret wasn’t able to get into his thoughts without him knowing. It was hard to tell. Some of the people from the lab were very gifted.

The vision of the nuclear explosion wasn’t a surprise to Angela, though it did increase her concern that other people were now receiving it. That implied it wasn’t far off and she still didn’t have a solution for it. “Blinkers are a better choice than scroll divers for this topic. Talk to Shawn as soon as he wakes up.”

Charlie stared in surprise. “Aren’t you worried about him blinking?”

“I’m worried about him blinking on his own goals. As long as he’s working on mine, under our supervision, he’ll be safer and we’ll meet our goals sooner.”

Bret peered back into the room. “Now you do sound like Reicher.”

Angela shrugged. “I can’t be perfect all the time.”

Both boys smiled at her.

Angela limped out and went to the ladder. “I have one more quick stop and then I’ll go get a shower. After, I’ll meet you in the mess for a meal and story time.”

Everyone wanted to hear what they'd gone through. Angela had decided she would give it to them and spare the rest of her team from being hounded for those details.

Charlie went to the mess to make sure there was something for her to eat. It was a long time before breakfast.

Bret brought up his shield. He followed her without being seen by the guards on the top level who frowned when they saw she was alone.

Angela shook her head when they would have come with her or called for a free Eagle to escort her. "As you were."

The theater had a movie playing with the volume down and the lights dimmed. Half of the seats were filled. Isabel was in the front.

The rest of the chairs were occupied by Eagles who were obviously keeping an eye on her. Most of those Eagles were rookies, like Erin and Piper, but having so many of them in here said a lot about how dangerous they all thought Isabel was.

The Eagles nodded at Angela and waited for Isabel's reaction. If she made a single threatening move toward the boss, she would die right here.

Isabel noticed Angela and jerked upright in her chair. She immediately braced for death. She fully expected Angela to remove her.

Angela disliked seeing Isabel's healing face with fresh bruises. She'd obviously taken another beating. "Why would I kill you?"

Isabel was certain it was a trick. She didn't lie. "I broke our deal, mate. I returned to my old diet."

Angela gave credit where credit was due. "You saved the ship and everyone on it."

"But I ate them!" Goldie had been starting to wake when she and the caretakers found him. It had been impossible to forgive him in that moment. Isabel had knelt over him and waited for him to open his eyes.

Then I told the caretakers to dig in. I needed to hear him scream once before I bit out his delicate, delicious throat.

Angela wasn't surprised or disgusted. Isabel was another tool in her arsenal of damaged fighters. Angela would wield her carefully. "Wade said you asked for a compromise on the diet. This is it. I no longer care how evil is removed, just so long as it is."

The Eagles approved. It would be a long time before they trusted Isabel, but it was obvious that Angela already did. It went a long way in calming their concerns. As long as cannibalism wasn't going to be the new norm, it was fine.

Isabel nodded. "I can do that...Boss. I know I can."

Angela smiled. "I know it, too. Welcome to Safe Haven, Isabel. May you settle in quickly and stay with us for a very long time."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Close

May 1st

1

“**W**e’ll be there soon.”

Zack nodded at Ray’s update. He had duty over the open bridge.

People were moving through the halls, doing chores and daily routines. The submarine was fully cleaned up. All the bodies and shark waste had been burned in the incinerator and everything had been scrubbed. For Zack, it felt like the threat was over.

He knew not to put faith in that impression. Nature love to surprise them.

Zack was traumatized from his ordeal, though he was trying hard not to show it. He was ashamed of himself when he compared his six-hour hell to the eight weeks the mission men had survived. It made him feel weak.

Ray felt Zack’s unrest and sympathized. He had a lot on his mind, too.

Ray felt bad for going foggy while he was in control of the submarine, but he was proud that he had been smart enough to write notes in between those moments. He was also glad they were keeping the bridge door open now so it couldn’t happen

again. The thought of accidentally sinking this submarine was horrifying. “Are you okay?”

Zack rubbed the stinging, scarring wound on his hip through his pants. He’d taken a lot of slices and dices. *I had no idea shark tails were so sharp!* “Right as rain.”

Ray sensed Zack was trying to find the right moment to talk to him about something. Zack was on duty over him by choice. Ray just didn’t know why. “Get it over with.”

Zack waited for the patrolling caretakers to go down the ladder to the bottom level. “I volunteered so I can give you some advice.”

“What is it?” Ray was expecting something about the way he was running the submarine.

“Let Grant do whatever he wants. It’s not your choice to make for him, even if you believe it’s the wrong one. Every person deserves the right to make their own decisions.”

Ray had already come to that conclusion, but it was because of how many normals they’d lost on this run. Lisa’s words were spreading. “I’m going to recommend it. I want Grant to have another defense, even if he can’t always count on it. Magic is one more chance than he has as a normal.”

“Good.” Zack checked the radar screen. Pitcairn Island was showing up and it looked normal from here. The hive rumor of a new nuclear explosion was making everyone worry even more about why Safe Haven wasn’t answering. Seeing the

unchanged shape of the island on the radar was easing that concern for him and Ray.

Ray lowered the volume on the music in preparation for the call he had to make in a few minutes. He quickly scanned the security cameras to check on other areas of the submarine; as the captain, that was part of his job.

Ray watched Jayda walk by the medical bay with a smile at the bored patients inside. Even Thomas was asking when he would be able to leave the medical bay on crutches or in a wheelchair.

Zack thought about how Thomas had gotten those terrible wounds and grimaced. “Harry and Angela both told him it will be at least another week.”

“Good.” Ray believed it should be longer. Looking at Thomas’s bruised and bandaged body on the monitor gave him a chill.

Harry was leaving the worst leg exposed for part of each day so the wound got air. He swore it would speed up the healing process, but right now it was a bright red, grotesque hole that made Ray glad he had been on the sub.

Thomas’s other leg was also healing, though not at the same rate. Harry’s experiment of not using magic on it had been a failure. He was treating both legs the same now.

Harry didn’t seem disappointed. His focus had switched to finding ways to make better supplies for their medical needs. Angela had given him that new goal the day after the hurricane. Harry was already

working on it. He was currently making computer notes and recording into a handheld device at the same time. Ray was certain Harry would come up with some amazing inventions. His time in the lab had produced more good results than with any of the other men.

In the bed next to Thomas, Theo was reading a book and not feeling any withdrawal effects at all. He had been told he had a severe case of pneumonia and accepted it without question. He hadn't asked for a drink even once. Ray didn't know exactly what had happened there, but he suspected magic was involved and approved of it. He couldn't take listening to Theo scream again.

Zack shifted off of his sore leg. "Maybe we should just let him leave."

"Angela will help him."

Zack snorted. "Yeah, help." He didn't agree with torture of any kind, for any reason.

"Help isn't always pretty."

Zack sighed. "Yeah."

The charges against Theo hadn't been dropped yet, but they would if he stayed like this. The Eagles were telling people small crimes could be erased with hard work, regret, and a great attitude. No one was perfect, not even the boss.

Everyone on the submarine had felt better after hearing that, because they all had flaws. They'd also liked finding out that a normal had saved the sub, though she'd had help. The normals and the

descendants on this ship wanted peace and that was a step in the right direction.

Isabel was still being watched, but she was also being celebrated for her achievements. Lisa and Piper were openly spending time with her. Ray hoped that developed into a long-lasting friendship for all three women. He didn't want Lisa to go with the mission men. He didn't want any of them to leave. Out of the entire group, only Gus, Greg, and Shawn were still talking about it.

"I doubt Shawn will leave now." He was also being celebrated for all of the work he'd done during the crisis. It was wonderful to see him with his head held high again. Zack didn't think Shawn was going to give up that feeling for an unknown life in the wastelands. And when Shawn refused to go, Greg, Erin, and Lisa would probably change their minds. A small group wasn't enough in the wastelands. "Gus is the one who might follow through."

"The boss is still working on him, too." Ray wanted Gus to find some peace. He certainly deserved it.

In the bed on the other side of Thomas, Dace was sleeping until Harry put on a new cast. The first one had been temporary to get the ankle to start mending. Now that it had, a cast was being put on that would last for a month.

Dace was eager to return to duty, but Ray had noticed there wasn't a sparkle in his eye or passion

in his voice. It was completely possible that Dace would resign from the Eagles.

“He’s not the only one.” Zack bit his tongue to keep from revealing those names. This run had been hard on all of them.

Ray already knew. The hive connection was strong right now.

Zack tensed, expecting Ray to call him on it.

Ray resumed scanning the monitors instead. He was trying to give Zack space to make his own choices.

Outside of the medical bay, Lisa was pacing restlessly. She had a few more days of guard duty over Dace. Ray wondered if Angela would push them together again after this. It was obvious they were attracted to each other, but Lisa’s fear of magic was preventing any of Dace’s attempts from getting through.

She was openly bragging that a normal had saved the sub, but she hadn’t seen the other side of that yet. The normals would have to be the only security in that setup, which would endanger them daily. Ray expected Lisa to lead the normals into some sort of compromise, though he wasn’t sure what that would be yet.

Zack thought Dace was wasting his time. “He needs to take Wade’s class again if he really wants her attention.”

Ray nodded. “Yep.” Biff was already seeing results by using that method on Jayda. Most of the single men were observing those two intently. This

was the first actual application of Wade's lessons in an attempt to secure a mate. If it was successful, other Eagles would follow Biff's lead. Angela's breeding tree was going to get all of the branches she wanted and then more.

Ray noticed Jayda kept glancing into the tiny workout cubby where Biff and Mel were side-by-side on the treadmills even though Biff's ankle was sprained and wrapped. Ray believed Biff had chosen to be there intentionally, but he didn't know how the man would have known Jayda was going to volunteer to spend her off day on guard duty. He assumed Biff had pulled it from her mind, but he wasn't certain. Sometimes fate placed people in the right locations and let nature take its course. That might be the case there.

Ray scanned the monitors on the other side and quickly glanced away from the sight of Greg and Erin rolling around naked on a bed in the private quarters. Out of the fast relationships that had started at the beginning of this run, none of them had worked out. Ray was curious if Greg and Erin would be different. It seemed to him that bonds formed during tense moments didn't make for good long-term relationships. The fact that Erin was a descendant might help them, though. Ray believed couples needed commonalities to make things work and Greg hadn't had that with Lisa. That relationship had been forced on him by Marc and Angela.

Ray looked over at Zack, disapproving of his bruised face and haunted eyes. *No one should ever have to go through the challenges we've all faced since the war.* “When are you going to tell everybody?”

Zack decided to be honest. “Soon, maybe even today as long as things are okay at home.”

Ray’s eyes narrowed. Giving Zack space to make his own choices sank to the bottom of the ocean. “I never viewed you as a quitter.”

Zack sighed. He expected to hear that a lot. “I’m not quitting, Ray. I’m retiring. There’s a huge difference.”

“I don’t see it.”

“Resigning means you quit, you’re done, you’ve given up. Retiring means you completed your job and are leaving it with honor. It also means you can be called back to duty if you’re needed.”

Ray was forced to admit that was right. “Fine. What do you plan to do with your retirement?”

Zack gave a small smile. “I’m going to get married and raise my kids. I’m going to spend days sleeping on the beach and nights enjoying match ups and the companionship of my friends and family. I’m looking forward to it.”

Zack missed his family. The time underwater had forced him to see he had fulfilled his duties as an Eagle. He was ready to enjoy that feeling and just live. A lot of the mission men were feeling the same. Zack expected quite a few of them to join him.

Ray briefly considered it for himself and then discarded the idea. *I'm not done yet. I have more to give.*

“As do we all, just in different ways.” Zack cleared his throat. “You know if you ever need to talk or anything, I can probably find the time.”

Ray was touched. When he'd first joined Safe Haven, he had been afraid to let anyone know he was gay, and Zack was a lot of the reason why. He and his friends had been nasty to anyone who didn't conform to what they considered normal behavior. Fast-forward a year and Zack was one of his closest friends. Ray fought back tears. “I'll keep that in mind. You do the same. I'm always here for you.”

Zack could feel Ray wanting to hug him. He held up a quick hand. “I'm not Kyle. I already feel...man things.”

Ray busted out laughing.

A smile curved Zack's lips. “I dare you to use his new nickname over the radio.”

Kyle had woken yesterday and appeared to be his same surly self. He was currently stomping through the lower level, glaring at everyone. As far as Zack was concerned, Kyle needed to lighten up.

Ray scanned the radar again to see how far away they were from the island. “I might take you up on that challenge.”

It had been smooth sailing from Howland Island to here. The ocean hadn't given them any signs that a hurricane had come through. According to the temperature gauges built into the top of the

submarine, it was a warm, beautiful morning in a tropical hemisphere. Ray hoped it stayed that way. *But if it doesn't, I'll do my part the same as I always have. I'm not a quitter.*

2

“You have to quit now. It’s time to eat.” Cate slapped Shawn on the arm.

Shawn slowly sat up. His Blinking sessions were approved, but the twins were making sure he took breaks for food and other parts of real life. Shawn wasn’t sure he still required that now, but he was grateful that Angela had assigned the twins to ride his ass. Some obsessions were so intense that it was incredibly easy to slip back into them and not even realize it until it was too late.

Shawn rose from the bunk and went to the exit.

Cate walked next to him, forcing herself to tolerate being near a person other than her brother or her parents. It was part of her new training.

Shawn now understood why Angela hadn’t allowed Biff or any of the mission men to help the little girl with the chairs during their first night on the island. Cate needed to get used to being around people.

“It’s also to build up her strength.” Cody walked slightly behind them, practicing being on guard duty. “If she’s going to be my body man, she has to have more muscles.”

Shawn smiled at the little girl. “If I have to eat, so do you.” He knew a good diet was the best way to help her accomplish that goal.

Cate made a face. “I never should have agreed to wear the bow.”

Shawn and Cody laughed at her joke.

Behind them, Wade and Trent observed in approval while helping the orphan kids get dressed and ready for breakfast. The other helpers were doing most of the work, though. Wade and Trent had both insisted on getting back to work, so Angela was making sure neither of them had to do much.

Wade’s skin had returned to normal instead of looking like a raisin and his bruises were already starting to fade. The long bandage on his arm was one of the only visible signs that he had been hurt recently.

Trent wondered what Wade was going to do now as far as being an Eagle, but he didn’t ask. There were rumors going around that some of the senior men were talking about retirement. Trent thought it would be a shame if Wade did that.

Trent’s fever was gone, and his rash was fading, but he was weak and jittery. The progress he’d made while helping dig Dace out of the sinkhole had been left behind. His fear of water had come right back and surprised him. All it had taken was a few stories from Angela’s team about the sharks. *I can beat this. I just have to keep facing it.*

Wade finally understood Trent’s revulsion of the ocean. It was a hard lesson for him, but he had

learned from it. *I'm also afraid of it and I hate that.*
“Trent, would you like to help me form Safe Haven’s first official dive team?”

Trent immediately nodded. “I would.”

Becoming so ill so fast had made Trent wish for magic. He had figured out that Lisa’s attempt to stir up trouble had been just that. *I'm not scared of the descendants, kids or adults. I've wanted to be like them for a long time.* “I think I’m ready to join you guys now.”

Wade had been told to expect it. He marveled over Angela’s ability to predict their actions and reactions. “Right now, or do you want to wait until we’re alone?”

Trent glanced around. Other than the kids who were putting on their shoes and the mothers who were brushing their hair, the bunk room was empty. Everyone else was already in the mess, on duty, or doing chores. Life was almost back to normal for them. “Let’s do it now.”

Wade put his uninjured hand on Trent’s arm. “Take your place among the alpha’s army.”

Unlike Goldie, Trent wasn’t overwhelmed as the hive connection kicked in. He felt warmth and acceptance from the other descendants as the doors of power began to appear in his mind.

A thin, angry looking demon appeared in front of those doors and bowed to him. *Master.*

Angela’s voice was full of pleasure that lit up the hive. *Welcome to my army, Trent.*

“It’s my honor to be here.” Trent wasn’t anxious to explore his gifts, though. Just knowing he was finally accepting his real self was enough. He smiled at the demon and then turned his attention back to the orphan kids to see who still needed help.

Wade was thrilled to have another descendant among the ranks. He didn’t dislike the normals, but he did distrust most of them.

Wade saw Angela go stomping by the bunk room. It was time for her first therapy session with Adrian and she wasn’t happy about it. All of the mission team had made it clear; if they had to go through it, so did she.

Wade noticed a slight distortion behind her and assumed she had private security that was practicing not being seen. The danger was over as far as they knew, but several senior Eagles were quitting soon. Those warm bodies would have to be replaced and who better than the refugees from the lab who had already been doing that duty?

Wade just hoped Angela didn’t share her gifts with Isabel or the caretakers. Isabel was already dangerous; the last thing she needed was magic.

The Australian anthem coming over the radio lowered in volume, making Wade sigh in relief. He liked the anthems but hearing them 50 times in two days was a little much.

Everyone tensed as Ray’s voice came through the speakers.

“We should be there in about 15 minutes, folks. Prepare to go ashore.”

3

“Copy.” Angela continued her angry march to the therapy cubby, while trying to prepare her mind for what Adrian was about to put her through. She was already late for it; she’d delayed as long as she could. Angela suddenly had sympathy for everyone she’d forced into an appointment with him.

She had no illusions that he was going to spare her feelings because of their relationship. In fact, she expected him to be harder on her because of it. *I just have to keep him out of my inner thoughts for a little while. I can do this.*

Angela had been doing therapy sessions with Kyle and Shawn over the last two days, and she was no longer as concerned about either of those Eagles. Kyle’s cracks were sealed, and he was able to see that nothing had changed. He had been afraid that healing those cracks would make him too passive to remain Jennifer’s mate. Angela had assured him that wasn’t true.

As for Shawn, he had figured out that he was valuable to Safe Haven and it wasn’t just because Harry liked to use him as an assistant. Shawn had his own set of needed medical skills. Being thanked over and over by people who had been hurt during this run was helping that feeling along. She had little doubt that Shawn would have rough moments in the future, but she had more hope for him than she’d had before.

Angela had hope for all of the mission team now. Their mental injuries were still there, but they were healing. Fears had been conquered during the hurricane and they had come to personal revelations that made her proud of them for not resisting change.

She was also thrilled with how well the Eagles on the submarine had done. Promotions would be handed out soon.

Angela climbed the ladder and walked down the hallway, nodding at people and looking into compartments for a quick check in. She already drafted a landing team yesterday. They were gathering supplies and weapons that she hoped they wouldn't need, but there was no point in being careless. Something was wrong at home; they were about to find out what it was.

Adrian opened the door to the therapy room. Her bad vibes had arrived before she did.

Angela went to the chair and sat with her arms crossed over her stomach bump and a deep frown planted on her forehead. *You know, I don't really have to do this at all. I have other options.*

Adrian shut the door. "I see you've chosen to do this the hard way."

Angela waited for him to sit down before speaking. Then she hit him with everything he'd been suspecting. "No, I don't plan to survive the final battle. You'll be in charge at that point, guiding Cody into future leadership. Not only am I not going to survive it, but I don't want to, Adrian. Most of

what I'm feeling is my fault, but some of it is yours and I hate you for that. Leave me alone. You don't have to carry this guilt, I do!"

Adrian's mouth dropped open in shock.

Before he could say anything in response, Angela hit him with her strongest memory charm.

Adrian gazed at her in confusion. "Where was I?"

Angela smiled sweetly. "You were about to put your head on the table and take a nap."

"Thanks." Adrian put his head on the table for a nap.

Over in the corner, Bret lowered his shield and leaned against one of the shelves. "You've done that to him twice now. It won't hold for much longer. He'll figure it out."

She shrugged. "Then he'll come at me from a different angle, so I don't keep repeating this. He'll adapt."

"Why do you tolerate their disrespect and rebellious behavior? You're the boss. You don't have the same rules."

Angela smiled at the curious boy who was also recovering, though he hadn't noticed it yet. "I'm teaching them, Bret. They're learning to think around corners, to adapt, and to overcome incredible mental cliffs."

Bret snorted. "You do it because it amuses you and you're bored."

Angela chuckled. "Sometimes."

Bret felt his gifts go out. An ugly chill ran up his spine.

Angela felt it, too. She sighed. “Here we go again.”

The boy made a face. “Our gifts are no longer reliable.”

Angela hated that, but there was nothing she could do about it yet. “Mel told Kyle the longer we’re in limbo, the more unreliable our minds will become. I believe that’s connected to why we’re not getting an answer from home.”

Bret stared at her in concern. “Are you able to save us all this time?”

Angela wanted to say yes. It was a blow to her pride that she couldn’t. “Not until I figure out what’s going on. Like they always said, I can’t fix it if I don’t know what’s broken.”

The radio lit up with Ray’s frustrated voice. It was obvious that his gifts were out, too. “We are 10 minutes from land, Boss.”

Angela keyed her radio. “I’m on my way. Landing team will meet me at the hatch.”

Fresh tension ran through the sub.

4

“If we spot anything we need to worry about, I’ll have Ray sail us around the island before we go ashore. Keep your guns in your holsters and try to remember this island is protected. No matter what’s happening, Nature isn’t going to break her deal with

us.” Angela could only hope that was true. A week of no contact with home had sent her mind to terrifying places.

The team stared back at her without really accepting those instructions. They were all nervous about their loved ones.

Angela didn’t change her mind on who she wanted to take with her. There was no way Wade and Kenn were going to stay here, and she always felt better with Marc at her side.

Angela unlocked the hatch, but she didn’t push it open yet. She focused on the nervous men standing at the bottom of the ladder. “Don’t let your emotions control your behavior.”

Wade and Kenn knew that was directed toward them. Neither man made a promise they couldn’t keep.

Angela pushed the hatch open and climbed the ladder, ignoring the pain in her ankle as she put more weight on it.

Her ankle still had a gaping wound that was slowly being filled in by her body and repeated healing sessions. Harry had offered to stitch, staple, or cauterize it, but Angela had refused. *I went through enough pain getting the damn wound. Why would I want to make it worse?*

Angela loathed the mistakes that had allowed it to happen. To make up for that error in judgement, she’d ordered the bridge crew to give her an hourly update on the weather from now on. *I won’t be caught off guard again in that way.*

Angela stepped onto the top of the submarine, being careful not to slip.

She turned to view the island.

The landing party hurried up behind her.

Gus didn't see their camp or any signs of it. "Where's the dock?"

"Where's the pontoon bridge?" Kenn had been expecting damage from the storm, but this was a complete lack of buildings and structures that should have been here.

Marc scanned the island, frustrated that he didn't have his mental grid. "I don't see any hurricane debris." Howland Island had been covered in garbage and wildlife that had been left there when the water receded.

Not to mention the fact that Pitcairn Island was a lot higher. There was no way the top of the cliff had flooded, but Marc didn't see the guard towers they'd been working on when the mission team left. "What the hell's going on?"

Wade moved toward the RIB compartment. His heart pounded furiously. "Help me get this thing out."

Kenn hurried over to help.

A bright blue sky over a beautiful tropical island mocked Marc's disbelieving gaze. All the structures that had been here when they'd first arrived blended in perfectly with the small beach. Marc even thought he could detect the tip of the small shed on top of the cliff where he had killed Quinn. The shed

had burned to the ground that night, but he was looking at it right now. *That's not possible.*

“Ray isn’t spotting any of our ships on the radar.” Zack stayed at the top of the ladder to find out if Angela had any messages or instructions for him.

Marc looked down at Zack. “Is he sure we’re in the right place?” Marc already knew they were. He recognized the landmarks, but he still had to ask.

Zack scanned the island in stunned surprise. “It looks like we were never here.”

A chill went over Angela’s skin. There was no path leading into the jungle anymore and no fire poles alongside of it. The jungle was completely undisturbed, as if human feet had never trod through it.

There were no smells in the air to indicate a human presence. There was no smoke from campfires. There was no music or conversations. There was only the sound of the ocean and the immense fear beating in the back of her brain. “Safe Haven is gone.”

Nature enjoyed their confusion and terror. *You won't escape my wrath this time.*

She gently fingered the hole where she was missing a piece of her magnificent antlers. The pain from her injury never stopped.

It was the first time in her existence that Nature had experienced the sensation. It had returned her

focus to the Safe Haven pests who always managed to evade her traps.

Nature sent a stiff winter breeze in their direction. *I can't wait to watch you all fade away!*

The End of Book 19

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“Please move.” Isabel glared at Goldie. He was blocking her way into the laundry compartment, where the caretakers were working. The amount of dirty duds that stacked up each day was staggering.

The caretakers were doing a turn on it this week. Next week, someone else would get to sort through all of the stained panties and boxers.

Goldie saw the caretakers frowning at him. He realized he was drawing too much attention and slid over so Isabel could enter. He had followed her around the submarine for the last half an hour, trying to get her to change her mind, but it wasn't working.

Goldie still followed her into the laundry room as she began sorting another dirty load into a washer.

The caretakers all scowled at Goldie this time, but they didn't say anything. They were waiting for Angela to handle it, like the Eagles had told them to do. But they were running out of faith that Angela was a good leader. The caretakers were used to the way Reicher had run the lab; this type of hounding behavior had been punished harshly and swiftly. Waiting until someone actually committed a crime was unheard of to them.

Goldie barely kept himself from telling them to mind their own business. He didn't want that to get

back to leadership. Safe Haven's rules were lax in some ways compared to Reicher's, but it wouldn't go over well if he was caught being abusive to any of the females. So far, he'd been careful to beg Isabel and not threaten her. "We were almost friends. What changed? Why don't you like me?"

Isabel finished putting the load into the washer. "I just don't want any friendships right now. I need time to settle into how they do things here. Their setup is a heap different than ours, you know?"

Goldie nodded. "That's why I think we should be friends. We can help each other."

Isabel went over to the dryers and began helping the caretakers unload and fold the freshly cleaned items. "I'm not interested. Please leave me alone."

Now that she had said it openly in front of witnesses, Goldie was supposed to obey her wishes. Safe Haven's rules were clear at this point. He just couldn't follow them. "At least say you'll think about it in the future."

Goldie leaned closer, trying to intimidate her without drawing more attention. "Things could go bad for you if you're alone too long."

Isabel tensed.

The caretakers noticed it. One of them motioned to the guard out in the hallway. The Eagles had told them when to call for help. Even though Goldie hadn't hurt Isabel yet, it was obvious that he was going to in the future.

Goldie retreated. He held his hands up, glaring around at them. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Gus came into the laundry room with fast steps and a quick pull of the electric baton from his belt. He still had it from the session on the beach with the mission men.

Goldie hated being shocked. That hatred immediately transferred to the man holding the device. "If you hit me with that thing, I will kill you."

Gus lunged forward and hit the button.

The caretakers retreated while nodding in satisfaction.

Isabel felt bad for getting Goldie in trouble. She didn't have anything personal against him. *He has the rage illness, I think.* "Please stop!"

Gus continued to hit Goldie with a high-powered zap that brought him to his knees and then took him all the way to the floor from the pain.

"Gus."

The sound of Angela's displeased voice broke through Gus's enjoyment of doling out a punishment. He slowly let go of the button as dismay filled his mind. *I'm not supposed to enjoy this.*

"No, you're not." Angela approached Gus without fear. She held her hand out.

Gus was reluctant to surrender the weapons of torture. "I feel powerless without them."

"I'm giving you something much more powerful, Gus. You'll make the laws so people like him get what they deserve without turning all of us

into animals. We have to keep our honor. In the end, it's the only thing that really is ours."

Gus placed the electric baton in her hand and then added a few other items from his belt that he had collected over the last few days.

Goldie recovered and crawled by them. He scurried to his feet and got out of sight.

Angela looked around to make sure everyone was okay.

One of the bolder caretakers regarded Angela in disapproval. "You let him go."

"He hasn't done anything wrong yet."

"He's going to."

Angela nodded. "But this is the way a civilized society is supposed to handle these awful moments. Without proof, we might as well go back to lynch mobs."

"That wasn't always a bad thing."

Angela sighed. "There was less crime when there were more vigilantes, but the innocent lives that were lost during those moments are more important than the criminals. You may not agree with me, but if you were ever falsely accused, you would change your mind. Everyone deserves to be presumed innocent until their guilt is proven."

It was hard for the caretakers to accept that after all their years of being in Reicher's lab. They didn't argue with Angela further, but they clearly didn't agree.

Deleted Scene #2

Angela followed the crowd, not speaking or drawing attention to herself. A drama moment was about to happen that she needed to settle. She preferred this type of leadership anyway, but it was also fun to suddenly be there and surprise everyone by how she appeared and disappeared based on where she was needed. It added to her legend and it amused her.

It also amused the Eagles, who used the same techniques. There was nothing magical about feeling drama coming and using it to your advantage. It was amazing how many people didn't comprehend that leadership was mostly showmanship unless there was action happening.

“You can't keep me in here!”

Theo's shouts were bringing down the mood and causing people to look at each other for confirmation of the rules.

“I haven't done anything wrong. Let me out!”

The curious crowd around the brig increased. The remaining military men were still locked. They were the most vocal.

“What did he do to get put in there?”

“No idea. He seems like a good bloke.”

“Let me out!”

“Maybe we should let him out.”

“I'm not crossing the alpha here.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know he’s in there.”

Out of the fifteen military men Kenn had bunked with, only five were still alive. Gus was sorry for that, but he’d known all of them wouldn’t make it into Safe Haven. Even he’d been able to detect their flaws. There was no way Angela would have let that all fly even without them conspiring against her. Gus hoped the few who were left didn’t do the same. He’d grown used to having them around.

“You have to charge me with a crime!”

“And there it is.” Angela spoke loudly to be sure Theo heard her over the muttering witnesses. “Theo, you are officially charged with disturbing the peace, intimidation, and being drunk and disorderly.”

“I’m not drunk! That’s the problem, you bitch!” Theo hated himself for causing so much trouble, but he had no control over his emotions or his body. *I want a drink!* Theo rattled the bars of the cell, shaking them viciously.

Those crowded around the brig door now retreated so they weren’t in the line of fire.

“I’m holding you in contempt. That will add another day.”

“Fuck you!”

Angela eyed the crowd. “We’re drying him out so we don’t have to remove him. Theo is a good man with a big problem. Understand?”

They all nodded; most of them left.

Angela was encouraged. This small crowd was all from the lab. Even the subjects who were being treated for worms were here and looking better after three days of medication. The fact that they were all willing to consider rescuing someone after suffering Reicher's abuse was a sign of recovery.

Angela entered the brig with that in mind. *If Theo doesn't try harder, I'm going to arrange a little of what the mission men went through. I don't want to, but he's giving me no other choice.*

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Angela's Books

Life After War

(Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy)

The Bachelor Battles

(Dystopian Adventure Romance)

Bone Dust And Beginnings

(Dystopian Western Quest)

Book 20



Fading Away

1

“How is she?”

“No change.” Marc swept Angela’s sleeping form in concern. “Harry’s going to start an IV in the morning to make sure she and the baby are getting nutrients.”

Adrian poured a cup of coffee and joined Marc at the table. “Any movement?”

“No. We’ve started rolling her over every five hours to make sure she doesn’t get bedsores.” Marc was haunted by this waiting game. It reminded him

too much of being at the rest stop, waiting to find out if she would live or die.

Adrian also contemplated those days, but he focused on how she had helped them end a tyrant's rule. Cesar hadn't survived that encounter with the Eagles and their timid seer. *That gave her the confidence to do all the rest of it. Without that night, she never would have become who she is.*

Marc found it easier not to get nasty about it this time. Accepting Angela's choices was nothing compared to being in that lab. It was still haunting all of them, though it was slowly losing power. In a few months, it would only make their stomach's tighten. A few months after that, it would just bring grimaces. A year from now, it would hopefully be like all their other ugly survival moments—blurry and fading.

Adrian stared at Marc's scruffy face and red eyes instead of Angela's body. "You've been doing well. They're all proud of you."

Marc snorted. "Whatever."

Adrian grinned. "I guess you know they all want the tiger back and I don't, but I mean it. You're not embarrassing her or questioning her choices anymore. She's happy about that."

"I know. That's why I'm doing it."

"So you chose to do what makes her happy."

"Obviously."

"But you don't really mean it."

Marc sighed. "I do, most of it. She's brilliant. She protects all of us with everything she has."

“It sounds like you’re still bitter.”

“Ya think?” Marc put his beer down and leaned on the table. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Give true, unflinching support to her and the other females?”

Adrian chuckled. “That’s easy for me.” His voice cooled; his eyes hardened. “I honestly see them as equals.”

Marc slumped in the chair. “I suppose your mother taught you that.”

Adrian nodded. “Yes. I’m surprised your mother didn’t pass it on to you. From what I’ve heard, she was also strong and brilliant.”

“She was.” Marc refused to share those memories. “She was also ruthless. I viewed her as my tormentor.”

“What about the other women in your life?”

“What other women?”

“The aunts, friends, grandparents, cousins, girlfriends, lovers...your sister.”

Marc tensed. “Stop.”

Adrian smiled coldly. “Like that’s going to happen. This is a therapy session, Marcus. We’ll keep doing these until you get over it.”

“We never get over our traumas. You know that. They ride our asses forever.”

“Not when we stop giving them power over us.”

“Drop the psychobabble, *Dr. Mitchel*. You’re not really a shrink.”

“Fine. When you dwell on those ugly moments and let them change your mood or stop you from functioning as a happy person, that’s giving them control. You have to stop yourself from thinking about it. Refuse to engage every time your brain brings it up. You say no and manually redirect your mind to a different topic that’s strong enough to hold you.”

Marc immediately thought of his time in the Marines.

Adrian shook his head. “No, that’s the part you have to let go of.”

“It wasn’t all bad.”

“I would imagine most of it was good. That doesn’t matter. That culture taught you to look down on anyone who appears weaker.”

Marc couldn’t help being defensive. “I didn’t treat them differently. Some of the men did, but I was better than that.”

“And yet, you silently agreed.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do, and it’s all from observing your interactions. Would you like to know what gave you away first?”

Marc nodded curtly. He couldn’t change his behavior unless he knew what he was doing wrong.

“When she got hurt, you tried to convince her to quit. You never would have treated a man that way. You would have told a man to toughen up and keep going.”

“I love her. I hated seeing her hurt or in pain. I wanted to protect her.”

“As would anyone, but that wasn’t the real reason, was it?”

Marc realized Adrian knew that secret, too. Lying was futile. “No.”

Adrian stayed still so he didn’t inadvertently trigger Marc’s physical anger. None of this was easy on him. “Tell me the truth. Get that poison out.”

Marc contemplated being under the water while Angela was in charge. That action had been enlightening and devastating at the same time. “I didn’t think she could do it back then. I wanted a man to have those jobs, those runs.”

“Now tell me when that changed for you, because I know it has. I feel it.”

Marc again considered their underwater hell. “She handled it better than I would have. I never would have considered putting us in a canvas shelter. I would have tied us to the trees and taken the air tanks, but we would have been crushed in the waves of debris that kept coming in. She foresaw it and covered it, and I don’t mean with magic. Her mind sees so far! It’s amazing.”

“That’s why I chose her. That decision wasn’t personal. She’s built for this job. If she ever leaves it, she’ll start fading away.” Adrian realized Marc had distracted him. “Tell me about the other women now.”

Marc thought of his aunt Judy, who had stayed with an abusive man for most of her life. She'd birthed two abusive sons.

"Who else?" Adrian was keeping track of Marc's mind to make this easier on both of them.

Marc ran through the females, with nothing good to think about any of them. *The aunts and cousins were all like my mother—they controlled their men brutally and didn't give them loyalty in return. My first official girlfriend was a lot like my mother.*

"Jeanie, right?"

"Yeah." Marc remembered how pushy she had been when they were alone. "Jeanie wanted me for the power of my family name and possible control over us in the future. She didn't even really like me."

"And the sister?"

Marc sighed miserably. "My sister was timid. She was terrified to use her gifts against anyone, let alone our mother."

"And your mother thought she was possessed."

"Yes. I look back now and I can see that she was scared of magic." Watching the normals around them made it impossible for Marc to deny.

"Why?"

"She knew deep down that my sister would remove her at some point for the way she treated everyone."

“So she did it before your sister could. And you watched it happen without using your gifts to help her.”

Marc fought the shame. *Think of something else!*

“There’s no reason for you to keep carrying that burden, Marc. Little kids are not meant to challenge adults. We have to grow up first. Then we handle it as they deserve.”

Marc nodded. He’d ruined his family. Many of them had died in prison. His mother had spent her last days in a nursing home where she was abused. “But I hated her for pushing me into that.”

“So you stayed in the Marines, where they slowly returned your sense of honor and self-worth.”

Marc snorted and let out a nasty truth. “I stayed in the Marines so I didn’t go home and take her place as head of the family. I loathed them, but I could feel that Brady lineage wanting me to take my rightful place.”

“You would have been good at it.”

“Probably.” Marc let out a long, deep breath. He felt better talking about these things. It was just hard to get it started through his stubborn mind.

“Angela wants the old you back.”

Marc’s eyes flew to his. “That can’t be right.”

“No, there’s nothing right about it, but it is correct. She misses your first relationship. The Eagles miss your rough attitude. You’ve made quite the impression on all of us.”

“So what does that have to do with the way I treat her?”

“Everything. At some point, that tiger will come back out of its cage and you’ll have to decide how far into the jungle you want to go. If you take it too far, like you were before, you’ll lose her even though she thinks it’s what she wants.”

“Because she doesn’t. She really wants me to be like *you*.”

Adrian laughed. “I assure you, she does not. She wants the old Marc, just with this new understanding of how valuable she is.”

“I can’t balance the two. It’s one or the other in my brain.”

“Maybe your demon can help when that time comes.”

“Do you let yours pick your words and actions?”

Adrian nodded. “Sometimes. It’s better now, so I don’t have to do that manually. My power has earned my trust.”

Marc had thought he and his demon were on good terms, but the slightly cold air in his mind said differently. “I’m a mess.”

Adrian chuckled again. “We all are. No one comes through life in the same condition they started in. We adjust, we improvise...”

“We adapt, we overcome.” Marc grinned despite himself. “I love that movie.”

“Same. Do you remember how Gunny Highway treated the females?”

Marc frowned. “He tried to get laid. He didn’t see them as equals.”

“But his ex-wife took him back anyway because she loved him, missed him, and she knew he wasn’t going to change any more than he already had.”

Marc waited for the point; he was certain he wasn’t going to like it.

Adrian dropped that bomb gently. “Angela has been doing that with you since you two were kids. She’s always known who and what you are deep inside. She loves you enough to stop trying to change you because it always takes pain. You’ve never changed your mind about anything unless you were hurt first.”

Marc tried to find a moment where that wasn’t true.

Adrian waited, but he was confident Marc wouldn’t. He’d been making these observations for over a year. He was confident in his conclusions.

Marc grunted, arms crossing over his chest. “What does that mean?”

“It means she’s been putting in all the hard work. You owe it to her to find that balance and be the man you’re both satisfied with. You can’t make her happy any other way.”

Marc scanned the sleeping people around them who were probably faking to listen. He used them to get something he needed. “Do you know what she’s hiding?”

“As usual, you’ll have to be more specific.”
Angela had more secrets than anyone Adrian had ever known, and that included himself.

“About the final battle.”

Adrian shrugged. “Again, more specific.”

“Don’t play with me! I’ve been straight with you.”

Adrian sighed. “I’ve caught flashes and then it goes dark.”

“She has no plans to survive.”

“She’s too full of guilt and shame that she won’t let go of.”

“She thinks she deserves it.”

“Maybe she does.”

Marc scowled. “She’s the kindest, most caring person any of us have ever met!”

“Agreed. She’s also the most ruthless. Anyone who has ever crossed her would verify that—if they were still alive.”

Marc refused to let Adrian talk bad about his wife. “She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“Ah. You’re still under the impression that she would have picked something else for herself but couldn’t.”

“Isn’t that how it happened? I shoved her onto a path she never would have taken. Fate just finished what I started.”

“No. She could have picked a different way at any point.”

Marc was desperate to save her. “Prove that!”

Adrian tried to find the right words, but there was only one thing he could say. He hoped it didn't restart an old quarrel. "She put her kids in danger to keep this job."

Marc's mind snapped that into place. The old anger flared up.

Marc shoved it down. Making progress here was more important. "Keep going."

Adrian was proud of Marc. "Even after all the issues she's had, she kept the job. Look at her—I mean, really see her. She's scarred all over her body and her mind. She could have walked at any point. You didn't do that to her, Marc. She chose it."

"We have to find a way to save her."

"I'm working on it, but her plans are so intricate! And she'll just change them where she needs to. We have to find a way to make her think it's her idea to survive."

"I'm going to use the kids against her."

"That's good, but it won't be enough. We need some other leverage."

"What we need is to figure out exactly why she chose to die."

"Will she do another therapy session?"

"She will if we tell her the others need to see her pouring out her heart and soul, too, but I doubt she'll be honest."

"We have to save her! She deserves it more than anyone. She's saved all of us over and over again."

On the bunk near them, Charlie rolled over. He pushed up on his arm. "That's why she decided to

handle the final battle that way, I think. She loves the job, but she hates the pain she causes people to achieve those goals. She wants to escape that guilt, and to stop herself from doing it to anyone else.”

Charlie yawned as they stared at him in belief and disappointment that they hadn’t figured it out themselves.

Charlie sat up and wiped the crust from his eyes. Adrian and Marc exchanged relieved glances.

“We can use that.”

“Yep. Your kid’s a genius.” Adrian grinned. “Not you, though. Just the kid.”

Marc laughed.

Angela let out an annoyed breath and smacked the cot. “How am I supposed to sleep through all this jibber-jabber?!”

Everyone rotated toward her in hope.

“She’s awake.”

“That doesn’t sound like she’s okay, though.”

“Angela?”

“Boss?”

Angela groaned and sat up. She glared around at all of them. “I worked a double and then cooked a meal. What the hell?!”

Cheers filled the bunk room. She had some of her memory back. That was the first stage of returning to their reality.

Angela tolerated the hugs from Charlie and Marc, and the shoulder pats from the others. She knew something bad had happened. She struggled to remember what it was.

“You were out. We couldn’t reach you for days.”

“Days?” Angela checked herself for injuries; her hand settled over her stomach bump in relief.

Marc kissed her cheek. “Harry said the baby’s fine. She’s the right size and everything.”

Angela smiled, forcing back tears. “I needed to hear that.”

“And we need you.” Marc nuzzled her cheek. “Don’t ever sleep again, okay?”

Angela chuckled dryly with them. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

Marc handed her a canteen.

Charlie stayed next to her, providing protection. He and Marc hadn’t left her side except for bathroom breaks, and then Adrian had filled in that slot.

Angela stood and grabbed onto the bunk to keep from falling. “Why do my legs hurt so much?”

“You have a lot of bruises from the way you hit the water.”

Angela winced as she remembered the fall. “I’m lucky to be alive.” She turned slowly, searching for the one who’d saved her life in that moment.

Cody grinned at her from the next bunk over. He and Cate had also stayed by her side. “We missed you.”

Angela staggered to their bunk and hugged both kids. Cody had risked his life for her and Cate.

Charlie yawned again, and watched Angela and the twins without jealousy or bitterness.

Adrian noticed Charlie's happy vibes. "Something happened with you."

Charlie nodded. "It's good, though. Really good."

"Wet dream?"

People frowned at Kenn for the crude comment, but some of the males, and Charlie, snickered.

Adrian motioned. "Tell us. We need another good boost."

"Tracy just had the baby. I dreamt about it." Charlie grinned, sending more good waves through the bunk room. "They're both fine. I'm a father!"

Everyone began offering congratulations. The bunk room grew loud with all the voices. Almost their entire group was in here right now. They were all tired of being ignored by the ghosts of their friends and family on Pitcairn Island.

Marc and Adrian joined in, but they both kept shields over their thoughts.

"I'd like to add to the good mood." Shawn sat up as they all turned toward him. He'd been blinking so much that he was starting to lose weight again. "I might have figured out how to get us home."

"That's great! What do we have to do?"

"Is it hard?"

Shawn smiled. "Not hard at all. All we have to do is drop a nuke and not die in the blast. For us, it should be easy."



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