

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #22



VISITING  
HELL

Copyright  
**Visiting Hell**  
by  
Angela White

**Title:** Visiting Hell  
Life After War Book 22  
**Length:** 801 pages  
**First Edition:** 2024  
**Author:** Angela White

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

Thank you to the terrific people who helped me with this book. Jim, Jerry, Sue, Terre, Mattie, Karen, Holly, John, Crystal, Drew, Joe, Kristi, Jackie, Jacqueline, and Wendy. I enjoy every interaction with you guys and gals!

# Table Of Contents

[Verdict](#)

[Very Good](#)

[Water People](#)

[Who's Billy?](#)

[I Had To Try](#)

[You're Not Alone](#)

[Take It Outside](#)

[My Word On It](#)

[Happiness Is Fleeting](#)

[Visiting Hell](#)

[A Bad Substitute](#)

[Saying Goodbye](#)

[One More Try](#)

[Sole Target](#)

[That's An Eagle](#)

[All In Good Time](#)

[Fair Enough](#)

[Don't Believe It](#)

[Accidents Happen](#)

[Be Careful](#)

[Loopholes](#)

[The Cage](#)

[Control](#)

[It's Here](#)

[You're Welcome](#)

[Missing](#)

[Locked](#)

[Roll!](#)

[It's Time](#)

[The Monster](#)

[I Approve](#)

[Gotcha](#)

[Listening](#)

[It's Your Call](#)

[Duplicates](#)

[Full Dark](#)

[Close](#)

# Always Riled

I was his favorite child.

We walked the earth, when it was warm and mild.

We talked about love.

We studied the lifeforms, both below and above.

We laughed together.

We roamed the realms, and made things better.

The angels were filled with jealousy.

He didn't love them the same, was all they could see.

They plotted my demise.

Then the normals killed me, making sure I couldn't rise.

I was betrayed.

My mother found my body, salting the ground where I laid.

My destiny hasn't changed.

I was sent back to save them, furious and deranged.

Now my time has come again.  
I'll be born soon, able to spot the slightest sin.

My wrath cannot be controlled.  
Even my new mother has no idea, what the  
future will hold.

I was his favorite child.  
I am neither warm nor mild.  
I am always riled.  
My destiny will never be reconciled.  
I hate them all.

## Chapter One

# Verdict

## The Runway

### 1

“We’ll hear closing arguments now.”

Angela settled deeper into the hard chair, looking for a spot that didn’t make her legs hurt. “Defense went first with opening statements, so prosecution will go first this time.”

Samantha picked up her pen to take notes as Kenn moved to the front of the large, crowded tent, but she already knew she wasn’t going to be able to pull this one out. *Tim and Ralph are in deep shit.*

The wedding tent had been enlarged, making room for 200 angry camp members to observe these proceedings. They’d been taking turns over the week that the trial had taken; it was fully packed now, with even more people sitting and standing outside in the sun. Everyone knew Angela was going to hand out the sentences today. The only residents who weren’t here were on guard duty, point, or on a needed work crew, but even those few had been stopping by on their breaks.

Kenn swept the upset people crammed into the huge tent, judging their levels of anger. He had no

doubt that Angela was doing the same. Her final verdict would take that into account.

Tim and Ralph were dressed in their Sunday best and sandwiched between the two lawyer's desks. Neither man had spoken at all until it was their turn on the stand and even then they'd been subdued and remorseful. Kenn was certain that had come from Samantha. Ralph wasn't smart enough to do it on his own and Tim wanted to rant about the unfairness of this trial. Tim believed because he was a preacher, he should have immunity. His thoughts were rebellious and aggressive. Kenn was also sure Angela would take that into account.

Well-armed brawlers in jeans and tank tops stood around the edges of the warm tent instead of Eagles, keeping hands on their gun belts to control the crowd that had gotten rowdy a few times as evidence was presented. Kenn decided his plan to stir them up again was a good idea. Too many of the camp members were only angry. He needed them to be furious.

He scanned Angela's personal guards, Bret and Adrian, to be sure they were alert. Then he faced the camp. "They brought the old world back among us."

His provocative statement drew those who'd been getting bored. Heads whipped toward Kenn in fresh anger.

Gus stepped closer to the prisoners. Angela had been rotating the guards over Tim and Ralph since the night of the flood; it was his turn this week.



“We swore we wouldn’t let the old ways destroy the world again. *They* swore it. Then they lied to our faces and aided in the murders of four camp members. They betrayed our trust.”

Mutters went through the crowded tent. A faint breeze riffled papers on the desks.

“You’ve heard evidence from the top Eagles over the last week. Tim knew Courtney was going to plant bombs on the cruise ship.” Kenn’s feelings bled through. “That one almost cost us two women, their babies, and several medics!” He didn’t mention the unborn son Courtney had been carrying, but he felt the loss.

Kenn looked down at Dog, who was lying in front of Angela’s desk. “It did cost us two kittens.”

The female cat howled on cue and staggered out of the tent.

Dog growled lowly toward Tim and then followed his cat.

The mood dipped.

“All Tim received for that was a fast beating and then it went away. We’ve heard how Ralph kept the normals riled up on the ship, telling them Angela was out to kill them all. He was even on the Law Council at that time, but it wasn’t enough to keep him from starting trouble. And he was never punished for it. His removal from the council came because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Even on the trip here, both men had already proved they weren’t trustworthy.”

More mutters floated through the warm tent, raising the temperature and lowering the mood.

“Now we’re on this beautiful island where we’re protected from Nature. That bitch hunted us for a year! We weren’t supposed to be hunted anymore!” Kenn calmed, turning to include everyone. “They hid killers. One of our innocent kids was accused and arrested. Missy spent a night in jail for something she didn’t do! They stole from us, lied to our faces, and allowed bad men to hunt defenseless women, all in the name of sanctuary, in the name of religion.”

Church people winced and slid down into their seats to avoid drawing attention. They didn’t want to be blamed for Tim’s actions, though they felt bad for Ralph.

Ralph began to cry again.

Tim glared back at the crowd, now barely keeping his mouth shut.

“Angela told them they could have their church as long as it didn’t break our rules. When we searched that church, we found stolen supplies, a hidden boat, and murder weapons. You all saw how those killers attacked our leader the night of the flood. Tim triggered that mess, but he didn’t help us in the fight at all.” Kenn waited while people remembered the ugly battle with Nature and her minions. Then he went on.

“Tim and Ralph chose those outsiders over us. They don’t deserve to be here. They shouldn’t be a part of our camp anymore. I want them both gone.”

Kenn focused on the now furious camp. “What do *you* want?”

“Kill them both!”

“Banish them!”

“Banishment!”

“Death!”

The brawlers let the shouts go on at Angela’s motion. People had a right to be angry.

Ralph’s sons begged for mercy, but they were drowned out by the shouting crowd.

Gus stayed by the prisoners and tried to act like he would protect them if there was a riot, but he had already decided to step aside and let them be taken if that happened. They didn’t deserve to be protected from the crowd’s justice; they were guilty.

Kenn glared at both defendants, then regarded Angela. “The prosecution asks that you *eliminate* them, as an example of what should happen to traitors.”

Kenn returned to his seat as the crowd cheered.

Samantha waited until it died down before standing. She felt Wade move closer in case she needed help. She’d gotten some nasty remarks during the trial; it had made him nervous. “Our justice system demands that accused people get a strong defense to make sure they’re really guilty of the crime. I’ve done that during this trial by telling you why they hid the refugees, why they didn’t come forward. Deep down, you all know Tim and Ralph to be good men. They wanted to help the refugees, to help the normals. They’re not evil.”

Samantha drew in a deep breath and delivered an ugly surprise. “But they are guilty of these crimes. I don’t have an excuse for that. I’m not going to lie and twist the words. It bothered me to defend them.”

Samantha didn’t look at her clients as she faced Angela. “I’m asking for mercy because this camp doesn’t need to turn into rabid killers foaming at the mouth to see someone executed. That’s not what Safe Haven is about. I ask that you consider banishment instead of death.”

Daisey broke into sobs as the crowd shouted, denying that request. They now wanted both men executed.

Samantha returned to her seat with a churning stomach. *I don’t want to defend guilty people anymore.*

Angela caught that and made a note in her book. “Does the defense or prosecution have anything else they think this court should hear?”

“No.” Kenn was more than happy with how things were going.

Samantha shook her head.

“May I address the court?”

Everyone quieted as Adrian stepped in front of the desk.

Brawlers glared at Adrian. He was supposed to be protecting the boss, not participating in the trial.

Angela frowned. “If it’s related to these cases.”

“It is.” Adrian only looked at Angela. “I want it known for the record that Ralph has saved lives in

this camp. All of the bulletproof canopies we used on the run here were handsewn by Ralph and his boys. He's one of us."

"The court will take that into account."

Adrian scowled. "I mean it, *Judge*. Ralph has the rage illness. Without that infection twisting his mind, he never would have done those things."

Samantha looked up. "What about Tim?"

Kenn held up a sheet of paper. "This is the blood work. Tim does not have the rage sickness."

Tonya hadn't been here for the trial, but her test results had been used several times.

"Anything else?" Angela glanced around.

No one spoke.

"A verdict will be handed down in five minutes, and then sentencing will proceed directly after that." Angela slowly stood and waddled to the tent flap with Bret in front of her and Adrian behind.

She stepped out into the bright sunlight and went toward the bathrooms that had been dug just for this trial.

Bret peered into that bathroom before moving aside for her to go in. Then he waited next to Adrian without speaking. He was thrilled to have been chosen for guard duty over the boss again, but he didn't think he was needed. Everyone's anger was directed at the prisoners. Angela wasn't in danger.

Adrian agreed with that observation. He also knew things could change in an instant. Bret wasn't old enough yet to comprehend how unpredictable life was. As a new member of Safe Haven, Bret was

still on probation, like Selina and Isabel and a few others, but he was doing well so far. Adrian hoped life didn't change that.

Adrian made eye contact with the guards around the large tent that was sitting in the middle of the runway. There wasn't a better place for a gathering of this size. They needed to clear out some of the jungle, but he already knew Angela wasn't going to agree to that even though she'd had a rough time getting up here each day. Her enormous stomach was preceding her everywhere she went.

“Shut up.”

Adrian grinned at her muffled complaint. He didn't tell her how much he enjoyed seeing her that way. It wasn't welcome, but all the men on this island were feeling it. She was beautiful, in a different way this time. Giving life was the noblest—

“I said shut up!”

Adrian swallowed his amusement as she came out. He didn't stare at her and add to her annoyance. He extended his arm while scanning the thick, brittle jungle.

Angela took his arm with a huge scowl. “If men had to go through this, the species would have died out centuries ago.”

Adrian chuckled. “I'm sure you're right.”

He led her back toward the tent, but slowly and not just because of her size. She needed a minute more to clear out the ugly thoughts she'd been having. This trial hadn't been easy on her and Tim's resentful contemplations weren't helping.

“He thinks he’s above our rules.”

Adrian nodded. “He’ll figure it out.”

“When it’s too late.” Angela wanted to have mercy on Tim, but his attitude wasn’t leaving her any room to work.

“He doesn’t deserve mercy.”

“I know.” *But I’ll always feel that way about the normals.* Angela went to the tent flap, locking her mind again like she’d been doing for the entire trial. She was trying hard not to appear biased.

Adrian helped her to her seat and then put some distance between them to appease the people who didn’t like them being so close.

Bret stood behind her and waited for this ugliness to be over.

The crowd quieted all at once, turning toward Angela eagerly.

“I find you both guilty.”

No one had expected anything else. They waited impatiently for the next part.

“Before I pass sentence, both defendants will be given a chance to speak. Ralph, you’ll go first.”

Samantha and Daisey helped Ralph to his feet. Tears streamed over his raw, puffy cheeks.

“I’m so sorry!” He drew in a gulp of air between the sobs. “I just wanted to help them!”

Ralph sank back into his chair, hands coming up to cover his face.

Some of the crowd felt bad for him, but most didn’t. They were tired of being betrayed by people they’d thought they could trust.

Angela motioned. “Tim.”

Tim shrugged Gus’s big hand from his shoulder. He stood and swept the crowd. He spotted the church group sitting together; his lip curled. Not one of them had come to speak on his behalf. They just wanted to hear the sentence. “This is wrong.”

The camp booed.

Tim faced Angela. “You’re not God! You shouldn’t even be in that job. You don’t really care about our lives. All you want is more power, like Harry!”

Mission men frowned deeply at Tim. He hadn’t been along for that run. He had no right to speak about it as if he had been.

“Are you done?”

Tim’s face hardened at Angela’s emotionless query. “You’ve ruled our lives for over a year. You’ve changed our constitution, our camp laws, and how we’re allowed to live. You rule us like a king. You’re planning to put Marc’s kid on that throne next. Everything about you is wrong and they all have the right to know!”

Eagles were looking over now, silently asking if Tim needed to be shut up. He was blaring thoughts that most of them had had but kept to themselves to keep from causing unrest among the normals.

“You’ve let battles and deaths happen that didn’t need to. You’ve kept information to yourself that could have saved lives. You’ve murdered people! Why is it okay for you, but not for me?!”



Angela studied Tim tolerantly, tone almost bored. “Anything else?”

Tim realized she’d expected this, that she was allowing it for some reason he didn’t understand. His hands clenched into tight fists. “All I did was give sanctuary to a group of refugees. I didn’t kill anyone. I don’t deserve any of this. *You* should be the one on trial!”

The crowd shouted louder, making the brawlers tense. They didn’t want to defend Tim from the camp.

“Both defendants have had a chance to explain their actions. They’ve made statements. They were defended by the best lawyer we have here. Are you all satisfied with this?”

The camp’s shouted agreement drowned out Tim’s next protest. He sank back into his chair, sulking. “Go on and banish me, then. I was tired of living among you freaks anyway!”

There were more mutters and some shock, but most of those observing just waited for the punishment.

Angela gave it without a change in tone or expression. “Ralph, you are banished from Safe Haven.”

Daisey’s tears became sobs again.

“You’ll go on the run we’re making to the States for Jayda’s family and you’ll stay there, without supplies or assistance from us.”

Angela pinned Tim with her fury. “*You* were told what would happen if you broke the rules.”

Tim paled as he realized what was happening.  
“You can’t do that!”

“I can and I will. For your crimes, I sentence you to be hung by the neck until dead, Tim. You have one week to put your affairs in order.”

Standing with the guards, Jennifer’s eyes lit up bright red.

Next to her, so did Daryl’s.

They spoke at the same time, “I volunteer as executioner!”

The crowd cheered.

Tim started shouting.

“This trial has concluded.” Angela held up a hand before Daisey or Samantha could try to talk her out of it. She wasn’t going to change her mind. Tim’s life now belonged to fate. “I have a couple of camp updates.”

The crowd quieted again; the sobs from Daisey and Ralph didn’t stop.

“You can’t do this to me!”

Angela glared at Tim. “I can take away the week and let them execute you up right now.”

Tim stopped yelling.

Angela used her calm tone again. “There will be a vote next month to elect a sheriff and a police force to take some of the weight off of the Eagles.”

“Can we do both?” Stuart wanted to be an Eagle, but he also enjoyed the life of a brawler.

“No. If you become a cop, you have to resign from my army.” Angela smiled at the man. “The

brawlers, and Stuart, have my full support for those positions.”

The brawlers exchanged grins and pride. The boss was happy with them. For many of the residents on this island, that was all they needed to be satisfied.

Angela found Parker in the crowd and motioned him forward. “You’re the new leader of the church?”

Parker and the others came toward the front of the tent. “They voted me in. We’re already making changes.”

Angela scanned the jeans, loose hair, and makeup on the women, approving. They wanted to believe in God and also have freedom. She saw no problem with that.

Tim did. “You’re already disrespecting it!”

The crowd shouted at Tim, while Parker ignored him.

Angela held out a sheet of paper. “The Law Council has decided on the new rules for the church.”

Parker took the paper without reading it. “We agree to all of them.”

Tim’s scowl covered his face. “Don’t you even want to negotiate?”

Parker nearly growled. “No! We’re not traitors like you!” He quickly signed the sheet.

Angela motioned. “Post it on the front door of the church and make sure every member reads it, no

matter how young or old. If they can't read, read it to them. You'll all be held to it."

"We'll make you proud." Parker didn't spare another glance at Tim. He led his group out of the tent.

Angela tapped her notebook. "If you'd like to sign up for the police force or the Eagles, I have the sheets right here."

While people went toward Angela, Ed eased over to where Tim was sitting in furious understanding. By removing him, Angela would now control the church through Parker.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't talk to you until the trial was over." Ed had been a key witness for the prosecution.

Tim glared. "It doesn't matter, *traitor*."

Ed winced. He and Tim had been good friends at one time.

"Tell Adrian and Neil I want a minute with them." Tim stood as Gus held out the cuffs. It was time to go back to his cell. "They both owe me a conversation. Tell them I said that."

"I will." Ed watched as Gus led the prisoners toward the flap. One was weeping; the other was glowering at everyone, including Angela.

Samantha stayed with Daisey and Ralph's sons, trying to offer comfort. She would go to the jailhouse later to handle last requests. She wasn't looking forward to it.

In the far corner, Ray stayed in his chair and watched the crowd as they left. His mind was full of confusion.

Kenn noticed. He went over to the quiet man. “You okay?”

Ray wasn’t ready to talk about it. “Peachy.”

He stopped Kenn from questioning him by asking one of his own. “I’m restarting the campfire group. Will you be there?”

Kenn was completely distracted. His mind went to those odd nights where he’d finally felt welcome. Most of those people were gone now.

“It will grow again, probably.”

Kenn’s mind stayed in the past. “I’ll be there.”

Ray left Kenn to his contemplations, escaping before the smart Marine could recover and start asking questions. *Sometimes a guy just needs time to think.*

Angela spotted Ray as he left, but she didn’t call him over and demand to know what was wrong. Ray was one of the few people here who could be trusted in every way. When he was ready to talk, he would come to her or someone else. Until then, she would respect his privacy.

Angela sneered at Tim as Gus led him by, then she turned her back to him. As far as she was concerned, he was already dead.

Everyone around her did the same, presenting stiff backs to Tim.

Tim held his chin up and walked out of the tent. “Remember this moment, lady. It’s the moment you sentenced an innocent man to die.”

“You aren’t innocent!” Shawn pushed toward Tim, drawing the brawlers into a line between them. “You got good people killed! And Missy almost paid for it! You deserve this!”

Tim walked away without answering; it was clear that he didn’t agree.

“What happened to him?” Adrian was stunned by Tim’s transformation.

Angela also headed for the exit. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“This is who he really was all along. You were just too kind to see it.” Angela went toward the least-used breezy jungle path, hoping the wind meant they had rain coming soon. It had been weeks without a single drop.

“I’m too kind?” Adrian didn’t view himself that way at all.

Angela nodded. “Since the war, you’ve seen the best in people and tried to find ways to fix their flaws, even if the methods were harsh. It was always based on helping.”

Adrian’s stomach began to bubble. “You’re not like that, are you?”

“Nope. I see the flaws first.” She swept him from head to toe, pointedly, and then waddled into the brown, wilting jungle.

Adrian sighed. “Gonna be one of those days.”

“Yep.” Angela didn’t tell him sentencing Tim to death had hurt her inside, so much that she could barely tolerate the feeling.

He knew, but there wasn’t anything Adrian could do about it. Some people needed to die. It was the law of any land.

“It’s a shitty design.”

“Yep.” Adrian could tell she needed to talk, and he was thrilled to have any time with her, but he was also torn. There was something else he really wanted to be doing right now.

“How’s that going?”

Adrian sighed in miserable excitement as he followed her through the jungle. “Good, as far as I’m concerned. No idea how Marc feels about it.”

“Yes, he was shocked when I put you two together right after the flood for daily rounds. The next step will floor him.”

“And everyone else. Sharing control of everything while you’re on maternity leave isn’t what anyone expects.”

“I don’t have a choice.” Angela finally told him why, taking advantage of them being alone for the moment, except for Bret, who was bringing up the rear. “Jennifer proved she can’t handle it yet and the other co-leaders are all busy on big projects or handling personal issues.”

“You could have given it to Marc, alone.”

“He’s too strict, like Jenny. There has to be a balance.”

Adrian knew there was more to it. “It will also keep him from making changes you don’t approve of.”

Angela delivered an intense smile as a reward for him seeing that.

Adrian tripped over a brittle vine, snapping it off as he hit his knees next to her.

Angela laughed. “You should do that more often.”

Adrian grunted. “Do what?”

“Kneel at my feet. I like that view.”

Adrian got up. “Whatever you want.”

Angela could feel his restlessness. She waved. “Go on.”

Adrian still hesitated. Marc had sent him to guard her during the trial.

“The trial’s over.” Angela looked to their right. “And I have another guard coming. Go on so you don’t miss your walk with Marc.”

Adrian spotted Kenn coming through the dry foliage and grinned. “Thank you!”

He pushed his luck by kissing her cheek before he took off running. *Wait for me!*

Kenn snorted as he stopped by her. He’d caught most of that. “It’s funny that he doesn’t see what you’re doing to him.”

Angela took Kenn’s big arm, swallowing the automatic revulsion. “It’s funny that you think he doesn’t know.”

“Then why is he allowing it?”



“Because I’m giving him something he wants almost as much as me or leadership.”

Kenn frowned. “Time with Marc means that much to him?”

“As much as it does to you.”

Kenn opened his mouth to deny that and then snapped it shut. He hated Marc, but he also loved the man and that would never change. “What did you do to us, witch?”

Angela kept walking, forcing Kenn to keep pace or let go of her.

Even now with her as big as a house, sweating, and wearing a blue jean jumper big enough for him, Kenn craved any contact she would allow; he kept pace and locked his thoughts.

Angela smiled at him.

“You’re being nice...”

She nodded, still smiling.

Kenn’s stomach dropped. “You want something I won’t want to give.”

Angela beamed.

Bret shoved Kenn from the back as hard as he could, neatly taking the man’s place at Angela’s side.

Kenn hit the dusty ground and rolled, coming up ready to fight. “What the hell was that for?!”

Bret shrugged. “She likes you guys on your knees.”

Angela burst out laughing.

Kenn understood Bret was trying to improve her mood. He dusted himself off. “I see you have another convert.”

Angela patted Bret’s hand. “I have another son.”

Kenn’s mouth opened before his brain was in control. “You can adopt all the kids you want. It won’t bring back your dead babies.”

Angela stopped.

Bret let go of her arm and retreated to clear her a line of fire. “Dumbass.”

*Fuck!* Kenn waited stiffly for the pain to come. The only unknown was what form it would take.

Angela connected to Kenn and let him feel her emotions.

Kenn fought her, but it was impossible to avoid the agony spreading into his heart and mind. When the tears started rolling down his cheeks, he barely noticed. “Please. I’m sorry.”

Angela was flashed back to their life together, to how he had always gotten meaner when she’d begged him to stop. For one instant, she increased the pain, letting him feel that, too. Then she broke the connection.

She turned back toward the path and resumed her walk, mood now shattered. “You will stay here when the team leaves on the run to find Jayda’s family. Stay here with your son and be the man you couldn’t be before. If you don’t, I’m going to pull my support. Tonya will follow my lead.”

“Why would you do that?!”

“Because I still see dark spots when I scan your mind and heart, Kenn, and I’ve had enough. It’s time to prove me wrong.”

“Or?”

“Or leave this camp and don’t ever come back.”

Chapter Two  
**Very Good**  
In Town

1

**“I**t’s over.”

Neil carefully hammered in another nail instead of responding to Selina’s comment. The bunkhouse wall had more cracks that they were patching with scrap wood.

All of the workers were wearing fanny packs that held a hammer and nails. Piles of boards and scrap sat near the taped off side of the structure; the sound of hammering echoed across the town.

They were trying to add a layer of support to the wall that had collapsed in the flood. The entire bunkhouse was tilted. This side of it had been emptied. The other side was crowded and cluttered. Angela had moved two dozen Eagles to the church bunkhouse to make more room, but it wasn’t enough. They needed a new home.

Selina knew Neil didn’t want to talk about the trial. She handed him another nail and enjoyed being part of the work crew. She was eager to be helpful to her new clan.

Neil spotted the first group of camp members coming back into town and forced himself to

concentrate on putting in the next nail. The clinic plans had been put on hold while they repaired the bunkhouse, but it never seemed to be finished. Every morning they woke to find a new crack or another hole that had to be patched.

Daryl walked by, frustrated with the work. He was the foreman on this job and it wasn't going like he needed it to. Patching holes on a broken foundation was like using a band aid on a stab wound.

Daryl glanced over at the small patio of the restaurant, where their patients were resting and getting some sun. Daryl knew he owed Jennifer and Angela everything. He was still stressed, and he would stay that way until the births, but things were definitely better now that he wasn't having to drain himself daily just to keep his wife alive.

The restaurant had become a gathering place, like Angela wanted. They took meals there in shifts and enjoyed the quiet of the small patio next to it between those meals. That area received full sunlight; it was perfect for people who needed to rest.

Brittani smiled back at her husband and then resumed reading her book. She still had rough days, but the three babies were growing like they should be. Things were better now that more evil had been removed from their camp.

Daryl joined Neil and Selina. He'd been going to the trial every day on his break. He didn't tell them the verdict. He was certain they already knew.

Even the people who hadn't attended the trial had been keeping track of it mentally.

Neil smothered his guilt and kept working. Tim used to be on his team. It was bothering Neil to know the man was going to be executed. "This isn't going to hold."

Daryl knew. The flood had collapsed this part of the bunkhouse and weakened the wood from soaking it. "We need to lift it all up and add support beneath it."

"Like concrete blocks?" Neil gestured. "We have a small stack of those near one of the public restrooms."

"That would be perfect, but we can't lift it. We don't have the equipment." *And this isn't the only leftover problem from the flood.* Daryl eyed the taped off tunnel hatch nearby and grimaced. The alligators that had gone down there to keep from being washed out to sea were still there. They often heard the unhappy reptiles trying to find a way out.

Neil spotted Biff coming back from the trial. He was also on this work crew. "Go get the concrete blocks. I'll line up the heavy equipment."

Daryl was shaken out of his personal issues as he understood what Neil was going to try. "Is that a good idea?"

Neil nodded. "The camp loves Biff. They've been asking him to do things like this for weeks. It will increase his status here."

Daryl was reminded of his own needs in that area. He motioned at Jayda and Thomas, who were

also on this work shift. “Grab both wheelbarrows and follow me.”

Neil saw Ed coming back from the trial and sighed as the man zeroed in on him. “Everyone else, take five.”

Selina hurried toward the barn. The kids were in a school session next to it. The den mothers and some of the babies were inside the barn. Selina wanted to check on Missy and her infants. It was a daily pattern for her.

Selina liked it that the kids were treated well here. Everyone took turns teaching them. Molly and Piper were handling it this week. Rotating teachers kept the kids and the instructors from getting bored or frustrated. Selina just wished she had something to teach them other than how to change a diaper or spy for the boss.

The rest of the construction workers were glad of the short break. The sun was bright and they’d been working since right after dawn. Everyone was looking forward to lunch.

Theo put his hammer onto the hook on his belt and wiped sweat from his face and arms. He ignored the ogling by camp women as a small group of them walked by. They’d attended the trial. Theo could tell because they were sizzling with need. One of the other camp relief sources would handle them. Theo wasn’t interested in random encounters anymore.

*I’ve spent the last three weeks chasing pussy and thinking about everything that happened on my last run. I’ve figured out I’m not satisfied with one-*

*night stands even though I'm staying so horny I don't really need a hammer.*

Theo glanced around for Debra, trying to be subtle.

Ed chuckled as he went by. "She's with the fishing group at the beach."

Theo hadn't realized people knew he was watching Debra again. He wondered if Debra knew.

Ed kept going, not telling Theo that Debra wasn't just helping the fishing crew. She was practicing her swimming skills on breaks while there were people nearby to help her if the tide started to pull her out. Theo wasn't going to be happy when he found out his deaf ex-girlfriend was joining the diving team.

Ed stopped next to Neil, waiting until the other workers moved away. They didn't have privacy anymore, but old habits died hard.

"Where's Samantha?" Neil already knew; he was trying to dodge this conversation.

Ed kicked dust from his boots. "On the runway, for now. She and Wade will be going to the jail to get Tim's last wishes."

Neil winced. *So much for avoiding.*

"He wants to talk to you."

Neil stored his tool.

Ed pushed. "Tim said you owe him a conversation as his former team leader."

Neil sighed, shoulders drooping. "Yeah."

"So you'll go talk to him?"



“At some point.” Neil wiped dust from his black tank top. He’d stored his trooper clothes on the ship after the flood. It was too much gear to wear while working.

Ed was satisfied. Neil would probably delay for a couple of days, which would make Tim suffer more. *And he deserves that.*

“Does he?”

Ed nodded. “You didn’t go to any of the trial days. If you’d heard what we all did, you’d understand you don’t need to feel guilty over the removal order. Just do your duty as an Eagle and let the rest go.”

Neil sighed. “I’ll try. Thank you.”

Ed continued on, happy that Neil hadn’t argued. There was a fine line between justice and revenge. Neil didn’t want any part of that and Ed respected him for it. *But I don’t agree at all. Tim deserves everything that’s happening for not telling us about Courtney. The rest of it just piled on. That first offense should have been the one that got him killed.*

Ed went to the class next to the barn, smiling at the kids and teachers. He stopped at the guard post, returning to his place now that his break was over. “Enforcer J.”

Jennifer enjoyed his good mood. “Ed.” She’d taken the shorter path back to check on Roy and Autumn quicker.

Ed thought Jennifer looked like one of the school kids in her jean jumper and long braid. He

tried not to let her catch that thought, though. He knew she wouldn't like it.

Ed waited for any updates she wanted to give while doing a full scan from one end of the area to the other. He'd had duty over the kids every day since being released from the clinic. Jennifer had healed his injuries and then Angela had put him in a public post so everyone could see he hadn't been a part of the problem. Being a spy among the church group for those two months made that necessary, but Ed was also enjoying having a little of the spotlight again. He'd missed the public interactions with those in authority.

The rest of the guards on duty over the kids did their own scans. There hadn't been a single problem in three weeks. It was making some of them twitchy.

Two dozen teenagers were here, all in folding chairs with small lap desks and pencils, listening to Piper as she taught them how to check the soil for mold. Most of the kids were in shorts and tank tops, but the weather here would soon change that. It was late fall on Pitcairn. They were about to go through their first winter here.

The folding chairs lined in neat rows bothered Ed because it reminded him of schools in the past. He believed homeschooling was a better choice than restarting the environment that encouraged bullies and shootings, but Angela wanted the kids to be able to form bonds and friendships that would see them through the future. They were both right as far as Ed was concerned, but he did wonder how

she would prevent those problems when they had more students.

Jennifer smiled at Grant, who had point over the guards for this shift. She could tell Grant was enjoying his time away from their ships, but there was no warmth in his gaze for her like there had been in the past. Their friendship might be irreparable.

Grant scanned the opposite direction while keeping his thoughts locked.

Ed knew that bothered Jennifer. He was also being treated as an outcast by some of the people who didn't understand he had been Angela's spy. He felt bad for Jennifer. It gave them something in common. "You should go talk to him."

Jennifer put her nose in the air.

Ed shrugged. "I don't think his coldness has much to do with you. Grant's been like that with all of us for the last couple of weeks. It's connected to Ray."

Jennifer stored the information to put in her nightly report. That man had also been quiet, though he didn't have a bad attitude toward her or anyone else. He was just in his own mind these days. "Ray went through a lot on that run. Grant needs to give him time to settle back in."

"They've been back for almost a month."

"Everybody adjusts at their own pace. When Ray is ready to talk, he'll pick someone."

Ed wasn't sure that was true. All of the people Ray usually confided in were busy with their own

lives, and he obviously didn't feel comfortable talking to Grant about whatever was on his mind.

"I'll mention it to the boss."

Ed smiled again. "Make sure you tell her how happy I am with this assignment."

Jennifer knew Ed was pleased to be back in the public spotlight. His reputation was already rebounding. She also knew there was more to it than that.

Jennifer scanned the students who had immediately gone quiet when she returned. One of the girls in a front folding chair caught her attention.

Jennifer scanned the girl's long blonde ponytail and bright brown eyes, trying to figure out a puzzle. She knew the girl was special in some way. So was her little sister. Both girls looked the same, talked the same, and acted the same. They might as well have been twins if not for the age difference.

Ed distracted her. "Everyone's coming back now. It will be hard for the kids to concentrate."

Jennifer took the hint and saved it for later. "I'll be around." Jennifer went into the barn.

"I'll be here." Ed kept a blank mind until she was out of sight. Then he favored the girl in the front row with a warm glance. Margret was 15. The single men in camp had been crowding her since her birthday last month. Ed had given her friendship with no strings. *And if she picks one of them instead, that's okay. I don't need a mate to be content here.*

Ed knew he could pick from the camp women, but Margret was special. So was her mother,

Amanda, but she terrified Ed. There was a hard shell around Amanda that said the man who won her daughter's heart had better be worthy of it or they might pay the ultimate price.

Margret blushed and dropped her eyes back to her notes before one of the teachers scolded her for not paying attention to the farming lesson.

Piper acted like she hadn't caught it all, but she made a note in her book about it. Her nightly report would let Angela know that future match was proceeding slowly, just like they wanted it to. Margret was legally old enough to pick a mate; that didn't mean she had to yet. Angela wanted their kids to have time to grow up before they had to start breeding.

Piper glared at a gaggle of camp women who went by. They were flirting, waving, and even blowing kisses to the older boys in the class. "Move on!"

The five needy camp women barely responded to Piper's shout. They wanted this new crop of teenage boys.

Piper looked toward the barn. "Enforcer J?"

The camp woman hurried on as Jennifer came out of the barn, carrying Autumn.

Jennifer scowled at them, getting them to leave faster. They were quickly out of sight.

Autumn didn't wake up. She would sleep until Jennifer reached the ship and then she would spend time with KJ. Autumn and Tonya's son were

developing a close friendship that already worried their mothers.

Little Roy was still with the other younger kids in the barn. The den mothers were working on counting this week, using the barn steps. It gave the kids exercise as well as knowledge, but it was also a smaller area so the den mothers could keep an easier eye on them while everyone was distracted by the trial.

Jennifer went to the patio as the classes resumed. Their kids had to know how to grow their own food and it wasn't as simple as dropping a seed into the ground and waiting. They'd already had a failed crop of tomatoes. For some reason, the plants were wilting and falling over even though they were being watered twice a week.

Piper motioned. "Guard duty."

Cate hopped up, grinning. She'd been waiting patiently for her turn. Piper always sent one of them with Jennifer as a guard.

Piper wondered if they would continue the same routines now that the trial was over. She hoped so. It was comforting to have a solid daily schedule. She washed up, had breakfast, worked a shift with the kids, had lunch, put in her two hours on Eagle workouts and training, and then spent the evening with her mate. They'd even played cards with Daryl and Brittani last night. Piper was happy here.

Jennifer wished she felt the same. Many people were still avoiding her and some were rude any time they had contact. Eric hadn't forgiven her at all.

Jennifer was trying to think of a way to make peace with Zack's son, but the boy didn't want it.

Deep down, neither did Jennifer. She didn't like Eric.

Cate walked behind Jennifer and to the right, so she could see ahead while protecting from the rear. She stayed ready to bring up her shield.

Jennifer was a little embarrassed to have a guard after all this time, but her large stomach said she might need the extra help when things went crazy again.

Jennifer rubbed her belly with her free hand, marveling over how fast life had changed for her. Two years ago, she'd been in school herself.

"You should take the classes with us." Cate was adorable with her short black spikes and red hairband, but her jeans and white shirt were covered in dirt spots and ink smudges. It was great that Cate seemed to be embracing both sides of being a girl.

Jennifer pondered the suggestion. "Maybe all of the adults should."

Cate made a face. "Yes! Some of our people are stupid."

"That's not nice."

"It's the truth. That matters more than being nice."

"Fair enough. But don't say that again. Call them...educationally challenged."

"No."

"No?"

"I don't lie. You can handle that."

Jennifer grunted. "You're in a mood today."  
Cate glared. "I'm practicing my 'tude."  
Jennifer snickered. "I like your nice attitude. Why are you practicing being a brat?"  
"I have a class with Adrian coming up."  
Jennifer snickered. "Well, in that case, carry on."  
"Don't tell me what to do!"  
"Perfect."

## 2

Jennifer's amusement carried on the wind as they went by the patio next to the restaurant where four people were sitting.

Dace smiled. "She's in a good mood."

"Yep." Lisa handed him a cup of iced tea. There wasn't much ice on the island. She had talked the cooks into a cup for each of their wheelchair patients.

Brittani sipped her tea and enjoyed her book. Reading about magic amused her now. *I wonder if having a wand would make our gifts stronger...*

Dace shifted toward Lisa. "Can I have a shot with it?"

Lisa handed him the flask. Dace didn't really like beer or wine. He preferred scotch. She was rationing the bottle she'd gotten from the medics. The cooks had refused to part with any of their alcohol supply. This island was slowly going dry.



Sitting next to them, Jack scanned the women who were coming back from the trial. He studied the big breasted brunettes, willing himself to feel anything.

Lisa had opened the umbrella on the table to keep Dace from getting sunburnt. She was in the chair next to him, where the sun was beating on her skin and warming her. She was staying chilly. *It's better than morning sickness.*

Jack couldn't stand to look at Lisa as the sun turned her into a glinting goddess. She was sweet, beautiful, strong, and forbidden. The torment was a physical pain that kept him annoyed and restless.

Lisa laughed at something Dace said.

Jack stood and walked away, unable to take any more of it. "We'll finish the card game later."

Dace stared after his brother. "Is he okay?"

Lisa shrugged. "He's been quiet around us for the last week. I believe he's lonely. We should set him up with someone."

Brittani opened her mouth. Then she shut it and went back to her book.

Jennifer stopped by her. "Need anything before I go to the ship?"

Jennifer was doing roaming rounds today. She wanted a weather check next. While she was on the ship, she would also check on the medical crew that was working there today, and deliver a healing session to anyone who had an appointment.

Brittani lightly patted her huge stomach. "Food again, soon."

“Awesome.” Jennifer headed for the path, relieved that things were going so well with Brittani. She was out in the sun and fresh air daily, relaxing while her babies developed. Jennifer now had a lot more hope for her to carry to term.

Jennifer caught sight of Angela coming through the jungle with Bret. Angela had refused healing treatments. She said using magic on her wouldn't work.

Angela gave Jennifer a sharp look.

Jennifer headed down the path, but she stewed on it. There was something going on with Angela's pregnancy. Jennifer was trying to figure out what it was.

Bret moved closer to Angela. “She'll figure it out soon.”

Angela made a face. “She should have already gotten it. I'm a little disappointed that she hasn't.”

Bret slyly dropped some new information. “She needs classes with the camp enforcer.”

Angela slowed, frowning deeply. “Jennifer *is* the camp enforcer.”

“She's too young. She needs time with Amanda.”

Angela stopped.

Bret showed her who he was talking about.

Angela let the boy believe he'd surprised her. Bret's education on people was coming along nicely. If she didn't let him feel like he had a victory here and there, it would stop that progress and make

him shut down. Kids needed encouragement. “She’s been here the whole time.”

Bret nodded. “There are others, hiding and waiting.”

“Are they also trying to go good?”

Bret shrugged. “The ones I’ve been able to scan are. They’re all happy to be here, but I feel others who never let their guard down long enough for me to learn anything about them.”

“What do you suggest for that?”

“Scans while they’re distracted.”

Angela resumed their walk. “We’ll do that during the Eagle event, but don’t push any buttons, no matter what you find. Always come to me before you confront them.”

“What if they catch me snooping?”

“Use my name for protection and then come to me.”

“I will.”

Angela headed for the bunkhouse, but not to get an update. She’d caught the thoughts about using Biff’s skill. She wanted to watch with everyone else, while judging the camp’s reaction to it. If this went well, they might start using more magic in other projects.

“What if they can’t handle it?”

“You tell me.”

Bret concentrated, bringing up a shield around her while he was distracted.

Angela smiled at the people and guards who rotated toward them. “Just practice.”

The camp members accepted that answer.

The Eagles continued to sweep for trouble.

Bret kept his voice low. "If they can't accept it, they'll be the next ones on your list for relocation."

"Very good." Angela joined the bunkhouse crew, chatting lightly and letting them enjoy their break, but her mind continued to make plans that would have both pleased and angered them.

Angela stopped next to Neil.

Neil stiffened as he felt her full attention settle on him.

"How are you today?"

Neil snorted lowly. "You don't care about that."

Angela shrugged. "Fine, how is Samantha?"

"She's getting better every day." Neil was thrilled with that. So was Wade.

Angela's lips curved. "How's the sex?"

Neil lifted both brows, along with his voice. "That's none of your business!"

Angela already knew that part of Samantha's life hadn't returned to normal. It was in Wade's twitchy eyes and Neil's lack of self-control. "She thinks it's because her hair is so short."

Neil's next shout was interrupted. "What?"

Angela fingered her own long, dusty braid. "Her hair is short; it's just starting to curl again. She believes that's the reason you and Wade haven't made any moves on her. She feels ugly."

"She's not! It has nothing to do with that."

Angela lifted a brow, waiting.

Neil realized she wasn't going to let it go without an explanation. He reluctantly confided. "She still flinches and twitches. She doesn't sleep through every night. She's still a little obsessive about the boys being in sight."

"You don't think she's recovered yet."

Neil shook his head. "I love her more than my own life. There's no reason for us to rush through her recovery. Sex can wait."

"Have you considered that this *is* the next step in her recovery?"

Neil hadn't. He stared at Angela. "Is it?"

Angela nodded. "Samantha wants her full life back, Neil. That includes intimacy with her mates. As long as you guys are holding yourselves back, she's going to continue to flinch and twitch and not sleep through every night. She thinks something is wrong with her."

"She's picking up our bad vibes."

"Yes. So what are you going to do about it?"

Frustrated, Neil yelled again. "Stay out of my love life!"

Angela snickered. "Get a love life and then maybe I'll stay out of it."

"Stop pushing me!" Neil was horrified to find his mouth still running even though his brain was telling him to stop. "I don't need you to run my life! You don't own me! I'm not afraid of you!"

Bret brought his shield up around Neil instead of Angela, to contain the man.

More of Neil's fury spewed out. "I'm not a threat to her! She's a threat to me!"

People all around them had stopped, more than surprised.

Angela waited tolerantly.

Neil knew he had already gone too far, but that didn't stop his mouth from flapping. "Just punish me and get it over with! I'm tired of waiting for the pain!"

Bret lowered his shield as a bond formed. He'd often had that thought during his time in the labs. *But I was never stupid enough to actually say it.*

Angela reached out.

Neil immediately flinched back even though he had asked for it.

Angela placed her dusty hand on his forehead.

Neil didn't resist the calming spell she sent. He embraced it.

"Better?"

Neil slowly nodded as she lowered her hand. "I'm sorry."

Angela understood it was for losing control of his emotions, not for what he had done in the past. "I think you've had enough of a break. I want you back in full Eagle training."

Neil sighed. Nothing satisfied him now. He'd been happy in this camp before it had all gone to hell. Maybe diving back in would fix the problem.

Angela glanced around at the people who were still staring in surprise. "Does anyone else want to

yell at me today? I'd like to get it all out of the way now."

Neil winced.

Everyone else chuckled and resumed what they'd been doing.

Angela locked eyes with Neil. "I'll punish you when I'm damn good and ready and not a minute before then! If you do this to me again, you'll force me to be a lot rougher than I plan to be. You screwed up. Suck it up and accept the consequences of your actions. That's what an Eagle does."

Neil dropped his head, regretting all of it. He didn't know what to say to make it better or to make it go away. He just wanted it over with.

Bret looked at the man in sympathy. "That's part of the punishment, dude. Alphas always use us against ourselves. If you were happy to be getting a break from it, then she would have handled it already. Stop making it worse. She doesn't really want to punish you at all."

Angela glared at Bret.

Now Bret dropped his head to avoid her anger.

Neil moved away from them before he could say anything else. He didn't have control over what might come out of his mouth.

As soon as he was out of hearing distance, Angela rewarded Bret. "Very good."

Bret straightened in pride. He loved these lessons on how to handle people. He was already certain it was going to come in handy in his future.

Angela caught that and refused to confirm or deny it. Bret didn't need to know what the future held for them. No one did.



Chapter Three  
**Water People**

1

“**C**an you do it?”

Biff studied the sagging corner of the bunkhouse while the crowd around them talked and pointed excitedly. They were eager for the show.

Biff wasn't sure. “I've never tried to lift anything.”

Neil waited, letting the man figure it out. If Biff could do this, it would help them tremendously.

Neil motioned for Jayda and Thomas to bring the wheelbarrows closer. They were both full of concrete blocks now. “When he says go, I want everyone to grab a block and hand it to us. Daryl and I will line them up in the right spots.”

Daryl and the other workers were ready, but they were also doubtful.

Watching with the rest of the crowd, Theo kept his thoughts to himself. It was likely that the building would collapse completely if it was lifted. Theo didn't want to say that and possibly jinx them.

“Move back, people!” Jayda pointed at Theo. “You should have said it anyway. Someone could get hurt if it collapses again.”

Theo flushed.

Jayda didn't care about his embarrassment. She only cared that he wasn't doing the right thing.

Jayda had decided that a strict moral code would be best for her and she was living it. When others didn't do the same, she became frustrated. "Make sure everyone is out of there before we do this!"

Brawlers hurried inside to check.

Neil was embarrassed that he hadn't thought to handle things that way. "Thanks."

"Yep." Jayda was soothed by Neil's proper response to a minor screwup. Theo's reaction was just the opposite.

Theo stomped toward the restaurant. Lunch was being served by Troy and Anna, under Thelma's supervision. The cooks were happy to have the extra hands and the people here were happy with the meals. Troy had been right to pick a career in food after his time as a subject in Reicher's lab. He was already proving that he could do it even though he was a teenager.

Anna, on the other hand, liked cooking but she wasn't good at it. Thelma had already suggested she pick something else, but Tobias's widow was determined to keep at it until she succeeded.

Theo entered the restaurant and went to the counter. Thelma often gave him samples and scraps. He was turning those extra calories into new muscles.

Theo heard the crowd let out a sound of delight and knew Biff had brought out his stone warrior.

Theo tried not to be jealous and failed. He hurried to his stool and pretended he wasn't normal.

At the bunkhouse, Biff strained mentally, directing the stone warrior to slide its huge hands beneath the corner of the bunkhouse. It was hard work.

The weak corner of the bunkhouse lifted, wood groaning and creaking. A new crack split up the side wall.

“Not so fast!”

Biff let go at Daryl's shout. The bunkhouse slammed to the ground, sending up dirt and dust, and cracking off one of the boards they'd just used for patching.

“Damn it!”

Biff winced. “Sorry!”

Neil shook his head at Daryl when the man would have scolded Biff. “Try again. Just go slower this time.”

Biff brought the stone warrior back out, breaking a sweat. He was suddenly sure this type of work would become a regular thing if he was successful. He didn't mind. The thought of failing in front of everyone did bother him.

People clapped as the stone warrior lifted the corner gently and held it.

Dirt and small pieces of wood fell off the building. Cracks sounded from other areas. It would have to be fully checked out before they went to bed tonight. Neil realized that mistake too late.

“Don’t worry about it. We can go to the ship for a few days if we need to.” Angela wasn’t upset. Mistakes were going to happen as they learned.

“Go!” Biff steadied his mental hold and used his energy to keep it all in place.

Neil and the others got to work putting the concrete blocks into a wide square beneath the lifted corner. None of them cared that an imaginary being was keeping them from being crushed by the bunkhouse. It worked because they all believed.

Angela watched in relief and concern. It was amazing to have this type of power for building and fighting. They were formidable. It was concerning that they were becoming more odd by the day.

The cheering normals in the crowd felt that way, too. They clapped, and retreated.

Thomas joined Angela. “When he lowers that, there will be new cracks to patch. We’re really better off tearing it down, pouring a concrete foundation, then rebuilding it.”

“Noted.” Angela didn’t want to have that conversation.

Thomas limped over to help heft the blocks from the wheelbarrows.

Biff blinked sweat from his eyes. “One minute.”

The block layers worked faster.

The lunch bell rang again, pulling some of the crowd.

Angela sighed. *And that’s the next problem I need to cover. We’re low on food.*

She wondered if anyone had noticed all of the lessons and classes were centered around food production. *If I can't find a way to feed us, we'll have to go somewhere else. There's no point in rebuilding the bunkhouse if we won't be here to live in it.*

## 2

Greg scanned the beach with his one good eye, where their large group was fishing, stringing poles, baiting hooks, and enjoying the quiet away from town. Even those who didn't like the water were doing well today, himself included.

There were a lot of people in this crew. More than a dozen of them sat, stood, and worked. They were taking turns at each station Morgan had set up. They were switching once an hour to keep people from getting bored, but also to make sure everyone got practice at all of it.

Greg enjoyed the warm sun on his scarred skin. "Here comes Jennifer."

Morgan already knew. He'd felt her arrival. He kept working while the ocean gently lapped at the shore and gulls flew overhead. The beach had become a peaceful location for him during times of stress.

Morgan was living with Kyle and Jennifer now. Everyone had adjusted to that over the last three weeks except for Morgan himself. He still felt the need to occasionally pinch himself to make sure he

was living in reality. He was part of a family who accepted him in almost every way. It had awkward moments, but Kyle had been a great sport so far. Morgan still hadn't figured out why Kyle had agreed, other than the extra set of hands to care for Jennifer and the kids. Morgan refused to take that thought any further. *I don't need to know. I just don't want it to end.*

Greg took the freshly strung fishing pole over to Erin, who was putting bait on the hooks as they needed it. She had dug a small can of worms out of the jungle that was in need of rain. None of them had forgotten about the flood, but they were all looking forward to a little bit of moisture. The dust was a huge pain. It was all over everything.

Morgan nodded at Jennifer, seeing the baby was asleep. He smiled at her guard, always happy to see that she had one. They hadn't had any problems on the island in a while. *We're due.*

Cate glowered at him. "Shut up."

Morgan laughed.

Jennifer didn't stop to talk; it wasn't good to distract any work crew, but especially not this one. Morgan and the others were catching fish for dinner while training the new people on how to do it. It was important that they began producing enough food to feed everyone. She did slow a little, so she could catch any random thoughts that might be important. As the enforcer, that was her job.

Cate glared at people who tried to be friendly, reminding them she was on duty, but it felt good to

be welcomed. She just wasn't allowed to show it until her shift was over.

The adults observed tolerantly. The Eagles were proud of the girl even though it felt odd to have someone as important as Jennifer protected by a child who only came up to her hip.

Erin hadn't noticed Jennifer and Cate's arrival. She resumed chatting to Greg about the plans she had made. "I think I'm going to get XO on Angela's team with this plan."

"Uh-huh." Greg waited for her to finish putting the bait on the hook so he could take it over to Raheem and Selito, who were their fishermen for this hour. Gio and Nero were digging worms out of the beach grass nearby while counting the minutes until they could go have lunch.

"She always says she likes ambitious plans."

Greg didn't answer. He was thinking about Kyle. Jennifer had shared her gifts with him and then taken that power back. Kyle had popped in as a descendant on his own at that point. Greg was wondering if becoming a hybrid had stopped his own gifts from coming in naturally. Greg had briefly discussed it with Shawn. As far as they knew, they couldn't give the power back to Angela, but neither of them were willing to ask her and find out.

"Are you listening to me?!"

Greg's head whipped around at Erin's shout.

Conversations paused as people rotated toward her.

Jennifer stopped.

Erin flushed as everyone stared at her.

Jennifer frowned. This wasn't the first time Erin had yelled at someone for no reason. "The rage vaccine isn't working on you."

Everyone tensed at the reminder of the infection that half of the camp still had.

Erin didn't want to tell the truth in front of everyone, but she already knew this was going to be reported to Angela. She reluctantly confided. "I didn't take it."

Greg scowled at her. "Why not?"

Everyone else on the submarine had been vaccinated and cured. None of them were feeling rage any more, just the normal anger that came from everything they'd been through.

Erin shoved the baited pole into Greg's hands. "I don't want to give up the strength. Every day that I have it, the rage illness makes me stronger." She did a quick flex of her arm, where a bulging muscle drew his attention.

Greg had only vaguely been aware of the changes in her body. He had assumed they came from another source.

Jennifer took out her notebook and wrote it all down.

Erin saw her and got defensive. "You can't make me take it!"

"Oh, shut up!" Sadie was already tired of the drama. "We have bigger issues to handle than you." She pointed at Jennifer. "When are you going to punish Adrian?"



Sadie's blue hair made her appear wilder than she really was. Despite her start with this camp, Sadie had turned out to be a minor camp member without any real fight in her. Jennifer knew the boss was disappointed.

Panaji, her boyfriend, was useful, helpful, and easy to like. They were all still hoping he would rub off on the former UN fighter. Sadie didn't have the rage illness, but she was full of anger at Adrian's betrayal.

"Stop it." Panaji put a hand on Sadie's arm. "You have to let it go."

Sadie jerked away from him and stomped toward the jungle. "I'll never let it go."

Morgan sighed. "Maybe we should all take a break."

Raheem held up a line with a dozen large fish hanging from it. "Do you want us to gut these now and take them to the cooks?"

Morgan shook his head. "I'm holding a fishing lesson with the kids. I'm going to teach them to do it."

Morgan was hoping that spilling fish blood would help ease the symptoms of the rage illness in their children, especially Missy and Amy.

Jennifer caught that. She stored her notebook. Morgan had obviously figured out the rage vaccine wouldn't work on their kids. She hoped the others didn't know it, too, but it was impossible to keep secrets in this camp. If they didn't know now, they soon would.

“Sorry, man.” Greg felt bad for Panaji. He thought the man could do better than Sadie.

Panaji shrugged. “Women in my country were easier to handle.”

Debra looked over from where she was storing the fish they’d caught. “Oppressed!”

Panaji frowned. “Some of them were. Now, it’s happening to the men.”

Debra blew out a rude snort and then resumed taking fish off of the hooks and putting them into the live well.

Debra was wearing a bikini top and soaked jean shorts that accented a great body. Many of the males studied those curves when she wasn’t looking.

Greg didn’t agree with either of them. “It doesn’t have anything to do with oppression or slavery. Sadie’s pissed. She wants justice. Until she gets it, she’s not going to let it go.”

Panaji was enjoying most of his relationship with Sadie. He felt the need to defend her. “Cheating should not be allowed. It should be a rule, with a strong punishment.”

“You can mention it to the boss; maybe she’ll have the Law Council discuss it.”

Panaji immediately shook his head. If Angela wanted that to be a rule here, she would have already handled it. Sadie wasn’t the only one who was angry at someone for cheating.

Bernice grinned at all of them. “In the Cayman Islands, if you cheated, body parts came up missing.”

People winced or chuckled.

Bernice was wearing a long sundress and flipflops that made annoying noises when she walked. Her long, dark hair was in a ponytailed braid that reminded everyone of the boss. It made her less approachable, intentionally. She didn't want to be bothered by the single men in camp.

Selito sniggered. "The water people were always happy to have those extra parts. They ate them."

Raheem snickered.

Bernice went still and quiet.

Everyone regarded Selito for an explanation, except for Morgan and Jennifer. They both caught Bernice's reaction to the topic.

Erin had to ask. "What are water people?"

Selito pointed toward the ocean. "The swimming people who live beneath the water."

"You mean mermaids."

Selito nodded at Erin. "We were a fishing country, mostly. We had a lot of contact with the water people."

"You're joking, right?"

Selito grinned.

Bernice changed the subject. "What other signs of the rage illness do you have?"

The mood immediately dipped.

Erin began defending herself.

Greg tried to calm her.

Bernice resumed working.

Jennifer and Morgan exchanged looks.

Standing with the group, but not really participating, Zack and Eric continued to fish while listening. Neither of them had spoken aloud since arriving, but they'd been having a mental conversation the entire time.

Zack was trying to convince Eric that the hunt for power was forbidden and he needed to obey that rule. Eric was trying to convince his father that without more power, they were all in danger from Jennifer and everyone like her. The fact that both men were descendants didn't matter because they were so far down the hierarchy that they were subservient to everyone else. Now that Jennifer was here, both males had gone silent mentally as well, waiting for her to leave.

Debra gave Zack a hard look.

Zack sighed. "I'm trying."

Debra forced speech between her lips again. "Not enough!"

Zack already knew that. Eric wasn't going to be swayed until he and Jennifer made peace, but that wasn't likely to happen. His family held onto grudges anyway, but Jennifer was also stubborn. It would take something serious to broker a truce between the pair.

Jennifer continued toward the dock, where the Adrianna was bobbing softly in the water.

Debra caught a glimpse of Autumn sleeping in Jennifer's arms and smiled wistfully. She hadn't told anyone she was pregnant yet. She was still

enjoying it. She was lonely, however. Her mind flashed back to her conversation with Angela.

*You killed him!*

*“Yes. Name your price.”*

*Debra glanced toward the hallway, where Theo was coming out of his cabin. I was happy then.*

*Angela sighed. “Can I recommend someone more suited to you?”*

*No. I want him!*

*“I’ll see what I can do.”*

*Debra made a guttural noise that blended perfectly with her sneer. Don’t give me that shit. You make everything happen now. You’re a master chess player who could beat any of the angels from the Weigh Station. You’re beyond byzan, so just give me what I want!*

*“It may not be what’s best for you.”*

*Debra didn’t care. I took a bullet for you in the mountain. You owe me!*

Morgan looked over at Debra. “Shut up!”

Debra tossed the net down and ran over to the water. She neatly dove in and went to the bottom.

No one asked Morgan why he had told her to shut up. That was a common order going through the camp whenever someone contemplated something bad or something that wasn’t supposed to be known by everyone else.

Greg had noticed that Debra was always wet. “She’s spending a lot of time in the water.”

Erin filled him in. “She wants to join the dive team.”

“Is that safe for her, with her being deaf?” Greg liked Debra. He didn’t want her to be in danger.

Erin shrugged. “I think people should be allowed to do what they want to.”

Morgan spoke up to keep that fight from restarting. “It’s not like we can hear anything under the water anyway. When we’re down there, we try and then we get freaked out because we can’t. That won’t happen to her.”

Morgan didn’t tell them Debra had already been approved for the diving team by the boss. That was her news to deliver when she was ready, just like the pregnancy was her information to hand out. As long as Debra was single, she didn’t have to answer to anyone.

### 3

Jennifer saw Kenn coming down the jungle path. She waited at the end of the dock for him.

Kenn’s shoulders stiffened as he realized she wanted to talk. He locked his thoughts as he reached her. Fog head was screwing with his balance and his brain function. He couldn’t seem to say the right thing today no matter how hard he tried.

Jennifer lifted a brow.

Kenn sighed, dropping the mental walls. “It’s just fear. Nothing bad.”

Jennifer didn't dig into him. She turned toward the fishing group. "Did you catch any of that?"

Kenn relaxed as he realized he wasn't her focus. "I got it all."

He ignored Cate, like he was supposed to do, but he suddenly wished they could have time together again. Marc's little girl had been good for him.

Cate felt the same way. She added it to her mental list of things to ask Angela for the next time she did something great or special.

"And?"

Kenn understood Jennifer wanted his thoughts. "Who do you want to cover first?"

"Erin."

Kenn scanned that woman. She and Greg were talking quietly now, unaware that they were still being observed by the enforcer. "She may become a problem in the future."

"Like Darren?" Jennifer was scared of another snap that would endanger innocent lives.

"Like Allison. Other women who are weak will see Erin getting stronger and they'll want it."

"Yeah. I wish they'd follow Angela's example and do it naturally."

Kenn snorted sarcastically. "Naturally."

Jennifer frowned at him. "You believe her strength comes from magic? Boy, do you have a lot to learn."

Kenn didn't want to get into that with Jennifer. "Next?"

Jennifer rocked Autumn as she started to wake.  
“Greg.”

Kenn paused. He wasn't sure if he was comfortable reporting on Greg after what they'd gone through in the lab.

Jennifer respected that. “I just need to know how he's doing. Keep his secrets to yourself.”

“What if that is the secret?”

“Then tell me so we can find a way to save him.”

Kenn wanted that, too. “Greg's playing a great role. He looks and acts happy. His thoughts are solid, calm.”

“But?”

“But he's doing everything he can to convince people he's not depressed anymore, including himself. When it hits him again, and it will, he might flip back into being dangerous to himself.”

“I thought his new relationship and coming kids were helping.”

“That's all adding to his stress level.”

“What's the biggest problem?”

Kenn sighed. “Memories, nightmares. That lab hurt him in ways you can't comprehend without having been there.”

Jennifer was willing to take Kenn's word on it.  
“What can we do for him?”

“The boss has to handle that one.”

“Soon?”

Kenn wasn't sure. He knew Angela didn't need the stress so close to her delivery, but Greg was showing signs that the problem in his mind was



getting worse. “Watch him and you’ll know. When nothing riles him, he’s in his head and that’s a scary place.”

“I will.” Jennifer let Kenn pick the next one himself as his gaze went over the fishing group.

“Eric hates you.”

Jennifer sighed. “I’ve tried to talk to him and Zack. Zack’s okay, but Eric won’t let it go.”

“The more power he gets, the more of a danger he’ll be to you.”

“Does Angela need to send him away?”

Kenn slowly nodded as he delved into Eric’s thoughts without the rebellious boy knowing. “Maybe for a little while. He needs a strong dose of reality to appreciate what he has here.”

Jennifer wrote it in her book.

Kenn moved on. “The two foreigners are fine. They’re happy.”

“Their names are Raheem and Selito.”

“Whatever.” Kenn didn’t care if Jennifer believed he was being prejudiced. He didn’t like either man because they were both so clean that they made him look filthy. “Sadie needs the same thing. She’s forgotten that it’s a cruel world out there.”

“Will she come back?”

“Definitely. She loves it here when she’s not stewing on Adrian. Maybe some personal time with the boss would help her.”

Jennifer wrote it down, copying quicker to get all of Kenn’s observations.

“Debra is lonely. She’s also scared of getting back into a relationship with Theo because he was so controlling, but she’s jealous of the women he’s been servicing...” Kenn grinned. “And she’s pregnant.”

Jennifer acted like she hadn’t known. “That’s great.”

Kenn snorted at her attempt to fool him. “Now, for Morgan.”

Morgan looked over at Kenn with bright red eyes.

Kenn grinned, not intimidated. “He’s... fine. No worries there.”

Jennifer smiled. “Good.”

Morgan calmed, surprised that Kenn was covering for him.

Kenn sent a quick mental thought. *Shut up!*

Morgan turned his mind to the topics around him.

Jennifer wrote that in her book, too, even though she didn’t want Angela to dig into their personal setup.

Kenn shifted so Morgan couldn’t see his hands.

Jennifer translated the Eagle coded message with a reddening face.

*Morgan isn’t going to really be happy until you tell him he’s welcome in your bed. He wants the same setup that Neil and Wade have.*

Kenn headed for the ship. “After you give birth, you’ll need to make that choice.”

Jennifer had already made it. She enjoyed spending time with Morgan until it got awkward and then she left the room. She didn't want a physical relationship with him.

"Then tell him that so he'll go unload in someone else's bed."

Jealousy went through Jennifer.

Kenn snorted. "I thought so."

Jennifer went across the dock with a mind full of confusion. "I don't understand what's happening to me."

Kenn did. "You're growing up, becoming a woman. You have desires. It's not wrong."

"It feels that way."

"If it felt right, *then* you should worry about it."

Jennifer let Kenn climb the ladder first while she tucked Autumn into the chest sling. Then she followed him, with Cate on her heels.

When she reached the top, Jennifer faced Kenn. "Now tell me the truth."

Kenn groaned. He'd thought he got it by her by giving her something else that was smaller. "You're good."

"No, I'm not. Tell me the truth. What's wrong with Morgan?"

Kenn sighed. "He's torn up over not being able to save Hannah. He can't talk to you about it because he knows you're jealous and he knows you don't want to talk about topics like love and sex with him. He's depressed and covering it with a great act."

“Like Greg?”

Kenn slowly nodded. “Those two might pop at the same time.”

Chapter Four  
**Who's Billy?**

1

**K**enn scanned the ocean as he reached the top of the ladder. It was calm and clear in all directions. *Why does that make me so nervous?*

Jennifer swept the top of the ship as she reached the main deck. Everything up here was covered in the same dust that was driving them crazy on the island. The ship was still being used for projects. A few couples and families were also living on it to give them more room in the broken bunkhouse, but it wasn't enough to keep the ship clean anymore.

Cate scanned the empty bridge as she reached the top. It bothered her to be on a boat without a captain, even if it was docked.

Kenn let Jennifer go down the ramp first, automatically taking the other guard position next to Cate.

Cate delivered a sneer.

Kenn grinned. "Still practicing, I see."

Cate giggled.

Kenn wondered who the girl was torturing today, but he didn't ask. He wasn't supposed to distract her when she was on duty.

Jennifer snorted. “She’s eager to catch people doing anything wrong. You can talk to her about whatever you want and she’ll still find any problems.” It was one of the things that Jennifer liked about Cate.

“She’s like you.” Kenn saw that clearly; so did the rest of the camp.

Jennifer tried not to get defensive about that comment. “We like our jobs.”

“It’s earned you both bad reputations.”

“Yeah, you’d know all about that.”

Kenn stopped teasing her. He walked in silence, now annoyed.

Cate was humbled by how fast the teenager had gotten to Kenn. “I’ll never be as good as you at this.”

Jennifer smiled. “Sure, you will. That’s why you’re practicing. In time, you’ll have a cool nickname, too.”

Cate sulked. “Hard to beat the Dragon.”

Jennifer grinned as she reached the bottom of the steps. She loved that name. It was a far cry from frightened pregnant teenager.

“Are you still frightened?” Kenn hadn’t believed Jennifer was scared of anything.

Jennifer immediately nodded. “All the time. It’s the apocalypse, you know?”

“I may have noticed.” It always bothered Kenn that so many of their people were the same scared souls hiding under Eagle outfits, but Jennifer had

unlimited power. She didn't need to be afraid of anything or anyone.

"Except Angela," they stated in tandem.

Cate nodded. "We're supposed to fear the alpha. If we didn't, why would we listen to her?"

"Why *do* we listen to her?" Kenn was in his own mind now.

"She loves us and wants what's best for us."

Jennifer frowned at Cate's prompt answer. "Do you believe that, Kenn?"

Kenn slowly shook his head. "She wants what's best for the normals. Most of the time, the descendants are an afterthought."

Jennifer agreed, though she understood the reasoning behind it. "We've had too much peace. We need shit to go crazy again so we can appreciate how much she accomplishes that does benefit our kind."

"Maybe." Kenn was bored and restless, too, like most of the senior people here, but he refused to do what Jennifer had just done. Wishing for trouble wasn't a good idea. His time in the lab had shown him there were much worse things than being bored and restless.

"How are things going with Tonya?"

Kenn swept the corridor as they reached the intersection near the chapel. The memorial hadn't been relocated yet, but it had been crated. "Tense, sad." Kenn didn't elaborate. Tonya missed Rico and nothing he'd done so far had taken her mind off of that dead man.

“You’re trying something new today. Good for you.” Jennifer didn’t give him time to complain about her reading his thoughts. “She hasn’t spoken to anyone about him yet, as far as I know. The boss thinks she’ll start moving on after she can do that.”

“Or maybe she’ll see I’m not like him at all and move on in other ways.”

“Ah.” Jennifer now understood why Kenn had waited so long to try this despite Angela telling him to do it weeks ago. “Well, I’d have faith in the boss on that one. She likes observing you two. If you split up, that can’t happen anymore.”

Kenn glanced at Cate in a sudden attempt to garner more support. “What do you think?”

Cate swept the hallway on her side. “Tonya wants my daddy. You’re just a substitute teacher.”

Jennifer scowled. “Cate!”

Kenn’s demeanor flipped into anger. He held his tongue by actually biting it.

Cate swept Kenn’s side while he was distracted. “They all want my daddy. All the men are substitutes. No reason to get pissy.”

“Don’t curse,” Jennifer corrected automatically. “And it’s not all of them. I have no interest in Marc at all.”

Cate glared at her. “Liar.”

Kenn stared at Jennifer. He believed Cate completely. “That’s why you have an extra hanging around. Angela has Adrian and you have Morgan.”

Jennifer stopped, turning toward him.



Kenn sighed, head dropping. That was twice today he'd riled a woman to the point of battle. "No need to crush me. Tonya will handle that for you."

Jennifer made her feet take her toward the steps. "Go away now, Kenn."

He immediately took a different path to the medical bay.

Cate wasn't sure what had happened. "He told the truth and you got mad. Why?"

Jennifer examined that question. It was the truth, though she wasn't doing it to be like Angela. *And I really don't want Marc. He scares me too much for there to be a spark. Kyle is the only man I'm comfortable with...*

Jennifer sighed. Her feelings for Morgan had grown over these weeks of him being in their daily lives. "I'm waiting for Kyle to snap."

"Everyone is." Cate had caught enough thoughts to know Kyle was a jealous man. He should have tried to kill Morgan instead of inviting him into their lives. "Maybe *he* wants to be like Neil?"

Jennifer shook her head. "Not a chance. Kyle has some other reason for it and I'm going to figure out what it is."

"Why not just ask him?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes as they went down the steps to the medical bay. "You have a lot to learn about women and the way we work, kid."

"So, no direct questions. Why?"

Jennifer shifted closer to the girl and lowered her voice. “If we ask a direct question, then we have to give a direct answer.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Jennifer sighed. “No woman on the planet ever starts off with a straight answer. If you do that, it will screw the rest of us. We want our men off-guard and confused.”

“I don’t understand the benefit of that.”

They were only running essential services on the ship. Most of the hallways were dark as the females went through. It was a little eerie. Jennifer moved faster to get down to the medical bay. “When you get a boyfriend, you will.”

“I have one.”

Jennifer frowned at the girl. “Your dad doesn’t like Bret that much.”

Cate smiled. “I meant Joey.”

Jennifer stopped, heart twisting. “Joey died, Cate.”

“I know.” Cate kept smiling. “He’s happy in Hell. I can’t wait until we go visit him.”

Jennifer resumed their walk, now the one off-guard and confused.

Cate smirked. *The alpha was right. Practicing is fun.*

## 2

“You’re all clear, Trent.” Terry handed the happy man a sheet of paper.

The medical bay was the busiest place on the ship right now as people traveled through the rooms and hallways doing paperwork, stocking supplies, and attending appointments. They hadn't had any serious injuries since the flood, but the medical crew was always busy with minor issues like stomach aches, migraines, and teeth problems.

"Awesome." Trent wanted to get started with the diving team as soon as possible. Waiting to be cleared medically had been frustrating.

Trent had a new T-shirt, a trim new haircut he'd done himself, and a new pair of boots that fit him perfectly. Angela had insisted that he re-outfit himself. Trent was grateful. He hadn't felt right getting into the supplies on his own, but all of his gear was starting to fall apart from so much use.

Terry was the opposite of Trent. He was dirty, tired, and obviously not getting enough sleep. Many of their medics were in that condition, though not from being overused. They were all restless and trying to find something to occupy their time. Many of those activities involved staying up too late and not sleeping enough to compensate for it.

"Are you really going back down there after what you went through?" Isabel was still trying to figure out what drove these Safe Haven people. In the labs, courage like theirs was punished. It was interesting to see what happened when they were rewarded.

“Yep.” Trent slid his boots on and tied them. “Wade, Zack, me, and a few others are fighting the fear. Besides, we’re nowhere near Port Stanley.”

“Still. There are sharks, stingrays, killer whales...” Isabel stopped, smiling at him instead. “I hope it goes well.”

Trent smiled back. He liked Isabel. Most of them did. “Same. Are you a swimmer?”

“Never have. Never will.” After spending all of her life in the underwater lab in Australia, Isabel hated the water. She didn’t even like taking a shower. She had to force herself to do it.

A cloud passed over Trent’s face. “Never say never in this camp.”

Isabel scanned her infants and then resumed digging through the dusty files on the opposite counter.

Trent grinned as he caught Terry staring.

Terry had noticed Trent’s yellow teeth. He assumed his own were the same. “I wish we had a dentist.”

Trent gestured toward Jennifer as she entered the medical bay. “Get the Dragon to handle it.”

Jennifer chuckled. “Dragons can’t handle dental issues. I already tried on Marc’s chipped tooth.” *And being that close to him reminded me that he’s a true hardass and I’m just a kid with some power.*

Trent stood from the chair in the main lobby where he’d been waiting for his paperwork. “There are more than a hundred camp members here who

don't have a job yet. Maybe one of them is a dentist."

Terry made a note in his book. "Dragons can't heal scars either." Trent's body was still covered in them even though Jennifer had given him three healing sessions since the flood.

"We all have limits." Jennifer put Autumn in the pumpkin seat on the counter next to Tonya's sleeping son. Isabel's infants were there, too, awake and watching everyone. Jennifer was looking forward to having her unborn son here with them. Her pregnancy was making it hard for her to bend or pass up a bathroom.

All of the babies were happy and healthy. They were being well-cared for. The camp members were taking turns volunteering as den mothers when they needed more hands, but they had a basic crew of two dozen that were led by Daisey and Trent. Jennifer wondered who their head den mother would be after Daisey left the island.

Trent went to the exit. "It's bath night. Tell those two so they don't start another mini-riot."

Jennifer laughed. Autumn and KJ hated bath time. They got all the other kids to cry last time, bringing in guards and parents to see what was wrong. "Sorry, den mother. You're on your own."

Trent chuckled as he left. *I love that title.*

Jennifer did wonder why the kids hated getting clean. She'd been there for many of the bath nights. The den mothers were gentle and always careful not to get soap in their eyes. The babies were rinsed

quickly and dried in fluffy towels to keep them from getting a chill. Then they were fed a full meal and held until they went to sleep. It should have been something they looked forward to.

Cate picked a shadowy corner and went there. “We don’t like the soap.”

Jennifer was immediately concerned. “Does it hurt your skin?”

“It stinks. We smell awful for days.”

“What’s wrong with the smell?”

Cate shrugged. “It’s like poop. How can you not smell it?”

Jennifer sniffed her arm.

“You guys use the bars. We get that yellow stuff in a bottle.” Cate held her arm out. “I got a shower yesterday.”

Jennifer sniffed the girl and recoiled, stomach turning. “Wow. It went bad, maybe.”

Terry frowned slightly. “I didn’t know soap could go bad.”

“Me either.” Jennifer wrote it down. “We’ll stop by the shower on my way out and get you cleaned up.”

Cate smiled. “Thank you.”

“Why didn’t you guys say something?”

“We thought you liked it.”

“Yuck.” Jennifer went into the first exam room.

Cate stayed in the shadows where she could see all the exits.

Jennifer left the door open. She only had one healing session to do today. “Hello.”

Candy smiled at her. Sitting on the exam table while Conner looked after the twins, Candy seemed happy and healthy.

“Good afternoon, Enforcer J.”

Jennifer snorted. “What do you want?”

Candy laughed.

Conner glanced over, drawn by her sounds.

One of the twins spit up on his shirt.

“Ah, man.”

Jennifer pointed toward the sink in the main lobby. “Go on. We’ll cover the kids.”

Conner put the baby girl into the twin stroller and went out.

Jennifer turned toward Candy. “Make it quick. He’ll be right back.”

Candy lowered her voice. “I need some birth control.”

Jennifer realized Candy was ready to take the next step in her relationship. She used her new healing gift while considering what to say. Brilliant green light flowed around both women.

Candy’s cancer was completely gone, according to the descendant x-ray scans they were doing every time she came in. All of their cancer patients were in remission. They were hoping that it was really cured, but with cancer, it was impossible to tell until it returned. Jennifer was just happy to be able to help. Candy looked so much better that it was hard to believe she was the same person who had almost died during the birth of her girls. “Have you been approved for that?”

“The medics just cleared me...and it’s been ten weeks since the birth.”

“I meant by the boss, Candy. You guys are supposed to obey the age limit until you’re married.”

“Oh, stuff the age limit! That boy is mine and I want him.”

Jennifer chuckled. “Angela knew this was coming. She told us to remind you that he’s a Mitchel and then stay out of it.”

Candy sneered. “I love my Mitchel. She loves hers, too, but I’m not afraid to show it.”

Jennifer shrugged. “You don’t have Marc for comparison.”

“And I don’t want him.” Candy shivered. “Marc scares me.”

Jennifer recognized the copy of her own feelings. “I’ll check the dates on the medications. The three-month shot would be good for you so you don’t have to remember to take a pill every day.”

“What did you ask her for?!” Conner was standing in the doorway, glowering. Anger came off of him in menacing waves.

Candy flushed at being caught. “I’m fine, and you and I will...at some point.”

“No, we won’t! No pills and no shots!” Conner was exhausted. Helping with the twins was only a part of it. He was spending all of his free time trying to find a way to make them both happy, but there was no way to know for sure if Jennifer’s healing



gift had fixed the problem. Most likely, it hadn't. Descendant powers had limits.

Jennifer didn't want to get involved. She spoke up anyway. "She needs to be covered, Conner. Another pregnancy might kill her."

"That's what I mean!" Conner pointed at Candy, yelling at her for the first time. "You had a stroke during the birth! We're never having sex, so there's no chance of you getting pregnant and dying!" He slammed the door as he stormed out.

Candy sighed. She'd known he was stressing over her health, but not how much.

Jennifer added it to her book. "He's not wrong, you know. Even with birth control, it could still happen. Those Mitchels are fertile."

"I don't care. I'm tired of being scared. I want my life back—all of it."

Jennifer understood that. "There might be a charm to prevent pregnancy. I can talk to someone about it."

Candy nodded. "Talk to whoever you want, but even bad news won't matter. Conner and I were meant to be mates and we're going to."

### 3

"He's doing great." Tonya handed the infant back to his father. The other mothers were feeding the baby breast milk when they had extra, but Charlie was doing everything else. "Mathew is a good name."

Tonya tried to ignore the welcome fear she felt around Charlie. He was a Reicher. It made her think of Rico even when she didn't want to.

"Thanks." Charlie cradled the baby to his chest and yawned.

"I know that feeling." Between her baby, their orphans, Kenn, and her job, Tonya was always tired. Add in her workouts and she went to bed exhausted. Tonya loved it.

Charlie wrapped the receiving blanket back around the sleeping infant. "No shots this time?"

"Not for another month or so." She didn't tell him the vaccines they'd brought were almost out of date. The medics were using them sparingly. They didn't know what side effects might come from expired chemicals.

"We're covered here. Jennifer can heal almost anything, including broken bones." Charlie picked up the diaper bag and went to the door. "Thank you."

"Yep." Tonya wrote it in the baby's chart and then stayed to clean the exam room so it would be ready for the next patient. They were working on the cruise ship this week so everything could be cleaned and restocked, but also so they could take stock. Angela wanted to know what supplies they were low on so the next mission team could hunt for them while collecting Jayda's family.

Tonya turned to go back to the main lobby.

A man in the shadows stepped into view, face hidden by the wall.

Tonya's heart jumped. "Rico?"

Kenn stepped out so she could see him, steeling himself to the disappointment that went over her face before it was quickly hidden.

"Hiya!" Tonya hurried over and kissed Kenn to take away the sting, but in her mind, sadness bloomed once again.

Tonya's eyes went to his big arms beneath that black tank top as she stepped back. Rico had also been covered in scars. *Everything reminds me of him. Damn it!*

Kenn let it go. It was just proof of where her mind was; he'd already known who she was dwelling on when she wasn't working, training, or riding him.

Tonya caught his thoughts, and Angela's words about him staying here or leaving forever. Instead of talking to him about it, Tonya used distraction on both of them. She motioned toward the exam room and leered.

Kenn chuckled but refused. "Later."

"Okay." Tonya headed for the main lobby instead.

Kenn faded into the shadows.

Tonya glanced back to ask if he was here for something medical-related and didn't see him. *But I feel him watching me...*

Tonya swallowed a sob and joined the other medics at the front desk. They were observing the babies that had just woken.

Autumn and KJ were cooing and making speech noises. They were clearly conversing, though none of the adults could translate it.

Candy pushed her stroller out into the main lobby, joining the others.

Her babies began to coo and gurgle, joining the conversation.

It was funny that they were able to communicate with the animals, but not the babies. All of the witnesses wondered why it was like that. Many of them had tried to talk mentally with the kids, but it only worked on rare occasions, like with Jennifer and Autumn. Tonya hadn't been able to communicate with KJ at all despite numerous attempts.

Terry observed in longing. He would never be able to have that experience. Even if he convinced Jayda to give him a chance, he couldn't give her a child. Both of them were sterile.

His results had come back in the last batch, along with a lot of others. It was worrisome how many of the camp couldn't have offspring. Angela was right to be focused on a breeding tree.

Isabel didn't need a gift to know what was on Terry's mind. She'd seen that look in the lab. "Would you like me to get you a copy of the recovery diet from the thumb drive?"

Terry had gone over all the information they'd brought from the lab. He was finally lonely enough and sad enough to try it. "Yes."

Isabel immediately went to do that. As medical trainees and gophers, she and Daniella were supposed to be searching for information on how to help Dace recover the use of his legs, but they hadn't found much. The medical journals were limited.

Terry ignored the sympathy of the others. Jennifer and Tonya couldn't help him. This wasn't a natural defect to heal, like Brittani's issue. It wasn't from an injury. This was a manmade tragedy caused by exposure to too much radiation during and after the war. It wasn't something Nature or her spells could fix. *I'm broken now and there's nothing anyone can do about it.*

#### 4

In the hallway, Charlie stopped to fix the blanket over his son again. Little Mathew's skin was fragile; he would burn easily.

Conner came down the hall, now back in control of his emotions. He wanted to escort Candy to town before he had to start his work shift.

Charlie missed having someone to talk to.

So did Conner. The boys stared at each other for a brief instant of shared misery.

Conner tried to put his aside. "How are you?"

"Tired." Charlie blew out a sound of frustration.

Charlie had a diaper bag over his shoulder and a fanny pack around his waist. There was also dried

spit on his shirt. He looked like all the other mothers.

Conner sympathized. “Babies will keep you busy.”

Charlie motioned toward a hallway window. “It’s not the baby. It’s them!”

Conner saw three camp women staring at Charlie. They were batting their lashes and making gestures. Charlie caring for his son, and doing such a good job, had reminded the camp women that he was legal to chase now because he was a father. The fact that he was powerful, cute, and the boss’s son was making it worse.

“They won’t leave me alone. I can’t even take a piss without one of them sneaking in for a service!”

Conner wasn’t having exactly the same problem with the women in camp, but he was occasionally followed into a private place for a request. He never satisfied any of them, but he also didn’t tell Candy about it. There were just some things a woman didn’t need to know. “They all want you.”

“I don’t feel the same.”

Conner still didn’t get why Tracy had left. Being married to the boss’s son would have given her a lot of power and safety.

Charlie had been working on that for months. “Do you remember the night of the storm on this ship, when Sherman was hit by a chair and almost died?”

“I heard about it.” Conner had been a hostage at the International Detention Center then.

“Sherman had been harassing Tracy. I believe the baby caused his injury and it scared Tracy because she thought her kid was evil, like Cynthia’s would have been. It flipped her, hard.”

Another camp woman joined the group at the window. She waved enthusiastically at Charlie.

Charlie gritted his teeth. “I should have attended the school session!”

Conner felt bad for Charlie.

At the front desk, Candy laughed at something Jennifer said.

Conner’s heart clenched at the sound. *I want her!*

Charlie took a chance. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Conner sighed. “It won’t help. I’m stuck and I don’t know what to do.”

“You could talk to my mom.” Charlie grimaced as soon as he said it. “Sorry.”

Conner nodded. The last thing he wanted was to discuss his sex life with Angela. “I just love her so much!”

Charlie offered a suggestion before he thought it through. “Maybe you need some time away to think.”

Conner stilled, considering that.

Jennifer rotated toward them with a huge scowl on her face.

Tonya frowned at Charlie.

Conner missed it as his mind latched onto a possible solution. “Maybe I will.”

He went down the hall to open the door so Candy could get the stroller through.

Candy had heard it all. She started to shout at Charlie, then she remembered who he was. She pushed the stroller by him with a nasty glare.

Charlie was confused. "What did I do?" Conner had the right to take time and be sure about what he wanted from the future.

"It's not about the right to choose his future." Tonya was blunt. "It's about breaking the rules. Conner isn't allowed to leave this camp, ever. That came straight from your mom."

#### 4

Timmy hurried by the drama-bound people, going to the cafeteria for his break. Dwight and Gus's brothers were cooking on the ship today, prepping some of their meat for the freezers. Timmy wanted to be there for scraps.

He was doing better now. He was getting along well with the brawlers and he'd even lost a few pounds, but his love of eating hadn't been conquered.

"Let go of me!"

"Shut up!"

In the past, Timmy would have continued on, determined not to get involved, but his time with the brawlers turned his feet toward the voices to find out what was going on.



“Let me go!”

“Say you’re sorry for calling me wrong!”

Leeann held still so the painful pinch on her arm didn’t turn into hair pulling or a slap. Mike was mean when he was angry. “I’m sorry!”

Timmy entered the chapel, scowling. “Leave her alone, Mike.”

“Get out of here, lardass!”

Mike and Leeann were standing next to the crated memorial. Timmy didn’t ask what they were fighting about. It didn’t matter. Mike always had to be right. “If you don’t stop hurting her, I’m going to tell Angela.”

Mike immediately charged forward, firing a spell while swinging.

Timmy hit the ground.

Leeann clasped a hand over her mouth to keep from shouting for help.

Mike’s spell froze Timmy in place while he beat on him. Mike was taller and stronger than Timmy. He didn’t need to use his magic on his brother; he wanted to.

Leeann grabbed Mike’s arm as blood splattered Timmy’s white coat. “Stop it! Someone will see you!”

Mike shoved the girl back as he stood up. He kicked Timmy in the arm. “If you open your mouth, I’ll do this to you every time we’re alone!”

He kicked his brother once more and then strolled out of the chapel before the guards came to see what was happening.

Leeann helped Timmy to his feet, trying not to cry. “Are you okay?”

Timmy wiped blood on his sleeve. It was dripping from his nose and smeared across his split lip. “You have to tell someone.”

“No!”

“This isn’t right. He’s not allowed to hurt you!”

Leeann’s face iced over. She used the same tone Mike had just used. “Stay out of it, lardass! It’s none of your business!”

Timmy studied her sadly. “Why?”

Leeann drew in a shaky breath. “Because he’ll kill me. He already said so. If you tell anyone, I’m dead.”

Timmy’s swelling face darkened. “Billy was better for you than my brother.”

He left, going to the bathroom so he could clean up. Thoughts of lunch had been punched from his mind.

Leeann stared after him in confusion as a bell began to ring in the back of her mind. “Who’s Billy?”

Chapter Five  
**I Had To Try**  
The Beach

1

**“D**o you want me to hang around and help out?”

Marc scanned the line of reluctant animals coming down the beach path toward them. “We finished our walk. You’re off duty.”

Adrian hadn’t expected another answer. He still lingered.

Marc hadn’t spoken much during their walk of the island. Adrian wasn’t sure what was wrong with the man, but he knew something was.

Marc opened another bar of soap. The animals were covered in thick dirt. One wasn’t going to be enough.

“How did you get them to do this care session willingly?”

Marc snorted. “None of them are willing. Dog got them to stick to the deal with threats.”

Adrian didn’t like the sound of that. “What kind of threats?”

“He said they’ll be sedated every time we bathe them. They were all terrified of being removed from the island while they were knocked out.”

“It’s good that they like it here so much.”

“Yeah, I just wish we had more females.”

Adrian huffed, pouting. “Don’t you have enough women lusting over you?”

“Yes!” Marc backtracked. “I meant animals. Female *animals*.”

Adrian laughed and tried not to think dirty thoughts. Even with a small clan of kids and a very pregnant wife, Marc was the most desired man in camp. His oldest son was the second-most hunted male.

The radio on Marc’s belt crackled and then lit up with Angela’s calm voice. “I have a couple of announcements, camp. First, all unneeded shifts are canceled for tomorrow. We’re having a half-day Eagle event with a shooting contest!”

Angela paused, letting the cheers of excitement fade. Then she finished the announcement. “Second is a team meeting alert. Be at the runway tent at dusk, ladies. If you can’t make it, you can’t be my XO. That is all.”

Adrian lifted a brow at Marc as the radio went quiet and mental complaints from women across the island immediately began to hit the hive. “What was that about?”

Marc dunked the soap in the water bucket to get it wet. “Not sure. I didn’t know she was having an Eagle event tomorrow or a meeting tonight. Did you?”

“No.” Adrian smirked. “Maybe some of us should show up and observe.”

Marc adjusted the volume on his radio. “Maybe we will.”

Adrian stifled the urge to offer his help again. He headed for the path to town, ignoring his needs. It wasn’t good for him to become attached to Marc. He knew the man was holding back. They didn’t have a bond even though Adrian desperately wanted one.

The fishing crew was still working nearby. They didn’t offer to help. No one was eager to talk to Marc. The last three weeks had been calm and peaceful. Marc’s daily walks around the island were comforting, but his icy demeanor was a silent threat that few were willing to cross.

Charlie came over the dock from the cruise ship and joined Marc on the beach. “Hey, Dad.”

Marc smiled at his son and grandson as he continued setting up the items he needed.

Marc motioned to Dog. “Take them in, one at a time. I’ll scrub and then you’ll take them back in for the rinse.”

Dog eyed the softly rolling waves along the beach, then looked at Charlie. *Get me out of this!*

Charlie chuckled. “No can do. You guys need a bath.”

Dog snorted. *Dirt don’t hurt!*

Charlie laughed this time. That was the line the kids were using. “Copy that saying all you want. Just get in there and then let dad clean you.”

The animals spent a lot of time rolling in the dirt, which wasn’t a big deal until you added in their

waste. For whatever reason, Dog and the others preferred to roll in the same areas where they defecated.

Marc pointed. "Pick a cat and get to it."

Dog whined.

The kitten that was now half the size of its parents leapt onto Dog's back and began hissing.

*My thoughts exactly!* Dog pranced into the surf and let the incoming wave drench them both.

The other animals retreated in fear and disgust.

*Not the water!*

*The wet monster!*

Marc prepped the scrubbing pads, marveling at how much easier this was with animals that could communicate.

"Do you want me to help?"

Marc almost said yes. He enjoyed spending time with Charlie. "I think your mom wants you and little Mathew in town for lunch right now."

Marc was extremely proud of how well Charlie was doing with his newborn son. He hadn't believed the boy was capable of such dedicated care just a few months ago. The aftermath of the war was still making changes in all of them.

"Dinner tonight?"

"I should be there unless your mom does story time with the kids tonight." They'd been having meals together like a real family. Marc loved that. It was great for his mood and great for his twins. They often played UNO or Sorry during the meal.

Dog trotted over with a soaked, hissing kitten clinging tightly to his back.

Marc started scrubbing.

Charlie paused. “I thought Madison was going to help with this.”

“She is. I sent her to collect the horse.”

Charlie heard female laughter and rotated toward it like many of the guards and fishermen around them.

Madison was riding the horse, slowly, down the path. Madison was in good shape, and while she wasn't beautiful, she was cute. Marc thought Charlie could do worse.

He scrubbed the cat's little body quickly. “Biff wants her. If you do, too, make it clear now or you'll lose that one.”

Charlie's face froze. Then it filled with pain. “Tell Biff I said I hope they'll be very happy together.” Charlie marched toward the opposite path to town.

Marc sighed. “I had to try.”

Charlie's loneliness was surrounding him like a shield and drawing in skanks from all over their camp. Marc wanted him paired with a good woman, not a gold digging whore. He'd thought Madison might be a decent place to start with that goal.

Madison realized people were staring at her. She assumed her normal blank facade and carefully directed the horse down the beach to the prep area.

Selito and Raheem both smiled at the woman as she rode by.

Madison felt their attention, but she couldn't even bring herself to nod politely. The thought of dealing with either one of them was overwhelming. If not for Marc insisting, she wouldn't be helping him either. *I never know what to say!*

Marc gently rubbed the soap scrubber across the kitten's filthy paw while observing mentally. He was trying to catch every thought Madison had. Angela wanted her cleared.

Madison stopped the horse near him and dismounted awkwardly. She barely kept herself from falling.

The horse immediately trotted toward the goat family that was grazing on beach grass. He didn't like people either.

Madison waited for orders. When she did this alone, it was usually with a water bucket and a cloth, and that was it. The animals refused to tolerate soap when she gave them a bath.

"Take this one in for a rinse, Dog." Marc focused on Duke next. "Grab a cat and let's get this done."

Duke crouched, whimpering, so Buster could jump onto his back.

The bunker cat did it with his fur bushed out, angry eyes promising retribution.

The animals were still traveling everywhere together and providing entertainment, but they needed to be tamed. Marc just wasn't sure how to handle that without breaking their spirits. Like with



the kids, the wildness of the animals was part of what made them who they were.

Marc gestured at the other supplies he had brought. “We’re using Dawn dish liquid on the adults to make sure any fleas are killed. Be careful not to get it in their eyes. Everywhere else needs a thick layer, including their ears.”

Madison prepared her scrub brushes while she waited for Duke to bring the cat back to her. She thought about trying to make small talk, but again, she didn’t know what to say.

The woman’s tension sent Marc back to his trip to Safe Haven with Angie. None of them knew if Madison had been hurt, but they all assumed that was the case. It explained her lack of willingness to participate in their society. He decided the easiest way to do this was to confront it directly. “So what’s your problem?”

Madison froze.

Marc shrugged. “I don’t believe in beating around the bush. You’ll get used to it.”

Madison snorted. *Unlikely.*

They both watched as Dog laid in the surf to make sure the water reached the kitten. A wave broke over top of them, rinsing off most of the soap in one blast.

“Well?”

Madison forced herself to answer. “People scare me.”

“All of them?”

Madison considered that question. She was doing okay with Biff, but they avoided touchy subjects. She tolerated the kids when she had babysitting duty. “Mostly, yeah.”

“What can I do to help you with that?”

Madison was touched; she was also sad. “I don’t know. My parents spent thousands of dollars on therapy sessions before the war, but nothing made a difference. I couldn’t talk to them either.”

“You’re good with the animals.”

Madison heard the concern in his tone. Her sharp mind clicked pieces together. “That’s why you’re giving me an evaluation. The animals like me.”

Marc refused to lie. “It makes people nervous. It reminds them of Chris and Chad.”

Madison made a face. “I’m nothing like them.”

“I don’t think you are either, but some of our people are concerned. They mentioned it to the boss. That’s why you’re getting this evaluation.”

Anger made Madison’s tone sharper than anyone was used to hearing from her. “Who was it? Who told her I’m a threat?”

Again, Marc didn’t lie. “Neil and Wade.”

Marc didn’t blame them for it after everything Samantha had gone through with Chad.

Madison motioned toward the town, furious. “That’s why people are looking at me funny! They had no right to do that!”

The fishing crew nearby stared in shock at her shouts.

“I seriously doubt Neil or Wade said anything to camp members. Those people are picking up the vibes you’re giving off.” Marc laid it out for her. “You don’t talk to us. You don’t eat meals with us. All you do is spend time with the animals or you’re alone. Anyone can see that you’re not fitting in here. That’s what’s making them nervous. The connection to the vet just makes it worse for the people who know about him.”

Madison was angry and humiliated. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“No. This evaluation will help calm things down.” Marc’s tone lost the little bit of warmth it had held. “But it will never really stop until you change your behavior.”

“I don’t know how to do that!”

Marc pointed at the female cat who was pregnant again. Her stomach was already slightly swollen. “She’s next, Dog.”

The drenched kitten hopped off of Dog and began shaking water from its fur.

Marc frowned at the kitten. “Don’t roll in the same dirty spot or we’ll come right back here and do this again.”

The kitten hurried over to Marc, meowing and rubbing on his leg.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that before.”

Madison looked at him in surprise. “Do you understand them?”

“Sometimes.”

“Me, too.”

Dog knelt so the female cat could get on his back. The dogs had figured out that if they knelt, the cats hopped or even walked up instead of jumping and digging in their claws.

In the surf, Duke whimpered louder as Buster dug in claws to keep from being knocked off by the waves.

Marc kept the conversation going. “I thought you always understood them.”

Madison pushed her ponytail over her shoulder as Duke hurried toward her with the wet bunker cat. “Sometimes they talk too fast for me to catch it.”

That snapped into place for Marc. *They’re talking too fast!* “That’s helpful. Thank you.”

Madison felt odd at Marc’s praise.

“It’s called happy. You’re allowed to be that here.” Marc didn’t look at her. He had figured out that shy people had a problem with eye contact; if he didn’t force them to make it, their brains worked better. “I don’t know what you went through that made you this way, but I’m going to help pull you out of it because I want you to have a good life. There’s nothing bad in your mind. I’ll make sure the boss knows that. Will you meet with me a couple of times a week for chores like this so we can work and talk?”

Madison slowly nodded. If Marc could help her get over this damnable anxiety, then maybe she could pursue some of the other goals she was too scared to try for.

“Tell me one of those. Give me the one your heart desires the most.”

With Marc’s sensual voice ringing in her ears, Madison was unable to refuse. “I want to be a mother.”

Marc snorted dryly. “Well, there are half a dozen men staring at you right now, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Of course, it’s a problem! What if I can’t talk to my kid either?”

Marc hadn’t considered that. “Then we need to help you with this before you have the baby. Easy.”

A reluctant smile came to Madison’s lips. “Thank you.”

Marc got his scrubber rinsed. “It’s my honor to do it, but you should know it came from Angela. She doesn’t want you being blamed for things other people have done in our past. No matter how much you remind us of our former vet, you don’t deserve that treatment. It bothers Angela to see you getting it.”

Madison’s anger returned. “Damn, Neil!”

Some of the people observing them now frowned at her small show of anger.

Marc was happy about it. Showing anger meant she had a whole host of emotions in there that just needed to be uncorked. Being shy and being afraid to live usually went hand-in-hand. During an apocalypse, that was a dangerous mix because without courage, people were more likely to stay alone, dropping their survival odds. “I’ll do the

horse next and you can tell me how to fix his shyness problem.”

Madison shook her head. “It isn’t a shyness problem with the horse. He hates humans. He’s only had a bond with two people and both of them turned out to be bad. We may never be able to get through to him.”

Marc was encouraged by the way she phrased that. He didn’t draw attention to it, however. “Between the two of us, I bet we can make some progress even if we can’t cure him.”

Madison smiled as she scrubbed Buster. “Agreed.”

Marc took the conversation to the next level. “Have you always been able to talk to animals?”

“Yes.” Madison ignored Buster’s small nip on her arm as she scrubbed his neck. “Even when I was a little kid.”

“Are there any animals you can’t talk to?”

“I can’t do insects.” Madison frowned toward the jungle. “I’ve been trying that one a lot since we got here.”

Marc chuckled. It would be handy to be able to make the bugs leave them alone. “Were your parents descendants, too?”

Madison stilled. “I’m not like you guys.”

Marc realized Biff had been correct. He’d put it in a nightly report that Madison didn’t know she was magical. He’d also mentioned that he wasn’t sure if she would be happy to find that out. “Yes, you are. That’s why you can talk to animals,

Maddie. You're a nature descendant. In time, you'll evolve gifts like the rest of us have."

For once, the shyness didn't come first. "Really?! That's awesome! I've always thought if I had gifts I would use them to help people and then they would see I'm not a threat. I know I make them uncomfortable. I'm sorry for that." Madison continued babbling as she worked on Buster's stomach. She ignored his little nips and scratches. "It really is nice of you to do this for me. I'm sure you don't welcome all of the new magic users personally."

Marc saw her reaction as proof that all Madison needed was someone who didn't push her in the wrong ways.

Madison realized she wasn't feeling awkward. She looked over in gratitude. "You're easy to talk to."

Marc snickered. "I wish someone would tell my wife that."

Madison immediately volunteered. "I will."

Then her shyness flooded back in. "Maybe I can write it in a note."

"One step at a time is usually enough to get you there. Winning this race doesn't matter as long as you finish it."

"Marathon, not a sprint?"

"Exactly. And speaking of marathons, it's going to take a while to do the horse. We might not be done for a while."

Madison shrugged, a bit sadly. “It’s okay. I don’t have anywhere else to be or anything else to do tonight.”

*That will change soon.* Marc didn’t tell her that as he began searching through her mind. He was looking for other gifts she might have that she just didn’t know how to use yet. Once Angela discovered Madison wanted to create bonds and be helpful, she would put the girl to work. Marc just hoped it wasn’t in the same ways she was using her team.

That returned his thoughts to her announcement. Angela hadn’t mentioned a team meeting. This was a complete surprise to everyone. *Adrian’s right. We should all show up for that.* Marc followed his instincts. “Did you hear the announcement?”

Madison nodded. “I passed Sadie on the path on the way here. She had her radio on.”

Marc waited patiently.

Madison realized he wanted to know if she was going to attend that meeting. She immediately cringed. “No!”

“What if you escort me there, so I can spy on them? I need a guard.”

Madison’s shyness wasn’t able to conquer her need to be seen in public with Marc. It would settle things with the camp. *And I already know it will make me feel good. He really is easy to talk to.* “Okay.”



It didn't occur to Madison that Marc should be asking nearly anyone else on the island for a guard.

Marc allowed himself to feel good about having already made some progress with the girl. "Slip off during dinner. I'll find you on the way there."

"Am I allowed to go?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Madison lifted Buster's tail to reach the areas no one wanted to clean. "I just don't want to break the rules."

Marc swallowed a sigh. "The boss is going to love you. Just remember that she hates liars. As long as you always tell the truth and follow the rules, you'll be welcome everywhere you go. She'll see to it."

"You promise?" Madison wanted that more than anything.

"Yes. Honesty and integrity are the two most important things to Angela. People with those qualities are rare. As soon as she knows who you are inside, she'll bring you in and never let you go."

Madison liked the sound of that, but the words sent her straight to the trial. No one was talking about it, but everybody was thinking about it. Angela had handed down a death sentence. Tim would be executed in a week. It was a clear sign that failing to follow the rules would end in personal misery.

Marc put the bucket strap over his arm. "If you bite me, I'll bite you back. Same goes for kicking. Be nice to me and I'll be nice to you."

The horse let out a loud snort and pawed the dusty ground.

People on the beach and the dock paused to watch. No one had been able to get close to the horse except for Biff and Madison and even they had limited contact. Madison riding the horse today was the first time it had happened in their camp.

Marc didn't try to pet the horse. He sat the bucket down in front of it. "After I soap you up, you'll have to get pretty far into the water to rinse it all off. Madison and I will both go in with you. We'll also put a rope on your neck so we can pull you back to the shore if you have problems."

Marc didn't know if the horse was afraid of water or if it understood what he was saying, but he continued with the light chatter the same way he'd done with Madison, hoping it might put the big animal at ease. If the horse panicked, Marc would have to use his magic on it and he didn't want to do that. He was already certain Jack Devine had done that the entire time he'd owned the animal.

The horse held still as Marc began to wash him. When Marc tilted his canteen over the horse's back to wet its mane, the horse shook it off, spraying the human and the ground.

Marc ran his sleeve over his face and then continued to work. "It was nice of you to let Madison have a ride. That will please the boss. She wants Madison to be happy here."

The horse's head tilted, encouraging Marc to keep talking.

“The boss also wants you to be happy here. But we don’t have pets. All animals are required to work.” Marc firmly scrubbed a wide dirt spot on the horse’s big neck. “Dog and Duke do security patrols. The cats keep mice and other animals away from our bunkhouses and food supplies. The goats give us milk. The puppy will eventually do guard duty with the others. It’s time for you to take your place in our camp, too.”

*I am not a toy to be played with!* The horse pawed the ground violently. *I will not provide rides for your amusement!*

Marc was a little surprised at having already drawn a reaction from the horse. He quickly recovered and continued scrubbing. “That wouldn’t be useful. We need you to provide physical labor. You’re strong and we need things hauled from the ships to our town.”

The horse jerked its head toward the jungle. *If I do that, I can stay?*

“You can stay anyway, for now. If you refuse to help us out, the boss will send you somewhere else eventually and you’ll be on your own again, away from all the friends you’ve made here.”

Madison frowned at him. “You’re being a little rough.”

Marc gentled his hands, but not his tone. “I’m just telling him the truth. He’s had months to adjust to us. If he doesn’t put in the effort now, he won’t be able to stay.”

Madison caught the double-meaning. She was glad that she had already agreed to try; she was also offended on behalf of herself and the horse.

Marc saw it as another sign of her coming out of her shell. *I'm having a good day.*

The horse shifted and let go of a stream of urine, soaking Marc's leg.

Marc sighed. *I knew better.*

Urine ran down Marc's leg and formed a puddle inside his boot. The intense scent of ammonia filled his nose.

The horse waited for a beating. Marc reminded him strongly of his previous owner.

Marc resumed scrubbing the thickest dirt spot.

The horse began to relax under his firm, nonviolent touch.

Marc saw old scars all over the horse as he cleaned it. His anger at the animal's treatment made him wish they could go back and kill the horse's previous owner a few more times.

Madison gestured toward the ocean. "If you want to do a quick rinse off, I can get him to wait here."

"No." Marc's eyes went over the dock and then locked onto the spot where he had killed Kendle. Misery flooded his mind and his heart.

The horse took a step back, sensing it.

Madison also felt his mood change, though she didn't know what had caused it. She quickly distracted him. "I don't think I want to attend the execution. Is it going to be mandatory?"

Marc pulled out of his memories. “I don’t have an answer for that one. You’ll have to find some courage and talk to the boss.”

Madison shook her head. “I’ll just make myself go. It doesn’t mean I have to watch it.”

Marc wished it was as easy as just not looking, but life hadn’t allowed him that luxury and he doubted it would give that to Madison either. Seeing death up close wasn’t something he ever got used to, but Marc always expected it now. *If that stops, I won’t know how to handle it.*

Unhappy with how long the wash was taking, Buster swiped out and took a layer of skin from Madison’s hand with his claws.

“Damn!” Madison rubbed the wound, smearing blood over her fingers.

Marc scowled at the cat.

Dog growled. *There are no more rats now! You don’t have a purpose! The humans will stop feeding you!*

The other animals turned toward the wolf, afraid.

Dog was also scared. He didn’t want them to be split up. *Protect the humans no matter what and the alpha will always make sure you have a home here. When she finds out you’ve hurt one of them, you might be removed!*

Buster meowed in terror.

Madison wiped her hand on her pants and then picked up the scrubber she’d dropped. “I won’t tell on you.”

Buster held still this time as Madison resumed washing his tail.

“Dog is right. If you ever do it again, Angela will handle you.” *And that’s the same for every living thing on this island.* Marc thought about the alligators and groaned. *She’s going to cover them, too. I don’t know how I missed that.*

Madison snickered. “Not looking forward to gator hunting?”

Marc turned toward her, staring. “You just read my mind.”

Madison froze for an instant. Then she beamed. “I’m having your good day.”

Chapter Six  
**You're Not Alone**

1

“**G**ood evening, ladies.” Angela went to the desk in front of the chairs that were filled with her team members. She moved slowly, spine and legs protesting the heavy load. The walk here to the trial tent had taken her twice as long this time.

The women watching her sympathized and worried. Angela’s delivery date was a month away, but it was clear she wasn’t going to make it that long.

Angela picked up the clipboard she’d left here. She began marking off the names of the women who’d shown up, making eye contact with each of them as she did so. It wasn’t a surprise that Candy wasn’t here. She had been ill recently, but it was a surprise that Sadie hadn’t shown up. Angela had expected her to be here.

It bothered Angela a little that none of the women were wearing their Eagle uniforms, but she understood. It was hot and dry and with no action going on, most of them didn’t see the need for it.

The women settled in to wait, curious about why she’d called them together. They were sweaty, dirty,

and a little annoyed at being pulled away from their planned activities even though none of them said so.

The jungle around the runway was dark and noisy. Animals and insects were a constant static noise now that night had fallen. The rest of the camp was enjoying a good meal and good company in town. As far as the women knew, they were alone up here on the runway. They didn't have guards. The brawlers were at the jailhouse while Gus went to dinner. The only man in sight was Wade, who was standing by the open flap. Angela wasn't allowed to go anywhere without protection.

"Tryouts for team slots are being held the day after tomorrow. Wade will clear your schedules."

Tension went through the tent.

"I kept it a surprise from everyone, including the other Eagles." Angela hadn't wanted them to know it was coming. These last weeks had allowed her to see who was training on their own and who wasn't. "I currently have three names for XO. Would anyone else like to add theirs?"

Molly opened her mouth and then shut it. After being removed from the Law Council, she doubted she would be picked as XO.

Sitting next to Molly, Jennifer nudged the woman. "I nominate Molly."

Jennifer couldn't participate in this tryout and it would be a while before she was able to even after the birth. Their team needed an XO now. *But in the future, I'll reclaim that spot!*



Molly cleared her throat. "I'd like to be your XO."

Angela wrote her name down. "Anyone else?"

Piper put her hand up. "I'd be a great XO." She fought her queasy stomach, missing dinner. She hoped Adrian and Conner waited for her.

Angela added her name. "Anyone else?"

Piper and Molly weren't sure if their names were welcome based on Angela's emotionless tone.

Isabel met Angela's steely eyes. "I'd need to be trained, but you know I'm a fast learner."

"Agreed. You'll have to win the cage matches."

"I know." Isabel wasn't a strong fighter unless her life was in danger. She'd been getting lessons from the Eagles, but she wasn't sure it would be enough. Some of the women in this tent were strong and all of them were younger. Isabel missed her youth.

"Add me to the list." Tonya leered as women paled. She had more muscles than any of them.

Angela wrote it down, not asking why Tonya had changed her mind. She already knew. Tonya hadn't wanted to be picked as XO and then have to flee when she was accused of Gabe's murder. Now that that situation had been handled, she was free to fully participate. "Who else?"

Lisa shifted in the uncomfortable seat, not really paying attention. She was frustrated by not finding anything that would help Dace. The medics had searched all the books they'd brought, and Jennifer

had tried to use her new gift, but nothing was working.

“Lisa!”

Lisa flinched at Angela’s hard tone. “Sorry.”

Angela wasn’t upset. “Take some time off and keep caring for Dace like he needs. My team will be open to you in the future.”

Lisa stood up, relieved. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Thank you for caring for Dace. I know he’s a handful.”

“That, he is.” Lisa left the tent with her head up.

Angela motioned at Wade. “Escort her. I’m covered by my team.”

“I’ll be right back.” Wade went after Lisa.

Angela swept the women. “Does anyone else need a break from this team?”

Jennifer sighed. “I don’t want it, but I probably need it.”

“I have paperwork you can handle until you deliver and then after. There’s always a ton of red tape.”

Jennifer perked up. “Be glad to.”

Angela went on. “We’re doing the tryouts right here, and making an event of it. The camp will be invited to observe. We’ll have food, betting, and a fun time.”

The women realized it would be a replacement for the monthly matchup. Most of them approved. This would still get violent, but it wouldn’t end with

a ton of trash in the jungle and piles of vomit that needed to be cleaned.

“I’m leaving on the next run, but I’d like to be considered.” Jayda wanted to keep her options open. She wasn’t sure if her family would come back here or if she would stay with them in the States.

“You can participate, but you can’t be given the XO slot until you know if you’re staying with us.”

Jayda nodded at Angela as the other women stared at her. Not all of them had known she might not come back. “That’s fair.”

Jayda didn’t gawk at Angela’s stomach the way the others were. Finding out she couldn’t have kids was a sore spot. There was no need to rub salt in that wound.

“Any questions before we go to dinner?”

“Who are the frontrunners?” Tonya hoped to hear her name.

Angela snorted. “Why would I tell you that?”

“Because it will make the others fight harder?”

“Nice try. Next?”

“Who are the three names you already had?” Tonya had to keep trying.

“You, Piper, and Isabel.”

Tonya smirked. “Awesome.”

Piper beamed. “Yeah.” As Angela’s XO, she would have more authority. She might be able to hurry things along for Adrian. He only had five weeks left on his probation.

Isabel was surprised. “Me?”

Tonya understood why. “You saved her life, twice, and you have balls. We all respect that.”

Piper smiled at the older woman. “Have you used your favor yet?”

Isabel was confused. “What favor?”

“You get to ask for a favor when you save the life of someone in leadership.”

Isabel’s eyes flew to Angela.

Angela was pleased by how things were going. “Any other team business before we’re done?”

No one spoke, but a dozen thoughts went through their minds. A few of the females hadn’t spoken at all. Erin was one of those.

“Meeting adjourned.”

Samantha rose and joined Angela by the desk. “Can I talk to you about Tim and Ralph?”

“I’m not going to reconsider, Sam.”

Samantha had known, but as their lawyer, she’d had to ask. “See you at dinner.”

“You did a good job at the trial.”

Samantha frowned at Angela’s tone. “But?”

“I don’t want you doing that job anymore. Pick someone to replace you. I want you back full-time on my team.” Angela tapped the paper. “The next time we have tryouts, I’ll expect your name to be on this list.”

“Thank you.” Samantha still had a lot of nervous moments and a few outright terrified moments. Being back on Angela’s team would help her conquer those.

“I think Jennifer wants you guys at their table tonight.”

“Yes, I do.” Jennifer joined Samantha near the desk, smiling.

Samantha knew Jennifer was trying to make amends for not knowing Chad had kidnapped her. “You have to forgive yourself, Jenny.”

Jennifer sighed miserably. “Yeah.”

Samantha hugged her.

It was a good moment that drew tears from some of them.

Tonya blew out a rude snort. “You’re blocking the exit.”

Samantha laughed. “So much for being a softie.”

Tonya waved at Angela to go first. “I’m covering the boss; she’s hungry. Your emotions can wait.”

Tonya sounded like an XO. Everyone recognized it, including Angela.

The team went through the flap behind the boss, jostling each other to get into the guard positions while laughing and joking about the horse pissing on Marc.

Angela stopped as a cold breeze hit her skin. “We’re not alone up here.”

The team surrounded Angela as shadowy forms began to appear through the trees and in the shadows.

“Who is that?” Tonya wasn’t able to get a mental read on any of the men now coming from all sides of the runway.

“Layered shields over the boss!” Jennifer brought her shield up first. She also sent out a mental call through the hive for help.

“Is anybody getting anything from them?”

Heads shook nervously at Angela’s question.

Angela lifted her hand. “Fire on my call.”

Samantha, Selina, and Isabel all hurried over to take the positions closest to Angela even though two of them were normal and one of them was terrified.

The combatants coming toward them also layered their shields.

The female fighters formed a tight circle around Angela, putting their backs to her so they could protect her from every direction.

“Good evening, ladies.” Marc kept his shield up as he stepped forward with Madison staying tight to his heels.

Angela’s team let out sounds of relief and then immediately began blasting Marc and the others with their anger.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Don’t do that to me!”

“Do you know how close we were to firing on you?!”

Marc went to Angela, who was smiling. “We’ve been practicing.”

Angela chuckled. “We weren’t able to get anything from any of you. Nice work.”

Jennifer frowned at Angela. “You knew the whole time, right?”

Angela shrugged. “It was a good test on both sides. All of you reacted exactly the way you were supposed to. Good work, ladies, gentlemen.”

Angela spotted Madison in the bodyguard position and understood how Marc had gotten her to come up here. Angela wondered how long it would take the girl to figure out she wasn’t needed as a guard. Madison wasn’t an Eagle. She wasn’t in Eagle training. Marc acting like he needed protection at all shouldn’t have worked. *I’ll smarten her up.*

Madison dropped her eyes, cringing inside at being up here around all of these powerful people.

The rest of the men stepped out of the jungle and joined them on the runway. All of the mission men were here, including Gus, who had given up his dinner break in favor of being with his team for a few minutes. Even Theo had come; his bad attitude pushed out around him like a thick shield he didn’t need.

“Since you’re all here, I’ll give you the next announcement now instead of the surprise I was going to spring on you after dinner.” Angela didn’t lead them back into the tent. This wouldn’t take long. “I want another area found on the star map or an area cleared on a location we already have.”

Marc frowned. “You mean Hell.”

“Yes, dear. I want you to go to Hell.”

People laughed at her words.

Cate celebrated. "I get to see Joey!"

The mission men remembered the last time they'd gone to Hell.

Greg rubbed the empty socket under his eyepatch. "Can we ask Joey for permission to visit?" Greg wasn't in a hurry to go back there.

"I think we should do that as soon as we arrive." Angela's tone made it clear that she was going with them this time.

Wade returned from escorting Lisa to town. He had run so he didn't miss much. "Who's staying behind this time?"

"You and Cody, along with Jennifer."

Everyone recognized the power trio being left behind. It increased the tension. That implied Angela was worried she might not make it back.

"Speaking of who's in charge while you're gone..." Thomas regarded Angela's huge stomach. "You'll deliver soon. Who has point then?" Not having a clear chain of command bothered Thomas.

Angela didn't stare at the shrapnel scars on Thomas's cheek like many camp members did. "Marc and Adrian will share control. That will go into effect as of dawn."

Once again, people were certain she wasn't going to make it to her delivery date. She was putting things in place to cover that long before it was supposed to be needed.

Marc hadn't known he was being put in charge at all, let alone sharing it with Adrian. He stewed on



the information as the conversation continued around him.

“When do you want us here for the map work?”

“Tonight, after everyone else is in bed.”

“Cool.” Greg joined Erin with a kiss on the cheek, but he didn’t speak. He’d noticed she had been among the last of the females to fall into the proper place around the boss for the fight. She was dropping into obscurity while the rage illness stayed in the front of her mind. He knew he needed to do something about it, but he didn’t know what.

Shawn went over to Selina, proud of her. She had reacted quickly.

Charlie followed Shawn, glad for the short break from his son but also feeling guilty about leaving the baby with the den mothers. He would go check on little Mathew when they finished here, and then get a meal in the restaurant. Charlie handed Shawn a sheet of paper. “Isabel printed off a few extra copies of the diet from the thumb drive.”

“This is the one that might help me with my...issues?”

Charlie nodded.

Selina immediately snatched the paper out of Shawn’s hands and hurried toward town. “Thank you!”

Charlie chuckled. “She’s very determined.”

Shawn sighed. “She also has a great ass.” *I wish I could pound it like it deserves.*

Charlie made a face. “Not me. Pounding is what got me into this mess.”

“I did notice you’re being hounded. Most men would enjoy it.”

Charlie cursed under his breath.

Standing next to them with his arm around Samantha, Wade looked over. “Come talk to me when you’ve had enough of it.”

Charlie hated being one of the main items of gossip going around. “Like I told Conner, I’m not interested in servicing the gaps in this camp.”

Women frowned at him for the wording.

Men snickered at another sign that he was becoming a man.

“Like I said, talk to me when you’ve had enough of it.” Wade directed Samantha toward the path to town before Charlie could answer. Wade wanted him to know it wasn’t a hopeless situation.

“I was cleared medically today, Boss. When can we start the dive team?” Trent’s red hair stood out like a flame among the green and brown of the jungle.

Angela noticed he avoided looking at Jayda. Trent was still salty that he hadn’t gotten to enjoy more time with her. Angela found it amusing that Jayda had the attention of so many men in camp. When she finally made a choice and settled down, there were going to be a lot of broken hearts. “That’s great.” Angela favored Trent with a smile. “I’ll get back to you with a start date shortly.”

Trent didn’t push her. He wanted to get over his fear of the water, but he did fear it. Not having to start yet was a relief.

Theo was in his head again, but Trent's request drew him out of it. "Are you going to let Debra join the dive team?"

Angela braced for a scene. "Yes."

"You can't let her do that!"

Everyone frowned at Theo for yelling.

Theo didn't care. "She has to be protected!"

Angela pointed toward town.

Theo stomped in that direction before he yelled again. It was obvious that Angela wasn't going to listen to anyone. "Don't you let anything happen to her!"

Wade and Trent considered trying to offer the man reassurance in that area, but they didn't, based on how Angela had handled it. If she wanted Theo comforted, she would have either done it herself or passed it to someone, not just pointed silently.

Angela swept the people who were left. Kyle was standing nearby, watching the dusky shadows around them. He occasionally scanned his wife curiously.

Angela was happy that Kyle had decided not to retire and let his fear win. She was certain that being a descendant of natural origins had helped with that. He still wanted adventure, just not as much of it as before. Kyle had died twice during their last action here on the island. He and Jennifer were both terrified that he would continue the pattern and eventually they wouldn't be able to pull him through it.

Next to Kyle, Zack was staring after Theo and thinking about the diving team. Zack was supposed to join them in that endeavor. He was also stressing over his sons. Mike and Timmy had gotten into a fight, but neither boy was willing to tell him what it had been about.

Kenn joined Tonya, tossing an arm around her bulky shoulders. He saw Ray standing near Zack. Ray's mind was completely blank, and his demeanor was defeated. He was obviously having issues.

Zack also noticed that. Ray was usually the life of the party during moments like this.

Opposite of Ray's mood, Biff was beaming all over the place. Spending the day using his gift in front of the normals had put him in a great mood.

Angela caught his eye. "Have you picked someone to teach?"

Biff nodded. "Madison."

Everyone turned toward the woman who was standing behind Marc and trying not to show how nervous she was.

Madison realized they were talking about her. "What?"

"Biff is going to teach you how to do what he can."

"Oh... Okay." Madison wouldn't have argued even if they had been alone. Angela was smiling, and writing it in her book. That meant the boss wanted it to happen and Madison knew better than to argue with her.

Angela scanned the timid woman again, hoping their plan to draw her out was the right way to go. Sometimes antisocial people could be pushed into harmful behavior. They were going to try hard to make sure that didn't happen.

Still standing in the shadows of the jungle, Bret observed it all with a bit of longing. He had figured out that if he was more like Marc and Charlie and less like Adrian, he would be accepted here.

“You'd also have a better chance at getting the female you want when you're both old enough.”

Bret didn't deny that. “It's hard, though. You're the one I really want to learn from.”

Adrian felt love enter his heart for Bret. He still tried to steer the boy in a safer direction. “Your life will be easier if you act like them.”

“But will I be happier?”

Adrian sighed. “I can't promise that from either side. It all depends on you and the choices you make.”

Bret faced his father, taking a risk. “I'd like to move in with you.”

Adrian was living in the shack again. No one had complained since the broken bunkhouse had less room and many people still didn't like seeing him around. He had refused to let Piper live with him, however. She needed to stay with the camp to maintain her friendships and reputation. “I'll talk to the boss about it.”

“Thank you.” Bret turned back to the runway to keep observing the people there.

Adrian stepped around him and went to Marc. He didn’t leer at Angela despite thinking she was the most beautiful woman here. “I need a moment.”

“No.” Marc still went with Adrian to the other end of the runway so they would have a little privacy.

Angela headed to town, not caring what they were discussing. It was when they stopped talking that she would worry about it.

Most of the people left on the runway followed Angela to make sure she had protection as she walked through the dark jungle.

Kenn and Tonya were the last two people left by the trial tent.

Kenn had been observing everyone and coming to conclusions that made sense and also worried him. He hadn’t realized staying in the shadows would provide so much information.

“Rico once told me it allowed him to make observations about our camp that were dangerous and scary. He said everyone here is hiding their true self behind a civilized demeanor.”

“Maybe he was lying.”

Tonya’s tone sharpened. “I threw privacy out the window when I learned what he was accused of. I heard every thought he had after that.”

Kenn shoved the jealousy aside. This was the first time Tonya had said the man’s name since they

left the ship the day after Rico died. “Will you tell me about those observations?”

Tonya slowly went toward the jungle path. “I’ll talk to you about them as you figure them out.”

Kenn snorted. “Not even a hint?” He already knew she had something specific on her mind.

Tonya looked to where Jennifer and Angela were walking side by side and then shook her head. “You have to get it on your own, Grunt.”

Kenn immediately started trying to figure it out.

Tonya stitched up her broken heart once again and acted like she wasn’t missing Marc’s uncle.

## 2

Marc stopped near the burnt shed area and waited for Adrian to discern what was on his mind.

“I know she hit you with this out of the blue. I’ll tell her no if you want me to. She’ll probably give you Wade as a right hand instead. Maybe even Neil. He’s made a lot of progress.”

Marc wasn’t upset about it, though he let Adrian believe he was. “I know it’s what you want. I can feel your happiness. Why would you give it up?”

Adrian shrugged. “Things have been peaceful between us. I don’t want that to change.”

Marc inwardly gloated at how well he was handling people. Angela had been right.

“She’s always right. It’s a little frustrating and hard to keep up with.”

Marc was surprised to hear Adrian say that. “I thought you’d be proud of her.”

“I am. I’m also suffering from comparison. I was never as good as she is.”

Marc wasn’t in the mood to blow smoke up anyone’s ass, but the truth was the truth. “People were happier under your leadership.”

Adrian blinked back tears. “That may be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’ll stop soon.”

Adrian realized Marc had been saying nice things to him for weeks. “Are you okay?”

Marc started to say yes and was horrified by what came out of his mouth. “I’m bored. So much that even fighting with you sounds good.”

It wasn’t the first time Adrian had heard that, but he was surprised by who it was coming from this time. “A lot of people feel that way. We’ve had too much downtime.”

“Is that even possible?”

Adrian gestured toward the somber group heading to town. “They should be laughing and joking or bitching and complaining. Everyone’s emotions have bottomed out. Without the excitement that usually hits us, we don’t know what to do with ourselves. You’re not alone.”

Marc didn’t answer.

Adrian got the sudden impression that he was being played. He ran through the conversation again.



Marc waited, confident that Adrian would come around to it. *He's right, though. All of this downtime has made us dull.*

“What’s really on your mind?”

Marc still didn’t answer.

Adrian groaned. “I hate it when you play these games with me!”

Marc chuckled. “I usually enjoy the hell out of it.”

Marc’s tone might have triggered an argument at another time. Here and now, Adrian understood it was all a deflection. “And the only reason you ever deflect like this is because of Angela.”

Marc rotated toward the cliff and scanned the ocean, half expecting to see a green cloud coming toward them.

Adrian didn’t let the memories of fighting through the fog inflict more damage on his mind. All of the mission men were doing better with that, as were the team members who had been sent to rescue them, but everyone still had moments where they would freeze and had to pull themselves out of it. The camp had gotten used to that reaction. “You guys are making it seem like you’re the perfect couple. As far as the camp can tell, you don’t have any problems.”

Marc’s heart clenched.

Adrian got it all at once. “You expect her to lose the baby.”

Marc faced him. “It doesn’t normally take you this long. What’s going on with you?”

Adrian shrugged. “I fell for your con. I’m settling into camp life again and trying to behave.”

“That is not what these people need from you. It isn’t what they need from any of us, even though they think it is.”

Adrian refused to be sidetracked. “Tell me.”

Marc gestured toward the group that was almost out of sight. “There’s something wrong with that baby.”

Adrian’s heart dropped. He tried to be positive. “Jennifer can heal a lot of things.”

“It’s not a medical issue.”

A faint alarm bell rang in Adrian’s mind as he tried to remember something.

Marc filled him in, tiring of torturing the man. “She dinked with your memories on the submarine, or maybe Cody did. She also got Wade and Gus. All of you noticed the problem and she made it go away.”

The charm over Adrian’s mind snapped.

*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.*

Adrian's lips thinned. "There's something wrong with that baby."

"Now he gets it."

Adrian wasn't pissed about Angela messing with his memories the way Marc was. He could feel that man's anger just waiting to burst out. Adrian hoped Marc was able to control it at least until after the delivery. Someone that pregnant didn't need to be arguing with anyone.

Marc knew. It was why he hadn't directly confronted Angela yet, along with the fact that he didn't believe it would do any good. She was going to protect the baby no matter what.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Marc didn't answer. He headed toward the path to continue maintaining the calm demeanor the camp now expected to see. "She's setting things up for the birth and it's too soon. She hasn't punished anyone in a while and she's all nice to everybody on the outside."

"And on the inside?"

"She won't let me anywhere near her. I have no idea what's going on in her mind."

"I guess you want me to try?"

Marc nodded. "Figure out what's going on with that baby and I'll let you stay close to me the entire time she's on maternity leave. All of this happiness that you've been enjoying will continue."

“And if I don’t?”

Marc didn’t answer once again.

Adrian followed the man while shaking his head. “I don’t know how you could possibly miss this. One quick conversation with you has already reactivated my ulcer.”

“Well, then at least something good came from today.”

Adrian tried to fight the familiar, welcome feeling of Marc being snotty to him. “You’re such an asshole.”

Marc sighed. “Say it again and mean it.”

Adrian walked away.

Chapter Seven  
**Take It Outside**

1

“**C**harlie’s here!”

“Yay! We should ask if he needs any help with the baby.”

Charlie was quickly surrounded by women as he entered the restaurant. He held himself in place instead of sending out insults like he wanted to.

He almost wished he had his son with him for protection; when he was holding the baby, people kept their distance instead of crowding so close. All of the kids were getting baths or showers right now and getting ready for bed. Then they would have story time. Marc and Angela were with them. Charlie had hoped to have a meal in peace, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“Where’s the baby?”

“Do you need a babysitter?”

“You can sit with us.”

“You’re such a good dad. Do you want more kids?”

A sharp whistle broke through the din of female chatter.

Adrian waved. “We have a spot open here.”

Charlie would normally have turned his nose up at that invitation, but he was eager to escape the single women. He hurried over to Adrian's table and sat down between him and Conner. "Thank you."

Adrian grinned. "It's only a temporary respite. They're hunting you."

The females he'd left at the door huffed as they returned to their tables.

The women at Adrian's table—Candy, Piper, and Daniella—scowled at the few braver females who considered trying to follow Charlie.

Those women decided not to press their luck.

Charlie looked around the restaurant. All of the camp's popular people were here except his mom and dad. At nearly every table, a woman leered in open invitation.

Charlie groaned. "When does this end?"

Adrian snickered. "Most men wouldn't complain if they were in your shoes."

Charlie swallowed a nasty remark. He smiled at Thelma as she brought a tray over. "Thanks."

"Eat while it's hot." Thelma didn't wait on many residents herself. She was doing it for Charlie because he would have been surrounded again while getting his tray. The boy was doing a wonderful job with his newborn. *He deserves a break.*

Thelma went behind the counter to put away the leftovers now that all the shifts of people had been fed. Thelma enjoyed having a full house for dinner, but she was missing Dwight and the boys who were

still on the cruise ship, prepping fish. Troy was a big help and Anna tried hard, but it was always better when all of her family was here.

Charlie dug into the tuna helper. It was one of his favorite meals.

Adrian was glad to see the boy eating something that had protein in it. Charlie still had a lot of growing to do. His body needed it.

The conversation at Adrian's table resumed.

Grant spun a piece of paper around in the middle of the table so everyone could view it. "How does this look for the party tent?"

They were planning a wedding for Ray and Grant and for Conner and Candy, and a huge birthday party for half of the camp. There was a lot involved in getting all of that together at the same time.

Candy traced the pretty design with her finger. "Looks good to me. I love purple and blue together."

Ray didn't even glance at the paper. His untouched tray in front of him was another sign that he wasn't interested in normal life.

"Are you okay?"

Ray realized he was drawing attention to himself. He nodded at Charlie. "Sorry, I was just trying to figure out if we have enough scrap wood for the fire after dinner."

Charlie lifted his cup. "The campfire group reunites."

Grant remembered why they had been fighting before Ray left on the last run. Kenn was one of the



campfire people. There were only four of them left now.

In a good mood, Grant decided not to be jealous anymore because Kenn was straight. “We can do an after dinner walk down a jungle path to hunt for more if you want.”

“Sure.” Ray redirected the focus onto someone else. “Are you ladies going to try out for XO on Angela’s team?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.”

Piper and Daniella began chatting about it.

Adrian smiled at Daniella, encouraging her. She and her sister were slowly adjusting to life here without Tobias. Daniella was still helping the medics for her work shifts. Anna was currently behind the counter with Thelma, trying to help with tomorrow’s meals. Anna believed the practice would help her skills. Thelma was positive that it wouldn’t.

Candy was a little offended that Ray hadn’t included her. “I might try out for XO, too.”

Conner opened his mouth to protest.

Adrian quickly shook his head.

Conner stopped, letting out a long sigh. He and Candy hadn’t spoken much since leaving the ship after her medical treatment. He was stewing and she was annoyed. Talking wasn’t advisable.

“I’m going to volunteer to be a full-time teacher if I don’t get XO.” Piper didn’t know which one of those she wanted most. They were both important.

Adrian beamed at her. “Those are worthy goals.”

Piper blushed at the warmth in his gaze.

This time, Charlie changed the topic. “I hear you and my dad are going to be in charge of the camp while mom’s on leave.”

“I heard that, too.” It occurred to Adrian that Charlie’s opinion would be a good reflection of the camp since the boy didn’t really like him. “How do you feel about that?”

Charlie shrugged. “You’re doing better now and it’s not like my dad knows how to do all of that leadership stuff alone. I think it’s a good idea.”

Adrian and Piper were both relieved. Half of the reason they were still at dinner even though they were finished eating was to listen to conversations to judge how it was going over with the camp. So far, they hadn’t heard anything bad from anyone but Sadie.

Charlie dug into the food and enjoyed being at a table where there wasn’t as much personal drama as he had expected when he’d decided to come to the restaurant for a meal. He’d been skipping this for numerous reasons, but Marc had told him it was starting to become a new topic of gossip that he was avoiding public places. Charlie hoped showing up a couple of times a week would be enough for them to leave him alone about it.

*And it’s not just the skanks. I can’t take the happy couples vibe.*

All over the restaurant, couples were sitting together, holding hands, exchanging warm looks. It made Charlie lonely and bitter. He ate faster so he could escape.

Adrian understood what the boy was going through. He felt that way every time he had to watch Marc and Angela have a tender moment.

“Are you going to the execution?”

The conversation at the table next to them drew Adrian’s attention, along with everyone else who heard it. Most people were steering clear of that subject.

Thomas slowly nodded at Molly. “I don’t really know Tim, but I feel it’s my duty to attend. I assume Angela is doing it publicly as a lesson for all of us.”

“I guess that means I have to go.”

Molly and Thomas were wearing matching outfits and identical ball caps. It was cute to most of their audience. They were sitting with Sadie and Panaji.

Panaji shook his head at Molly. “It’s not mandatory. I asked earlier. The boss said we don’t have to go.”

“She’s going to broadcast it over the radio.” Sadie glared toward Adrian. “At least she’s cracking down on some of these people.”

Panaji was fed up with Sadie concentrating on a former relationship. He stood up, scowling. “I need to talk to you. Let’s step outside.”

Sadie sighed as Panaji marched toward the exit. “It’s time for a new lecture. Oh, joy.”

Molly and Thomas snickered. Some of the younger couples in camp were entertaining to watch.

“Just imagine what it’ll be like after they start having sex.”

Thomas frowned. “I thought they already were. What is he waiting for?”

Molly blushed. “He wants her heart as well as her...”

“That’s enough of that!”

Thomas and Molly laughed, glad to have the table to themselves. After they finished eating, they would do a slow jog around the town to keep strengthening his legs.

Molly was happy to be helping Thomas recover from the shark attack, but she was a little disappointed that she hadn’t found a place in camp beyond floating or being on Angela’s team. Working at a hardware store before the war hadn’t given her any skills. She wasn’t going to get the XO slot and she knew it.

Thomas put his hand over hers. “Maybe you could organize the supplies and stocks.”

“That’s a good idea.” She still wished she had something more to give. Now that she wasn’t worried about dying from cancer or being banished, Molly was happy here. She wanted everyone to feel that way about Safe Haven.

Sitting at a table near that happy couple, Ed smiled at one of the leery church members across from him. Ed was trying to make friends with Margret's mother while they ate. Amanda preferred not to have a relationship with any of her neighbors. She had been with Safe Haven for a long time, but she hadn't been cleared because she was so determined to avoid bonds with anyone.

This long table along the rear wall held two dozen church members who were studying their Bibles while they ate and trying to ignore the dirty looks from some of the camp members who didn't believe there should be religion in Safe Haven. They saw Tim and Ralph as proof of that.

Ed was a little surprised to find Amanda sitting at this table again. He hadn't seen her at any of the services, but she had taken dinner with the church group every night for the last week. He was curious what had prompted that change, but he didn't ask.

Somchai was also sitting with the church group, along with Bo and Renard, but they weren't regular members either. He and the boys observed the church people and listened to their chatter, storing information.

"Is Daisey at the jail house?"

Ed nodded at Parker's question. "She'll probably spend the night there again, like she's been doing."

"It will be terrible to lose her and Ralph." Parker was certain that Daisey was going to leave with her husband.

Ed didn't add anything to it. He had strong feelings about Ralph. He didn't want those to get back to Daisey and make things even more awkward than they already were.

Daisey didn't want him in the church group anymore because he had been a spy, but Ed enjoyed the services and the faith in something that couldn't be seen. Now that two of the rotten apples had been tossed, this was another seed that would grow and become a dependable tree to lean on when they needed it.

*Speaking of bad apples.* Ed focused on a table in the far corner where Zack was sitting with two of his boys and Leeann. There was a scrabble game set out on the table in front of them, but no one had played a tile. Zack and his boys were occupied with other issues.

Zack's mind was replaying Allison's death and trying to convince him that he needed to feel guilty over it because he hadn't stopped her from flipping out. Zack's boys, Eric and Mike, were glaring toward Jennifer's table. Ed knew that was going to be another problem that Zack was going to feel guilty for not handling when he had the chance.

Zack was aware of Ed scanning him. He shut down the replay of Allison's death, but he didn't insist on a conversation with his sons.

Timmy had refused to come to dinner. He was working an extra shift on the ship. Zack hated the bruises on Timmy's face and Mike's hands. He assumed it was normal sibling rivalry, though. Eric

was the one he was worried about. “You need to make peace with Jennifer.”

Eric glared harder toward Jennifer’s table. “Never! She attacked you!” He didn’t care who saw his anger, including Kyle.

Mike supported his rother. “I agree!”

Leeann leaned back in her seat, refusing to look at any of them so she didn’t trigger more abuse later. Mike was already worked up. She didn’t need to be worked over.

Zack wasn’t interested in another repeat of the words they had flung at each other during the fishing lesson. He fell silent, allowing his mind to bring up Allison’s death once again.

At Jennifer’s table, Kyle glared back at Eric. “I’m getting tired of that kid.”

Jennifer’s table held a lot of dirty dishes and garbage, some of it from them and the rest of it from Samantha’s group. Jennifer had told them to go on, that she would clean it up. Kyle knew that was because Jennifer was feeling guilty. He didn’t mention it yet, but he knew he was going to have to. At some point, Jennifer had to forgive herself for making mistakes. *None of us are perfect. I know that for sure.*

Kyle did understand why Eric was upset, but there was no point in making things even more awkward than they already were. Jennifer needed to be able to have a meal without stress.

“Leave it alone for now.” Jennifer was still trying to figure out a way to make peace. Kyle publicly reprimanding the boy wasn’t going to help the situation.

Kyle glanced at Morgan, surprised that he wasn’t voicing his displeasure, too.

Morgan was observing a table near the window. Gus was having dinner with Bernice, like he often did. Morgan had mentioned her behavior during the fishing lesson to that man a short time ago. He was curious if Gus was going to bring it up.

Gus and Bernice had a small, private table that even had a candle on it, though it wasn’t lit. It was romantic, but neither of them were showing signs of being affected by it. Morgan didn’t know if Angela had plans for those two to stay a couple, but it wasn’t going to happen unless Gus grew some balls. Bernice seemed happy with just friendship.

Kyle saw who Morgan was observing; it reminded him of his first impression of Bernice. She was still in good with the camp and she didn’t appear to have any flaws. *I still don’t trust her.*

Jennifer was more interested in Selina, who was at the counter bargaining her free time for work shifts in exchange for some of the food items she needed for Shawn.

Jennifer had serious doubts that changing his diet would fix Shawn’s problem, but she was also curious. It was interesting to see the way certain foods were connected to good, and bad, health. Her



time around the medical teams while she delivered healing sessions had been educational.

Shawn was at the bunkhouse, doing a short shift on guard duty while Brittani and Daryl had a semi-romantic dinner alone. Jennifer wasn't surprised when Thelma gave Selina a basket of leftovers to deliver. Brittani's appetite was endless now that her pregnancy was progressing normally.

Jennifer felt attention on their table as the camp continued to keep track of her. She wished Samantha and her family had stayed longer, but Samantha's twins still needed a walk in the surf to help settle their stomachs. It was a nightly ritual that several couples were doing with them even though they didn't have children yet.

Morgan narrowed in on Gus and Bernice through the clanking dishes and talking people. Bernice's reaction to a joke hadn't been normal. Morgan wanted to know what had caused it.

## 2

Gus pushed the ketchup over as Bernice started to reach for it. "It's weird to use ketchup on tuna helper."

Bernice chuckled. "That is your opinion."

Gus brought up Morgan's concern. "I was told you got upset today. Are you having problems with people in camp?"

Bernice stiffened. "I did not get upset."

Gus recognized her tone. He wanted to let it go, but her happiness mattered more than a possible argument. “If you’re having problems, I’d like to help you with it.”

Bernice frowned at him. “I am not having problems with people. I did not get upset!”

Some of the conversations around them stopped as more diners tried to listen.

Gus frowned. “Why are you upset now?”

Bernice realized she was almost yelling. She put a smile on her face and controlled her tone. “It’s female time. Sorry.”

Most of those listening accepted that answer and then tuned out because they didn’t want to hear any more about it.

Gus wasn’t fooled.

Neither was Morgan. He was a little disappointed when Gus changed the subject to the alligators in the tunnels instead of insisting on finding out what her problem was.

Kyle had caught all of it. “We can dig into that if you want.”

Morgan slowly nodded. “I think that’s best. We’ve had enough surprises in this camp.”

Jennifer had allowed Bernice to babysit Autumn and Roy several times. Kyle expected her to defend the woman.

Jennifer shrugged at both men. “I may have missed something. Check her out.”

They were surprised to hear her admit she may have made a mistake. Neither of them liked it, but both of them respected her for it.

“Maybe one of us should hit you.”

Jennifer and her men turned toward the table behind them, bracing for violence.

### 3

Lisa, Jack, and Dace were having dinner and trying to come up with ideas now that the medics hadn't found a way to help him. Lisa and Jack were sitting in chairs; they had moved the other one to make room for Dace's wheelchair. Their table was in the middle of the restaurant where everyone could see them. Lisa and Dace didn't seem to care. It made Jack uncomfortable. He was worried that everyone who saw them together could tell how he was feeling.

“Maybe one of us should hit you.”

Jack snickered at Lisa's comment. “I've hit him a bunch of times. You can take this one.”

Lisa laughed.

Dace didn't. His mind latched onto the suggestion. “I think that's a good idea.”

Lisa quickly denied that option. “I was only joking. We're not going to hurt you.”

Before Dace could argue, Lisa changed the subject. “Angela put me on a break for a while. That means I get to take care of you full-time.”

Dace didn't want Lisa to give up everything for him. "Maybe you could do other things while you're on the break."

"Like what?"

"Uh..." Dace considered how their romance had started. "Do you like swimming? I've heard they need more people for the diving team."

As if conjured by his question, Debra came through the front door of the restaurant with Laura's nieces behind her. All of them had wet hair and lightly sunburnt skin. It was obvious what they had spent the day doing.

"Uh-oh." Lisa gestured toward the table by the door, where Theo was having dinner with Gio and Nero, the worm patients from the lab. Theo had just spotted Debra.

Debra felt Theo staring at her. She smiled, hoping to have a pleasant end to the evening.

Theo shoved up from his chair. "I forbid you from being on the diving team!"

Laura's nieces went around the former couple, going to the counter. They were fed up with Theo. They didn't understand what Debra saw in him. Both of them gave him dirty looks as they went by. They would have reprimanded him, but their tongues had been cut out years ago.

Debra's fury flashed out in fast hand signals and angry grunts.

Gio and Nero began grabbing things off of Theo's plate while he was distracted. They shoved their mouths full and hoped no one noticed. They

were both putting on weight from all the grazing between meals.

Kyle reluctantly stood and went over to the arguing couple. "Take it outside."

Theo ignored him. "I'm warning you! Stay away from the damn water!"

Debra gave Theo the finger.

Kyle opened the door. "Out!"

Debra pushed around Kyle and went to her usual spot at the counter.

Theo started to follow her.

Kyle stepped between them and chest-bumped the man. "The boss is going to get involved soon."

Theo almost swung on him. He spun out the door instead and headed toward the barn where some of their alcohol was stored. *If I can't protect her, I'm useless!*

Kyle understood why Theo was upset. He wasn't sure the diving team was a good idea for Debra either, but Theo didn't have the right to control her.

Kyle returned to his seat instead of following Theo for a conversation that wasn't going to make any difference. The only one who could fix that problem was Angela and she was busy with story time for the kids.

Jennifer smiled at Kyle. "Do you want to sneak over and see what story she's telling tonight? She should be starting soon."

Kyle immediately nodded. It was one of the many things he was curious about.

Jennifer felt Kyle scan her again, but she didn't respond to it. Kyle was trying to figure out how things were going with her and Morgan. She was afraid he would be upset when he found out Morgan was making progress by just being reliable and then leaving her alone. She considered him a good friend. In time, that might become more.

Kyle gestured. "We need a guard."

Morgan immediately followed them, ignoring the curiosity and disapproval of some of the camp members. They believed he should still be in mourning over Hannah. *I am. I just don't want you guys to know how deeply.*

#### 4

At the church table, Ed looked at Somchai. "Did you get all of that?"

"I catch everything." Somchai slyly regarded the woman sitting to his right. "So does Amanda."

Amanda stiffened, glaring at him. "Don't start with me."

Somchai leered cruelly. "Your future here will be ugly when they find out. I'm looking forward to watching it."

Amanda immediately left the table. Then she left the restaurant. Somchai hadn't been in this camp when she'd joined. After his pickup at Port Stanley, she'd considered jumping ship to avoid him, but she would have had to leave her two girls here. She

wished Somchai had joined any other group of survivors.

Ed scowled at Somchai. “Why do you have to treat her that way?”

Somchai gestured. “You should ask her that.”

Ed got up without responding, but he knew he would at some point. *I’m waiting for her daughter to grow up so I can marry her. Pushing Amanda into a conversation she doesn’t want to have is the least of my worries.*

Back at Adrian’s table, Charlie swallowed his bite and then regarded the man coldly. “Well, you’ve made it three weeks without breaking a rule. That’s probably a record for a Mitchel.”

Adrian was taken aback by the boy’s abrupt switch from calm to rude. “What are you talking about?”

Charlie pointed his fork toward the door, where Amanda was going through it. “You know who she is. You also know Somchai’s history. You haven’t told my mom any of it. Omission is lying in our camp now, which means you’re breaking a rule.”

Piper looked over at Adrian in concern. Charlie was right. If Adrian was withholding information, he would be in trouble.

Conner and Candy both stared at him in dismay.

Daniella didn’t believe it was a big deal. She began to clean the mess on their table. She didn’t care about personal drama. She was thinking about

Angela's team meeting and wondering if there was anything she could do to secure that XO position.

"Your mom knows everything about Somchai."

Adrian kept his voice down. "They've had many nights of playing chess and discussing the past."

"What about Amanda?" Charlie was positive his mother didn't know who that woman was.

Adrian sighed. "Safe Haven is supposed to be a place of second chances."

"Crap." Grant stood up. "We don't need to hear this. Let's go."

Ray glared at Adrian and left with his fiancé.

"You're withholding information about a bad guy. That's even worse." Charlie shoved in another bite.

Adrian suddenly felt like he was being grilled by Marc. He tried not to get defensive with the boy. "I made a promise to Amanda when she joined Safe Haven back in South Dakota that no one would be told who she is. Your mom will understand why I kept that confidence when the truth finally comes out."

Piper stacked her empty dishes together. "Is it going to come out soon?" She wanted to know how much damage control she needed to do.

Adrian nodded. "She and Somchai have a past. I think he was going to let it go, but Ed has been spending a lot of time around Amanda. Somchai believes they're about to become a couple."

"Ed isn't interested in Amanda, but even if he was, why does that matter to Somchai?" Conner had



caught Ed's thoughts about a much younger female in this camp.

Charlie stared at Adrian, waiting for him to answer. If he refused, Charlie was going straight to his mom about it.

Adrian reluctantly told the truth. "Somchai is jealous. He wasn't happy when Amanda ended their marriage."

Everyone gawked.

Charlie paused with his fork in the air. "They were married?"

"For about 15 years. She's his ex-wife."

Chapter Eight  
**My Word On It**

1

“**A**manda. Wait up.” Ed hurried after the imposing woman, ignoring the arguing couple near the barn and the shadow inside who was chugging from a bottle. Sadie, Panaji, and Theo would have to handle their own issues. Ed didn’t have time for them.

Amanda kept walking, furious. *Why can’t the past leave me alone?!*

Ed caught up to her, but he didn’t grab her arm. “Please.”

Amanda spun around with bright red eyes under her wild blonde braids. “What?!”

Ed stopped and retreated a step. “I just want to help you.”

Amanda glowered. “You just want my daughter. You don’t care about me.”

Ed flinched, but he didn’t deny it. He also didn’t admit to it. “Tell me what Somchai’s about to let out. I’ll help you with the camp and the boss.” Ed assumed it was something bad.

“Leave me alone.” Amanda resumed her march toward the bunkhouse.

Ed tried again, following. “When the boss finds out, you’ll need a friend here. I can be that. It might keep you from being banished...or worse.”

Ed wondered why Amanda was single. He’d already figured out she and Somchai had been a couple in the past, but that had obviously been long before the war. She had to be lonely. She didn’t join in any of the activities or training sessions anywhere in camp or on the ship. She stayed to herself and that was never good for people in Safe Haven.

Amanda stopped, shoulders rigid. “Margret is too young for you.”

Ed knew that. “I’m not in a rush to be a husband. There’s time later for that.”

Amanda didn’t care that Ed had been a spy or that some residents were wondering if he had been part of the problem with the church group. She knew he was one of the good guys. He had been all along. The only thing that concerned her was the future. Despite being Angela’s undercover man in multiple situations, Ed didn’t seem ambitious. Amanda didn’t want her daughter with someone who was going to be forgotten about or overlooked because she wouldn’t be close enough to the boss to be safe.

Ed waited patiently. The lessons from Wade had been priceless. *It’s okay to push women, gently, but it’s never okay to rush them.*

Amanda sighed. “She likes you. I’ve seen her watching you.”

Ed was thrilled. “Thank you for telling me. I wasn’t sure if one of the other Eagles might have caught her attention.”

“They’re all sniffing around.” Amanda didn’t like any of the men who’d tried to get her permission to date her daughter. “Margret needs a good friend who can let her grow up before they start breeding and fighting.”

Based on that, Ed assumed Amanda’s relationships had all been ugly. “I have no plans to even talk to her yet.”

“You aren’t listening. She needs a friend. Now.”

Ed frowned. “Why?”

“Because she’s like her mother. She’s bored here. I don’t want her to go searching for trouble.”

Ed was a little confused but hopeful. “Only under your supervision. Set it up and I’ll be there for her. And for you.”

Amanda knew it was all going to come out soon anyway. Adrian had told her this camp didn’t keep secrets, but she’d still tried to maintain her distance and her privacy.

“What did you do?”

Amanda scowled. “It’s not what I’ve done. It’s who I am.”

Ed waited, now worrying.

Amanda faced him with a familiar, cocky attitude. “I was the family enforcer for decades.”

Ed groaned. “Don’t say it.”

Amanda sneered. “I’m a Mitchel and so is my daughter. The safest thing you can do is stay away from both of us.”

Amanda went to the bunkhouse.

Ed watched her go, mind racing. Being friends with that family was hard. Getting close to them was even harder. Having a satisfying relationship with one of them was impossible. “I have to stop asking fate for a challenge.”

## 2

Biff smiled at Madison as they fed and watered the horse behind the barn. “Some of our people have a lot of drama. I’m glad we aren’t like that.”

Biff and Madison weren’t close enough to hear what Ed and Amanda had been saying, but the general vibe hadn’t been good.

Madison snorted.

Biff noticed she hadn’t spoken to him since they’d arrived. “Are you upset that I gave your name to the boss?”

Madison shook her head. “I’m going over everything that happened. I think Marc tricked me somehow.”

“I was wondering how long it would take you to catch that.” Biff grinned. “Marc didn’t need a guard. He just needed to get you to attend the team meeting.”

“He’s tricky! But I didn’t attend the meeting.”

“Yes, you did. Your name was put in Angela’s book. That means you were there.”

Madison grinned. “That’s so sneaky!”

“You have to be clever in this camp, or people will run circles around you.”

“That’s a problem. I’m not smart enough to keep up with them.”

“You don’t have to be.” Biff wanted to offer more comfort, but he sensed Marc’s approach would work better. “When do you want your first conjuring lesson?”

Hearing it spoken so bluntly brought back Madison’s awkwardness. “Are you sure you picked the right person? I’m barely a descendant at all.”

“I’m sure.”

Madison understood he wasn’t going to let it go. “Tomorrow?”

Biff was encouraged that she’d picked a date so close. “Perfect. I’ll let you know the time and place.”

“Okay. Just don’t pick some place where everyone is watching us, okay?” It was great that Biff could do magic in front of the camp, but she wasn’t ready for that.

“No worries. We have a jungle to cover us.”

Madison dumped half a bucket of oats into the horse’s trough. “Make sure you drink a lot of water tonight, horsey. If you get clogged up, it might kill you.”

The horse was still clean, shiny fur showing all of the scars underneath. Both of them felt bad for the animal.

The horse nuzzled her hand in a rare display of affection.

Biff stared. “How did you manage that?”

“It was Marc and Dog. They reminded the animals that Angela will remove them if they aren’t helpful and nice.” Madison pointed at the line of reluctant animals approaching the bunkhouse. “It worked on the cats, too.”

Biff laughed at the sight. “I hope the boss is ready for it.” All the cats, all the dogs, and all the goats were going to the porch. It looked like a cartoon lineup.

“The kids will be happy with it. That’s all that matters.”

Biff caught her tone and wondered if Madison wanted children. *I don’t. I hope she doesn’t either.*

Madison frowned at him. “Don’t think another word on that subject or I’ll never agree to the date you’re leading up to.”

Biff stiffened. Those words said he hadn’t been as subtle in admiring her as he’d thought.

Madison was fully aware that Biff had a romantic interest in her. She hadn’t decided yet if she felt the same way, but she knew Angela was matching people up for the breeding tree. It would be better if she made her own choice before Angela could do it. Madison didn’t plan to have kids until she conquered her shyness, but knowing Biff didn’t

want them at all was a huge problem. *He has to change his mind or I'll change partners. That's a deal breaker.*

### 3

“Tonight, I’m going to talk to you about the old world.”

The kids around Angela groaned or made faces at her announcement. They’d been hoping for another fable or a fairytale.

The adults in the room and those listening from other parts of town put their drama aside and paid attention. If Angela was discussing the old world, then this lesson probably wasn’t just for the kids.

Angela leaned back in the rocking chair, waiting for the kids to get settled in the cots with their books, blankets, and stuffed toys.

The kids’ cots were all next to each other and covered with thick blankets to account for the cool nighttime air. They were all wearing PJs and smelled like minty fresh toothpaste. Angela was content that they now had a good bedtime routine going. Trent had insisted on that change and Angela agreed completely.

Her gaze went over the opposite end of the dusty bunkhouse, where it was taped off to keep people from being hurt on the broken floor. The cracks on the inside walls were larger than those on the outside, thanks to being lifted. The rest of the structure seemed sound enough, but the holes were



letting in the breeze. That wasn't a problem now, when it was warm. Later, it might cost lives.

Everything inside the bunkhouse had been moved over, creating a cluttered environment that was continuously producing bruises and minor injuries from residents bumping into things. The church bunkhouse was the same way. So were the few houses and sheds on the island. They had cleared everything out of here that they could while repairs were happening.

“In the old world, there weren't as many people in the beginning. I'm sure most of you remember big cities with large crowds and traffic jams. Our country didn't start out that way. Before America was officially formed, there were Indians, explorers, settlers, and a lot of land.”

Some of the kids perked up, hoping for a wild west story.

“As more people came to the country, fights happened. Even though there was room for everybody, some groups wanted to control all of it. Our government wanted the land for settlers. The Indians wanted the land for their tribes. Both sides committed awful atrocities that eventually brought us to war. By that time, settlers were living all over the country, just trying to survive. Like we are right now.”

The younger kids were already bored. They played with their dolls and flipped through their books, but they didn't make noise or distract the older kids who were paying attention.

Angela sipped on the water bottle Marc handed her and then continued. “You already know the Indians lost the war and the founding fathers took over the country. It was a rough place to try to carve out a life. Survivors from both sides had a completely different way of living. They refused to compromise. Eventually, the Indians were removed and the settlers began to set up large towns and homesteads that eventually became the old world we were all living in.”

Angela was keeping it extremely simple so their young minds would be able to comprehend the point she was getting to. These kids had seen enough ugliness; they didn’t need to hear all the gory details right now. Their school lessons would cover that, including what Angela believed was probably the first biological attack in America with the Smallpox blankets.

“The settlers who came here had very strict rules to live by.” Again, Angela didn’t get into the details of that. The harsh life their ancestors, especially the women, had survived would also be covered in other classes. “The children of the settlers weren’t allowed to have the freedoms that you guys enjoy. They were up at dawn. They worked on the farm all day, doing backbreaking labor. They didn’t have other career options. Some of you guys will be Eagles. Some of you will be doctors. Some of you will be sailors. Back then, there was no other choice. People farmed and

hunted. They didn't even have schools. Most of the kids never learned to read, write, or do math."

Some of the listening kids were encouraged by that. They didn't like the school classes that kept them from doing more fun things.

Some of the adults thought they knew where Angela was going with this and approved of it. The others kept listening, trying to figure it out.

"The kids of the settlers buried their parents at early ages and died young themselves. Most people didn't live past 50. It was a hard time to be alive. Girls and boys married at early ages and had kids long before they were ready for it; there weren't enough people to build a society. They needed those babies. Like we do."

The younger kids had completely zoned out now. They weren't listening at all. The older kids paid close attention, exchanging looks. Some of these preteens were already forming friendships that might turn into relationships.

"The grandchildren of the settlers weren't happy with just working and having kids and dying. They began to change things, growing their towns and adding new occupations, like doctors and builders. That continued over the next few generations until those towns became cities."

Marc took a place along the cluttered wall near Angela's chair, smiling at all of the kids, including his twins. Cate and Cody were listening closely, but not because they were interested in the story. The alpha was speaking; they were listening.

“As more cities popped up, more kids began to realize there was a different way to live. Thousands and thousands of settler kids made the choice to move to the cities, to live in a more modern society. They figured out that they lived longer that way.” Angela looked around the group of kids. “The families they left behind were devastated. There were no longer kids to help them work the farm. They couldn’t reproduce fast enough to replace the manpower because of that lifestyle. They were still dying just as early as they had been, but now the kids were gone. The adults died sad and alone.”

Angela went on, not wanting them to be upset at bedtime. “Cities flourished, along with crime and bad people who took advantage of the crowded living conditions and innocent children who didn’t understand what was happening. The government was forced to find ways to produce food to feed the residents in the cities. Even though they had moved away from the farming lifestyle, the city people were still having babies at the same rate. It was a lot of mouths to feed.”

Angela sensed the older kids were getting restless now and got to the point. “The family farms that had once fed a growing country were shutting down or changing their crops to accommodate the lack of manpower. The cities became overcrowded, letting diseases and crime run unchecked. Those situations contributed to the mess of the old world we all lived in. Here’s my question: Who was right and who was wrong?”

None of the kids spoke for a moment, little minds working on it.

Angela scanned the adults in the room with a lifted brow, telling them they were allowed to participate.

None of those adults spoke up. They were able to view the right and wrong on both sides. They already knew there wasn't one correct answer.

Missy frowned. "Why couldn't they compromise so both sides were fed and safe?"

Angela gestured. "That is one of the biggest problems with humanity that all of us need to fix. Both sides were sure they were right. They weren't willing to compromise."

"Both sides were right and both sides were wrong." Mike had arrived right before she started. He was annoyed that he had to be here for bedtime stories at all. It came out in his stuck-up tone. "They didn't have an alpha to make rules for them. It's just another example of why magic users should be in charge of the world."

Angela wasn't surprised when that started an argument between the kids. She let them go for a minute, judging their reactions. History was a painful subject no matter a person's age.

When she thought they'd vented enough, Angela went on. "As you guys get older, you'll be making career choices. Some of you will stay here on the island. Some of you will go back to our country, or other lands, and start rebuilding things

there. Both of those choices are right, as long as enough people stay and enough people go.”

Little Amy yawned, bored and sleepy. She didn’t remember the ugly things the other kids were replaying in their memories.

Angela decided a few more of the kids could use the memory charm that Marc had used on Amy. “We are now at the same place as those original settlers were, just with better supply stocks. We have to start producing food. All of you are already helping with the farming. We don’t have hospitals or schools. It’s possible that our lifespans will be shortened. Soon, you’ll be picking the career that’s best for you. All I ask is that you keep in mind how the old world was created and try your best to keep that from happening again. It isn’t all about magic or government. It’s about the people who create a society. You have to compromise. If you don’t, we’re all doomed to repeat the mistakes that brought us here. It will dishonor me and everyone else in this camp if you allow that mess to restart.” She smiled at the disappointed kids and adults who’d expected something bigger, something more important. “I know this wasn’t the story you were hoping for.”

“It’s not a story at all.” Dutch yawned. “It really happened.”

“Not all stories are made up.”

Dutch settled under the blanket. “Why is this one important?”

“If all of you leave, then Safe Haven will fall. If none of you leave, the cities won’t be rebuilt. It’s

my job to protect the future.” Angela scanned the kids, glad that Kendle’s relatives and Reicher’s sons weren’t being shunned. There hadn’t been a single problem with any of them yet.

*And that’s a problem in itself, isn’t it?*

Angela nodded at Marc’s silent question. *They’re trying too hard to blend in. We need to make sure they don’t get so stressed that they can’t make friends and feel safe here.*

*I’ll work on it.*

*So will I.* Angela was working with all of their kids. These orphans would rebuild the world. Stories like this would make sure that Adrian’s legacy was safe. All she had to do was reach them. “Now, to make sure you remember this story, I have some special guests to visit with you.”

Marc went to the bunkhouse door and opened it.

The kids shouted and rose as the animals entered.

The next few minutes were chaotic as the kids mauled the animals and the adults tried to keep them from getting scratched or bitten. Dog’s warning went a long way. Even Buster kept his claws in. It resulted in sticky fur, slobbery ears, and upside down hugs.

Marc rearranged the cat in Amy’s arms so it wasn’t hanging by its leg.

Kenn did the same for one of his orphans while giving Tonya a fake annoyed look.

Tonya snickered. She was standing behind Angela, watching over the boss. She didn't have to handle the kids or the animals.

Kenn pried a claw out of his jacket and handed the kitten back to little Wendy. "This was mean, woman."

Tonya chuckled. "I know."

Kenn was thrilled to hear her laugh. He made a funny face to get her to do it again.

As Tonya laughed, Angela was flashed to their life together. Kenn had often done that when he wanted her in a good mood. *Then he would flip into a violent bastard and I couldn't go out in public for days.*

Angela rose from the rocking chair and left the bunkhouse.

Marc followed, not sure what had ruined her mood, but something had. She was almost moving fast and her body language was stiffer than normal.

Tonya also went out even though Marc was with her.

Left behind with the kids and animals, Kenn let his walls down with a mental sigh of relief. Acting perfect was exhausting. *At some point, I'm going to screw up and lose it all.*

Kenn's youngest orphan came over and hugged him, squishing the cat between them. "Try harder. Please."

Kenn hugged the little girl back and ignored the hissing cat. "I will. You have my word on it."



“Are you okay?” Marc followed Angela as she stepped out into the darkness.

“I’m fine. Why?”

Marc wasn’t sure if she was being sarcastic. He could feel a wave of anger coming from her.

*But it’s different.* Marc narrowed in on the source. “I’d like to talk to you.”

Bugs flew around them, drawn to the solar powered lights that were all over the camp. Adrian had continued to make improvements to the town over the last few weeks. They even had a generous store of water barrels scattered around. Angela was pleased with him in that way. She headed for the bathroom. “Sure. What about?”

“About that baby.”

Angela stopped.

Tonya also paused a few feet away, trying to do her job while giving a couple privacy for the coming argument. She already knew this talk wasn’t going to go well.

Marc tried to be careful with his words. “There’s something you’re not telling me. I can feel it. What’s wrong with the baby?”

Angela sent out a strong mental charm and locked Marc’s mind.

It happened too fast for Marc to fight it. He stared at her blankly, mind refusing to work.

“Wow.” Tonya stiffened as Angela’s eyes turned to her. “Are you going to do that to me?”

Tonya prepared to bring up a shield and fight even though she knew it wouldn't be successful.

Angela shook her head. "I'm going to trust you to keep your mouth shut."

Tonya gazed back in defensive concern. "No threats or anything?"

"No." It wasn't necessary. Angela was certain Tonya understood how ugly things would get if she told anyone what had just happened, even by accident.

"Why are you doing this? It would be easier to screw with my mind, too."

"Easier, but not effective. It won't give me the results I need."

Tonya stepped closer as people walked by, glancing at them curiously. "What results do you need?"

Angela reached out and ran a gentle hand over Marc's forehead, removing his memory of this moment. "Time, and someone I can talk to about this when the guilt is keeping me awake at night."

Tonya scowled. "Why didn't you do this to him before? He's been suffering over Kendle for months."

"Because he deserves to feel grief and guilt over that bitch. This is different."

"How?"

Angela sighed. "Marc will turn against the baby and people will follow him. I can't allow that."

"Even at the cost of your marriage when he finds out?"

“Yes.” Angela went into the bathroom as Marc began to wake up.

Marc blinked, mind kicking into gear. “Where did she go?”

Tonya pointed at the bathroom and kept a tight lock on her thoughts. She would consider it all later when she was alone. “She had to go.”

Marc smiled. “That explains why she left the kids. Bathroom calls have to take top priority when you’re as pregnant as she is.”

“Yep.” Tonya refused to think about anything at all. She soaked in Marc’s rough demeanor, always reminded of his uncle whenever they were together. She didn’t scan him like a piece of meat, however. *I’m not interested in beating my head against that brick wall.*

Marc’s mind went to the animals that were being loved on by the kids. All concerns about the baby were gone.

In the bathroom, Angela fought her emotions. The things she had done while leading this camp often bothered her, but this was one of the worst moments even though it didn’t involve death or violence. She hated controlling Marc this way. “But I’ll do what I have to in order to secure the future. When it comes down to it, this baby is more important than he is.”

The hard knot in Angela’s stomach eased. Good vibes flowed over her, easing some of her discomfort.

The anger also faded, allowing her to relax. Her unborn baby already wanted Kenn dead. She had left the bunkhouse before the child could attack him in front of everyone.

Angela rubbed her stomach comfortingly. “I’ll always protect you. You have my word on it.”

Chapter Nine

# Happiness Is Fleeting

1

“**Y**ou have to let it go! Everyone is getting upset with you.”

“With me?!” Sadie waved her arms wildly. “He cheated! He deserves to be punished!”

Sadie liked Panaji and spending time with him, but it wasn’t the same as when she had been with Adrian. She missed that relationship.

Panaji had already been embarrassed by Sadie’s behavior. Now, he was getting angry. His entire relationship with Sadie had been a disappointment so far. “Why are you obsessing over another man?”

Sadie groaned in frustration. “He hurt me!”

He figured it out in dismay. “You still love him. That’s why you can’t let it go. You want to be with him.”

Sadie’s voice rose. “That’s not true!”

Panaji was done. “I can’t be with someone who can’t love me.”

Sadie realized he was about to break up with her. “Stop!”

Panaji turned away. “We’re through.”

Sadie tackled him.

Panaji hit the ground and rolled.

Sadie straddled him and locked their lips.

People stared at them through the window of the bunkhouse and the restaurant in disapproval. Public displays of affection were frowned on.

Panaji enjoyed her kiss, but his body didn't respond. His heart wasn't in it.

Sadie wasn't used to a man who would refuse her body. She leaned back, tone regretful. "I'm sorry."

Panaji smiled sadly. "We'll still be friends."

Sadie tried to kiss him again, to get him to forget about it.

Panaji rotated his head and waited for her to get off of him.

Sadie's heart thumped. *I've lost him.* "No!"

Panaji was torn. He wanted to give her another chance; he'd been attracted to her for months.

Sadie fought tears. "Don't give up on me!"

Panaji pulled her down for a hug. Then he delivered the ultimatum he knew she needed to hear. "If you can't let him go, I'm done. There are other women here who will love me."

Sadie wiped a tear on his shirt as she hugged him. "I'll try harder."

Panaji already knew it wasn't going to be enough, but he did care for her. He rubbed her back and hoped it worked out for them in the end.

"I'm sorry." Sadie kissed him again and resumed obsessing over Adrian.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t good.” Shawn hadn’t wanted to do this in the bathroom, but there was really no other place to have any privacy unless they wanted to go all the way to the ship and Shawn didn’t. Being around the water made him queasy. That was one of the many leftovers from being in the underwater lab.

Selina grinned at Shawn as he knelt between her long legs. “It was great for me.” She was still spasming; heat was scalding her thighs.

Shawn wiped his mouth on his sleeve, glad that he’d pleased her but disappointed that it hadn’t gotten a rise from him. His mind was into it; his body wasn’t.

Selina lowered her shirt as he stood up. “We knew it would take time.” She leered. “And a lot of practice.”

Shawn chuckled. Her confidence was heartening. “I had an idea earlier.”

Selina tugged her pants up and fastened them. “Let’s hear it.”

“You could wear green clothes...and let your hair go wild.”

Selina knew it was the connection to Nature that he wanted. Shawn had been aroused by that cruel entity. “Should I change the color, too?” She didn’t mind.

Shawn shook his head, hand going out to stroke her soft purple tresses. “I love the color.”

Selina blushed prettily. She hugged him, enjoying the feel of his hard body. He was in great shape now that he was getting full meals. All of that protein was returning his body to a muscled wall that she loved being close to.

Shawn fixed his clothes and then went to the bathroom sink for a fast wash. He watched her in the mirror, wondering why she was with him at all. Selina was bright, loyal, and hardworking. She could have her pick of the single men and half of those who already had a mate.

Selina felt his unhappiness. She flashed a sunny smile. “Let’s go join story time.”

“It’s over, I think.” Shawn had been listening to it mentally until Selina had seduced him into the bathroom for a private moment.

“Then let’s check on the kids and see if Missy needs anything.”

Shawn’s mood improved. “Good idea.”

Selina held the door for him, not letting him see her sly look. She knew Shawn’s bond with Missy was part of what was keeping him from being so depressed that he couldn’t function. She planned to use that and anything else she thought of to pull him through this. *Then we’ll be a happy family.*

Shawn kissed her cheek as he went through the door. “We already are.”



Jack saw Shawn and Selina come from the bathroom, smiling and holding hands. She was glowing like a woman who'd just been satisfied.

Jack turned away from his cot. He'd been about to try sleeping instead of stewing on his emotions, but that was impossible now. He left the bunkhouse, lost and lonely.

Jack spotted Dace and Lisa coming from the restaurant. He stared at them in open pain.

“Sometimes a substitute will ease that feeling for a little while.”

Jack found Angela standing on the porch of the bunkhouse.

Her guard, Tonya, swept the shadows and acted like she wasn't listening to them.

Jack didn't try to hide anything from Angela. He didn't think he could even if she hadn't been strong enough to break through his mental walls. “I'm sorry.”

Angela waddled over to him, also watching Lisa and Dace. “Heartache sucks.”

Jack nodded. He didn't want to have feelings for his brother's woman.

“There are a dozen camp women who look like her, sound like her...” Angela doubted Jack would have any problem finding a substitute. He was attractive, in good shape, and he was an Eagle. All he had to do was pick one out and snap his fingers and then there would be another branch growing on the breeding tree.

Jack understood Angela was trying to help them all. Situations like this often led to fighting and violence. She was trying to head that off before it became an issue. “Will any of them make me happy?”

Angela shrugged. “Happiness is fleeting, Jack. None of it ever lasts for long.”

“So, no.”

Angela didn’t like his pain. “They’ve started to notice. It won’t be long before they figure it out.”

“I know.” Jack was aware that his behavior was drawing attention. “I don’t know how to make it go away.”

“Then maybe you should embrace it.”

Jack scowled. “I have honor! I’m not going to steal his woman.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Angela moved that future affair into the open light. “Dace can’t please her. Nothing works on him from the waist down and he knows it.”

Jack focused on Angela, mind putting those pieces together.

Angela kept going even though he was getting upset. “Lisa has needs. She isn’t feeling it yet, but she will, and even little bits of relief won’t be enough in the end.”

“You think she’ll cheat on him.”

“I think she’ll need private moments with a good friend. She’ll never leave him, though. She loves him completely. They’ll be a couple long after many of the others in this camp split up.”

Jack was crushed all over again. There was no hope of Lisa changing her mind.

“Jack.”

“What?!”

Angela smiled. “Be the private moment she needs and stay close to your brother. Consider it public service.”

Jack wanted to grab onto that idea because it was the only hope he had of being with the woman he wanted.

“With the woman you love.”

Jack couldn’t deny it. He loved Lisa. “I’m a piece of shit.”

“You were, in the past.”

Jack stiffened. *She knows!*

“I know everything, Jack.” Angela’s voice turned cold. “You should have died in that prison. Fate gave you a second chance.”

“I’m trying hard to honor it.” Jack’s anger deflated. “But it’s not enough. I want her!”

“And you’ll have her, in short moments. Then she’ll go back to Dace and you’ll keep holding onto your second chance.”

“I’ll find a substitute.”

“Yes, you should do that. It will be a while before Lisa needs you. Find someone to spend time with and try to enjoy your life here.”

Jack let out a ragged sigh. “How long have you known I’m a killer?”

Angela patted his big arm. “Since I first laid eyes on you. I know my own kind.”

Jack watched her waddle away, confused, scared, and lonely. He was also relieved. Angela knew he'd been in prison for murder and she was letting him stay. *Public service.*

Jack slowly nodded. "I can do that."

Lisa snickered at Dace's joke as they went by, both smiling at him curiously. They'd seen him talking to the boss.

Jack smiled, hiding his emotions. "Good night."

He headed for the barn before they could ask him to join in another card game. Those were torture for him.

Jack entered the barn and shut the door.

"Leaves mes alone!"

Jack frowned at Theo's drunken order. The engineer was in the loft.

"Pass that bottle." Jack went up the steps and took the bottle from Theo while he was staring in surprise. Jack downed two large gulps and then came up for air.

Theo grinned sloppily. "Company!"

"Yeah, let's call it that." Jack sat on the steps and tilted the bottle up.

#### 4

"Do you want me to interrupt that?" Tonya was mad at Theo for breaking into their alcohol stock and for drinking at all.

Angela shook her head. "Things will change soon. Let them go for tonight."

Tonya didn't ask what was coming for them next; she already knew. She was confident that Angela would guide them through it like she always did.

“Actually, Marc and Adrian are going to cover it this time.”

Tonya groaned. “I'd like to register a protest.”

“Against which one?”

Tonya didn't hold back. “Both. Neither of them are fit to lead this camp.”

Tonya wasn't worried over talking about Marc that way. Angela already knew she didn't mean it personally.

“Like I said, things are going to change soon.”

Tonya assumed those two men were about to get a crash course in leadership. “What do you want me to do?”

“Keep earning the spot you want and take care of that beautiful baby boy. I have big plans for both of you.” Angela went into the bathroom before Tonya could respond. “I should just move in here until the delivery.”

Tonya laughed. Then she replayed Angela's words.

Anyone else might have started stressing about those big plans. Tonya was relieved. *If she has plans for me and my son, then we're staying with her where we're safe.*

Tonya thought about Kenn and sighed. “She didn't mention him.”

Tonya swept the town and frowned at Sadie and Panaji. They were on the ground in the middle of the town, making out. “That *is* an issue you need to handle now.”

Angela’s muffled voice floated out of the bathroom. “Go on. I’ll be in here for a minute.”

Tonya snorted ruefully. “That’s your headache, not mine.” Tonya wasn’t leaving Angela without a guard. She also didn’t like Sadie, so she wasn’t able to be fair.

“How would you handle it if you were in charge?”

Tonya grunted. “Punishments for making out in public and a talk with Sadie about her future here. She didn’t show up to your meeting.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too.” Angela fixed her clothes and took a minute to sanitize her hands. They were keeping bottles of it in all the bathrooms to cut down on the use of water, but it was another item they were now running low on. “What kind of punishment?”

Tonya considered. “We need to dig out the tunnels and clear the gators. They’re both wild. Put them on that work crew.”

“Done. You handle it.” Angela came out of the bathroom and pointed at the couple who still didn’t know they were under observation.

Tonya frowned. “I’ll be distracted.”

“You can’t do two things at once?”

Tonya huffed. “You’re being too obvious.”

Angela chuckled. "I wasn't sure if you knew. You're hard to read."

"Thank you." Tonya meant that. She'd been trying hard to stay closed off from the boss and everyone else.

"And that's an issue I will handle."

Tonya sighed. "Just not yet, okay? I'm not ready."

Angela pointed at the moaning couple. "Get it done and then we'll go raid the restaurant for a snack."

"You shouldn't be on point duty." Tonya had never seen a stomach so big, except on Brittani, but she was having triplets.

"Same." Angela rubbed her belly, where the baby was currently doing small rolls. "Hurry up. She's hungry after she does her workout."

Tonya didn't question the oddness of that. She marched over to Sadie and Panaji and kicked dirt over them. "Get up!"

Sadie rose angrily, ready to fight.

Panaji hurried to his feet, embarrassed.

Both of them saw Angela and froze.

Angela smiled coldly.

Sadie brought up her shield in defense. Even though she didn't agree with Angela about Adrian being in camp again, she was still terrified of the alpha. "I'm sorry!"

Angela waited, letting the tension build.

Tonya tried to get the timing right. She watched Sadie's reactions. When the girl's mouth opened

again, Tonya barked loudly. “Where were you tonight?!”

Sadie flinched. “I didn’t go.”

“I know that.” Tonya glared at Panaji. “Work crew for the next week for breaking the rule about sex in public.”

Panaji was glad that was the only punishment he was getting. He quickly nodded.

Angela enjoyed watching Tonya handle the situation even though she wasn’t happy with Sadie and Panaji for making it necessary. She was getting a good look at what Tonya might be like as her XO. So far, Angela was pleased.

Sadie protested, lowly. “We were only kissing.”

“Then why is your shirt half off?” Tonya didn’t give the girl time to keep arguing. “I want to know why you weren’t at the team meeting. Tell me and do it right now!”

Sadie responded to the threat in Tonya’s tone. “It was for XO. I’ll never get it.” She began fixing her shirt.

“Why not? You’re wild enough and strong enough.” Tonya sneered. “Though you might be too stupid for the job.”

“I’m not stupid!”

“Then why didn’t you go?”

“I lost two cage fights!” Sadie’s shoulders sagged. “I’m not good enough.”

Tonya felt bad for the girl at that moment. She didn’t let it color her response. “You’re on work



crew for the next *two* weeks. One week for public sex. The other is for being a coward.”

Sadie flushed.

Panaji fought with himself not to defend her. He knew she needed this correction; he still didn't like seeing her get it.

“You'd better be at the next team meeting or I'll beat your ass and you can make it *three* lost fights.” Tonya pointed at the woman. “The boss wants you on her team. She's given you special attention and bonded with you in ways that she hasn't with the rest of us. Show up and do your best. Honor the second chance she gave you!”

Sadie nodded angrily. “I'll be there.”

“Good.” Tonya allowed a bit of warmth to enter her tone. “Now take your man to a private spot and carry on.”

Sadie stared. “What?”

“Your punishment doesn't start until tomorrow. Go have some fun. Just don't do it in public.”

Sadie grinned. “You sound like the boss.”

Tonya and Angela both chuckled.

Sadie grabbed Panaji's hand and dragged him toward the jungle. “The Cliff Road bunker is empty right now.”

Panaji hurried to keep up with her.

Tonya and Angela watched them go while listening to the nighttime sounds of the jungle around their camp. It sounded peaceful and happy.

Angela didn't look over at the patio, where Candy and Conner were having a private moment

together. As long as they weren't being affectionate in public, she wasn't going to interfere with that couple anymore. *But it's still a bad idea because he's a Mitchel. She'll find that out in time.*

Tonya shuddered. "Can't we stop it? We know what's about to happen."

Angela shook her head. "Things like this are under the control of fate. Until we can make a deal with that entity, we'll always have to face moments like this."

"What happens if I stop it myself?"

Angela didn't mention the losses Tonya would suffer from that. She gave the answer that always kept her from interfering. "If you stop this one, the next one hits us by surprise and it may cost us more. At least with this one, Safe Haven survives."

Tonya followed Angela toward the restaurant. "I know you're right, but it feels so bad!"

"Welcome to leadership."

## 5

"Well, that was interesting." Candy stared after Tonya jealously. "She's already being trained for the job."

Conner shook his head. "The boss is having moments like that with all of the women on her list. It's easier to judge them fairly that way."

Hearing that added to Candy's annoyance that she hadn't been included in the XO talk at their table during dinner. "Why not me?"

“Why didn’t you go to the meeting if you want that slot?”

Candy frowned. “I was sick. I thought she’d cut me some slack.”

Candy was a little offended that Angela hadn’t even acknowledged her presence or tried to find out why she didn’t go to the team meeting. *It’s almost like they’ve all forgotten about me.*

Conner snorted. “Now tell me the real reason.”

“How do you know I’m lying?”

“Because no one believes Angela will cut them some slack because of an injury or illness. We all see how the mission men are treated even after everything they went through.”

Candy gestured at the women who were almost out of sight. “That’s the right choice. She won’t pick me.”

“So, you’re not going to try because you know you won’t win.”

“Yes.” Candy waited for his agreement.

Conner just stared at her in disappointment.

“What? Say something.”

“I felt the same way about you, back in the mountain and before that. I knew there was no way you were going to give me a chance.”

“...and you still tried.”

Conner nodded. “Some things pull you that way. You have to try even when the odds are stacked against you.”

“But she’ll never pick me!” Candy didn’t hide her frustration. “The cancer’s gone, but I’m still weak. I can’t do the job yet and it pisses me off!”

Conner took her hand, sending sparks through both of them. “You know what to do about that.”

Candy grunted in defeat. “I have to get my ass back to work and recover my health. It isn’t going to do it by itself.”

Conner smiled softly. “I’ll be by your side for all of it if you want me to be.”

Candy immediately agreed. “You could use a few more muscles. I need a lot more. Workout room on the ship a couple of times a week?”

“I was thinking every day.” Conner was tired of comparing himself to the men in this camp and coming up short.

Candy made a face. “I hate workouts.”

Conner’s mouth opened to make a lewd suggestion. He quickly shut it, face turning red. He’d forgotten his reluctance for a minute. Being around her did that to him.

Candy started to bring up that sensitive subject and then decided it could wait. She wasn’t ready to jump into bed with him yet anyway.

Conner shifted in his seat to accommodate his growing body. He was more than ready to jump into her bed. “It’s not going to happen!”

Conner got up and walked away.

Adrian had been standing right outside the restaurant, listening and observing everything. He joined Candy at the patio table.

Candy braced for a warning or advice that she wouldn't be able to follow. She didn't mind Adrian as much now, but she didn't want to hear a lecture from him.

"He's terrified for you. If you want that to stop, you'll have to insist."

Candy stared at Adrian in surprise. Everyone else wanted them to wait.

Adrian shrugged. "I want him to be happy. I think you're great for him. He might be one of the few Mitchels who actually get that happily ever after."

Candy was honored. "Thank you."

Adrian shrugged again. "Glad to help."

"The boss won't agree with you."

Adrian didn't look toward the restaurant. When Angela had come in, he'd gone out to avoid her knowing, angry gaze. "I think you'll be surprised." Adrian's tone deepened. "Just don't come up pregnant. She didn't lift the rule on unauthorized Mitchel breeding."

Candy frowned. "Not even after we're married?"

"No. When she made that rule, she meant it for all of us, at all times. Getting pregnant without permission will destroy both of your lives."

Chapter Ten  
**Visiting Hell**  
The Runway

1

**“I**s everyone ready?”

Snorts and glares went through the people in the tent. None of them were eager, except for Cate and even she was quiet as she sat next to her dad.

Bret stood behind them, moping. He didn't want Cate to go; he'd heard about her friendship with Joey.

All of the adults were over-gear'd this time, even down to the bulletproof double vests. None of them expected those things to matter, but it was ingrained in them as Eagles to get fully dressed for a run like this.

Angela was also in Eagle gear, though she wasn't wearing a vest. They didn't have one that would fit. Even her Eagle jacket was too tight to zip up, but she still felt better wearing it.

“No, we're not ready.” Wade had already been approached by half of the men and women here while they waited for Angela to arrive. As their camp XO, it fell on him to handle this. “We don't want you to go, Boss. Stay here and I'll take your place.”

Angela scanned the three dozen people with a slight frown. “Get ready. We’re going in two minutes.”

Wade regarded Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. Angela’s tone wasn’t leaving them any room to wiggle or trade. “She’s the boss.”

“Until dawn.” Marc glared at Angela. “That’s why you set this for tonight, so we couldn’t overrule you.”

Angela stared back coldly. “You’re not just a pretty face. I like that.”

People winced at her tone, at her words, and at the hostility on her face.

For the mission men, it was a relief. It calmed their nerves.

Isabel moved closer to Angela. “Can I go?”

Being normal had serious disadvantages. Isabel hadn’t been invited to the runway. She’d followed the group without permission.

“Yes. You’ll stay by me at all times.”

Isabel immediately took the chair on Angela’s right, beaming.

“Can I go?” Cody hated being left behind.

“Not this time.” Angela knew the boy wanted an adventure, but this wasn’t the run for that. “You’ll stay by Wade. Keep him safe.”

“I will.”

Wade smiled at the boy. He knew it was really so Cody would be protected.

Cate hugged Cody and then climbed into Marc's lap. "I'll tell Joey you said hi."

"You're all overlooking something important." Jennifer hadn't been on Howland Island for their first attempts to explore Hell, but she'd pulled those dreadful details from their memories weeks ago. "Little Joey isn't going to be on our side. It's likely that you'll be trapped. I don't think any of you should go."

People glanced around, seeing who all agreed and who didn't.

Angela sat in her chair and tried to get comfortable. "You will stay connected to Kyle. Cate has Cody. Wade will cover me. Just don't pull us out too soon. We need to know if there's another area connected to Hell."

"What if there isn't?" Thomas didn't want to go back there. He also wanted to be helpful. He was torn on this goal.

"Then we'll work on other areas, but it's impossible that neither the Weigh Station nor Hell have any connecting areas. Everything is connected, even if it's by water." Angela was sure of that. "It's like those zones are surrounded by high walls. We can't see the other exits, the other land masses, but I know they exist. Tonight, we'll try to get permission to prove that theory."

"So, we're just meeting with Hell's new ruler tonight."

Angela nodded at Kenn. "I doubt it will go well. Jennifer's right. Joey isn't on our side. While we're



there, we'll see how much he hates us and try to determine if he needs to be replaced."

"By who this time?" Zack had been thinking hard on that. "Evil people running Hell are a bad idea, but we can't sentence a good soul to run that place either."

"I'm still working on that one." Angela refused to let them read her thoughts on it.

Adrian already knew. "Mitchels have controlled Hell throughout its existence, until now."

Angela was a little relieved that he already seemed to know what she had planned for his future. "Michael Mitchel was limited. He couldn't stop the angels at the Weigh Station from making bets and destroying innocent lives. I want to change those limits."

Adrian fought his fear to give her what she needed. "Keep Joey talking and I'll dig into the rules and limits. Maybe we can find a book down there or something."

"There was a globe." Angela remembered her brief time with the King of Hell in fear and fondness. Michael had been a scary, yet comforting presence. "It was like the Book of Life at the Weigh Station, but it had more details because it wasn't colored by what the angels wanted me to see. If we can access that, we might be able to learn more about other areas on the map."

Everyone began to realize they weren't exploring Hell; they were infiltrating.

“One minute.” Angela settled her mind, calming herself so she could do it for her team. All of the people in this tent were twitching, stressing. These fighters had already been to Hell. They weren’t eager to go back.

“We’re short one.” Shawn signed his name on the clipboard that Selina was passing around. “Where’s Theo?”

Angela scowled. “Passed out in the barn loft. We’ll handle that tomorrow. Thirty seconds.”

Adrian gathered energy to knock them all out.

Brawlers on duty outside the tent came closer to listen and to make sure the tent was covered. Angela had made it clear they were the last line of defense for the people she was leaving here. Her cold tone had woken them up despite the late hour. The rest of Safe Haven was sleeping soundly. Most of them didn’t know their leader, XO, and main Eagles weren’t.

“Harry should be with us.”

Mission men nodded at Gus’s comment.

Angela frowned deeply. “Do I have to act like Reicher and Thalia every time we do something like this? Can’t you control your own shit for a change?!”

Her nasty scold snapped them back to their time in the lab instantly. Men shivered, shifting toward her obediently.

Angela sighed, shutting her eyes. *I hate myself some days.* “Do it now before I punish all of us for not paying attention.”

Fear went through the tent.

Adrian slammed them all with a sleep spell, using most of his energy to make sure they were out. Then he joined them.

Silence descended as bodies slumped and minds went blank.

## 2

“I’m not sure we’re in the right place.” Marc studied the ruins that surrounded them in every direction. Burnt, broken rock walls rose into the dark sky, offering no protection. The ground was littered with bones, clothes, weapons, and larger skeletons that could only be from horses.

Angela blinked, trying to clear the haze from Adrian’s sleep spell. His gifts were getting stronger. “It’s the right place. Ownership has changed things.” The rocky cliffs in the distance were still spewing flames. The sky was smoky and smelled like death.

Isabel stuck to Angela’s hip and tried to act like she wasn’t afraid. The feel of this place was just as bad as any of the lab rooms.

The team stayed in a circle around their few females while searching the shadows for the nightmares that had haunted them last time. Only the mission men had been here before. The surroundings didn’t affect them as much. Everyone else stared in fear. Hell was usually only a place they saw in a movie or their dreams.

“Someone’s coming.” Shawn rotated toward one of the many destroyed stone doorways.

Greg stepped closer to Angela when Marc didn’t, still scanning for snakes and monsters.

Erin frowned at him, but kept her mouth shut.

Gus fought his inner demons as a red light flared to life and showed them thousands of souls around the ruins. “Get ready to fight!”

Thomas had already spotted their observers. “Why aren’t they attacking?”

Kenn pointed. “It’s a line. They’re waiting for something.”

The light got closer, bringing more shadows into view. Some of those ghosts were very familiar.

Angela stared at Warren, flashed to their last encounter. The preacher was leering at her but not moving. Right behind him, was Cynthia.

Cynthia’s red eyes stayed on Angela with a fierce vengeance that made Isabel long for a gift to use. “She hates you.”

Angela swept the line of doomed souls standing outside the ruins. She recognized many of them. “They all do. I’m the reason they’re here.”

“No.” Isabel took Angela’s hand. “Their actions sent them here. You were just the road they traveled.”

The light reached further up the line; Angela sucked in air as another of her sacrifices came into view.

Becky pointed at Angela with a clawed, bony hand. The girl was emaciated, filthy, and insane. “Boss.”

Angela blinked, hoping the nightmares vanished.

Marc tried not to scan the doomed people. *Please don't be here. Please don't be here.*

“Hello, Marcus.”

Marc refused to turn around at the familiar voice. He'd been hoping her energy had gone anywhere but here.

Kendle took a step forward.

Flames rose from the ground, searing a layer of her skin.

Kendle screamed.

Marc shuddered.

Angela sighed, recovering faster than the rest of the team. “Enough with the threats. Get out here and talk. Cate's been waiting for months to visit with you.”

The red light flared brighter and then faded to a soft yellow glow. Joey came through the ruined doorway, smiling happily.

Angela studied the boy, feeling his new strength. She hadn't been sure if Joey would continue to age or not down here. She still wasn't. He wore a long red robe and had longer hair that spilled over a child's body. In his mind, a man already existed. A few months in Hell had changed him.

“Joey!” Cate started to run to him.

Erin put a hand on Cate's shoulder.

Cate brushed it off. "Joey's my friend!"

Marc and the others watched as the two kids embraced, holding tightly to each other. Marc refused to look at the dead woman staring at him without blinking. Her hatred was thick and painful.

Cate stepped back, smiling. "I told you I'd come visit."

Joey frowned a little. "It was a long time."

Cate's lip quivered. "I'm sorry. I have to obey the alpha."

Joey's hard green eyes scanned Angela and the rest of the team. "Welcome to Hell."

Angela heard the longing in that tone. Joey wanted her here permanently, to torture. He hadn't let go of his hatred at all; he'd embraced it. "Hello, Joey Livingston. How are you?"

"I'm dead."

Angela flinched this time. The deaths of children would always bother her the most.

"Why are you here?"

"I need information that only you can give me." Angela hoped directness was the way to go with Joey. It hadn't been before.

"You lied to me."

"You were planning the death of everyone in my camp."

"They deserve it." Joey looked at another burnt doorway. "My father was right about that."

Angela scanned the newest nightmare in resigned dismay. "Joel."

Joel was in the line. He was in the fifth position, ahead of the woman Marc was still refusing to acknowledge.

All of the damned souls were in the same condition they had been upon their deaths, including Joel. His skeleton under the ragged clothes was terrifying. Angela tried not to remember how he had exploded into bone dust as she banished him to this realm.

Joel glowered at her and her team. “Where’s the enforcer?” Even in death, Joel was still obsessed with Jennifer.

Kyle stepped toward the evil man, still furious after all this time. “Stay away from my wife!”

Joel mocked him. “I’ll see her soon. I’ll see *all* of you soon.”

Angela’s lips thinned. “Why are all these people here, Joey? They’re supposed to be punished.”

Joey held out a hand to Cate instead of answering. “I brought you a gift.”

Cate took the golden bracelet and put it on before anyone could protest. It clicked around her small wrist and glowed brightly.

“You’ll be safe here now, so you can visit whenever you want to.”

Cate rubbed the pretty jewelry. “Thank you.”

“Joey.” Angela used a harder tone, suddenly sure that she was going to hate the answer. “What have you done?”

Joey walked toward his dad; his long robe dragged over the charred ground. “I’m sending them all back.”

Many of the team were confused. Angela wasn’t. She held her stomach. “As new souls?”

“As themselves, with full memories.” Joey took his father’s hand. “You said everyone should get a second chance. I’m giving them that.”

The team muttered as they began to understand.

Angela tried a reprimand. “Hell is not where souls go to be judged!”

“Then send me to the Weigh Station.” Joey eyed her cleverly. “My dad will take over down here and do what you want.”

“No deal, kid.”

“I’m not a kid!” Joey’s rage burst forth in thick red flames that circled the team and covered the doomed, angry people around them in the glare. “You killed me!”

Marc finally turned. “And I’d do it again. Sending you here was the right thing to do. I just shouldn’t have given you so much power.”

“Marc.” Kendle used the soft tone that had always gotten to him. “I loved you.”

Marc slowly looked at her, starting at her ragged boots and going to her wrinkled face. The signs of her demise glinted at him. She was wearing the same outfit she’d been in when he held her under the water. Pieces of ocean life and seaweed dotted her wet hair. His fingerprints around her neck were clear.



Marc's guilt and loneliness were impossible to hide. A part of him still loved her and wanted her around. The rest of him was disgusted with her and himself for feeling that way.

"You killed me."

Marc nodded, heart pounding. "I did what I had to."

"I hate you!"

Kendle's shriek drew more of the doomed souls in the distance toward the line. They all wanted to be sent back to get revenge on those who'd hurt them.

Biff brought out his stone warrior. He hadn't been strong enough to do it the last time they'd come here. He didn't look at the lab sacrifices he'd been responsible for killing during his sessions.

Biff's success encouraged some of the others to try harder. Shields went up through the team.

Gus sneered at the people he'd killed in the lab. He didn't have sympathy for any of them. "If they were good, or innocent, they wouldn't have been sent to Hell. Stop letting them make you feel bad."

None of the team knew who he was speaking to, but it didn't matter. This was obviously a trap.

Greg snapped out of it, bringing up his shield. "He's right. These people deserve to be here."

Greg couldn't help feeling bad for the females in the line that he'd dispatched, though. He remembered every single one of them.

Piper, Erin, and Jayda stayed close to the boss and let the men shield them with magic and their

bodies. The three women didn't have ghosts in this line. They hadn't seen as much action as the others had. Their terror came from the intentions of the doomed souls that were only being held back by the flames. Serial killers, rapists, and cannibals leered at them in naked hunger.

"They can't leave the line. You're safe here." Joey glowered. "For now. Don't stay too long or I'll release a few of them just for fun."

Unlike the rest of the team who were avoiding their ghosts, Ray scanned the line intently, hunting for a familiar face.

Joey sneered at him in contempt. "Dale isn't here. I can see him in your mind. You left an innocent soul to die!"

Ray wasn't intimidated by Joey or the other evil people. "He wasn't bad, but he wasn't innocent, *kid*. I'd bet he went to the Judgement chamber."

Joey frowned. "What is the Judgement chamber?"

Ray clamped his lips shut and refused to think about it. *That little monster doesn't need any more information.*

Shawn saw Tara in the middle of the line. Regret filled his mind. *That's where I lost my chance at a normal life. I hate that bitch!*

"Careful." Joey mocked him coldly. "A few more moments like that will put you down here with us."

Shawn stiffened. "I'm a good person."

Joey chuckled.

Kyle rubbed his holster, wishing he could use his gun and end all of them. The line of doomed souls stretched into the distance. Kyle recognized a hundred of them easily, but he was surprised not to feel guilty, even about the ones that had haunted him for so long.

“You’ve already punished yourself.” Angela scanned her team, checking on them all while verifying there was no one sneaking up behind them while they were distracted.

Adrian had his back to her, guarding that direction while avoiding looking at the kids in the line. They bothered him more than Cynthia did.

Lisa stayed next to Dace, thrilled that he’d brought her along for this. She stayed quiet and listened, not sure if Angela was upset that she’d come. Even Selina had been told to stay behind and protect Wade.

Dace enjoyed being on his legs again. *I’m not paralyzed down here!* He tried to memorize the feeling to carry with him. He hoped this would jog his brain on how to walk.

Neither of them cared about the ghosts or the threats Joey was making. Their own issues were bigger.

Charlie saw one of his nightmares in the line. “It’s Badger.”

Badger waved at the boy, flashing black teeth and a rotting tongue.

Charlie tried to be strong, but it was hard. He hadn't actually killed Badger, but he'd outed the evil man to Adrian, causing that death.

Zack froze as a familiar female wandered toward the line from the cliffs. Even this far away, he knew who it was. "Allison."

Allison staggered closer, reminding everyone of the rib breakers they'd handled upon landing on Pitcairn Island.

Zack cried. Allison hadn't been evil when they started dating. "I turned her that way."

"No." Angela glared at Joey. "Tell him the truth."

Joey couldn't resist the order even though he wanted all of them to suffer. "The cancer drove her crazy. Nature haunted her mind for months. You didn't turn her; life did that."

Joey had to drive in a nail. "You also didn't help it. Ignoring her when you came back was the final straw."

"You little shit!" Angela pointed at the gloating boy. "Keep pushing me and you'll find out how evil I can be!"

"I already know. You killed me!"

Angela didn't deny it. "I gave you a second chance. Adrian tried to help you, too. Blame your father for the way you turned out."

"I do." Joey smiled at his father.

"None of this is right." Kenn was seeing people he'd killed before the war and those he'd removed during his time as an Eagle. The one that bothered

him the most was the old man he'd shot while he and Marc served together. It had been right after Marc took over leadership of their fire team. Kenn had never forgotten it. "I'm sorry."

Angela was encouraged by that reaction.

Joey gazed at Kenn in spite. "It won't be enough to save you. She already has your death planned down to the minute, *Grunt*."

Kenn paled.

Angela's fury surrounded the team as she tried to shield her mind from the boy. "One more time and we'll all fry together. I'll burn them into ashes so you can't send them back at all!"

Joey reluctantly withdrew from her thoughts.

"Now tell him you lied."

Joey faced Kenn sullenly. "I exaggerated. A little."

Angela wasn't happy. Anger flew out of her stomach and struck the child.

Joey hit his knees. Blood trickled from his nose. "You hit me!"

Angela fought to control her anger. "I came here to make a deal, but there will never be deals between us!"

Joey rose, smirking. "Did you know the masters of this place can only be replaced twice?"

"No." Angela hated the sense of failure that settled onto her shoulders at his words.

"That means you can't replace me or my dad. One of us have to be here since you sent Michael away." Joey's face lit up with intense hatred. "No

matter what you do from here, Livingstons are in charge of Hell and we're going to release every demon you fear. We'll cover the earth in evil until you can't breathe. And when you die, you'll come down here and be punished like you should be. All of you will. Get ready for eternity in *my* lab. Now get out!"

Joey's order sent the full team back to the runway tent in an instant. They snapped awake, groaning and moaning at the pain of the abrupt departure.

Wade and Jennifer brought up shields, startled into an automatic defense.

Cody went to Marc, feeling his pain.

Selina hurried to hug Shawn, immediately worried about his demeanor.

Bret hurried over to check on Cate. He was very unhappy to have been left behind.

Angela didn't tell the boy he was part of the power group she'd left here in case they didn't make it back. Bret would figure out in time how important he was to this camp.

The team all focused on Angela with panic falling out of their mouths.

"Sending him to take his father's place was a huge mistake."

"They're all coming back to Earth!"

"We have to stop breeding."

"It's a trap. If we have babies, they'll be evil. If we don't, humanity will die out."

"We're screwed."

Angela made her way over to the desk and pulled out a pack of cigarettes that she'd been hoarding. She opened it and tossed them around, then pulled a lighter from her pocket.

Angela enjoyed the first few draws, ignoring the disapproving looks from some of them. Everyone else calmed themselves and tried to find a solution.

Angela's stomach rolled. She handed the smoke to Marc and sat in the desk chair. She surveyed her army tiredly. "We'll have a little time for most of them. Our biggest enemies weren't first in line."

"And they'll just be babies, right?" Ray was hoping they'd have a lot of time to hunt those killers, though someone else would have to remove them. Even knowing what the kids were really like inside wouldn't be enough to get him to handle it personally.

"Did you see almost all of them have power?" Marc stared at Angela and held his son, blowing out a thick cloud of smoke. "He's sending descendants back."

"Yes. He's delivering an army to Nature in the form of kids because he knows that's where we're weak. If he hadn't attacked you, Joey never would have been removed."

Marc nodded. "Jayda's right; we're screwed."

Angela wasn't ready to admit defeat yet. "Get comfortable. We're going to spend the next few hours right here, working through this. There is a way to stop him. We just have to find it."

Chapter Eleven  
**A Bad Substitute**

1

“**T**hat’s enough for tonight.” Angela groaned as she stood from the uncomfortable chair. Her hips, legs, and neck sent out sharp flares of pain. “Keep working on it during your downtime.”

The team followed her from the tent, aware that it was 2 a.m. The jungle around the tent was pitch black and alive with rustling noises that made them all nervous. Their minds stayed on Hell. Half of them expected to see a line of doomed souls appear ahead of them.

The team split up, taking several of the paths, but no one traveled alone by unspoken agreement. The people who had picked the same path as Angela stayed close to her. She was way too pregnant to be trekking through the jungle anymore.

Bugs flew around them as they walked, but there weren’t as many as there had been. The lack of water was also affecting the insects.

Angela took the most used path because it was beaten enough to give her legs a break.

Dace rolled along next to her; this path was easier for his wheelchair to get through, but that wasn’t why he’d picked it. His mind was in chaos,



though not because of the evil that was being sent back to conquer them. Having his legs back, even for that short time, had been wonderful. Being in reality where he was still paralyzed was the real hell. “Lisa had an idea earlier.”

Lisa frowned. “I was just joking. Don’t put that on me.”

Angela shook her head. “No.”

“But it might help me!”

“No.”

Dace’s frustration came out. “I’ll find someone to do it! I don’t need your permission.”

Angela kept walking. “It might kill you, Dace. It definitely won’t help. This isn’t amnesia. One of the nerves that control leg movement was damaged. Hitting it isn’t going to heal it.”

Dace sulked, knowing she was right, but he was desperate to regain full use of his body. “It might have been from something else.”

The bags under Dace’s eyes and his clenched fists said he was in a rough place mentally, but there wasn’t anything she could do for the paralyzed man. “It was caused by the attack on the submarine.”

Lisa winced even though she’d already known that. Part of this mess was her fault.

“There is something you haven’t tried.”

Dace regarded Thomas hopefully as the man limped along with them. “What is it? I’ll try anything.”

“Brain exploration.”

Isabel made a face. “Even Reicher wouldn’t go that far.”

Dace didn’t care. “I would.”

“We don’t have anyone with knowledge of how to do that.” Angela hated Dace’s misery. “We do have a lot of books on the brain. Start studying them.”

“But that could take months!”

Angela gave him the truth sadly. “Years, Dace. It will take years before any of us have enough experience to try something like that and even then, it won’t work.”

Dace was crushed all over again. Angela was never wrong. “I wish I was dead.”

Dace rolled his chair down the path faster to get away from them.

Lisa hurried after the man, crying at his pain.

Angela sighed. She would always feel guilty for Dace’s injury because she’d taken him on that rescue run.

“It’s not your fault.” Isabel wrapped her arm around Angela’s waist and encouraged the boss to lean on her.

Angela let the human contact warm her spirit. Marc barely touched her anymore so he didn’t upset her stomach, and none of the others put hands on her for any number of reasons. She admired Isabel’s courage.

Isabel refused to ruin the moment by asking for what she wanted. Even though she’d earned a favor or two, she didn’t want to cash in on them yet. *But I*

*will soon. Nature said all lifeforms eat flesh. Eventually Stanley will see how old I am and I'll lose him!*

Angela hugged her.

Isabel's eyes filled with tears. She was rarely touched either.

Marc walked in the rear of the group with Cody and Adrian, haunted by knowing Kendle was in Hell. Her hatred and state of mind were concerns, but just knowing she was there was awful. "Why didn't Kendle make a deal for her energy to go somewhere else?"

Adrian yawned tiredly. "Maybe she did. I don't think we can escape eternal damnation with deals."

Marc sighed. "Yeah."

Cody tugged on Marc's hand. "I saw something while you were gone." Cody had spent the time searching the future.

Cody was just as fastidiously dressed as he usually was even though he had spent all day on lessons, training, and a lot of walking around the island. Marc was almost sorry to put his arm around the boy and coat him with dust. He was one of the few people who seemed to be immune to it. "Show me."

Cody leaned against his father, missing the smell of guns that Marc used to be known for. They didn't have much gun play on the island.

Cody shared the mental image of Cate and Bret, in Hell. They'd joined the line of doomed souls. The

only consolation was that they were both older by a few years.

Marc understood what that meant. It wasn't the first time he'd been warned of Cate's demise. "I'll find a way to stop it. So will Angela."

Cody let the words ease his mind. He had great faith in Angela.

So did Marc. It bothered him when she didn't add her support.

Angela was aware of the coming issue. So far, Bret and Cate didn't know, but that wouldn't last much longer. She hoped to have an answer by the time they started asking questions.

A small group of people with torches were waiting for them on the path near town.

Stanley hurried to Isabel, smiling. "Bed time!"

Isabel laughed, letting go of Angela. She let Stanley escort her toward the ship. They had a cabin together there. "Night, Boss."

"Sleep well, Issy."

Isabel tried not to cry. *I love it here!*

Erin slid her arm through Greg's. "Let's get some rest."

Greg braced for a scene. "I need a minute with the boss."

Erin jerked her arm free.

Greg wasn't in the mood for a temper tantrum. "You go on to the ship. I'm sleeping in the church bunkhouse tonight." He put his back to her.

Erin's fury came off of her in thick, jealous waves. She marched toward the ship, following Stanley and Isabel.

Greg went to Angela, sorry that he'd decided to have a relationship with anyone.

"I'm sorry they haven't been able to put you first." Angela really was. Greg deserved a good woman.

"She won't take the vaccine. It's making her angry all the time. Jealousy is just the cherry on top."

"Like Ralph and some of the others."

Greg was suddenly curious. "I know we don't have much of it left, but are we vaccinating Ralph before he's sent away?"

Angela nodded. "I don't want him to spread it. I also don't want him to die from it. He didn't get a death sentence."

"Can I give it to Erin while she's sleeping?" Greg knew that would be the end of their relationship. Erin would never forgive that betrayal.

Angela reluctantly shook her head. "This matter has to go to the Law Council to decide."

"We already got some of the people after the last matchup, while they were passed out."

"Yes, and some of them are furious about it. They're still talking about leaving."

"Let them." Greg was covered in dust. He'd stopped trying to brush it off weeks ago. It gave him a gritty feeling that wasn't helping his attitude.

Angela frowned. “Freedom matters, Greg. We can’t take away their right to choose what’s best for them.”

“But it’s endangering this camp.”

“Yes. The rage illness will decimate us if we don’t do something.” Angela tried to stretch her spine as she walked, being careful. She didn’t seem to be able to find a comfortable position. *It won’t be much longer.*

“Why aren’t you handling that yet?”

“Because it doesn’t matter until we scavenge more of the vaccine, and like I said, the Law Council needs to handle this.”

That made sense to Greg and worried him. “So, we do nothing and just watch everyone get worse. Great.”

People looked over, a bit shocked. Greg never spoke to Angela that way.

Angela reached out and took his hand.

Greg froze, fighting the sensation of skin-to-skin contact with her.

“Morgan needs a friend. He has many of the same problems as you.”

“I don’t have a problem.”

Angela didn’t blast through his mental doors. “Reicher wins every time you consider suicide.”

Greg shuddered. He didn’t deny it.

Angela let go of him and waddled down the path now that she’d let everyone know Greg was still unstable. “Spend some time with Morgan and keep

him from having those thoughts. It will help you both.”

Most of the people around them hadn't known either man was having issues.

Greg let Kenn steer him down the path, struggling not to lash out or beg for help. *I used to be so strong!*

Kenn grunted. “Same.” He gave Angela a dirty look and moved faster through the jungle toward town. Kenn's mind was full of Joey's warning.

*“It won't be enough to save you. She already has your death planned down to the minute, Grunt.”*

“He lied.” Greg pulled away from Kenn but kept pace with him. “Don't let that little bastard win.”

“I'm trying.” Kenn spotted Tonya ahead of them.

Tonya had been left on point duty over the town. Dog was at her side, eyeing all of them through clean hair and golden eyes. He'd also been worried for his humans. Now that he knew they were okay, he hurried to the barn where the cats and goats were enjoying dinner. Dog had already been fed. He just wanted to nap with his friends.

Tonya knew it hadn't been a good session. She didn't ask questions; she waited for orders.

“Adrian has point. Get some rest.”

Tonya put her arm around Kenn as he came over to her. “Thanks. This was fun.”

People snorted at her joke, but the mood lifted a little.

Angela scanned the town from end to end and then came back to the restaurant for a second look. Inside, Gio and Nero were helping with the clean-up while eating scraps off of plates. Outside, Neil and Samantha were sitting at a patio table, having a cup of tea. They were waiting for Wade.

Angela wondered if Neil had tested her theory yet by using mood switches to see if Samantha really was following their vibes. He would be back in full training tomorrow; it would help him with that issue. Being around the other Eagles often made the men adventurous. Samantha was about to have her mates back and then her life would slowly return to normal.

Angela hoped. It was always possible that fate would flip another card in their lives.

Neil eyed them all in sympathy. Trips to other places were sometimes fun. Hell was never going to be called that.

“They know what we were just doing.” Kyle looked over at Angela. “How do they know?”

Kyle and the others had locked their thoughts while they walked back from the jungle. No one else had been close enough to catch anything that had happened.

Angela shrugged. “Neil and his family see a lot more now.”

Everyone assumed that was because of Samantha’s kidnapping.

Angela knew there was another reason for their suddenly endless knowledge.



The town at night was almost beautiful, with solar powered lights throwing off warm glows. It was a lot like the old world until they realized there was no electricity or plumbing. The windmills that had been built on the island to generate power hadn't been working when they'd arrived. They still weren't. It was on the to-do list.

Ed saw them enter town and came over from his post near the barn. He handed Angela his nightly report along with a wave of curiosity and need.

Angela shrugged again. "I'll let you know after I talk to her."

Angela couldn't clear Amanda and her daughters without an in-depth look into their minds. She had left those three alone for a year. It was time that changed. "Wade, schedule me an appointment with Amanda for tomorrow."

Wade quickly wrote it in his book and then waited in case she had anything else for him.

Angela gestured toward the patio. "You're off duty for the rest of the night. Tonya will cover anything I need."

Wade was relieved. He needed to spend time around Neil and Samantha to help recover his mental balance. The trip to Hell hadn't been good for him.

Tonya was thrilled. She gave Kenn a quick hug and then came over to Angela's right.

Kenn went toward the bunkhouse in resignation. He'd been hoping for a quick orgasm

and then dreamless sleep. That obviously wasn't going to happen.

Morgan came by with his arms full of gear. He smiled at Kyle and Jennifer, but he didn't stop to talk. He was prepping the fishing area on the beach for the lesson with the kids tomorrow. He had stayed up to keep an ear on Jennifer while they were gone, but he also wasn't sleeping well. Sometimes, he couldn't force his brain to let him rest until dawn.

Greg detoured from the church bunkhouse and fell in with Morgan.

Angela was satisfied those two men would spend the rest of the night discussing their problems and hopefully giving each other a little relief from that stress.

Angela swept the center of town, where the burned down campfire in the center said people had enjoyed it even though Ray and Kenn hadn't been there. *Don't worry. You guys are going to get plenty of time around the fire.*

Angela locked her thoughts as Adrian focused on her.

"Bret asked if he could move in with me. I said yes, as long as you agree."

Still walking next to Cate, Bret listened hopefully.

Angela nodded. "Good idea. You guys can keep each other out of trouble."

Bret grinned. "I'll be packed in 10 minutes."

Adrian shook his head. “I’m on point tonight. You can do rounds with me and then we’ll go to the shack when my shift is up.”

Bret had just gotten two things he wanted—permission to move in and time with his father. His happiness flew out and hit everyone around them, including Angela.

Angela was sorry to put an end to the good mood, but she didn’t have a choice. She locked eyes with Adrian. “Charlie put it in his mind, but he can’t leave. You’ll have to fix that.”

Adrian already knew what she was talking about. Conner’s mind had been full of it during dinner. “I’m going to give him a few days and see if it fades on its own. If it doesn’t, we’ll have a firm conversation.”

No one asked why Conner wasn’t allowed to leave the island. Most of them assumed it was Angela’s attempt to save the boy. If he left here, he wouldn’t have good influences.

Adrian knew it was worse than that. He refused to think about it so the others wouldn’t find out. “What’s going on with your pregnancy?”

People around them stopped, immediately concerned. They hadn’t known there was a problem.

Marc studied Angela’s reaction while she wasn’t focused on him.

Tonya’s eyes flew to Angela. She couldn’t charm them again in front of everyone.

Angela rubbed her stomach. “I got pregnant before I sent Joel to Hell. This baby is fine. It’s the

ones who haven't been conceived yet that we need to worry about."

The others relaxed on that front, attention redirected.

Adrian looked at Marc.

Marc headed toward the bunkhouse with his sleepy twins. Adrian would have to try again another time. Angela was too alert right now for them to get anything out of her.

Jayda handed Angela her nightly report and then went to the restroom, giving a friendly nod to the medic who was on his way out of those stinky bathrooms.

Terry tried not to stare at Jayda. As soon as she was out of sight, he took his notebook from his pocket and marked off another day on his calendar. *24 down, 66 to go.*

Terry went to the bunkhouse to get some sleep. He was hoping he would be able to rest now that all of Angela's group had returned safely.

As the team reached the center of town, the bunkhouse door opened, letting out half a dozen females who immediately zeroed in on the new father walking in the rear of the group.

Charlie groaned. "Go away!"

Angela turned an angry gaze on the group of lot lizards, immediately sending them in the opposite direction.

Charlie was embarrassed that his mom had to interfere. He turned toward Wade, who was still

standing near them. “How do I get them to leave me alone?!”

Wade handled it like he would with anyone else. “Why do you want them to leave you alone? You could be a relief source in this camp. Everyone wants the boss’s kid.”

Charlie made a face. “I’ve said it a lot. I’m not interested.”

“Because you’re mourning Tracy?”

Charlie sighed. “Yes, but I also refuse to take the chance on having another baby. One is already too much some days.”

Charlie was just as dusty as everyone else, but he also had the added stains of parenthood. The three-day beard and blood shot eyes said he was approaching a breaking point.

Wade gestured toward the barn, where two of their camp members had passed out. “Maybe you need to get drunk.”

“Don’t want to.”

“Then find an activity that you do enjoy. Abusive parents happened mostly because those people resented the kids for keeping them from enjoying life. Don’t be one of those parents. Remember to take time out for yourself.”

“But I don’t enjoy anything now!”

Wade could tell how much Charlie was missing Tracy. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll search through and find you a substitute.”

Charlie grumbled. “I don’t want one. I want Tracy.”

Seeing her again had stirred up his pain.

“I’ll find you one close to her, but who can handle our kind.”

Charlie turned and walked away.

Marc had been listening to all of it. “Go on and find that substitute, but make sure she understands if Tracy ever comes back, he’ll leave her in a flat second.”

Wade frowned. He’d been thinking about trying to find the boy a perfect match. “How do you know that?”

Marc glanced at Angela with all of his usual heat showing. “Because that’s how I felt about his mom the entire time we were apart. It hasn’t changed one bit.”

Wade nodded. “A substitute it is.”

## 2

Kenn entered the bunkhouse and found Grant standing right inside the door. He flinched, not expecting anyone to be there.

Grant had been waiting for Kenn. He glared at the man. “I want to talk to you!”

Kenn couldn’t think of anything he had done to anger their captain. “What’s up?”

“In private!”

Kenn glanced around the crowded bunkhouse and then reluctantly stepped back outside.

Grant followed, closing the bunkhouse door gently instead of slamming it like he wanted to.

Kenn scanned Angela's group and didn't find Ray among them. Ray had taken a different path back from the runway tent.

Kenn stifled a groan. He didn't want to talk to Grant about this.

Grant pointed toward the barn.

Kenn frowned. "It's not empty."

Grant snorted. "The drunks in there don't care about what I have to say."

Kenn reluctantly followed Grant into the barn, hoping this would be over with quickly.

Grant waited for Kenn to enter and then shut the door. He ignored Jack, who was very drunk but awake. "I want to know what's wrong with Ray."

Jack focused on them blearily and then tilted up the bottle that was almost empty. Theo had passed out a short while ago, sliding to the floor with a relieved look on his face. Jack hoped to join him soon.

The barn reeked of alcohol and body odor. Grant didn't notice it, but Kenn did. He fought not to let his stomach react to it by curling his thumbs into his palms like Angela had taught them.

"Answer me!"

"How should I know what's wrong with your boyfriend?"

"He's my fiancé!"

Kenn grunted. "Whatever."

"There's something wrong with Ray and you better figure out what it is!"

Kenn was already fed up with Grant's bad attitude. "Figure it out yourself. I'm not your nanny."

"No, you're a man-stealer!"

Kenn was startled into a laugh. "I've never been called that before."

Grant didn't think it was funny. "He'll talk to you. I know he will. He has a thing for you!"

Kenn knew that, too, but it usually wasn't discussed openly. "We all had a hard run. Just give him some time."

"I've given him three weeks and all I can get out of him at night is a quick kiss and then he puts his back to me...and not in the good way! We haven't had sex since before he left!"

Kenn groaned again. "T.M.I."

Grant didn't care about Kenn's delicate sensibilities. "I want my man back and you better help me with that or things are going to get ugly for you in this camp."

Kenn's eyes narrowed at the threat. "Be careful, *Captain*. I'm not going to put up with much, even from you."

Grant understood his aggressive approach wasn't working, but he was too upset to be calm and reasonable. "I mean it, Kenn. Find out what's wrong with Ray and fix it or I'm going to get mean and I'll only have one target."

"Why are you laying this on me? I have a mate. I'm not interested in Ray!"



Grant stepped closer, finger coming up to Kenn's big chest. "Because he has feelings for you and you've allowed him to feel that way because you like the bond. I'm sick of being your substitute! Fix this and then fuck off!"

Grant left, slamming the door.

Kenn sighed. He considered going to the bunkhouse and then went over and climbed the stairs to the loft instead. "Pass that bottle. You're not the only one who needs to tie one on."

The bottle held little comfort, but it was all Kenn had.

### 3

"It sucks that she outed us in front of everyone."

Greg grunted, bending the table leg to get it locked in place. "I'm surprised she didn't spend more time on it. We usually get lectures, meetings, and Eagle pressure over stuff like this."

The darkness around the two men didn't bother them at all as they set up the fishing area. Both of them were Special Forces Eagles who knew how to handle a threat. Their minds were another matter entirely.

Morgan put the next table in place. The folding tables were easy to carry and convenient. They were using them all over the island for special projects. "Have we had issues like this in the Eagles?"

Greg nodded. "The whole time we've been in Safe Haven, but it's normally handled in-house."

Morgan hadn't been a part of any of those moments. "Who?"

"Rookies, usually. When we were in the mountain, we did several. Some of the shit we go through takes a toll on them." Greg sighed. "And on us. Senior people are not exempt from the effects of making sure this camp survives."

Morgan wondered why he hadn't been included in any of those meetings.

Greg wasn't sure. "Kyle and Neil handled it. Maybe you were busy."

Morgan frowned. "For all of them?"

Greg agreed it seemed funny, but he didn't have an answer.

Morgan knew he had a reputation for being closed off and cold, like Marc. "Maybe it was my winning personality."

Greg chuckled.

"Or maybe they didn't trust me to be fair and quiet."

Greg shook his head. "Considering that you're living with Kyle and his wife, I'd say trust wasn't an issue."

Morgan accepted that answer and asked a harder question. "Why hasn't he tried to kill me?"

Greg had also wondered that. He knew Kyle didn't want another man in Jennifer's life. "Unless he dies."

Morgan huffed. "I'm his safety net?"

Greg shrugged. “Maybe he saw something and wants his family covered. It’s a great honor that he picked you.”

“He didn’t.” Morgan was still humiliated by how that had happened. “If not for the recharge, and then Darren’s shit...”

Greg wasn’t sure that was true. “Kyle knew about it, though. I heard him tell you that. It was only a matter of time before Jennifer found out, too.”

Morgan had hoped she wouldn’t ever know. “Brandon and I talked about it once. He chose to stay behind in Ciemus to avoid this situation.”

“And because he’s a Mitchel.”

“Yeah.” Morgan frowned this time. “We have a lot of those here now.”

“Four of the five family lines live here.” Greg didn’t mind that. “Mitchels are survivors. They can rub that off on the rest of us.”

Morgan sorted the gear in his kit onto the tables, creating three small stations for the gutting lesson. “There might be someone from all five. I think there’s a Sinclair here, too.”

Greg paused. “How’s that possible? William would have recognized his family... Right?”

“Not if they weren’t with us until after we left America.”

Greg was curious. “Can you tell me who?” He didn’t want Morgan to break anyone’s confidence.

“Thomas.”

Greg's sharp mind jumped ahead to Morgan's coming point. "We haven't had a radio call from William in a month."

"Yep. About the same amount of time as you guys have been out of that lab."

Greg swore. "That son of a bitch!"

Morgan nodded. "William couldn't reach him in that underwater lab, not with Reicher listening to everything. Angela busted him out and in return, Thomas has been feeding William information."

"Does the boss know?"

"I believe so. She doesn't spend time around Thomas anymore unless other people are around. I think he already lost his second chance here; he just doesn't know it yet."

Chapter Twelve

# Saying Goodbye

1

“**W**here am I?” Tonya couldn’t see anything through the thick gray fog. It surrounded her in every direction.

She wasn’t scared; she just hated the fog. She had even before the rescue team had come home with their fantastic story. Many of their camp members believed the team had made it all up. Tonya didn’t. She was just glad that most of the abused men had returned.

Tonya walked slowly, not sure what type of ground was under her boots. She could feel a hard surface, but that was it. “I’m not on the island anymore.”

Tonya heard water nearby and instinctively rotated in that direction. She knew a survival technique was to follow a body of water to civilization. “But we’ve destroyed those. Tiny populations are all we have left and even those are dying out.”

Tonya’s mind wandered as her feet did the same. She was fine with the life she was carving out in their camp, but her heart was a desolate place. “I hate you, Rico Reicher.”

“Why? All I did was protect you when no one else was.”

Tonya stopped, heart pounding. *He sounds so close!*

Tonya knew it was just her mind playing tricks. Her brain was doing whatever it took to heal her broken heart. “It’s not working.”

“You have to try harder to forget me.”

A tear rolled from Tonya’s eye. “It hurts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be! I was fine until you started stalking me.”

“Were you?” Rico moved closer through the fog. He’d been unable to resist her pain. Even in her sleep, she was calling out to him. “Were you ever really happy in Safe Haven?”

Tonya trudged toward the water, skin and hair now soaked from the fog. “No. I’ve never really been happy in life at all.”

She put a qualifier on that. “I’m content when I’m with my son.” It was still shocking that she enjoyed being a parent. “And I do like my job. Being a lab tech is good for me. It makes me smarter.”

“And now you have a chance to be the XO on Angela’s team.” Rico knew that meant a lot to Tonya.

“If she gives it to me. We do have a past.”

“It’s not that bad. She likes your strength, your courage, your determination. She just hates your mate.”

Tonya held in a sob. “If I’d met you first, Kenn and I would never have gotten together.”

“And I may have been happy, too, but fate didn’t give that to us. All we can do now is move on.”

“I’m trying!”

“I know.” Rico tracked Tonya through the dream walking fog, still protecting her even though they were a thousand miles apart in reality. “There are charms, spells.”

“I won’t do that.” Tonya didn’t like being in pain, but she would rather feel this way than to forget him. “I’m sorry you died for me.”

“Saving your life was the best thing I’ve ever done. I’ll never regret that. You’re not allowed to either.”

Tonya smiled through her tears. “We would have been a terrible duo. It’s probably best that we didn’t get the chance.”

“Yes.” Rico had often had that thought. “Marc and Angela might not have been the power couple in your camp.”

Tonya stopped, able to feel the edge of the water. The fog cleared, showing her the dock to the Adrianna.

Tonya’s heart clenched. “This is where you died.”

“This is where you lost me.” Rico was trying hard not to let her know this was really happening, that he was alive. He didn’t want her to leave the safety of Safe Haven to come find him, and he

wasn't coming back to wreck her mostly happy home. She needed to let him go.

Rico was also lonely and missing her. He stopped a few feet away, staring through the fog bank that was keeping them apart. "I would have fought for you. I had to go."

"It might have worked." Tonya didn't have to hide or lie in her dreams. "I would have pulled you into the light like I've done with Kenn."

Rico frowned. "Kenn isn't as far into the light as you think."

Tonya knew that warning came from Kenn's behavior and Angela's thoughts. "I just need more time to work on him."

Rico didn't argue. She'd lightened his soul without directly trying. With full effort, anything was possible. "Just be careful."

Tonya shivered. "I will."

Rico knew it wasn't good to linger, but he loved looking at her as much as he ever had. He stepped closer, hand coming out.

Tonya sobbed as his hand stroked her curls.

"I always wanted to do that."

Tonya knew. "This all seems so real!" The dock under her feet was hard. She could smell the salt in the ocean waves. Even the dampness from the fog was making her fingers wet.

Rico lowered his hand and clasped hers. He sent a wave of love and protection.

Tonya slid to her knees, crying. "I miss you!"



“I’ll always love you.” Rico let go and vanished back into the fog.

Tonya stayed on the dock and sobbed, saying goodbye.

## 2

“I’m here to say goodbye.” Neil didn’t tell Gus which person he was talking about as he signed in on the clipboard at the front desk of the jailhouse.

Gus had been dozing in the chair. He wasn’t surprised to see Neil here, considering that Tim had been on his team. Gus forced himself to pay attention so he could report the conversation if he needed to.

“You won’t need to.” Neil spent a lot of time in other people’s minds now. He refused to apologize for that.

He and Samantha had been spending a lot of time working on their gifts, including mind reading. Only a handful of people were able to keep them out. Wade wasn’t as strong as they were yet because he wasn’t as ruthless when it came to using it, but Neil was confident Wade would build his skills in other ways. The need to protect Samantha would drive that.

The jail had been cleaned recently. Neil ignored the hated smell of bleach. Things had to be sanitized so they didn’t have illnesses, but Neil wished they had a different cleaning method. The smell of

bleach always reminded him of the clean up after one of their slaughters.

Neil dropped an envelope onto the desk. “That goes to Ralph after you read it.”

It was a list of places Ralph and Daisey might be able to go and be safe for a while, though nothing was guaranteed. Surviving an apocalypse was hard enough without being on your own and elderly.

Gus opened the envelope and read the paper.

Neil went over to Ralph’s small cell and peered inside.

Ralph didn’t rise from the cot. He knew Neil wasn’t really here for him. “Thank you for the help.”

Neil did feel bad for Ralph, but there was nothing he could do for the man. Angela’s sentence was final and almost everyone agreed with it. In fact, a lot of people believed Ralph should be facing the same sentence that Tim was. “I wish you nothing but the best.”

Ralph didn’t answer. He didn’t have the mental capacity for fake conversations.

Neil went to the next cell, steeling himself for what was sure to be an ugly conversation.

Tim was standing in the rear of his cell, with his back to the bars. “I thought you’d be here a lot sooner.”

Neil frowned. “Why would you think that?”

“You said you’d be there for me, even when I screwed up.”

“Do you understand you’ve gone beyond a simple screw up?”

Tim went on with his rehearsed guilt attempt. “You’ve been responsible for a lot of the deaths in this camp, Neil.” Tim’s voice was without compassion. “We both know you should be in this cell for murder.”

Neil didn’t respond. He waited, letting Tim get it out of his system.

“You were a good team leader in the beginning. All of us trusted you, even Jeremy.”

Neil winced.

So did Gus. Tim had just brought up a very sensitive subject.

“You couldn’t save Jeremy, but you can save me.” Tim turned around and faced Neil. “As a member of your team, I’m asking for help.”

Neil’s guilt was heavy. Tim knew exactly how to trigger him into feeling that way, but Neil didn’t let it affect his choice. He had already known Tim would try something like this. “Where were you when Jeremy died?”

Tim stared at him in confusion. “What?”

Neil’s voice hardened. “Where were you when Chad kidnapped Samantha? Where were you when Nature was turning good people against us?”

“I’m not responsible for any of that! Those people all made their own choices.”

“I feel the same way about you, Tim. You made your choices and endangered everyone in this camp, including my family. Nature could have killed all of

us that night on the ship; you triggered that fight and then you didn't help with it. As far as I'm concerned, you deserve the sentence you were given."

Tim's face darkened as he realized Neil wasn't going to honor the Eagle code and save him. "You're a disgrace."

"And yet I'm the one walking out of here and you're the one set to swing at the end of a rope in just six more days." Neil turned away. "Goodbye, Tim."

Neil left the jail with his chin up and Gus nodding in approval.

*But he managed to make me feel guilty, just like I knew he would. Damn him!* Neil headed for the kai class he was teaching today while trying to ignore how it felt to fail. It was an awful reminder that he hadn't been able to save his best friend. Throughout the months that had gone by since Jeremy's death, Neil still hadn't put him out of his heart. "I'll never say goodbye to you, buddy. Never."

### 3

"Good morning!"

Marc glared at Adrian over his strong coffee. "Shut up."

Adrian laughed, taking the chair across from Marc. The restaurant was mostly empty; it was an hour before breakfast. Marc had just staggered in here from the bunkhouse.

Marc would have recognized Adrian's good mood even without the smile on his face and the glow radiating from his healthier body. Adrian had worked on getting himself in shape over the last three weeks. He had a long way to go, but the differences were starting to show. Adrian was wearing full Eagle gear just like Marc was, but his fit better. Marc was still underweight from his time in Australia.

"Are you ready for updates?"

Marc gestured. "Go on."

Adrian opened his book, still smiling. As of dawn, he and Marc had taken over leadership of the camp. The first two hours on his own had been glorious even though all he had done was walk around and survey things. It felt amazing to be back in charge even for a little while.

"Keep that shit to yourself." Marc wasn't in the mood to feel Adrian's emotions.

Adrian got started with the updates. "Tonya and the boss both crashed in the little clinic an hour before dawn. I wouldn't expect either one of them to be up until around noon."

Marc had already known where Angela was. He sipped his coffee and listened to the waking camp, not sure if he was happy to be in control of things. Most of the reason for that was sitting across the table from him. *I don't want to share, least of all with Adrian.*

“Stuart is organizing the rest of the brawlers. He swears everything will be set for the Eagle event by noon. We’ll use the same setup for her XO tryouts.”

Marc suspected Angela had intentionally set the tryouts for a day that she wouldn’t be in charge. He was hoping that meant she was going to sit down and observe. It was time for her to rest and deliver a healthy baby.

“There were no problems overnight and everyone is accounted for.”

“Good.” Marc studied the boy standing outside the restaurant door, waiting for his father. Marc didn’t believe it was a good idea for Bret to live with Adrian, but Angela had already given her approval. *It’s another thing she handled before I took over.* Marc tried not to be resentful.

Marc saw Bret had his kit in hand and a backpack on over his rookie Eagle gear. The boy wasn’t officially part of the rookies yet, but he would be. Marc did approve of that. All Mitchels needed to be in the Eagles where they could be watched.

“The weather checks have all been clear, but the wind is picking up out there.”

Marc could see the trees moving through the window of the restaurant. It was warm and dry. He hoped that wind meant they had a little rain coming. He was tired of taking a shower and then being covered in dust just from the walk back to the bunkhouse.

“That’s all I have for now. I’ll be up around lunchtime.”

Marc took the leadership book Adrian pushed across the table and stored it in his jacket. “I’ll come get you if I need you sooner.”

“Have a good morning.” Adrian left before his great mood caused Marc to lash out at him. Unlike Marc, Adrian wasn’t in a hurry to revive their rivalry. The last weeks had been good for him. He was looking forward to more of it.

Adrian motioned to Bret. “Let’s get some sleep. Later, we’ll rearrange the shack to make room for you.”

Bret had his sleeping bag in his kit. He didn’t care that he would be spending his first day on the floor. He was just thrilled that they had received permission.

Bret gave Marc a cool nod as he followed Adrian. He had tried to increase his bond with Marc because Marc was obviously a better influence, but Marc’s attitude had stayed closed off since they’d found out Adrian was his father.

Bret tried not to be angry about that. *I would rather be with my dad anyway. Marc is too strict. He’s definitely a Reicher.*

Adrian caught that. “Very few people have ever created a bond with Marc. Don’t take it personally.”

Bret looked toward the path to the clinic. “There’s something going on there.”

Adrian sent that to Marc and then took the opposite path toward Cliff Road. “Marc will cover

it. He's good at what he does when his mind is on it."

"Is his mind on it right now?"

Adrian thought of their attempts to find out what was going on with Angela. "No, but he'll do his duty. That's what he's known for."

Bret looked over curiously. "What are you known for?"

Adrian considered how long it had taken him to get back in control of Safe Haven and smiled brightly. "I *never* give up."

#### 4

Marc got up and headed for the little clinic, leaving his coffee mug behind as an example to the others. A lot of their dishes were ending up in odd places because people were walking out of the restaurant with them.

Marc spotted Parker entering the church with an armful of bags and a pack over his shoulder. The newly chosen leader of the church group was redecorating with fancy items from the ship that Tim had scorned. Gold curtains were already up over the windows and there were a dozen rocking chairs on the small front porch, hiding the bullet holes from their battle with Corey and Martin.

Marc was sure most of the church members would like having those things on display and for their use. The chairs were a good idea in Marc's opinion. Tim hadn't wanted his parishioners to



gather and exchange gossip on church grounds, but people needed time with others like themselves. Parker seemed to know that.

The wind blew Marc's hair around, reminding him that he was no longer high and tight. While Candy had been ill, they hadn't had anyone cutting hair. Marc hoped she resumed that career. There was a fully stocked salon on the ship. It just needed someone to run it.

Marc went faster as he began to pick up the bad vibes coming from the clinic. He found it interesting that neither he nor Adrian had been the ones to feel it even though it involved Angela. Her bond with Bret was something of a concern to Marc, though he'd never mentioned it. Marc had tried not to be biased against Bret because of his father, but he'd failed at that. Marc didn't like it that Angela was so close to the boy.

Marc saw Kenn coming down the path from the ship and remembered who else was at the clinic. Kenn had felt something happening where he and Adrian hadn't. "That only means one thing. She's shielding from us."

Kenn had just come from the ship. After getting drunk, he had gone there to get a shower and a clean change of clothes, but he could tell Marc was able to smell the alcohol by the way his nostrils flared. "Save the intervention for Theo and Jack."

Marc frowned. "I don't know what Angela has planned for Jack, but Theo needs more than an intervention."

Kenn nodded. “Nothing seems to get through to Theo. Angela’s going to have to take drastic actions if she wants to save him.”

Marc winced mentally. When Angela got drastic, things got unpleasant.

“What are we walking into?” Kenn had been drawn by Tonya’s pain, but he wasn’t able to connect to her, so he didn’t know what had caused it.

Marc shrugged. “I can’t get through either. We’ll find out together.”

They didn’t see anyone else as they moved through the jungle, not even the brawlers. Everyone was either asleep or getting ready for the events of the day. The clinic wouldn’t be busy until after all of that was over.

Both men brought up shields as they reached the clinic and saw Terry and Timmy standing outside on the porch. Both males had expressions that said there was a problem they couldn’t handle.

“It’s Kenn and Marc!” Timmy was relieved. “They’ll handle it.” He quickly headed for town.

Terry lingered, waiting to see if they needed support.

Kenn put a hand on his holster. “Who’s in there with them?”

Marc had a more important question. “Why didn’t you call for help?”

Terry frowned at both of them, not appreciating the accusing tones. “It’s just Tonya and the boss in

there. I didn't call for help because it's just Tonya and the boss in there."

Terry headed toward town, following Timmy's example. The boy had the right idea to get away from here.

Kenn and Marc exchanged worried glances. If Tonya and Angela were having a fight, it would wreck the peace between them and disturb the camp.

The sound of crying echoed as Kenn reached for the door handle.

Mutters, like someone using magic, flooded out next.

"Angela?"

"Tonya, honey?"

The men entered the deserted clinic with shields up and their senses tingling.

Nothing was out of place in the lobby as far as they could tell. There were boxes everywhere that the medics were sorting through to give Angela numbers about their supplies. Everything else was where it belonged.

Marc motioned for Kenn to go first.

Kenn snorted quietly and took point, easing down the hallway as the noises got louder.

The door was open to the first room. Kenn peered inside carefully and saw Tonya on the cot in the corner. Her sobs were rocking her shoulders. She was drawn up into the fetal position, soaking herself with her tears.

Judging from her puffy face and wrinkled clothes, Kenn didn't think Tonya had gotten much sleep. It wasn't the first time. Nightmares of Rico's death had become common for her.

Kenn lowered his shield and entered the exam room. It was a relief to find her finally letting those emotions out. She might be able to move on after this.

Kenn gently scooped Tonya into his arms and held her on his lap while she cried. He didn't care what was going on with Angela. He only cared about Tonya.

Marc kept going to the supply room, where Angela had been spending a couple of nights a week. She said her ups and downs during the night bothered the camp. Marc hadn't believed that excuse. He still didn't.

Marc lowered his shield and opened the door. "Angie?"

Marc paused in the doorway, taking in the situation in a fast glance.

Angela was sitting on the cot, scowling and holding her stomach. Supplies and books were flying through the room in a giant circle, spinning faster and faster. Pencils, staplers, books, and pieces of clothing smacked into the wall before bouncing back into the air to rejoin the other debris in the tiny tornado.

Angela didn't appear to be in any danger or pain. Marc was grateful for that.

"I woke up in a bad mood. It flipped her."

Marc stepped in far enough to shut the door and then retreated against it to get out of the way of the whirling dervish of supplies and gear in the center of the room.

“It’s time to settle down! You’ve vented enough.”

The spinning debris flew faster at Angela’s order.

Angela let out a grunt of annoyance. “I mean it. Stop!”

Marc suddenly understood all of those moments where she had excused herself when someone annoyed her or displeased her. “You had to get out of there so the camp didn’t see this.”

Angela rubbed gently on her hard stomach to calm the upset baby. “She’s very strong. They won’t understand that she’s just reacting to my emotions.”

“Is that normal?”

Angela snorted. “Nothing about this is normal.”

“You know what I meant.”

Angela sighed. “I think so. Babies from byzan parents are stronger; they inherit the strongest gift from either parent. Even when locked, they can control through emotion spells. *This* baby has inherited gifts from both of us.”

Marc saw it all at once, understanding she had been afraid he would side with the camp. Marc walked over to her, sidestepping the spinning debris. He leaned down and placed a hand on her stomach. “Stop it now.”

All of the debris immediately crashed to the floor, echoing through the clinic.

Angela huffed. “Daddy’s little girl, huh?”

Marc was concerned. The baby already had so much power that Angela couldn’t control her. “We need to talk about this.”

A piece of debris lifted from the floor and slammed into the closed door.

Marc’s eyes narrowed.

Angela held up a hand so he could assist her off of the cot. “Let’s do that later, after she’s had a meal and a nap.”

Marc scanned the mess in the room and reluctantly agreed. If she flipped out in front of the camp, it would scare everyone. “But I’m not going to forget, no matter how many times you mess with my memories. And that reminds me, stop messing with my damn mind! I went through enough of that in the lab.”

Angela dropped her head, regretful. “I won’t do it again.”

Marc stared suspiciously at how easily she had given in.

Angela smiled as her stomach finally settled. “Do you have time to escort me to breakfast?”

“Of course.” The sooner they got food into her, the better.

Angela took Marc’s arm and carefully stepped over the debris as they left. “Tell them I was upset about the trip to Hell.”

“I will.” Marc didn’t know what they were going to do about that either, but he was aware that Angela was using it as a distraction technique. He let her think it worked, not wanting to upset the baby by flipping her mood again. “It’s gonna be one of those days.”

Angela shivered.

## 5

“Why is this door unlocked?” Thelma pushed the barn door open and stepped inside.

Still in the loft, Jack looked down at her and then went back to the bottle he had dug out of a crate. It was his second and he was almost finished with it.

Next to him, Theo finally stirred.

“What’s going on in here?!”

Theo glanced around at Thelma’s shout, not sure where he was at first. The strong stench of old alcohol filled his nose.

Thelma left, heading for the man on point. She hated drunks and drinking. If it was up to her, it would be outlawed. She was disappointed with Theo, but she wasn’t surprised about it. She hadn’t expected to find Jack here, though. “We need to put a better lock on the door.”

Theo began to realize what he had done. Bitterness and anger filled his mind. He didn’t have any leverage to make a deal with Thelma not to tell on him. “I hate being a normal!”

Theo staggered to a crate and began grabbing bottles. He smashed them against the wall, not flinching from the glass that hit his arms and face.

Jack cradled his bottle closer to protect it.

The sound of shattering glass drew attention from the guards.

“I hate this damn place! I hate my life!” Theo threw another unopened bottle against the barn wall. “I hate myself!”

Jack nodded drunkenly and tilted his bottle up again.

Theo noticed it. He staggered over and clumsily snatched the bottle out of Jack’s hands. “That’s enough! No one is going to drink anymore!”

Theo threw the bottle on the ground, splashing them both in whiskey and glass.

Jack leaned over and threw up on Theo’s dusty boots.

Stuart and a few of the brawlers entered the barn right then.

“It stinks in here!”

Stuart scanned the situation and pointed at Theo. “Arrest him.”

Theo didn’t resist as two of the brawlers handcuffed him and helped him down the steps. “No more drinking! No more!”

Stuart studied the mess as the two brawlers led Theo out of the barn and toward the jail. Only a few residents were out and about to see Theo taken away, but it was enough to get the gossip line started



early. “Someone go find Marc and fill him in. He needs to know it’s gonna be one of those days.”

Chapter Thirteen  
**One More Try**  
The Cruise Ship

1

“**T**his is a bad idea.” Greg opened the little black box and admired the beautiful diamond ring again. He’d just picked it out from the ship’s biggest jewelry store. It would clip right ovetop of Erin’s engagement ring.

Morgan’s suggestion to make his commitment tangible was a good one. It would make him take it more seriously and it would soothe Erin’s ruffled feathers.

Greg still knew he was about to make a big mistake. He didn’t want to solidify his relationship with Erin. In fact, he wanted to end it. *It’s too late to back out.*

Greg opened the door to their small cabin on the descendant deck.

Erin was laying on their bed. She spread her legs as wide as they would go. “Good morning.”

Erin knew jealous rants weren’t going to save their relationship. She was hoping more sex might. Greg definitely enjoyed her body. If he was spent, maybe it would keep his mind where it belonged.

Greg swallowed, hardening at the sight of her naked flesh. "It's getting better." Greg shut the door with his boot.

Erin saw the ring box.

Greg pulled the ring out and dropped it onto her flat stomach. Then he knelt between her legs and got to work.

"It's beautiful! Oh!" Erin held the ring and arched as Greg pleased her.

Passing by the door, Ray snickered at the sounds and kept going.

The amusement quickly faded, returning his mind to his problem. He went to the chapel on the ship while it was empty. The camp members and Eagles came here often to remember their lost fighters and heroes. Ray wanted it to himself for a little while.

There was a busy day ahead for everyone, thanks to Angela's surprise event. The camp would be happily traipsing all over the island while watching training sessions and Eagle lessons. Ray wasn't looking forward to any of it like he used to.

Ray paused in front of the chapel door to read the new rules. A copy had been posted here as well as on the church door in town.

*A list of all members, kept current, will be given to the Law Council.*

*There is no Seal of Confession. If you know and don't tell, you will share the punishment.*

*Camp rules come before any other rules.*

*All members will attend the execution, no matter their age.*

Ray believed some of those were a bit harsh, but he understood why Angela was doing it this way. If she didn't, the camp might rebel against the church group and drive them out. People were furious that Tim had known about Courtney, and then Corey and Martin, but hadn't warned anyone.

So was Ray, even though he believed Tim had been trying to help those troubled people. Tim had a kind heart and a complete disregard for authority that was about to get him removed.

Ray opened the door and stopped, spotting one of their kids in the chapel. "Hello?"

Leeann peered at him with confusion on her little face. "I'm like you...right?"

Ray nodded, entering but not shutting the door. He assumed she meant a descendant. "Why are you here?"

As far as he knew, Leeann hadn't had a connection with the fighters or heroes who'd died.

"I miss Romeo and Sean."

Ray remembered how many kids they'd lost to the radiation sickness. He still didn't like it that the girl was in here by herself. "Do the den mothers know where you are?"

"Probably. I come here every morning."

The little girl was healthy and she was neat and clean like most of the other kids, but it was easy to

tell she wasn't happy. Ray would have recognized that even if it hadn't matched his own mental chaos.

Leeann knew her gifts were locked, though she didn't know why. She was still able to tell that Ray also had magic.

Leeann took a chance. "I'm going to ask you something. Please don't lie to me."

Ray stiffened, suddenly sure what was coming. "I'm the wrong one to ask, kiddo."

Leeann frowned. "Because the boss locked me. I have to talk to her about it."

Ray was relieved that it hadn't been what he'd suspected. "Anything related to kids or magic has to go through the boss. I'd help you if I could."

Leeann sprang the trap. "Then tell me who Billy is."

Ray immediately left the chapel. He headed for the man on point to let him know the girl's memory charm was weakening.

Leeann scanned the crated memorial, lost and scared. "He must be bad or they'd tell me."

Leeann left the chapel. She had lessons starting shortly; her mind dwelled on the mystery man that she wasn't allowed to have any information about. "There has to be someone who will tell me the truth."

She didn't know why it was so important, but Leeann knew it was. There was a feeling that her entire life might change when she got that forbidden information.

Kenn came up the stairs from the ship's medical bay and spotted Ray. Running on a partial hangover and only half the normal amount of sleep, Kenn hesitated to make contact.

He'd just gotten Tonya calmed and settled in for the day, though she'd still refused to talk about Rico. She was supposed to give a chemistry lesson to some of the older kids later. The last thing Kenn wanted to deal with right now was another emotional female.

Ray sneered, offended. "You're the bitch in this camp, not me!"

Kenn snorted at the insult. "We need to talk."

Ray went down the hallway. "Save it for your diary, Mary. I'm busy."

Kenn gawked. He was used to Ray being polite and sometimes even overly friendly. Ray wasn't behaving that way now. He was scanning Kenn in dislike. Kenn wasn't used to feeling that way around Ray. "What the hell is your problem?"

"I don't have one."

Ray wasn't angry with Kenn, but he needed to make Kenn leave him alone until he was finished considering his options. He had one final choice to make and then it didn't matter if Kenn or anyone else found out what his problem was.

"Yeah, that's why your fiancé cornered me in the barn last night and threatened me, because you guys don't have a problem."

Ray reluctantly stopped. “Grant talked to you?”  
Kenn grimaced. “Yelled, accused, threatened.  
There wasn’t much talking.”

“I’m sorry he involved you in my issue.”

“So there is a problem.” Kenn took a guess.  
“Wedding jitters?”

Ray resumed his stride through the hallway.  
“Yep. Cold feet. Now leave me alone.”

Kenn wanted to, but Grant’s threat was echoing  
in the rear of his mind. After what he’d heard during  
their trip to Hell, Kenn didn’t need more problems.  
“Let’s go grab a cup of coffee in the mess and talk,  
like we used to.”

“No.” Ray stepped into the elevator and quickly  
pushed the button. “I’ll make sure Grant leaves you  
alone from now on. Now go play with yourself or  
something.”

Kenn stared in annoyance as the elevator door  
shut before he could get in. He didn’t want to be  
involved, but Ray’s behavior had just made that  
impossible.

Kenn had saved Ray’s life, more than once. He  
felt responsible for the man. He added it to his to-  
do list. “Now I just have to figure out how to get  
him to talk. His lips are locked tighter than Tonya’s  
asshole.”

“I thought *you* were Tonya’s asshole.”

Kenn jumped and turned, hitting the wall and  
almost pissing himself.

Morgan kept going toward the cargo bay to gather more supplies for the gutting lesson. He laughed hard.

Talking with Greg had made Morgan feel better. He was light on sleep, but he had woken in a better mood than he had since before the mission team left. He had spent the last weeks mourning Hannah and hating himself for not preventing her death, but talking to Greg had reminded Morgan that the Eagles didn't just grieve. They took active steps to keep it from happening again.

There was a huge mystery about why anyone named Megan or Hannah never survived. Morgan was determined to figure out what it was and put an end to it. He hadn't checked the names on the camp list in a while, but he was certain there was already another female in this camp by at least one of those names who was doomed to die. *I couldn't save my Hannah, but maybe I can save someone else's.*

The biggest problem was that he didn't know where to start. Joey obviously wasn't going to give them any information, and Doug and his group up at the Weigh Station had limited information, not that Morgan was allowed to contact either of those places. "I just need a starting point."

The voice in Morgan's mind spoke up, something it rarely did. Morgan had never gotten comfortable with his magic, so his demon had never felt welcome. *The man you just mocked is a scroll diver. Scrolls contain unlimited information, if you can reach them.*



Morgan stopped, groaning. “Damn it!”  
He turned around and went back up the hallway.  
“Hey, Kenn! Wait up!”

### 3

“Hey, Marc! Wait up!”

Marc stopped on the dusty jungle path. He’d been going to the jail for a check in there.

Mike hurried to catch up.

Marc wasn’t happy. He’d just gotten Ray’s report about Leeann’s memory charm weakening and now Mike was coming to tell him someone had called on the radio. That was the only thing that would have gotten Mike to leave the radio cubby during his shift.

Marc studied the teenager as he approached. Something had changed with Mike since he’d gotten that job, but Marc wasn’t sure what.

His demon gave him the answer. *That boy has more dark spots than a rotten banana.*

“I took a call from Australia!”

Marc read the scribbled note while digging into Mike while he was distracted. The boy was wearing Eagle gear and he looked like any of the other rookies. Marc had the sense that the boy was trying hard to present a perfect image.

Mike smiled. “From Australia! There are survivors there!”

“Hush.”

Mike's happiness faded. "I can't tell anyone about it."

Marc finished the note and put it into his book. "Not until after I make it public."

Marc was relieved that it wasn't bad news. The animals Tilly had promised to give them were gathered and waiting to be collected. Tilly wanted to deliver them and then stay a few days for a visit between nations.

Marc didn't know if Angela would agree. He'd gotten the sense that Angela didn't really like Tilly and her group. "I'll let you share the details, but you can't reveal how you got that information."

Mike turned back toward the ship to resume his shift. "I'll say I overheard Adrian talking about it."

Marc frowned at the smart, cruel answer. He didn't call the boy back because he didn't have a reason to grill him. He made a note in his book and continued toward the small jail.

Samantha was on her way to deal with Theo. Marc didn't know if she would also get Tim's last wishes while she was there, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Marc wanted to hear those last wishes and to offer support if Samantha needed it. There was no doubt that Tim would try to make her feel bad because she hadn't been able to get him cleared of the charges.

Marc also wanted to be there in case Adrian showed up. He already knew Neil had been by. If either of those men were guilted into breaking a rule, they would be removed. Marc actually hoped

that happened to Adrian, but he planned to talk to Neil and save the trooper from himself. Neil had been his first friend in this camp. Marc still felt like he owed Neil for that. “Some debts just have to be paid.”

Marc had expected his time in the lab to make him a harder, more bitter person, but it seemed to have done the opposite. Neil was going to get one more try. “But not Tim. He blew his second chance when Courtney confessed and all he did was pray about it.”

Marc heard heavy steps hurrying up the path and stopped again, already knowing it was for him. This first day hadn’t been bad, but it had been busy. He’d gotten used to a slow wake up with coffee and quiet while Angela handled this stuff. *Doesn’t she know I’m going to make changes? Isn’t she worried that I won’t want to give it back?*

Grant tried not to sound out of breath as he finally reached Marc. The radiation sickness hadn’t entirely left him. He often felt like someone was sitting on his chest whenever he participated in any physical activity. “We have a weather system approaching from the southeast. It’s moving slowly. Should be here in a couple of days.”

Grant was dripping sweat and obviously miserable. Marc gave him an approving nod as he took the note, along with the man’s nightly report from yesterday. “Let me know if that changes.”

“I will.” Grant headed back to the ship, running. Regaining his health was important to Grant. The

lessons and classes they were holding today were likely to suck for him because he was still so weak. “But I’m doing it anyway. Eagles don’t give up.”

Marc tucked the papers into his book and stayed still, able to feel someone else coming toward him. The weather report was handy and he admired Grant’s determination to get in shape, but it could have waited. The person approaching him had a problem that couldn’t. If he let this one go, she might upset the camp with her panic.

Lisa hurried up the path, bouncing in all the right places. Marc found her beautiful, though not on Angela’s level. He doubted anyone would ever be able to compare to Angie in his mind, but Lisa was definitely among the top 20 most attractive women in camp.

Lisa felt his regard and ignored it. She was used to being noticed for her body first and her brain last. “Dace is missing. I can’t find him in camp at all.”

“Did you check on the ship?”

Lisa frowned. “No. Why would he be on the ship?”

“Because it was his home.” Marc had caught Dace’s thoughts an hour ago when he’d passed the man wheeling himself down the jungle path. “Dace is mourning his old life. You have to let him go through the grieving process. When he gets angry enough to fight back, you can help him. Until then, there isn’t much you can do.”

Dace hadn't been in the lab, but he'd still suffered. Marc was sorry for it. He hadn't wanted to trade his freedom for Dace's mobility.

Lisa didn't stare at Marc like many of the women in their camp did. She wasn't attracted to him. Even if she had been, she had more important things on her mind. "He's very depressed."

"A lot of people are. It comes from life throwing balls we can't always catch."

Lisa flushed at his tone. It said he hadn't forgotten that she'd stirred up the normals on the sub and contributed to them dying. "I served my time for that. Fuck off!" Lisa headed for the ship while calling mentally for Jack to come help her.

A grin stretched Marc's lips. No one else would say that to him without fearing payback. Like her or not, Lisa had guts. Marc respected that in anyone. He made another note in his book and continued on. "Let's try this again."

#### 4

"Don't give up. You can't ever give up."

Neil walked between the kids who were struggling through the kai lesson, a few of them for the first time. Angela had sent some of them to these lessons over the last few months, but he had a full roster of students today. "Life is hard. All of the things we go through are hard. That's the price we have to pay for surviving. It's easy for the dead

people. They don't have to do this crazy shit anymore."

The kids giggled in surprise at his comment. They were dirty and sweaty. If not for their smaller size, it would have been like teaching any other rookie Eagles to defend themselves.

The few adults who were here watched in disapproval. They expected Neil to have more respect for the dead than to talk about them that way.

Neil knew the kids needed extreme motivation. They had just been forced to eat oatmeal and none of them were going to be allowed in the cage for the matches during Angela's XO tryouts. They needed a release as much as the adults did.

The kids would have a shower and playtime on the ship after this. Then they would attend their school lessons, have dinner, and get ready for bed. They'd discovered that later hours for schooling and shorter times in those classes gave them better results. Safe Haven wasn't using school as a babysitter, unlike in the old world, where school hours had matched that hated 9-5 schedule. It hadn't been designed to help the kids and that was part of why it hadn't worked. Neil hadn't felt that way before. Now that he had children, his views on nearly everything had changed.

All of the kids on Angela's list had been rotated through the ten-minute lessons she'd wanted them to have for picking a career. They needed these children to grow up and replace the adults in specific jobs, but none of the kids had shown a talent

for those positions yet, other than Cody, who was being trained by Wade. Today's lessons would hopefully help. They had to assign a job soon to all of the kids who were approaching their teenage years. It couldn't wait. Time certainly wouldn't.

Many of the adults were hosting a session right now. Thomas was working on the ship with Grant, seeing if that group of older kids had a proclivity for sailing or wiring. Tonya was overseeing a chemistry class. Morgan was teaching a group to prep fish. Terry had a first aid class going. Daryl was overseeing a carpentry class. The kids would all be tired by the time the den mothers collected them. The trainers would then go to the Eagle event on the runway for downtime. The boss had planned a full day for everyone.

Neil eyed the taped-off hatch nearby. He wasn't hearing the alligators this far away from town, but he was still doing a regular check on the hatch. "Surviving is the hardest thing that any of us can do. You think your school lessons are rough. You've heard about the missions some of us have been on as Eagles and you feel bad for the things we've gone through, but honestly, the hardest thing is just getting up every day and making yourself keep going no matter what. Surviving is hard. You have to keep trying."

Neil returned to the front of the group and began to run through the rookie level again himself, going slow to demonstrate each move.

The kids tried hard to copy him. They knew Angela wanted them to learn how to do this, and many of them had watched the adults in longing for how well they controlled their bodies and how well they could fight, but it was incredibly difficult to force their little limbs into submission.

Amy swung her fist to the right and tried to kick to the left. She overbalanced and fell backward, smacking into Cody. They both hit the ground, groaning.

Neil continued with his demonstration. “Get up! Eagles don’t quit!”

Amy’s rage flared out in a quick moment, sending heat toward Neil. “I’m not an Eagle!”

Neil blocked her spell and sent it right back at her, burning the little girl’s skin with her own heat.

Amy’s scream echoed through the jungle, drawing guards and camp members.

Neil had already known Amy’s gifts weren’t locked anymore. Now, he would have to report it to the boss.

Amy began to cry, though it wasn’t from the pain. “I’m sorry, Daddy Neil!”

Amy didn’t want Neil to be upset with her. She loved her life with her new parents. It was just impossible to control the anger sometimes.

Cody helped Amy to her feet and then resumed his place. He didn’t offer any encouragement or a reprimand, but both went through his mind. Now that he was being trained for leadership, Cody saw everything differently. In this moment, he wasn’t



the right one to give her either of the things she needed.

The other kids continued their workout while waiting to see if Amy was going to be punished. If she was, it would upset everyone. If she wasn't, it would encourage them to also misbehave.

Neil knew he was in an awkward place, and not just because of fairness. He adored Amy and loved having her in their lives. He didn't want her to be unhappy. Their family didn't need to have their boat rocked anymore. He used a sharp tone anyway. "Restart from the beginning!"

Amy scrubbed the tears from her face and immediately did as he said.

"All of you have the rage illness." Neil decided it was time for the truth. "The alpha sent you here to learn how to control yourself. If you can't do that, you won't be allowed to stay in our camp, no matter who you're related to or who you're living with. You already know Ralph and Tim are being removed from our camp. The rage illness made Ralph do bad things and now he has to leave. I don't want that happening to any of you, but I can't do this for you. You have to work harder. You have to try harder. You have to never give up!"

Encouraged by his words, the kids repeated it, "Never give up!"

Neil was reminded of the animated film with that tagline. *We should show them that movie this week.*

He forced his mind back into the lesson. “Swing to the right and balance on your heel so you’re able to spin and kick with the left leg. I want you to practice this. I want to see your little bodies kicking and punching all over this camp!”

Walking by on the way to the jail, Samantha smiled. “He’s really good with them.”

Wade nodded. Neil was one of the best instructors in camp, on any number of subjects. “It’s a great lesson. They need to learn how important it is to keep trying even when things are hard.”

Samantha and Wade were both concerned about Amy’s actions, but not because of what Angela might do to her. They assumed the little girl would be locked again. Their concern was about the rage illness. Without a cure that worked on their kids, Safe Haven’s future was dark and dangerous.

“Angela will cover it.”

Wade smiled at Samantha’s attempt to reassure him. “I think so, too.”

Wade was enjoying the time alone with his partner. He had a long day ahead of him. After the diving team lesson, he was going to the runway to help with the Eagle event. After that, he had to put in his two hours of workout time and then Angela would probably give him another shift overnight. It was nice to have these few minutes alone with Samantha.

Samantha hugged Wade tightly, but she wasn’t enjoying the moment as much as he was. She had a

hard duty waiting for her at the jail. She was glad she wasn't going to be doing this anymore. *I just have to pick a replacement who's fair and completely trustworthy. In this camp, that's an extreme challenge.*

"Do you think we can talk the boss into giving Ralph one more try?" She already knew Tim wasn't going to be given that opportunity.

Wade led her up the path away from the kai lesson. "There isn't a chance in hell of that, Samantha. Not in this one or in Joey's kingdom. Tim is dead and Ralph is a goner."

## 5

Jack hurried down the path, unable to stay in the center of it. He was still drunk.

Lisa heard him coming and turned.

"Where is he?"

"Marc said he's on the ship."

"He can't get on the cruise ship by himself." Jack knew that for sure. When Dace wanted to go to the memorial, he had to be carried on someone's back and someone else had to lug his wheelchair.

Lisa caught a whiff of Jack; her nose wrinkled at the pungent smell of old alcohol.

Jack staggered toward the beach path.

Lisa wished she'd called someone else to help. She trusted Jack, but she'd never been around him when he was drinking.

"I'm not drinking. I did that already."

Lisa followed, grabbing his arm when he headed for a tree.

Jack sucked in a tight breath at the contact.

Lisa let go. Many of the people in Safe Haven didn't like to be touched.

Lisa went around him, understanding she would have to take the lead. She flipped her radio on in case she needed to call for someone who'd had coffee this morning and not bourbon.

Jack focused on her ass so he didn't hit a tree. His feet teetered and wobbled, but his mind started to clear.

Lisa pointed as they came out of the jungle. "His chair!"

Lisa kept going by the overturned wheelchair, following deep drag marks in the sand.

Jack stopped by the chair for a moment to check for blood.

Not seeing any, he resumed his drunken jog. He'd been mostly out when Lisa's mental call for his help had come. He'd immediately gotten up, wiped off on some of the old hay, and answered her need. *It's what the boss told me to do.*

"Come on!" Lisa ran across the dock, seeing small blood spots on the wood. "He crawled across the dock!"

"Dragged his-self." Jack hiccupped, stomach turning. He didn't like being on the water when he was like this.

"I see him!" Lisa ran faster.

Dace was sitting on the end of the dock, leaning against the railing that went up the steps to the cruise ship. He was staring at the open ocean.

Dace heard them coming. He didn't look up. "Damn chair flipped me out when I hit the sand too fast."

Lisa scanned him as she reached him, seeing tiny holes in the knees of his pants and blood drying on his elbows. "Why didn't you call for one of us?!"

Dace ignored her question. "I want the fog to come back."

Jack leaned over the dock and vomited.

Dace snickered. "That's one vote against it."

Lisa began to relax as she realized Dace hadn't come here to hurt himself.

"I'm facing what happened and letting go of my hopes, my dreams." Dace started to cry. "I'll never walk again."

Lisa dropped down and held him, heart breaking.

Jack threw up again, offering his full support.

Chapter Fourteen  
**Sole Target**

1

“I can’t believe you left me in here all night after that joke of a trial!” Tim didn’t give Samantha a chance to respond as she and Wade entered the jailhouse. “You’re a shitty lawyer!”

Guilt flooded Samantha even though there hadn’t been any way for her to win this one.

Gus looked over from his seat at the desk. “You’re a condemned man. You aren’t a priority.”

“Shut up, Gus! You shouldn’t even be in this camp!” Tim was in a furious mood. He didn’t try to censor his words. “I heard about you torturing your teammates. You should be in this cell, not me!”

“I see you’re having a good morning.” Samantha signed in at the desk.

Gus shrugged. “He’s been ranting for hours. I almost don’t hear it anymore.”

Ralph and Gus were both suffering from lack of sleep, but Tim was wide awake and breathing fire. He was using his fear to keep himself going.

Samantha smiled at Gus. “Tell Bernice we’d like her to sit with us for dinner tonight.”

“I will.” Gus was glad of the offer. He had to do the overnight shift here for the rest of the week. This

way, Bernice and Crissy wouldn't have to sit alone for the meal.

“You can't let them do this to me!”

Wade pointed at Tim. “Already tired of hearing you. Close that big mouth or I'll ask the boss to knock you out until the execution.”

Tim crossed his arms over his chest and glowered, but he didn't keep yelling. If he was knocked out, he couldn't work on getting out of this mess.

“You aren't getting out of it, Tim. You deserve to be here.” Wade had no sympathy for his former teammate.

Samantha went to Ralph's small cell. “I convinced the boss to give you some supplies.”

“Thank you.” Daisey was on the cot across from Ralph's cell. She slowly sat up, face filled with puffy wrinkles. “Tell her I'm going with my husband.”

Sam nodded. “She knows. There are also supplies from your share of the camp's stock. It should be enough to cover you two for a couple of weeks.”

“What about my sons?”

Samantha frowned. Those conversations had been extremely awkward. “They've decided to stay here, Ralph. They'll be by to talk to you over the next few days.”

At least Samantha hoped they would. Ralph's sons were horrified by his crimes. They didn't want

to be associated with him so the camp's displeasure didn't rub off on them.

"Good. They'll be safe here." Ralph tried not to cry again. His face already hurt from how much of that he'd been doing. "Make Daisey stay here, too."

"Not going to happen." Daisey didn't want to leave, but she loved Ralph. "We're married. You can't get rid of me."

"But we'll die out there alone!"

Daisey nodded at Ralph's shout. "Until death do us part. We'll go out together."

Gus got up and went outside so he didn't have to be affected by their emotions for a few minutes. "Wade has point in here."

Wade understood. He didn't like it either. Daisey should stay here. He also understood love. If Neil or Samantha had been banished, he would go with them, too.

Outside, Gus spotted Marc leaning against the side of the jail. He turned his thoughts to the beautiful day so he didn't give it away. Marc obviously wanted to listen without being seen. Gus was suddenly sure Marc had been here for Neil's visit as well.

Inside, Samantha delivered the rest of the terms of Ralph's banishment. "Your belongings will be loaded onto the mission ship. You'll be vaccinated and confined to quarters for that trip. You'll be escorted off the ship as soon as it reaches America. You're not allowed to stay on the boat. Don't beg for it; the Eagles won't agree."



Ralph sniffed, tears welling. “I won’t. Tell them all I’m sorry.”

Samantha wiped the sympathy from her face as she focused on the third prisoner in the small cells. Theo reeked of alcohol. So did his clothes and his cell. “The boss gave me a message for you.”

Theo braced for it while holding his head. He had an awful hangover.

“She said you can do things her way now or leave with the next team and don’t ever come back. She’s had enough.”

Theo had been expecting it. “I’ll do whatever she wants.” He assumed he would be spending a few weeks right here in this cell.

Samantha was glad he’d given the right answer. “I got you out on bail.”

Theo stared in surprise. “How did you manage that?”

“I asked for help from someone who wants what’s best for you.”

The jailhouse door opened. Debra stepped in.

Debra was suntanned, with red spots and skin peeling in places. Her hair was in a wet braid and her pretty face was clear of makeup; she didn’t need it.

Samantha tried not to be jealous. Debra had youth on her side. *And my hair will grow back. I just have to give it more time.*

Theo was humiliated, but relieved that Debra cared enough to help him. He gazed at her in regret and longing, wishing he’d handled everything

differently. He missed waking up next to her, even if it had been just relief moments.

“You’re being released into Debra’s custody.” Samantha frowned at the hungover man. “If you drink a single drop or cause a speck of trouble, Debra will be the one to pay for it.”

“I won’t.” Theo was ashamed of himself for losing control of his anger, for drinking, for all of it.

Samantha pointed at the sign in sheet. “As soon as she signs her name, Gus can let you out.”

Debra flashed fast hand signals.

Samantha translated since Theo was too hungover to keep up. “She has a class. She wants you to go get a shower, a meal, and then to meet her on the beach by the dock.”

Theo stared at Debra. A hundred thoughts came to mind, but none of them came out of his mouth.

Gus stuck his head in the door. “I heard it. Go on and take him.”

Gus stayed outside, waiting for them to be done and gone. He wanted to resume snoozing at the desk. He hadn’t adjusted to switching shifts yet.

Samantha spared a glance for Tim and found him still glaring at her. She decided a little more bad news wouldn’t hurt since he’d already been sentenced to die. “That attitude is why you got a death sentence and Ralph didn’t. You don’t believe you did anything wrong. All of this is your own fault.” She held up a hand as Tim’s mouth opened to fire back. “I’m resigning as your lawyer, Tim. From now on, you’re on your own.”

Adrian was already up before his alarm went off, echoing through the small stone bunker under his shack. He and Bret were rearranging things to make room for the boy's gear and a bed. This small shack hadn't been made for two people, but they would get it set up for that anyway. It just took time and hard work, things both males were familiar with.

Adrian shut the alarm off and then paused to examine the results of their efforts.

They had moved everything out from along one side and cleared off two of the shelves that were built into the wall. There would be just enough room. Adrian planned to get a small mattress from the cruise ship later. "Get your stuff put away, then go to the restaurant for lunch."

Bret frowned lightly as Adrian wiped off and then got a clean shirt. "You're leaving early."

Bret hoped it wasn't because Adrian was already tired of being around him.

"I have a pitstop to make before I join Marc for rounds."

Bret read his thoughts. "Tell him no."

Adrian didn't want to talk about Tim. "Make sure you shut the door when you leave. We don't need animals in here."

Bret stared after his father, noticing Adrian hadn't answered. Bret worried about that; he

couldn't help it. Adrian had a reputation for doing what he wanted and not following the rules. Bret was afraid he was about to lose the new life he had just set up for himself.

Adrian felt Bret's concern, but the boy didn't comprehend the situation as well as he thought he did. When Bret was older, he would be faced with some of the same choices. It was never easy to pick between duty and honor.

Adrian hurried down Cliff Road, eager to get this chore out of the way.

The den mothers, with Trent in the lead, were coming up the path with a line of kids between them. The kids were dirty, dusty, tired, and glad to be going to town. They didn't usually have such a full day. Adrian was certain the den mothers would be happy when the kids crashed early.

Adrian met Cate's eyes. She was sullen because their private lesson had been canceled.

Adrian noticed Cate had stopped wearing clothes with bows or decorations. He planned to ask her about it at their next training session. He wasn't sure when that would be. Angela hadn't rescheduled any of the shifts that were supposed to happen today.

Cate glared at him and kept walking.

Adrian snickered. He'd been looking forward to it as well, but it was better that the little girl understood sometimes the fun things had to be put on hold until the work was finished.

Cody put his arm around his twin sister. “It’s okay. You’ll get to beat him up next time.”

Cate kept her voice down so the den mothers didn’t overhear her. “I wanted to talk to him.”

“About what?”

“About mom, our first mom.”

Cody immediately dropped his arm and went to walk next to Missy.

Cate rubbed her wrist where the gold bracelet Joey had given her was resting against her skin. She tried not to get angrier than she already was. No one wanted to talk about Julia. *Just like nobody wants to talk about my Joey.*

Cate understood Joey had done something bad, but she didn’t believe he would really send all of those evil people back to hurt those she loved. *He just needs me to be a good friend.*

Trent was using his gifts continuously to read the minds of the people around them to keep his charges protected. He frowned at Cate’s thoughts. He wanted to talk to her about it, but he had his hands full taking the children to the restaurant for lunch. He decided to bring it up later, when there weren’t as many people around. Marc’s daughter was a handful even when she was in a good mood. “Like father, like daughter.”

### 3

Adrian picked up his pace to a fast walk and then turned it into a steady jog, once again working on his health. He had done remarkably well in a

short amount of time, but that was because he had pushed himself and stuffed his face with as much protein as he could catch with his fishing pole. He felt better than he had in months; he was also sick of fish.

Dust flew up from his boots as he ran along the jungle path. He was glad they didn't have many smoking materials left. A dropped cigarette butt right now would be bad.

It only took Adrian five minutes to make it over to the other side of the island this time. Two weeks ago, it taken him 15 minutes. One week ago, it had taken eight minutes. It was more proof that the work he was putting in was making a difference. "Now if I could just find enough Tylenol to make it stop hurting."

On the way over, Adrian jogged by people who saw him exercising and then forced themselves to do the same as his example rubbed off.

Adrian knew they needed that throughout the camp. One of the many things he wanted to talk to Marc about changing while they were in charge was the people who didn't have a job. It hadn't been necessary for people to do more than a few shifts a week, except during the times they were low on manpower. Now that they were on the island, residents were taking advantage and becoming lazy. They even had a small demographic who were overweight. Adrian wanted to put a stop to that before it grew out of control like it had in the old world.

Adrian knew it would be a hard sell for some of them. Before the war, people had spent 40+ hours a week laboring away for other people just to have enough money to pay their bills. The war had afforded some of them an opportunity to do nothing but what they wanted. Giving that up would be hard. Spending all day reading, playing games, socializing, and listening to music was always preferable to manual labor.

Adrian nodded politely to the two brawlers, and Stuart, who were on duty outside the jailhouse until after lunch. They would be relieved soon so they could have their turn at the Eagle classes. A few hours after that, everyone who didn't have duty would attend the Eagle event.

Adrian wasn't sure why Angela had insisted that anyone who joined the new police force couldn't be an Eagle, but he was certain she had a good reason for it. Instead of asking, he was trying to figure it out for himself. She liked it when her people did that.

Adrian went to the desk to sign in on the clipboard. "I'm giving Ralph a piece of paper. It's a list of places he and Daisey might be able to find supplies once they get back to the States."

"Okay." A few people had dropped things off like that for the elderly couple. No one had brought anything at all for Tim. As far as Gus was concerned, Tim was lucky to even be getting meals now.

Gus felt Marc's presence outside this time, but he didn't mention it. *I'm getting sharper.*

Adrian went over to the cells and handed Ralph the sheet of paper. He didn't stop to talk to the man, however. There was nothing he could say that would make Ralph feel any better. There was also nothing he could say that would make Angela change her mind about the punishment.

Tim stood and came over to the bars of his cell as Adrian approached. "It took you long enough."

Adrian frowned at the combative tone that Tim didn't seem to be able to get rid of. "What can I do for you?"

Tim glared. "You can get me out of here!"

Adrian shook his head. "No, I can't."

"I was one of your top Eagles the entire time you were in charge of Safe Haven."

"That's true."

"You always said if one of your Eagles got into trouble, they could come to you for a favor. I'm asking for that now."

Adrian stared at him regretfully. "You gave up that honor when you made the choice to betray this camp, Tim. There's absolutely nothing I can do for you."

Adrian saw the empty cell; he was surprised that Theo wasn't in it. He admired how fast Samantha had been able to get the drunk released. He just wished she had been more successful in helping Ralph.



“You owe me!” Tim grabbed the bars angrily, clenching his fist around the metal. “You were my boss! I need your help!”

Adrian had known this would be hard, but it wasn’t as bad as he had been expecting. He locked gazes with Tim, voice like stone. “I wouldn’t help you even if I could. Safe Haven means everything to me. You knew that. You disappointed me and everyone else. Now you have to face the consequences, alone. None of us are going to risk our places to help you when you didn’t try to save any of us from Courtney, Corey, or Martin. You are on your own.”

“You gave Kenn another chance and he tried to kill Angela!”

Gus looked over. He hadn’t heard about that.

Adrian grunted at Tim’s continued attempt to make him feel guilty. “I can’t help you, Tim. You dug this grave; you’ll be buried in it.”

Adrian *was* tempted to help Ralph. He wasn’t going to bust the man out, however. *I’ll talk to the boss again.* Adrian didn’t expect it to do any good. Angela was furious with both men and rightly so.

Adrian left, not feeling the guilt that Tim had been trying to induce in him. Adrian loved the Eagles. Tim wasn’t one of them anymore. It was time he accepted that. It was time everyone accepted that. “You’re either with us or against us. There is no in between.”

Gus resumed snoozing at the desk as the door shut and Tim’s mind went to ugly places. Gus now

understood why he was on duty this week. Most of the guards who volunteered over the jail were normals. Because he was a descendant, Gus was able to keep track of Tim's thoughts and make sure the man wasn't planning anything that would endanger the camp again. *Don't do it, Tim. I'll put you down quicker than the boss will.*

#### 4

Adrian had 45 minutes before he had to meet with Marc for their round of the island. He jogged down the path toward the kai class, where Piper was about to get a level two lesson. He wanted to show up for a minute to offer support and to make sure she wasn't feeling left out or angry about Bret living with him when he had told her no.

Ahead of him on the path, Greg and Erin didn't hear Adrian behind them.

Greg looked and sounded happier, but Adrian knew he wasn't. *Erin's new ring is the cause of that. Greg doesn't want her anymore. I wonder what changed.*

Greg was wondering the same thing. A week ago, he'd been content that Erin would help him find some happiness even though he was in love with Angela. Now, he was hating the world and Morgan's idea seemed like a huge trap that he'd sprung himself. Greg kept acting like it was all a good idea. "I need to know why, Erin. The vaccine would help you."

“I just can’t compete with all of them.” Erin was in a much better mood now that she was wearing Greg’s ring. She answered his question honestly this time. “I have to keep the strength from the rage illness...or I’ll fall back into being forgotten about.”

Greg leaned over and kissed Erin on the cheek. “You’ll never be forgotten about.”

Erin held out her new ring as they reached the kai training area. “Isn’t it beautiful?!”

The kids had just left. Neil and the helpers were packing it all up. Most of it was going to the runway for the days’ events. They all turned toward Erin or congratulated Greg.

Greg spoke to Neil as Piper oohed and aahed over Erin’s new jewelry. “Be careful today. Avoid her stomach.”

Neil lifted a brow. “Not feeling well?”

“Pregnant.”

Neil slapped him on the shoulder. “Nice!”

Erin smiled softly. “I’m having Greg’s baby.”

Piper oohed and aahed over Erin’s pregnancy as if she hadn’t known about it.

Erin blushed happily. She hadn’t been sure how to announce it.

Greg didn’t tell them his new gift allowed him to detect life forming inside any female. He’d had an evolution.

*And she isn’t the only one who’s pregnant and hasn’t told the camp yet.* Greg eyed Piper, but he didn’t out her. It was her private business. He did wonder how the boss would feel about it, though.

Two seconds later, the radios on all of their belts lit up with Angela's icy voice. "Emergency meeting of the Law Council will be held tomorrow evening. Be there!"

Adrian winced, joining the group to congratulate the newly engaged couple. He tried to act like there was nothing wrong, but his heart thumped painfully. Angela was pissed. *And I'm her sole target.*

## 5

"Thank you for coming."

Amanda snorted quietly, aware of Angela's bad mood. That quick radio call had sent waves of displeasure all over the island. "Like I had a choice."

Angela pushed the kettle of hot water across the table with the potholder, then resumed making her own cup of tea. She was in the restaurant, with a table of food she didn't want. Her appetite was normally hearty. Today, her guts were rolling. When Brittani got here, she would eat most of it.

It was also a good time to check in with the mom-to-be and make sure she wasn't having trouble and hiding it like she had been before Jennifer tricked Nature into parting with that amazing healing gift.

Amanda chose lemon flavored tea and assembled a cup from the spread on the table. She

kept her mind closed and hoped she wasn't here for the reason she was afraid of.

"You are." Angela smiled coldly at the woman's surprise. Amanda's mental walls were good, but no one kept the alpha out. "We'll get to that. Have some tea, listen to the camp."

Angela enjoyed that as much as Adrian always had. Everyone was up now, except for a few people who had third shift duty. It was full of life and happiness. That mattered to Angela, but it was also easier to judge the levels of contentment with her leadership when she was out of the picture and just observing.

"I don't know why you worry about it. That 17% doesn't matter."

Angela approved of the honesty, but it added another nail to Amanda's possible coffin. If she knew about that, then she'd been absorbing information for months. "It matters to me."

"That's part of why you've been in charge for so long. Most of our kind can't keep their honor and have to be removed."

"Yes." Angela picked out the usual Mitchel features on Amanda—the blonde braids and bright blue eyes—and then went deeper, examining the woman's scars. Her arm had a large patch of old needle marks. Some people probably believed she'd been a junkie before the war. Angela knew it was a sign of life in a lab where they were constantly being injected with chemicals and then having blood drawn to test those results. The mission men

had the same signs, though not as many. Amanda had obviously spent years in captivity. Angela didn't let her sympathy show.

Amanda swept Angela's scars and matched them to the stories she'd heard and the few action moments she'd witnessed. Amanda had been in camp for all of Angela's adventures and brushes with death, but she'd never been allowed to get this close.

Angela sipped her tea, lids shutting. "That's very good."

Amanda snickered, being put at ease against her will. "Want to act out an old coffee commercial?"

"Maybe later." Angela put her cup down and wrapped her hands around it to absorb the warmth. "First, I need to find out why an enforcer has been in this camp for over a year without working or helping."

Amanda froze. Then she slowly thawed, lifting her cup.

Angela scanned the restaurant while she waited for Amanda to form an answer she thought would be accepted. Thelma was off today, along with her entire family. She'd left an easy meal that only had to be heated up by the volunteers. The restaurant was empty around them, and clean. Thelma was dependable and she loved her family. Angela wished she could find a more important job for Thelma so she would know how much they valued her. It just couldn't be on the Law Council.

“I assume you don’t want husbands and wives on the council together?”

“No.” Angela didn’t mind that Amanda was keeping track of her thoughts. “If I have to remove one, they’ll still have access through their spouse. I’d have to remove them both. Too much hassle.”

“When will you stop keeping it a secret?”

“Soon.” Angela pinned the woman in place with a hard glare. “Same question.”

Amanda sighed, no longer trying to find a way out of this conversation. “I retired, before the war. I was told it would save my life.”

“And it did. You’re alive.”

Amanda remembered the quick moment with a Seer in a dangerous compound. “I need to send my youngest daughter away for training. If she doesn’t get it soon, she’ll start to turn bad.”

Angela read those details in Amanda’s mind and frowned. “We don’t have a plane, and a boat can’t reach that location.”

“Yes. It would take an Eagle mission team...”

Angela laughed.

Amanda scowled at the rude reaction. “You could have just said no.”

“And you could have just asked for what you need. Playing games with me is dangerous. You’re smart enough to already know that.”

Amanda hadn’t been convinced of Angela’s extreme intelligence, but she was coming around to the idea that Angela deserved the job she had. She wasn’t just one of Adrian’s little hump bunnies.

Angela was offended. “That’s what all of you hiders think.”

Amanda flushed at being called a hider, but she didn’t deny it. “Of course. Why else would he gift this duty to a female?”

Angela hadn’t expected to encounter that attitude from a fellow woman. “Tell me about being the family enforcer.”

“What do you want to know about it?”

“Mostly, I want to know why someone like you would allow fear to rule their lives for so long.”

Amanda bristled. “I’m not afraid!”

Angela stared at the woman in sympathy. “It surrounds you thicker than any shield. You’re terrified. Tell me why and then I’ll decide if I want to help you.”

“I didn’t ask for your help! I’ve been a good camp member. All I want is to be left alone!”

“Tell me why.”

Amanda didn’t feel Angela trying to read her thoughts. She was a little surprised at that. She had expected the leader here to tear into her without mercy.

“I will when it’s needed. Tell me why.”

“No. Respect my wishes and leave me alone.”

“Then get out of my camp.”

Fear rose up in Amanda’s throat. She gritted her teeth to keep from blurting out the truth or begging to stay. “I’ll leave on the next run.”

“That’s your choice. It’s a bad one.”



Before Amanda could get up, Angela reached out a hand. “Let me show you what the future holds.”

Amanda had obeyed the rules for decades. She had never viewed her own future. She slowly put her hand in Angela’s, heart pounding. *Please, let it have changed. I’m not the same person I was anymore.*

Angela revealed a secret of her own. “And that’s why you’ve been left alone for the entire time you’ve been in this camp. I’ve known about you since before we entered the mountain.”

Angela connected their minds and showed Amanda her future.

“It hasn’t changed.” Amanda fought the tears at the ugly image of her coming demise.

“No, just the time and place.”

“But I changed! I went quiet.”

“And avoided any bonds. You have no friends, even among your family. You barely tolerate your own children because they were forced on you in a lab. You have no one and nothing in your life that you can count on to save you.” Angela let go of the woman’s hand. “You’re going to die alone and in fear.”

Amanda shuddered. Her hard shell fell. “Please help me.”

“I will.”

“And in return?”

“In return, you’ll use your gifts for the greater good and stop hiding. It’s time you came into the light.”

“But it will get me killed!”

“No, you weren’t told to hide forever. That isn’t a life. You’ll use your gifts to help secure the future of these normals and in the process, you’ll make bonds that will save you.” Angela’s warmth vanished. “Or you’ll keep hiding and that vision will come true in every way. The future is closer now, Amanda Mitchel. It’s time to decide your place in history. Make your choice.”

Amanda shivered. “I’ll help you.”

Angela opened her notebook and rotated it so Amanda could read it. “This is your first assignment.”

Amanda read the note in dismay. She was starting to understand why Angela was in charge.

“But you don’t respect me yet. No worries. That will change. It always does, when it’s too late to avoid the pain that came from doubting me.” Angela picked up her warm cup. “I didn’t get this job because Adrian’s obsessed or because there was no one else to give it to. I’m the alpha. This is what I’m supposed to be doing and the same is true of you. Now get out of here and let me figure out how to save you. I can’t concentrate with your fear burning so brightly.”

Amanda stood up, offended, scared, and annoyed. “You should be the one they call the Dragon.”

Angela snickered. “I have other names. Jennifer can keep that one.”

“She needs to be trained.”

“Yes.” Angela knew Jennifer would be upset. The teenager thought she was the oldest, strongest enforcer on the island. “You’ll start on that after you finish your first assignment.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You’ll be on the next boat out of here and so will your girls. I’ve had enough of Mitchels breaking the rules. Punishments for that will now be harsh.”

Amanda left the restaurant with her mind and emotions in chaos.

Angela finished her tea. “Mitchels aren’t so hard to handle. All you have to do is fuck their brain and they fall in line like anyone else.”

## 6

Jennifer went by the restaurant as Amanda came out. She smiled, not expecting a response. Amanda didn’t exchange greetings with anyone. “Good morning.”

“Is it?” Amanda wasn’t allowed to hide anymore. She dropped her mental walls and let Jennifer see what she’d been hiding.

Jennifer was instantly pissed. “How dare you!”

She lifted her hand to zap the woman.

Amanda fired first, taking Jennifer to her knees with the lowest level so it wouldn’t hurt the baby.

“You have a lot to learn. I look forward to teaching you.”

Amanda continued to the jungle path, ignoring the two furious men now hurrying toward Jennifer. She wasn't scared of Kyle or Morgan. *But Angela is starting to terrify me.*

Jennifer picked herself up, furious and afraid. “Oh, hell no!”

She marched on shaky legs to the restaurant to register a formal complaint with the boss. “This island isn't big enough for both of us. She has to go!”

Chapter Fifteen  
**That's An Eagle**  
The Runway

1

“**T**his is not a level test, Eagles. We’re doing a training session. Pick a station and show everyone what you can do. Later, we’ll have a shooting contest!” Daryl was glad he’d been chosen as point man for this event. His mind needed a break from the constant stress. Brittani was with Angela, eating lunch. Daryl knew she was in good hands. “We have some new people here. Make them feel welcome.”

The runway was covered in Eagles and four training areas. A senior man had point over each one. They were all reporting to Daryl, who would deliver a final report to Angela later. Marc and Adrian were in charge, but a copy would go to the real boss.

The farthest area overlooked the cliff. It was the gun training setup and it had the most people. The Eagles had missed using their weapons. Daryl was sure some of them were getting rusty. It should be a close contest, unlike some of the past events.

Next to the target area was a roped off section where they would hold an open magic lesson for the first time. The fighting area was at the end, where

Daryl was standing. The center area was just a campfire that hadn't been lit yet and a cooler with drinks. As each person finished at the other areas, they would gravitate toward the center to hang out and socialize. Daryl thought it was brilliant. Angela knew what her Eagles needed.

"It was Marc's design." Biff went by Daryl without saying anything else. It bothered Biff that Marc didn't get enough credit in this camp.

*You're biased because of the run you guys went on together.*

Biff shrugged at Madison's thought. "Maybe."

It occurred to Biff that he wasn't as uncomfortable as he normally was around large groups of people. He didn't feel the need to bring out his stone warrior this time. He attributed that to the woman walking next to him. *It always helps to have a friend.*

Madison kept her head up and acted like she was happy. She'd forced herself to say yes to Biff's invitation to come. Being here, with so many people around, was nerve-wracking. Instead of honoring her wishes and holding her first session in private, they would have a huge audience. She wasn't allowed to be mad at Biff for it, however. She was certain the order had come from Marc.

Biff reached out and took her hand, hoping it would go over well.

Madison smiled at him. She knew he was just trying to offer comfort. Then she pulled her hand

loose so he, and everyone else, didn't get the wrong idea. She wasn't ready to be in a relationship yet.

Biff wasn't offended. He was encouraged. It was the first time she'd let him touch her without flinching. "What would you like to try first? We have guns, magic, and fighting."

Madison almost picked fighting. She pointed at the gun area instead. "How does it work?"

Biff led the way, aware of the pleased expressions from the senior men that he'd gotten her to come. "You'll get a full magazine of practice with an instructor offering advice. Then you'll line up and take your turn with everyone else."

"That's it?"

"Yep. The best score from the contest gets the top gun in camp title." Biff frowned slightly. "It usually goes to Kenn, Marc, or Adrian, so good luck on that one."

"You, too." Madison was surprised by all the attention she was getting from people she didn't know.

The Eagles knew it was the first step in recovery for her and possibly a good life in their camp. They also assumed she would be Biff's girl at some point; they were happy for him.

Madison spotted Neil at the fighting area as they went by. She glared at him and then turned her nose up.

Neil didn't notice. He was busy putting out mats that would offer a little protection from the ground. They weren't using a cage tonight.

Biff did notice it; he tried to explain.

Madison cut him off. "I feel bad for his babies and Samantha, but he and Wade are on my shitlist. They both owe me an apology."

Biff grinned at her sign of spunk. He led her by the magic area that was empty. He was certain it wouldn't stay that way for long once he started demonstrating what he could do. *I just wish I had more than conjuring.* He could finally lift a shield, and he was solid at reading minds, but those weren't the same as having a physical gift.

"Maybe you'll evolve."

Biff shook his head. "I never wish for that. Evolutions only come from pain and stress, and I've had enough of both."

This time, Madison reached out and took his hand.

Biff's heart warmed.

Madison blushed, letting go as they reached the gun line.

"Who hasn't had a free mag yet?" Shawn was in charge of the gun area. He wasn't defending his title even though he was the official top shooter in their camp. His hands still shook sometimes. The knockout chemicals had lasting side effects.

Biff nudged Madison. "She's next."

Biff didn't mention he wasn't competing. He was going to let her find that out later, putting her on the spot to judge her nerves. It was an Eagle trick for rookies. Madison wasn't exempt just because he



had an interest in her. *And there's also the fact that I hate guns and violence now, for any reason.*

The line of mostly men at the gun area looked over curiously, appraising them both.

Biff led Madison to the taped line. “Bulls-eyes are good, but just try to hit the target. Shawn will eval you as you roll.”

Madison swept the line of handguns on the table. “Real bullets?”

“Yes.” Shawn made a subtle gesture for people to be ready to bring up a shield or duck. She was already hesitating; it was a sign that there could be a problem.

Biff wanted to help her. “We usually pick the—”

Biff stopped as she grabbed a 9mm and quickly checked it for rounds. When she smacked the magazine in and tugged on it, Biff grinned and stepped back to let her work.

Shawn did the same, recognizing her perfect gun posture. *She's not a rookie.*

Madison let the feel of the gun in her hand take over her mind. She was no longer on a runway on a tropical island, surrounded by strangers. She was at her childhood home, shooting targets with her father.

Madison pulled the trigger firmly and neatly, sending the slugs into the target one right after the other.

Shawn grinned. “Four bulls-eyes, a close hit, and a trim. That's a level three Eagle score. Try to

steady your hand and you'll do even better next time."

"I will." Madison flipped the safety on and disengaged the magazine smoothly. She put it back on the table, flushed with the tiny thrill. *I could learn to like this.*

Biff congratulated her while the witnesses murmured in respect. Rookies rarely did so well.

Madison's scores drew attention from a lot of people, including the man on point. Daryl added her name to the list in his book. Angela wanted to know who all of their best shooters were. Madison had just made that list, though it was at the bottom.

Madison followed Biff over to the line of shooters who were going to compete. "Who has the title now?"

Biff waved toward Shawn. "He does, but that's only because our real top shooters don't participate in these contests anymore."

Those listening realized they hadn't had a shooting contest on the island yet.

"It's not really top shooter in camp anymore."

Greg shook his head at Biff's comment. "Nope. Now it's top gun on our island."

People grinned at the thought, at the reminder that they'd come so far together.

"Who are the real top shooters?" Madison felt that was important information to have. Whenever they used their weapons, she would pay attention to their techniques and hopefully improve her own skills.

“Marc, Kenn, and Adrian.” Shawn wasn’t ashamed of that. He had been one of the best and that was good enough for now.

Shawn looked toward the jungle path, where Marc and Adrian had just come into view. They were going to Daryl for a check in.

Biff snorted. “It’s Marc. We all know he’s the best.”

Greg wasn’t so sure. “That run was rough on all of us. He might not be the best anymore.”

Marc turned toward them.

Shawn grinned. “You’re in trouble.”

Greg tensed at Marc’s hard stare. “I just think it was a hard run.”

Marc didn’t speak to any of them as he went to the table of handguns. He chose the same weapon as Madison, adding a full magazine, and then stepped to the line.

People went quiet all over the runway, eager to see if Marc was still as good as he had been.

Marc didn’t need to calm his nerves or imagine his target was a person he hated. He popped off six shots and stepped back without a change in expression.

“Perfect! Six bulls-eyes!” Shawn gushed. “And that’s why he’s in charge, folks.”

The camp cheered. Marc was the favorite, but he was being viewed in much the same manner that Kenn was by the Eagles. Marc’s hard shell made it hard for them to trust him. They weren’t sure if they

liked him being in charge of the camp. Most of them would have preferred that it had just been Adrian.

Marc nodded coolly to Greg as he replaced the weapon and walked by him to rejoin Adrian.

Madison groaned. "I'll never be able to match him."

Biff snickered. "Nope. He's a badass."

Greg smothered his jealousy and kept his mouth shut. He didn't need to challenge Marc on anything. They were two very different men. *And he'll screw up all on his own. I don't need to have anything to do with it.*

"What about Kenn and Adrian?" Madison continued to redirect the spotlight off of herself and her performance. She didn't want them asking her how she'd learned to handle a firearm so well. Those memories were private and painful now that her father was gone.

Everyone looked at Adrian.

Adrian sighed at Marc's challenging glance. "Leaders aren't supposed to take part."

Marc waited, sure that Adrian would give in. His pride wouldn't let him refuse this chance to miss or match.

Kenn came out of the jungle, frowning deeply at all of them. He went to the shooting area first even though he was already a few minutes late at the fighting station. He was helping Neil with the adult kai lessons.

The camp watched Kenn with slight disapproval. He wasn't their favorite.

Shawn retreated, able to feel Kenn's displeasure. "They mentioned your name every time."

Kenn lifted the same gun Marc and Madison had used. "I want my damn title back. I had it before all of you!"

Kenn spun and opened fire from where he was standing.

Shawn called it, but he wasn't happy that Kenn hadn't walked to the line like everyone else. "Six bulls-eyes."

Kenn dropped the warm gun on the table and stalked toward his station.

The witnesses laughed, having fun.

Madison looked at Biff. "He's the one I'd bet on in a pinch. He carries that anger into everything he does. It makes him dangerous."

Biff agreed. "Fair, but we never bet during Eagle lessons. The boss doesn't like it. Neither does Adrian."

"I couldn't care less about Adrian's opinion. Angela terrifies me, so I'll listen to hers every time."

People respected Madison for having the courage to say that where Adrian could hear it. They all watched him for a reaction.

Adrian grunted. "It was my damn camp first!"

Much like Kenn, he stalked toward the gun line with only anger in his mind.

The camp watched as Adrian took his place on the line, thrilled to see him participating.

Marc didn't watch the blond man shoot. He knew it would be good. He studied the rest of the men and women on the runway, searching for problems while they were distracted.

Adrian pulled the trigger from the line, muscles clenching in his thicker arm. It drew attention from the Eagles.

"Six bulls-eyes! He matched them both!"

"Check out those arms. He's been working out."

"Are you going to fight tonight?"

Adrian shook his head. "I'll be watching."

People groaned in disappointment.

Marc overruled it. "Yes, you will. So will Kenn...and myself."

Now loud groans went through the Eagles. No one wanted to fight Marc. The only one to ever beat him had been Rico. It hadn't escaped notice that shortly after that, Rico had died.

The audience began talking excitedly. It made everything better to know the top fighters in camp were going to participate.

Kenn didn't mind. He needed the stress release.

Adrian joined Marc to finish their walk. "Why did you do that?"

"You need the workout. I've never seen an ass as big as yours."

Adrian stopped, turning. "Not the ass!"

Marc chuckled. "It will encourage them. They enjoy watching us abuse each other."

Adrian stopped laughing. "You mean it'll be us in the cage."

“On the mat, but yes.” Marc leered. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m not!” Adrian followed Marc into the jungle, good mood gone. “Be nice, for once?”

“Not on your life.”

## 2

“That should be an epic fight.”

Thomas walked slowly next to Molly and his level three team. Angela had honored her word and put him in that slot, but Thomas hadn’t been able to do many of the workouts or challenges because of his legs. *That’s changing tonight.*

Thomas refused to use his crutches anymore, no matter where he was going or what he was doing. His legs were getting stronger because of that, but it was also painful as the muscles stitched themselves back together.

Molly knew Thomas was in pain. She was proud of him for pushing through it and disappointed with herself that she wasn’t putting in the same amount of work on her own future.

Jack walked next to them and tried to pretend his brain wasn’t splitting open. He was relieved that Dace was okay and he definitely wanted to be here for the Eagle event, but he was still a little drunk and hung over. Sleep would have been a better choice. *I’m just glad I wasn’t arrested.*

Everyone knew about Theo getting in trouble now. They all assumed he was sitting in a jail cell

next to Tim and Ralph. Jack's name hadn't been mentioned.

Jack pointed at the chairs that were being set up for people who had injuries. "Grab a front row seat so you don't miss anything."

Thomas went to the fighter's side of the mat. "You can kiss my seat."

Jack laughed. "That's an Eagle." He was starting to understand why Thomas was starting out at so high a level.

Thomas enjoyed the ribbing and jokes. It was a much better atmosphere than in the lab. He was fitting in here and making a life for himself. He had a good woman, his honor, and a solid job. Being a Navy engineer was also slowly giving him Theo's place in camp since Theo was a drunkard who couldn't be trusted now. *I should be a happy camper.*

Thomas hid his frown. *But I feel like I'm playing a great role. At some point, the story will end and I'll be gone.*

"You need to do something amazing that makes people remember you forever."

"Like what? From the stories I've heard, nearly everyone in this camp has saved someone's life. It's hard to match that."

Jack shrugged. "I don't know, but when you figure it out, tell me. I have the same issue."

Thomas enjoyed the chat, but they didn't have the same problem at all. Jack was in love with some tart who didn't feel the same. Thomas didn't know



who it was and he didn't care. *My problem is much more complicated. Marc is in charge now and I don't want that to change. A man should be running this camp.*

Distracted by his own miseries, Jack missed that. He was trying not to advertise his hangover. *In this camp, everyone is hiding something. It's just what we do.*

Molly did go to an observers' seat. She didn't want to get into the cage again until it was time to fight for the XO slot on Angela's team. She didn't enjoy physical violence because it brought out the worst in her.

"What do you like?" Morgan was reading everyone's thoughts, digging for information. Kenn had agreed to scroll dive for answers to the name mystery, but Morgan was still hunting for answers on his own, too.

Molly sighed. "I miss my rose bushes. I miss growing things, but I tried farming last month. It didn't go so well."

"I think there are some rose seeds in the cargo bay."

Molly shook her head. "The boss won't let me use island space for flowers. We need it for growing food."

Morgan wrote it in his book. "I'm sure we can find a place here somewhere for a small operation. People need pretty things in their lives. Angela will agree it's needed if you say it will help with her breeding tree matches."

Molly's mood improved. "That's a great idea." Men wanted to be able to give flowers when they had a date; weddings needed flowers. "I'll talk to her about it. Thanks!"

"My pleasure." Morgan's tone lost all warmth. "Now tell me what's going on with your new boyfriend."

Molly hadn't known there was a problem with Thomas at all, but as she stood there, she was able to feel other senior Eagles giving her questioning looks. It was an unwelcome reminder of her mistake with Monica. "What are you talking about?"

"Thomas is hiding something and I want to know what it is."

"Then ask him!" Molly got up and left, heading for a different area.

Morgan grunted. "I plan to." If Molly knew and was hiding it, she would share in the punishment. That rule wasn't just for the church residents.

Greg lifted a brow.

Morgan shook his head. *I didn't get anything from her.*

Standing with Kenn near the fighting mat, Neil caught all of that and added Molly to his list of people to watch. Thomas had already been on it, but unlike Greg and Morgan, Neil knew what the man's problem was. *The boss will teach you to respect her, Navy man. You just may not survive the lesson.*

Neil smiled at Samantha. She was in the crowd, showing off pictures of the twins on her phone.

Samantha was at that stage in parenting where every moment needed to be captured with a photo.

Neil narrowed in, listening to her conversation.

“This is JJ.”

“I guess the name stuck.” Bernice didn’t mind viewing the pictures. It kept the spotlight off of her.

Samantha chuckled. “We tried other names, but it was a lost cause.”

Neil resumed prepping for the fights, content that Samantha was having a good time.

Morgan had also been listening. He paused, mind clicking in a new piece of the puzzle. *People use letters in place of names...*

Morgan began scrambling the letters in Hannah’s name to see if it spelled anything. He doubted it would, but he had to try something. Unlike Neil, Morgan would never have a family. *The least I can do is figure out the mystery before it takes another life.*

### 3

Eagles at every area quieted as Angela’s team came up the main jungle path toward the runway. It was obvious that some of them didn’t like each other, but they were still in perfect formation, functioning as one group.

People watched without speaking, curious where that group would go first.

Tonya stepped to the front of the team without giving any of them time to protest. “Fly, Eagles!”

Tonya was immediately rewarded by the group fanning out on either side of her to form a perfect V. The audience clapped and cheered.

Angela’s team had met in town to discuss it before they came up here. They went straight to the gun area; all of them were worried their skills weren’t good enough. They had a holster and a weapon of their own, but some of them had never used it in an action moment.

Lower ranked Eagles called encouragement and names, picking out favorites.

Senior men watched silently, evaluating. They hadn’t seen many of these women in action yet, other than during Angela’s demonstration on the cruise ship and that had been months ago.

Isabel stayed in the position Tonya had put her in, following nervously. She wasn’t worried about her gun skills, but everything else could be a problem because of her age. She was determined to do her best to prove she belonged on the boss’s team.

“You’re worrying about nothing.” Tonya didn’t like it that the older woman was already distracted, but she didn’t feel right scolding Isabel for it. She tried to solve the problem instead. “Even if you aren’t an Eagle, Stanley is as loyal as they come.”

Piper snickered. “He has a mommy now. He isn’t going to give that up.”

Isabel laughed with her team and enjoyed feeling welcome. She didn't let it sway her, however. All of these female fighters were half her age. They didn't understand yet how fickle a man's heart could be when he compared his mate to other women. Stanley would soon realize there were better matches for him all through this camp.

It was intimidating to know how many of the females in Safe Haven were special. It hadn't mattered to Isabel in the lab because Reicher hadn't encouraged them to be competitive. He had just wanted obedience. This camp was the exact opposite. Slackers and fence-sitters weren't really accepted into this special part of Safe Haven. Isabel wanted desperately to be a part of it and not just in the honorary form that her actions had given her so far. *I want to be one of them and I will be even if it breaks every bone in my aging body.*

As they went by, Selina tossed Shawn a bright smile and a small baggie she had brought from the restaurant. Thelma had been willing to make deals for small amounts of the food she needed for the reproductive repair list, in exchange for delivering food to the jail and work crews, and doing a cleanup shift whenever it was needed. Selina believed it was a fair trade. She didn't mind working toward her goals.

Shawn opened the bag and began eating the canned carrot slices. They didn't have carrots in any other form anymore. Like Jennifer, Shawn doubted

a change in diet would make a difference, but he was willing to try anything.

Shawn noticed Selina was wearing a green shirt and green trousers and gave her a smile in return. As long as they were both willing to work on it, there was still hope. “Next shooter to the line!”

Angela’s team broke into a run to be the first one to reach the line. They shoved and tripped each other, not being gentle.

The observers laughed with them, encouraged to see the women acting like any other Eagles who wanted to reach a higher level. They also observed the females who didn’t have a known partner, always on the hunt for sex or a relationship. For some of the Eagles, either one would do. They just needed it to be with someone who had the same goals they did.

Jayda reached the line first, dusty and disheveled from the short physical battle.

Jayda was still carrying scars from the explosion on the cruise ship. It was another reminder that Theo had messed up. The overheated wire that had caused the explosion was his fault. Attitudes toward Theo dipped another notch.

Shawn pointed at the other females. “Clear her a line of fire!”

The disappointed women stepped back.

“Do not fire that weapon!” Kenn’s shout from the next area over got everyone’s attention.

Kenn scanned Angela’s team, not having mercy on Tonya or anyone else. “The boss said if you can’t

match level three in shooting, she's taking your name off her list for XO. Good luck, ladies."

Witnesses cheered while the women started complaining.

Kenn shrugged. "It's an Eagle challenge. You can either do it or you can't."

Jayda flipped the safety off on the handgun and aimed carefully. She might not be coming back if her family didn't want to return with her, but if she did, Jayda wanted that XO slot. "This one's for you, Boss."

Jayda opened fire.

#### 4

"It's Ray!"

"Ray's coming!"

Ray snubbed all the people waving and smiling at him, hoping he would join the contest. He went to Daryl. "No changes in the weather."

Ray was on a 20-minute break while Timmy did a very short shift over the bridge. The boy had been told not to touch anything.

Ray wasn't worried about it. Timmy was the only one of Zack's sons who could be trusted. "I stopped by town. She's taking a nap. Everything seems fine there."

Daryl was grateful for the update. He hadn't expected Brittani to come to the runway for these events. "Who's with her?"

“Parker and the church group have her covered.”

Daryl was fine with that. The church group was nonviolent. He hadn't expected them to come up here, either. “Thank you.”

Ray turned around to leave and spotted Grant sitting in the crowd. He was glaring at Kenn openly.

Ray sighed. *I might as well get this over with. I've made my choice.*

Ray motioned to Grant and then went to an empty part of the runway.

Grant hurried over, smiling. “I didn't know you were coming up here today.”

Ray ducked the hug Grant tried to give him. “I'm moving out of our cabin.”

Grant stared in shock. “What?”

Ray got it out all at once, trying to get this over with quickly. “The wedding is on hold. I'm moving out. I need time to think.”

Grant's face fell. “What did I do? Is it because of Jonny?” Grant knew it still bothered Ray that he had allowed Jonny to take advantage of him.

Ray shook his head. “It has nothing to do with you.”

He turned around to leave.

Grant hurried around to get in front of him. “You could at least tell me why!”

“I don't want to talk about it. And stop talking to Kenn about me.”

Grant studied Ray in desperation. He wasn't eating, sleeping, or talking to anyone. He was also



wrinkled and hadn't had a shower in a few days. It was completely unlike the man Grant had come to love.

The Eagles and the camp watched the two men curiously. Everyone wanted to know what was going on with them.

"I thought I meant more to you than this!"

"You mean everything to me." Ray hated Grant's pain. It allowed the truth to slip out of his mouth. "I don't deserve you."

Grant took Ray's arm and led him further away from the intently observing audience. "What are you talking about?"

"Something happened on the submarine." Ray forced himself to finish it. "I think I cheated on you. I woke up wearing a dirty rubber."

Grant was crushed, but he loved Ray. He didn't want the relationship to end. "You guys were all fogged. I'm not going to hold that against you; you didn't know what you were doing."

Ray's self-loathing flew out of his mouth. "You don't understand!"

"Then explain it to me!"

Ray's voice dropped to a mutter. "It didn't smell right."

Grant stared in confusion.

Ray struggled not to break down. "It wasn't a guy, Grant. I cheated with a woman."

Ray walked away, hating himself.

Eagles grunted in disappointment and resumed what they'd been doing. None of them had expected that from Ray.

Grant stayed there as a new volley of gunshots rang out, heart breaking into small pieces that he would never be able to put back together. He could have eventually let it go if it had been a man, but a woman? "That's unforgivable."

Chapter Sixteen  
**All In Good Time**

1

“**W**here the hell is she?” Theo marched by the people who were swimming and sunbathing to reach the dive team instructor.

Brittani’s parents were off duty today. Thelma and their sons were on the beach. Dace and Lisa were nearby, observing the diving lesson. Bernice was also here, eyeing the water with longing and trepidation. All of them turned toward Theo’s rude call, unhappy that drama was going to interrupt their peaceful moment.

Trent scowled. “She wants you to sit in the sun and think about what you’ve done.”

“I’m not a child!”

“Then stop acting like one.” Trent rotated toward the students who were already in the water.

The diving students were in the shallowest part of the water around the beach, only deep enough that the water came up to their waist. Theo still didn’t like it. He intentionally picked a shady spot and started to drop down.

*In the sun, you hard headed prick!*

Theo stared at Debra, surprised by her anger. He was also a little turned-on by it. He sat in the sun and resentfully watched the lesson.

Trent didn't hide his amusement. Debra would get Theo in line, but he still had to be punished for the damage he'd done to the barn and their stock of alcohol. A work crew was trying to get all of the glass cleaned up. The next preschool lessons would have to be held outside because of that. The den mothers weren't pleased with Theo.

"The ropes I put on you should always be there. If you feel them loosening or falling off, get out of the water immediately!" Trent couldn't help the near shout that made them all frown at him. His kidnapping, while roped under the water, wasn't something he could forget. "I also gave each of you a blade in a sheath to wear around your waist. If you get tangled in the ropes, don't panic. Just cut yourself free."

Theo listened with acid burning in his gut. Every word Trent was speaking meant Debra shouldn't be in the water at all.

Wade, in the water near Debra, glared at Theo. *Shut up so she can concentrate. Your worry will be what gets her hurt.*

Theo glared and tried not to think bad thoughts.

"I connected you to a partner. Keep that connection. If you have trouble, the rope, the knife, and your teammate are the most important things to remember. The ocean has no mercy. Keep your partner close."

Theo shuddered as the sun beat on him and made his hangover worse. *Please don't let her get hurt, Wade.*

Wade went beneath the water with the rest of them at Trent's motion.

Theo jumped up, unable to see Debra.

Trent pointed at an imposing woman striding down the beach toward them. "That's your first punishment, Theo. Get it over with before Debra comes back up."

Theo only heard a few of the words. "Where is she?! Get her out of there!"

Trent pushed Theo, getting angry. "Do what you're told!"

Theo stumbled, almost falling.

Amanda came up behind him and reached for his shoulder.

Trent retreated quickly so he wasn't accidentally caught in the blast, like when Tonya had hit Gabe. He'd been warned this was going to happen.

Amanda used her enforcer gift to zap Theo, taking him all the way to the sand with one short strike.

Theo screamed, instantly flashed to Kyle hitting him with the electric baton on the submarine.

Their witnesses froze, unsure what was happening. Some of them didn't know Theo had gotten into trouble.

Amanda knelt, reaching out again.

Trent put his boot in front of Theo to block his escape as he tried to crawl away.

Amanda hit him a bit harder, not enjoying it. She hated using her gifts for punishments. *And Angela knows that. She's getting both of us with this moment.*

All the activities going on around the beach stopped; more people turned toward the sound. They hadn't heard screaming in a while. It wasn't welcome.

Theo's screams also drew attention from the people in the water as they surfaced.

Debra started swimming to the shore.

Wade pulled her back by their rope. "Stay out of it or he'll get worse from the boss."

Wade hadn't known Theo was going to be punished, but he agreed with it. What Wade didn't like was knowing this woman had been among them the entire time with the power of an enforcer. *Who is she?*

Debra held onto Wade's arm and suffered with Theo as the tall blonde woman zapped him a third time.

Theo fought with his bladder and won, but he couldn't stop another scream.

Amanda stepped back. "This will happen once a day for the next two weeks. If I have to come find you, you'll get all three hits in full. Face the punishment yourself and perhaps your boss will let you off early."

“She’s your boss, too.” Trent gestured. “Finish up. We’re busy here.”

Trent had just come to the same conclusion as Wade. Amanda had been here all along, but she hadn’t helped them with any of the fights or struggles.

Amanda let her eyes glow bright red. “I have no boss, and your displeasure means nothing to me. Contain your rudeness. I won’t tolerate it, even from one of fate’s wildcards.”

Trent snorted, surprised to feel intimidated. “Go away now, Enforcer A. I have a class to handle.”

Amanda inclined her head. “As you say.”

She marched across the beach without another word or glance at anyone.

Theo rose onto his knees.

Trent sighed as the man threw up. “Let’s take a break so we can all talk about what just happened.” He didn’t want them distracted while they were in the water.

Everyone climbed out, helping each other.

*Who is she?!* Debra was furious.

Wade wasn’t happy either. “She’s listed as Amanda Abbot.”

*But?* Debra knew there was more.

“But she has the feel of another famous family line. I think she’s a Mitchel.”

“Welcome to the first shooting competition on our island, Safe Haven!”

The crowd cheered loudly at Shawn’s call. Most of the camp was now on the runway to observe the contest.

“Who will earn the title of best gun in camp?!”

“You!” Selina smiled, hanging on his arm.

The crowd laughed as he grinned.

“You got a good one there, Shawn!”

Shawn nodded at the shout from a camp member as he put an arm around Selina. She was wearing her new Eagle jacket proudly and smiling at everyone; she was clearly happy.

Shawn was personally training Selina to be an Eagle and making sure she attended all the lessons, but it wouldn’t be enough today. “The competition will start in ten minutes. If you’re shooting, get in line so we can add you to the roster. If you’re not shooting, grab a seat and remember to stay behind the taped line.”

Shawn and Selina broke apart, heading for separate areas. Shawn was the MC for this event; Selina was one of the competitors. Shawn expected her to do well, but there was no way she or the other hopeful females would win. All of the senior men would be a part of this, including Kenn and Marc. Adrian’s rule about leaders not participating had been tossed out the window. The camp needed a good moment where Marc kicked everyone’s ass and proved he would be a strong leader while Angela was on maternity leave.



“He isn’t going to win.” Kenn walked by Shawn to reach the long line of shooters. “Bet against me and you’ll lose that pretty gun.”

They didn’t have much to bet with on this island now. They were down to weapons and personal gear. Unlike in training sessions, betting was allowed during events like this. The crowd was trading work shifts and the few luxury items they’d hoarded, but most of it was running out.

Shawn wondered how Angela would replace the betting system. He had no doubt that was on her list. She didn’t like them trading shifts and bullets. It disrupted their schedules with the wrong people on the job, and they needed those bullets for supply runs.

*She was right to change that. And smart to be doing it so slowly that the camp won’t notice and resist.* “There are two changes coming to this competition, folks. The first is how we do the eliminations. Because we can’t afford to waste lead, there will only be one elimination round. All shooters must get five perfect shots to proceed to round two.”

The crowd cheered again, delighted that the final round would only be the best shooters in camp.

“When we do this next time, we will not be using live rounds. We have all those CO2 tanks, so we’ll be using our airsoft pistols.” Shawn grinned at the dismayed reactions from all of the competitors. “As you know, the wind screws with every shot on

those light pellets, so it will be a lot harder to get a win.”

The crowd laughed as the shooters groaned.

Shawn believed it was a great idea. It would give them the practice they all needed, while making them concentrate on accounting for weather conditions. The Eagles wouldn't like it, but the results would make the boss happy. “While we wait for everyone to finish signing in, the boss wants me to remind you that we have full shifts running after this. All Eagles will meet at the cabin by the beach; it will cover your two hours of workout time.”

Shawn stored the mike on his belt and went to the sign in desk to count how many shooters they had. He wanted to be sure he'd brought enough ammunition. He shaded his eyes as he read. It was early afternoon, with a bright sun beating down, but it wasn't as warm as many of them expected it to be. A lot of the camp were wearing sweaters. Season change was happening on the island whether they wanted it to or not.

“Whose idea was that?” Greg had been hoping to have the rest of the night off. “It didn't come from Angela.”

“No. Marc gave me that one a little while ago. Workouts will now serve a double purpose a few days a week.”

Greg shrugged. It was a good idea. *And the boss loves a twofer, so I can't complain.* “What are we doing there?”

“She wants it emptied.” Shawn assumed that was so the cabin could be reoutfitted as a honeymoon spot. The upcoming double wedding would be a good test of the location. It was a small cabin, but four people should be able to share it once they changed things a little and built another wall to make a second bedroom area.

“Fair enough.” Greg went over to stand with Neil and Wade. He’d been picked as the team XO while Jennifer was on maternity leave. Greg didn’t think Jennifer would be coming back to Neil’s team at all, even after she recovered from giving birth. *The boss has different plans for that one.*

“Where’s Ray?” Kenn needed to try again to find out what Ray’s problem was so Grant would leave him alone.

“Ray volunteered to stay on the ship and watch the radar.” Wade wasn’t happy about that, but he didn’t add more. It was awful that the gay couple couldn’t avoid the mistakes of everyone else. Wade had held high hopes for them. He also didn’t want to be part of the gossip vine. Kenn could find out the men had broken up from someone else.

Wade spotted Amanda in the crowd and swallowed another comment. He’d been stewing on her since the diving lesson ended, but he’d decided not to bring it up during this event. People would find out soon enough and start shunning her.

“Who has point while Marc and Adrian are goofing off?”

Shawn frowned at Greg. “Daryl.”

Greg snorted. “That figures. He did a shitty job while we were gone, so let’s put him in charge again.”

Shawn studied Greg, seeing dark spots under his eye and a nasty attitude that matched. “What are you pissed about?”

“She shouldn’t have put Marc and Adrian in charge.”

“Ah. You think it should have been you and Marc.”

Greg sneered. “It should have been me *instead* of Marc.”

Shawn stared coldly. “That wasn’t going to happen, not for this and not in *any* other way.”

Greg sulked.

Shawn spotted the gold band on Greg’s finger and figured it out. “Your engagement became official today. You’re pissed about being forced into another relationship you don’t want.”

Greg walked away so he didn’t have to answer.

Shawn added it to his list for the nightly report. Greg’s anger was a good sign, though. When he got quiet and withdrew from everything, that was when he was in danger. *Like Ray.*

“I’ll work on him. You just handle your own shit.”

Kenn’s grumpy tone carried. People in the line frowned at him.

Shawn already knew what Kenn’s issue was. Being overlooked in this camp was painful. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

Kenn grunted. *Like I don't know that.* He was up against the best men in camp, men who had already beaten him, literally. *I'll never have a good place again, no matter how hard I try.*

Shawn also added that to his report. Angela would be disappointed that Kenn seemed to be regressing. He almost hoped Kenn won tonight so his attitude would improve. Shawn didn't want Angela to be upset with the Marine. *Unless she decides to remove him. I could get behind that.*

Most of the camp could now that everyone knew what an asshole he'd been in the past. Everyone knew Tonya was the only reason Kenn was still alive.

Shawn ignored their small bond from being in the lab together. It wasn't enough to change how he felt about Kenn. *At some point, he has to go. I just hope he doesn't drag Tonya down with him.*

Kenn was having a bad day, but he had also gotten used to being left alone. He hadn't realized that everyone still had such animosity toward him. He spun around. "You got a problem with me?!"

Shawn grinned. "We all do, shithead. Get in line or go sit in the jail with the other traitors."

Kenn swung.

Wade was there to catch Kenn's arm and shove him toward the line of intently observing shooters. "That's enough!"

Kenn jerked away from Wade, but he didn't consider swinging on that man. Wade was bulked up, a great fighter, and Kenn didn't have an issue

with him. He glared at Shawn. "I'll be here long after she fries your ass for hurting Missy. I'm not the only one on borrowed time!"

Kenn went to the line and joined Zack, not caring if he was welcome. Kenn also didn't care about Shawn's scars, mental or physical. He had both of his own.

Shawn's anger rose. It was a struggle not to attack Kenn and roll around on the ground like kids.

Wade shook his head. "Not right now." There would be matches later to let them release the built-up testosterone. Many of their senior men needed the coming fights. They'd behaved for three weeks. Wade sighed. *Apparently, that's our limit.*

Shawn resumed MCing, but his good mood was gone.

In the line near Kenn, Selina stared at the ground while forming a plan to make Kenn pay for humiliating Shawn. *I won't stand for that. He just made a huge mistake.*

Shawn scanned the stands and residents who were gathered around the viewing area. "Do we have any other challengers? Has everyone gotten their practice shots?"

"I haven't had mine yet." Charlie came through the crowd, ignoring the women who turned toward him. He hurried to the desk to sign in.

Wade took the moment to scan the females who were standing up, moving closer, calling out their support for Charlie. He immediately dismissed all of the redheads and blondes. There were only four

black-headed females left after that. *But those are the ones who are showing an interest. What about the ones who aren't?*

Wade studied the crowd again, looking for females who were being subtle. He needed to match the boy with someone smarter than Tracy.

Charlie quickly loaded a handgun and stepped over to the tape. His annoyance allowed him to line the shots up almost perfectly.

Shawn knew it was good before the boy fired. He was a lot like his mother. When he was annoyed, his aim was great. "Five bulls-eyes and one miss!"

Charlie put the handgun back and got into the line. He didn't care about the competition, but Wade's advice to find something he enjoyed had stuck with him. It was also a way to avoid his gaggle of admirers. They weren't allowed to be in this line unless they were taking part in the competition.

"I'm next!" Candy shrugged off Conner's hand as they reached the runway. She was tired of being treated like an invalid.

Candy's good health was obvious. It made many of the camp members look around for Jennifer so they could express their approval. Tricking Nature into giving her that healing gift had earned Jennifer more friends in camp. They were willing to forgive her other mistakes because of that.

Shawn stayed close to the woman as she adeptly loaded the gun and went to the line.

Candy pulled the trigger too fast, letting her emotions ruin the shots.

“Three hits, three misses! You need a lot of practice, little lady.” Shawn smiled at her to take some of the sting out of his words.

Candy slapped the gun onto the desk and went back to Conner, embarrassed. She didn’t join the line of competitors. She already knew she wasn’t good enough.

“Anyone else?” Shawn hoped Candy didn’t feel bad. Several people had done poorly, including Ned, Dario, Anna, and a few of the brawlers. Shawn doubted that would exclude those few men from becoming part of the police force, however. Using guns on the island was forbidden except for training sessions and extreme situations. It was a small island and a bullet could travel a long distance. It might not be necessary for the police force to be proficient with a firearm. For an Eagle, it was the foundation of who they were.

There had also been a few surprising entries who *had* done well, like Dwight and Quincy. Both of those men had scored three bulls-eyes. Shawn didn’t expect either of the cooks to make it into the second round, but it was good that they had shown some skills in that area.

Richie, the last Indian from Natoli’s tribe, had also tried out a few minutes ago and scored only a single hit. He was still a gopher for a Special Forces team, whereas Stanley, Richie’s best friend, had already been bumped to an official level one. *Some people are cut out for this and some are not.*



Shawn frowned. *And then there are the people who should be here, but aren't.* It was worrisome that Timmy, who had been training with the brawlers, and Molly, who had always been a reliable Eagle, had both declined this competition. Molly was in the stands, chatting with people around her and flashing smiles of encouragement at Thomas. She didn't seem like she wanted to be an Eagle anymore.

Timmy was exactly the opposite. Shawn knew the boy wanted to be one of them more than anything. He should have been here. Instead, he was on the ship counting supplies while his face healed. Shawn assumed the boy was embarrassed that he had lost a fight to his brother. "The competition starts in three minutes! Last chance to enter!"

A woman in the rear of the crowd stood and came forward. Her knees shook slightly as she approached Shawn.

People pointed, surprised.

Opposite of the camp's reactions about Candy, they were upset with Jennifer as Samantha went to the line. It was obvious that she wasn't doing as well. Many of them hoped Jennifer could use her new gift on Samantha even though that woman's injuries were mental. None of them liked seeing Samantha in short hair, nervous, and avoiding her team. Everyone believed she would be better off if she was still an Eagle. It was disappointing that she hadn't attended any of the lessons or workouts in the last two months.

Wade was proud of Samantha as she signed her name and then chose a handgun. She hadn't touched one for a long time. He and Neil hadn't been sure if she was done with this part of life in Safe Haven.

Samantha loved the feel of the weapon in her hand. *If only I'd had this when Chad took me!*

Shawn felt her mental chaos. He gave her a stern look. "Concentrate, Eagle!"

Samantha was glad for the correction and to be called that again. She aimed carefully and pulled the trigger six times in painful joy.

"Three bulls-eyes, and three hits!" Shawn was impressed.

Samantha put the gun back, but she didn't join the competition. She just needed everyone to know she wasn't finished as an Eagle. *I also had to prove to myself that I can still do this part of the job.*

"Competition starts in one minute!" Shawn glanced around to see if anyone else was going to join or come up to make a point.

Several people in the audience considered it, but in the end, no one else did.

Shawn had planned to start with the highest-ranking people and then work his way down, but Marc and Adrian hadn't made it back up here yet. He adjusted on the fly, doing it the other way around. "Rookies, level ones, and non-Eagles, to the line! You're going first."

Raheem, Selito, and Stanley were already in the front of the line. They'd gotten here early to secure

their spots. Sadie and Daniella were right behind them.

Isabel, Terry, Eric, and Stuart all moved to the front. Madison reluctantly joined them, wishing she was able to wait and go with the senior people.

Theo also moved toward the front of the line, embarrassed once again. He wasn't an Eagle anymore. If not for Debra insisting, he wouldn't be here at all. He didn't care about being the top gun in camp.

Theo stood next to Terry, the Chief Medical Officer, only feeling a little better that he wasn't the only former Eagle here.

"You get six shots." Shawn pointed at the second table of firearms that were loaded and ready to go. "You heard the new rule. If you can't get five perfect hits, you're out."

The crowd settled into their chairs as the competition started.

Out of the line of shooters, only five made it through. Conner, Isabel, and Stuart all got perfect scores. Madison and Stanley only had one miss. All five of them moved to the rear of the line, beaming.

Sadie stomped toward town, not interested in staying to watch the rest of the competition after only getting two bulls-eyes and four misses. She had been watching for Adrian instead of getting her mind ready to shoot.

Raheem and Selito were rookies who hadn't had much access to a weapon. It wasn't surprising that they didn't make it through, like with Eric, who was

new to shooting. Daniella, Terry, and Theo not making the next round was a surprise to everyone. Terry and Theo had been Eagles, and Daniella had proven she was good with a firearm, though it was also a reminder of Tobias's betrayals. People were trying not to hold it against her and her sister because they had been charmed. Many of them had been rooting for her to go all the way in this competition.

It was a relief that Eric hadn't made it through, though. The senior Eagles were all keeping track of him because of his bad attitude. If he had passed the first round, it would have made them nervous to know he was already so good with a gun.

"Levels two and three, you're up!"

Charlie's gaggle of giggly girls pushed closer to the line as he went to the front of it.

Residents began chanting names as Tonya, Selina, and Isabel got ready to shoot.

Thomas, Jayda, and Grant came up together, completing a seven-person group that would have made a badass team in Shawn's opinion. All of those people were incredibly talented even though two of them were normal.

Jayda, Grant, and Thomas all failed to make the mark on this round. The crowd cried out on each one, shocked that three of their favorites were out of the running.

Two of that trio hung around the shooting area, chatting with those in line. Thomas had the excuse of his injury and being in the lab for so long without

access to a weapon, but Jayda was disappointed in herself.

Grant no longer cared about the contest. He headed for town, still acting like nothing was wrong while his heart throbbed in time to his misery.

Charlie, Isabel, Selina, and Tonya joined the other people who had made it through the first round, grinning and teasing the people who hadn't had a turn to shoot yet.

“Levels four through six, you're up!”

Zack, Ed, and Kenn moved to the front of the line. All of them were high level shooters, but their rank as Eagles put them in that position. Kenn had received automatic rank bumps from all of the action he'd gone through since he'd officially joined the Eagles, otherwise he would have been shooting with a much lower-ranked group.

Shawn sent out a mental call. *Adrian, you're up!*

Adrian wasn't officially an Eagle at all since he had been banished. Shawn had decided to include him with this group because of his skill level.

*On my way.*

Shawn motioned for the others to go ahead.

Kenn got a perfect score, as did Zack, but Ed didn't, surprising everyone again, including Angela, who was now up here watching.

Adrian hurried out of the jungle and came over to the line. Marc was right behind him.

Adrian didn't let so many witnesses or being slightly out of breath ruin his aim. He pulled the trigger lovingly.

“Five bulls-eyes and a close hit!”

The three men who had passed went over to the line, while Ed went to sit with the rest of the crowd. It was embarrassing that he hadn't done better, but he hadn't been practicing his gun skills. Firearms were rarely needed as a spy.

“Special Forces, you're up!” Shawn suddenly wished he was going with them, but he didn't want to be humiliated when his hands refused to obey.

Wade, Neil, Morgan, Kyle, and Greg all went to the front of the line. Marc joined them even though he wasn't on either of the Special Forces teams. There was no reason for him to be in a group by himself, though he often felt that way.

Shawn wasn't surprised by the outcome. “Six perfect scores!”

It would only have been surprising if any of them hadn't made it through. “Those are your shooters, folks! The final round of the competition starts in ten minutes. Place those bets!”

The 18 men and women left in the line exchanged good-natured ribbing while the crowd tried to figure out who would be the winner. It made one of the competitors very uncomfortable.

Madison wondered why Biff hadn't stayed for the competition. He'd left the line a short time ago to join the audience, without saying a word. It was uncomfortable to be standing here without a friend.

Marc went over and stood next to Madison.

People who saw Marc and Madison standing together had mixed reactions. A few of them

wondered if he might be having a Kendle moment, searching for a replacement while his wife was so heavily pregnant. The others wondered if he was evaluating Madison for positions that they wanted. The people who knew he was trying to help Madison with her anxiety approved completely. They would shut down the other rumors later.

Madison smiled. "Thank you."

Marc nodded. "You're welcome, but that doesn't mean I'm going to make this easy for you. If you want it, you have to fight for it."

Madison grinned, caught up in the spirit of competition. "I'm going to kick your ass, little boss man."

The crowd around them laughed in surprise. Madison was proving that she could be one of them if she wanted to be.

Now watching from the crowd, Biff made his way over to Angela. He had a big favor to ask. Madison was so much like him that the thought of not being with her actually hurt. *But I don't ever want kids. I need the boss to convince her we wouldn't be good parents. If she can't do that, I may as well give up now.*

Marc shoved into Biff's thoughts with a sharp warning and blunt truth. *If you want her, you'd better start fighting for her. You're not the only one who's interested in Madison.*

Anger filled Biff's mind with determination. *She's mine!*

Marc hid a smirk. *I don't know why Angela is so ready for a break. This shit is easy.*

Angela smiled patiently and rubbed her hard stomach. *All in good time, my love. All in good time.*



Chapter Seventeen  
**Fair Enough**

1

“Is everyone ready?” Shawn flinched back at the loud cheers from the audience, grinning. The camp was in a great mood. The brawlers had gotten the metal stands set up across the runway. Most of the camp was sitting in them or around them, enjoying the atmosphere. *The boss was right to do this. We needed some fun time.*

Shawn thought the Eagles would enjoy it, too, once the main competition was over. The center fire hadn't been lit yet; it was only early afternoon, but the people who'd asked Angela for access to the instruments on the cruise ship were already gathered around the cold fire ring. Upbeat music was soothing many of their beasts.

Shawn knew some of them might be disappointed that there wasn't any alcohol in the cooler by the firepit, but they would adjust to it. Shawn also assumed the next supply run would see crates of drinks brought back. *And someone will eventually get a still working and then we'll all be toasted again.*

Shawn didn't miss drinking like a lot of the Eagles did. *There's only one thing I want back and it doesn't come from a bottle.*

Shawn rotated toward the line of shooters. “The second round has a new challenge.” Shawn pointed at a large trunk near the taped shooting line. “We’re using rifles!”

The crowd was thrilled.

Many of the shooters frowned. Not all of them had experience with a rifle.

Those who did know how to use one weren’t rattled by the challenge.

All of the Marines cheered. They missed using those powerful weapons.

“Targets have been placed in the trees at the end of the cliff. You’ll get three shots. Do not fire more than that.” Shawn approved of that order. They didn’t have as many rifle magazines as they did for the handguns. Ammunition was another item the next supply run needed to cover.

“You can go in any order; aim for the next blank target in the line. You must get two perfect hits to make it to the final round.”

Observers tried to spot the targets in the trees, but the cards from the ship’s giftshop were too far away. The ocean was behind those targets, hopefully ensuring the rounds would go harmlessly out to sea. Shawn approved of the setup. When it came to things like this, Marc knew what he was doing. “We start in one minute. Line up!”

The military men strode to the taped line without hesitating. The women who’d practiced on the cruise ship with Angela also went to the front of the line, eager to use more intense weapons.

Everyone else took a rear spot and hoped watching the others would help them figure out what to do.

Shawn got a rifle from the trunk and went to the end of the line. “We’ll have a quick demonstration.”

It was another test of these people to determine how well they remembered instructions after only one short lesson.

Isabel, Stanley, Selina, and Stuart paid close attention.

Shawn noticed Madison was in the front of the line, near Marc again. She wasn’t watching the demo. *She knows how to use a rifle, too. Interesting. We need to find out her background.*

Sitting in a chair in front of the stands, Angela kept her eyes on the shooters while her mind dug into those around her. Shawn was fully focused on the competition. He would identify their top shooters and the weaknesses of the others. She and Bret were searching through the camp while everyone was distracted.

Bret stood behind Angela and stayed ready to bring up a shield if things got out of control. He loved being her guard.

“First shooter, get to it!” Shawn laughed as Marc and Adrian both hurried to grab a rifle.

Marc bumped Adrian with his hip, sending the man crashing into the table of handguns.

Adrian grabbed the falling weapons, scowling. “Cheater!”

Marc snickered as he lifted the rifle. “All’s fair in love and war.”

Adrian's eyes narrowed. *Remember you said that.*

For one instant, Marc considered turning the gun on Adrian.

The crowd tensed, catching the vibe.

Adrian felt it clearly. He lifted a brow.

“Just keeping it friendly.” Marc turned toward the targets.

Adrian chuckled. “I can tell how today's gonna go.”

Marc began firing instead of responding.

Shawn lifted his field glasses. “Three perfect hits!”

The crowd cheered.

Marc handed the rifle to Adrian. “How long has it been since you fired one of these?”

Adrian took the rifle. “Longer than you're thinking.” He spun to the line and fired his three shots quickly.

“Perfect score!”

Adrian smirked at Marc's disappointment. “You can't rattle me.”

Marc stared at him. “Wanna bet?”

Adrian retreated a step, passing the rifle to Kenn. “Uh, no, actually.”

The crowd laughed.

So did Shawn, understanding the men were giving the camp a good show. They didn't mean any of the threats.

Marc kept his thoughts blank as he caught Shawn's observation.

Adrian and Marc went to the rear of the line to watch the other shooters.

Kenn lifted the rifle confidently. *I love guns. It doesn't matter what kind.*

Shawn peered through the glasses as Kenn got ready to fire.

Marc hip-bumped Adrian again, taking the place in front of him and jostling several people who protested.

“Hey!” Adrian knew it was an attempt to distract Kenn this time.

It didn't work.

“Three perfect hits!”

Kenn handed the gun to Greg. “Marc's in a good mood today.”

Greg had noticed that, too. “Must be nice.” Greg popped off his three shots while barely aiming.

“Perfect score!”

Marc wasn't surprised. Greg couldn't be flustered by things going on around him. Like the Marines in this line, Greg was used to performing under fire. *But he can be rattled mentally.*

Marc didn't do that, however. He didn't want Greg's mind to become more messed up than it already was.

Wade tripped Neil and got to the line next. He was laughing as he fired.

“Perfect score!” Shawn was suddenly sure round three would have more shooters than he'd accounted for when he chose the challenges. *I should have brought more targets.*

Morgan rushed to the line, throwing out a leg that also tripped Neil. “My turn!”

Neil hit the table and rotated quickly, hip throbbing. He shoved Morgan toward Shawn and snatched the warm rifle.

Morgan laughed, waiting as Neil fired.

“Perfect score!” Shawn was almost bored. *I should have picked something harder.* Half of the playing cards taped to the tree trunks were now dotted in holes. He had drawn small circles in the centers, but that clearly didn’t matter.

Morgan reached for the rifle.

Kyle hip-bumped Morgan to the side and neatly took the weapon from Neil. He reloaded it from the mags on the table, finishing before Morgan picked himself off the dusty ground.

The crowd was howling and clapping, enjoying the show.

Morgan rubbed his leg. “That didn’t go as planned.”

Kyle fired with a steady pull of the trigger, loving the feeling. *I wish we got to use rifles more.*

“Perfect score!”

Kyle handed the weapon to Morgan, laughing at his dirty look. “Try harder.”

Morgan caught the double-meaning. “Suck a slug!”

Kyle snickered, going to the line with the others who’d made it through. “Maybe later, dear.”

Morgan’s laughter screwed his aim. He knew it as he fired.

“Two close hits!”

Morgan wasn't mad. Being the top shooter wasn't important to him. He gave Kyle the finger and then headed toward the stands to keep an eye on Jennifer. She was laughing at their antics. That did matter to Morgan.

Zack went to the taped line at the same time as Charlie and Stuart. He let them bump and shove each other, not joining in. Zack barely felt like being here at all.

Charlie surprised Stuart with an elbow to the ribs and managed to reach the line first. He hefted the rifle, chuckling at Stuart's glare. “It's not my fault you're old and slow.”

“Oohh!” Shawn laughed. “That's a low blow.”

Stuart smirked. “Better than young and dumb.”

Charlie chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Charlie's admirers came toward the line, hoping to get a moment with him after he finished shooting.

Shawn glowered at the women. “Volunteers to clean up the brass. Great!”

The five females made faces and started to return to their seats.

“Stay right there!” Shawn was tired of them harassing the boy. “I gave you a job. You will do it!”

The women stayed put, now sorry that they hadn't remained in their seats as the crowd and the shooters laughed at them.

Charlie was embarrassed all over again. He fired with turmoil in his mind.

“Two trims!” Shawn knew he’d blown it because of his admirers, but there wouldn’t be time to clear distractions during a firefight. He didn’t tell the boy to take another turn. “Next shooter!”

Stuart took the gun and held it out to Zack.

“Thanks.” Zack reached for it.

“Sike!” Stuart pulled it back, turned neatly, and fired his three shots.

Zack chuckled, slowly being drawn out of his misery.

“Perfect score!”

Stuart reloaded and handed the hot rifle to Zack for real this time. “Just do your best, *rookie*.”

Zack snorted. “I’ve got your rookie right here.” He aimed and fired, nerves settling down for the first time in a while.

“Perfect score!” Shawn was a bit surprised that Zack had done so well. He’d thought the man would bomb out because of his mental issues. Allison’s death had hurt Zack deeply.

Zack automatically reloaded the rifle.

Stuart tossed an arm around Zack’s shoulders after he put the gun down. “What are you doing after dinner, sweetheart?”

Zack bent and lifted Stuart over his shoulder. “Nailing you to the mat.”

Stuart slapped Zack on the ass. “All right!”

Everyone laughed with them, glad that Zack was in a better mood.

Marc motioned Charlie over to the line. He didn’t want the boy going back to his son yet or



hiding from the women in the crowd. “Hang with us.”

Charlie was happy with that. He watched with everyone as Shawn gestured and the rest of the shooters rushed the line.

Stanley shoved Conner and then tripped over his own feet. He went down, hitting Tonya. The trio fell in a pile together as Madison, Selina, and Isabel ran by them, pushing and grinning.

Selina tripped Madison.

Madison grabbed Selina’s arm and held her back as she fell, allowing Isabel to reach the line first.

Isabel lifted the rifle and then looked at Shawn.

Shawn realized she hadn’t caught enough of his demonstration. “Put it against your shoulder. Find a comfortable spot. Be ready for the recoil.”

Isabel smiled at him. “Thanks.” Then she fired three smooth shots and shocked everyone.

“Perfect score!” Shawn made a note in his book. “Have you ever fired a rifle before?”

“No.” Isabel put the heavy gun back on the table. “Reicher didn’t like firearms in the lab.”

“Where did you learn to shoot?”

“I didn’t.”

*She’s a natural.* Shawn shut his book and motioned to the others. “What are you waiting for?”

Madison took the hand that Selina offered, no longer in the mood to wrestle for it. *He’s going to ask me that, too.*

Selina lifted the rifle and fired three fast shots.

“Three hits!” Even rushing, Selina was also a natural. Anyone else might have found it a simple coincidence that two women from that lab were so good with guns, but Shawn knew it wasn’t. *Angela will sort it out.* “Next!”

Madison was tempted to blow it so she didn’t have to answer questions.

Marc was tracking her thoughts. *You can’t keep secrets and be one of us, Maddie. Make your choice and do it now.*

Madison cringed.

Shawn saw it. “You don’t have to keep going.”

Madison took a deep breath. “I’m okay.” She went to the line and lifted the hot rifle.

“Perfect score!”

Madison handed the gun to Tonya and headed for the rear of the line, hoping no one would ask.

Marc waited until she got to the line and then he pinned her with a hard gaze and a tone loud enough for everyone around them to hear it. “Where’d you learn to shoot like that?”

With his eyes seeing deep into her soul, Madison couldn’t have lied even if she’d wanted to. “My father taught me.”

Marc knew there was more to it. “He was a police officer? SWAT team?”

Madison sighed. “He was a gunrunner.”

*That explains a lot.* Marc rotated to watch the other shooters.

Madison held still as those who’d heard stared at her in shock.

Tonya's eyes narrowed. *That chick is competition.* "Are you trying out for team XO?"

Madison quickly shook her head.

Tonya frowned. "Overruled. I expect you in the cage tomorrow. Be there!"

People laughed at Tonya's copy of Angela's angry radio call.

Madison quickly nodded, trying to get the spotlight off of herself. She could feel Biff staring at her in dismay. He'd caught it all.

Tonya rotated with the rifle and fired.

"Three hits!"

Tonya hated it that she hadn't gotten any perfect hits, but she doubted it would matter. Once she got into that cage, no one would be able to beat her.

Tonya went to stand by Madison as Conner and Stanley walked to the line.

Marc looked over, catching Tonya's eye.

Tonya tensed, feeling his need. She shook her head even though she knew Marc needed it. *I'm not ready to talk about your uncle.*

Marc accepted that, but it didn't help him.

Shawn inched closer to Stanley as he took his turn.

People quieted and got ready to run for cover.

Stanley forced his body to do what he wanted, but it hurt. His temple started to ache as he gently pulled the trigger three times.

"One hit!" Shawn was glad when Stanley handed the rifle to Conner and walked away with his chin up. "Good try."

Stanley hadn't expected to do well with a rifle. He'd never fired one before. In his mind, one hit was good.

Angela agreed. Stanley had all sorts of untapped skills. They were just overshadowed by his clumsiness. The sweet young man had done a lot better since she yelled at him. *And I still feel bad about that.*

Conner reloaded the rifle, telling those watching that he'd been counting the bullets as they were used. It impressed the Eagles.

Conner expertly put the butt against his shoulder and took his turn.

"Perfect score!" Shawn was surprised again. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

Conner put the rifle on the table and turned toward the line of curious shooters. "My stepfather. Major Garret made sure all of his men were proficient with firearms."

It was a reminder that his mother's death, at the hands of her husband, hadn't been that long ago.

Adrian waved Conner over and hugged him.

It was the perfect reaction, sending sympathy toward Conner and approval toward Adrian from all directions, even the Eagles.

Marc snorted. *These people will fall for anything.*

Angela met his eyes. *That's why they have to be micromanaged. If they were smart enough to do it on their own, we wouldn't be needed.*

Marc didn't know if she meant leaders or descendants, but it didn't matter. She was right. These people needed someone to show them another view of the world, one that was scary but important. *I'm that man, but I won't get enough time to do it. Unless...*

He turned back toward Shawn and refused to finish the thought.

Angela knew. She wasn't upset. *I gave you the job for that reason, Marc. I know you won't want to give it up.*

*All part of the plan?*

*Yes, dear.*

Marc's lips curved. Even while she was getting one over on him, he still loved learning from her. If not for his mental chaos, they could have led this camp together and done a magnificent job at it.

Angela sighed. She didn't tell him that she'd given up on that. *Because I haven't.*

## 2

"Round three starts in two minutes!" Shawn got the attention of the betting, talking crowd and the restless shooters.

"For this final set, we're using the Eagle motto." Shawn grinned. "We're just taking it to an extreme."

Shawn motioned at the brawlers he'd asked to help out.

The brawlers came out of the jungle carrying the rollout targets the Eagles were used to using. They

assembled them quickly in the middle of the empty part of the runway. The ocean was crystal clear behind them.

“The Eagles believe if you aim small, you’ll miss small, providing better results.” Shawn pointed at a group of camp women coming forward carrying familiar items. “Aim small, miss small, shooters.”

The colorful balloons on strings drew laughter from everyone.

Shawn let it go while the targets were taped to the rollouts. Until today, the helium tanks in the gift shop hadn’t been touched.

Shawn waved the cleanup women over, adding to their punishment. “We need more balloons. Start blowing on those rubbers.”

The witnesses laughed while the women rolled their eyes or snickered.

Shawn pulled a roll of tape from his pocket and began putting the floating balloons in place.

The senior Eagles eyed the new targets in tolerance. Balloons, inflated, were easier than gift cards or playing cards.

The newer shooters still eyed them warily.

Shawn looked over. “You can’t hit the balloons. If you hit even one, you’re out.”

Tonya frowned. “Then what are we aiming at?”

Shawn tapped the string that was now holding a balloon to the target. “Aim small and hope.”

The crowd groaned and restarted the betting, thrilled with the new challenge.

Senior shooters now studied the narrow strings and realized this wasn't going to be as easy as they'd thought.

Shawn handed the tape to one of the cleanup women. "Finish that for me."

He went over to the weapons to reload them all. "You can use a handgun or a rifle. Release as many balloons as you can...in 10 seconds."

The shooters groaned at the time limit. Most of them were a bit rattled now. This was a test of skill, not just good control. The strings on the balloons were only a few inches long. They would have to account for everything, including the wind.

"Who wants to go first?"

No one rushed or fought for it this time. They eyed each other and those floating balloons in concern.

Isabel stepped forward. "I'm not scared of you. I don't float anywhere."

People who got the IT reference grimaced and looked around for the killer clown. Those who didn't assumed it was connected to the lab.

Isabel chose the handgun. She liked the feel of it more than the rifle. *The rifle makes me feel too powerful, like I can do anything. That's a dangerous way to be in a gunfight.*

Shawn pointed at the four rollouts that were now covered in colorful balloons. "When my hand goes down, you can shoot. When it goes up, stop immediately."

Isabel made sure the 9 mm was loaded and then waited for the workers to clear the area.

Shawn lifted his hand. “Go!” He hit the timer on the stopwatch in his other hand.

Isabel began shooting.

The crowd got into it as she hit the first string and a balloon floated up. They began counting her hits.

“One! Two! Three!” *Pop!*

Shawn hit the timer. “Three is the score to beat, shooters.”

Isabel stared at the balloons, feeling a little homesick for the first time since being rescued from the lab. *He didn't let us have many celebrations, but when he did, there was always balloons.*

Isabel's sadness pulled Stanley from the crowd. He took her hand and led her to the stands.

Stuart went to the line next. He already knew it wasn't going to go well. The strings on the balloons were shifting in the breeze. He used the handgun and tried to do better than he was expecting.

“One! Two!” *Pop!*

Stuart replaced the gun while the crowd groaned. *I'm a brawler.*

Angela corrected him. *You're a police officer, keeping the peace for everyone.*

Stuart brightened. That sounded perfect to him.

Zack also doubted he was good enough for this. He went to the line with his mind once again falling into misery.

“One!” *Pop!*



Everyone was surprised that he hadn't done better, except for Angela. A lot of their top men were hiding serious issues and almost all of it was mental leftovers from the trauma they'd gone through. This competition would bring some new life into their teams while the senior men continued to recover.

Tonya wasn't intimidated, but like Zack, she knew she wasn't this good.

“One! Two! Three!” *Pop!*

Tonya groaned. “So close!”

Shawn laughed, but he didn't tell her Isabel's score wouldn't stand for much longer. Everyone knew the Special Forces teams would do better.

Kenn went to the line with a cocky walk. He was eager to prove he belonged at the top.

Selina shifted closer, hand coming up to cover her mouth.

Kenn started shooting.

“One! Two! Three! Four!”

Selina faked a loud sneeze and then did it again.

Kenn kept firing.

“Five! Six!” *Pop!*

Kenn turned to glare at Selina.

Shawn got ready to step between them.

Selina shrugged, not trying to hide her actions.

“You can either do it or you can't.”

Kenn flushed at having his own words tossed back at him.

Selina smirked.

Kenn held the gun out. “Let's see how you do under the same conditions.”

Selina marched up, but she was no longer amused.

Kenn chuckled. He got back in the line without trying to distract her. He'd already done that.

Embarrassed, Selina took it out on the balloons.

“One! Two! Three! Four! Five!” *Pop!*

“Damn it!”

Shawn laughed, relieved that Kenn had walked away. “Six is still the score to beat, shooters. Stand by while our blowers refill the targets.”

Adrian and some of the others watched the balloons float away on the wind, reminded of the ceremony on the ship when Angela had released balloons with the names of their dead. *She's replacing that memory with this one.*

Angela nodded at him. *We have to move on, no matter how hard it is.*

*It's not right.*

*No, but it's necessary. You already know which of those is more important.*

“Next shooter, to the line!”

Greg tuned out everything as he went up, determined to do well. The military men always had an advantage in these contests. Greg was tired of coming in second best to the three Marines.

Shawn hit the timer and did a fast check on the target area while the camp counted.

“Six! Seven! Eight!” *Pop!*

Greg was happy with that score. *I beat Kenn!*

“Oh, grow up.” Kenn joined Tonya, trying not to hold a grudge where everyone could see it. Greg

wasn't a real threat and Shawn was Marc's bitch again, like he'd been when they first reached the mountain. *I'm not competing with them for Marc's attention. I've had too much of it over the years.*

Madison strode to the line. "You know, I really hate balloons." She opened fire, once again shocking everyone.

"Ten! Eleven! Twelve!" *Pop!*

Madison replaced the rifle, grinning at the thrill. Her secret was out now. *I don't have to hide anymore! It feels great.*

"She just beat Kenn and Greg!" Shawn was stunned. He was sure that nearly all of the shooters left would do better, but it was still amazing.

Madison went to join Biff in the stands even though she had the top score. Like Shawn, she knew she wouldn't have it for long.

Biff let her sit next to him, but he didn't speak to her.

Conner went forward at Adrian's nudge. He also picked a rifle. He really hadn't wanted anyone to know how good he was. It always led to questions that he didn't want to answer. No one here wanted to talk about their old lives.

"Ten! Eleven! Twelve! Thirteen! Fourteen!"  
*Pop!*

Conner ignored the happiness from his father and the approval from the Eagles. He looked across them all to Angela. *Don't put me to work because of this. I won't do it.* Garret had made him kill people. Conner wasn't ever going to do that again.

Angela hadn't planned on it. *I like you right where you are. For now.*

Conner was relieved. He knew he had to pick a career in camp soon, but it didn't have to be today and it would never be this.

Neil went next. He was confident that he could at least match Madison's shooting. He wasn't sure about going higher. He eyed the balloons as Shawn directed the blowers into replacing those that were now floating above the island.

Some of the balloons had already been pushed into the jungle by the breeze. Neil hoped he wasn't on the crew that would be drafted to clean up the mess. *We need to find ways to do this that don't leave garbage everywhere.*

Shawn cleared the line of fire and made sure everyone else did, too. "Next shooter, on your mark!"

Neil began firing.

Angela didn't count with the crowd. She turned toward Bret with a brow lifting.

Bret was getting random thoughts from the hidiers. *You won't like any of it.*

Angela sighed. *I never do.*

"Fourteen! Fifteen!" *Pop!*

Wade took the rifle from Neil and reloaded it, grinning. "Nice shooting."

Neil slapped Wade on the shoulder. "Just do the best you can, noob."

Wade laughed, enjoying himself.

Neil stayed close as Wade fired, admiring the man's thick arms. *I miss our private time.*

Wade caught that and groaned, finger pausing. "Cheater!"

He resumed firing.

"Eleven! Twelve!" *Pop!*

Wade wasn't mad. He walked with Neil toward the crowd, where Samantha was beaming at both of them as bright sunlight streamed down on her. "I miss it, too."

Neil thought of Angela's words and fought not to get hard as they walked. "Soon."

"Thank God!" Wade didn't think he could have waited much longer without begging.

Neil chuckled, heart easing on that front. If Angela said it was time, then it was. No one was better at judging what people could handle.

"Fifteen is the score to beat!" Shawn got ready to hit the timer as Kyle came to the line.

Kyle loved moments like this. He was up for any challenge that involved his Eagle duties. He fired while smiling.

Marc caught Adrian's eye. *Let him win.*

Adrian wondered why.

*Figure it out.*

Adrian dug in on that while the camp counted.

"Fifteen! Sixteen! Seventeen!"

"Time!"

Kyle put the gun down, thrilled that he hadn't popped any of the balloons. So far, he was the only one who hadn't.

Adrian picked a rifle that hadn't been fired yet as Shawn reset his timer and the crowd leaned forward to watch.

Marc eyed the way Adrian held the gun, recognizing the same training. The only difference between them was how much experience he'd gotten compared to Adrian. With another decade of practice, Adrian would be just as good.

Marc shifted so he could see Angela. She was observing Adrian, eyes shining as she waited for the blond man to prove himself.

Marc wasn't jealous. He was thinking hard on the future.

"Fifteen!" *Pop!*

The crowd groaned as Adrian fell one hit short of matching Kyle.

Marc knew they weren't going to believe he and Adrian had both fallen short by one. He decided to take a full dive and let it look like both men had done better. *In the real situations, I'll always come out on top. I don't have to do that here.*

Marc lifted a rifle and began firing.

Angela knew what he was doing when she noticed he'd chosen a rifle that hadn't been reloaded. He didn't need a full mag because he wasn't going to use it all. She approved; she also hoped no one else caught it. They needed Kyle to feel like he was the best in camp for a while. He'd earned it, but he also needed it. His status with the camp had dipped since he'd said he would take Jennifer away from Safe Haven if she wanted it.

Now that they were staying, he needed the bump in status.

“Ten! Eleven! Twelve!” *Pop!*

“No way!” Shawn called it, certain he had missed something. “Kyle wins! Say hello to the new top shooter on Pitcairn Island!”

Kyle rotated and waved to the crowd. He didn’t let on that he knew what had happened. *When Jennifer is back in charge, this shit won’t be allowed. I never want it this way again.*

Angela met his eyes across the celebrating crowd. *So noted. Now take one for your team. There’s no shame in being third best in this camp.*

Kyle chuckled. *Fair enough.*

Chapter Eighteen  
**Don't Believe It**

1

“**W**e’re having a conjuring lesson now, folks.” Daryl got attention from the camp members and the Eagles. People glanced over, not sure if that was a good idea even though they’d known it was going to happen.

There were still fighters around the mat, including Isabel, who was too old to be doing this. Daryl looked at Ned and Dario, the new men Angela had brought back. Everyone liked their dog, Duke, but his owners weren’t fitting in yet.

Dario quickly shook his head. “We’d rather work on the ships.”

Ned nodded. “We like sailing.”

It wasn’t the first time the men had mentioned that. It made everyone nervous to have strangers so eager to be in control of their boats.

Daryl saw Eric approach the magic ring. The boy was trying to see what power everyone else had. *That makes us nervous, too.* “Don’t be afraid to come over and watch the show. Our enforcers will keep shields over the entire area so nothing will get out of control.”



That was good enough for most of the camp. They knew Jennifer could be trusted to enforce the peace.

The people who'd caught the wording scowled, assuming one of their kids was being brought up from town. The kids weren't supposed to be at this event. They were with Trent and the other den mothers.

Jennifer knew exactly what it meant. She looked at Angela, hurt. "Boss?"

Angela motioned toward the magic area. "Go do your duty."

Jennifer stiffened as she realized Angela wasn't going to change the call. She'd complained about Amanda earlier and been blown off. "This is low, even for you!"

Angela chuckled as Jennifer marched down the stands, glaring.

Bret didn't like anyone talking to Angela that way. "She needs to be trained."

Angela rubbed her stomach. "That's the second time I've heard that today."

"What did you say the first time?"

Angela motioned to the magic area, where Amanda was now walking stiffly through the Eagles. "I gave her the job."

Bret was satisfied with that. He resumed digging into the minds of the hidiers. The amount of power in this camp was staggering. *And these people only know about half of it.*

Angela wasn't sure how the camp would take it when those hidiers were flushed into the light, but she planned to worry about it later. *I just want to watch the show and act like my spine isn't throbbing.*

Amanda was wearing a long cloak of black and red fur that touched the ground as she walked. Her long braids were pulled back in a ponytail that hung to her hips. It drew attention from the women who admired her looks. The men stared, hardening without a pause. She oozed sexual prowess. It was impossible to miss.

Jennifer lifted a shield over the magic area without straining. She had a strong shield anyway, but anger and embarrassment were fueling it now. *I can't believe Angela is doing this.*

Amanda stopped near Jennifer, also lifting a shield. Tiny flames crackled in the air as she covered Jennifer's shield and expanded it to a wider radius.

Jennifer glowered at the woman while people stared and pointed. Amanda's shield looked just like the one Angela had.

Gossip flew through the camp from those who knew Amanda had punished Theo. It pushed out the gossip about Biff lifting the bunkhouse and Madison's father being a criminal.

"Biff is going to handle the first lesson." Daryl motioned at the quiet man. "Let's see if anyone can do what he can!"

The camp headed for the magic area, talking eagerly.

Biff went that way as well, no longer in a good mood. *Her father was a gunrunner!*

Madison was aware of Biff's displeasure. She went to the bottom of the stands and then walked toward the jungle path to town.

"Get back here!"

Madison flushed, turning at Tonya's angry call. It drew a lot of attention to them.

Tonya motioned. "If he's too stupid to see that was the past, it's his problem. Don't screw up your place here based on him."

People around them nodded in agreement, though they hadn't all heard Madison's confession.

Madison liked Tonya for trying to help her. She sighed. "What happens when they find out it wasn't just my father?"

Tonya shrugged. "It's still the past."

Madison walked with Tonya toward the magic area, trying not to feel self-conscious. *But I am. I've always been this way. It feels like everyone's staring at me and they don't like what they see.*

"That second part is all in your mind." Tonya stayed close to the woman, mind rolling along the future. "The first part is always true. Just pretend you're a queen and they're all beneath you."

"I don't view them that way."

"I don't either, but we can't let them know that or they might expect us to be nice or something."

Madison chuckled. "Thanks."

“Anytime. As your team leader, you can count on me to give you shit whenever you need it.”

Madison laughed. “You haven’t been given that title yet.”

Tonya just smiled as they joined the enforcers.

Jennifer admired Amanda’s shield resentfully.

Amanda turned toward the girl, curious.

Jennifer couldn’t resist the challenge. She strained, trying to make her shield crackle.

Amanda started the first lesson, assuming Jennifer wouldn’t know that was what was happening. “Have you tried using grief?”

Jennifer’s anger flowed out. She pulled it back quickly before she did something she would regret. “Stay out of my mind!”

“I always do.” Amanda strengthened her shield as more people joined the area to observe the lesson.

Jennifer tried harder. She hated to fail at anything.

Amanda waited, letting the girl tire herself out.

Jennifer huffed angrily. “How do I use grief?”

“You think of the thing you’ve lost that hurts you the most and then push it into the shield.”

Jennifer’s pain flooded her heart. *My baby!* Tiny crackles appeared over her shield and then vanished.

“Very good.” Amanda allowed a bit of warmth to enter her tone. “And I’m sorry for your loss. I was actually hoping you didn’t have anything like that to fuel you.”

“Because then you can take my place easier?!”

“Because it’s awful that someone your age has already been hurt so much.” Amanda turned to scan the opposite direction.

Jennifer fought the unwilling bond that tried to form. *She’s lost someone, too.*

Watching from the gun area that was being cleaned up, Kyle frowned. He already didn’t like Amanda because she’d hurt Jennifer. “Why is the boss bringing in new people? Why now?”

Shawn had an answer. “Let me ask you a question. Do you think Angela and Jennifer are the strongest descendants we have here?”

“Absolutely.” Kyle nodded at a couple of camp members going by who offered congratulations on his win of the top shooter title.

“They’re both about to be out of commission for a while.”

Kyle knew from Shawn’s tone that it wasn’t to replace those women. “And?”

“It would be a very bad time for the hidere to suddenly band together and try to take over.”

“Keep your enemies close?”

Shawn nodded. “It might not be enemies, though. The boss is showing them how great a life in this camp can be. She’s winning them over without them knowing it.”

Amanda looked over, eyes glowing bright red.

Kyle grunted. “They know.”

Shawn had to agree. “Still, it’s better to have them on our side than to let them form alliances against us.”

Kyle glared back at Amanda. “We’ll remove them before that happens. The boss will see to it.”

“Yes, I will.” Marc walked by the men on the way to the matchup mats.

Kyle and Shawn both tensed. Then they got to work.

Amanda nodded to Marc, automatically responding to his authority. She’d been rooting for him all along.

Marc felt a flash of attraction. It reminded him of Kendle so much that his stomach turned. *Keep that shit to yourself!* The joking tone he’d used with Adrian was gone. *Once more and I’ll tell my wife you shouldn’t be here.*

Amanda dropped her chin. *Snitch.*

Jennifer didn’t want to bond with Amanda, but she also didn’t like how quickly the woman had given in. “Don’t mind him. He’s lucky to be here at all, let alone to be in charge.”

Amanda sighed. Marc was a Reicher; she could feel it. “That family has ruled our kind for centuries. They always win.”

Jennifer shook her head. “You have a lot to learn.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.”

Jennifer’s face darkened. “I’m not doing it. I don’t need a teacher!”

Amanda sent energy into her shield, making it vibrate, vanishing and reappearing but never falling.

In a good mood, most of the camp clapped.

Jennifer gritted her teeth. “That’s nothing.”

Amanda found herself wanting the teenager's respect. She forced herself to ignore the challenge. *I'm too old for this.*

"Yes, you are. Look at the gray in those braids!"

Amanda's lips thinned. "You're rude, rash, and rebellious. Your camp may find it cute, but I don't. You'll get the alpha killed."

"You don't care about the alpha!"

"Not true. I want her to have a healthy baby and take back over."

Jennifer stared suspiciously. "I heard you thinking about Marc. You believe he should be running things."

"I believe that, but I don't want it. Reichers are too strict. If Marc keeps leadership, many of us will leave."

Jennifer wondered if that was true of the Eagles. She glanced around and found them silently agreeing. She rotated toward the fighting area to see if Marc had noticed.

Marc acted as if he hadn't. He'd only been in charge since dawn. It would take longer than that for people to trust him. *And then there's the fact that I don't care if some of them leave. This camp would be better off if we lightened our load anyway.*

Adrian frowned at Marc as he joined the man near the mats. "I hope you don't mean that."

"Why?"

"Because she won't give you this job again." Adrian delivered the warning he knew Marc needed to hear. "You have to love them all, even when they

disappoint you. Safe Haven's leader can't hate half of her citizens."

Marc knew that was true. "Make me love them. You can do that, right?"

Adrian slowly nodded. "But you'd have to let me in for that to work. You can't keep holding me at arm's length."

Marc stepped to the center of the mat and waved. "Come on. Let's get closer."

Adrian groaned as he obeyed. "Me and my big mouth."

Marc took up a kai stance on the mat. "What do you think of the new woman?"

Adrian scanned Madison, then Amanda. Then he swept the crowd where there were at least 50 faces he didn't have names for. "Which one?"

Marc started with level one, just running through the kai positions.

Adrian did the same, waiting. He assumed Marc meant Amanda, but he wasn't sure.

"You didn't tell us she was here."

Adrian ducked Marc's mock swing as they moved closer. "Don't hold that against her. She's not bad."

"She's a female Mitchel." Marc swung faster as he switched to level two.

"You want to know if they're different than the sex-crazed males." Adrian increased his pace, following Marc's switch.

"Among other things."



Adrian sensed Marc didn't really care about that at all. "I thought you'd be mad."

Marc swung, letting his hit land this time.

Adrian took the mild punch with a lightening heart. He loved physical combat. He shook it off and swung back.

Marc let the hit land, barely feeling it.

Adrian ducked the next swing and switched them into level three. He also sensed Marc didn't want to fight him. "What are you doing?"

Marc slowed so the audience could view the moves. "It's a twofer."

Adrian understood. Their demonstration would draw out more of the leery residents who also liked to fight or those who wanted to learn kai. "I'm only seeing one side of it."

Marc nailed Adrian in the jaw, taking him to the ground.

"Ah." Adrian got to his feet, hurting. "You get to abuse me in the process."

Marc had already lost the fun of it. He turned his back to Adrian as he switched to the next level.

Adrian was glad. He hadn't been looking forward to the pain. He stepped next to Marc and tried to mirror his movements exactly.

"Very good." Marc ducked and spun, kicking.

Adrian ducked and spun, kicking.

Neil came over and got into the line, eager to be with his friend and his mentor. He stood where the sun was beaming down, warming his body and fueling his mind.

In the stands, Angela watched them without letting anyone into her thoughts. Pain radiated through her stomach.

“She’s hiding something.” Marc turned so he could look at Adrian while they ran through the levels. “Other than mind messing.”

Adrian already knew that from their talk. “What did she say?”

“She deflected, blaming it on her emotions.”

“And you let her get away with that?”

Marc thought of the mini-tornado the baby had produced. “I’ll need your help after the birth. Do us all a favor and don’t screw up, huh?”

Shocked, Adrian missed his footing and turned right into Neil’s fist.

Neil frowned at them both as Adrian hit the ground. “What happened?”

Marc chuckled. “He thought this was going to be painless. I couldn’t have that.”

Neil laughed.

Adrian groaned and got to his feet while his vision blurred. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Amanda.”

“That’s better.” Marc thought about his quick flash of attraction. “She’s dangerous. Angela will put her to work.”

“She already has.” Neil filled them in on Theo. “He has to go through it every day for two weeks. Debra is furious.”

“Where are those two?”

Neil concentrated. “Debra’s running him around the island for her workout. Then she’s sending him to the shower.”

Marc chuckled. “She’ll get the alcohol out of him that way.”

Adrian stepped off the mat, still trying to clear his head. “I’m out.”

Marc snickered. “If we ever go at it for real, you’re in trouble.”

Adrian already knew that. Marc shooting him had at least been quick. *But I’ll never forget the pain.*

Terry came over to check on him, wishing his new gifts had included something medically related. All he could do so far was read minds and bring up a shield. He was looking forward to his first evolution.

Adrian waved the medic off and stepped back onto the mat to resume the practice session.

Neil was proud of the former leader. He pulled his next punch.

Marc didn’t hit Adrian again, mind going to other places while his body got the workout it needed. When he’d told Adrian he was bored, he hadn’t told the full truth. *I need to see some real action or I’ll go crazy. A simple fight, even if I win, just can’t compare to my father’s lab.*

Neil had already figured out what was going on. “Why are you toughening him up?”

Marc ignored Adrian’s sudden happiness. “He needs it. He can’t protect her like he is now.”

It was a reminder that Marc would be leaving the island on supply runs.

Neil swung out hard, catching Marc's jaw. "Idiot!"

Marc didn't take offense. He'd already called himself much worse. "Say it again and mean it."

Neil swung harder, aiming for Marc's eye.

Marc let the hit land, not even flinching.

Even being beaten on wasn't helping Marc's mind. He left the mat, frowning.

Neil kept going with the demonstration.

So did Adrian, but they both kept an eye on Marc.

They saw his gaze go over Amanda in dislike.

Neil assumed the new woman hadn't made a good impression.

Adrian knew it was just the opposite. She reminded Marc of Kendle and that was dangerous.

"But not for the reason you're thinking." Marc wiped off on a towel that Richie handed him. "Forget about the affair. Think about all the trouble she caused."

Neil frowned. "You think any woman you're attracted to is dangerous to you."

"Not to me. To the camp." Marc studied Amanda without mercy. "I won't tolerate her or anyone else hurting these people while I'm in charge. I won't hold a trial or wait for the camp to be able to handle it. I'll pike her head outside the bunkhouse and make them all look at it."

Neil switched to the next level. “This is all on you.”

Adrian joined Marc at the side of the mats. He didn’t tell Marc that was going too far. “You’re going to do a great job while she’s on maternity leave. Stop stressing over it. She’ll be proud of you.”

“Will she?”

“Yes. You’ll do the right thing in the end. You can’t help it. That’s just who you are.”

“I’m a Reicher.”

“You’re a Brady.” Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder, hoping it was accepted. “Stop hating yourself because of your family. Try to love the good things about them, if you can.”

Marc avoided Adrian’s touch, but he did try to accept his words. “I need a beer.”

Adrian chuckled. “Not a drop left on the island. Would you settle for a bottle of gin?”

Marc brightened. “You have a stash?”

“I hid a bottle on the ship months ago. We’ll open it when you’re ready.”

“Deal.” Marc smiled. “A little more mat time?”

Adrian rubbed his swelling jaw. “Only if you promise not to hit me anymore.”

“Okay.” Marc looked at Neil.

Neil snickered. “I’d be happy to.”

Adrian groaned as he followed Marc back onto the mat. “The things I’ll do for this camp.”

The laughter of the bleeding men was noticed by everyone. It was good to see them getting along.

The fighting was still violent, but it wasn't the hatred of the past matches.

It also wasn't satisfying. Marc continued to steal glances at Amanda as they finished the set.

## 2

“She’s already messing with his mind.” Somchai sat on the bench seat next to Angela and leaned over. “You should banish her now before you lose your mate.”

Angela laughed.

Somchai had gained weight during his months in this camp. His son, Bo, had also gained weight, filling him out nicely. All of Somchai’s extra pounds had gone straight to his gut and cheeks. His jowls jiggled as he spoke. “How can you not see it? He wants her, like he did the other one. And he wants your place. He will steal it from you and replace you with Amanda.”

“Marc would never have an affair with a Mitchel.” Angela smiled sweetly. “But do keep trying to split us up. Your fate is almost sealed.”

Somchai jerked his hand away. “What are you talking about?”

“You. Your ex-wife. The other hidens here who think I don’t know about them.” Angela resumed rubbing her hard stomach. “Marc is looking for a worthy target. He’ll be thrilled when he finds out you’ve decided to challenge me.”

“I’m not!” Somchai tried to redirect the conversation that had already gotten away from him. “Even now, your most loyal people are glad of his leadership. They’re forgetting about you.”

“You’ve been with us for months, but you still live in the past.”

“I know what I’m talking about. Marc and Amanda will take over your camp and drive you out.”

Angela held up a hand.

Every Eagle on the runway turned toward her eagerly, expectantly, in concern.

Somchai scowled as he realized it was a demonstration. “That means nothing!”

Angela lowered her hand.

Everyone resumed what they’d been doing, but they all kept track of the conversation.

Angela shifted in the chair, fighting the urge to hit the bathroom yet again. “Shall I tell you your future?”

Somchai tensed. “No.”

Angela didn’t insist. “You accuse others of what you’re considering. You want her back. You want control of my camp.” Angela smiled again, coldly this time. “Our chess nights have told you that I’m nice, I’m easy to fool, that you have an advantage. Don’t believe it, Somchai Abbot.”

“But... But you saw it! You felt the attraction between them.”

“Marc is working on solving a puzzle.” Angela looked over at the older man who was now wishing

he hadn't sat down. "He's trying to figure out why Amanda hates you so much. I suggest you leave on the next run and don't come back. When he finds out, your death will come swiftly."

Somchai rose, red faced and intimidated. "You've taken it all wrong."

"No, I haven't." Angela motioned. "Go to the mat and fight for her. Admit your sins and accept their contempt. In time, they'll forgive you."

"And if I don't?"

Angela shrugged, aware of Marc listening to every word. "My husband is going to eat you alive. And I'll throw a party to celebrate it."

Somchai stomped off toward town.

Angela looked at Bret.

Bret nodded. "He didn't even feel me snooping. I was able to slide right into his mind."

"Has he made a plan yet?"

"I didn't see one. He can't find a way to alert the other hidens. When you go into labor, we need to put him in the jailhouse."

Angela yawned. "Marc will handle it."

Marc left the mat and came over to them. He took the chair next to her and gently clasped her hand. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Letting me handle it this way."

Angela loved the feel of their skin touching. "If you think it will save some of his allies, I have no problem screwing with his mind. In fact, I'm rather enjoying it."



Marc grimaced. "I thought you would."

Angela felt him searching for words to explain why he was doing it this way. "I trust you with my heart and my life, as well as my camp. You never have to explain yourself to me."

"What if I want to?"

Angela leaned over and put her cheek against his big shoulder. "Then it's my honor to listen."

Neil was glad the couple was having a good moment.

So was Adrian, but he was also tired of being confused and left out. "He could have just told me it was an act to draw out some of the hidiers."

Neil wiped sweat off his forehead and then restarted the entire lesson from level one as more people around them joined in. "She's training him. He has to practice. How else will he get as good at it as she is?"

Adrian snorted. "He'll never be as good as she is."

Neil didn't rush to defend Marc, but he was certain that Adrian was wrong. Marc had the perfect mentality for it. He just needed Angela to pull it out of him the way that Adrian had pulled it out of her. "Maybe you should do the same for him."

Adrian had already thought about that. Marc was a perfect student. "He'll never let me in enough for it to work."

"You never know until you try."

The people laboring around them paid attention to the conversation and tried to follow along, but Adrian and Neil were moving through the levels faster now. It had become automatic for them.

Kyle joined them and easily caught up to where they were in the stances. “He is attracted to her, though.”

Adrian concentrated on the moves instead of staring at Amanda. “Female alphas are always like that.”

Neil stumbled as he realized what that meant. “She’s an alpha. Like Angela.”

Adrian shook his head. “None of us here are like Angela.”

“What’s the hierarchy?” Kyle knew Jennifer was curious about Amanda’s place in camp. He could feel her jealousy, but also her longing to be as strong as that woman was. Kyle was already determined to give that to her.

“She’s an enforcer. You already know they’re above everyone else.”

“And?” Kyle knew there was more.

Adrian shrugged. “And they’re usually the right hand of leadership. They handle punishments and protect the leader’s life. Angela wants Jennifer in that spot, but she’s too young for it.”

Kyle understood what that meant. “We have to check Amanda out.”

Neil nodded immediately.

Adrian switched them into the next level, sweating and enjoying it because he was with his

Eagles. “Marc already has that covered. What we need to be concerned with is people interfering.”

“No one is crazy enough to interfere with Marc in this camp.”

Adrian took a quick look over at the magic lesson next to them that wasn’t producing any results thanks to Biff being upset over Madison’s revelation. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

### 3

Biff didn’t care that Madison was his only student and everyone else was just observing. “You use fear. Push it into the door in your mind that has a purple triangle on it.”

Madison tried to search those dark doors, but it was hard with everyone watching her.

“When you open it, don’t look around.” Biff was sure the creatures behind that door would scare her. “Just push the fear through and see what happens.”

Madison couldn’t find the right door. She nodded distractedly, wishing she hadn’t agreed to do this.

Charlie made his way over to the fighting mats. He wasn’t sure if he was going to join in. He wasn’t ready for the downtime to be over, but he didn’t feel like hitting anyone or being hit.

Still sitting by Angela, Marc pointed toward the magic area. *Go watch Biff for a few minutes and see if you might want to try that.*

Charlie immediately went that way. He was glad Adrian and his dad hadn't beaten on each other very much. *I hope they grow out of that.*

As Charlie reached the magic area, the crowd shifted. He tried to avoid bumping into anyone and tripped over the cooler.

Madison automatically caught his arm to keep him from falling.

Heat seared Charlie's hand and ran up his arm. He looked into Madison's eyes, drawn with no time to resist.

Madison's heart skipped a beat. *He's adorable.*

Both of them let go and moved back, startled by the quick interaction.

Biff saw it and couldn't control his jealousy. "You have to pay attention for this to work!"

Madison cringed.

Charlie frowned. "Don't be an asshole, Biff. It's not your color."

People laughed.

Biff started to blast the boy with an insult and then remembered who he was talking to. He clamped his mouth shut and glared at Madison.

Madison couldn't take it. She walked away with her head down.

Charlie didn't know the girl at all, but he didn't want her to be upset. He trotted up next to her. "I'll escort you to town."

People approved of his gentlemanly gesture.

Biff growled in frustration. He rotated toward Marc angrily as he understood. “You did that on purpose!”

Marc acted like he hadn’t noticed.

Madison and Charlie hurried into the jungle, getting away from Biff’s anger and the jealousy of Charlie’s admirers.

Several of those women got up to follow.

Samantha motioned. “Handle that.” She turned back toward Bernice with a smile that hid her attempt to find out what was going on with the Cayman Islands woman.

Wade hurried from his seat and got in front of the gaggles of females. He flashed a cold smile. “Let’s talk for a minute.”

Charlie was aware of Wade reading those women the riot act, but his mind was on the female walking next to him. He already understood what that reaction between them meant. He asked himself if it mattered.

“It doesn’t.” Madison wasn’t interested in him or anyone else. “I just want to be left alone!”

Charlie instantly bonded with her. “As you wish.”

He walked next to her in silence all the way to town.

Halfway there, Madison began stealing looks at him, unable to help herself. *He really is adorable.*

Neil frowned. "That's trouble coming."

All of the men paused as they saw who was marching out of the jungle toward the magic demonstration.

Kyle wasn't sure if they should interfere. "Should we put a stop to it?"

Adrian shook his head. "No. You're about to find out why an older enforcer is better than a younger one even when the younger one has more courage."

Kyle immediately left the mat and went over to the magic lesson to be there when Jennifer needed his support. He didn't think about joining the demonstration, however. His one shot freeze spell was absent. Giving the power back to Jennifer had cost him some skills. He didn't want anyone to know that yet.

Adrian and Neil watched silently as Debra reached the magic ring and walked right through Amanda's shield as if it wasn't there.

Amanda grunted. "Your mate is being punished by the alpha."

Debra didn't stop.

Amanda tried again. "It wasn't my idea and I didn't enjoy it."

Debra raised her fist.

Amanda sent a jinx spell.

Debra missed, almost falling. Furious, she swung again.

Amanda jinxed it each time without moving.

People around them pointed and murmured as none of Debra's hits got through.

Jennifer watched it in longing. *I want to be able to do that!*

Amanda smiled even as she jinxed Debra again. "It would be my honor to teach you."

Jennifer realized she'd been tricked into asking for lessons. She crossed her arms over her chest and mentally cursed Angela.

Debra got tired quickly. She finally stopped swinging, glaring and sending silent insults instead.

Amanda waited for a pause and then lifted her hand.

Everyone tensed, expecting the worst. It was obvious that Amanda had power and spells none of them had seen before.

Amanda motioned. "Ask the young one to use her gift."

Debra stared in confusion.

Amanda looked at Jennifer. "Nature gave you the power to heal."

Jennifer felt her cheeks get warm. "I can't believe I didn't think of that."

Amanda smiled tolerantly. "I'll teach you everything I know."

"And in return?"

Amanda shook her head. "It's my job to pass it on. I expect nothing in return but for you to do your best."

Debra stared between them, not understanding. She didn't get how the woman had evaded her or why everyone was staring at her hopefully. *What?!*

Jennifer stepped over to Debra. "I want to try healing your ears. Is that okay?"

Debra quickly nodded. She held still as Jennifer used her new gift, heart pounding. *I could be normal!*

Green light flowed over the deaf woman, bathing her in the glow.

Jennifer lowered her hand, yawning. "I'll need a nap after that one."

Debra's eyes widened. *I heard her!*

Amanda smiled at Debra this time. "Say it. Hear the sound of your own voice for the first time in your life."

Debra opened her mouth. "You're a bitch!"

People clapped, delighted.

Jennifer grinned. "It worked."

Debra burst into tears and fell into Amanda's arms, sobbing. "I can hear!"



Chapter Nineteen

# Accidents Happen

1

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

Charlie looked over as they reached the town.  
“What?”

Madison realized he hadn’t been stewing on her.  
“Congratulations on the baby.”

Charlie sighed. “I wish I was better at parenting. He’s so little!”

Madison thought of her own desire to be a mother. “You’re lucky. Just the baby and no relationship to give you heartburn.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed.

Madison stared. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Charlie knew she hadn’t meant it in a bad way. He swept the town that was mostly empty. “Where would you like to go?”

Madison hadn’t picked her next activity yet. She didn’t have a shift until later when the animals needed to be cared for. “Where are you going next?”

“To check in with the den mothers. After?” He shrugged, still feeling lost.

Madison understood. “We can do something together if you want.”

Now Charlie did take it that way. He opened his mouth to drive her off.

Madison turned and walked away. *I never say the right thing!*

Charlie felt bad for her as he realized he'd misunderstood. He caught up to her. "I saw you eyeing the fighting ring. I could give you a kai lesson."

Madison quickly nodded. "That sounds like fun." She looked around. "Does it have to be where everyone can watch us?"

"No." Charlie didn't want to be on display for the people who would return to town soon. He swept the few buildings and motioned. "Above the restaurant is usually empty except for the cooks and they only go up there to get supplies."

"Okay."

Charlie cleared his throat. "You don't mind being alone with me?"

Madison thought about it. "You don't scare me."  
*Yet.*

Charlie caught that. He headed for the restaurant. "I hope I never do."

Madison followed. "You're not like your dad. He scares me a lot."

"My dad scares everyone." Charlie didn't tell her Marc had a soft side. Madison might never get to see it. Marc had a small circle of people he showed emotions to and that was it.

"Will you be like that when you get older?"

“I hope not. He’s too closed off.” Charlie held the door for her to enter.

Madison caught a hint of his smell. Her stomach tightened. She forced away the attraction, surprised at herself. Even with Biff, who was very handsome, she hadn’t felt a response. The desire wasn’t welcome now.

The few residents in town recognized another breeding tree match. They pointed and smiled.

Charlie slammed the door and stomped toward the steps. “I hate it when people assume!”

Madison shivered. *Okay, now he’s a little like Marc.*

Charlie looked over his shoulder. “You really are scared of everything.”

Madison flushed, staring at the floor. “I’m working on it.”

Charlie ignored the looks and their knowing looks. “I’ll help you with it if you want. I used to be that way, too. So was my mom.”

Madison was surprised. She followed him up the wooden steps. “How did you guys get over it?” Charlie and Angela were two of the bravest people Madison had ever met.

“We joined Safe Haven and let the magic here heal our pain.” Charlie just wished that it still worked.

“Maybe you need more time. It hasn’t been that long.”

“Yeah.” Charlie hoped she was right. “I need it to hurry up, though. If it takes much longer, it might drive me away.”

“Because the skanks won’t leave you alone?”

“Because I’m not happy being alone, but all of them remind me that Tracy left and she isn’t coming back no matter what I do. I lost her.”

Madison almost hugged him. She stopped herself at the last minute.

Charlie was glad. He didn’t want to be touched. If someone hugged him, he might break down in tears.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Men aren’t supposed to cry.”

Madison frowned. “My dad said that, too.”

“Your dad the gunrunner?”

“Yeah.” Madison bit her lip, waiting for the boy to question her about it.

Charlie began clearing a small place for them to workout.

Madison was relieved. *He really isn’t like his dad.*

Charlie considered how Marc was now playing with people’s minds and grunted. “No. I’m like my mother.”

“That’s good, right?”

“No.” Charlie slowly smiled. “It’s amazing.”

“It’s amazing!” Terry lowered the otoscope he’d been using to peer into Debra’s ears. “She’s completely cured!”

Debra wiped away more tears and hugged Jennifer again.

Jennifer chuckled. “You’re welcome.”

“I’ll make a list of other people you can try that on.” Terry already had a few of them in mind. When Jennifer had failed to heal Dace, they’d written off the other issues, but they shouldn’t have.

“Did it come from you?” Jennifer looked over at Angela, who was sorting through files. The clinic around them was full of medics, patients, cleaners, and leadership. It was warm from so many bodies.

Angela kept thumbing through the folders in the tall metal filing cabinet. “Nope.”

Jennifer sighed. “I have to thank her.”

Debra nodded. “Amanda’s great!”

People winced at the shout. It would take Debra time to adjust to sounds. Until then, she didn’t know how loud her voice was.

“I wonder if it might work on them.” Terry motioned toward Laura’s nieces, who were sweeping and dusting alongside Anna. Terry still didn’t know their names.

Jennifer immediately went over to try. She’d attempted to unlock them right after Laura kidnapped their three kids and got herself executed for it. *But I only tried unlocking.*

Debra joined them, hugging the girls as she continued to leak tears. *My life is perfect now!*

Bright green glows lit up the room.

“Anything?”

The girls shook their heads. Both of them rubbed their jaws, tingling.

Jennifer saw it. “Schedule me a weekly session with them.” Some illnesses and injuries needed more than one treatment.

Terry added it to the appointment book.

Dace wheeled his chair over to Angela and handed her the next stack of folders. “Please, let a medic hit me in the same spot!”

Dace hadn’t shaved or showered in a while. Angela knew he was embarrassed that he had to be helped with everything, but he barely resembled the playboy who’d been so keen to go on the run.

“No.” Angela took the folders one at a time to keep giving Dace something to do. He was feeling useless on top of everything else. She’d ordered him to come here and help instead of sitting on the patio sulking. It wasn’t good for their other resting patients to be around his negativity.

The den mothers had the kids on the patio right now, letting them soak in some sunlight while they practiced the kai lesson Neil had delivered. The brawlers were on duty there, but the entire town, minus the Eagles at Luke’s old cabin, were also there. The kids were well-protected. “I want you here for work shifts, starting tomorrow. You don’t get to just sit around and watch the rest of us work.”

Dace stared, hurt. “I’m in a wheelchair!”

“So?”

Dace struggled to form an answer. “So? So...it’s wrong to make wheelchair people work!”

“Not when their minds are perfectly capable.” Angela put another folder into the cabinet. “I need eyes on these files that have nothing to do with the medical profession.”

Dace sulked. “Why?”

“Because you might catch something that we miss.” Angela smiled at Dace. “Welcome to the Medical Review Board.”

“The what? I don’t know anything about this stuff!”

“Exactly.” Angela didn’t tell him the medics would always have full say over the treatments and patients. Dace needed to find a place where he could fit in and accept his new limits. The MRB was already important. In the future, it would be vital.

“What about me?” Candy was ready to get back to work so Conner would see he didn’t have to be scared of their future.

“You still have another month of light duties and treatments.” Terry frowned at the woman who’d just finished giving him a blood sample. “Don’t push yourself.”

Terry believed the issues they’d had with cancer returning in their healed patients was partly because those people had immediately tried to jump back into normal life and stressed their bodies. *Stress is a fuel for cancer.* Terry couldn’t prove that, but he believed it completely.

Angela agreed; she still overruled him. “The cooks need another hand on the breakfast shift.”

Candy was happy to have been given any job. “I am always up early.”

“Yeah, that reminds me. No birth control.”

Candy stared at Angela, brows coming together. “What?”

“We’re not sure if it will interfere and maybe bring back the cancer.”

“But you won’t ever be able to know that!”

“We’ll take the chance on it later.” Angela looked at Candy pointedly. “Leave him alone until the wedding, or you’re breaking the conditions that you both agreed to.”

Candy started to protest.

Angela shut her down. “You’re pressuring him into it and I won’t tolerate that. Wait, or you will face charges.”

Candy moped. “Fine.”

Angela motioned toward the door. “Go help with dinner. Three hours is your limit. Don’t stay longer than that.”

Candy stomped toward the door, scowling. She also felt loved that Angela cared so much about her health.

“Will it work?”

Angela shrugged at Jennifer’s question as Candy left. “Hard to say. Conner isn’t like his father, but we can’t stop accidents.”

Jennifer heard a small ding in the rear of her mind. She hugged Debra again to cover it as she



tried to figure out the reason for it. *I have Tobias's gift. That ding means Angela just lied. But about what?*

"Is there anything else I can do?" Anna was eager to be helpful while the boss was here to see it.

Jennifer frowned at Tobias's widow. "You're doing FND. Why?"

Anna's face fell. "I was hoping no one would notice that for a while."

Jennifer scowled. "Why?"

Anna sighed. "I didn't want to answer that question."

People turned toward her, forcing her to do it anyway.

"Harry screwed up. I don't want to be blamed and I don't want my baby to be blamed." It was the first time Anna had mentioned the pregnancy.

Tonya hadn't known. She went to the other file cabinet to add it to Anna's folder. "Congrats."

Anna was still wearing her long dresses and shawl. She was tall, slender, and mysterious. Terry understood why Harry had been attracted to the woman, but he still wasn't okay with anyone cheating. Like Sadie and a few others, Terry wanted a law against it.

Jennifer just wanted the full story. "I didn't know you and Harry were close."

Anna still missed him. "Harry cared for my health; it became friendship. The affair was a one-time thing when he told me goodbye before his run. He was so eager to go!"

Angela winced.

Anna was lost in her memories. “I was scared he wouldn’t come back and I’d lose the only real friend I’d ever had. I...took him right here in an exam room.”

Jennifer glared. “What do you mean you *took* him?”

Anna blushed. “I gave him a cup of tea. The jungle vines make a man ready even if he doesn’t want to be.”

Angela scanned the woman. “Are you confessing to rape?”

“No! Harry had a problem with his body. It rarely worked for him. I’d been brewing tea for him at the restaurant. He wanted a mug to take along for the run. When I gave him a cup here, he understood what it meant.”

“The vines work like Viagra. Interesting.” Terry wondered if it would help Shawn.

Anna nodded. “They’re better because there’s no side effects.”

“How did you figure that out?”

Anna tried not to get defensive. “I was trying to forage greens for a fresh salad. Tobias tried a few bites and noticed the effect.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

Anna frowned at Terry. “Because the last thing the men in our camp need is more wood.”

Angela laughed.

Terry wrote it in the medical journal they were keeping for new ideas. “Permission to tell Shawn, Boss?”

“Granted, but she’s right. We have enough horny men here. Tell him to keep it to himself.”

“I will, but if it works, other people will ask questions.”

“We’ll handle that then.” Angela rubbed her hip and reluctantly went to one of the padded chairs in the lobby. She was always miserable now.

“Are you okay?”

Angela smiled at Anna. “Right as rain.”

“Yeah, I hope we get some soon.” Anna shook her cleaning rag. “It’s hard to keep the dust out of...everything.”

Angela looked toward the main door.

Marc appeared. A line of animals were behind him.

“Don’t let them in here!” Anna was tired of cleaning.

“Too late.” Marc went to Angela and kissed her on the cheek.

“You look tired.”

He yawned.

Angela chuckled. Marc was doing all-day rounds. He would go to bed 12 hours after Adrian had gotten up so that one of them would always be on duty.

The goats stopped near Marc, waiting for him to be done.

The dogs and cats went toward people they liked for attention or they explored the scents and ignored the humans.

Jennifer stiffened as someone else appeared in the doorway.

Amanda entered, helping Isabel. “She may have overdone it a bit.”

Isabel flushed as Angela glared at her. “I had to try!”

Terry and Anna helped Isabel toward an exam room as she limped on a sore ankle.

Amanda turned to go.

Debra rushed over and hugged the stern woman. “Thank you!”

Amanda patted Debra’s arm and gently pushed her away. She didn’t like to be touched. “Jennifer would have thought of it on her own in time.”

Jennifer wasn’t sure about that, but she didn’t argue. “Thank you.”

Amanda inclined her head, but she was uncomfortable with the attention.

Buster, the bunker cat, jumped up on the chair next to Jennifer and started rubbing against her stomach. He yowled and then started to purr.

The other animals were drawn to Buster’s target. They sniffed Jennifer and rubbed against her legs.

Dog was the only one who didn’t react to it. He sat next to Angela, sniffing; his ears laid back.

Angela didn’t touch the animal like she would have in the past. “Jennifer has treats in her pocket.”

Dog immediately joined the other animals as Jennifer laughed and pulled out the dog treats that even the cats loved.

Amanda looked at the teenager. “Congratulations.”

“For what?” Jennifer tried to get the cat to stop rubbing her stomach.

Buster ignored her small pushes and rubbed harder.

“He hears your son.”

Jennifer smiled. “That’s sweet.”

Angela knew there was more to it than a cute moment. “Why the congratulations?”

Amanda headed for the door, aware that she wasn’t really welcome in here. “True geniuses are very rare. Cats always react to them that way.”

Jennifer was happy about it. Finding out her son would be normal had only been a tiny bit disappointing. This way, he would still have something special to be proud of.

Amanda walked toward the runway to determine if they needed anything else up there from her. Isabel had stayed after the senior people left so they wouldn’t stop her from trying to fight. Amanda didn’t look at Marc at all.

Marc scanned the clinic. “I assume everything’s okay here?”

“We’re fine.”

Marc used a stern tone. “Don’t sleep here tonight. You need to be in the bunkhouse where the good vibes can help.”

Angela nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m going to the cabin next. Call me if you need me.”

“I always need you.”

Marc smiled, but his mind was in other places.

Angela didn’t get angry. Marc had to have time to sort through his thoughts. She’d found doing rounds often helped her with that. Hopefully, it would do the same for him.

“Come on, cats, dogs, goats, and any other lifeform that shouldn’t be in here.”

The animals followed Marc, causing laughter from everyone but Jennifer. She was holding her stomach and now trying to decide if congratulations were really in order. “What is a true genius?”

Angela shrugged. “We can ask Adrian later.”

“He didn’t tell you about Amanda.”

“I know. And she isn’t the only one.” Angela filled them in on the hidens, including the part where those powerful people were waiting for the right moment to attempt a takeover.

### 3

Marc took the shortest path to the cabin, aware of Angela giving out details. Marc had told her to do that. The gossip vine would spread it and make those hidens nervous. A few more might be saved. “The rest will burn.”

Marc keyed the radio on his belt. “Good evening, Safe Haven. I have two quick updates for

you. The first is to get to your shift right this minute. I won't tolerate you being late. If you don't have a shift right now, get off the runway so the workers can get things ready for tomorrow."

Marc paused to let people vent, not trying to catch it all. Then he went on. "The tunnels still need to be cleared. I've drafted a crew for it. Check the bulletin board on the bunkhouse wall to see if you're helping. If not, you can provide light, tools, and breaks for those who are. That is all."

Marc preferred to say *copy* or *over* at the end of a radio call, but *that is all* was amusing and sometimes took the sting out of orders like the one he'd just given. No one wanted to go in the tunnels at all, let alone to dig a ramp for the alligators. It was sure to be rough.

Marc was looking forward to it, but not because of the workout. *It might be dangerous. I need that.*

Marc reached the cabin quickly; he walked through the yard around it, remembering, as the Eagles worked.

"Help me pull this trunk out." Morgan crawled further into the small space under the cabin to help from the other side.

"What are we doing with all this stuff?" Stanley wiped cobwebs off the floorboards as he also crawled in to reach the long trunk.

"Most of it is being sorted into the camp stock. Some of it goes to Marc's cabin."

"Why?"

“Because some of it belonged to Kendle.”

“Gotcha.” Stanley didn’t remember her very well. “I thought she was okay until the rage illness flipped her into crazy land.”

Morgan frowned. “Kendle didn’t have the rage illness. She went insane from being held prisoner by a man who did have the rage illness.”

“Still. It’s a shame. She was a strong fighter.” Stanley loved strong women and fighting. They were his hobbies now.

Morgan grunted, tugging the trunk. “It’s a miracle that she didn’t have the rage illness.”

Marc stopped near the crawl space as those words sank in. He remembered something Angela had said to him months ago.

*“I spent time with Kendle.” Marc used a careful tone. “We can’t have them here, spreading that. She was allowed to live because she didn’t spread it.”*

*“Yeah, you should ask her why that is,” Angela answered just as carefully. “Watch my back. I feel something coming for me again.”*

Morgan emerged from the crawl space, dusty and webby. He spotted Marc. *Damn.*

Marc stared back, mind now running at a faster pace. “Are you allowed to look at the list of patients who have the rage illness?”

“Of course.”

“Compare it to a list of those who went through the radiation sickness.”



“Okay.” Morgan was glad Marc didn’t seem upset by the conversation. “What am I looking for?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Then why am I doing it?”

“Because Kendle didn’t have the rage illness, but she should have.”

“And?”

“And maybe something protected her from it.”

“Like what?”

“Radiation.”

Morgan frowned, remembering those awful weeks on their ship. “She didn’t have it. She didn’t get sick then.”

“Kendle fought the radiation sickness before she joined us. I want to know if it saved her from getting the rage illness.”

“I’ll check into it.”

“Thank you.” Marc went into the cabin to determine how much work was left. The Eagles had already put in their two hours. It should be about finished.

Adrian saw Marc come in. “It’s almost empty.”

Marc didn’t let old memories take over his mind as he scanned the cabin. All the furniture except for the dresser and mirror were gone. Boards and drywall were stacked along the empty space next to the fireplace, ready for tomorrow.

Most of the Eagles had left for other shifts and chores. He’d passed Panaji and Sadie on the way here, though he hadn’t spoken to either of them. They were still being punished. He would have time

around them tomorrow when they went down to clear the tunnels.

Marc fought a shiver as memories tried to take over his mind anyway. Clearing this island had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. *It's awful that I hope it will be that way tomorrow.* "How long will it take to get that wall built?"

Daryl stored his hammer on his belt. "A few hours for the first one. The door will take a little longer. We didn't bring doorknobs or many hinges. We'll have to take them from one of the ships."

"Use the garbage boats."

"Will do." Daryl lit the lantern on the dresser so they would have light to work by. Evening was falling fast.

"What did she decide to use this cabin for?" Adrian hadn't thought to ask before now.

"It's going to be a small maternity ward with a medical post and storage space. It will get the moms and babies away from any ill people at the clinics on the island or the ship." Daryl yawned. He'd been working for a double shift now, though the Eagle event hadn't been manual labor like clearing this cabin had been.

*Thump!*

The men in the crawl space bumped into the floorboards, rattling the walls.

Marc frowned as the lantern flickered. "Go tell them to be careful down there."

Daryl hurried out to handle that.

*Bump! Bump!*

The lantern slid toward the edge of the dusty dresser.

Marc ran forward, already knowing he was going to miss.

The lantern fell off the dresser and crashed to the ground, splattering fuel oil all over the dresser and the wall.

Flames sparked.

“Smother it!” Adrian stomped at the flames on the floor.

Marc didn’t have anything to smother it with other than his shirt. He ripped it off and beat on the flames that were spreading over the very dry wood.

Daryl came back in and stared. “What the hell? I was only gone for a minute!”

The fire quickly spread over the dresser, sending thick smoke into the room.

“We need water!” Adrian also ripped his shirt off. He dropped to the ground to smother the flames there while Marc tried to stop the fire on the wall from reaching the ceiling. They wouldn’t be able to reach it if it spread up there.

Daryl ran out the rear door. “I need hands!”

Marc followed, leaving his burning shirt. He saw Daryl running to the shower. “Great idea!”

Daryl ripped the pipe out of the water barrel.

They hefted it between them and rushed back into the smoky cabin.

Adrian went out the front. “Get out of the crawl space! The cabin’s on fire!”

Marc and Daryl dumped the water barrel on the dresser, flooding the fire and extinguishing most of the flames.

Marc used what was left in his canteen to splash the rest.

Daryl and Adrian did the same, coughing. The cabin had gone up surprisingly fast.

Radios crackled with Jennifer's voice. "Do you need help?"

Daryl eyed the damage as Marc and Adrian finished putting out the fire. "It's covered."

Marc coughed deeply.

Daryl scowled at them. "If you guys didn't want this place ready yet, you could have just said so."

None of them laughed. The dresser was smoldering. The rug under it was charred. The wall was blackened and hot. Three minutes had done a lot of damage.

"We need that fire crew restarted."

Adrian nodded at Marc's comment. "I'll talk to Ray about it."

Ray was still on the ship, monitoring the weather pattern that was approaching while avoiding Grant and everyone else who wanted to talk to him about the breakup.

"We also need to find a way to transport water across the jungle." Marc had no idea how they would manage that. The jungle wasn't easy to walk on, let alone to roll things through. There were a lot of places that even Dace's wheelchair wouldn't go.

Getting something bigger through there would be a nightmare.

“What happened?” Morgan was in the doorway now, waving away the smoke.

Adrian gestured at Daryl. “He tried something new.”

Morgan frowned as Daryl’s mouth dropped open. “It didn’t work.”

Daryl chuckled at the joke. “I didn’t like the color of the wood.”

“Well, it’s different now.” Marc stepped outside to get a clear breath.

Adrian joined him, coughing again to clear his lungs.

Morgan eyed the two sweaty, half naked men. “You guys look like you’re about to pose for a fireman’s calendar.”

Adrian laughed.

Marc frowned. “We don’t have calendars anymore.” All the ones they found now were for last year. The war would forever be memorialized by stationery.

“We should be able to print some new ones.” Morgan added it to his notebook, along with a reminder to himself to check with Kenn and see if that man had had any luck scroll diving for answers to the name mystery yet.

Daryl nodded. “Good idea. I hate feeling like I’ve missed entire days.”

Marc thought of his eight weeks in the lab and grimaced.

“What happened here?”

Marc waved at Stanley, not scolding the man for being clumsy. Accidents happened. It was a part of life. “Go find Bret and tell him he and his dad are spending the night here.”

Stanley frowned. “Why? They have the shack.”

“Because the fire might not be out all the way.”

Adrian spat out smoky phlegm. “Tell him to bring some jugs of water and my full kit.”

“You got it.” Stanley hurried off.

“It was nice of you not to ream him for it.”

Marc shrugged. “I’m just glad Daryl was here to handle it.”

“Same.” Adrian looked around, deciding where he and Bret would sleep.

“I’ll send a few people your way with bedrolls.”

“Sounds good.” It really did. Adrian hadn’t slept under the stars in a while. “I’ll still do rounds as soon as I clean up.”

“Stay here. The last thing we need is a fire.”

“You’re the boss.”

Marc considered joining him and then he remembered he was in charge. The boss needed a full night’s sleep. He wouldn’t get that if he stayed up late telling stories around a campfire. “I’ll be around.”

Adrian went back into the cabin to verify the fire was still out.

Marc headed toward town to let everyone know things were under control. Descendants all across the island had been alerted through the hive. *But it*

*came from Adrian's excitement, not mine. I barely had an increase in pulse. Even a small fire isn't enough to satisfy my need for pain.*

Behind him, Daryl followed Adrian into the cabin to check on the hot wood. "At least we didn't lose the main structure."

Marc walked faster. *I wish the entire cabin had burned to the ground.*

Chapter Twenty  
**Be Careful**  
Morning

1

“**G**ood morning, Safe Haven.” Marc held in the mike on his radio while he sipped his coffee, then cleared his throat. “In one hour, we will be clearing the tunnels. Stay away from the hatches unless you’re on the work crew. We’re getting the alligators out of there today. If you see them, go in the other direction. After almost a month underground, they’ll be in a bad mood. I suggest you eat and then go to the runway for the day’s events.” There were no hatches right next to the runway, but the guards would still be doubled there in case the gators fled that way once they were released.

“It will count as your Eagle workout time for the day, but I still want the cabin cleared the rest of the way.” Marc had already sent that order to Adrian, who would be getting up shortly to help with the tunnels. He and Adrian were both a bit light on sleep, but Marc didn’t expect any problems once they figured out the best place to dig a ramp. The hardest part would be flushing the animals toward that ramp.



Marc finished the radio call. “We are restarting the fire crew next week. If you’d like to volunteer, Ray will have the signup sheet. That’s all for now. Marc, out.”

People in the restaurant chuckled and worked faster to get things ready for the first wave of camp members who would now arrive sooner thanks to Marc’s call.

Marc consulted his book and marked off the announcements he’d given. It was a light day so far. There was a moral board meeting right after breakfast. Then they would have the tryouts for Angela’s team XO, starting around noon. That would last into the evening and then they would come back to town for dinner and bed. Marc yawned as he shut the book. *Maybe Angie needs the break from this because it’s so mind numbingly boring.*

Candy put a tray down in front of Marc and then hurried back behind the counter. She was happy to be doing something other than sitting in a chair and resting.

Thelma was already happier with Candy’s help than she had been with Anna. Candy had a natural skill for cooking. Marc was sure she would be on this duty for as long as Angela could keep her here.

Marc agreed with Angela’s choice on that, but he was also a little annoyed that the choice hadn’t gone through him. Marc refused to mention it, however. *After she gives birth, she’ll be too busy to step on my toes.*

Marc glanced up as the door opened.

Theo scanned the restaurant and saw Marc. “Is she in here?”

“You can tell that she isn’t.”

Theo didn’t care about Marc’s disapproving tone. “I don’t know where to meet her for my...” Theo left, shutting the door.

Marc’s frown stayed on his face. That was another thing Angela had done even though she wasn’t the leader right now. Marc was considering talking to her about that one. After his time in the lab, he didn’t believe in torture as a punishment.

He was also morbidly curious if the shock treatments would cure Theo of his alcoholism. *That’s my dad coming out in me.*

Marc decided to stay out of it. If it cured Theo, it would save the man’s life. It wasn’t being used for evil; Marc was able to tell the difference. Angela wasn’t doing it just to hurt the fallen engineer, though Marc suspected Theo would be crushed once again when he found out Debra was carrying Ian’s baby. *Everything she does is to help this camp or to save one of them.*

“He’s a normal. That’s why she’s doing it.” Kenn left the counter, where he’d been nursing his own cup of weak coffee. “If it had been one of us, she wouldn’t even try.”

Marc waved Kenn to the chair across from him. “She would if they were pregnant or had kids.”

Kenn grunted in acknowledgement of that. News of Debra being healed was flying through the

camp, along with Daisey leaving and Somchai and Amanda's failed marriage, but the bigger gossip was Debra being pregnant. "Theo doesn't know yet."

"Debra will tell him when she's ready. And if she can't, Amanda will deliver the news."

Kenn scowled tiredly. He'd been up late scroll diving, with no results. "What's up with that chick getting all these jobs and authority in our camp? We don't even know her."

"Angie and I are occupying a Mitchel."

"And testing her loyalty?"

Marc shook his head. "We're just putting her to work before she can be pulled into the next attempted coup." The tests of her loyalty to the leader would come later.

"Yeah, we need to talk about that." It was the reason Kenn had come in and waited for Marc to finish his morning address. "I don't agree with leaving them alone until they do something wrong. They're thinking about it. That's enough for me."

Marc nodded. "I agree."

"But?"

Marc sighed. "But some of them are normals and Angie wants to save them if we can."

Kenn leaned back, grumpy and sore. Firing a rifle had a recoil. His shoulder felt like he'd been kicked by their horse. "What are you going to do about that?"

"Nothing." Marc forced the words out. "She'll just change it back when she takes over."

“What if she doesn’t take back over?”

Marc locked eyes with Kenn. “Be careful.”

Kenn chose his words wisely. “She loves the kids and they need her. She’d be the perfect den mother who can also fill in for you and help you with any big plans. Come that final battle, she can still lead it if you’re not trained enough by then.”

Marc sighed at having his thoughts spoken aloud. “Stop it or we’ll have to include you in with the hidiers.”

“She has my death planned. What do I care?”  
Kenn got up and left the restaurant.

Marc didn’t call him back. He was encouraged that Kenn had spoken to him about it. If Kenn was a real threat, he would have made a plan, alone, and then carried it out. “He wants me to save him. Kenn couldn’t care less about who’s in charge.”

Marc made a note in his book to spend some time with Kenn. Their conversations could be private. Kenn wasn’t going to run to Angela every time he considered a change that she wouldn’t like.

Marc assumed that was why Adrian had been put on this duty with him, but it still didn’t explain why he’d been given the job at all. The Eagles hated it; the camp was tolerating it. No one wanted him doing this because of all the issues they’d had during the trip here. *At least it has nothing to do with Reicher’s lab.*

A scream sounded outside, coming from the direction of the barn. Theo’s shriek echoed, bringing people from the showers and both bunkhouses.

Marc was glad the man wasn't running from his punishment. He made a note. *Tell Amanda to do it in front of the herd from now on so the scream doesn't scare them as much.*

Marc shut the book and downed the rest of the coffee. He headed for the door, yawning again. *If it stays this boring, I'll be happy to give it back to her.*  
*Liar!*

Marc ignored the mental protest from his demon as he went to the small tool shed to start prepping for the tunnel work.

## 2

"There they are." Daryl shined the flashlight into the open area directly under the center of town. The tunnels around them were dark and still a bit muddy despite weeks without moisture. The closed hatches had protected them from drying out.

Shields came up over the work crew as half a dozen alligators blinked, coming to life when light hit them. They saw the people and snarled.

Marc motioned. "Toss in the fish. Get it all in that rear corner and then stand guard while we pick a place to dig. If they come out, alert us and get out of the way. Do not try to stop them."

The twitchy crew moved to allow Ed and Wade through with their loads of fish. Marc had decided feeding the gators was a good idea in hopes that the reptiles might not attack them. After being down here so long, they had to be hungry.

Marc turned to Theo and Thomas. He'd insisted both men come and help. "Let's pick it and start digging."

Theo was already scanning the walls around the center area. Being punished had improved his mood; he refused to think about why.

Thomas was limping along slowly and using this as another exercise to strengthen his legs, but coming down the ladder had hurt. He was still trying to catch his breath.

Sadie and Panaji carried the tools and bags and waited for orders.

Sadie glared at Adrian, fighting with her anger. Pink hues went through her eyes before she banished them.

Marc frowned. "Go topside and help with the digging."

Sadie went quickly, needing to get away from Adrian before she did something that couldn't be erased with a simple punishment.

"We need to dig from the top, in a slide pattern." Theo pointed at a wall. "We'll start there, but I can't be sure it will hold. We may get half through the digging and have to restart somewhere else."

"It's fine." Marc didn't expect Theo or Thomas to be experts at this. They weren't power line diggers or miners. "Just do the best you can." Marc had almost brought Ralph out of the jail for this, but he'd decided against it. He didn't want the camp to think Ralph could earn his way back in, but their engineers also needed the experience.

Thomas eyed the wall and started to protest. He decided not to since they hadn't really found a better place on their walkthrough of these tunnels.

Wade and Ed sat their bags by their boots and began pulling out the stinking fish remains from Morgan's gutting lesson.

Daryl and Neil kept their lights trained on the alligators.

Wade tossed a fish carcass, hard, reaching the far corner. It slapped against the wall, making the gators turn in that direction, hissing.

Ed tried hard to reach the corner, but he didn't have Wade's strength. It landed near the gators.

The alligators snapped and flipped their tails. Then they attacked the food, growling and shoving against each other to reach it.

The throwers quickly tossed in more of the carcasses, hoping the big animals stayed put. There were four tunnels off of this main area. If the gators took off down one of them, it would increase the danger and make them have to pick a new place to put in the ramp.

"This is the tunnel that goes toward the old Kraft property." Theo took a metal pole from his backpack, screwing the ends together. "Help me shove it through so we can find this spot from the top."

Several of the crew went over to help.

Marc eyed the alligators as they fed. It was noisy and messy, but it wasn't as energetic as he'd

expected. Marc assumed weeks without food had weakened them.

“You should be able to see the pole from the hatch.” Theo motioned at the diggers who were taking the first turn at breaking ground on the project. “Dig a foot down, then step forward and dig two feet down. Then three. Just keep going until the sides fall in and you can see the tunnel.”

The diggers hurried up the ladder to the hatch, eager to get out of the ground. The bad vibes that had been here when they’d first cleared this island hadn’t faded at all.

Marc and the others felt it, too, but this work had to be done. They needed the storage space these tunnels provided, but they also needed them for transporting larger gear from the cove to town. Going through the jungle wasn’t an option with some of those items.

Theo wiggled the pipe to help the topside crew find it.

“Can you hear me nowwww?” Kenn’s voice came through the pipe, drawing snickers. The sound of digging came next.

The rest of the crew in the tunnel scanned the dark, dirt walls and listened to the gators feeding while waiting for their turn to work.

Marc had picked a crew that was almost all magic in case they needed to use shields against the alligators. He’d brought some fireworks from the ship that he hoped would drive the big beasts up the ramp, but if that failed, they would be using



Adrian's sleep spell to knock the alligators out and then they would have to drag them up the ramp. It was a lot of work, with a lot of danger. "Who has the rope?"

Neil patted his kit while watching the alligators as Ed and Wade finished tossing in the fish. "They're going through it quick. We may need more."

Marc didn't want to take the time to go to the beach for more carcasses. "Try to keep them in there. Tell them a joke or something."

Neil snorted.

Wade latched onto the idea, using it to push away his bad feeling. *The last time I was down here, someone died.* Wade hadn't forgotten a second of it. "Did you hear about the alligator with brain damage? He had reptile dysfunction."

Snickers went through the workers.

Wade tried again, wanting real laughs. "What do you call a gator wearing Crocks? A traitor."

Marc rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Wade chuckled. "We should invite them to dinner. They're *snappy* dressers."

Marc groaned. "I'm very sorry."

Wade couldn't resist one more. "If they get us from behind, they'll be tail-gators."

Laughter went through the tunnel and carried on the wind.

Neil joined in. "Why shouldn't you taunt an alligator? Because it might come back to bite you in the end."

Ed wiped his hands on his shirt and retreated. “Did you know alligators can grow up to 15 feet? But most only have 4.”

Marc shook his head. “We’ll be hearing gator jokes for the rest of the day.”

Kenn’s voice echoed down the pipe again. “This is hard work. We need some Gator-Ade.”

People burst out laughing.

Drawn by the sound, Fate flicked her tiny pink wings and flew closer.

### 3

“Put it close to the wall so we aren’t tripping over it.” Kyle supervised the workers who were bringing the burnt dresser out of the cabin. “Don’t forget to bring out the mirror and any debris.”

The cabin was still a bit smoky, but everything was cold. They were finishing the cleanout like Marc wanted.

Stanley controlled his body as he handled his end of the dresser, once again fighting a migraine. Keeping his body in check hurt.

The rookies put the dresser along the cabin wall and went back in for the mirror and garbage.

Kyle felt something coming over the radio and increased the volume.

Stanley hefted the mirror up and came down the front steps with it.

Radios across the island blared with panicked voices.

“It fell!”

“The tunnel collapsed!”

“We have people down there!”

“Clear the air waves! We have an emergency!”

“Here come the gators! Get out of the way!”

Kyle ran toward town, followed by the rookies.

Stanley tossed the mirror down by the dresser, breaking it.

Small shards flew over the ground and immediately caught the glare from the sun as the entire work crew ran toward town to help.

#### 4

Kyle went straight to Angela, who was standing near the hatch. A dozen workers with shovels were trying to dig a hole.

“We have a crew working down there, too.” Angela held onto Conner’s arm, using her frailness to keep him up here. Conner had to stay out of danger, even during a moment like this.

Kyle scanned the hundreds of residents who were watching, seeing Sadie’s smirk and Bret’s tears. “Do you want me up here or down there?”

“Up here.” Angela was confident that Neil and the others would dig their buried men out. Kyle was needed up here to protect their important people. Angela’s eyes went to Cate and Cody, who were by the hatch.

Kyle caught the hint. He went to stand next to Marc's twins without asking who had been buried. He already knew.

The twins waited nervously, able to hear Marc's calm thoughts. They knew he was okay, but they wouldn't relax until he was safe.

Jennifer stayed by Angela, protecting the boss as she scanned the thoughts of those around them to determine if this was an accident or something sinister.

Amanda pushed through the crowd around the fallen tunnel section. She brought up a shield over Angela and Jennifer.

Eagles around them realized they weren't doing their duty. They began sorting themselves into guard posts around and through the large crowd.

More people came out of the jungle and rushed toward the accident scene.

Eric stayed next to Zack, unable to control his excitement. *This is what I've been waiting for!*

Bret couldn't control his panic. "I can't lose them!"

Angela pulled Bret close, holding both of Adrian's sons. Bret loved Adrian and Marc. Angela could feel his pain over the loss of time with Marc as she tried to comfort him.

The church group gathered on the porch of the church, following Parker's lead as he started to pray.

Dog ran through the crowd, followed by the animals that ignored the crowd. They also loved Marc.

Madison reached out and grabbed Dog's collar. "Let them work."

Dog tolerated it because he knew Madison was trying to help. The other animals gathered around her and Dog, rubbing on the wolf.

Charlie joined Madison without speaking. He was mentally connected to his dad. Marc's clear thoughts were keeping him from running down the ramp of fallen dirt. The Eagles were already working on freeing the trapped men. They didn't need anyone getting in the way.

Standing nearby in case he was needed, Biff glared at both of them. He felt bad for yelling at Madison, but he didn't try to tell her that. He was afraid he would just do it again.

Radios lit up with Wade's voice. "They're coming through. Shields up!"

Shields came to life through the crowd.

Amanda double layered her shield over the pregnant women.

Jennifer felt the sting of being replaced.

Amanda bobbed her head. "Help me keep it solid."

Jennifer knew the woman was just giving her make-work; she added her energy to Amanda's shield anyway. This wasn't the time for a petty squabble.

*Keep that shield up!* Wade's voice blared through the hive this time, making everyone jump. *Push them up the ramp!*

The crowd retreated as a huge alligator waddled up the ramp. It reached the ground and hurried toward the tree line, tail swishing angrily.

Another gator came up right behind it and followed. Neither animal paid any attention to the people.

“Four more!” Wade let go of his radio and held tight to his shield as the female alligator approached him. She snapped at his shield, emitting a clicking noise that made Wade’s teeth vibrate. “Up, you big bitch!”

The alligator snapped and swished, defending her family.

The other three alligators fled by Wade and went up the ramp.

Wade pushed his shield out, forcing the big female back. *This is what Charlie feels like.* “I do not want a kiss! Back off!”

## 5

Topside, Eric stepped in front of his dad as the three smaller alligators came toward the crowd.

Zack tried to pull him out of the way.

Eric pushed energy into his shield and stayed put, straining. “Come on!”

The alligators bit at his shield and snarled.

Eric’s shield pushed back, enlarging. Another shield popped into place inside the first one, scaring the reptiles. They scurried off into the tree line.

“Great job!” Zack slapped Eric on the shoulder.

Eric’s eyes glowed with power and greed before fading into harmless surprise. “Cool! I didn’t know I could do that!”

The crowd clapped.

Amanda turned to Jennifer. “Make sure he’s never alone with the boss.”

“Yep.” Jennifer wrote it in her book.

Angela rubbed the arms of her boys and kept waiting for this to be over. Her stomach tightened unhappily the entire time.

“Here she comes!” Wade kept his shield in place as the big female went up the ramp. Dirt fell around her huge feet and added another layer of earth over the fallen men. Marc and Adrian weren’t moving so they didn’t draw the attention of the fleeing reptiles. They were covered in dirt and wooden boards that had fallen when it collapsed.

Ed hurried over to dig them out with Neil at his side. Neil was calm and steady. He could hear Marc’s thoughts. He knew the man was alive.

Ed was frantic. *He saved my life! I have to save him. Marc has to keep leading us!*

Topside, Kenn and Greg watched it all unfold with identical thoughts. *Maybe neither of them will survive.*

Angela’s eyes lit up bright red. “Handle that.”

Amanda and Jennifer rotated in tandem, sending out pain spells.

Kenn hit his knees, groaning at Jennifer's punishment.

Greg opened his arms as Amanda zapped him, grinning. "Finally!"

Both women stopped, confused and disgusted.

Morgan went down the ramp with a shovel. He took Neil's place as the trooper retreated. "What happened?"

Neil wiped the dirt from his scratched arms. "We were under it, trying to decide if it was wide enough. Something thumped up there and then it all came down. I grabbed Theo and Thomas."

Thomas was standing nearby with his shield up and a pale face. He hadn't had many moments like this.

Morgan looked over and saw Theo leaning against the wall, covered in dirt. "You okay?"

Theo nodded, chest hurting. "Hangover leftovers."

"More like zap leftovers." Neil frowned. "Daryl jumped out of the way and Marc saved Adrian."

Morgan paused. "Say that again."

Neil came over and knelt to pull a cracked board out of the pile of rubble. "Marc protected Adrian. That pipe should have impaled him. Marc used magic and saved his life."

Morgan eyed the pipe that was stuck in the dirt wall. It had clearly been blasted there by a force spell. "Okay, then."



Morgan and the others worked quickly, wondering what Marc was up to. All of them knew there had to be a reason.

Marc's shield pushed up, lifting the dirt. He let go of it, taking a deep breath.

Under him, Adrian groaned. "Oh, my God. Did you just fart?"

Marc laughed. "You're welcome."

## 6

Neil came to stand by Angela as the two unburied men were examined by the medics. "Can I talk to you, Boss?"

"No."

"Please."

Angela knew that wasn't easy for Neil to say. "Did you know the church group hasn't come to speak on his behalf because he's guilty and a danger to everyone here?"

Neil sighed. "Yes."

"Tim will be removed from this camp and there's nothing you can say or do to stop it, short of breaking him out and getting him off this island."

"I won't do that. I also don't think public executions are a good idea."

Angela nodded. "I don't either, but he didn't leave me many other options."

"So, it's a quiet removal."

Angela realized Neil knew what was coming. She looked over at Samantha, who was checking on Wade.

Samantha didn't hide anything.

Neither did Neil.

They both braced for her anger.

Angela smiled. "There are seven of us now. Good. I don't feel so alone."

Neil stared at her. *We thought you'd be upset that we're like you.*

"On the contrary. I'm thrilled. You have no idea how lonely it's been to be so different."

Samantha chuckled. "I told you she'd be okay with it."

Wade hugged Samantha and wished they could all return to a time when there was no magic, there was no Weigh Station full of their dead friends, and there was no glowy thing looking back at him in the mirror.

Angela noticed Morgan standing by himself as everyone else converged on Marc and Adrian, including the kids and animals. Angela concentrated, trying to get Morgan's thoughts.

*There are nine of us.*

Angela smiled at the sign of Morgan's evolution. *Who else?*

Morgan looked toward Kyle.

Angela was surprised that the mobster had evolved but Jennifer hadn't.

*Are you upset?*

Angela shook her head at Morgan. *All the top people will eventually get there. It's not something to be upset about.*

*Then why are we hiding it?*

Angela sighed. *Because I'm tired of burying normals.*

Morgan winced. His mind went straight back to rearranging the letters in Hannah's name.

Angela got a cold chill. "Take the day off and follow that thread."

Morgan went toward the restaurant for a cup of coffee and a chair.

Terry delivered good news. "They're both fine."

The crowd cheered, mostly for Marc.

Terry caught Shawn's attention and led the man away from the crowd to tell him about the vines.

Adrian hugged Piper as she pushed through the crowd. She'd been waiting patiently.

A bright blue spark ran up Adrian's arm and vanished.

Angela's eyes narrowed.

A stiff breeze pushed through the crowd, lifting hair and clothes.

Angela ignored Marc's concern. She smiled at both men while keeping tight control over her emotions. "Are you two okay to resume duty?"

They both nodded, aware of her displeasure.

Marc wasn't sure what had caused it this time, but he sensed he wasn't her target. *That only leaves you, numbnuts.*

Adrian sighed mentally. *Let's go back down in the tunnels. You can just leave me there this time.*

Marc chuckled, tossing an arm around Adrian's dirty shoulders.

Piper quickly stepped out of the way.

“Let's get a shower and get back to it.”

Adrian played along, acting like they were good friends. The two men strolled through the crowd, being the spectacle that people watched in shock.

Unnoticed by almost everyone, Isabel slipped a tiny recording device into the pocket of Marc's target and then joined the boss as a guard. *I love it here.*

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Loopholes

### 1

“**L**unch is almost ready, the showers are open, and there’s still some work that needs to be done on the runway for today’s event.” Wade’s voice over the radio dropped noticeably. “If you see the alligators, leave them alone. One rescue a day is more than enough.”

Adrian chuckled as he scrubbed off a layer of the muddy dirt they’d been covered in, but he wasn’t really amused. “What do you think the moral board is discussing?”

Marc paused in washing to look over. “You.”

Adrian grimaced. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Adrian didn’t ask Marc why he’d saved his life. He also didn’t thank him. *He killed me once. He owed me that.*

Marc spotted the sword scar on Adrian’s hip and back and tried not to wish it had been a fatal injury. He wasn’t supposed to be having those thoughts. *A good leader keeps all of his people alive.* That had been true of his time in the Marines, as well. He’d never really liked Kenn, but he hadn’t let the man die. “Would you like to confess and get it over with?”

“Innocent until proven guilty.”

Marc resumed scrubbing off the tunnel muck. “Maybe that’s what she’s changing.”

Adrian knew Marc was joking. It was still surprising. Marc’s mood had improved with their brush with death. “You’re an odd duck.”

Marc nodded. “We move silent; we move deadly.”

Adrian snickered at the Heartbreak Ridge reference. “We should endanger your life more often.”

Marc laughed and increased the hot water. Theo and Adrian had done a great job on these showers. There was hot water, with controllable faucets, and even hooks for towels and clothes.

The shower door opened, letting in a breeze and an angry man.

Morgan glared at Marc. “I want to talk to you!”

Adrian stared, not understanding Morgan’s flip. He’d been fine during the rescue.

Marc knew what the problem was. “She was never in danger. The alligators didn’t even get close to her.”

“But they might have! And you let that new bitch zap her while she’s pregnant!” Morgan didn’t care that he was almost yelling or that both men were naked and soapy. “You were willing to hand Jennifer over to Joel because he had your little girl. You aren’t fit to lead us!”

Adrian stayed quiet, letting Marc defend himself on this one.

Marc still felt bad for that moment, but he didn't offer an excuse. In the confined space of the shower, it was easy to feel the matching desperation even though Morgan had remained on the island for the lab run. He needed help. Angela hadn't covered it with the people who'd stayed behind. "You need to go on the next run."

"Why?!"

"Because Eagles can't live in cages, Morgan. It drives them crazy."

Morgan's mouth opened but no sound came out.

Ed entered the shower, drawn by the noise. "Come on." He took Morgan's arm while shooting an ugly look at Adrian.

Marc decided to handle that issue as well. "It's time to accept who you are, Ed."

Ed pushed Morgan through the door. "I like being invisible."

"Really?"

Ed's panic broke through; he spun around. "No! All I could do was dig! You almost died!"

Marc pointed. "Take Bret with you. Go talk about fear and magic."

Bret scowled from his place in the corner. "I'm not leaving!" He was the self-appointed guard over the showering men. They clearly needed protection.

Bret had spent the night at the cabin with Adrian, learning how to make a safe campfire and cook fish over it. They'd passed a pleasant evening and then slept in their bedrolls next to the doused fire. For Bret, it had been one of the best nights of

his life. He wasn't going to let that be the only night they spent that way. "You need a guard."

"Get out." Marc's tone didn't leave any room for negotiating.

Bret stomped out with Ed and Morgan. "What an ass!"

As the trio left, Adrian filled Marc in on another potential problem. "Greg and Kenn were punished while we were playing in the dirt. The enforcers zapped them."

Marc rinsed off, enjoying the warm water. "What for?"

"Hoping we didn't survive."

Marc shut the water off and reached for the towel he'd hung over the wooden divider. "That doesn't surprise me."

But it was disappointing. Kenn was taking steps back while Greg was leaping backward.

"Can we save them?"

Marc shrugged. "A better question is do we want to save them."

Adrian frowned. "Angela does."

"Angela isn't in charge. It's *our* choice to make."

Adrian considered that, but the answer was still the same. "We always need strong fighters."

Marc had just been curious about Adrian's answer. "She has a plan rolling for both of them. Let it play out. If they fail her test, they'll be removed."

"Will they fail?"



Marc reluctantly shook his head. “Tonya will pull Kenn back from the dark side like she’s been doing all along.”

“And Greg?”

“He has teammates who will guide him through the minefield.”

Adrian shut off the water in his stall and got his towel. “Do his teammates care enough to help him?”

Marc knew that was Adrian’s way of asking if he was holding a grudge against Greg. “I’ll help him because of what we went through in the lab.”

Adrian heard the tone change and made an offer he wasn’t sure Marc would accept. “Would you like to talk about your uncle?”

Marc hated how much he wanted that. He’d been disappointed when Tonya refused. “Later, maybe, while we walk.”

“Cool. I’ll pencil you in.”

Marc grinned. His mood was definitely better. All it took was saying hello to death. *I really am an odd duck.*

## 2

“I want to discuss magic laws before we get to the offense we need to judge.” Angela glanced around at the nine people who were in the jailhouse with her. “We’ll only have an hour until the brawlers bring Tim and Ralph back from the showers.”

That announcement didn't draw the attention Angela had been hoping for. Everyone here had other things on their minds.

Grant was moping over Ray and the end of their relationship. He didn't care what violation had been committed. No one else asked what rule had been broken. Before Angela had said it was a meeting of the moral board, all of them had assumed that was a distraction so the camp didn't know it was really a law meeting. Many of the camp members were still trying to figure out who was on the council.

Isabel copied Angela's words into the official notebook and tried to ignore the pain in her ankle. The medics had wrapped a bandage around it and given her a pain pill, but neither of those had helped during the walk here from the other side of the island. Isabel agreed that Jennifer's gift shouldn't be used for minor injuries, but she wished they'd made an exception. She wasn't used to being in pain.

Tonya did a count. "We're short a few." Tonya was eager to get this done so she could go to the runway for the tryouts. She wanted to spend the day working toward her future instead of longing for the past.

Angela leaned against the bars of Tim's empty cell. There were only a couple of stools. "Harry is gone, Ralph has been removed, and Molly resigned. We'll add more as we go."

"What if there's a tie?" Gus didn't like it that there were exactly 10 of them.

“The boss breaks all ties.” Piper was happy about the even numbers. There were five descendants and five normals. For the first time, she felt like the non-magic side of the camp was well-represented.

Piper was also thinking about the tryouts, but unlike Tonya, she didn’t expect to get anything out of it except a lot of bruises. She was still going to try. *Because that’s what Eagles do.*

“I’m getting complaints about Jennifer and the new woman punishing people with magic. Are we talking about that?!”

“Yes.” Angela was aware of Morgan’s fragile mental state. It matched others in here, like Grant. “Let’s get started.”

Council members settled onto the stools or the edges of the desk. No one went into any of the cells.

“We have to decide which set of rules to live by. Are magic punishments okay? Are they only to be used on descendants? Do we include magic rules in the new constitution?” The smell of sweaty bodies in the small building turned Angela’s stomach. She was very sensitive to smells. She fought a gag.

*Knock-knock!* Samantha opened the door and entered with Wade right behind her. “Sorry to interrupt. I have some things for you.”

Angela frowned. “We’re short on time. Can it wait?”

“Considering that our prisoners are being harassed while they shower and their guards don’t care, I’d say no.” Samantha put an envelope in

Angela's hand. "That is a list of violations, from how prisoners are handled to Marc's loophole."

Angela remembered Marc's smugness and realized he'd offended the camp lawyer.

*Jennifer spun around and pointed. "You're under arrest for the kidnapping of a camp member!"*

*Marc smiled coldly. "She wasn't a camp member then. Our laws don't apply to her."*

*Jennifer hadn't expected that. She huffed. "You told Ivan to do it!"*

*"Can you prove that?"*

"Prisoners aren't searched. Anyone can get them released just by saying it came from the boss." Samantha didn't look at Gus as she spoke. "Our guards aren't trained and it's going to allow a prison break at some point that gets people killed. As the camp lawyer, for now, I demand that the Law Council close these loopholes immediately." Samantha smiled at all of the shocked members and then headed for the door. "Your magic choices can wait for another eight months. These issues are more important."

Wade escorted Samantha out before anyone had time to yell at her for interrupting. He shut the door and hurried her up the path toward the runway.

Angela shut her book and opened Samantha's envelope. She read the list quickly. "She's right. We'll cover these instead."

The rest of the council was relieved. Deciding if normal laws or magic laws would rule everyone was a huge choice that shouldn't be made in a rushed hour.

“I still want you to think about the other topic. Listen to people, gather feelings for our next meeting. It will be the most important decision we've made.”

“Because we have to pick one, right?”

Angela nodded at Gus. “Man's laws and magic laws often contradict each other. We can combine some of them, but we have to decide which one trumps the other. If magic laws come before man's laws, then we have a lot of items to adjust on the constitution.”

Gus hated to do the same job twice. “Why didn't you have us cover that first?”

“I wasn't sure if it was needed at all.”

“I assume someone forced your hand?”

Angela's eyes narrowed. “Not just someone. Multiple residents are breaking rules and it has to stop, or we have to decide those laws shouldn't exist. The next time we meet, the people we're discussing will be present to defend their choices and to face our decision.”

Jennifer heard the pointed tone and sighed. “What did Adrian do this time?”

Angela wasn't ready to get into it now that they'd changed topics for the meeting. “Ask him.”

Jennifer nodded. “I will.”

Now that it had been confirmed that Adrian was breaking a rule, everyone wanted to know what it was.

Piper pretended she did, too, but inside, she hoped Adrian was ready to face the music. Angela knew what they'd done and she wasn't happy about it.

Angela looked directly at the woman. "Unhappy is an understatement." She motioned at the list of loopholes. "We'll start with Samantha getting Trinity and Brittani cleared of the charges while we were on the cruise ship. Both of them were guilty of breaking the no magic fighting rule."

Morgan glared at Angela. "I'd rather spend this hour talking about why you put Marc in charge of this camp!"

Angela sighed. "Didn't I tell you to take the day off and follow a thread?"

Morgan made a face. "I didn't think you meant for this, too."

"Marc's right. You need to go on the next run."

Morgan snapped his mouth shut.

Jennifer's heart thumped. *Morgan's leaving the island!*

Morgan marched to the door. "And I might not be coming back!"

Everyone stared in shock as the door slammed.

Angela held up Samantha's list, now glad for the interruption. It was obvious that no one was in the right mind to decide important matters today. *It can*

*wait.* Inside, her anger at Adrian continued to grow. “Lawyer loopholes.”

“I thought that was a play.” Grant hadn’t heard anything else.

Angela gave them the truth. “Samantha told them to say that. As their lawyer, she did everything she could to get them cleared and it worked.”

“And almost cost Brittani’s life. If Trinity had been punished for it, she might not have tried to kill Brittani.” Gus waved toward the empty cell he’d been cleaning when the rest of the council arrived. “She should still be sitting in there.”

Grant frowned. “So should Brittani. She was part of it.”

Gus grunted. “I agree.” Fair was fair. Either way, Brittani’s life wouldn’t have been in danger from Trinity trying to shove her off the cliff. It might not even be in danger from the babies because she would have been in jail instead of getting married and pregnant.

“I want it stopped.” Jennifer was also still furious about that. “Forget the magic side for a minute. I don’t want any lawyer lying and cheating for anyone, guilty or not. I say we make all lawyers go through a mental evaluation and then we keep doing it to make sure they haven’t gone corrupt. They get no second chances when it comes to cheating and lying. And no attorney-client privilege. If they know and don’t tell, they share the punishment.”

“Let’s draft a list and vote on it.” Angela looked over at Gus. *Bernice is hiding something. Find out what it is or one of the enforcers will do it.*

Gus stopped himself from protesting. *I’ll handle it.*

*Good. I like having her here. I think you two make a good couple.*

*But?* He could tell Angela was about to deliver another blow to his happiness.

*But she’s hiding something big, Gus. Brace yourself for the worst. She might not be staying on this island either.*

### 3

“Welcome to Angela’s XO tryouts! We’ll get started here in a few minutes. In the meantime, go on and start placing those bets!” Wade was happy that he’d been chosen to MC the day’s event, but he was even happier that Marc had ordered Samantha to stay by his side. Sam needed to be around the Eagles again. Her score yesterday in the shooting competition was proof of that.

Samantha pushed Wade over a bit so the sun was hitting him directly. He couldn’t catch up to her and Neil if he didn’t spend time in the sunlight. That was how she and Neil had evolved so fast without action.

Wade glanced around to determine how many of the competitors were here. He saw almost all of



the women, except for Piper and Tonya. He didn't dwell on their location.

Wade spotted Morgan entering the stands with a pensive look. Morgan had been at the jailhouse a short time ago. Wade assumed something had happened.

Samantha leaned closer. "I think he quit."

Wade was more than surprised. Almost all of the Eagles wanted a place on the council so they could have a hand in shaping the future. "Any idea why?" Wade knew Samantha and Neil were constantly scanning everyone in camp now. They had more information about the residents here than even Angela did.

Samantha shook her head. "I can't talk about it right now."

That told him people were paying attention to their conversation. He locked down on his thoughts and plastered a big smile on his face as he lifted the mike. "If you're here to compete, go over to the time trials. Dog is ready to race you!"

The crowd clapped and began talking excitedly, remembering the session on the cruise ship. Only Stanley had been able to match the wolf's speed.

Women began heading to the small course the Eagles had put together for this run.

Dog came over to Wade and looked up excitedly. *Do I have to wait?*

Wade grinned. "Go on and do a lap or two to warm up."

It was good for the mood of the crowd and it would also let the women know what they were in for. Dog never held back.

Isabel came out of the jungle and went toward the course even though everyone who saw her frowned or protested. She was determined not to let her age or her sprained ankle hold her back.

Wade was impressed by Isabel's determination, but he had rules to follow. He pointed at her. "Marc wants you in the stands. You've been ruled out. He also said he expects you to try again next time."

Isabel made a face and went over to the seats, but inside, she was relieved. She was already in a lot of pain and it was obvious from the healthy bodies of the younger females now stripping off their jackets before they ran that she was never going to be able to keep up with them. The desire to stay close to Angela hadn't lessened, however. *There has to be some way I can stay close to her!*

Wade also shook his head at Candy. "You've been ruled out, too. Take a seat."

Candy gave him the finger, but she went to the stands and sat next to Isabel. Candy was already feeling better now that Angela had given her a work shift. *I don't have to be the XO on her team as long as I have a solid place in this camp.*

People understood Candy had been worrying about that and smiled at the woman, relaxing as they realized it wasn't for nefarious purposes. Everyone wanted to have a good place in this camp.

Tonya came out of the jungle with her hair in a wild ponytail and a bright gleam in her green eyes.

The camp began pointing and placing wagers. Everyone knew how hard she had been working, and she was a well-respected member of their medical staff. She was the favorite to win.

The other women who were about to compete glowered at her. They knew it, too.

Wade lifted the mike again, marveling at Thomas and Theo's ability to get their technology to work without cords. Wireless power was still something new and confusing to most of them. Making the two men work together had been another of Angela's brilliant ideas.

Samantha continued to study the people around them as Wade encouraged the crowd to bet and the competitors to line up. She didn't tell him that making the two engineers work together had been Marc's idea. A lot of people were underestimating Marc based on his past behavior. Samantha wasn't. She knew Marc to be brilliant as well as ruthless. Now that he was using that brain for the greater good of the camp, Samantha expected big things from Marc.

Wade glanced around for Angela, ready to get started.

Angela was still on the jungle path with her entourage. The council hadn't gotten a lot of work done, but she was happy with what they had accomplished. Lawyers would no longer be able to

shield guilty people without going to jail themselves. *Go on and start. I'll be there shortly.*

Angela was moving even slower than normal. *I miss floors.*

Many of the people around her nodded in sympathy, including Jennifer. All of the walking was supposed to be good for an expectant mother, but it didn't feel that way.

Wade turned toward the course, where Dog was tearing around the track and making many of the competitors stare in concern. "First runner, to the line!"

Tonya went first, walking confidently. She left her jacket and gear on, proving that even a bulky outfit couldn't slow her down. Hard work was going to give her exactly what she wanted.

"Go!"

Tonya took off running as fast and as hard as she could. She didn't think she could beat the wolf, but she was putting in full effort anyway.

The crowd leaned forward in their chairs to get a better view as Dog took off, quickly catching up to the redhead.

As they went around the course, Tonya fell behind but she didn't slack off, aware of Wade holding a stopwatch.

Tonya pushed herself harder, trying to find another burst of speed as she came around the last turn.

Ahead of her, Dog crossed the finish line and slid to a stop, sending dust over the audience.

Tonya crossed it a few seconds later.

Dog came over to rub her hand for attention, hoping she wasn't upset at being beaten.

Tonya rubbed the wolf's soft ears, gasping for air.

Wade held up the stopwatch. "Ladies, 31 seconds is the time to beat. Who's next?"

As the women lined up to take their turn, Tonya looked around for Kenn. She hadn't seen him for most of the day.

Samantha caught her attention. *He got in trouble earlier.*

Tonya read Samantha thoughts, hiding her frown. Kenn's recent behavior was a disappointment.

Tonya looked at Angela as she came through the jungle.

Angela shrugged.

Tonya didn't know what that meant. *I don't have time for it right now. I'll find out how much trouble he's in later.*

Tonya strolled toward the observation area, determined to get a good score on the awareness test. She didn't watch the women who were getting ready to run the course. She wasn't worried about any of them. *I can hold my own against anyone in this camp except for the boss and if she gives me enough training, I'll be able to match her on things, too.*

Angela caught that and smiled. *Challenge accepted.*

4

“It worked just like you said it would. I had an evolution!”

“Good for you. I told you it would just take a lot of practice and hard work.”

Mike peered through the flap of the tent that had been erected over the radio setup and then shut it when he didn’t see anyone around. “It helped that I was scared of the alligators.”

William chuckled through the radio. “I can see where that would provide motivation.”

Mike lowered his voice even though he was alone in the small radio cubby. “Are you still trying to find a way out here?”

William’s quiet voice came right back. “Yes. Her deal with the ocean has prevented me from leaving, but I might be able to make a deal of my own. Hopefully, I’ll visit you soon.”

“I’m looking forward to that.” Mike tried not to sound sappy. “These calls are sometimes all I have to look forward to.”

“I’ll always be here for you.” William paused long enough to make sure it sounded sincere. “She’s close to her due date.”

“I think she has about a month to go. She is huge! You should see her.”

“Maybe I will.”

Mike caught the bad vibes and realized they'd been on here for a while. "I should go. Thanks again for helping me with the evolution. I feel stronger already."

"It's my honor, Mike. Call me for help anytime."

Mike hung up the headset and stepped out of the radio cubby so he could go to the runway. He wasn't scheduled for a shift today; it would look funny if someone found him in here.

Leeann was standing by the door. "You traitor!"

Mike quickly fired a memory spell, robbing Leeann of the information like he did nearly every day when she spotted something that he needed to keep quiet. She wasn't the only one either. All of the guards who did shifts on this ship had fallen prey to his gifts.

Leeann blinked. She saw Mike. "Hi!"

Mike came over and gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. "Hi, yourself."

He eyed her growing body and forced himself to keep waiting. A physical relationship between them was impossible even though he had perfected his memory charms. Someone was almost certain to notice if she started showing signs of being a woman too soon. He had to be content with using a relief source.

Mike clasped Leeann's hand and led her out of the garden area and away from the radio cubby. "Let's go watch Dog run circles around everyone." *Like I'm doing. Angela thinks she's so smart. I'll*

*show her. I'll show all of them. I'll be the best lurker that ever existed.*

Ray was in the hallway as the kids came out. The garden area was empty; everything had been transported to the island so it would get more sunlight. There was no reason for anyone to be here.

Leeann smiled at their captain. "Ahoy."

Ray frowned slightly instead of smiling back. "What are you guys doing?"

Mike thought fast. "She was looking for me. I was looking for her."

Leeann chuckled even though she didn't remember that. If Mike said that was what had happened, then that was what had happened.

"Oh, okay." Ray motioned toward the steps. "Hurry up. You guys are missing all of the fun on the runway."

All of the kids were allowed to be up there today. It would put their youngsters in a good mood. Ray wished he was that easy to please. He didn't want to attend the event at all.

Mike and Leeann climbed the steps, holding hands.

Ray was eager to get away from them before Leeann brought up her previous topic again, but he did wonder why Mike hadn't told her the truth about Billy yet.

The ship bobbed peacefully under his feet as Ray took a different route to the bridge now that his check in was done. He assumed Mike knew it would be bad for Leeann to regain her memory and start



running away again. *I hope the boss knows what a good kid Mike is. He's going to go far in this camp.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# The Cage

### 1

“**W**e’ll start the cage matches in a couple of minutes, folks. While we wait, how about a round of applause for Erin and Tonya, the winners of the time run and the awareness challenge!”

The crowd cheered.

Erin and Tonya waved at the audience and exchanged dirty looks. Neither of them were happy with one win and one loss. The cage match would determine who became Angela’s XO.

Wade saw Angela’s hand go up. “The boss has something to say.”

Angela stood, smiling instead of groaning as a sharp pain went through her stomach. “I told you this was a competition for my XO. It’s actually for team leader, ladies. The winner will run my team until I recover and then she’ll pick her own.”

The crowd clapped while the women beamed, delighted.

Tonya had suspected that was the case. It was part of why she had been working so hard. Other than Angela, there were no female team leaders. Tonya wanted that honor.

Angela looked right at the sweaty redhead. “As the favorite, Tonya will go first...and face every fighter.”

The crowd gasped.

Tonya strode toward the cage, dropping her jacket. “It’s gonna be a good day!”

Kenn met her at the door, scowling. “This isn’t fair!”

Tonya kissed him, hard. Then she went into the cage, grinning.

Kenn understood she wanted this; he still wasn’t happy about it. He stood by the cage, glaring in Angela’s direction.

Jayda approached the cage with a leer as she showed off her muscles.

Tonya waved. “Get in here so I can make you sore.”

Jayda laughed as she entered. “Your ass is mine.”

The two women advanced at the same time, fists raising.

Kenn looked away as both punches landed and both women immediately swung again.

Blood splattered the bar by his boots.

Kenn stared at the stands, unable to watch the fight. *Don’t punish her because of me!*

Angela frowned at him. *This is a reward. You know that.*

Kenn winced as Tonya took a punch to the face. *I don’t want her in there!*

*Tell me why and unburden your mind.*

Kenn refused, clamping his lips shut. No one needed to hear his true feelings on females in the Eagles.

Angela already knew. She'd known since she joined. She pointed. *Watch the fight, Kenn.*

Kenn refused. He marched over to the guard post and scanned the crowd and the jungle. He looked everywhere but at his fiancé. It didn't matter to Kenn that Tonya might win all the fights. *I don't want her to be an Eagle at all. She should be raising our son and caring for our home.*

Biff came over to stand with Kenn. He kept his voice down. "The guys have scheduled an intervention after everyone goes to bed tonight."

Kenn frowned distractedly. "For who?"

Biff snorted.

Kenn's frown deepened. "Me?"

"You're showing signs of sliding back into who you used to be."

Kenn sulked. "Maybe we should all return to who we were before." *Then I wouldn't have so many nightmares.*

"Your team wants what's best for you, Kenn. Be in the barn tonight so we can help you through this."

Kenn was touched that they cared so much. He was also furious with himself that it was needed. *I've been doing so good! I don't understand what changed.*

Angela met his eyes across the shouting, groaning crowd. *You went through hell in Reicher's lab and you didn't get to kill anyone for it. Then we*

*came back here and you've forced yourself to pretend you aren't damaged from that run. Your mind is tired. It's not really about Tonya at all.*

Kenn glanced toward the cage in time to see Tonya slam Jayda to the mat and claim the win. He sighed deeply. *This life sucks.*

Angela hated feeling his pain, but it wasn't something she could avoid. *Let your team help you. The things that are said during an intervention are private. Unburden yourself and try again.*

Kenn refused to answer.

In the cage, Tonya helped Jayda to her feet and then got the woman to the door so the medics could check her out. "Who's next?!"

Selina stepped into the cage before Shawn or anyone else could stop her. She didn't need mind reading gifts to know she was in over her head against Tonya.

Tonya paused, eyeing the new woman's green clothes and always purple hair. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Selina quickly nodded. "I want to earn a place on her team. Or on your team."

Tonya liked the girl. She gave her one more chance to back out. "There's no shame in skipping a fight that you're not ready for."

"Shawn's been teaching me the basic kai moves."

Tonya shrugged as Selina took up the first stance. "Just don't take this personally, okay?"

"I won't."

“Good. Make sure you remind Shawn that I gave you a chance to back out.” Before Selina could answer, Tonya rushed forward and punched her in the forehead, knocking her out of the cage.

The crowd laughed and cheered.

“Match to Tonya!”

Selina was on the ground and having a hard time getting to her feet.

Molly marched over to the cage. “That was a dirty trick!” She stepped inside. “I’ll teach you not to pick on people!”

Tonya settled into the first kai stance, waving Molly forward. This would be a better match.

Molly rushed forward angrily.

Tonya hadn’t been expecting a direct attack even though she should have been. Molly’s punch landed on her nose. Blood sprayed both of them.

Tonya quickly recovered, anger rising. She swung back, using her big arms to drill Molly in the shoulder repeatedly.

Molly tried to defend herself, but Tonya’s hits came too fast. For a brief instant she considered using magic and then swung again instead.

Tonya kicked hard, catching Molly’s hip. It knocked the woman sideways, allowing Tonya to punch her in the face, taking her to the mat.

Wade waited to see if Molly was going to get up while the crowd groaned.

Molly wanted to, but her head was rattled and all she could think of was using magic. She lifted her hand in defeat.

“Match goes to Tonya!” Wade let out a cheer as the crowd around the cage congratulated her on winning her third fight in a row.

Tonya helped Molly to her feet. She walked her to the cage door so the medics could determine if her nose was broken. It was dripping blood down her chest. So was Tonya’s, but she still moved back to her side of the cage to face the next challenger.

“Are you okay?” Thomas kept an arm around Molly to steady her while the medic examined her.

Molly spat out blood. “No.” She pinned him with a weak glare, hurting. She hadn’t really wanted to get in the cage at all, but Tonya’s dirty trick had been too much to resist. “What are you hiding from me?!”

People quieted to listen.

Morgan and Greg both moved closer to handle the problem if Thomas admitted what they suspected.

Thomas was aware of their mistrust; he didn’t lie. “I think Marc should stay in charge.”

That wasn’t a surprise. A lot of people felt that way. Morgan lifted a brow. “What’s your family line?”

Thomas glared at the man. “I’m not a threat!”

“But you are a Sinclair.”

People stared in surprise, including Molly.

Thomas nodded. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Morgan and Greg scanned his thoughts and didn't find anything bad. They both looked at Angela.

Angela shook her head. She'd never suspected Thomas of being a traitor. She wasn't spending time with him now so he had a chance to prove he could stand on his own in this camp without her babysitting.

Thomas read their thoughts this time and snorted. "I have no idea who William is!"

Both men offered apologies.

Thomas accepted them, but he was embarrassed to be put on the spot like this. "Just ask me next time."

"We will."

"Sorry, man."

Thomas decided not to hold a grudge. All the mission men were edgy, himself included. "Find me a beer and we'll call it even."

Morgan snorted. "All I have is a bottle of gin I found stashed on the ship."

People laughed as the tension faded.

Angela carefully stood and rubbed her aching hip as she smiled at the victorious woman. Then she looked around. "Do we have another challenge for team leader?!"

Tonya lifted her chin, proud of herself for getting in such good shape that Angela thought she was capable of handling this.

Kenn scowled. "The Eagles never go through so many challenges to pick a team leader!"



Angela ignored his displeasure. “Team lead, going once! Going twice!”

“I’ll take a piece of that action!”

Tonya tensed.

The crowd went quiet as Erin removed Angela’s jacket and stepped toward the cage. Erin had been doing a very aggressive workout for weeks and she had already been in good shape before that. The match everyone had expected when this test started was about to take place.

Angela didn’t show her displeasure that Erin had waited until Tonya faced three challengers and was likely getting tired, but it revealed a large weakness.

Tonya retreated to her side of the cage as Erin entered. Several thoughts crossed her mind, along with plans of action. She could feel Erin mentally doing the same.

Erin didn’t offer insults the way Molly had. Her smirk did it for her.

Tonya realized what the woman had done. She glared. “Team leaders are supposed to have honor.”

Erin gave her a knowing look. “Yes, they are.”

Tonya flushed at the implication that her honor was in question. She settled into her fighting stance and waited for it to start.

Erin had hoped to get a rise out of the redhead so she would waste this time slinging insults instead of using it for planning. She took her place on the other side of the bar that had been installed in the middle of the cage, waiting for the call.

“Get those bets down!”

Wade’s reminder triggered a small rush of residents toward the betting tables. They were enjoying being able to see a moment like this without worrying about magic use. They loved the rule that power wasn’t allowed to be used in this tryout.

Erin didn’t love that rule. She understood it, however. The leader of Angela’s team would need to be able to take care of business the normal way, as well as handling things like a descendant.

“Match starts in one minute!”

Kenn stomped over to Angela.

Angela waited patiently for his next tirade, but her patience level quickly went down as her hip continued to hurt and bugs continued to bug her. Some people weren’t being bothered by any of the insects that were drawn to their smells and the trash. Others, like herself, were being eaten alive.

“It’s not fair to have her face so many fights in a row!” Kenn kept plenty of distance between his big body and the boss. He didn’t want anyone to think he was a physical threat to her even though he was furious. His mind always reminded him to walk that line now.

“Are you saying this never happens in the Eagles?”

Kenn waved his hand angrily. “It’s different with the Eagles. A lot of them used to be military! They’ve been fighting for a year! Tonya’s only been on your team for a few months.”

People liked it that Kenn was defending his mate, but they didn't like him challenging the boss. Scowls went through the crowd and the guards.

“Turn around and watch the match.”

Kenn heard the stone tone and understood Angela wasn't going to change her mind. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned, but inside, some of his hatred for her flared back to life.

“Match starts in 30 seconds! Hurry up and finish those bets!” Wade smiled at Neil, who was one of the guards over the betting tables.

Neil scanned the excited crowd, looking for trouble, but there wasn't any. The normals and the descendants were mixed together in the seats, on the ground, and standing in small groups all around the runway and the cage. Despite not liking Jennifer's order that they had to eat their meals together, it had worked out well.

It was a relief to Neil every time he spotted something that Jennifer had done right. He made a mental note to mention it later to the gossipy church group so everyone else would see it, too. Angela wanted Jennifer to be completely exonerated for everything that had happened. Neil had made it his business to accomplish that while everyone else worked on other projects for the boss.

He wasn't sure what Samantha was working on, but he was confident that it would also give Angela something she wanted or needed. Neither of them had forgotten how much Angela was holding over their heads.

Passing by on a patrol of the island, Adrian and Marc both stopped and looked at Neil.

Neil quickly denied it before either of them could ask the question. *That's not the only reason we're doing it.*

Marc gave Neil's mind a quick scan and then moved on. He didn't find any clouds or spiders. It didn't feel like Neil was lying.

Adrian was tempted to dig deeper. Neil had made deals with him before and covered those lies so well that Adrian hadn't known until the trap was sprung. He loved Neil like a brother, but it was the brother that would always have to be at arm's length because he wasn't as good as he appeared to be. Marc was biased in Neil's favor because they had been friends before everything went to hell. Adrian didn't have that weakness. Neil turning his back had changed everything. The trooper had forgiven him; Adrian hadn't been able to do the same.

"The betting is now closed!" Neil's angry voice quickly settled into happy excitement as he realized he was giving himself away. The last thing he needed was for anyone to start digging into his mental state.

Wade caught the vibe and finished distracting everyone. "She's faced three in a row. Will Tonya come out on top in her fourth match or will Erin steal the prize from under her already bloodied nose? Let's find out!"

Marc and Adrian kept going, but both men were connected to someone who was watching the fight so they would know what happened even as they got out of sight.

Adrian patted his holster as they stepped onto the jungle path. “My rebuilt 9mm says Tonya wins.”

Marc chuckled. “No one on this island should take that bet.”

Adrian laughed as he realized Marc also thought Tonya would win. The redhead had done nothing but work and train for months. When she took over Angela’s team, all of the other women were going to be sorry that they’d slacked off because their leader was pregnant.

“Angela will love it.”

Adrian nodded. “I think that’s why she’s having them face Tonya one at a time. She wants everyone to see what a badass Tonya has become.”

Marc knew there was another reason for it, but he didn’t share that with Adrian. He was already sharing too much.

Adrian felt the mood dip. “It’s been three weeks and we haven’t had a single problem. I thought things were going well.”

“They are...” Marc didn’t finish the sentence, not wanting to start a fight.

Adrian decided to let it go. It was a beautiful day and it looked like clouds were finally moving in from the west. It hadn’t rained a single drop since the night of the flood. The jungle around them was

turning yellow and leaves were starting to fall off. It was so dry that the tops of the palm trees were wilting. No one was looking forward to a storm, but they absolutely did need at least one day of rain or parts of the jungle were going to die off.

They were also going through water supplies too quickly. The submarine and the cruise ship would allow them to constantly refill their stocks, but it had to be transported to town from the ships, taking a lot of time and manual labor. The water barrels that had been set up to collect the rain were a much easier way to replenish their supplies.

“What’s next on our list?”

Adrian consulted his notebook. “We have to check on the prisoners and make sure someone dropped off food and water to them. Angela also wants them taken to town for a medical checkup over the next couple of days.”

Marc thought she was being overly generous with their prisoners, but he didn’t complain. It showed that she had compassion and everyone needed to see that from a leader. “What else?”

Adrian gestured toward the cove. “We need to check the radar and the radio on the ships, and then we can go by the cabin on our way to Cliff Road for a check of the bunkers.”

“We’ll leave the jailhouse for later and go check the radar first.” Marc was positive the sight of clouds in the sky would cause anxiety for all of the mission men, but also for Angela. She didn’t need

that kind of stress now that she was so close to her due date.

The two men headed toward the path that would take them to the cove without having to go down the rickety ladder from the cliff top. Everyone was avoiding it until some repairs could be done. They'd been working on the bunkhouse; a lot of other projects had been put on the back burner.

A loud cheer split the air behind them; the fight was under way. Both men reconnected to a hive member to watch the match while they did their rounds. It was a daily routine that they hadn't missed in three weeks.

Adrian enjoyed it.

So did Marc. He just refused to say so.

### 3

Tonya ducked Erin's swing and jumped to avoid the kick that followed it. She stayed on defense as Erin lunged at her, punching again.

The crowd around the cage groaned as Erin missed. People in the stands cheered.

Angela watched the match with half an eye, more concerned with the pain spreading from her hips to her spine. She hadn't been this miserable in a long time.

Brittani was in a lounging chair next to her, looking better than she had in a while. Jennifer's weekly treatments were helping her and everyone else. Jennifer was on the other side of the heavily

pregnant woman just in case the trip up here had been too much. Jennifer's large stomach also stuck out, creating a line of females in the last stages of gestation.

Angela heard Erin's fist connect, but she scanned the crowd instead, seeing happy residents who were glad of the break they'd gotten from action and from the weather. Angela was unhappy that it couldn't always be this way.

Another pain rippled through her stomach and down her legs.

Jennifer looked over.

Angela shook her head and focused on the fight.

Tonya was still on defense. She ducked and spun, evading Erin's hold.

Erin figured out Tonya was trying to wear her out, flipping it around on her. She charged forward, trapping Tonya in the corner.

Tonya grinned. Then she fired back.

Erin was unprepared for the strength in Tonya's arm as the punch landed on her shoulder. She was driven backward.

Tonya swung again and again, not pausing between the blows. She hit Erin in the mouth, the jaw, the shoulder, and then the chest, drilling her upper body in multiple areas to cause the most pain.

Erin tried to hit her back, but the targeted blows had taken her breath away.

Tonya punched Erin in the forehead this time, following it with a fast kick to the knee that dropped Erin down onto one leg.



Erin's hand came up, but it was too late.

Tonya punched her in the mouth as hard as she could.

Blood sprayed the cage.

Tonya hit her again and then again, using her new muscles to make her point clear.

“Match to Tonya!”

Tonya kept swinging.

Wade hesitated to go in there and break it up. He looked around for Kenn.

Kenn was already on his way. He rushed in and pulled Tonya off of the moaning woman.

Tonya jerked out of his grasp and delivered a last hit that almost knocked Erin out.

“Stop!”

“She tried to cheat!” Tonya was furious. “She’s a cheater!”

That new reputation went through the crowd and stuck even though Erin wasn’t alert enough to hear it.

Kenn pushed Tonya toward the cage door. “Here’s your winner!”

The crowd cheered for Tonya, patting her on the shoulders while the medics hurried into the cage to check on Erin.

“There’s your team leader!” Angela shouted, celebrating Tonya’s win even though she felt rough. “Let’s hear it for Tonya!”

The camp cheered loudly.

Tonya made her way over to the betting tables and grabbed her spoils. Then she smiled at Angela with bruises and blood as her crown and jewels.

“Now you get to pick an XO.” Angela hadn’t planned on doing this yet, but the pain in her stomach said it wasn’t wise to wait.

Tonya scanned the hopeful females who were coming closer. “Jayda.”

The crowd murmured while the other women muttered.

Jayda glanced around. “Me?”

“I made the choice a week ago.”

Jayda frowned. “But I’m leaving on the next run.”

Tonya nodded. “So am I. The boss gave me control of your mission. We’re going together as team leader and XO.”

Jayda grinned. “Awesome!”

Kenn groaned. “No!”

Angela headed toward the bathroom, letting the crowd get Kenn in line this time. She didn’t have the patience for his whining.

Kenn was staying here and caring for their kids while Tonya went out on her first solo mission. He wasn’t pleased, but she was and so was every female in camp who’d been waiting for this moment. Other than Angela’s runs, there hadn’t been a mission yet where a woman was in charge the entire time.

Disappointed females came over to congratulate Jayda while everyone else went to the betting tables to claim their prizes.

Greg went into the cage to help Morgan get Erin on her feet. He put an arm around her waist. "I think she learned some new tricks." Greg had recognized Tonya's strategy. He'd been on the receiving end of something similar during the last matchups.

"Who taught her that?" Morgan was impressed. "Rico."

Tonya heard the name. Her eyes turned bright red. A cold breeze flew through the crowd, bringing silence as it was felt.

Jennifer glared. *Get control of yourself!*

Tonya shut her lids and forced the awful pain back into her mental crypt. When she opened her eyes, they were sparkling green again. "Time to get drunk!"

Another loud cheer ran over the clifftop and drowned the tension.

She looked at Kenn.

Kenn stopped protesting. He just wanted her to be happy and she hadn't been since Rico's death. "Whatever you want."

Tonya took the bottle Jayda handed her and tilted it up, but she only took a big drink and then passed it. It was a huge honor to lead a run and she wasn't going to blow it by getting drunk and crying over a spilled stalker.

*But I want to.* Tonya hadn't felt pain like this before. She put a smile on her face and forced out

words that she hoped were convincing. “Who wants to go with us? I need more hands.”

Eagles began signaling, getting her attention, and coming forward. Many of them were women, but there were enough men in the group to give Kenn a little peace of mind. He knew firsthand how wild women could be on runs, but he still wanted them to have someone along who had enough experience to help Tonya if she needed it.

Tonya scanned again, using the moment to her advantage. “I need a medic and a captain. Who wants it?”

Two hands went up in the resulting quiet. Both of them were a shock.

Tonya was secretly relieved to have so many volunteers. “XO, add Morgan and Grant to the list. We’re leaving in one week.”

“How long will we be gone?” Jayda already had her notebook out, doing her new duty.

Tonya locked eyes with Kenn. “As long as it takes to find your family and more vials of the rage vaccine. We aren’t coming back without both of those goals met.”

The camp cheered again.

Still in the bathroom, Angela held onto her contracting stomach and fought a low moan of pain. She didn’t call Marc or a medic yet. *Let them have a few more hours of fun and peace.*

She let out a deep breath as the pain subsided. *Then we’ll all visit hell together.*



## Chapter Twenty-Three

# Control

### 1

“It’s not broken.” Terry taped the bandage across Tonya’s swollen, purple nose and grinned at her. “Congratulations.”

Terry was relieved that none of the injuries today had been severe. It was a huge change from the violent monthly matchups they’d gotten used to.

“Thanks.” Tonya tried to resist rubbing her nose as it continued to swell. Touching it would only make it hurt more. She went over to Trent, who was standing near the cage, holding her son.

Trent carefully handed her the sleeping baby. “He’ll be ready to eat when he wakes up.”

KJ was growing fast and starting to sleep less. Tonya wasn’t looking forward to missing his first smile, his first time sitting up, and maybe even his first steps, but she believed in the future enough that she was willing to deal with it. Without the rage vaccine, he wouldn’t have a happy life here. No one would.

Tonya snuggled the little boy close, nuzzling his cheek. “Thank you for taking care of him while I work.” Tonya had enjoyed the matches for the most

part, but she didn't consider it fun. She was working toward her goals.

"No problem. He's a sweet kid." Trent loved caring for the camp kids, even the wild ones.

Trent caught Marc's attention and went to the end of the runway that wasn't covered in people and gear.

Marc followed him, hoping Trent wasn't about to deliver bad news. The mood was good, except for the women who'd lost. Erin was still being watched by the medics, while Selina and Molly observed through their own bruises. Marc didn't want the mood to be ruined.

Angela motioned to a few of the people around her. "I need a minute." She went into the empty tent as the rest of the camp started to break up and go to town or work posts.

Wade tried to help that along. "The clinic will be open for a few hours if anyone needs anything or wants to make an appointment."

Wade fought a yawn. It had been a long day, though he hadn't expended much physical energy beyond holding his shield against the big female alligator. Being the camp XO was a mental duty most of the time.

Piper gestured as she went by. "Trent will be around with Goldie's twins. They need a checkup."

She didn't mention her upset stomach, though it was part of the reason she hadn't gotten into the cage at all. She planned to go to the clinic later and get checked out.

“Izzy needs a checkup on her ankle.” Stanley helped the woman toward the jungle, glad she hadn’t been allowed to get into the cage.

Terry picked up his medical bag. “We can do that.” He and Tonya would be on duty there together, though he would handle the patients while she tried to identify components in the rage vaccine. She spent every evening that way now.

Isabel tried to walk on her own so they wouldn’t know she was hurting.

Stanley scooped her into his arms and headed for the clinic while she giggled.

Wade snickered. *That’s an odd couple.* “It’s also ship cleaning time, folks. You were given assignments this morning. That starts in half an hour. Don’t be late.”

Grant caught Angela’s eye. “We’re short on that crew.”

Angela paused in the flap of the tent, shaking her head.

Dario and Ned hurried over to Grant.

“Can we help?”

“We know how to sail.”

Both men wanted to be used for their skills.

Angela sighed as Grant started to ask her to give them a chance. Grant hadn’t learned yet that when she said no, there was a good reason for it.

“We have six ships, Boss. They all need captains.”

Grant didn’t look as though he’d slept at all last night. Angela didn’t comment on it. The end of a



relationship, or a big bump in the road, took time to recover from.

“Fine.” Angela looked around for an Eagle she could put on guard over them.

Dario knew what she was doing. “Please. We have to prove that we can be trusted.”

“Fine. Ned and Dario will do the checks and cleaning on the smallest pirate ship.” That boat had been converted into a trash container. If they messed something up, it wouldn’t be a huge loss.

Dario and Ned beamed. They stayed by Grant and waited for the top captain to give them more instructions.

Angela went to the desk in the tent with Dog on her heels while Grant supervised that crew. She and Marc had divided the work and hoped one of them would be able to perform double duty over two ships. It really would work out better if the new men could handle one of the boats. Even the smallest one was still big enough for the work to take the rest of today and maybe even part of tomorrow. It wasn’t as easy as running a duster over some counters. There was a detailed checklist that needed to be covered.

Grant read the assignments so everyone would know where they were supposed to be. “Ray, Missy, and Jayda will go to the submarine.” Grant had hoped to have that spot himself. He didn’t think it was a good idea for Ray to spend all day there because of everything that had happened on it, but he understood Marc had assigned people based on

their knowledge. He refused to think about Ray's betrayal at all.

“Jennifer and Cate will go to the cruise ship. Shawn and Bret will go to the tanker. Wade and Cody are on duty over the large pirate ship. I'll handle the other one with Selito and a brawler.” Grant smiled at the new men. “And Dario and Ned will handle the little one. Any questions?”

Leadership had insisted each captain have a descendant guard. It would also occupy their restless kids. Grant approved, though he doubted they would be needed. Safe Haven hadn't seen any action in a while.

Inside the tent, the people Angela had asked to stay behind waited impatiently for the crowd to leave. All of them wondered what Angela wanted to discuss. They also wondered if Marc would be here for it.

Half of the crowd was already on their way to chores and posts. The rest were lingering to socialize. Wade tried to hurry things along again. “There's only half an hour until those shifts start. Get out of here so our work crew can clean up the mess we've made.”

Wade swept the cleanup crew. Debra, Gio, Nero, Theo, and the two teens they'd brought from the lab were going to be very busy. There was trash in every direction and the tent had to be taken down.

Wade didn't see Theo.

Debra pointed at the outhouse. She'd just arrived. Watching the matches hadn't been able to compare to walking the island and hearing it.

Wade assumed Theo didn't know about Debra's hearing being returned yet. He lingered near the tent flap to observe.

Theo came from the outhouse, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He'd spent most of the day in a bathroom. His body was purging the alcohol. It wasn't pleasant.

Wade watched as Debra pointed at a stack of garbage and put Theo to work despite his rough condition. *Why isn't she telling him?*

Debra frowned at Wade.

Wade shrugged. *I won't tell.*

Debra joined the work crew that was pulling trash bags from their kits.

Wade left that mystery for later. He stayed by the flap to guard the people inside as well as to hear and take notes if it was needed. Marc and Adrian were in charge, but Wade only reported to Angela. He liked that setup; he doubted Marc did.

Wade glanced at the end of the runway where Marc and Trent were near the edge of the cliff, talking.

Wade narrowed in to eavesdrop.

## 2

“She’s asking about her mom; she tried to talk to Adrian about it.”

Marc wasn't surprised. "Cate hadn't seen her mom in years. She's a little upset that Cody got time with Julia before she died."

Trent swept Marc and found the same cold hardass the camp had always been leery of. The only difference was the lack of hostility in his eyes. Trent hoped that continued to improve. It would be better for everyone if Marc did a good job while Angela was on maternity leave. "So, it's okay to talk to her about Julia?"

"Just skip the bad opinions. Cate already knows her mom was a piece of shit. Let her have some good memories...if there are any." Marc didn't have a single good thought about Julia, but it was possible that the den mothers might be able to come up with something.

"Okay." Trent didn't want to bring up the next topic, but he did anyway. "She talks about Joey a lot. Some people have gotten her thoughts about your visit."

Trent had stains on his clothes. His hair was a wild bowl on his head, and his eyes were bloodshot. His happiness covered all of it. He clearly loved the job he'd asked for. "And?"

"And they're nervous. It would be better if Cate didn't talk about it with anyone but you or the boss."

Marc's mood dipped.

Trent didn't care. Angela would always be the boss to him. Marc was a substitute. "That's all from me. Trent, out."

Marc chuckled as the redhead walked away. He liked Trent. He felt the man was wasted as a den mother, but as long as he did a good job, Marc wasn't going to interfere.

Marc went to the runway tent without making notes in his book. He wasn't going to talk to Cate about any of it right now. Some of that would fade on its own. The rest would be discussed later, when he figured out what to say. Cate was a kid, but her mind was growing quickly and she adored little Joey. Marc wasn't going to tell her she had to end that friendship. *My mother did that to me about Angie and all it did was drive us closer.*

Angela smiled at him as he entered the tent.

Marc's heart skipped a beat. *I love her so much.*

Wade scanned the crowd that was still standing around talking about the matches, the magic, and the madness. "The cabin needs to be finished before we hit the rack tonight. You're putting in a frame for a wall and removing all the burnt areas, including parts of the floor." Just in case any of them hadn't gotten their assignments, Wade reminded them. "That work crew is Neil, Greg, Erin, Eric, Sadie, Molly, Biff, Ed, and Richie. For everyone else, it's almost dinner time. Go see what Thelma made and get off of this runway so we can clean. Now."

The remaining crowd shifted toward a path to town or a work site.

Satisfied, Wade held the flap for a few more people Angela wanted to talk to.

Kenn entered the tent and went to Tonya. He sat next to her and made faces at the baby.

Kenn didn't look at Angela. *I'm sorry.*

This time, Angela didn't answer.

Adrian came in next. He stood near the desk and waited, hoping this went quickly. He wanted to get back to rounds with Marc. He also wanted to avoid Angela's anger. She wasn't in a good mood.

Greg and Erin came in together and went to the corner, away from the others.

Wade regarded Angela. "Is that everyone?"

"No."

Wade heard steps and held the flap.

Somchai came in and went to the chair next to the desk.

Everyone frowned at him.

Dog growled, snout lifting.

Somchai grunted as he got up and went to a seat away from Angela. "I'm tired of being treated like an outsider."

Angela got things rolling. "Tell us about the SA compound."

Somchai sat down. "It's a safe place for our kind where we can train our children and not live in fear."

"It's still operating?"

Somchai nodded, not looking at Adrian. "There have been shakeups over the years, but it has always survived."

"Is there a lab?" Tonya handed the baby to Kenn so she could get her notebook out.

“No. There are brewing stations, however. You can make what you need, but I would imagine supplies are low.”

“Is there food and water?” Jayda had bandages on her nose, like Tonya, but she wasn’t feeling it. Terry had slipped her a pain pill. Jayda didn’t know why Tonya hadn’t taken one, too, but she didn’t ask. If Tonya wanted to suffer, that was her business.

Somchai rubbed his double chin. “Not enough to feed this camp for long.”

Angela wasn’t planning on moving them to South America. “I have a small crew going there on this next run to drop off some people who aren’t staying with us. Will that be a problem?”

Somchai quickly shook his head. “It shouldn’t be. The compound is a sanctuary for our kind.”

Adrian couldn’t resist a comment. “It was better before the last shakeup.”

Somchai glowered. “You’re responsible for that!”

Adrian didn’t deny it. “That was a long time ago. Get over it.”

“Never! You got half of the Abbots banished!”

“For murder! They deserved it!”

“Enough!” Angela wasn’t in the mood for their squabbling or for more revelations from Adrian’s past. “Ed will be in charge of the SA landing party. He’ll escort them in. You’ll pick him up on your way home.”

Many of them were surprised to hear that Ed was in charge of anything. They were used to him doing quiet work for leadership.

Tonya was copying the orders into her book. “He may have to wait there a while if we don’t find a lab right away with what I need.”

“He’ll survive until you arrive.” Angela lifted a brow. “No luck, I assume?”

“None. I haven’t been able to identify a single component of the vaccine.” Tonya forced out the rest, hating how it felt to admit defeat. “I can’t save them. If we don’t find more of the premade vaccine we’ll lose half of the camp.”

“We won’t let that happen.” Kenn patted Tonya’s hand and kept gently rocking the sleepy baby.

Kenn had duty over the clinic after this. Then he would get Tonya and his son settled in the bunkhouse for the night so he could attend the intervention that he doubted would help. *But I’ll still try.*

Kenn didn’t want his second chance to end because of a few bad days. Many of the mission men were having bursts of anger. It was the next stage in their recovery, according to Terry. Kenn hoped that was true. He’d been a lot happier before that run. *We all were.*

Tonya eyed Angela curiously. “Who’s going to the compound?”

“Amanda’s youngest daughter is being sent to stay with her aunt.”



“Why?”

Angela’s tone sharpened as she gave Somchai a hard look. “For descendant training. Apparently it’s been a hub for our kind for decades and it didn’t shut down with the war.”

Greg glared at Adrian. “You didn’t tell us about this either!”

Adrian quickly fired back. “It’s an underground compound with a limited set up! It doesn’t have plumbing and it barely has any electricity. Do you really think this camp is going to agree to live that way?”

Greg was forced to admit that they wouldn’t. “You still should have told us!”

People throughout the tent nodded.

Adrian delivered another surprise. “I told Angela about it months ago.”

Greg wasn’t ready to let it go. “You didn’t tell us Amanda was an enforcer.”

“No. She didn’t want to live that life anymore.” Adrian shot a dirty look toward Angela, surprising many of them. “She still doesn’t want to live that way. You’re forcing her to be someone she doesn’t want to be anymore. It’s not right.”

“Your objection is noted.”

Adrian knew from Angela’s hard tone that she wasn’t going to change her mind about Amanda. “You’re going to drive her out.”

“Or I’ll bring her into the fold where she belongs.”

Adrian paused. “Do you think you can?”

Angela immediately nodded even though it was obvious that Jennifer was hoping for a different answer. “A year ago, Amanda didn’t want to be an enforcer anymore. That was a year ago. Now she understands power can be used for the greater good instead of for the evil of man.”

Tonya glanced at Kenn pointedly.

Kenn couldn’t put that puzzle piece in place. He was still trying to figure out Tonya’s mystery about the things Rico had told her, but it was hard to concentrate with so much going on around him.

Tonya kept gathering the information she needed to finish putting the run together. “Where is this compound in South America?”

Jayda also had questions. “Can we get supplies there or do any trading? How many people live there?”

Angela waved off their questions. “You guys can talk to Somchai about that later. You can also try to convince him that grudges against an ex are not allowed in this camp. At least not openly.”

Kenn frowned, sensing that dig was aimed at him.

Several people in the tent assumed that. Relationships came and went in Safe Haven. That part hadn’t been changed by the war. People got together when they were hot and when things cooled, they split. One half of the split usually wasn’t happy about it.

Somchai scowled. “I’m not going to answer their questions. I’m not a circus side show that you

can put on display whenever you need a deflection or a distraction!”

Kenn glared at Somchai. “Yes, you will and yes, you are. You’re either with us or against us. There is no room for in-between anymore.”

Somchai was intimidated by Kenn. The Marine’s scars and big body accented his untouchable attitude. He reluctantly backed down, crossing his arms over his fat chest.

“We’re dropping Ed and his group on the South American shore closest to this island, right?” Tonya was making notes in her book as she spoke.

Angela nodded. “As of right now that will be a group of five. They’ll have their own supplies and gear. You won’t have to worry about that.”

“I’ll take a few extra rations just in case.” Tonya wrote it down. “From there, we’re going to California.”

People in the tent hadn’t known exactly where the next run was going. Excitement and dread filled the tent.

“Wasn’t that hit during the war?”

Adrian nodded at Jayda. It was well-marked on his map. “But the coast of California is over 800 miles long. You should be able to find someplace to land that isn’t covered in radioactive fallout.”

Tonya wrote down Geiger counters on her gear list, along with personal dosimeters. She wasn’t sure how many of those were left. *Maybe I can find some more while we’re on the run.* “From there, we’ll find

a lab and gather the vaccine. Then we'll go to New Mexico to collect Jayda's family."

"I recommend you do that in the opposite order." Kenn hated to overrule Tonya on something publicly because it would embarrass her, but he had a duty to look out for any team. "You don't want to be carrying vials of whatever you find from California to New Mexico and then all the way back to the coast to your ship. Get her family first and then go to the lab."

Tonya immediately wrote it down. "That's an excellent idea."

Kenn was relieved that she wasn't upset.

"I'm not positive where they are. I want you to know that." Jayda didn't want anyone to blame her if they got there and found it empty.

Tonya had already covered that in her plans. "No worries. After all the traveling Safe Haven has done, everyone will understand. You go where the supplies are or where you can find safety."

Angela gestured. "Tell us about your home."

Jayda smiled. "My family had the second largest cattle ranch in the state. There were 23 of us living on the ranch, not including hired hands, seasonal workers, and security."

Tonya didn't want to bring up bad memories, but she had heard the rumors about Jayda's ex-husband. "How many of those do you expect to be a problem?"

Jayda frowned. “Half of them will want to go and the other half will follow Zane. My ex-husband has a very magnetic personality.”

“Is he a descendant?”

Jayda shook her head, then paused. “I didn’t know I was either, though, so I can’t promise that.”

“That’s to be expected.” Angela wasn’t worried about them running into more of their kind. The normals were always a larger concern because they tended to panic. “When you get there, talk to all of them together, but don’t mention bringing them back here right away. Tell them you wanted to check on them and let them know what a good life you’re leading. That will make it easier for some of them to come around on their own.”

Several people in the tent realized that was a strategy Angela was already employing with their camp.

For Kenn, it finally put a piece of the puzzle into place.

Tonya checked her list. “That’s it for my questions now that I have a crew list.”

Tonya was thrilled by how many people had volunteered. She would have to sort through them and deny some. It was a huge honor and more proof of how far she’d come.

“We have a list of labs near where you’re landing, though I still think the west coast is too dangerous for long-term scavenging. Don’t spend more time there than you have to.” Angela took that list from her book and handed it to Wade to pass

over. “The southern most location is the most promising. It’s a huge facility. There might be stockpiles of vaccines. There could also be survivors hiding there. Don’t start another war, but get what we need.”

“I won’t come back without it, Boss.” Tonya meant that. She would miss the time with her son, but leaving him here was the safest thing she could do for him.

Kenn started to protest again.

Jayda looked over. “Shut up.”

Kenn glared at her.

Angela gestured toward the flap. “If you have a shift, get on it. Everyone else can meet later for details.” She stood, hurrying things along.

Somchai left first, mind spinning with ideas. *They’re going to the SA compound. Maybe I should tag along for that run even though I’m not allowed to live there anymore.*

Angela met Jennifer’s eyes. *He’s not staying.*

Jennifer nodded. “I think so, too. You get to tell Marc.”

Angela snorted, heading for the flap. “It was his idea to get Somchai off our island without having to remove him.”

“Isn’t that just sending our problem somewhere else for someone else to handle?”

“Yes.” Angela didn’t say she’d refused to remove the man until he did something wrong. They already knew how she felt about that.

Angela left with several of them at her side as she picked the easiest route back to town.

As they left the tent, Jennifer waved Zack over from his post on guard duty. “We need to talk.”

Zack already knew the topic. “I’ve spoken to Eric about hunting power. He promised he’s not going to do that.”

Jennifer didn’t comment on Zack’s new beard or the haunted look that never faded. “But?”

Zack sighed. “But he’s lying. Eric thinks the magic users are in danger. He wants more power to protect our kind.”

“That’s Angela’s job.” Jennifer didn’t give Zack time to argue or defend. “Remind him that Harry and Allison hunted power and they’re both dead now.”

Zack’s anger rose. “Are you threatening my son?”

“Yes.”

Zack stomped back to his post without returning the favor.

Jennifer quickly waddled down the jungle path to catch up with Angela. “That’s a big problem.”

Angela held her stomach as she walked. “Maybe. I still have hope for Eric. He may change his mind and just leave without an attack.”

“Still. Make sure you don’t go anywhere without a guard.”

“Same for you.”

Both women slowed as Ray came jogging through the jungle.

“The weather pattern is approaching faster. It will be here some time tonight.” Ray handed her a note on it and quickly jogged back down the path so he didn’t have to answer any questions or feel their pity over his mistake.

Jennifer watched him leave. “I feel bad for Ray.”

So did Angela. “The fog screwed with all of us.”

“Grant knows that, but part of him still thinks you guys made it all up.”

“A lot of people do.” Angela wasn’t going to waste power by showing the camp everything that had happened after they left Australia. “Give them some time. They’ll work through it.”

“What about the people in the tent we just left?”

Angela grunted, trying not to trip on the thick, brittle vines that layered almost every inch of the jungle floor. “Some of them will pull their heads out of their asses in time to avoid a hard landing.”

“And the others?”

“Will leave before I have to remove them. They’re already thinking about it.”

### 3

Still in the tent, Tonya looked at Kenn pointedly.

Kenn snapped it in place all at once. *Control.*

Tonya nodded. *Female control.*

Kenn pushed that out of his thoughts as the tent emptied.



*It's up to you.* Tonya didn't want to stay if Kenn was going to be unhappy with that shift in power.

Kenn nodded. *I'll think about it.*

Tonya was glad Kenn finally understood. Angela and Jennifer wanted women to control the world. If Kenn couldn't deal with that, then they might not be coming back. He had to decide soon so she could find an excuse to take him and the baby along.

Tonya decided it was a good idea to drop another warning. She looked over at Greg. "You've lost your protection from the boss. Get out of this camp or you may not survive the next action."

Erin tensed. "What are you talking about?"

Greg tried to avoid it. "Nothing. She's just biased against you."

Tonya huffed. "I'm trying to save her life, Greg. You and Kenn screwed up by hoping Marc died. You're on Angela's target list now."

Erin hadn't known. "Why would you do that?"

Greg sighed miserably. "It was just a reflex thought. And that was the first time."

Erin was worried now. "We need to get you off this island. Tonya's right. Angela won't protect you anymore."

Greg adjusted his eyepatch and dropped a bomb of his own. "I don't think she has been at all. I wasn't supposed to come back from that lab."

Erin stared. "What are you saying?"

"I think Angela tried to kill me by sending me on that run. She almost succeeded."

Marc and Adrian were the last people on the runway, other than the work crew. They'd lingered to make sure everyone else left for their next shift or dinner.

Evening was here. There were thick shadows over the edges of the runway and the jungle paths. Both men were glad Angela and Jennifer had left in time to reach town before it got full dark.

Marc studied the work crew as they gathered trash, trying to figure out why Debra hadn't shared her good news with Theo.

Adrian was studying Gio and Nero; they had both gained a lot of weight since the rescue.

"Why wouldn't she want Theo to know yet?"

Adrian shrugged. "Maybe she's afraid it will change their relationship."

"What relationship?"

Adrian didn't have an answer. "Maybe you should ask her."

Marc decided not to do that yet. There was a chance that Debra was just spending this time enjoying having her hearing back before she had to face Theo. His displeasure of her being added to the diving team was well-known.

Marc made eye contact with Zack, who was in charge of the cleanup crew.

Zack rotated to scan the jungle around them in case the alligators decided to make an appearance now that it was quieter up here.

Marc went toward the main jungle path, frowning slightly as he noticed a layer of whiteness coming through the trees. “I thought Ray said the weather pattern would arrive later tonight.”

Adrian also noticed the white swirls wafting through the trees as they headed down the path. “I hate the fog.”

A harsh smell hit Marc’s nose. His heart thumped. “That’s not fog. It’s smoke!”

Both men took off running.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# It's Here

### 1

“**T**here’s a fire at the cabin!”

Greg’s radio call produced a jumble of responses.

Marc cut through it using the hive. *I’m on the way!* He ran faster, aware of Adrian easily keeping pace.

The smoke thickened as they neared the cabin, becoming dense.

“We don’t have enough water for this.” Adrian could already tell by how much smoke there was. This wasn’t just a wall and a dresser.

Marc slid to a stop as they reached the cabin. The entire structure was engulfed. Flames were running up the walls and coming out of the front door. More fire was burning the rear of the cabin. Marc could see the flames on the roof, too. *But that’s not the problem.*

The jungle around it was on fire.

Molly fired her ice gift at the tops of the trees, trying to stop them from spreading the flames.

Biff’s stone warrior stomped out flaming branches as they hit the ground.

Richie and Sadie were beating flaming vines to stop them from spreading toward the main path to town.

Greg and Erin were holding sooty shields over part of the jungle, trying to smother the fire.

Eric was stomping flames and swearing because he didn't have another gift to use.

Marc's stomach dropped. None of it was helping. "Is anyone in there?"

"We just got here a minute ago!" Biff concentrated, moving his stone warrior over to put more space between it and the fragile humans.

"I don't think so. This is the entire work crew." Greg stayed close to Erin to protect her if anything fell from the thick trees above them.

Marc ran up onto the porch to make sure no one was inside; flames immediately shot out of the door and chased him back down the steps.

"We have to get help with this!" Molly was almost out of energy from using her ice power.

Marc considered using the fire gift he had copied from Angela, but he didn't have enough experience using it. He was afraid of making things worse.

Adrian hurried over to help stomp on the flames that were spreading toward a large thicket of dry trees. If it reached them, they definitely wouldn't be able to stop it.

Marc joined Molly, firing ice with her that quickly melted and became useless.

Sadie saw Adrian. She clenched her fists, nails drawing blood from her palms. Her eyes flashed bright pink before she got it under control and resumed stomping on the flames.

Ed tried to force his gifts to pop in as he fought the fire with a blanket from his kit, but nothing happened. *Damn me!* If he'd unlocked his gifts, he might have something to use now.

The fire roared as it covered the dry, hot roof. It burst into a cloud of flames above the structure.

Molly cringed, sent back to the explosion on the cruise ship.

Biff brought up a shield around himself and then widened it to include the terrified woman. He shuddered at the rush of fear soaking into his brain.

Heat and painful sparks blew over the fighters with the wind.

Greg paused, mind faltering as hot pain sank into his skin. *I'm back in the lab!*

Erin put a hand on Greg's arm and pulled him away from the flames. "We have to get out of here!" His panic was feeding her own. She also hated fire.

Marc lifted his shield, feeling something else coming.

The cabin wall collapsed, throwing out a blast of heat, fire, and wooden shrapnel that coated the fighters and their shields.

Screams filled the air.

Marc shut his eyes, holding the shield. For an instant, he was in a narrow cage again watching and listening as his team burned.

“Get to town!” Adrian pushed Sadie toward the path while she slapped at the tiny flames on her clothes.

Erin grabbed Sadie’s arm and fled down the path with Greg and Ed on their heels.

“Get to town!” Marc and Adrian stayed there as everyone else ran.

“It’s spreading in two paths.” Adrian coughed.

Marc saw that. “The one going to the beach will burn out when it hits the water. We have to protect the town.”

The roaring flames traveled over the dry vines and reached the thicket nearby. Loud burning noises echoed through the jungle as the dense thicket began to catch fire.

“We have water barrels in town. We can stop it there.”

Marc followed Adrian as the fire continued to spread. There was a clear area around the town that might stop the fire from reaching their buildings. He grabbed his radio. “All hands to town! We have a fire! All hands to town!”

As the two men got out of sight, a large gust of wind came through, lifting sparks and flaming vines. It blew them in circles, spreading the fire in every direction.

Gus turned down the volume on the radio as dozens of people tried to answer Marc's call.

"Let me out. I'll go help them." Fighting a fire was chaotic. Tim knew he might get a chance to flee if Gus let him out.

Ralph nodded, echoing Tim. "I'll come right back here when it's over." Ralph just wanted to help. He wasn't thinking about himself.

Gus snorted. "You two aren't getting out. Marc will handle the fire."

"He might need us."

Gus glared at Tim. "He needed you to be a good person and you blew it. You are not getting out of that cell."

Tim slapped the bars and went to his cot. His execution was coming in just four days. He was desperate to get out of here.

"I'm being banished anyway. Let me help the town one more time."

"No. Daisey will be back in a couple of hours with dinner trays. You two will eat and go to sleep. That's it." Daisey had gone to help with the camp kids for a little while. Gus suspected she would use that time to beg for help for Ralph. He didn't blame her, but he doubted anyone else was going to give supplies or hope to the elderly couple.

It was dark outside the jail house windows. It was making Gus sleepy. *Third shift isn't good for me.*

Gus stood and began walking around to keep himself awake. He wouldn't be relieved until dawn.



He still had a long way to go before this shift was over.

Gus thought about Angela's order again, but he still didn't know how to approach it. People didn't understand why he was taking things so slowly with Bernice, but they didn't spend time with her. They didn't understand how leery she was of other people. Gus now assumed her secret was the cause of that, but he didn't want to expose her and ruin their friendship.

The radio lit up with Parker's calm, firm voice. "Come to town and help. All church members will come right now to help fight the fire."

Tim looked at Gus. "Parker is dangerous."

Gus sneered. "That's rich coming from you."

Tim ignored Gus's sarcasm. "He isn't really religious."

Ralph nodded. He'd never trusted Parker, though he didn't have a clear reason for it.

Gus frowned. Tim had spent a lot of time around Parker. No one else really knew the man at all. "Can he be trusted?"

Tim shrugged. "He can be trusted to follow his own goals. He doesn't care about Safe Haven's values. He wants to replace them."

Gus looked over. "With what?"

"Complete freedom; no rules at all. He's an anarchist; he thinks running the church will help him achieve that goal slowly, using the boiling water and the frog method."

Gus was familiar with the theory that a slowly heating pot of water would keep the frog from knowing it was being cooked, but he didn't believe Angela would let that happen. "You'd think complete freedom would be a good thing."

Tim heard the scorn and laid down on his cot. "Just remember my warning and keep an eye on him or you'll all be cooked before you know it."

### 3

"I can't believe I'm stuck here picking up garbage!" Theo speared another piece of trash with his pointed stick and put it into the bag.

Zack scowled at Theo for disturbing the quiet once again. Everyone had their radios off to keep Debra from being blasted with noise while she was still trying to adjust to the sound of nature.

Working next to him, Debra huffed. She was trying to listen to the evening sounds of the jungle around them, enjoying her new hearing. Theo's constant grumbling was ruining her mood.

The other workers cleaning trash on the runway gave Theo dirty looks. They were also tired of hearing him.

The runway around them was completely deserted. The tent had been dismantled; all of the pieces were stacked together to be removed tomorrow when they could see to transport it. They just needed to finish gathering the trash and then they would be done.

Withdrawals were already attacking Theo, making it impossible for him to control his mind or his mouth. Theo stabbed a plastic cup. "I'm an engineer! I shouldn't be on a garbage crew!"

"Just shut up!"

Everyone looked over at Debra's shout.

Theo was used to her occasionally forcing words out. It didn't register to him that they were facing opposite directions and she couldn't see his lips moving. "All I did was break a few bottles. I don't deserve this!"

"I'm sick of listening to you! Shut up!"

Theo turned around to yell back. Then her words registered. "You heard me."

Debra grinned. "Jennifer healed me!"

"You can hear!" He hugged her.

Debra hugged Theo back. "I'm normal now!" She was still yelling everything, trying to adjust to the new volume level.

Theo hugged her again. Then he realized she'd been able to hear him for hours. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't ready."

"You should have told me!" Theo was embarrassed by all of the grumbling he'd done when he thought she couldn't hear anything. "That was a dirty trick!"

Debra's frustration reached a peak. "Asshole! Don't really care about me! Shut up!"

The other workers moved away from the couple as they shouted at each other.

The guard on the area rolled his eyes. Zack was also fed up with Theo's attitude. *I hope Debra wins this argument so we don't have to hear any more of it.*

Zack scanned the jungle around the runway. It was completely dark; fog was rolling in. It was an eerie feeling up here. He hoped the fog brought a little moisture with it, but it reminded him strongly of being on the submarine. He forced himself to look toward the ocean just to make sure nothing was happening there.

The view was dark but clear. *I guess the fog is coming from the other side of the island.*

Zack turned toward the arguing couple in resignation. He planned to talk to Marc about it later. Kenn wasn't the only one who needed an intervention. *If something doesn't change soon with Theo, the boss is going to fry him and that won't be good for any of us.*

Zack cleared the tickle in his throat and then resumed stewing on Eric. Jennifer's threat had been a wakeup call, but Zack didn't know what to do to fix his son's new obsession with power. *If I'm not careful, we're all going to go down in one big blaze of glory.*

#### 4

"I'm going to town to help them." Piper headed toward the front door of the clinic. "I'll let you know if we need any more hands."

Piper was feeling a lot better now. Terry had examined her and taken a blood sample. Those results wouldn't be done for a while and she was tired of waiting. If they needed help in camp, she wanted to be there. Adrian's latest challenge to the boss would require a lot of hard work on Piper's part to not be blamed for it, but also to help get Adrian off the hook.

Tonya and the others let her go. Despite the slightly panicked calls over the radio, none of them were worried about it. Marc was in charge. He could handle it.

Terry handed Goldie's infant to Daisey. "He's in perfect health."

Daisey swaddled the growing baby in the blanket and then tucked him into the stroller while Terry worked on the other twin. Daisey was glad to be helping them, and she always enjoyed spending time with the babies, but she had another reason for coming. She looked at Tonya. "As the leader of the run, you could refuse to take us."

People in the clinic understood why she was here instead of being at the jail with her husband.

Tonya looked up from the medical journal she was studying. "No, I can't."

"But you're the leader of the team!" Daisey tried not to cry. Tonya was her last hope.

"Even if I could refuse the order from the boss, and I can't, it wouldn't help you. If Ralph stays here, the residents on this island will take justice into their own hands."

“But we’re going to die out there!”

Daisey’s shout startled the babies and made the adults wince.

Terry continued his examination of the other twin while speaking to Daisey. “No one wants *you* to leave. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Daisey had heard that several times since the verdict came in, but it didn’t matter. “I’m not abandoning my husband.”

Terry shrugged. “It’s too bad that Ralph didn’t have the same loyalty to you when he made the bad choices.”

“He has the rage illness! He didn’t know what he was doing.”

Tonya felt bad that she hadn’t found a solution for that, but she couldn’t let Daisey’s comment pass. “A lot of people on this island have the rage illness and they’re still following the rules. Ralph was banished. That is *not* going to change.”

“Excuse me.” Daisey went to the empty part of the lobby, trying not to cry.

Radios lit up again.

“We need more water!”

“All hands to town!”

Tonya frowned. “Let’s finish the examinations and paperwork and then we’ll go to town and help. They’ll probably have the fire out long before we get there.” Tonya had faith in Marc to be able to handle the emergency situations that arose. Plus, Angela was in town. Between the two of them, it was covered.

She looked over at the corner, where Kenn was standing in the shadows, observing her and everyone else. Neither of them were hooked into the hive right now. Their thoughts about leaving and not coming back were too inflammatory for everyone else to hear. Until they'd had time to make a decision, they weren't connecting to the hive or anyone else.

They'd learned how to do it from Jeff. That man had blocked out all calls from Angela and the other descendants for months while he ran from the pain of Crista's death. He wasn't connected to the hive now, either, though Tonya assumed he was too far away to be heard anyway.

Kenn wasn't in full survival mode yet, but he was quickly getting there. Wishing that Marc hadn't made it through the tunnel collapse had been a huge mistake. There was no way he could take it back. All he could do was move forward and hope Angela wasn't going to pay him back for it.

Greg's revelation that Angela had tried to kill him by sending him on the lab run had struck a dark note with Kenn. Everyone had hurried to assure Greg that it wasn't the case. They'd reminded Greg that he hadn't even been on the list to go, that he'd angered her and forced her into that choice. Kenn didn't believe it. He thought Greg was right. *And if she tried to kill him, then she definitely tried to get rid of me.*

Tonya wasn't sure about it, though she was starting to lean in that direction. Angela's

intelligence was hard to estimate at any given moment. She often foresaw things and planned things out months in advance. It was completely possible that Greg was right.

Tonya wanted to have faith in Angela's words. More than once, she'd told Kenn that if she wanted him dead, it would have already happened. Tonya also knew Angela enjoyed studying them in an attempt to reproduce Kenn's reformation in other members of their camp and for their future populations.

*But I can't get Greg's words out of my mind.* She was having a hard time concentrating on the medical journal even though she didn't believe the answer to the rage vaccine was in the books anymore. *Why did she put me and Rico together if she really wanted me to stay with Kenn?*

Over the weeks since Rico's death, Tonya had asked herself that many times. The answer that kept popping up matched Greg's fears completely. *She put Rico with me because she didn't expect Kenn to make it back.*

Over in the corner, Kenn nodded. That was also the answer he had come up with. It had taken a few weeks for it to sink in, but now that it had, it was making it impossible to control his mood. *I'm scared of her.*

Tonya frowned at him. *You should be.* Despite his past, he'd never been violent with her. She was completely positive that Kenn had changed. *I guess*



*I always assumed as long as I felt that way, Angela would leave him alone.*

“You guys can use magic to force her to tell you the truth.”

Kenn and Tonya both looked over to find Stanley observing them intently. He was the only one paying attention.

For the first time, Isabel missed the lab. She had hated living there, but Reicher had been very strict about keeping up on the health of his staff. A simple injury like a sprained ankle would have been healed immediately. Dwelling on the pain, Isabel looked around in confusion at Stanley’s comment.

Stanley didn’t apologize for reading their thoughts. He was under orders from the boss to observe everyone and he was doing it. “She may not like it, but she wouldn’t be able to refuse. Then you’d know for sure.”

Tonya frowned at Stanley. “Boss’s pet!”

Stanley grinned at her. “Yes, you are. How does it feel?”

Distracted, Tonya smiled. “It’s wonderful.”

“I agree.” Stanley regarded Kenn, grin fading. “Deep down, you know you deserve to be punished and that’s why you can’t let it go. The boss said to tell you you’re only going to get one more reassurance and then all bets are off the table.”

Kenn and Tonya both stiffened, waiting for the ugliness from Angela to come out of Stanley’s clumsy mouth.

“Hard sacrifices had to be made to ensure that no one else suffers what you went through in that lab, *Kenny*. You were punished for the past, though it served a good purpose. You saved thousands of lives and that’s not just the ones from the battles we’ve had. I care about the future more than I care about the hatred in my heart. As long as you continue to prove that it’s possible to change, you will always be safe in my camp. Now shut up and pay attention. She’s trying to work!”

Tonya snickered, relieved. “She’s good.”

Kenn nodded, fear easing a bit as he chuckled.

Trent laughed with everyone else as he waited for the medical checkups to be done. He’d also been told to listen to everyone.

Trent eyed Isabel and then went to the hallway for a scan. Angela told all of the new people to listen to everyone so they could adjust faster. It was jarring to suddenly hear thoughts and even harder when you heard something mean, sexual, or downright nasty. The more he’d listened, the easier it had become to tune out as soon as someone’s thoughts went to those sensitive areas. Trent often forced himself to listen to them anyway so he would become desensitized to the surprises.

“That’s not the only reason.” Kenn decided it didn’t hurt to tell the complete truth here, among his own kind and their supporters. Even the older woman waiting with the other den mothers was part of the hive. “You hear secrets and she knows you’ll report the ones that matter.”

“It’s 1984.” Isabel shrugged at the disapproving looks that drew. “Reicher was more obvious and stricter. I think Angela does a good job balancing it.”

The others realized Isabel had learned a lot in her short time here.

Isabel also decided to drop some truth. “She’s having trouble with the baby. Marc’s very worried.”

Tonya shut that down quickly. “The medics will handle it. Mind your own drama.”

Isabel sniggered at the scold, eyeing Stanley. “Okay, I will.”

“How was the first day on the diving team?” Terry had almost volunteered for that himself, but he was usually too busy to fit in anything else. They didn’t have injuries very often now, but they were trying to count all of their supplies in preparation for the upcoming run so Angela could compile a detailed list of the things she wanted Tonya to search for.

Trent took the baby from Terry, carefully wrapping the blanket around him. “Entertaining, actually. With all the drama going on, I didn’t have much time to think about the water.”

Trent didn’t mind admitting that. He did hope his students didn’t know he was afraid of it, though. Then he remembered that was why most of them had volunteered for the diving crew.

Trent tucked the baby into the stroller next to his brother.

Terry gestured. “It’s a little warm in here. You may want to uncover them.”

Trent realized the medic was right and took care of that. “It’s amazing that Jennifer was able to heal Debra’s ears. Maybe now she’ll be able to hear all the grumbling Theo’s been doing and figure out she has better choices in this camp.”

Tonya caught the note of seriousness in Trent’s voice and decided to add that to her nightly report. She agreed that Debra could do better than Theo. If Trent had an interest in the woman, Tonya planned to encourage it.

Terry nodded. He wasn’t jealous of Jennifer’s abilities. He was grateful. Her new gift was taking a lot of pressure off the medics, as well as a lot of the workload. “We’re completely protected now.”

A cold draft went through the clinic.

The lights above them flickered.

Kenn groaned. “Why would you say something like that?!”

Terry was confused. “What?”

The lights above them flickered again.

Isabel glanced up. “Didn’t they just do a check on all of the wiring?”

Kenn went toward the window. He should be able to view the wires from here. “Maybe they missed a connection.”

The lights flickered a third time. Another cool breeze went through the warm room.

Every descendant in the clinic stopped.

Isabel was immediately creeped out. None of them were moving. It didn't even look like they were breathing.

Tonya shivered. "It's here."

Isabel grabbed Stanley's hand. "What is it?"

Stanley shuddered. "The fire."

Kenn peered through the window next to the door, remembering not to open it from all of the public service announcements he'd grown up with. Fear immediately entered his mind. "It's all around the front of the cabin."

Isabel jumped up. "We have to get out of here!" Reicher had instilled a huge fear of fire in everyone, including his staff.

"Do not open the door!" Kenn stepped in front of it so she couldn't. "We'll go out the back."

Trent and the other den mothers gathered the babies in their arms for a quick flight.

Tonya was able to smell the faint hint of smoke now. She scanned the clinic in dismay. "All of the work we've done is here!"

Kenn was already motioning toward the rear hallway. "Stay in line and stay together."

Tonya began gathering folders off of the desk that had her research on the vaccine. "We have to save this stuff!"

Kenn knew it was valuable, but lives were more important. "We have to get these people to town where they'll be safe."

Tonya thought fast. “There’s a hatch right near the back door. We can put everything in the tunnel and then use the tunnel to get to town.”

That immediately sounded better to Kenn than walking through the burning jungle in the dark.

Isabel didn’t want to stay. “Trent will take the rest of us to town. Stanley will help him.”

Tonya pointed at the woman. “Angela would want this stuff protected! The equipment and information can’t be replaced!”

Terrified but unwilling to risk her place in camp, Isabel reluctantly came over to the desk and started grabbing folders.

Daisey joined her, hoping saving some of these items would give her a small advantage when she begged Angela again to let her husband stay. “How close is it?”

Kenn scanned again. “We probably have about 10 minutes and then it’ll reach the porch.”

Tonya gestured. “We have a water barrel out back.”

Kenn swept the other direction and saw orange flickers. “One water barrel isn’t going to be enough.”

Terry scowled. “Why didn’t Marc warn us?”

Kenn shrugged, mind racing. “He’s busy with the town. He probably doesn’t even know the fire spread here.”

“Then why didn’t Angela warn us?”

Isabel frowned. “I tried to tell you she’s having trouble with the baby.”

Terry grabbed a stack of folders. “What does the baby have to do with her gifts?”

“I think she had Cody lock her to keep the baby from getting control.”

There was no time to consider Isabel’s revelation as smoke began to creep in under the front door.

Trent peered into the dark rear hallway. “We’ll need light to see by down in the tunnel. None of the wiring was replaced after the flood.”

Kenn took his kit off and motioned for Trent to do the same. “We’ll improvise torches while everyone else gathers the files and stuff. Only take what can’t be replaced!”

Terry had been listening to the panic that was starting to come across the hive. He drew in a deep breath, blinking as he came back to himself. “We have to hurry.”

Everyone in the clinic began grabbing folders, files, and books.

Tonya kept her mind blank and pretended she hadn’t known this was coming. Fear was beating in her brain even though she knew the outcome. *I don’t want to play this game anymore.*

Chapter Twenty-Five  
**You're Welcome**

1

**“W**e have a fire at the clinic!” The radio faded out and then came back with Kenn’s tense voice. “...evacuating into the tunnels.”

Marc didn’t have time to answer the call, though it added to his stress level. He hefted the last water barrel from the restaurant and strained, barely getting it outside without spilling any of it.

The flickering firelight was closer as he made it outside. The jungle path that came from the cabin was lit up as if there were street lights.

Neil and Stuart took the water barrel and struggled toward the bunkhouse with it. They were wetting the sides while Samantha and Morgan worked together to freeze the trees and walls next to the path. A group of Eagles were chopping down trees that were too close; another team was clearing vines along the sides. They were all sweaty and coughing as the smoke rolled into town ahead of the fire.

Both men knew what was coming next. Stuart was eager for the call to leave.

Neil wasn’t. All the work they’d done was about to be erased.



Marc scanned the smoky town. *Me and my big mouth. This is not what I wanted!*

People were working and packing valuable gear. They were coughing and cursing. The church group was once again praying. Animals were letting out cries of fear. What he didn't see was Angela. She should have already been out here supervising and directing. *She's really leaving this one to me.*

Stuart hurried back over to Marc. "What's next?"

Marc scanned the flickering jungle again. "I want Kyle."

People working nearby frowned. Kyle was a rookie descendant now, with very little power.

Stuart ran to the bunkhouse. Kyle was trying to organize things inside while staying close to his kids.

Near the barn, Madison attached a long rope to the bridle she'd just gotten around the horse's neck. She tied it to the barn door and then grabbed more rope from her kit to do the same for the goats.

"Throw together!" Morgan directed the descendants who had energy to spare. He counted down and then threw ice at the wall of fire coming across the main path. They were trying to stop it from reaching the buildings. "Now!"

Samantha threw cold wind, merging it with Morgan's ice while Conner did the same with his fog and Molly hit it with her freeze spell. All of it landed together and quickly smothered the flames on the ground.

“It worked!” Morgan was encouraged. They would all be exhausted by the time it was over, but they could fight it together.

The fire roared right back, covering the frozen area and quickly melting it. Even though it was wet, the fire in the trees around it spread over top of the damp spot and quickly began to dry it out.

The wind blew harder through town and swirled around Marc, dropping hot, tiny sparks. He gestured angrily, stomping toward the working crew. “Leave it! Gather around!”

People surrounded Marc, glad for the break.

“It’s almost here.” Marc rubbed his stinging arm. “Give me ideas.”

Neil had been working on that, but he hadn’t come up with anything. “We can’t stop it. We don’t have enough water.”

Morgan wasn’t ready to give up yet. “What if we take turns holding shields over the buildings and let it burn out?”

Marc shook his head. “If it takes too long to burn out, we won’t have enough air. I’d rather not take that chance.”

“We could do a controlled burn to keep it from spreading any farther.” Samantha had read about wildfires being stopped that way.

So had Marc. “Does anyone here know how to do that?”

No one spoke. Samantha hadn’t seen it done; she had no idea how it worked.

Neither had Marc. “Any other ideas?”

Stuart eyed the shovels by the barn that they'd been using for planting. "Maybe we could dig gaps that it can't jump?"

"With that wind, the ground doesn't matter." Marc drew in a smoky breath. "We're evacuating."

"Is that a good idea with so many pregnant women?" Daryl didn't want Brittani trying to walk through a flaming jungle. Jennifer was on the ship, too far away to help if Brittani went into labor again.

Marc gestured at the roped-off hatch area. "We'll stay under it. Some of those tunnels were still muddy. The fire won't make it down there."

Kyle joined Marc, waiting for him to finish. Like Stuart and Neil, Kyle had expected this call.

"I'd like to talk to Angela about this choice." Before Daryl could turn around, the roaring fire appeared through another part of the jungle, on the opposite side of town. It licked up the nearest trees and sent fresh smoke into the air.

Marc keyed his radio. "The fire has made it to town. I'm calling a full evacuation of all areas. Use the tunnels and head for the beach. We'll all meet up on the way."

The radio crackled loudly as he let go of the button. He didn't hear any answers.

Marc motioned. "Get them all ready and accounted for while I cover things out here."

Most of the Eagles ran to the bunkhouse or restaurant to spread the order.

Marc regarded Kyle in concern. “We have people scattered all over this island. I need them brought to the ship.”

Kyle frowned. “Use the radio.”

Marc kept his voice down. “Radios don’t work well in fires. The high temperatures cause problems.”

“It’s not bad right now.”

“Why are you arguing about this?”

Kyle grunted. “I don’t know.”

“I do. You don’t want anyone to know you’re a tracker.”

Kyle froze.

“I don’t have time for it. Find all of our people. This is a list of those we haven’t had contact with in the last hour.” Marc gave Kyle the sheet he’d worked on between trying to prepare the town.

Passing by them on the way to the bunkhouse, Somchai eyed Kyle knowingly. He didn’t look at Marc at all.

Dog growled at Somchai, taking a step toward him.

Somchai broke into a jog.

Kyle glared at the man. “He just figured out your secret.”

Marc didn’t have time to worry about that right now either. “The runway crew hasn’t answered their radio at all. Gus isn’t answering at the jail.”

“I’ll find them and get them to the ship.” Kyle glared at Somchai again. “You watch your six. The

boss didn't want anyone to know you can identify gifts."

"Look!" Samantha leaned against the barn wall tiredly. "None of it mattered."

Hot sparks were blowing on the wind, landing all over the ground, the people, and the buildings. As they watched, the top of the barn began to smoke.

"Full evacuation! Get everyone into the tunnels!" Daryl ran for the bunkhouse, mentally joining the church group in prayer that Brittani could handle a bug out.

"Take her chair and a stretcher!" They could carry Brittani if they needed to. Marc scanned the town again, running through the plan he'd made while determining where everyone was. He'd hoped they wouldn't need it. Marc motioned to Stuart. "Keep them together down there."

Stuart hurried over to get the hatch open. He waved at some of the brawlers. "Come with me. We have to get some lights made." They didn't have the firefly jars made yet. The kids usually did that right before bedtime, and their flashlights were all low or dead.

Adrian came from the restaurant and joined Marc. "Here's the other part of your list."

Adrian handed the paper to Marc while sweeping the town nervously. He wasn't scared of fire, but he definitely didn't like it.

Marc read the scrawled note. Thelma and the rest of the cooks were securing the food into the

freezers. They were also packing some of the equipment that couldn't be replaced. Marc had sent Adrian in there to hurry things along in case they needed to evacuate. Even though he had hoped they wouldn't, he had started preparing for it as soon as they'd reached the town.

“Where do you want me next?”

Marc pointed at the noisy bunkhouse. “Kenn usually handles our evacuations, but he's at the clinic. I need you to cover it.”

Adrian went that way while getting his notebook out. Marc had given him a complete list of everyone in camp. He would compare it and hopefully be able to keep track of everyone.

Marc watched the fire come closer. Melting plastic was dripping all over the ground from the wires that Kenn had put into the trees for the cameras.

Marc had seen enough. “We're bugging out, people! Let's go!”

## 2

Smoke rolled across the town in a thicker wave as more flames reached the trees around the buildings.

Adrian stood at the doorway to the bunkhouse, checking off names as residents hurried out and went toward the hatch. Coughs rang out continuously from the smoky air.

Jack hurried down the ladder with Dace on his back. Lisa came out right behind them, carrying the wheelchair.

Adrian waited until they were below ground to mark their names off. He hoped Stuart was able to keep track of people once they were down there. They didn't need anyone wandering off in the darkness.

Adrian peered into the chaotic bunkhouse, searching for Angela. He had expected her to be out here helping Marc keep everything together.

Daryl came out of the bunkhouse carrying a folded stretcher under one arm and Brittani's wheelchair in the other. He cleared the path while Parker and the church group surrounded Brittani as she slowly walked toward the door. They kept people from bumping into her. Daryl was grateful for the church group. They were always there when Brittani needed them.

Adrian motioned to Conner and Charlie. "Stay close to Brittani and help her if she needs it." He'd already considered knocking her out with a strong blast of his sleep spell, but it wasn't wise to use it before it was needed. It would be a long trip to the beach.

"Use the ramp!" Adrian pointed. "Don't make her go down the ladder."

The heavy alligators had come up the ramp without it collapsing, so it would also hold Brittani's weight and keep her from having to bend so much on the ladder.

Sadie came out of the bunkhouse ahead of the church group and quickly marched toward the hatch. Her fists were clenched as the rage illness fed on her stirred up emotions. She had figured out that stressful moments made everything worse and this was definitely stressful. There was fire on two sides of the town now and the smoke was getting so thick it was making it hard to see.

Piper hurried over from the restaurant where she'd been helping the cooks pack. She ignored Marc and went straight to Adrian. "Where do you want me?"

Adrian did look at Marc.

Marc pointed at the crowded hatch. Piper was a dependable Eagle to have in a moment like this. "In charge down there."

Piper was thrilled with that order. She always liked it when they gave her authority. She ran over to the hatch, pushing through people in an effort to get down there before everyone else. "Make a hole!"

Sadie growled as she was bumped from behind. She rotated and saw Piper. Her eyes turned bright pink.

"What's wrong with her?!"

Piper didn't have time to answer as Sadie lunged forward.

Sadie reached for Piper's throat, groaning in pain as her fingernails shot out and her muscles swelled against her skin.

Piper easily sidestepped the awkward attack.



“Look at her hair!”

Sadie’s hair grew at an extraordinary rate, pushing down her back and over her arms in seconds.

Sadie shuddered, eyes closing. She had no energy left to use.

“She just reached the next level.” Piper put Sadie over her shoulder and went to the ramp. There was no love lost between them, but Piper wasn’t going to leave her behind.

She hurried down the ramp ahead of the church group and found a spot along the tunnel wall to put Sadie down.

“Thank you.” Sadie was completely without energy. She still felt furious, but she didn’t think she could even lift her arms.

Piper saw Sadie’s fingernails were still growing, though her hair was slowing and her muscles were relaxing; her eyes stayed bright pink. “You’ve reached stage two.”

Sadie clenched her fists again. “I’ll be fine. Help the others.”

Piper went to do that, but she also felt on her pocket to make sure the spool of twine was still there. She’d been using it to tie boxes shut in the restaurant. Sadie might need to be restrained at some point during this trip. *And when we get to the ship, we’re going to give her a dose of the rage vaccine before she’s too far along with the illness for it to matter.*

Above ground, the church group began walking Brittani down the ramp as another cluster of residents came out of the bunkhouse.

Adrian struggled to get all of their names marked off, but he didn't slow them. Hundreds of people needed to be moved into the tunnels and the fire wasn't slowing down at all. They needed to hurry.

Marc had the same thought. He jogged into the barn to make sure there was no one in there.

Dog stayed on Marc's heels, protecting him because it was all he could do. Fire also terrified the wolf, but he was determined that he wasn't going to lose his loved ones to it. *You may have taken my first family, but you're not going to take this one!*

The barn was empty of people, but it was full of crates of supplies and food. Marc briefly considered trying to evacuate those as well, but the smoke in here from the fire on the roof said there wasn't time. He came out and headed toward the restrooms to make sure those were empty.

At the front of the barn, Madison put ropes onto the nervous goats who kept trying to avoid her efforts. All of the animals were snorting, pawing at the ground, and tossing their heads restlessly. They didn't like the smoke any more than the humans did.

The sound of babies crying filled the air as the den mothers began bringing the kids out of the bunkhouse. Amy hurried to Marc as he came out of the bathrooms.

"I want to help!"

Marc started to deny her and then realized he did have a job she could do. “You have to keep the kids together for me. Keep them safe.” Trent and Daisey were both at the clinic. The den mothers here needed all the help they could get.

Amy ran over and began lifting layered shields over the group to protect them from the panic that was starting to set in.

Another group came out of the bunkhouse and spotted the fire. They pushed and shoved, running toward the hatch that now had 50 residents gathered around it while they waited for Brittani to make it down the ramp.

“Link arms!” Parker directed the church group into a complete circle around the hatch to keep those people from shoving anyone into the hole or bumping into Brittani.

Shouts for her to hurry rang out.

Brittani struggled down the ramp while holding onto Conner’s arm. She tried to hurry, but it was difficult with so much weight in front of her.

“There’s a fire down here!”

“It’s not a fire. They have torches for light!” Charlie was getting fed up with everyone’s panic. He held his son close and stayed ready to bring up a shield to protect them both. “Calm down! My mom will get us out of this like she always does!”

“Where is Angela?!”

“She should be out here!”

People began to peer around, searching for the boss. None of them looked toward Marc. They

didn't have faith in him to handle a situation like this.

Neil directed Samantha toward the group of kids, grateful when Amy expanded her shields to include Sam.

Samantha didn't argue. She went over and took her twins from one of the den mothers and then stood next to Amy as they waited to get down into the tunnel. She tried to smile at the little girl, but it was hard when she didn't feel that way.

Amy patted Samantha's elbow. "We'll be okay. The alpha will protect us."

Samantha began to search for Angela the same as many of the others were now doing. It was odd not to hear her firm, calm voice directing things.

Brittani made it to the bottom of the tunnel and went over next to Sadie so she would be out of the way.

Conner kept his shield up around Brittani as the church group moved and residents began flooding into the tunnel.

Stuart stood a few hundred feet away from the hatch with a torch, blocking that exit to stop anyone from wandering off.

Ed did the same at the other end, but both of them were aware that if the crowd panicked, they wouldn't be able to stop them. *Still, at least people will be down here away from the fire.*

Piper stood at the bottom of the ramp and directed residents to line the walls and make room

for everyone else who was still topside. “Line up and get ready for a relaxing walk to the beach.”

People snorted, but the tension went down a little. Everyone depended on the Eagles in moments like this.

Piper knew. She ignored the roiling stomach that said they were in trouble once again, but their alpha was nowhere in sight.

### 3

Greg came out of the bunkhouse, pushing Zack’s sons ahead of him. They were upset to be leaving so much of their gear in the lockers, but there hadn’t been time for anyone to pack an evacuation bag this time.

Adrian saw Greg. “How many more are in there?”

“At least 80!” Greg got the boys into the line. He was glad Leann was with Mike. “Stay close to her.”

Mike smiled. “Oh, I intend to.”

“Good boy. Help them out wherever you can, but you guys stay together.” Greg knew Zack was terrified of losing his sons.

Adrian and Marc were both happy when Greg came back over and waited for orders.

Marc pointed toward the hatch that now had 100 people around it, pushing and shouting. “Get that under control and get them under the ground.”

Greg ran over, pushing his way right into the middle of the panicking mob. “Eagle check in! Everyone else, shut up!”

Quiet slowly began spreading through the crowd as Greg took charge. “Special Forces teams, secure all buildings and make sure there’s no one left inside!” Greg keyed his radio while he was speaking, but he doubted it was going to work in these temperatures. He was pouring sweat. “All rookies have escort duty. I don’t care where you are! Clear your area and get everyone into a tunnel!”

More of the panic started to fade. As people stilled, it made it easier for Adrian to scan the crowd and check off names he had missed as they rushed out of the bunkhouse.

Marc scanned the town again, seeing flames on top of the barn now. More fire was coming through the tree line behind the restaurant. The other sides were clear at the moment, but Marc knew that wouldn’t last long. He jogged toward the restaurant to clear it.

Eagles around him did the same for the sheds and the small house next to the restaurant that was only used for storage.

Adrian stepped inside the bunkhouse, groaning as he saw how many people were still in here. Camp members were casually strolling among the empty cots, gathering supplies that were theirs and supplies that were not. Many of them were chatting as if nothing was wrong.

“You guys have to get out of here!”

Many of those people quickly returned to their own lockers or cots to grab their bags.

Adrian pushed residents toward the door, mentally marking off their names. He would update his list as soon as he spotted his target.

Selina and Molly met his eyes in horror. They were standing outside the bathroom door. Molly had her shield up, but it was weak from all the energy she'd already used while trying to fight the fire at the cabin.

Next to them, Thomas was waiting with his hand on his holster.

Adrian couldn't leave his post by the door, but he knew what was happening by the way the three people were refusing to let anyone else into the bathroom. "Get out of here!"

More people left their gear and went out of the bunkhouse at Adrian's shouted order.

Adrian was forced to return to marking names off the list. There were too many of them for him to memorize.

Standing in front of the bathroom door with her arms over her chest, Molly added her support, scowling at the few residents who were still left in the bunkhouse. "The entire camp is in the tunnel now. You're going to be left behind! Have fun walking through there in the dark, alone."

Everyone else in the bunkhouse fled.

It took Adrian a couple of minutes of marking names off and even stepping out behind that group to make sure he accounted for everyone.

Greg was now standing a few feet from the hatch with his book in his hand, also marking off names. He rotated every few seconds, making sure no one had wandered off as well as keeping track of how close the fire was. Thick smoke rolled across the town, obscuring entire buildings. He nodded at Adrian and kept working.

Adrian stored his book as he hurried toward the rear of the bunkhouse.

A low moan echoed.

Adrian sent a mental call to Marc as he stepped into the bathroom.

Angela stared at him in the mirror as she leaned against the sink and tried to let the contraction pass. She'd gotten changed after her water broke and even cleaned up part of that mess, but then another pain had hit and she'd stayed right here, not wanting to distract anyone.

Adrian saw her white knuckle grip on the counter and the rock-hard stomach leaning against it. "You have some great timing."

Angela laughed through the pain. "It is one of the things I'm known for."

Adrian went over and gently put an arm around her. He didn't rush her out yet. He wanted to wait for Marc so one of them could hold a shield up and keep her from being bumped. He also wanted to let the crowd thin around that hatch.



Angela breathed in deeply as the contraction faded. Her heart rate slowed to normal, but her stomach didn't relax from the hard ball it had been in upon waking. "My daughter already knows how to make an entrance."

Adrian knew they could trust those guarding the door. "What do we need to know about her?"

Angela was relieved that she didn't have to hold anything back now. "She hates people. All of them. She needs bonds right away or to be isolated."

Adrian didn't ask more questions. He helped her to the door, aware of Daniella coming from a stall with her gun in her hand. He approved of her being a secret rescue plan if Angela needed it. "Who thought of that?"

Daniella put the gun away, but she walked with her hand on her unfastened holster. "Tonya."

Adrian brought Angela out of the bathroom slowly as boots hurried toward them. "How far apart?"

He was certain she'd already had a few contractions for it to be so painful already. Labor was usually a slowly progressing process.

"Half an hour. Next one should be 15-20 minutes."

Adrian did the math. "You're not going to make it to the ship."

Angela smiled at Marc as he reached them. "Make me proud."

Marc stiffened, expression darkening. "You did this on purpose because of my thoughts!"

Angela chuckled. “Are you still bored and longing for some action?”

Marc opened his mouth to yell at her in front of everyone. “Yes.”

Angela made it to the door and prepared to step outside. “You’re welcome.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

# Missing

### 1

“**H**old your hands through the bars.”

Ralph did it quickly. He always followed orders from the jailers.

Gus quickly snapped the cuffs around Ralph’s wrists and then reached into his pocket for the second pair.

Tim retreated away from the cell door. “You’re not leaving me handcuffed in here! I’m already in a cell!”

Gus gave the man a dirty look. “I’m not leaving you. We’re evacuating.”

Tim slowly came toward the door, not sure if it was a trick.

Gus gestured toward the window. “You can see the flames out there. It’s getting smoky in here. I can’t get through to anyone on the radio. It’s not a trick. We’re evacuating into the tunnels.”

Gus didn’t want to have to physically carry Tim. He hadn’t even known there was a problem until a quick trip to the outhouse had revealed smoke so thick that it could only be from a wildfire.

Tim put his hands through the cell door.

Gus quickly snapped the cuffs on. He met Tim's eyes. "If you become a problem, I will handle you. Do what I say or you won't have to wait four more days."

Tim quickly nodded, intimidated and relieved. He had been certain that Gus would leave him and Ralph in here and only protect himself.

*Bang!*

All three men flinched as something exploded outside the jail. Wooden shrapnel carrying small flames smacked into the wooden structure.

"That was the guard post." It was the only building Gus could think of that was close enough to reach them.

"Go straight to the desk and wait for me there." Gus unlocked Tim's cell and let him out. Then he went to do the same for Ralph, trusting Tim not to attack while his back was turned.

Tim didn't even consider that. He was against violence even if it meant it would save his life. *But if I get a chance to run, I'm taking it.*

Gus quickly pulled rope out of his pocket and spun around, reaching for Tim's arm.

Tim didn't resist as Gus tied their wrists together by a rope that was only about 3 feet long. *So much for running.*

Gus did the same with Ralph, tying them both to the same wrist so he had one free hand. He gave both of them a canteen of water from the desk that he'd filled a few minutes ago from the small barrel

in the corner. “Put it around your neck like a purse and then soak these bandanas.”

Gus demonstrated for Ralph with his own, aware of time running out. The sound of the fire was growing louder.

“Tie the wet bandana over your face.” Gus was certain they were going to have a hard time breathing while he tried to lead them to the nearest hatch. Unfortunately, there wasn’t one close. *But I’ll still do my duty and save them both.*

It didn’t matter to Gus that Tim was supposed to be executed soon. While the prisoners were in his charge, he was going to make sure they stayed alive and in custody, but he couldn’t do that from here. All Gus had was the kit on his back and the survival skills he’d learned since the war. The jailhouse wasn’t outfitted for anything like this.

Gus hit his radio again while the men wetted their bandanas and put them on. “Come in, camp! Can anyone hear me?” He sent the same call to the hive and got no response.

Gus wasn’t certain that the radio call had gone through, let alone been heard. He turned the volume all the way up so they would hear it if someone answered. Then he led his prisoners to the front door. “Everyone ready?”

Tim nodded, still hoping he got a chance to make a run for it.

Ralph didn’t answer at all. He was worried about being able to keep up with the two younger men.

Gus opened the door and led them out.

Heat rushed over all three men, immediately bringing a sheen of sweat to their arms. Tank tops weren't good gear in a fire.

Ralph stopped. It was so smoky that his lungs began to tickle and clench. The low roar of the fire was louder out here. The dark sky was completely obscured by the smoke. He couldn't even view the stars. It was hard to see around the jailhouse at all. He couldn't even pick out a path. "I can't do this."

Gus put a firm hand around Ralph's arm and began to move them forward. "Tim and I will get you through this. You'll be okay." He shot a pointed look at Tim. "Right?"

Tim immediately fell into the calming preacher demeanor that he had become so comfortable with. "Of course. She didn't give you a death sentence. The boss won't let you die."

Tim eyed the dark jungle in longing. As soon as he got free, he planned to run straight to the beach and take one of the life rafts off of the smallest pirate ship. Other than the cruise ship, it was the only one that still had a lifeboat that could be lowered by one person.

Ralph allowed Gus to take him toward the part of the jungle that wasn't in flames yet.

Tim glared at the back of Gus's head and tried to think of something he could use to cut through the rope.

“I hear something.”

People around Debra smiled at her.

“It really is amazing that Jennifer was able to heal you.” Theo had spent the last hour arguing with Debra, but he really did mean that. He was thrilled for her.

The other workers were tired and creeped out by the way the fog was surrounding the runway. They were grateful the couple had finally stopped bickering. It had been very distracting and annoying. Several of them now had a headache from it.

Debra pointed. “I hear something there.”

Everyone turned around to determine what it was, peering through the fog that had almost reached the runway.

“I smell smoke.” Zack stared at the fog... “What is that?”

“Look!” Nero was frozen in place as fear rushed into his brain.

Orange glows lit up the jungle behind the white clouds, bringing a rush of adrenaline and a wave of terror.

Gio immediately ran. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He was suddenly sure Reicher had sent the fire to punish him for leaving the lab without permission.

Nero shivered. Fire reminded him of being in the lab, too, but his terror kept him from running off.

“We can’t go that way! That’s where the smoke is coming from!” Zack cursed himself for not doing

his duty as the guard up here. If anything happened to them, it was his fault. “Gio, stop!”

Gio didn’t hear their calls. He ran into the smoke and vanished.

Zack turned on his radio.

“... evacuation...tunnels.”

Nothing came through clear on the radio.

A few seconds later, Jennifer’s frightened voice broke into all of their minds through the hive.

*We are under full evacuation, Safe Haven! Get in the tunnels and come to the beach. Do not travel through the jungle!*

Jennifer was on the ship. She hadn’t known there was a problem until now.

Theo and the other workers dropped their bags and pointed sticks, and ran toward the path that wasn’t on fire yet.

Kendle’s relatives followed the others without speaking. They rarely ever talked. They didn’t have friends in this camp, though they weren’t having problems with anyone. They just didn’t fit in.

Zack tried to remember where the nearest hatch was. The tunnel entrances near the runway weren’t used very often. The jungle had already covered them up.

Theo pointed at the other path leading up from town. “It’s coming through there, too!”

Zack swore under his breath. “We’re trapped!”

He was horrified that he hadn’t noticed the problem sooner. Now that he was aware of it, smoke was all he could smell in every breath that he took.



Theo's concern for Debra rose up in his throat. *I have to get her out of here!* "There's a creek this way. We'll hunt for a tunnel as we go."

Relieved, everyone followed him toward the path that went to the old shack at the rear of the island. As they traveled, shining their weak flashlights on the ground, all of them hoped they didn't run into any of the alligators that had been freed from the tunnels today.

"The call said to go to the beach." Debra didn't like it that they were going in the opposite direction.

Theo and Zack exchanged looks.

Zack admitted the truth. "I don't know where any of the hatches are. We have to use the creek."

Everyone began scanning the ground for one of the hatches they'd gone by every day and never given a second thought to.

It was odd for Debra to hear the sound of the fire burning through the jungle. She could almost swear the trees were screaming.

Theo saw Debra's fear and gently tugged her under his arm as they walked. He didn't mind fire as much. Water was his nightmare.

Debra held him close and tried not to smile because it was inappropriate. *I've missed this. I've missed him.*

She tightened her grip and wondered how he would take it when he found out she was carrying Ian's baby.

“You have to get her out of there!”

Kenn grunted as he came down the ladder with another box of medical supplies.

Trent shut the hatch to keep the smoke from filling the tunnel. “It’s not safe up there!”

The tunnel below the clinic was full of bags and boxes now. Trent was sure they had most of the valuable items out of the clinic, but even if they didn’t, it was too dangerous for Tonya to stay up there any longer.

The guard station next to the clinic was burning hotly, sending thick waves of smoke over the windows and doors. The radio was blaring with staticky, jumbled voices just like the hive was, but none of it was coming through clearly.

Kenn did a quick scan of the tunnel to check on the people down here. The kids were fine, as were Daisey and the older descendant woman whose name Kenn had never learned. They were caring for the babies while occasionally carrying something that was handed down the ladder. Tonya, Isabel, and Stanley were the last ones above ground.

Kenn hurried back up the ladder, taking a deep breath as he went.

He still coughed as he reached the top. The side of the clinic was on fire now. Thick flames were running up toward the roof.

Isabel and Stanley came by him, carrying garbage bags that were extremely heavy.

“She won’t leave without all the books.” Stanley carefully lowered the garbage bag down the ladder so Trent could put it with the other items. Then he took the bag from Isabel. They both went back inside for another load, coughing and sweating.

Kenn hurried in through the rear door, groaning at the temperature difference. It was easily 20° hotter outside. “Come on! We have to go!”

Tonya stood from stuffing medical journals into the garbage bag she’d found in a cabinet. They’d already filled all of the boxes and backpacks that were here. “Help me get these below. It’s the last of them.”

Tonya coughed to clear her throat. There was a large amount of smoke in the clinic now. “Take those!” Tonya pointed out the two bags she had ready for them.

Isabel and Stanley both grabbed a bag and began dragging it across the floor toward the door.

“Don’t break the bags! I don’t have any more.”

They tried to be more careful, but they didn’t slow down. Both of them were tired and frightened.

“When you get those bags in the tunnel, stay down there!” Kenn decided that was enough even if Tonya put up a fight. “We’ll be there in just a minute.”

Tonya realized she would only have time to take one more load. “We have to get the rest of these books!”

Kenn grabbed the last two garbage bags and yanked them up.

The bottoms immediately fell out, scattering the heavy books across the sooty floor.

“No!” Tonya hurried over and began grabbing the journals.

Kenn eyed the flames now coming through the wall of the clinic. They only had a few minutes before this entire building would be overwhelmed. “We have to leave them!”

Tonya kept grabbing the books.

Kenn realized he needed to find a way to transport the journals to get her to leave. He looked around and saw the medical stretcher. He shoved it over to her and began scooping books on top of it.

“Great idea!” Tonya joined him, ignoring the sweat running down her face and the soaked hair sticking to her neck. The medical journals were irreplaceable. “I should have loaded these first!”

She’d thought the test results, patient journals, and files were more important until she’d found the journals stuffed in a locker.

Kenn called for help again even though he knew his radio was useless. He had tried to reconnect to the hive a short time ago, but he didn’t know if it had been successful. “We’re about to lose everything in the clinic! We need help here!”

There was no answer over the radio or through the hive. It was like they had been completely cut off from everyone else.

*Thump!*

Something slammed against the side of the cabin where the fire was spreading up the wall.

Kenn and Tonya both flinched. Books slid off the stretcher and hit the floor again.

“That was the shed.”

Mild thuds and thumps landed on the roof of the clinic and hit the side of it as debris from the explosion came down.

Kenn saw the heavy oxygen tanks that were a mere five feet away from the fire. “Oh, shit!”

Tonya scrambled to grab the books.

Kenn grabbed her arm. “We have to get out of here!”

Tonya jerked away from him. “Rico would have helped me!”

For one instant, mental pain was all that either of them could feel.

*Crash!*

The window in the front lobby of the clinic exploded, showering them and the room with blackened glass. The sound echoed through the jungle and down into the tunnel.

Kenn grabbed Tonya’s arm and jerked her away from the books. “You can’t keep doing this! I’m not going to let you die so you can be with him!”

Tears rolled down Tonya’s cheeks. “I miss him so much!”

Kenn pulled her against his big chest and brought up a shield as fresh flames came through the broken window.

The roof was covered in fire; it dropped bits of wooden debris through holes that opened up almost instantly. The clinic was as dry as the jungle. There was nothing to slow the burn.

Kenn brought up another shield as hot debris landed on the first one and began melting through it.

*Boom! Whoosh!*

Part of the roof collapsed near the door, blowing fiery shrapnel into the clinic.

Kenn's shield went down.

Tonya brought hers up, straining for energy. She was exhausted from not sleeping, from the matches, and from trying to evacuate everything out of the clinic.

Kenn saw the fire approaching the oxygen tanks. He grabbed Tonya and ran toward the back hall.

Hungry flames came through the walls, cutting off their escape. Kenn and Tonya both brought up layered shields as the hallway burst into flames all around them.

*We need help!*

The few people who were strong enough to still be listening through the hive concentrated on it, trying to see if Kenn and Tonya survived. They tried to answer Kenn's call, but it didn't get through his panic. There was no way they could reach the clinic to save the couple. Most of them assumed Angela was about to be free of her hated ex.

In the tunnel, Daisey grabbed Trent's arm. "They should be down here by now!"

Trent knew she was right. "If I'm not back in five minutes, get everyone to the beach."

Daisey nodded nervously. Her heart skipped a beat. A warm feeling spread through her chest and immediately raised her blood pressure.

Trent took his kit off and pulled out one of the larger blankets he had brought along to put over the strollers if the wind was too strong for the babies. Many of the infants didn't like the breezes on the island that always hit whenever they stepped out of the jungle.

Trent dumped his canteen over the blanket, soaking it. Then he wrapped it around himself like a cloak and hurried up the ladder.

Thick smoke rolled into the tunnel as he left.

Daisey was able to see the skyline of the jungle thanks to the fire. It illuminated burning trees in every direction.

Her mind went to Ralph. "Did anyone warn Gus at the jail?"

No one answered her. They didn't know.

Trent hurried into the flaming rear door of the clinic, running through the fire that was only briefly held at bay by his soaked blanket cover. "Kenn! Tonya!"

He couldn't hear an answer over the roar of the fire that was now in every room of the clinic. He pushed through the heat and smoke, chest hurting.

Kenn and Tonya were inside layered shields and stumbling blindly toward the door. They couldn't see where they were going for the smoke and the flames that melted through the layers as fast as they could bring them up.

Trent ran into them, stumbling. He recognized the shields in relief. "Drop it!"

Kenn and Tonya let go, coughing while tears ran over their faces from the harsh smoke.

Trent threw his wet blanket over the couple and pulled them toward the door. Flames immediately latched onto his hair and clothes and began burning him alive.

Trent shoved the disoriented couple through the fiery door, knocking them both to the dirt as more of the hallway ceiling collapsed, showering him in flames.

Tonya crawled toward the hatch.

Kenn turned around to help Trent.

Trent felt something ugly coming. He brought up his shield and lunged forward, shoving all three of them into the hole.

Still sitting along the collapsed wall, the oxygen tanks caught fire. Two seconds later, the clinic exploded, blasting the walls and roof into the trees and sky.

The trio fell to the bottom of the ladder with grunts and groans. Tiny flames came down with



them and sputtered out in the cool dankness of the tunnel.

Kenn checked on Tonya.

Tonya coughed out smoke, moaning, but she waved him off. She was okay.

Kenn rolled over to check on Trent.

Trent stayed on the ground as Kenn beat out the flames on his hair and clothes. *That's the last time I tell the boss I'm ready for action!*

Laughter filled the tunnel, drowning out the fire above them for one instant. Then it roared back. Flames began to burn through the hatch; thick smoke came down the ladder.

"It's time to leave." Isabel came over with Stanley to help the injured people to their feet. All of them had glass shards in their arms and faces, burnt hair, bruises, and blood trickling from their ears and noses.

Tonya scanned all of the stuff they had saved, but she was still thinking about the medical books they'd lost.

Kenn walked down the tunnel. He took one of the torches Daisey was holding so he could lead the way. "It's your life that can't be replaced, Tonya. Snap out of it!"

Tonya knew he was right. She mentally added a new stop to the coming run at a medical facility that might have replacements. *We're going to be gone for a long time.*

Kenn nodded, wiping blood from his neck. *Maybe forever.*

“I don’t see anyone yet.” Jennifer scanned the smoky beach restlessly, pacing the top deck of the cruise ship.

“It will take them a little while to get here.” Wade didn’t mention the fact that the entire island was blanketed in smoke. There was no way to see through that. It would add to the normal time it took to reach the shore.

All of the ship crews were in full Eagle gear, including vests. Their dark outfits made them hard to see as the moon was covered by clouds. The guards still stayed close to the captains, listening for trouble while hoping nothing else happened. The fire was bad enough.

Almost everyone who had been assigned to a ship was on the top deck of it, watching as the island burned. Multiple areas were glowing bright orange. White smoke was rising in numerous places. The jungle was in flames that were spreading toward the water and toward the path that led to the cove. The ocean behind the ships was calm with a thick layer of fog coming their way. It looked like the ocean was also on fire.

Cate took Jennifer’s hand. “We’ll be okay.”

Jennifer stared at the child who wasn’t upset at all. “You knew this was coming.”

Cate shrugged. “Accidents happen.”

Jennifer didn't know what that meant. It didn't offer any comfort. She resumed scanning the island, searching for Kyle and their kids.

Wade also stared at the island even though he had told Jennifer it would still be a while before the camp made it here. He was just as worried as she was. He wasn't strong enough with his gifts to be able to reach from here to town. He had no way of knowing if his family was safe either.

Both of them tried to think good thoughts while wishing they had arranged to stay on the island today instead of doing this shift.

"The alpha put you guys here for a reason."

Wade looked at Cody. "What are you talking about?"

Cody gestured. "What do you see?"

Wade scanned the people standing on the top decks of the ships. Grant and Ray were both up there, though not looking at each other. Jennifer was here, along with both of Marc's twins. "And me."

Cody nodded. "Leadership always has to be covered in emergencies."

Wade had told Cody that during their last session. *He has a mind like a camera. He doesn't forget anything.* Many of the kids had decided to try leadership training as their career choice. Cody was going to excel at it. "Keep going."

Jennifer was drawn by the conversation. It was easy for her to hear them with her gifts because they were only separated by a few hundred feet. There wasn't a burning island between them. "He's right.

She left a power trio behind and people to keep them alive.”

“She sent a power trio who are capable of handling the survivors and rebuilding our camp.”

Jennifer nodded at Cody’s comment. That made perfect sense and fit in with what Angela was known for.

The back of her mind whispered there were also enough careers represented to be able to restart in that way as well. Wade would cover the Eagles while she handled leadership and the children, and Ray and Grant would sail them to someplace else to start over. It was a morbid thought that Jennifer quickly pushed away so she didn’t pass it on. *We might even be strong enough to still fight Nature in the final battle.*

Wade was following her thoughts. He assumed he would be mostly support in a moment like that. “Angela will have to leave the island now. Nature did this to draw her out.”

“You’re both wrong about part of that.” Ray looked toward Jennifer and Wade as smoke curled over the front of the submarine. He was straining for every thought or voice he could get. There was no way he could have missed their conversation. “She protected the chain of command and I don’t mean you two.”

All of them regarded Cody.

A warm breeze blew across the ships from the island, carrying heat and tiny sparks that landed on the deck near Jennifer’s feet.

Jennifer retreated, horrified. “Our ships are too close! Move the ships! Move the ships!”

Wade and everyone else ran to their bridges as they realized she was right.

It didn’t occur to any of them that the nuclear submarine and the full cargo bay on the cruise ship was why Angela had sent them here ahead of the fire and ahead of the camp.

## 6

“Hurry up!” Ralph stared at the flames that were now climbing the side of the jailhouse. “Find it! Find it!”

Gus didn’t waste his breath telling Ralph he couldn’t go any faster. The vines were too thick. He was having to kick at the ground and hope he hit the wooden hatch.

“Hurry up!”

“Help us or shut up!” Tim kicked at the ground next to Gus, trying to stay calm. The heat and smoke sucked, but it was still better than being in that tiny cell. *I’m not going back in there!*

Gus jerked Tim closer by the rope and kicked a patch of vines he hadn’t gotten to yet.

Ralph was pulled along. He slapped at sparks floating by them. “We’re going to die out here!”

Gus coughed. “Shut up.”

Tim nodded, also coughing. “We’re doing all the work. Help us!”

Ralph swallowed his fear to join them. “Where is it?”

*Crash!* Glass exploded from the jailhouse, spraying hot shards into the grass and trees.

Gus flinched as the other men dropped to their knees. The burning sensation on the back of his neck was too familiar. *I’ve been here before...*

*But I’m not caged this time.* Gus moved them further from the jailhouse, not watching it burn like Ralph was once again doing. He pulled the prisoners into the cooler part of the jungle, searching for a hole in the ground that now meant life or death for all three of them.

A swarm of bugs avoiding the heat ran into the three men, flying right through Gus’s shield with the wind and smoke.

Gus automatically ducked, hating the way gnats often flew up a nostril or into an eyeball. It was a daily occurrence on the island. He had hoped the cooler weather would kill them off, but he hadn’t wished for a fire. The bugs were being forced out into the open ocean from the heat now, where they were certain to die because they couldn’t make such a long trip. He felt bad for them even as he swatted them away.

A faint giggle echoed under the sounds of the fire.

Gus paused. *Did I hear something?*

After a few seconds, he got them moving again, dismissing it as the sound of the jailhouse burning down.

A few trees away, four camp kids huddled behind a thick trunk until Gus and his group were out of sight.

Wendy scratched at the dried mud on her arm while sweat ran down her neck. None of them were used to the jungle being this warm. “We’re going to get in trouble.”

Harold nodded. “We should have asked first.”

Dutch waved it off, heading down the path that was now well lit. “We’re allowed to go swimming.”

“But there’s a fire!” Hanli wished they’d stayed in town.

Dutch kept walking. “Marc will cover it. Let’s go swimming in the dark like the adults do!”

“Yeah!”

The four kids ran down the smoky path, grinning and coughing.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

# Locked

### 1

“I’m not leaving them!” Madison shoved sweaty hair away from her face. “You take the dogs and cats. I’ll get the goats and horse to the beach.”

Madison had already tried to lead the smaller animals down into the tunnels. She’d gotten tripped, bumped, and then bitten by the mother goat for her efforts. It was obvious that the animals weren’t going to go down there without being sedated. *And then there’s the fact that the horse won’t fit even if we knock him out.*

Marc eyed the line of roped animals. He was certain they could smell the alligators that had been down in the tunnels. “Are you sure?”

It seemed like a bad idea, but if she was able to ride the horse, the goats would follow.

“Yes!” Madison eyed the fire that was surrounding the town on three sides now. The barn was flaming hotly, along with the small shed and the rear of the restaurant. She fought her fear and tugged on the ropes. “Let’s go.”

“I’m coming with you.” Biff took the ropes for the goats from her hand before she could refuse.



Marc wiped sweat from his neck. “Stay together.” Marc met Biff’s eye. “Make her leave the animals and get into a tunnel if you have to.”

“I will.” Biff led the goats toward the only clear jungle path. “We’ll circle around and meet you guys at the beach.”

Marc handed Madison his freshly filled canteen. “It will anger me if you die.”

Madison chuckled. “I don’t think I’d be happy about it either.”

Mark was dripping sweat like everyone else. It ran down his back into the crack of his butt in an annoyingly constant drip. “Be careful.”

“Right back at ya.” Madison led the horse away from the smoky center of town.

*Wait for us!* Dog came flying out of the tunnel with the cats on his back.

“I thought you were staying with me.” Marc looked around. “And where’s the puppy?”

“Marc! We need to go!”

Adrian’s shout from the tunnel was approaching panic. Marc knew it was over Angela and not the camp. She’d had another contraction.

A faint yapping came to his ears.

Marc sighed. “Go get the puppy so she can put a leash on him.”

Dog shook off the cats and hurried into the smoky jungle.

Madison knelt and began attaching leashes to the collars of the other animals. She was relieved they all wanted to go with her. She liked Marc, but

he would have his hands full with the humans. He wouldn't have time to make sure the animals were okay.

Greg came over to Marc, adjusting his eyepatch. "I can go with them."

Marc scowled. "I need you with the camp."

"Do it yourself!"

Marc scanned Greg and saw the man was covered in fear. "What's your problem?"

Greg snorted, waving at the fire that was still rolling closer. "If I go down there, she won't let me out alive."

Marc read Greg's erratic thoughts. Patience wearing thin, he sneered at the man. "Angela didn't try to kill you!"

Greg stared.

Marc was fed up with both Greg and Kenn. "I got you in trouble intentionally so you'd be sent with me on that run. *I* hoped you wouldn't come back. She didn't try to kill you. I did!"

Greg attacked Marc, shouting as he lunged forward and took them both to the ground.

Mark punched Greg twice in the kidney, trying to get the man to stop by causing pain.

Greg swung back just as hard, enjoying the brawl even though they were all in danger.

Madison led the animals away from the fight. "I miss the boss. She's a better leader."

Biff stayed next to her. "And Kenn. He organized the evac from the mountain and it went well. I don't think he ever got credit for that."

The couple led the animals into the jungle without looking back at the fighting men.

## 2

“What’s going on up there?” Adrian was walking the line of nervous residents in the tunnel while Piper stayed by the ramp to make sure no one went back up there.

The tunnel was dimly illuminated by hand torches that had been hastily put together. It revealed a line of nervous, impatient camp members waiting for leadership to save them like they always did.

Piper peered through the smoky hatch. “Madison and Biff are taking the animals through the jungle...and Marc and Greg are rolling around on the ground like idiots.”

Adrian grunted. “Well, at least they’re having fun.” He eyed Angela, who was surrounded by her guards and most of the medics.

In the middle of another contraction, Angela blew air out in a long hiss.

The camp people around them began to notice and point.

“She’s in labor!”

“She can’t have a baby down here!”

“We need to get to the ship.”

“Where’s Marc?”

Adrian kept going, hoping Angela’s labor slowed. *But it’s not going to.*

Charlie joined Adrian. He had his son in a chest sling and a gun on both hips. “What can I do?”

Adrian didn’t want to send the boy topside even though someone needed to get Marc and Greg down here. “Can you call your dad, from here?”

Charlie frowned. “Already tried. He sent back an image of Greg’s fist coming toward his face.”

Adrian sighed. “We need Erin.”

“Nope.” Charlie went to his mom. “Call him down here.”

Angela concentrated, glad to have something to do except wait for the next pain to hit. *Gregory! Get down here right now!*

The mental call was harsh, stinging everyone as it went through.

Greg appeared at the top of the ramp a few seconds later.

Piper retreated to let him through, pointing and frowning.

Greg went to Angela, dripping blood from his nose and lip. “What?!”

Angela chuckled. It became a groan as pain settled into her back.

Greg pushed by her guards and put an arm around her shoulders. “Lean on me.”

Angela did, breathing deeply. “Won’t be much longer.”

Greg began to wake from the daze of fear now that he knew Angela wasn’t responsible. “I’m sorry.”

Angela bent over, cradling her stomach.

Power flew out and hit Greg in the chest, knocking him backward into the tunnel wall.

“What was that?”

“She’s in labor. He shouldn’t have touched her.”

Adrian helped Greg up. “She doesn’t like to be touched.”

Greg instinctively knew Adrian meant the baby. He wiped the blood from his face and resumed his position next to Angela, but he didn’t make contact physically. “We have to get her to the ship.”

Piper huffed. “Now he gets it.”

She retreated again as Marc approached the ramp.

Marc scanned the town once more, feeling like he was forgetting something important.

A fast flame caught his eye.

Gio ran into the town. Flames were shooting up from his clothes and hair as he ran to Marc, screaming.

Marc stripped his shirt and tackled the man, rolling and beating on the fire.

Piper sighed, still observing. “Now he’s rolling on the ground with someone else.” She grinned. “At least his shirt is off.”

People chuckled and moved closer to catch a glimpse.

Adrian motioned. “Lead us out. Keep them together at each intersection.”

Piper immediately began walking and waving at the camp to follow. The tunnel was full of smoke. They needed to get away from the hatch.

Marc wrestled Gio toward the ramp and shoved him down it. “Medical care!”

Marc rotated as another smoky shape came out of the jungle.

Dog hurried by Marc with the puppy hanging from his mouth.

The puppy yapped happily as they went by.

Marc went down the ramp as Dog vanished into the jungle, following Madison and the other animals. *Safe travels, my friend.*

Marc shut the hatch and went to the front of the line to take over the lead. “Let’s roll.”

Everyone began to move forward, nudging kids and people who had sat on the ground to wait.

“Which way?”

“Toward the clinic.” That area had already burned. Marc was hoping they could go above ground from there to get to the beach. He glanced at Angela as he walked by.

Angela tried to follow. Her legs buckled.

Greg scooped her up, ignoring the light zapping feeling coming through his skin at the contact. Her baby didn’t like him, but the minor pain was nothing compared to the lab.

Greg followed Marc while her guards hurried to keep them surrounded.

Angela moaned against his chest as another contraction hit.

Greg walked faster, regretting his behavior. When she needed him, he wanted to be there for her. He'd failed by fighting with Marc during a crisis.

“Shut up!”

Greg chuckled at her moaned order. “Whatever you want, baby.”

In the middle of the group, Erin watched them furiously. She had Sadie over her shoulder. Sadie had been cuffed and sedated as soon as Marc found out what had happened. Then he'd assigned Erin to carry her. *It's because I'm stronger than the rest of these weaklings now.*

Near her in the line, Amanda frowned. “It's to keep you busy while your man helps with the alpha.”

Erin glared, vision turning pink.

Amanda glared back. “I'll lock you and they'll sedate you, too. Control yourself!”

Erin swallowed humiliation and anger. “Just keep me away from them until this is over.”

Amanda immediately stepped in front of Erin, blocking her view.

Amanda's daughters, Margret and Alicia, did the same, blocking the path completely. They walked with their mother and waited for this adventure to be over.

Amanda's long cloak was now tied down to straps on her pant legs. Ed wondered how much work it would take to re-outfit some of their Eagle gear that way. Cloaks would be handy in a lot of the situations they went through.

Margret and Alicia were also wearing cloaks tied to their pants. The younger girl had her hood up and was walking sleepily. Margaret had hers down, head swiveling continuously to keep an eye on the people around them. In that moment, she looked exactly like her mother, just with braids that were only half as long.

Ed stayed close to the small family, but he also stayed quiet, trying to make his gifts pop in. He no longer wanted to be Invisible.

Eric was doing the same thing as he walked with his family ahead of Amanda. *I need a new gift! If I had more power, I could help!*

“You’ve been warned about hunting power. You need to be punished.”

Eric spun around to confront Amanda, eyes lighting up bright red.

Margret lifted a shield over herself and her mother.

Amanda’s youngest daughter fired her enforcer power and took Eric to the ground. Alicia smiled cruelly as his screams echoed through the tunnel, bringing Marc and Adrian on the run.

Piper threw her hands in the air and headed for the front of the long line. “Why are people so stupid?” She took over the lead while Marc and Adrian handled the descendants. In moments like this, she preferred the company of normals.

Amanda didn’t care about the witnesses. “You’ve been told repeatedly that hunting power is forbidden!” She zapped Eric this time, not being



gentle. “One more thought out of you that breaks the rules and I’ll lock your gifts!”

Eric stopped screaming as the pain faded. He huddled on the ground, crying.

Marc arrived in time to see it and hear it. “You have my permission to handle anyone who gets out of line.”

Amanda sneered at him. “An enforcer does not need permission from a substitute leader.”

Marc was taken aback by her hostility.

Amanda explained it without mercy. “You’re not the alpha. She never would have let things get out of control this way. You’re unorganized, distracted, and more concerned with your own mental well-being than with the upcoming birth of your daughter. Get your shit together!”

Marc suddenly flashed to being in the Marines and facing his old platoon leader. He instinctively straightened and lifted his chin. “I’m new here. I’ll do better.”

Surprised, Amanda chuckled. “I believe that. Now lead us out of here. Your daughter is to be born soon.”

Mike helped Eric to his feet, shooting a dirty look toward both of them. “Come on. We’ll file a complaint with the Law Council when this is all over.”

Timmy took Leeann’s hand and got her out of the way.

Leeann leaned in to ask him a whispered question.

Amanda quickly hit Leeann with a new memory lock. Hers would hold for years.

Marc nodded. Angela had been right to start giving Amanda authority in their camp. Jennifer wasn't able to handle it right now and the descendants needed someone to keep them in line while he was busy.

Daryl walked by with a shield over Brittani. He motioned toward Marc. "We brought some medical supplies with us. It should have most of what Angela will need."

Marc took the bag as the den mothers and kids also went by. Morgan was with them, guarding Roy and Autumn.

Eric saw the kids as he started to get back into the line. He couldn't control his anger. *This is all Jennifer's fault. She doesn't deserve to be a mother. I hope those little brats fry!*

"I warned you!" Amanda reached out and locked Eric's gifts.

New screams went through the tunnel.

Everyone around them ignored it this time.

Adrian observed it all. It was interesting the way the entire camp was accepting Amanda's authority over them. The mood was already calming. Adrian kept his thoughts locked so he didn't draw her attention, too.

Molly and Thomas limped by. Molly was carrying his crutches in case he needed them. She unzipped her Eagle jacket, starting to sweat.

Thomas had his jacket tied around his lean hips. Sweat was running down his chest. Like everyone else, he wished there was a breeze.

Amanda gave them both a stern look.

Molly moved quicker, also not wanting to draw attention from the new enforcer.

Erin went by carrying Sadie, with Panaji on her heels. She didn't bother to keep a good thought. She was actually hoping Amanda challenged her. *I'll beat that woman's ass before she has a chance to fire on me.*

Amanda snorted but let it go. She understood Erin was under the effects of the rage illness, but unlike Sadie, Erin was fighting it and doing well. Amanda knew Angela had big plans for Erin. She wasn't going to interfere. *But I'm not the easy match she thinks I am. Maybe we'll have some cage time in the future where I can prove that to her.*

The large line of cooks went by next, carrying packs with snacks. Thelma smiled at Amanda. She already liked the woman.

Tobias's widows didn't make eye contact. Anna and Daniella were terrified of Amanda because of the contact they'd had with enforcers in the past.

Amanda looked at Adrian. "Put them to work in full-time jobs or they'll start causing trouble."

That drew Marc's attention. "How do you know that?"

"Widows are like wild cards. They've lost their mate. They'll become restless and then dangerous."

Even though he was very busy, Marc got his book out and wrote that down. The females were proof that descendants could enslave their own kind, just like with Chad and Samantha. “Tobias told us he never lied.”

Anna swallowed nervously. “Saying he never lied was a lie.”

Marc snorted. “Everything about that bastard was a lie.”

Bernice came over to Marc. “Have you heard from Gus?”

Marc keyed his radio even though he knew it wasn’t going to work. “Gus? It’s time for a check in!”

There wasn’t an answer. Marc regarded Bernice. “Kyle will find them. No one can hide from him.”

Bernice visibly paled.

Marc nodded. “Whatever you’re hiding will come out. Do us all a favor and tell Gus what it is when this is over so he can help you.”

Bernice quickly hurried into the line with her daughter to keep anyone from asking questions.

Somchai and his small group went by them next. He smirked at Marc. It wasn’t surprising to him that Marc was already having trouble. He ignored his ex-wife completely.

Adrian dropped back next to Stuart, who was in the rear of the group with half of the brawlers to keep residents from going in the wrong direction. Adrian leaned in and whispered in Stuart’s ear.

Stuart nodded and kept walking without thinking about the order he'd just been given.

Dirt fell from the ceiling as Dace rolled by in his wheelchair. He was slapped by memories of the submarine and the attack where he had lost the use of his legs.

Lisa reached down to brush the dirt off of his shoulder and tripped over a pile of muddy debris that had been left from the flood.

Walking behind them, Jack automatically reached out to keep her from falling.

Heat seared Jack's hand. His body responded; his heart pounded wildly.

Angry with himself, Jack let go of her.

Lisa fell, landing in Dace's lap in the chair.

Distracted from his mental misery now, Dace laughed. "I'd be happy to give you a ride."

Caught up in the moment, Lisa kissed him hotly.

Need flared all over her body. She swallowed a moan and gently eased out of his lap.

Dace's misery immediately returned. He hadn't felt anything from the waist down. It was a horrible moment. *I'll never be able to have sex with the woman I love.*

Jack grabbed the handles of the chair and pushed it past the stopped group while thinking about anything except for what had just happened.

Dace wasn't the only one who was feeling the effects of being down here. All of the mission men were fighting flashes of their time in the lab and on the sub, but also the week they had spent in these

tunnels clearing them when they'd first reached this island. All of them kept an eye out for vines coming through the walls. Smoke was coming through instead, making the air stuffy. Coughs were ringing out through the group.

Another small family came by. Samantha was in the center of it, pushing both twins in the stroller while Amy walked right next to her.

Samantha and Neil were both wearing white t-shirts instead of the normal Eagle gear. Neil had insisted upon them both changing during the bug out so they would be easier to spot in the dim tunnel if they became separated. Amy was also wearing a white shirt and white shorts. Neil hoped it would be enough to keep them together if lightning struck their family again.

Samantha looked at Neil. "You have to care for the kids. I'm going to help Angela."

Neil wanted them to stay together. "She has guards and the medics."

Samantha shook her head. "She rescued me when she didn't have to. She risked her life, and others, to save mine even though she knew I'd screwed up. The least I can do is help her now."

Neil was proud of how far Samantha had come since her kidnapping. He kissed her on the cheek and then took the kids up the line to join the den mothers. He kept a link to Samantha in case she needed anything, but it occurred to Neil that being with Angela was the best place Sam could be.

Angela was surrounded by protection. Samantha would be safe there.

Parker led the church group through the tunnel at the very rear of the line. He began singing, hoping it would relieve more of the tension of being down here while a raging inferno covered the land above them. “Amazing Grace...”

The song swelled as the church group joined him. It grew louder as members of the camp also began to sing along. The sound of voices filled the tunnel.

“How sweet the sound...”

Angela stiffened in Greg’s arms.

Greg stopped walking. “Another one already?”

Angela screamed as pain ripped through her stomach.

Terry hurried over.

Angela pushed out of Greg’s arms and cradled her stomach, bent over and groaning. “Change the song!”

Greg stared in confusion. “Why?”

Angela screamed again as more pain ripped through her guts.

Greg hurried toward the church group to do what she wanted even though he didn’t understand why.

Angela inhaled deeply, trying to calm the baby. “She doesn’t like that one.”

People around her frowned as they understood. None of them spoke. They didn’t know what to say.

Angela resumed limping along in the center of her protection as Samantha joined them. “Don’t let them sing that song again. I can’t control her right now.”

Samantha took Angela’s arm to help her along. “Is anyone able to control her?”

Angela peered ahead at the front of the line where Marc was taking a spot next to Piper. “It’s really too soon to tell.”

Samantha looked over her shoulder where the new enforcer was getting the stopped group to move again. “We have other options.”

Angela quickly denied that. “Everything depends on us teaching her to control herself and to love these people. If we lock her, all hope is lost on both of those fronts.”

A new song began to echo from the church group. “This little light of mine...”

The camp mood immediately brightened. Even the children knew the words. Many of them began to sing along, walking faster. Those who didn’t like the song tolerated it when Angela didn’t scream again.

Angela was relieved when there wasn’t a reaction to that one. All of the pain she was feeling had come from the baby sending out power to make the music stop.

Angela’s stomach contracted again, forcing her to stop until it passed. This one didn’t have anything to do with the music. Her daughter was almost ready to be born. Angela found it ironic that the baby was



going to be born in the middle of a conflagration. It didn't bode well for her future.

Something heavy thumped on the ground above the tunnel, sending dirt and more smoke into the dank, dim space.

Angela tried not to be sad about that. *Sometimes a loss isn't always a loss. It all depends on how you view it.*

Above the camp, the town continued to burn. Glass blew out of the windows in the restaurant as the propane tanks exploded, taking out half of the wall that hadn't caught fire yet.

The barn collapsed, sending more fiery debris toward the showers that were already in flames.

The weak side of the bunkhouse cracked and fell again, taking the entire wall with it this time. Flames immediately latched onto the dry wood and began to spread across the porch.

Nothing was untouched. The entire town was burning with no way to save any of it. The only consolation was that it hadn't taken any lives. For that, Angela was grateful. *But it's not over yet.*

Samantha rubbed Angela's wrist, trying to send comfort. *Some people have to die. That's the law of life and we can't change it.*

## 2

“Stop! We're going the wrong way!”

Zack slowed at Debra's call, trying to peer through the smoke to determine if she was correct.

Theo kept stomping through the dense, dark vines. He was certain that she was right, but he didn't want to admit it.

Everyone from the runway was dripping sweat and covered in bits of green and brown debris from stomping through areas of the jungle that hadn't been traversed before now. Tiny bugs darted around their heads while startled wildlife ran away as they came through.

"None of this looks familiar." Zack scanned the smoky jungle around them, trying to figure out where they were.

"Wrong way!"

Theo rotated, scowling at Debra. "Just because you can hear now, that doesn't mean you know everything!"

Debra opened her mouth to fire back.

Zack rolled his eyes. "Not again!"

The arguing couple paid him no attention as they tossed insults.

Nero stayed close to Zack and hoped this nightmare ended soon. He was sorry that he hadn't run to town with Gio. That wasn't an option now. There was a wall of fire between them and safety and they hadn't found a single tunnel hatch so far.

"Know it all!"

"Giant prick!"

"Yes, it is, but that's beside the point. You're wrong!"

Zack took over the lead, switching directions slightly in case Debra was correct. They should

have reached the creek by now. They had walked twice as far as it should have taken to get to the old shack. This was a part of the island that Zack had never been to. He hadn't even known it was back here.

“Fire!” Nero pointed, retreating. He bumped into Theo.

Theo staggered, turning. “Shit!”

He jumped to the side as the large female alligator padded through the smoky weeds.

The alligator didn't pay attention to the humans this time. She waddled into the cool, dense vines, tail swishing angrily.

The humans waited, letting all of the alligators go by as they made a line through the jungle.

There was a clear path behind the alligators that showed where they had come from. Zack was tempted to follow it back to camp, but the heavy smoke rolling into the sky from that direction said the town was on fire. Marc hadn't been able to stop it.

Debra was tired of being ignored. “This way!”

She marched ahead, almost paralleling the path the alligators had taken. She wasn't worried about the reptiles. She was worried about Theo. He was still hung over and very pale. He needed to see a medic.

Theo eyed the sweat running down Debra's arms and was stunned by desire. Being horny was a way of life for him now, but in this moment, he felt like it had been years since he'd made love to a

woman. He shook himself out of the sexual daze and trudged forward through the knee-high vines.

Debra's flashlight went out.

Zack made a quick command decision and hurried up next to her. He put his flashlight into her hand and then stayed next to her, getting ready to bring up his shield in case the alligators came back this way.

Nero hurried after them, almost walking on Zack's heels to stay close.

Kendle's relatives had stayed calm the entire time. They walked right behind Nero while taking comfort in knowing the other one was there. It took a lot more to upset them than it did most people. They had Reicher to thank for that.

Left with no choice, Theo followed the group and resumed grumbling.

In the distance, a tall, wide shape loomed through the smoke. None of the group noticed the cave even when the clouds parted to let the moon shine down on the tiny silver flecks that covered the cave like stars.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

# Roll!

### 1

“**W**e have to go back!” Ralph pulled on the rope attached to his wrist. Fire was all around them.

“There’s nothing to go back to!” Gus strode forward through the knee-high flames.

Smoke surrounded the group as they went through the jungle. It blocked the view and filled their lungs, making them all dizzy. Fiery debris dropped from the trees above them, landing on Gus’s shield.

Gus brought up another shield as the first one began to melt. He inhaled another breath of smoky air and pushed through the flames.

Ralph caught his balance and ran along behind Gus, terrified.

“There has to be a hatch here somewhere!” Gus was still kicking at the ground as he went. He had a mental map he was following, but he was losing faith in his ability to find it.

A flaming tree fell behind them, blasting Gus’s shield.

The shield went down as Gus fell forward. He immediately rolled to his feet and brought up a new

one, but it didn't filter out the smoke. All of them coughed as they resumed traveling.

Gus sent out a call for help through the hive, but he was quickly running out of energy from having to keep his shield up. He didn't know if it got through.

Tim and Ralph stayed behind Gus, using the man's big body as a protective barrier as they went through another bank of orange flames.

Gus produced yet another shield as the top one melted from the heat. He kept stepping forward, scanning desperately.

A cleared area came up in front of them. Gus recognized it in relief. "There!"

The men ran toward the area eagerly.

A stiff wind came through the jungle, pushing on fire-weakened trees.

*Snap! Whoosh!*

Gus lunged to the side, but it wasn't far enough. The tree branch broke off above them and dropped heavily, smacking directly into the top of his shield.

Gus screamed as he was knocked to the ground. His shield vanished.

The branch was easily a foot wide and as long as the leg it was laying on. Tiny flames ran over the smaller branches on it, reaching out for anything it could spread to.

"Get it off of me!" The tree branch was too wide and heavy for Gus to lift off of his leg from this angle. He shouted as his ankle bone fractured.

Ralph began pulling on the end of the branch that wasn't on fire, trying to move it.

Tim snatched the knife from Gus's belt and quickly sawed through the rope that was binding them together.

“What are you doing?!”

Tim had a brief moment where he considered inviting Ralph to come along. Then he saw Ralph's weak arms strain to move the log and quickly changed his mind. Ralph would be a burden to be cared for and Tim was already unsure of being able to get himself off this island.

Tim threw the knife to the ground at Ralph's feet and took off running in the opposite direction.

Ralph didn't care about the knife. He kept pulling on the branch.

“You little bitch!” Gus's emotions fed his shield as he brought it up to block out the flames that were coming closer to them. Drawing on his time in the lab, Gus concentrated and used his shield against the branch.

“It's moving! Do it again!”

Gus reached out to Ralph. “I need more energy!”

Ralph was scared of magic, but in this case, he didn't even hesitate. He grabbed Gus's hand. “Take whatever you need!”

Gus used their combined energy and put it into the shield, straining and grunting.

The branch slowly rolled off of his ankle.

Gus screamed again as the weight lifted. Pain ran through his leg.

Another wall of flames raced toward them.

Ralph helped Gus onto his good leg and tried to support the big man's weight as they hurried toward the hatch.

Gus dropped to his good knee and yanked the lid open. "Get in there!"

Ralph quickly went down the ladder, stopping halfway to allow for the rope between them.

Gus slid his legs into the hole first and then dropped, screaming again as he landed badly.

Ralph was pulled down with him. He landed on top of Gus and quickly rolled over.

The muddy floor of the tunnel was a relief as it squished around their hot bodies and soothed their burnt skin. Both men lay there for a minute, getting their breath back.

Gus was able to see through the hatch hole. A flaming tree directly above them sent down a shower of hot sparks.

Gus rolled, pulling Ralph with him as the tree fell directly on top of the hatch. Fiery debris and wooden shrapnel shot into the tunnel, hitting both men. *That was intentional!* Gus knew the feeling of being targeted too well. *Damn you, Nature!*

Gus forced himself up, holding onto Ralph's shoulder for balance. He got them moving through the tunnel, taking deep breaths of the cooler, clearer air down here. He wasn't able to tell exactly where



he was going, but it was still better than where he had been. “Thank you for not leaving me.”

Ralph had never considered that. “It’s my honor.”

Gus nodded. “And I’ll make sure the boss knows that when it mattered, you had it.”

Ralph smiled at the big man and continued to help him along.

Gus eyed both tunnels as they came to an intersection. One was pitch black. The other held a faint orange glow.

Gus led them into the darkness. He didn’t tell Ralph there was a fire down here, too. Ralph didn’t need the stress. *And I don’t have any comfort to give.*

Above the tunnel, a shadowy form in Eagle gear ran by the flaming log on top of the hatch. Tracking their missing people, Kyle was now following a single red dot through the fire. He increased his pace, circling around with a shield up to make it through a hot area.

Kyle’s shield allowed him to travel faster. Tim didn’t have that advantage. He was having to detour around places where the fire was too thick to run through. It allowed Kyle to catch up to the man and then get ahead. The smoke provided a perfect cover.

Kyle heard steps running in his direction and stepped behind a flaming tree. He drew his knife.

Tim ran by without noticing anyone was there.

Kyle threw his knife, hard.

The blade hit the back of Tim's neck and sank in deep.

Kyle got his notebook out as the body fell. He put a check mark next to Gus and Ralph. He marked out Tim's name completely and then stored his book.

Kyle collected his knife, wiping it clean before putting it back onto his belt. Then he kicked a few of the flaming tree branches on the ground over to the body to make sure the fire would remove most of the evidence.

Kyle enjoyed the feeling of being the camp's executioner once again. He wasn't afraid of the fire at all. He resumed his hunt for the rest of their missing residents, moving through the flaming jungle with a smile on his face and a bloody song in his heart.

## 2

"We're lost!" Theo ran behind Debra, wishing again that he wasn't a normal.

Debra was sending out calls through the hive that weren't getting through. Their radios were useless and the smoke was so thick that they couldn't see the path to the creek that they were trying to reach. *But I can smell it.*

Debra increased her pace to keep Theo from stopping them again to search for a hatch. He'd done it twice already, causing them to be surrounded by the fire.

Debra jumped a small bank of flames, following her nose. As a deaf person, her other senses were already heightened, but her weeks of swimming had also taught her what water smelled like. *It's close!*

Nero and the two teens ran along behind them, coughing while trying not to trip or fall behind.

Zack stayed close to Debra, trusting her to find the water. He had faith in her senses where his were failing. All he could smell was smoke. All he could see was flames.

Debra veered toward a wall of fire, spotting a familiar tree. "Run through!"

All of them braced for another harsh wave of heat and pain as they increased their pace. Fire leapt onto their hair and clothes.

The creek stretched out in front of them like a beckoning oasis, but they weren't alone. Animals were all over the shoreline and in the water.

Debra took them straight in, splashing to the middle of the creek. The bottom dropped out and left her paddling. She ducked under, extinguishing the sparks on her hair.

Theo and the others stopped as the water reached their waists. They splashed water onto their burns and scanned the crowded bank in concern as more of the jungle caught fire around them.

Monkeys, squirrels, and other small animals swam away from the humans, but none of them left the safety of the water as the fire came closer.

Debra didn't care about the animals that were taking shelter here. She dove deeper, relishing the feel of it on her hot skin.

Zack saw the alligator at the same time as Theo. They both lunged forward and dove under the water toward Debra.

Debra realized she'd forgotten about the gators right as one snapped at her through the cold water. She jerked backward and sank to the bottom, panicking as the gator chased her.

Animals all around them fled as Theo tackled the large female, getting his big arms around her neck.

Zack grabbed Debra's leg and dragged her out of the way as the gator dove, taking Theo along.

Debra screamed, trying to go after him.

Zack held her in place, watching for the gator to surface.

"They don't!" Debra kept fighting to get free. "Roll!"

Zack remembered gators rolled their prey under the water until they drowned. He let go of Debra and drew his knife as the water rushed by, numbing his legs and feet.

Theo popped to the surface and sucked in a huge breath of air.

Debra grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the shallow area while Zack watched for the alligator to come back.

Theo wiped the water from his face. "That was my best knife!"

Debra hugged him, heart pounding. “Thought I lost you!”

Theo pushed her away, glaring and dripping. “Stay out of the water! Even with your hearing, it’s not safe!”

“Don’t own me!”

“You have to stop!”

“Why?!”

“Because I love you! I’ll lose my shit if something happens to you!”

Debra chose that moment to drop her news. “I’m pregnant.”

Theo stared, dumbfounded.

Zack pushed the couple toward the bank where the smoke was thick but there wasn’t any fire yet.

Theo’s mind struggled to make the connection. “Ian.”

Debra nodded. *I’m going to be a mother!*

Theo’s face collapsed. “You’re pregnant by that no good piece of—”

*Slap!*

Theo’s head bounced off of her wet hand, sending saliva and water flying.

Debra considered hitting him again and then turned away. *Angela was right. He’s not good enough for me.*

Theo rubbed his cheek, heart hurting. *She’s having Ian’s baby. I’ll never get her love now.*

Debra caught that and turned around to yell at him for being selfish. “Look out!”

The alligator surfaced next to Theo with a blade sticking out of the back of its head.

Animals took off into the jungle and down the creek to get away.

Theo threw himself backward, already knowing it wasn't going to work. *I don't want to die!*

A flaming log splashed down on top of the alligator, shoving the knife in deep enough to reach the killing spot this time.

It thrashed, knocking Theo roughly onto the bank as it died.

Everyone looked over to find Kyle standing there, frowning at all of them. His gloves were on fire from lifting the log.

Kyle casually dropped to a knee and plunged his hands under the cold water. Steam rose in a thick wave.

Debra held onto Theo, bringing up her shield this time. She'd just learned a hard lesson.

Theo held her tightly, shivering. All thoughts of jealousy and alcohol were gone. All he could see was death coming his way. *I'm done, with all of it.*

Debra kissed him.

Kyle stood, grunting. "Come with me if you want to live."

Zack and the teens laughed at the Terminator tagline.

Theo and Debra didn't hear it. They were lost in the moment.

Kyle motioned at the others. “There’s a hatch about 300 feet this way. Come on. They’ll catch up.”

Kyle frowned at the kissing couple. “Or that gator’s family will come along to express their displeasure.”

Theo and Debra broke apart, peering around in concern.

Zack chuckled as he followed Kyle through the fiery jungle. *Something about this just feels right.*

“It’s because you’ve missed being an Eagle. You need the danger and the excitement to feel satisfied. Resigning isn’t an option for men like us.” Kyle knew that for sure now.

Zack followed their top man, nodding. Kyle was right. *I’m an Eagle in Safe Haven. It’s the dream job even when it scares the hell out of me.*

Kyle grunted. “And that sums it up perfectly.”

### 3

“Do you think it will be much longer?”

“Probably another half an hour.” Kenn glanced over his shoulder, wincing as the glass shards in his chin rubbed against his shirt. “Do you need a break?”

Trent shook his head. “I’m fine. I think Daisey could use a breather, though.”

Daisey was limping along, occasionally slowing to climb over a slick debris pile. She was carrying one of Goldie’s twins. “I’m fine. Keep going.”

Kenn turned around to keep leading them through the dark, smoky tunnel. The torch he was carrying wouldn't last until they reached the beach. He had already searched through all of the items in his kit, but he didn't have enough supplies to make another one.

Kenn thought briefly of going up one of the ladders they were passing to grab a flaming tree branch, but he chose to keep them below ground instead.

They'd been hearing thuds and bangs the entire way as things fell over and were pulled down by the vines that were on everything. It wasn't a good idea to go up there unless they had no other choice. It would be a dark walk, but this tunnel would eventually bring them out near the beach.

Walking in the middle of the group, Tonya rotated so she could see Daisey. She didn't like how weak the woman sounded.

Daisey waved her off, trying not to fall. "Keep going."

Tonya wasn't sure. Daisey was pale in the flickering torch light, but she was also sweating. All of them were. It was cooler down here, but still very warm. Tonya didn't want to know what the temperature was like above ground.

She scanned Daisey again, trying to make a medical decision. Daisey was worried about Ralph, but she had also helped them get stuff into the tunnels. She had cared for the babies and inhaled a lot of smoke while doing it. Now, she'd been



walking for a while over piles of muddy garbage in the smoky dankness of these tunnels.

Daisey knew Tonya was about to call a break. She glared at the redhead. “The boss wouldn’t stop and you shouldn’t either. Get these kids to the ship!”

Tonya stiffened at the accusation that she wasn’t going to make the right choice. She scanned the people behind Daisey to make sure everyone else was okay and still together.

The older den mother gave her a small smile. That woman was carrying a baby and the diaper bags that held everything they needed for the infants. As soon as they reached the beach, the twins would need to be fed and changed.

Behind them, Stanley was walking with the other dwindling torch. Isabel was right next to him. They were both moving slowly, sore and tired from all of the trips they’d made down the ladder with the supplies from the clinic.

Tonya was proud of the older women for keeping up with them, but she was even happier with Stanley that he hadn’t dropped anything. He was doing a great job staying in control of his clumsy nature.

Stanley nodded at her through his migraine and kept carefully placing one big foot in front of the other.

Bringing up the very rear, Trent limped with his shield up, concentrating on strengthening his gifts. He was still riding high on saving Tonya and Kenn. He wasn’t feeling tired yet at all.

Tonya turned around and found Kenn standing right behind her. She bumped into his chest and almost fell. Pain went through her bruised and punctured skin.

Kenn caught her arm and neatly turned them around. He kept walking, feeling the cold shield of battle about to drop over his nerves. “Stay close to me.”

Tonya picked up on the bad vibes and groaned. “How do you guys stand this?!”

Kenn slid his free hand to his holster. He didn’t know what was coming. He wanted to be ready for anything. “You get used to it after a while.”

That was actually an understatement. *The truth is that we come to expect it and then we start to look forward to it.* It was an awful cycle that Kenn didn’t know how to break. He blamed Adrian completely.

Tonya snorted. “Try blaming Marc. Always trying to live up to that man has almost gotten you killed more than once.”

Those words matched what Greg had told them, but unlike Greg, Kenn now had the right target. “It wasn’t Angela at all.”

Tonya had already figured out that Greg was wrong. “Marc tried to get rid of you guys. Angela tried to save you both.”

*Crunch! Rip! Thud! Thud!*

The tunnel shuddered around them. Dirt fell from the ceiling, coating everyone.

Kenn rotated, expanding his shield over Tonya.

In the rear of the group, Trent lunged forward as more dirt fell from the ceiling.

*Whoosh! Thud! Thud! Rippp!*

A huge part of the ceiling collapsed right behind Trent. The earth fell in from all sides, carrying the flaming jungle above them.

The side of the tunnel began to fall as well, revealing the huge roots of a tree. Everything slid to the ground, shaking the tunnel and dislodging dirt and insects in every direction.

The tree fell over into the tunnel and across it, sending flaming branches into the opening. Trent was buried.

Isabel and Stanley fell forward, bumping into Daisey.

Daisey struggled not to drop the baby or fall.

Isabel caught Daisey before she could. They held onto each other as a wave of dirt and dust blew through the tunnel from the impact.

Kenn ran to the pile of dirt. He shoved the other torch into Stanley's hand. "Watch out for snakes and moving vines!"

Kenn began digging through the rubble while Stanley shined the torch around in fear.

Trent lifted his shield from under the dirt, like he'd seen Marc do. It freed him, using the last of his energy. His shield vanished.

Kenn reached down and pulled Trent onto his feet. "Are you okay?"

Trent stood there, getting his breath back. "Absolutely not."

Kenn scanned him for injuries. “Where does it hurt?”

Trent chuckled tiredly. “Everywhere. Can we go home now?” The thrill of the adventure had finally faded for him.

Kenn led Trent toward the others. “Yes. The cruise ship is always happy to have us.”

Tonya realized Kenn was right. “I’ll make sure to say thank you when we get there.”

Daisey pushed the baby into the other den mother’s arms and slowly slid to her knees. “Got to have that breather.”

Tonya hurried over as Daisey grabbed her chest and fell forward.

Tonya rolled the woman over and began checking her vitals.

Daisey groaned. “Just a skip.” Her heart was already settling down, but she didn’t move and possibly trigger it to happen again. “Happens a lot.”

Tonya opened her medical bag. “It’s not in your chart.”

“Don’t want to be seen as weak.”

“Anyone who can put up with Ralph is not weak.”

While Tonya worked on Daisey, Kenn and Stanley took guard positions around them while scanning the tree that had fallen over. The gigantic roots were sticking out of the ground in a huge circle. It was amazing to see up close. It was also terrifying since the tree was still on fire.

Kenn didn't know if it would continue to burn down here or not. There were dry vines all along the walls that implied they were still in danger even though they were underground. "We need to get going."

Daisey held her arm up for Tonya to help her to her feet. As long as she moved slowly, she should be fine. She always had been in the past.

"I'll carry her." Kenn got the weakly protesting woman onto his back while Tonya took the torch and the lead. He fell in behind her, glad when she set a fast pace.

Behind them, smoke rolled down the tunnel in a thick wave as if trying to catch up to them.

A faint moan echoed through the tunnel, giving Tonya chills.

Kenn walked faster, forcing Tonya to increase her pace. Pain ran through his stomach. "She's got some great timing."

"Who?" Trent couldn't tell who was in pain just by the sound of it, though it was great to know they were close to other people now.

"The boss."

Trent frowned at Tonya's answer, limping faster on his sore legs. "Did she get hurt? What's wrong with her?"

Kenn grimaced at his rolling stomach. "She's in labor."

Trent made a face. "Bad timing!"

Tonya turned right at the next intersection while scanning for problems. "Actually, it's fitting. Now

everyone has to share the experience with her. If that doesn't bond people to her little monster, then nothing will."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

# It's Time

### 1

“It’s okay. We’re halfway there.” Madison rubbed the horse’s side, trying to keep it walking over the hot ground.

Biff waited impatiently with the other leashes, ignoring the animals who nudged his hand for comfort. Madison hadn’t spoken a single word to him since he’d volunteered to help with these dumb animals. Biff was hurt and angry.

Madison led them over the burnt ground, trying to find places that wouldn’t hurt the animal’s feet and paws. The jungle floor was still smoldering in places even though the fire had already come through here. The animals pulled against the leashes as smoke ran along the ground, spooking them even more.

“Wow.”

Madison looked to where Biff pointed. “That’s a huge tree.”

“It was.”

They went over to the fallen, burnt tree, able to see a hole in the ground under it. Small animals and insects were taking shelter around the uprooted

branches. They flinched further back into the shadows of the roots as Madison came closer.

“I think that’s a tunnel!” Biff began leading the animals through the debris. “We’ll be safer down there.” Biff’s time in the lab had made him terrified of fire. Even his stone warrior couldn’t defend him against it.

“The horse won’t fit.”

Biff stopped, annoyed. “It’s just an animal! It will find its own way to the water.”

Madison scowled but didn’t argue. She wasn’t in the mood for it.

Biff peered into the dark tunnel entrance, wishing he had a fire gift to use for light.

Dog pulled on the leash Madison had attached to him when he’d dropped the puppy by her feet. The pup was also on a leash, but Dog knew how to get out of his. He kept pulling on it, stretching the collar.

Madison wished their camp members would appear in that tunnel. She didn’t feel safe and Biff wasn’t a comfort. His bad attitude had kept things tense. “I hope Angela’s okay.”

Biff frowned. “You just care about her son.”

Madison scowled. “I’ve had enough of your jealousy. Leave me alone!”

Biff backpedaled, not expecting her to confront him even though he’d brought it up. “I’m not jealous.”

“Yes, you are! I don’t belong to you and frankly, it’s a relief.”



“What?”

“You’ll push me to do shit I hate and then still never be satisfied until I’m as unhappy as you are. We’re never dating, Biff. Turn your unwanted attention to someone else.”

Biff tried to apologize, forming hasty words he didn’t mean.

Madison cut him off. “I’m not interested.”

Biff’s anger flared out. “It’s because of Charlie!”

“No! It’s because you keep yelling at me when you don’t get your way. Grow up!”

“But I want you!” Biff wasn’t used to being refused.

Madison knew that. She softened her tone but not her words. “You want anyone who might be able to erase what’s in your mind. That lab was a bad place.”

Biff immediately tried to find a way to use that to make her give him another chance.

“You need help, but I can’t be the one to save you from Marc’s plan.”

Biff paused. “What plan?”

Madison changed the subject. “You can take the other animals through the tunnel. I’m going to take the horse to the beach.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know if I’m brave enough to be an Eagle.” Madison had had enough of Biff’s company. She took a tight grip on the rope around the horse’s neck and then flung herself onto its back.

The horse immediately took off running.

Biff stared after her, mind replaying her words. He wasn't concerned with her safety or even her feelings. *She's right.*

And if she was right about his emotions, then she was probably right about the rest of it. "Marc had a plan..."

Biff took the animals into the tunnel, stomach churning. "He wanted us to get caught. I remember that part."

Biff walked into the darkness, pulling some of the reluctant animals along. "The only reason he would have made a plan like that was to keep us from being successful."

Biff's anger drew snorts from the animals.

"That son of a bitch tried to kill me!"

Now furious, Biff didn't notice when Dog slipped out of his collar and headed back up the debris ramp.

## 2

*They should be here by now.* Thick smoke wound all along the beach, obscuring parts of the island as Grant watched.

Standing on the front deck of the ship next to the one Grant was on, Jennifer nodded at his thought.

She scanned the island as wind blew in from the ocean, carrying a cooler breeze and the smell of rain. She hoped it came soon, but it was honestly too

late. The entire island was burning. Even the places where the fire had already gone through were still smoking heavily. *We lost it all.*

Jennifer swept the line of wild animals that were taking shelter in the water along the beach. She didn't find any alligators, but she was keeping an eye out for them. If the reptiles came down here, they would have to be contained while the camp came across the dock to board the ship.

*At least they'll be able to see.* Jennifer frowned at the bright moon peeking out of the cloudy sky. The smoke was being blown across the island, away from the ships. The view of the beach was clear.

They'd had to extinguish a couple of small fires on the decks, but otherwise, they hadn't been in danger at all. *And yet it feels like we are. I just can't figure out from what.* Jennifer scanned the other ships, searching for the problem.

She saw the new men, Ned and Dario, in the cabin of the pirate ship. It looked like they were trying to figure out the controls. They were pushing buttons and exclaiming about what they found.

Jennifer hoped they didn't do anything dumb. Everyone was too far away to help them if they made a mistake.

Jennifer turned her attention to the submarine. Ray and Jayda were standing on top of it while Missy stood on the ladder and kept an eye on them and the water.

Jennifer could feel Ray's unhappiness. She wished there was some way to help the kind man.

She listened to his thoughts, hoping she would spot something.

Ray knew the enforcer was tracking him, but it didn't matter. This wasn't something she could fix with her new gift. *Maybe she can zap it out of me.*

Ray was horrified that he'd cheated, but having it be with a female was a blow he wasn't sure he could recover from. *I'm gay. I've always been gay. I've never once considered a female. What the hell happened to me?*

Walking by on a patrol of the top of the sub, Jayda reluctantly stopped. "I think we should talk."

"About what?"

Jayda drew in a deep breath. "About the service you gave me."

Ray stared at the attractive woman. "You."

Jayda smiled brokenly. "Thank you for it."

Ray barely remembered anything about the moment. "Why me?"

Jayda flushed. "I'd really rather not say."

"I need to know. My entire life has been flipped."

Jayda glanced toward the water behind them, toward home. "My ex-husband picked me up off the streets when I was a teenager. He put me to work right away."

Ray was shocked.

Jayda was humiliated. "When I get drunk, or fogged apparently, I revert into that old lifestyle."

"You were a hooker."

She nodded. “I have no idea why it was you. I only know I’m not attracted to you now.”

“We were playing poker right before that.”

“Yes. Right after we finished, you flipped into fighting mode. I think it bothered you even while we were fogged.”

Ray struggled to remember. A flash went by so fast that he almost couldn’t catch it.

*“Go on and hook her up! You can’t say for sure until you try the other side. I dare you!”*

Fury filled Ray. “Trent did this. He intentionally broke us up.”

Jayda resumed her patrol, glad that she’d told him but also sad that the story would now go through their camp. People would find out she’d been loose. *And then they’ll understand I’m still loose. Ray may have lost his lover. I’m going to lose my life in this camp.*

Jayda refused to cry. *Maybe it’s best if I just don’t come back at all.*

Missy ignored the adult drama. She was supposed to be scanning the island and the ocean for trouble, but she was quietly using her special gift to slow her visions of the future so she could determine an exact time and place for something that was about to happen.

*My new mommy is very mad at Kenn.*

Missy knew Selina was still on probation with most of the people here even though she had saved

Angela's life and she was well-liked. It would only take one mistake for Selina to be banished, like Ralph had been. Missy was determined not to let that happen. *I love my new mommy!*

Missy scanned the future, searching for visions of a woman with green clothes and purple hair. Missy hadn't used this gift very much since she'd joined this camp. It was a struggle to fast forward time anyway, but slowing it to find the right moment made it even harder. She clenched her little fists around the metal railing of the ladder, forcing her gift to obey. *Show me Selina!*

Eager to be used again, Missy's witch helped the little girl control the time stream, showing her what she wanted to see.

Missy froze in pain. *She can't do that!*

Jayda and Ray looked over, drawn by her emotions.

Missy acted like nothing was wrong. "Leg cramp."

Ray and Jayda both smiled at the child and then turned back toward the burning island.

Missy locked down on her thoughts, trying to form a plan to save Selina. *If I lose her, I'll lose Shawn, too. I can't let that happen. Even if the alpha gets mad, I have to stop this one from happening.*

Grant was regretting his decision not to become a descendant yet. He could see Ray and tell from his expression that he was still upset, but without being

able to read his thoughts, Grant had no idea what was going through his mind. *I miss you.*

Ray didn't send back an answer even though he caught it. Until he sorted out his mind, there was no point in giving Grant hope.

"You're thinking about leaving."

Grant looked down at Cate; he didn't lie. "Safe Haven hasn't turned out to be anything like I expected."

"You thought we were perfect."

Grant nodded. "Turns out, it's just like the old world. Nothing's changed."

Cate rubbed her wrist under the golden bracelet. "It's not us. It's you."

"What?"

"We can't live up to your expectations so you keep being disappointed."

"I'm disappointed because Ray betrayed me."

"You should fight for him. Ray's a good person." Cate frowned toward the island. "He's one of the few who are."

"So I should forgive and forget?"

"If you can."

"Why?"

"Because he'd do it for you." Cate smiled up at Grant. "He loves you and he's sorry for it. Plus, he wasn't in his right mind. If you had all of that happening, he would help you through it."

Grant turned toward the submarine, where Ray was now glaring at the island. "He would, wouldn't he?"

Cate motioned at the pirate ship closest to them. “Yes. Selina will help Shawn. You should help Ray.”

Grant smiled at the little girl. “You’re older than you look.”

“So are you!”

Grant laughed for the first time in weeks.

### 3

“I wonder what they’re talking about.”

Shawn didn’t answer the surly guard. The brawler wanted to be on the island helping the camp, not babysitting ships and captains.

Shawn and Bret were both furious that they’d been sent away while this was happening. Neither of them thought it was by accident. Angela always foresaw things like this. There had to be a reason she had sent them away while their loved ones were in danger.

Shawn fought his rolling stomach as a wave bumped into the ship. He hated the water now. Being back on a ship was making him anxious.

Standing nearby, Bret shivered. “I don’t like it anymore either.”

Bret had been raised in an underwater lab. It hadn’t ever bothered him before. Now, all he could think about was the flaming island and wondering if he could swim to it.

“If you need someone to talk to, you can come to me.”



“Thank you.”

“Is there something you’d like to talk about?”  
Shawn needed the distraction.

Bret gave him one. “Did you know Marc didn’t plan on any of you coming back from that run? That’s why he had you all fill burn boxes.”

“That can’t be true.” Shawn found an excuse. “Eagles always handle their affairs before a run like that.”

Bret shrugged. “On their own. The team leader never insists on it.”

Shawn saw the boy was right. He added that up quickly “Marc tried to kill us all.”

“You should think about that whenever the water bothers you.”

Shawn was distracted now, but he was also angry at Bret for doing it so harshly. He fired back. “Did you know Marc would rather have Cate matched with that kid in Hell than with you?”

Bret tensed. “Because I’m a Mitchel.”

“Yes.”

“What an asshole!”

“On that, we can agree.”

#### 4

Jennifer stared at Cody, frowning deeply. He and Wade had joined her on the cruise ship a short time ago. The pirate vessel was moored nearby. All of their ships were lined up in a neat row, bright and lonely as they waited for passengers. “Do you have

something cruel and unexpected to drop on me, too?”

“Of course. That’s why I asked Wade to bring us over here.” Cody took an envelope out and gave it to her. “That’s Angela’s burn box.”

Jennifer stored it in her jacket pocket, instantly morbidly curious. “That’s what I get for asking.”

“Yep.”

She sighed. “What’s in it?”

“A list of her mistakes and secrets, and her plans for the future so you can keep them going.”

Jennifer eyed the boy and decided to be just as brutally honest. “There’s no place for a king in a world run by women.”

Cody smiled at her. “Yes, there is. I’m the figurehead.”

Jennifer realized the boy had already had this conversation, probably with the boss. “Won’t you get tired of that and insist on real power?”

“No. I believe in the alpha’s plan completely. You’ll understand when you finally get the details on it.”

Jennifer was tempted to rip open the envelope and see exactly what those plans were.

Cody frowned at her. “Kyle will try to stop us. You may have to pick between love and our future.”

*And I can’t do that.* Jennifer redirected the conversation. “How are you doing?” She knew he still felt bad about his mom.

“Better.” Cody peered at the sub, where Missy was. “We’ll be very happy together.”

“What about your sister?”

Cody sighed. “She wants Joey. Cate’s path will be much harder than mine.”

“Is there anything we can do to help her get over Joey? Someone else we can match her with?” Jennifer knew Bret had a thing for Cate.

Cody shrugged. “The alpha will try, but she’s busy and the longer it takes, the more Cate will want Joey.”

“Is it because he reminds her of the past?”

“It’s because he reminds her of Reicher.”

Jennifer realized the little girl was having a Stockholm Syndrome reaction just like the mission men were. “We have to put a stop to that.”

“Yes. But first, you have to find a way to get that bracelet off of her. Joey can see and hear everything through it.”

Jennifer was horrified. “I’ll talk to the boss as soon as she gets here.”

“He. Marc is the boss right now.”

“Another figurehead?”

Cody frowned. “Never. He doesn’t want to give it back already. They may fight over it when she’s recovered.”

Jennifer glanced over at Wade, who was being suspiciously quiet about the sensitive subjects. “Is there anything you’d like to add to this conversation?”

Wade made a face. “Not really.”

He wasn’t in the mood for any of the revelations that were happening around him. Wade was

concerned with the family that was all still on the island. He scanned the shore continuously, searching for them.

Cody liked Wade a lot. He smiled at the big man. “They’re all fine. They’re with the alpha.”

Wade’s bitterness came out of his mouth before he could stop it. “That doesn’t really mean much, kid. If she decides it’s time to remove Neil, witnesses won’t matter.”

Jennifer nodded. That was absolutely true. “But she’s not going to. She needs Samantha. Removing Sam’s mate won’t go over well.”

Wade frowned. “What does she need Samantha for?” He couldn’t help being suspicious of a sentence like that.

Jennifer shrugged. “Friendship? Leadership duties? Her skills as a lawyer?”

Wade snorted. “Don’t bullshit me, lady. Just tell me the truth.”

Jennifer didn’t like Wade’s tone, but she understood his immediate defense of Samantha. “Samantha has a place in the future that we’re building.”

Now Wade was interested in the conversation. “What kind of place?”

Jennifer gestured toward the smoky island. “Have you noticed how many of the men are taking over den mother duties while the women are joining the Eagles in record numbers?”

Wade had noticed that. “I assume that’s part of the great reset?”

“It’s because of the rage illness. Have you noticed that it affects men and women differently?”

“No.” Wade hadn’t been paying attention to that at all.

“Ralph has the rage illness. He’s in stage two. All he does is cry.”

Wade scowled. “While people like Erin and Sadie have become aggressive.”

“Exactly. None of this was Angela’s idea. You have to understand that she’s just trying to protect the future against what the governments have done to all of us. There’s no place in that future for men who can’t fight to still be Eagles, the same as it’s always been.”

“So, it’s not some nefarious scheme to put women in charge of the world?”

Jennifer shrugged. “The alpha is taking advantage of the situation. Things have to change. That’s the law of existence.”

Wade was a bit ashamed that she’d had to spell it out for him. “The men on this island are going to figure out what’s happening. Not all of them are as dense as I am.”

Jennifer smiled. “Of course, they will. As we gently let them in on the secrets and reveal small details here and there.”

Wade grunted as he realized one of those moments was happening right now. “Not everyone is going to take it as well as I will.”

Jennifer knew that was the truth. Several of the men in their camp were going to fight back as hard as they could.

Wade realized the worst runs had affected the most aggressive men, changing them. “It was all intentional.”

“I can’t say that for sure.” Jennifer thought the letter in her jacket pocket might clear up some of that confusion, but she refused to open it. People who were trusted with burn boxes were never supposed to open them unless the person actually died. “Some people will leave the island to avoid that future. Others will accept their new place in our history.”

“And what happens to those who stay here and try to fight?”

Jennifer swept the flames that were now reaching the backside of the island, sending more thick smoke into the sky. “They’ll be flushed out and removed.”

“How can you be okay with that? Kyle is one of those men!” Wade pointed at her large stomach. “And you’re having a son! How can you betray them all that way?”

Jennifer raised her voice right back at him. “Haven’t you been listening? The men are becoming feminine and the women are becoming dominant. If we don’t complete the gender flip now, before everyone understands what’s happening, humanity is going to die out in a war that will be men against women. No one will be safe; nothing

will survive. The only one who wins in that future is Nature.”

Wade began to understand that Angela and the other women weren't trying to take over just for themselves. “You're protecting the normals.”

Jennifer was relieved that he had gotten it so quickly. “In a war between men and women, the magic users will flock to our side. The normals will be on the side of the men because they want the world to go back to how it was. They'll all be enslaved or killed. Then it will just be descendants on this planet, battling it out to be the last one standing. We have to stop that future.”

Cody scanned the smoky beach, enjoying being able to see so many different animals so close to where they were. “Tonya's working on it. If she can bring back enough of the rage vaccine, or learn how to make it, we could send batches to all of the countries with survivors. There's still a small chance.”

Wade wanted to be hopeful about that, but he was aware that Tonya hadn't had any success in duplicating the vaccine. “It's not going to work.”

Cody sighed sadly. “No. The reign of men is almost over. The only unknown is what comes next. Either the women will lead us into the future or a new war will start and we'll destroy ourselves. Even Missy can't tell what's going to happen.”

A dark cloud came over the ships and headed for the island. The wind picked up as a feeling of evil filled the air.

“It’s time.”

Cody nodded at Jennifer’s comment. “The Creator’s most loved child is about to reenter the world.” He shivered. “If she’s our queen, all people will suffer; the land will burn for her pleasure.”

Jennifer knew Cody was scanning the future now. She couldn’t resist asking him another question. “Why did the alpha send us all out here while everyone else is in danger?”

Cody looked up at her with dazed, scared eyes. “Her baby cannot be controlled. The alpha sent us away to protect us.”

“What about the others? Are they in danger from her little monster?”

Cody blinked, coming back from the time stream. “That has not been revealed.”



Chapter Thirty  
**The Monster**

1

“Someone’s coming up behind us.” Marc motioned. “Let the rear guards know it’s our people.”

Piper hurried down the line, smiling at nervous camp members to let them know it wasn’t a problem.

Adrian saw Piper coming. He let her deliver the message even though he already knew. He’d felt Gus trying to reach the hive.

“Marc says some of ours are catching up.”

Adrian pointed at a faint light coming through the tunnel. “Check it out.”

Piper dropped a hand to her gun and hurried into the dimness by herself.

Adrian was proud of how dependable Piper had become, but he worried over her need for action. In this camp, when someone wished for that they usually got more of it than they could handle.

Piper spotted Gus and Ralph. They were both scratched, bruised, limping, and covered in soot from the fire. It looked like they’d had a rough trip.

Gus grinned at Piper. “It’s a little hot up there.”

Piper chuckled as she took his other side to help him to the medic. “All we have down here so far is mud and darkness.”

“Sounds perfect.” Gus lowered his voice as they reached the main group. “Tell the boss I lost one. Tim’s running loose.”

Piper eyed the rope that was connecting Ralph to Gus, approving of it. She wondered how Tim had escaped, but she didn’t ask. She was sure she would find out once the story hit the gossip vine.

“Gus!” Bernice ran to him.

Gus accepted her hug, heart hurting, and then he pushed her back. “I can’t date you anymore.”

Bernice froze.

Gus was sorry to embarrass her, but if he didn’t handle it right now, he might change his mind. “When you come clean, we’ll talk about the future. Until then, I need you to stay away from me.”

Everyone was shocked by Gus’s decision, mostly because Bernice was stunningly beautiful. Most men would have tolerated whatever she was hiding just to be with her.

Bernice got back into the line, but now, even the church people eyed her suspiciously.

Ralph scanned the crowd. “Where’s Daisey?”

“She’s with Tonya’s group under the clinic.”

Piper patted Ralph’s sweaty arm. “We’ll meet up with them as we go.”

Ralph spotted his sons in the line. All of them ran over to hug him and check on him.

Ralph was ashamed of his behavior once again. His sons loved him. *I don't deserve them.*

Gus didn't want Ralph to feel bad anymore. "He helped me when a tree fell on my leg and Tim ran off. Ralph probably saved my life."

Residents immediately began viewing the older man a little differently.

Gus had exaggerated, but he wanted Ralph to get full credit; he wanted Tim to get their full wrath.

Piper left the two men with Terry and rejoined Marc at the front of the line.

Marc was glad that two more of their people were here, but he didn't slow the pace. He was running out of time.

*You're not going to make it to the ship before she gives birth.*

Marc walked faster, ignoring that voice inside even though he knew it was right.

Greg came up and walked next to Marc. "She's not going to make it much further."

Angela groaned loudly, as if to prove Greg's point.

Marc sighed. He'd been listening to her get louder as they walked through the tunnel. "I'm trying to reach the ship. The medical bay has everything the medics might need. Keep her moving as long as you can."

Greg glared at Marc; he hadn't forgotten they were at odds again. Then he hurried back to where Angela was walking in the middle of the line.

Marc was aware of Greg's unhappiness, but he didn't have time for it. Everyone was unhappy right now. They were all sweating and very hot. It was smoky down here, too, though not so bad that it was causing coughs anymore. They were getting thirsty, too. They'd used most of their water to fight the fire in town; almost no one had any left.

It was also dark. The descendants who had spare energy were walking with fire shields up to provide light since the torches had run out. That was also increasing the temperature, but most of the heat was coming directly from Angela. Every contraction sent a new wave of warmth through the tunnel.

Angela was in Dace's wheelchair, being pushed along while Jack carried his brother. She had a whole camp of people around her, waiting to help when she said she couldn't go any further. Until then, Marc wasn't stopping. No one was safe down here.

Greg paused by Morgan as he spotted the man in line with the den mothers. "You should be back there with the boss."

Morgan shook his head. "Terry has her covered. If she needs me, she'll call for me."

Morgan scanned the kids around them, lingering on Roy and Autumn.

Greg glared. "If you're going to pick those kids over the boss in a medical moment, then you might as well just join the den mothers and kiss the Eagles goodbye."

Greg went on down the line. He never would have expected this out of Morgan.

Morgan was embarrassed, but he had made a promise to Jennifer and Kyle that he would stay with the kids no matter what and he was keeping that promise. Roy and Autumn were like his own children now. *If things go crazy, I can't trust Marc to keep them alive. None of us can.*

Conner and Candy were walking behind the den mothers, along with Charlie. They had been discussing baby care. That conversation stopped now.

Conner was a little surprised when Charlie didn't defend his dad. He knew Charlie loved Marc and he didn't like Greg.

Charlie shrugged. "He's made some mistakes. He'll keep proving himself and then everyone will want him."

Candy looked over. "Like they want you."

Charlie followed her line of sight and saw one of the camp relief sources eyeing him openly from her place in front of the den mothers. As they made eye contact, the woman stepped out of the line.

Charlie immediately brought up a shield around himself to avoid her.

Conner copied Candy's frown. "I thought Wade talked to them."

Candy shrugged. "Wade's threats mean little in comparison to the chance to be matched with the boss's son."

Walking directly behind Charlie to give him protection if he needed it, Amanda motioned toward her oldest daughter.

Margret hurried forward, eager to be useful. Just walking quietly was boring.

Margret lifted a shield over Charlie, Conner, Candy, and all three of their children.

Charlie let his shield go in relief. He gave Margret a quick smile. "Thanks."

Charlie was always tired now. Using his shield would have run him out of energy quickly.

"Do you want me to carry the baby for a little while?"

Charlie started to deny her and then shrugged. If the camp's new enforcer thought he needed a break, then he probably did. He was also curious if Margret was strong enough to keep her shield up and still function at the same time.

Margret took the baby gently, cradling the boy in one arm expertly. She often helped out with the children in camp. Her shield didn't even flicker. "He's a cutie. Too bad he'll grow up to look like you."

Charlie gawked in surprise as Conner and Candy snickered.

Margret shrugged. "I guess if he looks like your mom it'll be okay."

Charlie realized she was joking. He joined in the laughter, relaxing a little. All he usually heard from females was how handsome he was and how

important he was. He'd forgotten what it was like to have a friend.

Margret frowned. "We are not friends."

Charlie glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She wasn't staring at him or leering at his body like many of the other females did. She reminded him of Madison. "We can be, as long as you don't turn out to be like the rest of them."

Margret met his eyes. "Right back at ya, *kid*."

Charlie frowned. "I got your kid right here."

"Nope, I got *your* kid right here."

Amusement echoed through the tunnel, bringing the tension down a little.

Walking next to Amanda, Ed recognized the moment. "You did that on purpose."

Amanda shrugged, not about to apologize for looking out for the best interest of her offspring. "He's related to the alpha and he's so busy with his own baby that he won't be interested in making another one right away. They can finish growing up together without the pressure that a relationship with a full-grown man would bring."

Ed sighed. "Well, consider me out of the picture, then. My résumé can't match his."

Amanda had expected Ed to be upset, especially considering that she had almost promised him a chance with Margret.

"I'm not that disappointed. I'm sure I can find something else to do with my time." Ed smiled at Amanda. "I do hope that you and I can still be friends."

Amanda lifted a brow. “Are we friends?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

Amanda took another step toward changing the ugly future that waited for her. “Okay.”

Ed felt their relationship change. For one quick instant, he was attracted to the adult female. Then it faded, leaving him with faint disappointment and a restless heart that would need adventure to satisfy it. “Well, call me sometime. We’ll do lunch or something.”

Both of them chuckled without really feeling amused.

Anna and Daniella were right behind the den mothers. Both widows were unhappy that the enforcer was walking so close to them. They tried to ignore her while continuing their conversation.

“I can’t believe you’re pregnant.”

Anna beamed. “Harry gave me a wonderful gift. I never would have gotten to be a mother.” Tobias had been anti-children the entire time they’d been with him. He’d always taken great care to make sure they didn’t get pregnant.

Daniella wondered if motherhood might satisfy her as well. She and her sister were getting very near the age where they would be too old for it.

Daniella eyed the large group walking next to them. Brittani was surrounded by Daryl and her family. She was in her wheelchair and doing fine, but every low moan Angela let out was making them more nervous about Brittani’s birth. Daniella decided to use a little of the distraction technique



she was learning in the Eagles. “We have a lot of babies coming. You guys should think of names quick before someone takes all of the good ones.”

Daryl frowned slightly. “The alpha has to pick the names.”

Brittani was pulled out of her musings about having enough clothes for three babies. “How will she do that for herself?”

No one answered.

One of them knew, but she didn’t feel like talking to other people. Making one friend at a time was more than enough for Amanda.

Erin was listening to the conversation even though she was near the rear of the group. She was still avoiding Greg. *If I wasn’t pregnant, I’d break up with him.*

Panaji was carrying Sadie’s limp body on his back, giving Erin a break. Sadie hadn’t woken yet from the sedative. “Why not do it anyway?”

“Because a child needs a father.”

Panaji was worried about what would happen to Sadie now, but he didn’t ask. He’d already learned that it was best to wait until the action was over before talking to the boss. Angela was a lot more likely to hand out favors and mercy after she knew everyone was safe. “He can still be a dad even if you two aren’t together, like with Lisa.”

Erin realized she was about to be the unwanted ex, with an unwanted child. Her hand went to her flat stomach. *I’ll always want it even if he doesn’t.*

As if pulled on a string, Greg came through the line to check on her. It had occurred to him that he hadn't spoken to Erin the entire time they'd been in the tunnels. He'd only been worried about Angela. He expected Erin to be pissed.

Erin was. She quickly took her engagement ring off and held it out. "Return to your owner. We're done."

People around them felt bad for Greg, but they agreed with Erin's decision. Greg obviously wasn't going to be the attentive mate that she deserved.

Greg felt relief and pain. He put the ring in his pocket and moved away from Erin without saying anything.

Right behind them, Molly huffed. "More drama. Great."

"Yep." Thomas was relieved, though. He limped along next to Molly, now using his crutches. Other people's drama kept the spotlight off of him. *I still can't believe they thought I was making calls to the States. I haven't been there in a decade.* "I don't know a single person in that country."

Molly hugged him carefully so she didn't knock him off the crutches. "We know someone has to be in contact with William. When we figure out who it is, everyone will regret giving you the cold shoulder." Thomas's defense hadn't convinced everyone of his innocence.

Listening closely to everything going on around him, Mike spoke up. "Maybe we can set up cameras around all of the radios to watch things all the time."

People around him immediately protested.

“We don’t need to be under surveillance!”

“No!”

“We’re already watched enough!”

“It was just an idea.” Inside, Mike gloated. With one quick suggestion, he had eliminated the possibility that he would be caught on camera the next time he contacted William.

Bernice slid next to Mike and then dropped back further, putting herself and her daughter in the area around the church group. Somchai had been leering at her openly since Gus broke up with her. She couldn’t take it anymore.

Parker saw what was happening. He stepped aside so Bernice could get into the center of the church group and then stepped in front of her. He wanted to know what Bernice was hiding, but this wasn’t the time to dig in and find out. He motioned at the other church people. “Time for another song.”

He chose one quickly to get them started. “How great thou art...”

Angela screamed loudly, slowing everyone.

Parker sighed. “Okay, not that one.”

Angela screamed again, bringing the entire group to a halt this time.

Adrian froze. “It’s time.”

Everyone realized he was right as the descendant kids ran to Angela and surrounded her with shields and their bodies. The baby was coming. Now.

Marc headed for his wife, leaving Piper standing by herself in the front. Marc gave Neil a pointed look as he went by.

Neil reluctantly pushed the twin stroller over next to Morgan. “Here’s a couple more for you, *mother.*”

Morgan gave Neil a dirty look and then turned his attention to the babies. Amy had run over to Angela. Roy and Autumn were both yawning sleepily and waiting for food; it was past dinner time for everyone. Morgan was glad that Neil’s twins were sleeping.

Neil joined Piper, scanning for problems while hoping this went quick and easy for Angela. All he could think about was how her last two pregnancies had ended up. For the sake of her sanity and the future of their camp, they needed this to go well.

Charlie and Conner eased closer to the birth area in case they were needed. They were also concerned about this moment. They had been for a while now. The hushed whispers of the medics on this topic hadn’t been comforting.

The camp around them was glad for the break from walking, but no one was eager to listen to Angela’s pain as she brought a new life into the world. They leaned against the walls or sat on the floor that was still a little muddy. Some of them went over and began pulling vines from the walls

and putting them into their pockets without answering questions about why.

The den mothers moved the young children and the nosier camp members away from the birth area, distracting them with mental games and new gossip that hadn't had a chance to spread yet.

Marc pulled his kit off and dropped it next to Selina. "Get my bedroll put down while we get her out of the chair."

Marc forced himself to stay calm, but it was hard. *It wasn't supposed to go like this!* The medics had placed specific supplies in every location on the island to make sure they were covered no matter where she went into labor. *But we didn't think about being down here.* They didn't have anything they needed to help her give birth now except for magic and Marc was terrified that wasn't going to be enough.

Marc peered through the crowd, locking eyes with Adrian.

Adrian tried to send comfort, but he didn't leave his post. Neil would cover the front and Adrian would cover the rear. Between them, people would be safe while Marc stayed with his wife.

Greg put a gentle hand under Angela's arm to help her out of the chair. He immediately let go, flinching at the heat. "Damn." It felt like her skin was on fire.

Terry pointed at an area of the tunnel that was mostly clear and flat. The wall was covered in thick,

dusty vines, but that couldn't be helped. "Put the bedroll there."

He began digging through his medical bag to get out the supplies he thought he might need.

Angela tried to smile through the pain. "I waited as long as I could."

Marc kissed her and helped her stand. "You did fine, baby."

Greg glared at them.

Marc helped Angela over to his bedroll and eased her onto it. "I'm sorry this isn't a better room. All the expensive suites were taken."

Angela chuckled. It turned into a cry of pain as her stomach hardened again.

Terry knelt near her feet as she curled onto her side. "Do you give consent for this treatment?" Terry had gotten the idea to ask from watching the women in camp. Most of them didn't like to be touched without permission, even for blood work.

"Yes." Angela hissed out a long breath, shivering.

Terry frowned at the gawkers all around them. "Find something to do!"

People moved away to give her privacy.

Samantha and Selina stood shoulder to shoulder to block the view as Terry slid Angela's sweat pants down.

"I need to see how far you're dilated. I'll be gentle." Terry got to work, tuning out everyone else as he prepared to help bring a new life into the world.

Angela tried not to tense up. *It's okay. He's a doctor. He won't hurt me.*

Marc didn't watch the exam. He was busy praying for this to go well. *We can't take another loss, Lord. Please let this one live.*

Terry's eyes widened. He withdrew his hand and grabbed his medical bag. "I felt the head. You're fully dilated." This was going to go faster than he'd expected.

Angela drew in a deep breath as the contraction faded and her head spun dizzily. "I need Adrian."

Marc wasn't upset or surprised. He sent the order for Adrian to join them while he sat next to her. He wasn't leaving her side until this was over.

In the rear, Adrian reluctantly gave guard duty over to Stuart and the brawlers. "Keep it under control." He hurried toward the mother-to-be, also praying nothing went wrong.

Angela looked up weakly as he arrived. She felt like all of her energy was being drained. "Will you bless my daughter, alpha?"

Adrian smiled proudly. "I'd be honored."

He stayed back as people frowned or nodded in understanding. "Have you chosen a name?"

Marc wasn't sure. Angela had offered quite a few suggestions over the last few weeks.

"Need to see her first." Angela groaned. "Here we go."

Terry spread her legs so he had access.

Marc held her hand, barely feeling her nails digging into his skin.

Greg couldn't take her screams. He started to kneel next to Marc to offer comfort.

He was stopped by a shield.

Greg frowned at Samantha. "It's okay to let me in."

Samantha scowled at him. "That's not me."

"Go away!" Angela didn't want Greg to get hurt. The baby was using her gifts keeping him back. If he insisted, things could get ugly.

Greg stomped away from her. *I've lost my fiancé. I lost the boss. I've lost it all.* He glanced toward Lisa.

Lisa snorted in contempt and turned her back to him as he went by.

A stiff breeze went through the tunnel, carrying the smells of fire and brimstone.

All of the babies in the line woke at the same time. They began crying.

"That's not good." Adrian brought up a stronger shield around Angela, hoping to spare everyone else. The emotions coming from her were beyond ugly. They had the feel of a psychopath.

"It's not her." Marc knew what was happening. He placed a hand on Angela's hard stomach as she began to push. "It's time to join us now. There's nothing to be scared of."

The feeling of evil faded a bit.

Angela pushed harder, not caring when a rush of warm wetness soaked her legs and the bedroll. She wanted the baby to be born now, while she might still have the strength to do it. The pregnancy



had drained her so badly that she wasn't sure she could do this now that the moment was here.

"The head's almost out!" Terry was excited by any birth, but this one was special. He could feel it. "Push, Angie. Push!"

Angela screamed again as she pushed; pain ripped through her womb. Tears flowed from her eyes.

Terry caught the slippery baby as she came out, helping her turn to pass the shoulders and then Angela's squirming, squalling daughter was in his hands. "It's a girl!"

Residents cheered around them, relieved as the baby's loud wails filled the tunnel.

The other babies stopped crying. The descendant children bowed their heads in respect.

Terry cleared the baby's mouth of excess fluid and put her in the blanket Samantha was holding. He quickly tied and cut the cord.

Samantha rubbed the blanket edges carefully over the baby to clean it, almost crying herself. Birth was a miracle. "Hello, sweetheart. Welcome to hell."

Samantha ignored the laughs and the frowns. "It's a hard place, but you'll always be surrounded by people who love you." Samantha let the baby feel her warm emotions, trying to make a good impression.

Samantha began to suffocate, unable to draw in any air.

Neil turned her way, drawn by her panic.

Marc neatly took the baby from Samantha and held her out to Angela. "This is your mother."

Samantha drew in air as the feeling subsided. She waved Neil off and pretended nothing was wrong. *But it is.* She lifted a layered shield to keep that from happening to anyone else.

Angela cradled the baby, moaning as her stomach clenched again and another sensation of ripping tore through her body.

The baby opened her eyes. Glowing blue orbs stared at Angela without mercy.

"Do it now."

Adrian lifted his hands. "As the alpha of Safe Haven, I bless this child with all the love and protection of our kind. May she never go corrupt."

For one instant, a feeling of death came off the newborn in a thick wave that started to choke everyone inside the layered shields. Then it faded and the baby's eyes returned to normal dark blue. She stared at Angela in wonder.

Angela forced out words as the darkness in her mind beckoned warmly. "Karleen Elizabeth Brady."

Adrian finished the blessing. "Karleen Elizabeth Brady, welcome to the hive." He connected her immediately, letting her feel the relief of all the descendants that she was here.

The baby whimpered at the sudden noise and then accepted it as a part of her new life.

Adrian looked at Angela. "Borderline."

Angela smiled, barely feeling it when the placenta passed in another rush of blood. “That’s good. Marc can work with that...”

Angela shut her eyes as the blood loss began to take its toll. “Sleep.”

“Angie?”

Charlie felt death enter the tunnel; he moved toward the birth area. “Mom?”

Marc shook her arm. “Angie! Stay awake!”

“She’s bleeding too much!” Terry packed off the area with towels, but there wasn’t anything else he could do for her down here.

“We need a healer!” Marc looked around frantically. *It wasn’t supposed to happen this way!*

Angela’s eyes shot open. She screamed again.

“What’s happening?!”

Samantha was still monitoring the baby. She connected to Marc through the hive. *The baby’s healing her. Your daughter is a healer.*

Angela’s lashes fluttered again, but her chest rose in steady breaths.

“It’s stopping.” Terry didn’t know what had caused the problem or why the bleeding had slowed. He was just relieved when the towels stopped turning red so fast. He quickly got a pressure cuff on her arm.

Marc stared at the baby, astounded. *So much power already. We’ll never be able to control her.*

Samantha nodded. *We need to do everything we can to make her happy with us.*

Terry smiled. “Her pressure’s stabilizing.”

The baby yawned and shut her eyes.

Marc tried to remember how to breathe. Life just got better for them. *And harder. If we ever make her feel unwanted, we'll be in deep shit.*

Adrian nodded. "We also know we have to keep her away from some people."

Marc glanced over his shoulder, spotting Greg standing by himself near the tunnel wall. *He's at the top of the list.*

Angela groaned again; the pain was in her heart this time. "No!"

Everyone froze, waiting for the next problem to reach them.

Fresh tears ran from Angela's eyes. "Missing."

Marc leaned closer, trying to understand what she was saying. "What's missing?"

Angela sucked in air, exhausted. "Kids. We have missing kids!"

Marc's stomach dropped.

Angela held her daughter close. "It's okay... We'll find them."

The witnesses realized the baby had been trying to warn them. She just didn't know how to communicate yet.

Marc stood up, getting his notebook out. "I want a complete check right now!"

Marc desperately hoped it wasn't true, but he already knew it was. Now that it had been pointed out, he could feel the shortage of dots on his mental radar. *If those kids are dead, I'll drown myself in the same place where I killed Kendle.*



## Chapter Thirty-One

# I Approve

### 1

“**W**e are missing four kids.” Adrian gave the list to Marc, furious with himself. “I don’t know how I missed them.”

“Same.” Morgan was listening from the line. “I’ve been with the den mothers this whole time. I should have rechecked the list.”

Everyone was horrified that they hadn’t noticed four of their kids were missing. The den mothers moved the other kids closer together while the camp members gave them rough looks even though they hadn’t noticed the kids were gone either.

Marc grunted. “There’s plenty of blame to go around. We’ll beat ourselves up later. Right now, we have to find those kids. When was the last time anyone saw them?”

Adrian checked his notes. “They were with us when we left town. They must have snuck off after that.”

“They wanted to go swimming.” Little Amy yawned, leaning against Neil. “I told them to stay with us, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“Why didn’t you tell someone?”

Amy frowned at Marc. “I don’t rat on my friends!”

Neil sighed. That Eagle rule needed to change.

“How did they slip off without anyone noticing?” Adrian thought he’d done a good job of covering their rear.

“E.E.T.” Amy yawned again. “Can we go home? I miss the ship.”

“They’re going to the beach using Eagle Evasion Tactics, so that means they’re probably covered in mud. There’s nothing else down here they could have used for cover.” Marc concentrated. *How long?*

Kyle’s answer came right back through the hive. *Five minutes.*

Marc motioned to Piper. “Lead us out. Kyle’s about to catch up and then we’ll track them.”

Adrian shook his head. “You can send people, but you can’t do it yourself, Marc. The leader has to stay with the group.”

Marc was already tired of the rules and limits of being in charge. “They’re just kids!”

“I know. I’ll go if you want.”

Marc did, but he also wanted Adrian here to guard their rear and help him with the next action. The adventure wasn’t over yet. “Send Kyle as soon as he gets here.”

“I will.” Adrian went back to the rear, visually checking on Angela as he went by. She was in Dace’s chair again, holding the baby and trying to stay awake. Terry had lightly medicated her for the

rest of the trip. It hadn't been safe for the baby to do it before she was born.

Adrian eyed the sleeping newborn curiously. They'd all felt the girl's power. If she'd just been trying to communicate about the missing kids, then their fears were baseless.

Angela met his eyes, shaking her head.

Adrian went to the rear by the church group, trying not to dwell on it. *We'll cover it as we need to.* "On your feet, people. We're going to the ship!"

A cheer went through the tunnel. Everyone was ready to be out of here.

Adrian heard a lot of light steps coming and shined his flickering neck light behind them.

Bright eyes glowed, catching up quickly.

Adrian recognized them and grinned. "Anyone want to pet a puppy?"

Other than the haunted expression on Biff's face, it didn't look like it had been hard to reach them with the animals. He was still mostly unruffled. The animals hadn't fared as well. All of them were dusty on the top with muddy paws and leashes that were being pulled too tightly against their necks.

People chuckled as Biff let go of the leashes and the animals flew into the crowd to find their favorite people. They meowed and barked, trying to tell the humans what they'd gone through.

Biff marched toward the front of the line, ignoring everyone else. "I want to talk to Marc!"



Greg sensed they had the same issue. He grabbed Biff's arm and pulled the angry man into the line next to him. "Let it wait until we get these people to the ship."

Biff didn't care about any of them. "He tried to kill me!"

Greg glared toward Marc again. "It wasn't just you."

Biff calmed a little as he snapped that into place. "None of us were supposed to survive."

"Nope. And we'll handle it. After this run is done."

Biff stayed next to Greg, contemplating that moment. Knowing there were others wasn't a relief. It made him even angrier. *A leader isn't supposed to do that to their team!*

Marc heard and felt their anger as he got the line moving again, but he only cared about the missing kids right now. He sent out mental calls to the children, and to Jennifer, hoping she could hear them. There was a chance that the kids had made it to the beach and been picked up by one of the ships.

Charlie petted Buster, looking around. "Where's Madison?"

It angered Biff all over again that Charlie was the one who noticed. "She wouldn't leave the horse. She headed for the beach."

"Why didn't you tell us that?!" Marc was furious all over again.

"You let her go alone?" Charlie sneered at the scarred playboy. "Some Eagle."

“Slam you!”

Greg held Biff back. “Wrong target.”

“It’s not the wrong target. That little shit wants my woman!”

Charlie wasn’t scared of Biff. “She’s not your woman. In fact, she doesn’t even like you. Leave her alone or we’ll file a stalking charge.”

“I knew it! You do want her!”

Charlie snorted. “We’re friends. She doesn’t want a relationship and neither do I, so just back off!” He turned hard glares on the women in line around them. “That goes for all of you! Leave us alone!”

Eagles clapped, proud of him.

Biff glared, jealous.

Marc sighed. “Let’s roll. A ship with water, power, and food is waiting for us. We can duke it out then.”

The camp moved faster, drawn by those promises.

Charlie turned toward his dad. “I’ll go find her.”

Marc quickly shook his head. “We have a tracker who will handle it.”

Charlie didn’t argue even though he felt bad that Madison was out there by herself. He didn’t like having to make the choice to stay down here with his son, but he did it anyway. *Parenting sucks.*

Amanda was impressed with Charlie’s attitude and his obedience. *He’ll make a good son-in-law.*

Charlie felt the regard of the enforcer as she walked behind them. He turned around, walking backward without tripping. “Stop it.”

Amanda lifted one brow. “What?”

“Scheming to put me and your daughter together. She doesn’t like me that way.”

Margret blushed and refused to speak up.

“You’re wrong.” Amanda was certain of it. “She has many timid dogs sniffing at her heels when I’m not around. She needs a young pup who isn’t afraid of her mother.”

Charlie understood that was a compliment. He surprised them all. “My mom will pick someone for me when she thinks I’m ready. All skanks have to go through her.”

“What about good girls?” Conner was sure Margret and Madison were both good.

Charlie turned around and gently took his son from Margret. “The good ones can go through my dad. I’m not dating again unless they both approve it, so everyone can just stop it right now.”

Margret glanced over her shoulder at Ed.

Ed waited to see what her choice would be, but he was no longer as interested as he had been. He didn’t speak up.

Margret left the line and went to join Marc. “Is there a test or something I need to pass?”

Marc chuckled despite his heavy heart. “There is and you just did.”

“Cool.” Margret walked by Marc, lifting a shield over him that flamed and crackled, providing light. She knew how to be useful.

Charlie snickered. “She’s got balls.”

Conner regarded Candy. “Yes, she does.”

Candy blushed. “Stop it. We have another month to go.”

Conner didn’t let his fear ruin the moment this time. He was proud of the life he was carving out for himself even though he was a Mitchel.

Biff couldn’t take it. “Madison isn’t a good girl. She was a gunrunner!”

Greg frowned at the loud man. “A lot of us had bad pasts. We don’t hold that against people.”

Biff’s anger reached a boiling point. “His dad tried to kill me and he’s going to get my piece of ass!”

Greg moved over. “Mistake.”

Charlie turned and fired, hitting Biff with his new energy drain.

Biff screamed at the pain, energy dropping faster than he could recover it. He fell to his knees, heart finally settling down. *Now I feel at home.*

Charlie resumed walking. “Next time, ask the enforcer to torture you so you feel like you’re back in the lab. I need my strength for my son.”

Biff shuddered from the fading pain. “I’m sorry.”

Greg helped the man to his feet. “We all are. Now come on. The ship is waiting and so is our justice.”

Biff didn't move.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Do you want another one?"

Biff made people grimace by nodding.

Amanda motioned.

Alicia, her youngest daughter, hit Biff hard. His scream echoed all the way to the rear of the group.

"That is a proper use of your skills. Never use it for your pleasure."

Alicia looked at her mother as the line started to move again. "Is it okay to enjoy those moments?"

"Of course. You are a Mitchel."

"Incoming!" Kenn's voice boomed down the tunnel ahead of them.

Kenn's group was in worse shape than the other people in this tunnel. Marc scanned the injuries and pointed toward the medic. Terry would be busy digging glass out of their arms and faces for hours. The babies were in good shape, however. He was glad to see that.

Marc waved to his right side. "I need a wingman."

He didn't ask Kenn what had happened. Three of them were burnt, bruised, limping, and punctured. They'd clearly had a close call and survived it.

Kenn took the spot. "Wait until you hear about our adventure."

Marc snorted. "Later, Grunt."

Kenn's happiness fell to the dirt. "I know what you did."

“Like I said, *later.*”

Kenn saw Greg helping Biff to his feet. He didn't ask what had happened. He read their thoughts as Tonya and his group hurried by.

“Daisey!” Ralph couldn't leave the line.

Gus began untying the rope. “Go on.”

Ralph was moving the instant the rope dropped. He hugged Daisey, almost crying again. “I'm so glad you're all right!”

Trent pushed the couple toward the nearest medic. “She had a heart episode. Check her out as we walk.” Trent didn't tell them he had burns and his ankle might be fractured again. There would be time for that later. He wanted the others to be cared for first.

Stanley and the older den mother joined the line of kids, gratefully putting Goldie's twins into an empty stroller. Their arms were sore.

Isabel followed Tonya down the line.

Tonya spotted Angela and Samantha. She grinned, approaching without fear. “Let me meet that little monster!”

Angela chuckled tiredly. “I see she already has a nickname.”

Blood from the glass in Tonya's arms smeared onto the blanket around the baby as she carefully took the newborn.

Samantha and the others tensed, waiting to see what reaction the bruised, bleeding redhead received.

The baby opened her eyes. Bright blue orbs stared at Tonya.

Tonya knelt to give the baby a quick checkup. “She’s beautiful.” *And dangerous.* Tonya could already feel the baby’s power. “We’ll teach her to use it for the greater good.”

Tonya paused as pain went up her arms. She shook her head. “Save that for our enemies. We have a lot of them.”

The baby gurgled and closed her eyes, going back to sleep.

Tonya finished her checkup, shrugging at the surprise. “KJ’s a handful, too. He’ll need a strong friend.”

Angela leaned against the chair, mind flying over the future with the last of her energy. She yawned, then nodded. “I just might approve that match.”

Samantha was a bit jealous at the announcement and at the baby’s acceptance of Tonya.

“She felt your secrets.” Selina knew what was happening. She’d been around a lot of descendant babies in the lab. “When she understands you’re not a threat, it will be better.”

Samantha flushed as eyes went to her.

Angela subtly shook her head. This wasn’t the time for Samantha to admit to anything. “It’s more likely that she felt Neil’s issues. Power rubs off. Why wouldn’t shame do the same?”

People relaxed while shooting dirty looks at Neil.

Neil smiled at Angela. *Thank you, Boss.*

*It's my honor.*

Isabel put a hand on Angela's shoulder. "Take what you need. I give it willingly."

Angela inhaled deeply, moaning as the rest of the pain faded. "Thank you."

Isabel limped along next to Angela's chair, smiling at Selina. They'd made a pact for one of them to be with the boss when she gave birth. Isabel was glad that Selina had stuck to it.

Selina smiled back and then eyed Kenn as he walked next to Marc. She patted her canteen and kept walking.

Tonya carried the baby while scanning the den mothers and kids for her own son. She found KJ in the stroller with Candy's twins and approved. "Maybe we can make a match with her girls and Sam's boys."

Angela considered that and then nodded. "Great idea."

Samantha didn't agree; she had to talk to Neil about it, but she was soothed. Lee's girls would be good and their new father was a Mitchel, so they would always be protected. Mitchels cared for their kids, deeply. It was a redeeming factor in that troubled family.

Tonya walked by Samantha, carrying the baby. She could feel Sam's pain. "I don't think she handles emotions well. And she didn't like being touched. She gets that from her mother."



Samantha decided it couldn't hurt to try communicating with the child. "When you don't like the person who's holding you, tell them to put you down. *Down*. If they refuse, then you can let them feel how unhappy you are."

Tonya put the baby into Samantha's arms. "This is your Aunt Sammi. She's a sweetheart, so she needs to be protected from the bad people."

The baby didn't react this time, letting Sam hold her.

"Thank you." Samantha hadn't liked how it felt to be singled out.

"It's my honor." Tonya walked next to her and continued to scan thoughts to find out everything she'd missed. What she didn't do was think about anything that had happened at the clinic. She'd finally let Rico go. No one needed to know that yet.

Kenn caught the thought and allowed himself to relax. Tonya was his again.

"What's it like up there?"

Kenn shrugged at Marc. "There's a hatch. Let's find out."

Marc needed to know if it was safe to go topside yet. He went over and climbed the ladder. He reached for the wooden hatch.

Kenn felt danger coming. He ran forward and jerked Marc off the ladder as the hatch burst into flames.

Marc hit the ground as something fell through the hatch and slithered toward them.

"Snakes!"

Sparks rained down the hatch behind the snakes and fizzled out in the cooler air of the tunnel.

Marc scrambled up and retreated, shield coming up to block the long reptiles. “I hate these damn tunnels!”

Kenn chuckled, using his boot to kick dirt toward the three snakes. “They probably felt the coolness down here. It’s too dry for them to get through the ground.”

Marc brushed himself off, aware of snickers going through the camp. “How does she stand this?” It felt like every eye was on him.

Kenn gave the answer he’d figured out long before now. “She loves it, dude. It’s the perfect job for her.”

Marc tried not to resent her for it. He wanted leadership, but he didn’t enjoy most of it.

*Maybe you should try something else.*

Marc again ignored his demon’s comment. He wasn’t ready to give up yet. “Come on.”

He got them going again as the snakes vanished into the dark tunnel Kenn and his group had come out of.

“We left a lot of gear under the clinic.” Kenn was now glad they’d done it. “Make sure the boss knows it was all Tonya’s idea.”

“I will.” Marc was glad that Tonya was with Angela now. “She had a problem during the delivery. She needs to be in the medical bay for a full workup.”

“I’ll make sure Tonya knows.” Kenn wondered why Marc wanted him up here. The snakes hadn’t even been poisonous.

“Because I have something to tell you.”

Kenn braced for ugliness and prepared to throw it right back. He had a big beef of his own.

“Thank you.”

“What?”

“When we left the mountain, you handled that evac and didn’t miss anyone.” Marc was horrified that he couldn’t say the same. “You never really got credit for that. So, thank you.”

Kenn’s anger faded. He grinned. “Suck up.”

Marc nodded. “When I need to. In this case, you deserve it.”

And just like that, Kenn was on his side again.

## 2

“Incoming!” Kyle made sure the group ahead of them knew they were coming. It wasn’t a good idea to sneak up on Eagles in the dark.

Adrian stopped to greet him as the rest of the tired, sweaty people kept going. They’d been down here for hours now. No one wanted to stop again until they reached the beach.

Kyle slid aside for Debra and Theo to go by.

Adrian saw they were soaking wet and holding hands. He assumed they’d worked something out.

Kyle gave Nero a hand under his arm as the man limped by. “Let’s get you to the medic.”

Nero had tripped over something as they ran for the hatch. Kyle thought the man's ankle might be injured.

Adrian frowned. "That's four."

Kyle didn't get it. "Four what?"

"Injured ankles. Isabel hurt hers, Trent's limping again, and Gus was hit by a falling tree."

Kyle didn't say he'd been close by for that moment.

"Did you see Tim up there?"

"Yep. He didn't make it."

Adrian wrote that in his book. "The fire got Tim. Anything else the boss needs to know?"

"Nope."

Adrian knew Kyle was tired, but he couldn't give the tracker time to rest. "We have four missing kids."

Kyle groaned. "I knew I saw more dots on my radar!"

Kyle immediately turned and vanished back down the dark tunnel.

A small cheer went through the camp as they realized another group of people had caught up to them.

Zack joined Adrian, feeling the tension as his sons glared at everyone. "What did I miss?"

"Eric got out of line and the new enforcer locked his gifts." Adrian confided something he didn't want to be right about. "I think Mike is hiding something big. We need to check him out."

Zack sighed. He'd had that feeling for a while. "I'll talk to them both."

Adrian knew that wasn't good enough. "It's time to let the boss handle it."

Zack scowled angrily. "Marc isn't getting near my boys!"

Adrian frowned deeply. "I meant Angela. She's the boss."

It bothered Adrian how many of the people around them shook their heads in denial. Even though they had missing kids, those camp members and even some of the Eagles still wanted Marc to stay in charge.

"You're misunderstanding." Erin was keeping track of thoughts all through the line, using it to control her mood swings. "They want her to have a break. They think she almost died again."

Adrian relaxed. That, he could agree with. *But if those missing kids are dead, no one will ever trust Marc again, including his wife.*

### 3

"We're almost there. You can do it." Madison rubbed the horse's neck as she leaned over it.

Madison had a bandanna tied around her face that she was soaking regularly. She also had a small blanket over her shoulder that she was putting over the horse's face whenever they reached a fire area that she needed him to go through. Small burns were

all over her legs and the horse's legs, but there was nothing she could do for either of them yet.

Madison ducked her face into the damp bandanna, but it only helped a little with the smoke. It was hard to see through and even harder to breathe through.

The huge horse tolerated Madison like it had done before, mostly because it was scared. The fire was eating away at every bit of the clear path. Fiery trees dropped sparks that landed on his tail and burned him.

Madison used her leg to push those hot sparks off of the horse like she'd been doing all along. She winced at the pain as her ankle was burned again, but she kept doing it, determined to get them both to the beach.

Something heavy fell behind them, spooking the horse. He tried to run, hooves slipping on the piles of hot ash.

Madison pulled on the rope. "We have to go slower or you'll get hurt!"

She concentrated, trying to use a mood spell on the animal like she'd seen some of the descendants do to people.

The horse responded immediately. Its former owner had often done that to him.

Madison started to praise the horse.

"Help us!"

"Up here!"

"Stop!" Madison pulled on the rope again.

"Don't leave us!"

Madison saw muddy shapes in the tree as the horse went under it. Flames from the nearby branches illuminated four familiar, terrified faces staring down at her.

“What the hell?” Madison got the horse to stop even though fire was all around them.

“She stopped!”

“We’re sorry! We just wanted to go swimming.”

Madison didn’t know how the kids had gotten up there and it didn’t matter right now. She nudged the horse with her legs, getting it over to the tree.

She eyed the branches that were smoldering above and around the kids, trying to figure out how to get them down. None of the branches were low enough to climb and there was no way she could get the horse to hold still while she stood on its back. “I need a ladder.”

Madison was shocked when one appeared right up against the tree. “How did that happen?”

The kids didn’t care. They began coming down out of the tree, smiling and chattering.

“I told you the boss would send someone to save us!”

“She has a horse!”

“Can we ride it?”

The horse began to back up, tossing its head.

Madison concentrated. *If you save these kids, Angela will always let you stay even if you don’t do any work.*

The horse reluctantly stopped and held still.

Madison dismounted, keeping a hold of the rope. She tied it to her wrist and then helped the kids down the ladder and over to the horse.

Madison knew the horse wasn't going to be able to carry them all. She arranged the children by size and then began directing them onto the horse, using strength she didn't know she had to lift them up.

Harold held onto the horse as Wendy took the seat right behind him. Dutch was put between them, causing the horse to snort, but it held still even though it was a lot of weight. All three kids together equaled two adults.

Madison knelt for the smallest boy. "Get on my back."

Hanali quickly climbed on, reminded of his rescue by Angela right after the war. "But you don't look like my mom."

Madison chuckled. "I'll try to work on that."

She hefted the thin boy onto her back and led the horse toward the only part of the jungle that wasn't in flames.

Madison tensed as a shadow came out of the smoke.

Dog padded up to her, sniffing to make sure she was okay. He then checked on the horse the same way.

Madison was relieved to have the big wolf with her, but even being alone was still better than having Biff along. She pulled on the rope to get them moving.



As they vanished into the smoke, so did the ladder.

A shadowy form in Eagle gear came by the tree right as the ladder blinked out of existence.

Kyle stored it to examine later, along with the other odd things that had happened today. He followed the prints the horse was leaving in the ashy dirt while tracking all of the dots on his mental radar.

Madison felt someone coming up behind them. She rotated to defend the kids; a thick shield came up around all of them.

Kyle stepped out of the smoke. “Good work, rookie.”

He walked around her shield and led them toward the beach.

Madison was thrilled with her evolutions, but she was deeply relieved that Kyle was here. He was a dependable presence in any moment of crisis.

Kyle saw the kids were unharmed. Madison couldn’t say the same, but her injuries were minor. Kyle planned to send her straight to the medic as soon as they reached the ship.

Dog gave Kyle a quick sniff as he went by.

Kyle rubbed the wolf’s undamaged ear. “Good boy.”

Dog waited for the humans to go by and then slipped back into the smoky jungle behind them. He had other loved ones who were in danger.

Madison kept her shield up around the horse and the kids, protecting them from bits of flaming,

falling debris even though the smoke still got through. *Maybe we can figure out how to make the shields solid somehow.*

Madison was looking forward to being back with the camp. She had a lot of questions.

It occurred to Madison that she no longer enjoyed working on her own. *This place is changing me.*

Kyle didn't tell her that was why Safe Haven existed. He was confident that she was smart enough to figure it out on her own. *I just hope the rest of our hiders can say the same. If they attack, none of them will survive.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

# Gotcha

### 1

“It’s too smoky to stay down here anymore.”

“I know.” Marc was already aware of the problem. He gestured toward the dark ceiling above them. “We should be close to the hatch that comes out above the beach.”

Kenn coughed and then cleared his throat. “Is there a fire in one of these tunnels?”

Marc nodded. “That’s very likely.”

The vines that were all over the dirt walls made perfect tinder. He had assumed they wouldn’t burn, but that had been a mistake. He was almost certain that was where most of the smoke down here was coming from.

“We have to hurry up.”

“I know.” But Marc couldn’t move them any faster. He was already going at a pace that was dangerous and not just because of their weak and injured people. They were out of light now, other than a few fire shields and those people were almost out of energy. Rushing along through the darkness was a bad idea.

“Fire!”

The shout brought Marc running. Faint orange glows halfway through the line of people allowed him to see the vines on the wall were on fire.

Daryl pushed Brittani's chair away from the wall. "We have to go back to the last tunnel!"

Marc helped them smother the small flames with his hands. Thanks to Reicher's lab, he barely felt it. "There was a collapse around the clinic. That way is blocked."

"We have to go all the way back to town!"  
Thelma hated the darkness. She was terrified.

Zack reluctantly shook his head. "Kyle had to circle us around that area and find a different hatch. The entire town was burning."

Dwight tried to find a solution. "We can go over to the side of the island by the cove."

Gus denied that one. "It was very smoky in the tunnel where we entered by the jail. I'm pretty sure there was a fire down there."

Thelma gestured frantically. "So, we go up! Right now!"

Dwight hugged his wife, trying to lend comfort. "Can't we wait it out where Angela had the baby?"

Marc shook his head. "There were vines all over those walls. They'll catch fire, too, if they haven't already."

People around the flaming vines kept smothering them with blankets and shirts. Coughs rang out as thick smoke drifted through the tunnel unimpeded.

"I found the beach hatch!"

Kenn's call brought Marc back to the front of the long line. He went up the ladder first, bracing for more snakes. He pushed the hatch open and climbed out. They didn't have time to make sure it was safe first.

Kenn came right up behind him, ready to lift his shield.

"There's a clear path!" Kenn was relieved. It was the one that went straight to the beach.

Marc pointed. "We'll never get them all out before that fire gets here."

There were flames on three sides of the hatch, only a few hundred feet away in every direction. The fire was spreading too fast.

Kenn only came up with one solution. "We have to do a controlled burn."

"I don't know how to do that without making things worse." Marc had already considered it back in town, but he didn't have faith in his abilities.

Kenn knew what to say. He'd heard the Eagles use it on Angela, but he'd never thought to be saying it to Marc. "That's why you have a chain of command. Share the burden and the knowledge."

Marc watched the fire come closer as if sensing his presence. He hated it that he couldn't handle this on his own, but there wasn't time to experiment and hope he got it right. "I need Adrian."

"I'll send him up." Kenn headed down the ladder and ran through the crowded, smoky tunnel to reach the end of the line of people. Most of them

were coughing as the brawlers kept smothering the vine fires.

“The boss needs you.” Kenn took Adrian’s spot at the rear of the line.

Adrian ran, surprised that they weren’t evacuating people yet. He climbed out of the hatch and went straight to Marc. “We have to get them out of there!”

Then Adrian saw how close the fire was. “We’ll never make it in time.”

“Can you help me do a controlled burn?”

Adrian was a little surprised by Marc’s humble tone, but there wasn’t time to enjoy it. He shoved into Marc’s mind and began scanning his hallway of gifts.

The fire spread closer, eager for both targets.

“Yes, but we’ll need an ice gift, too. You can’t do both.”

Marc sent out a mental call. *Morgan! Get up here!*

Marc thought about calling Samantha, too, but she was likely drained from helping them fight the fire in town. Morgan had a larger energy bank because he had used his gifts more.

Down in the tunnel, Morgan quickly took all of the kids in his care over to Angela’s group. There was no way he could refuse this call.

Tonya and the others smiled in approval while trying not to cough anymore.

“We’ll take care of the kids.”

“You take care of the fire.”

The women were reading the thoughts of everyone around them. They knew what Marc was about to try and all of them hoped it was successful. No one wanted to make a run for the ship through the fire with just their shields while leaving people behind.

Morgan hurried up the ladder and went to Marc.

“We’re going to do a controlled burn to create a fire break.” Marc pointed at the area right next to the hatch that hadn’t burned yet. “You’ll freeze the path while I burn a line next to it.” That narrow area didn’t have any trees along the path.

Morgan understood the fire wouldn’t be able to keep spreading because Marc was going to burn everything ahead of it. “If this doesn’t work, we’ll be trapped.” The fire would surround the hatch.

Marc, still humble, met Morgan’s eyes. “I need you to trust me.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Safe Haven is a place of second chances...”

Because Adrian was there and obviously supported the plan, Morgan gave in. “Tell me when to start.”

“Do it now.”

Morgan began freezing the unburnt area.

Adrian teamed with Marc and helped him aim his copy of Angela’s fire gift.

Marc couldn’t trust the man enough to give him full control. The first spray went over the frozen area and hit a tree by the hatch, sending it up in flames. Fire quickly raced over the brittle branches.

Morgan directed his ice gift onto that tree, smothering the flames before they could spread. “If you two can’t work together, we’ll lose half of these people to the smoke!”

Adrian blasted Marc with the emotions he’d been keeping in check since they started doing the daily walks together. “I’d never hurt you. I love you, and hate you, like a brother.”

Overwhelmed with longing for Rico, Marc let the bond go through this time. He needed Adrian and there was no shame in that. It was survival; that was all that mattered. He let down his mental walls and allowed Adrian to control his gift as they tried again.

“Give it all you’ve got!” Adrian held the gift steady, directing it to the right location.

Fire rose on the ground next to the area Morgan had frozen. More smoke rolled over the ground as the unburned area went up in flames.

It was stopped by the frozen path that Morgan kept adding to. In less than two minutes, there was a five feet wide bare patch all the way around the hatch.

“Is that enough?”

Marc leaned against his knees, trying to get his breath back. They were all tired now. “We only need a few minutes to get them all out of there.”

Marc didn’t want to keep going and force anyone to use their reserve energy yet. There was still half a mile between here and the beach that had to be covered.



*Crack!*

The tree Morgan had frozen ripped out of the ground and fell over from the weight.

Marc had no time to avoid it. A heavy branch slammed into his ankle as the tree fell, knocking him to the ground.

Marc's scream drew attention from everyone in the tunnel.

Adrian helped Marc to his feet. "Ankle, right?"

Marc tried to ignore the awful pain rippling through his leg. "Same one Nature impaled."

Morgan kept freezing the path as the fire continued to come closer. "Start bringing them up!"

Adrian directed the mission men who'd come up at Marc's scream. "Don't waste your energy on the fire. We'll need it on shields. The fire might jump over this break."

Marc found Kenn in the crowd and pointed toward the hatch as he leaned on Adrian. "Keep them together."

"What about us?" Greg was still furious, but he was more concerned with getting Angela and the baby out of the tunnel now. Justice could wait a little longer.

Marc faced the angry mission men. "You guys can handle pain better than anyone here. Once these people start coming up, they're going to flee toward the beach. You'll have to run back and forth between the groups to keep track of everyone." Marc made sure he sounded sincere. "You guys can do this. I believe in each and every one of you."

The mission men were suddenly excited to do it. All of them had been bored and hoping for action. This way, it would serve a purpose and satisfy their need for another lab-like moment.

“Damn it!” Kenn slid aside as all of the cats came flying up the ladder, hissing and growling. Their leashes trailed over the ashy ground, giving him time to grab them, but he didn’t. He heard their faint mental calls for Dog and realized the wolf hadn’t been in the tunnel with them. “Let’s go! All injured and elderly people come up first. Then we’ll bring the kids up! Let’s go!”

Many of the people below turned toward Angela, wanting her to be sent up now.

Angela quickly shook her head. “I’m last. Brittani is first.”

Daryl and Brittani’s family surrounded her, keeping everyone else from bumping into her as she rose out of her wheelchair.

Brittani tried to hurry, but it was impossible to do with such a large stomach. She wasn’t sure how she was going to make it up the ladder.

Daryl gently turned her around as they reached it. “You’ll go up backward. I’ll go at the same time with you and you’ll hold onto my shoulders.” It would be awkward, but it was doable.

“You forgot her wheelchair!” Bo quickly grabbed it and got into the line. “She’ll need this.”

It only took a minute to get Brittani up the ladder with Daryl’s help. She and all of her family

quickly moved away from the exit so the other residents could come up.

Bo climbed the ladder and opened the wheelchair. “Have a seat and we’ll get you on the ship as soon as we can.”

Brittani smiled at the kind boy, sitting in the chair.

Daryl began to push her down the frozen path toward the beach.

Bo went over to the hatch to help pull other people out.

In the tunnel, Erin motioned to Panaji. “Get Sadie up there.” Sadie hadn’t woken yet, but the sedative should have worn off by now. Erin was glad she was cuffed.

As Panaji reached the ladder, he staggered.

Renard quickly slid underneath Sadie’s weight to help carry her up the ladder.

“Thank you.” Panaji had been carrying her for an hour. He was exhausted.

Ralph and Daisey were next. Gus helped Ralph up the ladder. The older man was feeling all of the walking and running.

Somchai got an arm around Daisey. “We’ll have you topside and on the ship shortly. Just hold onto me.”

Daisey was grateful for the help. She hadn’t liked Somchai very much when he’d first started joining the church group for meals, but she’d quickly adjusted to having him around. Now, she was grateful for his help.

“Another vine fire!”

People began smothering it as Ralph and Daisey went up the ladder.

“Gus is hurt. So was Trent.”

Both of those men shook their heads at Somchai’s reminder.

“The boss goes next.”

“It’s the boss’s turn.”

Another wall of vines burst into flames.

Camp members flooded toward the hatch. They didn’t care about the injured or the kids now. They wanted out.

Kenn moved back and let them go by. He had already learned from his time in the mountain that trying to stop a mob wasn’t a good idea. It was better to let them continue on their way and reprimand them later.

Many of the residents apologized as they went up the ladder ahead of the women and kids.

Kenn understood they were scared. He had faced moments like this in the lab. It had given him a thicker skin. Even with the fire coming through the tunnel and the fire roaring closer to the hatch, his heart was barely beating faster than normal. If not for Tonya and his son being down here, he doubted he would have been upset at all. “Let’s get those kids up here!”

The den mothers all went toward the exit, shielding the children with their bodies as more camp members hurried by to get up the ladder first.

Sitting in the chair along the wall, Angela motioned. “Get Dace up there.”

Lisa and Jack were both grateful for the order. They gave her an apologetic look and went to the ladder.

“There’s going to be hell to pay for this.” Tonya was furious that so many people were putting themselves ahead of their children.

“We’re going to let it go.” Angela shifted her daughter to the other arm, glad the infant was still sleeping. Being around panic was stressful. The last thing they needed was for her daughter to wake up in a bad mood. “I want you guys to go now. Take your kids and get to the ship. That’s an order from the alpha.”

“We’re not leaving you.” Tonya glared as more adult camp members went by without carrying any children.

“The kids need you more than I do. There aren’t enough den mothers to cover it. You have to get these kids out of here. They’re already breathing in too much smoke.”

All of Angela’s guards realized that was true. The den mothers were trying to herd the many children toward the ladder, but the kids were scared and they didn’t have enough hands to help.

Angela grimaced. “If I go last, I won’t have to hurry.” She could feel blood seeping through where she’d been injured. “A shove might do serious damage.”

Tonya and the others realized they didn't have a choice.

"We'll come right back for you."

"You'll stay with the kids and make sure they get to the ship!"

Tonya and the others made faces, but they stopped arguing as smoke continued to roll through the tunnel. They ran toward the den mothers to help.

Isabel also went with them to care for her twins. She pointed at Stanley. "Stay with the boss."

Stanley did it without hesitating. He always preferred to be on Angela's protection detail.

Angela wanted to let him stay, but Isabel had a sprained ankle and two infants. "She needs you. Go be with your future wife."

Distracted by the title, Stanley patted Angela's shoulder and then hurried off. *I should ask her to marry me.*

Angela was glad she had been able to direct that relationship into the next stage. She held her daughter close and stayed in the chair as more people went around her to reach the exit.

Neil helped Samantha put their sons into the chest sling and back carrier, but he didn't follow her as Amy went up the ladder. "I'm staying with the boss."

Samantha kissed him and then carefully went up, approving of the choice.

Neil went to stand next to Angela. He didn't speak. He wasn't sure what to say.

Angela immediately felt better as Gus and Trent also came over to stand next to her.

Erin went to help Tonya with her orphans at Angela's motion. Because of her new strength, she was able to carry two of the kids while Tonya did the same.

Molly and Thomas also lifted a child and hurried toward the exit, leaving his crutches behind.

Daniella kept her shield over her sister as the crowd bumped and shoved to reach the ladder. She spotted Troy huddling against the wall and lowered her shield long enough to pull the lab teenager into line with them.

Troy held onto her arm. He was panicking. *Reicher always burned us! Reicher always burned us!*

"Shh... I've got you." Daniella got the boy up the ladder as fast as she could.

Zack stayed with his small family, heart pounding with fear. *I can't lose them, too!* He kept a hold of Leeann and Mike's wrists as they neared the ladder. Timmy and Eric went up ahead of them. One was just glad to be out of the tunnel. The other hoped it collapsed and trapped everyone who was left down there.

Terry climbed the ladder next and hurried to catch up to Brittani and her family. "Don't push that chair so fast! She doesn't need to be bumped around!"

Greg held his arm out to Angela.

Angela pointed at the two kids who were left.

Greg didn't argue. He took Autumn from the stroller and put Roy on his hip.

Amanda caught Margret's attention and nodded toward Charlie.

"I'll cover it." Margret took a hold of her sister's hand.

Charlie looked over his shoulder.

Angela smiled. "I'm fine. Get my grandbaby out of here."

Charlie allowed Amanda and Margret to nudge him toward the ladder.

Conner and Candy went up with her twins, clearing the exit. That left Amanda and Ed to go next.

Amanda slid aside to let the rest of the den mothers go up with their charges.

One of them slipped, almost dropping the child she was carrying. Ed took the little girl and carried her up the ladder.

Bernice came up behind him, pulling Crissy along.

Piper and Biff went next, trying to keep things calm as they each carried a baby goat.

"Walk calmly to the beach."

"Stop pushing! The fire's almost out."

That wasn't true, but Biff didn't know what else to say to calm people. He reached the topside area and froze for an instant as he spotted the flames that were roaring up the trees a few feet away from him.

Kenn pushed Biff toward the fleeing camp members. "Make sure they stay together!"



Glad to be given a job, Biff let go of the heavy animal and hurried off. “Stay together!”

Piper grabbed the leashes on the baby goats and then took the adult goat’s leash from Raheem as he put it on its feet. She grabbed the other leashes as the Eagles handed the dogs up the ladder.

Piper found it odd that none of the animals were making noise, but she couldn’t find an explanation for it. The humans weren’t quiet or calm. Many of them were running full out toward the beach, making the mission men work harder and use more energy to keep track of everyone.

Parker got the rest of the church group started up the ladder. He looked at Amanda. “Don’t leave her alone.”

Amanda had stayed down here for that reason. “Go on.”

Parker went up the ladder with a frown. He sensed Amanda didn’t like him.

Amanda didn’t, but he was far down on her list of people to handle when the alpha gave the order. Amanda kept an eye on Angela and the new vine fire that was spreading along the tunnel wall.

Debra went by, carrying diaper bags that someone had shoved into her hands while offering support to Gio. He was bandaged on his head, hands, and face from running through the fire. Some of it was burns, but there were also nasty scratches from tree branches.

Theo followed with a camp kid on each hip and Kendle’s teenaged relatives on his heels. “Get up

there and follow the line to the beach.” Theo peered over his shoulder at Angela.

Angela waved him on, stomach cramping. “Stay with the camp. The Eagles don’t have enough hands.”

Theo frowned as Angela coughed from the smoke, but he did what she wanted.

Angela rocked her daughter, heart beating faster. “It’s almost over.”

“And we didn’t lose anyone this time.” Gus didn’t count Tim, though he was sure the man had died in the fire or from the smoke. He wasn’t sure why Tim had run off at all. There was no place to run to on a tiny island.

Angela grimaced as a fresh wave of pain tightened her sore stomach. “I said *almost*. It’s still too soon to tell if anyone has to die.”

All three men tensed.

The vines on the wall next to Angela burst into flames.

“It’s spreading!”

“We have to get out of here!”

“Time to go, Boss.” Neil pulled her up and then started trying to smother the flames to buy more time.

Angela held the baby and staggered toward the ladder as quickly as she could while fresh blood soaked her pants.

Angela began going up the weakened ladder, awkwardly holding on with one hand while she cradled her infant in the other. *Here we go.*

Lying near the hatch where Renard had put her down, Sadie woke up. She saw Panaji next to her and then she found Adrian close by, fighting the fire.

Her eyes turned bright pink.

Panaji tried to grab her. “Don’t!”

Sadie rolled over and lunged, screaming as she attacked Adrian with her cuffed hands.

There was a large crowd around the top of the exit now. Marc was injured and didn’t have time to direct things. The fire was getting closer. He was working with Morgan to create another break.

Angela couldn’t keep climbing while holding the baby; pain was ripping her guts open again and she didn’t have a chest sling. She stopped halfway up, groaning.

Gentle hands came through the hole and lifted the newborn from her.

Angela struggled up the ladder against the pain of internal injuries, but it was too late.

Somchai retreated down the clear path with his shield up and the baby tucked snugly under his arm. “Thank you.”

He turned toward the path to the beach while putting all of his energy into his shield.

*I need you!* All Angela could do was scream for help. She had no energy left to use.

All of the mission men turned in tandem and flew back toward the hatch with glowing red eyes.

Tonya and the rest of Angela's team felt the panic, but they had their hands full carrying the kids. They ran toward the dock, already knowing they wouldn't be able to drop the kids on the ship and get back in time to help.

Adrian punched Sadie in the temple, knocking her to the ground so he was free to help with whatever was making Angela panic.

A shadow came through the smoke, large and angry. Dog growled as he approached the scene. *You're going to die right here!*

Despite having a thick shield up, Somchai stopped. He was terrified of Dog. He always had been.

Marc saw what was happening and tried to run on his shattered ankle.

Bo lifted his shield around Marc and pushed his knife against Marc's back. "Gotcha!"

Renard was still standing by the hatch to help people out. He grabbed Angela's long braid and jerked her head back while putting his knife to her throat. He quickly brought up a shield to keep everyone out.

Angela didn't even have enough energy to try bringing up a shield. She didn't struggle against the knife. *As long as my daughter survives, it was worth it.*

Adrian realized he was the only one in charge now. He gestured toward the scared, coughing, gawking camp members. "Go to the ship!"

Most of those people quickly fled around the hostages and their captors. They didn't want any part of the action.

Adrian focused on Somchai. "What do you want?"

"I have part of it right now." Somchai drew his knife, aware of the wolf now approaching his shield. "I want your nuclear submarine. We'll leave without killing anyone."

Everyone heard the lie in his tone.

Somchai had no intention of letting either of them go, but he needed to get the furious parents to surrender. Even weakened, there were too many descendants here if they chose to fight. Somchai wanted Marc under his control. That's why he'd taken the baby. With Marc's gift of being able to tell what power any descendant had, Somchai would be able to target specific power and force evolutions until he was the strongest person on the planet. *And then I'll rule them all.*

"Give me the baby." There was no way that Adrian was going to let the man leave with Angela's daughter.

Somchai held his shield against Dog's snapping and pawing. "I need her for protection. Without her, you'll hunt me forever."

Marc glared. "We're going to do that anyway. You have my word on it."

"Only if you want this little bundle of joy tossed overboard." Somchai tapped the knife against the

baby that was waking up. “Don’t worry. She’ll be well-treated in my lab.”

The baby in his arms shifted uncomfortably, whimpering. She could tell it wasn’t her mother holding her.

The mission men arrived together and surrounded the scene, waiting for a chance to kill the three attackers.

“Just put the baby on the ground and leave. You can have the sub.” Adrian needed to get the baby out of the line of fire before any of them released their fury.

Somchai chuckled roughly, throat full of smoky tickles. “You always were a terrible negotiator.”

“And you always were a miserable piece of shit! I should have killed you right after my mother was murdered!”

“Yes, you should have. Did you know that was my idea? I passed it to the people who were able to do it.” Somchai indicated his co-conspirators with the tip of his knife. “That’s what I’ve done here, as well. It’s what I’m good at.”

Marc’s mind was running so fast he almost couldn’t keep up with it, but none of the plans would work. Even if he managed to kill Bo and Renard, Somchai would still have the baby.

Adrian knew he needed to keep the man talking while Marc figured out what to do. “Why that baby? You’ve been around a lot of our kids during your time in Safe Haven. And why now?”

Somchai glared toward the fire that was still approaching. “It’s all gone. There’s no reason to take over and stay here. We’ll use the submarine and go to Australia. We know from your stories that there’s only one descendant there. We’ll kill that young Mitchel and rule the country with all of the infrastructure in place. You guys can stay here and rot on this burnt speck.”

Angela was also trying to come up with a plan, but the blood still soaking her pants made it hard to think. The best she could do was create a distraction when Marc was ready.

Marc didn’t trigger that yet. He hadn’t found a plan that would work.

Adrian kept Somchai talking as more of the camp members fled to the beach to avoid the fire. “You could have taken any of the kids and snuck away before now.”

“Yes, your security has been very lax.” Somchai bowed his head toward Angela. “I’d like to thank you for that. It gave me time to see that this was possible. I’ll be the most powerful descendant on the planet. All I need is time.”

“You’re not going to get it.” Amanda came out of the smoky tunnel with bright red eyes and her fire shield crackling around her. “All you’ve gained from this is a well-deserved grave.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

# Listening

### 1

Somchai sneered. “My loving ex-wife, who switched sides. Have you told them you were in on this?” In all their years together, Amanda had never fought back against him. Somchai wasn’t worried about it now either.

Amanda nodded. “I’ve told the alpha everything.”

“Adrian is not the alpha!”

“He is right now.” Amanda kept her attention on Somchai as smoke rolled around the people, making it harder to see. She felt two Eagles come up the ladder behind her. She stepped away from it to redirect Somchai’s focus. “Give me the baby.”

“I gave you two!”

“You forced kids on me! I never wanted to be a mother!”

Hatred immediately settled into Marc’s heart for Somchai. Rape was something that he would never forgive or forget, even if the man hadn’t been holding his daughter hostage.

“And I never wanted to be sent away to Port Stanley so I couldn’t threaten the peace between the families, but here we are!”



Marc felt helpless as plan after plan rolled through his byzan mind and failed. *It wasn't supposed to happen this way!*

Neil snuck up the tunnel ladder as the fire came closer. He quietly stepped into the smoke, getting out of sight. Angela's voice in his mind was weak, and it only cared about one thing. Neil was going to make sure the baby wasn't harmed or die trying.

Somchai was thrilled that the capture had gone so easily, though he had expected more of a fight. It was almost a disappointment; Amanda coming along would make up for that.

Bo and Renard both waited for Somchai's call. The plan had been to capture Marc and Angela. Once Somchai negotiated the surrender of everyone else, they would knock out both powerful adults and get them onto the ship before they recovered enough to fight back. They had knockout darts in their pockets, just waiting to be used.

Somchai had been in Port Stanley for a long time, encouraging the chaos there. He'd lost the fight to control that speck of land, but this was a better opportunity. All of the kids Chuck had left behind could have that cold rock while Somchai and his group went to Australia in a nuclear sub.

Amanda took another step forward, drawing energy from her shield in small amounts so it wasn't noticed. "Abbots always crave power over others. It never ends well."

Somchai's expression softened for a moment. "Change your mind. Come with me. I still love you."

Amanda was sent back to her time in the government lab that he'd supervised. "What we had was never love! It was ownership and unfair magic."

"It doesn't have to be like that now. I'll put you higher in the rank. We'll rule them all together."

Amanda shook her head in disgust. "Having to leave behind everything you knew and loved wasn't enough to stop the need to conquer. You learned nothing from your banishment."

Somchai's face grew ugly. "I learned the strong rule the earth and the weak submit to them."

"That's not why we were put here."

Somchai stiffened, grip tightening on the baby as he got angry. "That's the unfair part! The normals aren't worth the ground that's burning around us!"

"That's not up to us to judge. The Creator wants them protected." Amanda continued to draw power out of her shield instead of doing it mentally where her ex-husband was sure to notice.

"I don't care about any of that anymore! I was sent away from our compound and forced to live on that miserable rock for a decade. I'm never going back to serving anyone else, especially not the bloodthirsty mother of this child!"

"You have made your choice. There's no going back." Before anyone could stop her, Amanda

lowered her shield and fired a powerful spell that radiated in all directions.

The hit took out both shields over the hostages.

Bo tried to run.

Marc automatically grabbed the arm holding onto him, rotating in Bo's grip while breaking his wrist.

Bo screamed.

The knife slid into Marc's arm as he quickly spun around the untrained man and snapped his neck. Then he sucked down Bo's lifeforce with a loud groan.

"No!" Somchai watched his son fall, seeing the life drain from his eyes as his body shrank down to bones and skin. "No!"

Without any real power, Renard knew he was about to die. "You're coming with me!" He jerked his arm down.

Angela used her reserve energy to lift a shield. The knife caught in it as she started to wither.

"Die!" Renard tried to fire a death spell, but it was too late. Angela inhaled deeply, taking his life in one fast snap. She groaned as the mismatched power began to sink into her body and heal parts of it.

Somchai backed up as Marc and Amanda headed toward him. He hadn't expected anyone to fire on him and risk hitting the baby. "Stay back!"

Neil moved with a smoke cloud while the man was distracted, sneaking closer.

Dog snapped harder at the shield as Amanda fired again. Her blast jarred Somchai's shield. "Give me that baby!"

"My only son! Why did you do that?! I told you she would be fine!"

The baby squirmed at his tight grip. She began crying. *Down! Put me down!*

Unable to take the sound, Angela screamed. "Together!"

Everyone fired at the same time, hitting the shield together, including Amanda, who used all of her energy at the base of it. Like they'd done with Nature, the combined hits slammed into the shield and took it down.

The baby, startled by the noise and the vibrations, sent out a wave of pain.

Still trying to defend against the unexpected hits, Somchai staggered, letting go of her.

Dog lunged forward, getting underneath the falling baby. The newborn hit Dog's back and rolled.

Neil lunged, arms coming out.

The baby landed in his hands, never touching the hot ground.

Somchai sent out his strongest magnet spell, hitting everyone around him. "Obey me!"

"Suck a slug." Marc fired his Colt, hitting Somchai in the stomach. Everyone here was already loyal to Angela. Somchai's spell couldn't break those willing bonds.

Dog spun around and bit down on the man's ankle, crunching through it like a chicken bone.

Somchai fell, screaming and bleeding.

Neil carefully brushed the crying baby off and took her over to her mother. He was relieved when the baby didn't attack him, but he certainly wouldn't have blamed her for it. She'd had a rough first day.

On her knees, Angela rocked the baby against her chest while looking at Adrian. "He has something that belongs to you."

Adrian marched forward furiously. He dropped down next to the screaming man. "This is for my mother!"

Marc and the others didn't watch as Adrian consumed Somchai bit by bit, but they did enjoy listening to his screams.

Neil swept the few dozen camp members who had stopped to observe. Some of them had been afraid to run and draw attention to themselves. "What about the other hidiers?"

Marc came over to Angela and sent Bo's stolen energy into her. He didn't watch as her gray hair turned black and her wrinkled skin finished smoothing out. "Stop them at the dock. Don't let anyone onto the ships yet."

The lifeforce had stopped the bleeding, but not the pain. Angela cried out as Marc and Adrian helped her to her feet.

Marc spotted the wheelchair Gus had brought up and motioned Neil to grab it.

Angela determinedly limped toward the beach path.

Adrian stood as she went by, taking the guard position.

Stuart knelt next to Somchai's body and pulled something out of the man's pocket. Looting was a common practice. People went by him without a second look.

Stuart pushed through the crowd while pocketing the item. He ran to the dock to carry out Marc's order.

Marc gestured at Neil. "Make sure everyone is out of the tunnel."

Panaji helped Sadie to her feet. They'd both stayed down until the fight was over. "I'll take her to the medical bay and find a guard for her."

Sadie didn't feel as angry as she had before. She still didn't look at Adrian as she went by with a throbbing head. "Sorry."

Adrian grunted. "Same."

Marc stayed by the hatch in case Neil needed help getting anyone out. He stared at the growing flames in regret. *I made so many mistakes!*

Neil came right back up the ladder. "There's no one else left down there." It bothered him that Angela had been one of the last people to come out of the tunnel. That would never be allowed to happen again.

"That's just another mistake I made."

Amanda sensed a male bonding moment was coming. She went with Adrian and Angela to avoid

it. *I don't want to feel Marc's emotions. Just being around him is too much.*

Adrian smiled sadly. *Now you know how I feel about his wife.*

Amanda accepted the gratitude of those around her and kept her mind blank so Angela didn't order her death.

Angela already knew. All of the women in their camp wanted Marc. "The only one who had a chance of getting him is still being defecated by the fish around this island."

Amanda chuckled. "You've finally convinced me you're the mastermind."

Angela leaned against Adrian's strength and held her daughter close. "You have one request. Would you like to use it now?"

Amanda quickly shook her head, thinking of her daughters. "Let me hold onto that in case I need it later."

Angela relaxed. "Wise choice." If the woman asked for something dangerous, Angela would have to grant it and then remove her. She didn't want to do that.

Adrian redirected the conversation. "How will Margret take the news?"

Amanda's lip curled. "Like her mother. She'll celebrate the death of the man who tortured us both."

Angela only had one question. Even though she had also been abused, she still had to ask. Amanda needed to say it, to hear it, and to accept that her ex

was no longer a threat. “Why didn’t you kill him all those years ago?”

Amanda shuddered, hands clenching. “I was scared.”

Angela let the bond sink in. She knew exactly what that felt like, how it had held her back and ruled her life. “You’re free now. He’ll never be able to hurt you again.”

Amanda smiled at the feeling. She also accepted the bond, letting it go deep into her scarred heart. “Thank you...alpha.”

“As always, it’s my honor.” Angela considered the spell Somchai had used. “You and Wade have that gift.”

Adrian nodded. “Somchai’s wasn’t a very strong magnet. His daughter Rosetta is the real power in the Abbot family. When she uses that spell, even the undead will obey her.”

Amanda and Angela chuckled.

Adrian didn’t.

## 2

“She should take it away from me. I almost got her and the baby killed by playing games with the hiders. I shouldn’t be leading this camp.”

Now that they were alone, Neil didn’t have to censor his words. “I thought you had this all planned out.”

Marc nodded. “I did. I forgot the basic rule we live by.”



“Everything changes.” Neil knew that lesson too well.

“I didn’t see these things happening, like the snakes or the explosions. I also didn’t foresee him getting his hands on one of the kids, let alone my newborn daughter. It wasn’t supposed to go like this!”

Neil didn’t want Marc to be upset. He knew the man would account for all of these mistakes for the next time something like this happened. He was also positive that some of the more bitter camp members would make sure Marc didn’t forget it. “She made mistakes in every battle. The outcomes were so extreme that it was often overlooked. She doesn’t need you to be perfect. She needed you to do exactly what you did; you gave it your all and everyone survived. In this camp, that’s a fucking miracle.”

Marc was startled into a laugh. It still sounded so odd when Neil cursed. “Fair enough.”

Both men followed the line of people toward the beach, staying next to each other as the fire reached the tunnel and began eating through the hatch.

“Do you feel better?”

Marc nodded immediately. “We faced so many action moments during the trip here, and even after arriving, that I just can’t settle down into calm everyday life.”

Neil shrugged. “I seriously doubt that’s ever going to be a problem for us.”

Marc chuckled again. “We do have an active record.”

Neil glanced over. “How do you feel about Adrian now?”

“I hate him and everything his family stands for.”

Neil hadn’t expected anything else.

Marc thought about how he had allowed Adrian access to his gifts. “I’m also glad he was here. I don’t think I could have done this without him, at least not with these results.”

“Sounds like the Reichers and the Mitchels might finally have a real truce.”

Marc’s eyes darkened; his tone deepened. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Why not? I can tell you don’t hate him anymore.”

Marc motioned as he grabbed the wheelchair. “She’ll be back to herself in a few months, sending out that sex appeal without even trying. There’s no way he’ll leave her alone.”

Neil eyed the fire behind them to make sure it wasn’t catching up too fast now that it was coming around the fire break area. “Does she really want him to?”

Marc wasn’t sure about that anymore. “I don’t think so, but we’re married. He should back off on his own.”

Neil lowered his voice. “If he doesn’t, I’ll help you handle it.”

Marc knew Neil had the skills to accomplish that. “He screwed up on the sub. Angela may handle it for me.”

Neil coughed. “What did he do this time?”

“He broke a rule on purpose to force the council to decide if magic laws have to be obeyed.”

Neil groaned. “Damn. He’s a walking dead man.”

“Yep.” Marc fought his hurting ankle to move faster so he could catch up to his wife.

Neil lifted a shield as they went under trees that were dropping fiery debris. “Are you going to save him again?”

Marc didn’t answer.

### 3

“Hold your breath until it passes.” Another cloud of smoke blew across the deck of the cruise ship, smothering Jennifer and Cate. Faint green tendrils came through the smoke and were swept toward the burning part of the island.

The faint green glows in the fog gave Wade the creeps. He hoped it wasn’t Nature trying to sneak up behind them.

Jennifer had her shield up, taking a turn to give Cate a break, but it didn’t make any difference. They weren’t able to make their shields solid. As far as they knew, Marc was the only one who had ever been able to do that.

As soon as the smoke cloud passed, Jennifer let her shield down. She refused to wait inside the bridge where she didn’t have a clear view. The entire island was on fire and covered in smoke; there were no signs of people.

Faint clicking noises echoed, making her look around curiously. It wasn't coming from the fire.

“Do you think my mom is down there in Hell?”

Jennifer was startled by the question. She frowned at Cate. “I have no idea.”

Cate shrugged. “I'll ask Joey the next time I visit.”

Jennifer scanned the shoreline again. “Where are they?!”

The path to the cove was also in flames, other than a thin unburnt strip coming from the center of the island. Light rain was finally falling as the storm rolled in, but it wasn't going to be enough to put out the fire. On the deck of the ship, it was both hot and cold. A full moon over them was providing dim light that was being muffled as the fog bank moved across the ocean, slowly swallowing all of the ships.

Jennifer tried to call again with her radio and her mind. “*Can anyone hear me?*”

There wasn't an answer. At this point, Jennifer didn't expect one. She assumed something was wrong with the radios and the hive connection. *I'll try to find a way to fix that for next time.*

Jennifer scanned the other ships around them. She was in contact with all of the other captains visually, except for the pirate ship with Ned and Dario on it. That ship had been swallowed by the fog. They hadn't had contact in over an hour.

Jennifer had considered trying to get one of the brawler guards to go check it out, but she'd decided against it because of the fog. It was coming in so

quickly and so thickly that it would be too easy for a team to get lost and row themselves out to sea.

“I see something.” Cate pointed.

Jennifer scanned the shoreline around the cove path, where the fire was burning hot and heavy. Trees were falling over; hot debris was blowing out into the water.

A familiar shadow in Eagle gear stepped out of the smoke.

Jennifer smiled in relief. “It’s Kyle!”

Cate nodded. “And some of the kids.”

They saw Madison come out of the smoke behind Kyle, carrying someone and leading the horse that was also loaded down with kids.

Jennifer took that as a bad sign even though she was glad Kyle was okay. Marc and Adrian never would have sent kids through the fire on a horse unless it was an emergency.

Kyle spotted Jennifer on the deck of the ship and waved at her.

Jennifer started to wave back... Death rushed across the deck and flew across the water toward Kyle.

*Crack!*

A large branch snapped off directly over him.

Madison saw it coming. She instinctively lifted her hand. “Arch!”

Everyone but her was surprised when a wide wooden archway appeared over Kyle.

The tree branch slammed into the archway and broke into a dozen pieces, scattering logs and fire along the path.

Heart in her throat, Jennifer instantly bonded to the former gunrunner. *I'm going to make sure she's the happiest woman on this island. I can't give Kyle to her. I'm too selfish for that, but I'll find someone else who makes her as happy as I am right now.*

“There they are!”

Jennifer rotated at Cate's shout and saw a line of dirty, sweaty camp members walking down the narrow unburnt path toward the dock. Morgan was near the front, carrying both of her children.

Jennifer nodded. “That's perfect.”

Standing nearby, Wade made a quick choice. They hadn't planned on sailing the ships to the dock until the fire was out. Because the submarine was able to take some hot sparks, they had expected to make two trips with it to ferry everyone out to the cruise ship. *But we have injured people.*

Wade could tell it had been a rough few hours for some of them. They needed to get to a medical bay, but the submarine's medical facilities were way too small to handle that many people. He gestured to Jennifer. “Dock us.”

Jennifer was happy with the order. She went to the bridge with Cate on her heels. “Let's go collect our people.”

“Everybody stop right here and wait!” Stuart was now at the front of the line where the dock met the shore. He waved the other brawlers over as he spotted them in the large crowd. “Everybody wait right here on the beach!”

Because the fire hadn’t reached this far, and it couldn’t burn the sand, people obeyed the order. The walk down here had calmed nerves, especially with the mission men running back and forth to check on everyone. The camp finally felt safe.

Stuart and the brawlers lined up between the camp and the dock, waiting for Marc to reach them.

Marc was limping along next to Angela now. Moving slowly and in a good deal of pain, they were a matched pair with powerful descendants behind them, beside them, and in front of them. Everyone felt bad for the lax security that had allowed the baby to be taken.

Marc sent out a mental call through the hive and then directly to a few of the residents who weren’t connected. *Line up next to the dock.*

A dozen people moved through the crowd and headed over to Stuart with worried looks. They didn’t know what was happening.

Neither did the camp. They gathered around the dock and waited while the cruise ship started inching toward them through the fog.

Marc pointed at the mission men. “Surround and hold.”

The mission men hurried into places around the crowd, blocking them from running off without a fight.

Nervous camp members eyed the fire and decided facing Marc and his merry men was a better idea. There was at least a chance that he would be lenient.

Marc raised his shield and his voice as he and his family came through the crowd. "Some of you were in on it."

Tension flew through the camp. They scanned each other in suspicion and anger.

"Some of you knew about it. We're going to separate you and send you out of this camp and away from us." Marc looked at the guilty people. "If you get out of line right now, I'll send a few rations with you. Ralph's group might even let you stay with them."

Ralph and Daisey regarded each other in fear. They'd both been hoping for a reprieve, but it was clear from Marc's tone that their new leader wasn't going to lift Ralph's sentence.

Two tall, bulky men stepped toward the brawlers with fear on their faces and their hands up.

Parker was disappointed to see it was members of the church group. "Traitors!"

One of the men sneered. "You'd know!"

"I'm loyal."

"To yourself. You don't really care about religion at all. You just want to be a leader, but you don't have the guts to join the Eagles."



“Stop.” Marc wasn’t interested in their squabbling. “Anyone else? We have supplies on the ship, in case you think I’m lying. We didn’t lose everything.” Marc didn’t mention the fact that Angela had refused to let them offload most of the cargo they’d brought. *She knew the fire was coming and didn’t tell me. I love her so much.*

Another man stepped out of the line and joined the others.

Marc nodded to them. “I’ll make sure you’re treated fairly because you didn’t participate.”

Marc eyed the listeners who were lined up by Stuart. “I want the rest of them cleared. As each one comes up, tell us if you’ve heard or seen something, and remember there are *no* friends when it comes to traitors. If you know and don’t tell, you’ll share their punishment. You’ve been listening. Now, it’s time to speak.”

All of the rookies, new descendants, and new camp members he’d called on stood together, nervous. None of them wanted to tell on anyone even though they understood why Marc was doing this. If it had been their newborn, they would have done worse.

Marc looked at Amanda.

Amanda tensed. “I told Adrian and your wife that he tried to get me to join them. I didn’t think he would really do it. I’m sorry I didn’t speak up as soon as you picked him up in Port Stanley. That won’t happen again. From now on, I’ll rat out anyone and everyone.”

Marc was glad she'd passed this test. *But it's just the first of many.* "Go to the top deck and help Jennifer."

Amanda waited for her daughters.

The two girls hurried by the line of brawlers.

All of the listeners shook their heads. They didn't have anything bad on Amanda or her girls. They all had secrets, but none of them needed to be exposed right now.

Another group approached the dock.

Marc stayed with Angela as the listeners scanned people and compared secrets. He didn't think there were many threats left, but it was better to be safe than sorry. "How are you doing?"

Angela smiled tiredly at him. "Better now that you're here sharing this burden."

Marc kissed her softly and then turned his attention to the dock, where Tonya and Kenn were next in line.

Tonya walked by with her head up. She'd been cleared of wrongdoing in Gabe's death and she'd carefully walked the line since then. She didn't have anything to hide.

The listeners all frowned at Kenn as he followed his fiancé; they didn't say anything. Kenn's dark spots weren't letting them view much, but no one had heard anything new about him.

It was the same for Neil and his family and for many more of the camp. There were still Invisibles in the mix and there likely always would be.

“Hider!” Selina pointed at the older den mother who’d been with Tonya’s group. “I heard her talking to one of the dead men in the church. She’s one of them.”

The woman started crying. “Please. I never would have helped them. I’m not bad. Please let me stay!”

Marc pointed at the small group of traitors while Trent took the child she was carrying.

“There’s another one.” Isabel pointed. “He was talking to Somchai in the restaurant. He was supposed to grab Cody.” Isabel had told Marc and Angela about that as soon as it happened.

The man stomped over to the other traitors, muttering under his breath.

Gus approached Angela. “Can I get that favor now, Boss?”

Angela sighed. “Are you sure you want to use it on this, on him?”

Gus nodded. “He showed courage and honor. I want you to give Ralph a second chance.”

“He’s a traitor.”

“He’s not too far gone. And he made me see it’s better to help people than to punish them.”

Angela relented. “The Law Council will discuss a pardon for good behavior.”

Gus beamed. “Thank you, and I quit. I don’t want to guard prisoners anymore. I want to defend them.”

Angela was thrilled. “Talk to our leader about it later. But I approve.”

Gus realized he was skipping the new chain of command. He limped to Marc and waited to see if there was anything he should be doing.

Marc motioned. "Medical bay for that ankle."

Gus was relieved. It really did hurt.

"You don't have any proof, just hearsay!" The elderly woman protested loudly, still crying. "We're innocent until proven guilty!"

Adrian gestured to Stuart.

Stuart pulled the recording device from his pocket. "I took this from Somchai's body." Stuart put it into the small audio player he always carried. Somchai's voice rang out clearly as he talked to Bo.

*"What are we doing with the hostages, dad?"*

*"Keeping them. With Marcus, the alpha, and their darling daughter under our control, we can restart the lab and have a lot of fresh DNA to work with."*

*"What about the camp members? Some of them have gifts."*

*"We'll keep those for the lab. We'll get rid of the normals. We don't need them."*

*"We might need more power."*

*"The Eagles will try a rescue attempt, like they did against Reicher. We'll be better prepared for it than he was."*

*"What if we're caught?"*

*"We'll be banished, at worst. The leader here hates to kill people."*

*“Someone’s coming through the tunnel behind us. Shhh.”*

Stuart clicked it off as the camp turned on the traitors.

“Remove them!”

“Get a rope!”

“They don’t deserve to live!”

Marc considered letting the camp handle it, but he decided Angela had always been right about that, too. “Get on the ship. The fog’s coming and we won’t be able to see the dock. You don’t want to be left on the island!”

The camp turned together and hurried across the dock while the listeners struggled to see anyone else who was hiding something big.

As most of the people went across the dock, Marc, Adrian, and the mission men closed the circle around the hidiers, leering.

The elderly woman stiffened. “You said you’d banish us!”

“Yeah. I lied.”

The hidiers looked at Angela.

“Please save us!”

“We didn’t do anything!”

Marc stepped forward. “The alpha isn’t in charge right now.”

Angela shut her heart against their pleas.

The Eagles lunged forward, each grabbing a traitor. They snapped necks, slit throats, and drained lifeforces.

The camp going across the dock cheered and clapped as they realized Marc had never intended to let the traitors go. None of them cared about the violence. Like the mission men, they'd come to expect it.

Angela watched sadly while Gus and Trent stayed by her side. She might have spared a couple of them because they hadn't participated; it was better this way. Marc was right to remove them.

Gus tried not to think bad thoughts. "Is that the last of our inside issues?"

Angela snorted.

Gus's mood immediately improved.

Angela sighed. "I never should have sent any of you to that damn lab. You'll never be the same."

"Good." Gus pushed her chair closer to the dock before she could argue. "Stop hating yourself for it now. That's an order."

Angela wanted to; she just didn't know how.

Chapter Thirty-Four  
**It's Your Call**

1

“**L**et’s get all these kids onto the ship.” Marc pointed. “Give the den mothers a break. They’ve had a long night!”

Marc still had to raise his voice over the sound of the fire. The coming fog was also muffling noises as it swallowed another one of the boats. Marc was glad that Jennifer and Wade had ordered the other captains to come to the cruise ship. Ray was currently docking the submarine alongside it so he could join them, too.

Marc eyed the smallest pirate ship. He could only see a bare outline through the fluffy fog. *I lost two.*

Ned and Dario were dead. He stored that awful knowledge for later as another group came down the beach. “Thank God!”

Madison and Kyle joined Marc and Angela near the dock.

Madison put Hanali down, grunting in relief. The child didn’t weigh much, but it had been a hard run through that last stretch to avoid the fire.

Den mothers rushed over to the kids as Madison helped them off of the nervous horse, scolding and hugging.

Camp members and Eagles alike were surprised that the horse had transported the children. People came toward Madison and the big animal, reaching out.

“Great job!”

“Nice work!”

The horse reared up, pawing the ground and almost knocking Madison over.

Madison sent another calming spell. “Let them say thank you. They love the kids you saved.”

The horse held still as multiple people reached out to pet him. After a few gentle rubs, the horse began to relax. *That feels good.*

Marc smiled at Madison. “Nice job, rookie.”

Madison snorted. “I’ve got your rookie right here.”

People laughed as she went to help the den mothers get the mud-coated children across the dock.

Kyle stayed next to Marc. He knew what was coming next. The only surprise for Kyle was that it had taken the mission men so long to figure out what Marc had done.

Gus also knew what was coming. He got into the line of people going across the dock without the anger and betrayed feelings of the other mission men. He understood why Marc had done it. *If I was in his shoes, I might have made the same choice.*



Being responsible for the prisoners had been an enlightening experience for Gus. *I thought the lab had crushed my dreams. It's wonderful to find out that isn't the case.*

Gus limped across the dock without looking at the other men. His leg was throbbing. "I'm going to the medical bay."

Walking in the line right ahead of Gus, Bernice heard that and turned to scan him for injuries.

Gus felt her concern, but he didn't respond to it. He meant what he'd said about her staying away until she could be honest.

"Get Izzy to the medical bay." Marc motioned at Stanley.

The older woman was lingering next to Angela to provide protection that she didn't need now. Isabel's small grimaces and grunts of pain made Marc feel bad.

Isabel gave him a grateful smile and limped onto the dock with her infants.

Stanley carefully took Isabel's arm to help her; a sharp pain lanced through his brain. *I don't feel so good.*

Adrian and Marc stayed close to Angela and the baby, recovering some of their energy while they waited for everyone else to get on board. Both of them had notebooks out and were scratching off names.

Neil got Samantha and the kids headed across the dock and then came back to stand with them.

“We’ve just seen a perfect example of how our children were taken in the past.”

Marc nodded. “Their mistake was going against so much power in one group.”

Adrian marked another name off of his list as Daisey stepped onto the dock with Ralph. “It wasn’t like this in the past. The government didn’t let large groups gather, so they couldn’t fight back.”

“We got lucky.” Greg glared at Marc as the fury continued to build in his mind. “You almost got her killed, again!”

Angela leaned against the wheelchair that Marc had opened for her. She didn’t have the energy to deal with Greg or anyone else right now.

“That’s another way it was easy for people in the past to take our kids.” Erin walked by the group to get to the dock, nose in the air. Now that she’d broken up with Greg, she already felt better. “When our kind gives birth, we’re basically defenseless.”

Adrian marked off the last name on his list. “That’s everyone, right?”

Marc verified it with his own list. “Just the group here now.”

Selina started to push Angela’s wheelchair toward the dock.

Every descendant brought up a shield, layering Angela in protection.

Selina looked around, hand dropping to her holster. “Is there another problem?”

“Angela is Nature’s favorite target.” After banishing that powerful entity from her own island,

Nature would be hunting for any way to hurt them. Marc motioned. "This is the perfect time for her to try something."

"Hopefully she's busy with summer in other countries, happily roasting survivors on the open roads." Adrian walked next to Selina as she pushed Angela onto the dock. He brought up a layered shield around her. "I've got this covered. You handle the rest of the drama and then get on the ship. It won't be long before the fog covers this dock."

Marc and the other men watched and waited as the last line of residents walked across the weakened wood. Just like with everything else, the water and use was taking a toll. The dock would need to be repaired as soon as they could find all of the supplies they needed for it.

Halfway across the dock, more pain slashed through Stanley's brain. He stumbled, bumping into Isabel.

"Hey!" Isabel fell forward, bumping into Tonya.

Tonya grabbed onto the girl next to her to keep from falling.

Startled, Crissy jerked away, knocking her mother off of the dock.

Bernice went under the foggy water with her mouth open and a shout of surprise coming through her lips.

*Stanley!*

Stanley cowered from Angela's mental shout. He had tried very hard to control his clumsy nature.

*I've changed my mind, Stanley. Just be yourself so you don't take down the entire camp.*

Stanley flushed, but the pain in his brain finally faded.

Gus saw who was in the water and dove in after her.

Parker also jumped into the water to help.

People who had been knocked down and knocked over got up and gathered around the edge of the dock.

“Get some rope!”

“It's not that deep right here.” Tonya knew that for sure. Her own rescue had only been necessary because of the tide coming in. The tide was out right now, revealing half of the dock poles.

Gus and Bernice surfaced. Everyone on the dock saw her gasp in air through slits on the side of her neck. Her webbed fingers gripped Gus's shirt as he kept them afloat.

Parker pulled them over to the dock against the gentle waves and light rain.

Gus felt Bernice's other differences as she held onto him, but it was the glowing red eyes that kept him spellbound. “You're one of us!”

Parker quickly handed Bernice up to the Eagles waiting on the dock and then he climbed out right behind her. “Link arms!”

The church group quickly came over and surrounded them even though they didn't know what was happening.

Marc had caught it all. He glared at Parker. “You can’t keep hiding in this camp. Neither can she.”

Gus came out of the water in a quick movement. He stayed next to Bernice and brought his dripping shield up around the entire group. He also glared at Parker.

Parker shook his head. “I’m not obsessed with her. I just know she may need protection.” Parker lifted his own hand to let everyone see his wet webbed fingers. As the skin dried, the webs vanished.

Walking by on the dock, Raheem laughed. “They’re water people!”

The church group around Parker had already known how different he was. They tried to use their bodies to keep anyone else from seeing it.

“A lot of us are different. We use it to protect the normals, not ourselves. That’s why we’re all here.” Gus lowered his shield and led Bernice forward. The residents who were likely to react badly were already on the ship. Everyone on this dock could be trusted with her secret.

Bernice stayed under Gus’s arm, shivering from being wet and scared.

“Tell me about it as we walk so I can let the boss know if you need a guard.”

Bernice didn’t want to, but there wasn’t another choice. She spoke in low, urgent tones. “We tried to make it go away! We don’t want to be like this.”

Bernice kept her eyes on her daughter as Crissy walked next to Tonya. “We inherited this curse.

Each generation picks normal human mates to keep breeding it out. We don't want to be this way!"

Gus understood completely. There had been plenty of times that he'd hated being different. "We'll get you to the medical bay so you can be checked out."

Bernice took a chance. "And then?"

Gus rubbed her soaked shoulder. "Then we'll all have a meal together and decide where we want to go from here." Gus wanted more information, but he sensed Bernice didn't have much of it. He looked over his shoulder at Parker. "That includes you."

Parker smiled, hands stuck deep into his dripping pockets. "I'll be there."

Parker wanted to go to the chapel first and see if there was anything he needed to do there. All of the expensive stuff he had added to the church on the island was likely gone. They only had the bare ship chapel again. Parker was suddenly sure that it would still be enough to comfort people.

Kenn had stopped halfway up the ship ladder to see what was happening. He had an orphan on each hip and one on his back.

Kenn resumed the climb, shaking his head. The world was incredibly different now. It was a huge adjustment.

Kenn reached the top of the ladder and put the kids down on the deck, coughing. He hadn't had a drink in hours. They'd used all of their water on the fire or the injured people.

Selina came over, holding out her canteen. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Kenn lifted the canteen to his lips.

Missy blasted it out of his hand with a force spell. The open canteen flew over the rail of the ship and hit the water below where it quickly sank as seawater rushed into it.

Kenn and Selina both glared at Missy.

Missy pointed to the ramp. “You have work to do. You can drink later!”

Kenn stomped by the snotty little girl. “You’re the real monster here.”

Kenn hurried down the ramp, going to the showers to drop the kids with the den mothers. All of the children needed to be cleaned up before they could be fed. They were layered in ashes and smoke particles that would continue to get into their lungs.

Missy glared at Selina. “Don’t you ever do that again!”

Selina realized the little girl knew what she had been doing. She quickly hugged Missy.

Missy hugged her back, trying not to cry. “Please don’t ever do that again!”

Selina held the little girl as tears pricked the back of her eyelids. “I won’t risk our life together again. I promise.”

Missy took Selina’s hand and led her down the ramp away from the curiously staring brawlers who were now on duty on the top deck.

Jennifer turned toward Wade. They were in the bridge. They’d caught all of it.

Wade shrugged. "It's your call."

Jennifer wasn't sure. They didn't know what had been in the canteen. It might have been something as simple as a joke, like the ones Charlie had played on the Marine before they'd left America.

"You have to tell the boss." Cody regarded both of them, but not angrily. "You can't be a leader if you can't follow the rules."

Jennifer reluctantly got her book out and made a note about it. She also added her feelings on the matter; there was no proof that it was something dangerous.

Wade smiled at the boy who was once again in perfect condition. Nothing ever ruffled Cody's appearance. "I'm very proud of you."

Cody grinned. "You should be. I'm awesome."

Laughter echoed out of the bridge and rolled onto the deck where Angela and Adrian were carefully coming up the ladder.

Jennifer spotted Madison herding kids across the deck and waved at her.

Madison glanced around to see who Jennifer was waving at. She realized it was her and waved back, confused.

Amanda was standing on the steps outside the bridge, providing guard duty over everyone inside. "His clock is ticking."

Jennifer stared at Kyle in longing as he directed camp people toward the ramp to clear room for Angela to come through. "We've saved him half a



dozen times, but it won't matter in the end. Kyle isn't going to be with us much longer."

Wade looked over in understanding. "That's why he brought Morgan into your lives."

Jennifer nodded sadly. She'd figured it out right after Madison had saved Kyle. "He's making sure I won't be alone when he's gone."

Amanda was tempted to view the future and find a way to stop it.

"Let's have a snack together in the morning and see what we can come up with." In this case, Jennifer didn't mind working with the new enforcer.

Amanda surprised herself. "I look forward to it."

Kyle acted like he hadn't caught their conversation. He made sure their kids were carried down the ramp by some of the brawlers he trusted and then he went back down the ladder and across the dock. He didn't want to miss the next action that was coming.

Kyle heard Kenn behind him and assumed the Marine was heading to the same scene.

On the beach, mission men surrounded Marc with their angry bodies.

Angela didn't put a stop to it even though she and Adrian both wanted to. "Some things, a man has to handle on his own."

Adrian knew she was right, but he still didn't like it. "He did a good job."

“I agree.” Angela wasn’t as satisfied with it as most of the camp was, however. They were happy now that they were on the ship and no one they cared about had died. His leadership during this fire would be remembered without incident by most of them. *But I’ll never forget that we almost lost four kids.*

Adrian put a hand on her shoulder. “Give him a break. He did for you after you went up the mountain alone.”

Pain went through Angela’s heart.

Adrian didn’t take it back. The need to protect Marc was strong. He wasn’t fighting it.

“He gave me a lot of shit before he let it go and I still see it in his eyes sometimes. He blames me for it.”

“You blame yourself for it.”

Angela couldn’t argue with that. In the dark of the night, when she was alone, the tears she shed were tears of hatred and regret over that choice.

Adrian didn’t push. He was confident Angela would understand it was unfair to hold Marc to a standard that she herself hadn’t been able to live up to. “He’ll cover it better next time.”

Adrian waited for her response, hoping to hear there wouldn’t be a next time.

Angela didn’t answer.

The ship lights and walls brightened noticeably as Angela made it onto the top deck with her daughter.

Amanda glanced around. “What was that?”

Cody waved at Angela. “The ship likes it when the boss is here. It means we’re staying for a while.”

Amanda didn’t question the oddness of that, but she felt it. Even after more than 50 years around magic, it still felt strange to her.

Tonya went down the ramp into the ship, rubbing the rail. “Thank you for always being here for us.”

The ship brightened even more. The lightly chugging engine smoothed into a purr that matched the cats who were prancing along after Tonya. The other animals were on the beach, sniffing and digging and enjoying a cooler area that the fire hadn’t destroyed. The backdrop behind them was flames and smoke.

“The evidence is gone from all of our cases.” Jennifer didn’t know if Angela had planned it that way, but she assumed so. Now that Tim was dead, they really didn’t need the crates of bagged and tagged items.

Jennifer spotted a couple leaning against the railing away from the crowd. She narrowed in on the conversation.

“Well, we made it through another one.” Molly scanned the fog coming around the rear of the cruise ship.

Thomas leaned against the rail, rubbing his arms. It hurt to walk on crutches. "I wish we could have done more to help everyone."

"So do I." Molly didn't say she had always felt like an outsider in this camp. She knew he felt the same way.

"Maybe we should go on the next run and see if there's somewhere else we'd be happier."

Molly immediately began to consider that option as she scanned the water around the front of the ship.

A familiar shape came to the surface.

Molly shuddered. "Oh, go away!"

Thomas saw the shark swimming around the dock. He assumed it had felt the vibrations from Bernice falling in. "I don't like sharks either."

Molly understood he had been traumatized, but it wasn't the same. "That bastard has been haunting me for months. It turns up everywhere I go."

Thomas didn't doubt her; he knew what it was like to be hunted. "It sounds like you need to be on land."

His idea of leaving sounded even better to Molly as she watched the shark dive under the waves and then come back up to nudge the dock. "Let's meet later and talk about it."

Jennifer whistled loudly, cutting through the din of all of the people on the deck. "There's work waiting, Eagles! We need you. Get to it!"

Molly and Thomas realized Jennifer was staring directly at them. They hurried over, happy to be

included. Molly didn't forget about leaving, though. She just put it aside for later.

Someone began to push going down the ramp; shouts echoed.

Jennifer gestured. "Go keep them calm."

Amanda obeyed immediately. She had figured out there were a lot of leaders in Safe Haven. Sharing the burden was what made a camp like this possible.

Jennifer caught Ed's attention and waved him after the imposing woman. "Guard duty and support."

Amanda felt special to be assigned a guard.

Ed took her right side as the people around them fell silent and stopped pushing.

Ed knew things had gotten awkward between them even though he wasn't completely sure what had caused it. "Do you still want me to go along for the run to the SA compound? I'm sure we can find someone else to lead the group if you'd rather that I didn't."

Amanda smiled sadly. "It will be hard for me to leave my daughter there. It will help to have a friend along."

Ed was relieved. "Do you have family there?"

"My sister is the enforcer in the compound. She took over my job when I left. It will be great to see her..."

Ed felt Amanda's pain and didn't like it. "Can't you keep Alicia here and let the boss train her?" Angela was great with their kids.

Shouting echoed behind them.

Ed turned around and saw Amanda's youngest daughter using her gift on the shark that had scared Molly. The shark was letting out odd groaning noises while the Eagles and brawlers frowned in disapproval. The little girl was smiling happily.

"No. Alicia needs to be trained with harsher methods than what the alpha here will approve of because she's a child." Amanda motioned the girl over.

Ed followed them down the ramp. "What made her like that?"

Amanda scowled. "Her father."

"Somchai hurt her, too?" Then Ed remembered they had been divorced for 15 years.

"Somchai fathered Margret."

"And Alicia?"

Amanda stiffened. "When Somchai wasn't able to reach me anymore, he sent a rapist to stay in the safe house where we were living. Alicia takes after her father. She has no conscience."

Ed knew before he asked. "It was a family member, right?"

"My brother, Roger."

Ed cursed under his breath. Then he made another connection. "Wait, Adrian has a brother named Roger."

Amanda smiled. "He also has a sister."

It all made sense to Ed now. "That's why he covered for you!"

“And I would do it again.” Adrian was now on the ramp right behind them. He stepped forward and hugged Amanda, blocking the ramp to give Angela time to get down it without being jostled. She’d refused to be carried or to use the chair now. She wanted the camp to believe she was okay. “Thank you for proving our family is worth the trouble.”

Amanda hugged him back. “Thank you for protecting me until I was capable of it.”

### 3

“They’re all on the ship now.” Biff turned toward Marc.

Kenn quickly stepped in front of the furious man. “I need some answers first.”

The men surrounded Marc in a tight circle even though all of them understood if he fought back, they were still likely to lose this fight. Many of the mission men were injured and needed to see the medic. They were sweaty, with sore throats and headaches, but none of that was able to top their anger at Marc’s betrayal.

The clicking noises around the mission men grew louder as more smoke curled around their boots.

“I have to know why.”

Marc sneered at Kenn. “You’re not that stupid. You already know why.”

“So because of my past, not because of anything I’ve done since you joined Safe Haven.”

Marc gestured angrily. “A little bit of it was for when I first joined. You were a real son of a bitch back then.”

“I’m a real son of a bitch now.”

Marc sneered again. “Save it for your diary.”

Marc’s flip from cool leader into hostile combatant triggered more anger from the other men.

Greg stepped forward, arm tensing in anticipation. “What about me? It was because there was a chance she would have said yes if you weren’t around, right?”

Instead of more aggression, Marc eyed Greg sadly. “There was never a chance for you, Greg. I wanted you out of this camp because you’re a danger to my wife.”

“She shouldn’t be your wife!”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’ve never been able to accept her decision. Her wants and needs don’t mean anything to you. You’re obsessed, just like Biff is with Madison. I knew it was coming in both of you. I tried to get you out of here before you proved me right.”

Kenn heard boots hit the dock as another ship was tied up to one of the posts. “What about Shawn?”

Marc made a face. “Again, you don’t need to ask that. Everyone in our camp knows what’s going on with him. Now we’re taking a chance that he’s going to hurt Missy. I tried to avoid that for her sake, as well as for Angela’s. In case you didn’t know,



Shawn is one of her favorite people. It's a horrible disappointment to her that he has such a flaw."

"Because she can't fix it."

Marc nodded at Kyle's comment. "The world has never been able to fix that particular problem in humanity and we probably never will."

Kyle kept things moving so he could get back onto the ship with Jennifer. "You were trying to remove him so Angela didn't have to."

Marc shrugged. "She will in the future, but probably not until it's too late."

Every man there made it a personal mission to keep a closer eye on Shawn from now on.

"We were also starting to watch Gus around Brittani."

A couple of them nodded at Neil's observation. They had been on guard detail over Gus a few times since landing on this island.

"Why would you do it to yourself?" Kenn expected to hear Marc hadn't been able to handle Kendle's death.

"I have a list." Marc's voice dropped into shame. "It started when I saved Ray from the snake women."

Kenn winced. He remembered that clearly. He was partially responsible for pushing Marc into it.

"It doesn't matter if you pushed me. I slaughtered an entire camp of women and not all of them deserved it. My rage took control. I became a murderer in my own mind at that moment." Marc went on before Neil or Kyle could offer excuses for

his behavior. “Then I endangered the camp with my jealousy. It cost me a daughter. It almost cost me the love of my life. After all of that, we reached this island and I couldn’t stop Nature from killing our medics! I didn’t think I could go on with a crypt full of boxes like that even before I removed Kendle.”

The anger of the men around him began to fade, except for Greg. He took another step forward, pointing. “Even if all of that was okay, what about Harry? He didn’t do anything wrong until after he was tortured in that lab!”

Marc slowly lifted his hand and pulled a piece of paper from his inside jacket pocket. He held it out. “I found this the day that Cerise and her traitors had dinner with the entire camp.”

Kyle read it out loud.

*“Personal journal entry 18. I don’t know if I’ll be able to make any more entries. My thoughts are no longer safe to put on paper. None of the people here will be okay with me having this desire to see how much power one of our kind can amass. They know the only way to do that is to kill and that’s the number one rule in safe Haven. Death without a good reason is a crime that has no mercy.*

*“To carry out the plan will take my entire life. I fully expect to die along the way. Any advancements I make will be worth it. I’m positive that Angela will document my successes and use them to our advantage in the future. I don’t want to rule the world. I just want to know if I can.”*

Marc prepared for pain, switching his stance to protect his injured ankle. “I’m not going to apologize for taking you guys in there. I’m also not sorry that you survived. All of you have shown the capacity to change. I fully expect that to continue no matter where you are or what you’re doing. I’m proud to have served with you.” Marc smiled coldly. “Now let’s get on with it. I’m ready to draw some blood and listen to you scream.”

Kyle and Neil brought up shields at the same time even though it wasn’t planned. They protected Marc and themselves from the advancing team.

“Get out of the way!”

“How can you protect him after what he’s done?”

“He’s the leader.” Kenn also lifted his shield over Marc, shocking everyone. “When Angie takes back over, then he can have a loving correction from his team. Until then, he’s off-limits.”

Slightly disappointed, Marc strode across the dock while the three men stayed on his heels and covered him with their shields.

Biff waited to see what the others were going to do.

Greg knew he couldn’t get through all of the shields by himself. He had been counting on Kenn’s anger to back him up. He peered across the dock to where Shawn was standing, watching them.

Shawn glared at Marc as the man went by. “We won’t have to wait until Angela takes back over.

Marc will arrange for the next monthly matchup to include all of us.”

Marc headed up the ladder. “You can bet your broken noses on that.”

The rest of the team came across the dock together, anger fading into the patience and determination that had gotten them through all of the hell they’d faced so far. They were willing to wait.

They were also convinced that Marc was being genuine, mostly because of the letter from Harry that Kyle was putting into his pocket. Marc had had a good reason for the decisions he’d made. All they could do now, other than to beat his ass and possibly ruin the peace in camp, was to accept their own weaknesses and make sure they continued to change.

Their respect for Marc increased, along with their dislike. Every one of them wanted Angela back in charge as soon as possible, but not just so they could fight with Marc. None of them felt right without her leading them.

Marc caught that thought as he reached the top of the ladder and stepped onto the deck of the cruise ship. It didn’t hurt his feelings. It matched them perfectly. *I don’t want to give it up any more than I did before, but I also don’t want to do it alone now. When she’s ready, I think I can finally share.*

## Chapter Thirty-Five

# Duplicates

### 1

“**W**here do you want me now?” Adrian stifled a yawn as he joined Marc on the top deck of the ship. He didn’t stare at the island or the fog. He also didn’t try to find the source of the odd clicking noises coming from all around the ship. He was too tired to care unless it was a threat.

The rest of the camp was in the cafeteria having a meal or in the showers, trying to remove the smoke and dirt from the trek here. The rest of the ship was deserted for now. Adrian knew it wouldn’t stay that way long. There were entertainments on the ship that the camp had missed.

“Sleep until dawn and we’ll switch.” Marc had found a second wind. He was fine for a while longer.

“She’s sleeping. They want her to stay in the medical bay for a few days at least.”

“Any issues with the baby and the medics?”

“No. Your little monster slept the entire time they checked on her and Angela.”

“Good.” Marc didn’t ask for those results. He didn’t need to be told that Angela had almost died and she was suffering the effects of having a baby in a dank tunnel without a real doctor. He’d been dwelling on it for hours.

Adrian wasn't sure where to go to sleep. He hadn't had a room on the ship in a long time.

"Use the extra cot in my cabin."

Adrian frowned. A yawn burst out before he could ask why.

Marc turned away, refusing to cover that right now. Adrian wasn't awake enough for a conversation and Marc wasn't ready yet.

Adrian headed down the ramp, passing Kenn as the Marine came up. He was Marc's right hand for this shift.

"All posts are covered and everyone is accounted for." Kenn joined Marc without mentioning the two missing men on the pirate ship that they still couldn't see through the fog.

"Good." Marc limped toward the bridge, wishing for a painkiller. It was after midnight. He'd almost been up for a full day.

Grant came to the steps outside the bridge so Marc didn't have to climb them again. "It's hanging around. It'll clear sometime after dawn."

Grant couldn't be more specific. Fog was unpredictable.

Marc yawned, scanning the deck. A few residents were still up here, but most of the camp was going to the cafeteria now. It had taken the cooks a while to get a big meal ready. Everyone was hungry after half a day without being fed.

"I have an answer for an old mystery." Kenn drank from his refilled canteen and gave Missy a dirty look. She was on guard over their captain.

Missy stuck her tongue out and tugged Grant back into the bridge so she could stand between him and the doorway.

Cody smiled at his dad from a post near the elevator in the bridge. Grant was surrounded by protection until his shift ended.

Marc leaned against the cold rail. "Let's hear it."

Kenn held out a smoke detector. "I took that from the medical bay on my last round."

Marc examined it. Other than dust, it seemed fine.

"It's dead."

Marc realized they should have been hearing fire alarms from all over the island and the ships. "It's been 18 months."

Kenn nodded. "We put them in the right places, but we didn't make sure the batteries were good."

"Son of a bitch."

Missy frowned at him. "Take that dirty mouth away from our captain. He doesn't need to hear that kind of talk."

Marc chuckled, but he did move away from the bridge. Missy's bossy attitude was great for keeping people awake, which was why he'd assigned her up here. He just didn't want to be her target.

"I have some of the brawlers searching for batteries. We'll have all the detectors on the ship powered by morning, I hope."

"Good." Marc glanced toward the island, but he wasn't able to see it. The smoke was still there,

mixing with the fog to create different colored clouds, but the landmass had vanished.

Kenn frowned. “Do you hear that clicking noise?”

Marc had been hearing it for hours. “Adrian thinks it’s the island protesting the fire. Jennifer says it’s the noise made by two extreme temperatures meeting from the fire and the fog.”

“I think it’s an animal caught along the shore.”

Marc grinned. “That makes sense. Like a dolphin.”

Kenn shrugged. “No idea what animal, but maybe we’ll see it a year from now when the fog finally clears.”

Marc snickered. He understood, though. The fog was a hated weather phenomenon for all of the mission men and the rescue team.

Kenn made eye contact with the guards up here. Trent was near the bridge in case the kids on duty needed support. The redhead was dirty and limping more than usual, but his mood seemed good.

Marc sighed as angry steps echoed from the ramp. “Call in Trent’s relief.”

“Why?”

“Because he needs the medic.”

Kenn studied Trent. “For his ankle?”

“For his mouth.”

Ray marched up the ramp and went straight to the bridge.

Trent grinned at him. “Welcome home!”



Ray drilled Trent in the mouth, taking the bigger man to the foggy deck with a single hit. “Right back at ya!”

Ray marched up the steps to the bridge.

Kenn helped Trent to his feet, trying not to get dripped on. Blood was running from Trent’s nose. “What did you do to him?” He was certain Trent had crossed a line.

Trent held his sleeve over his nose. “Delayed reaction to a stupid dare, I think.”

Kenn got Trent headed down the ramp as he keyed his radio. “If you can hear me, shift change for the bridge guard.”

“Copy.” Jayda’s voice came right back.

They were using people who’d already been on the ships for most of their manpower right now, to give everyone else time to get a shower and a meal.

Trent pulled away from Kenn and staggered down the ramp. “It’s been fun.”

Kenn could tell from the man’s tone that he meant that. Kenn grunted. “We’re a peculiar bunch.”

Marc didn’t answer. He was listening to the men in the bridge to determine if he needed to get the kids out of there while Ray and Grant either made up or broke up for good.

## 2

Ray handed a small gift bag to Grant, kissed him on the cheek, and then left the bridge.

Grant stared after him, hurting.

“Open it.” Missy smiled at Grant.

Grant peered into the bag. Tears filled his eyes as he pulled out the engagement ring he’d been eyeing in the jewelry store on the shopping deck. Ray had told him they didn’t need anything showy, so Grant had put it back.

“He’s sorry.” Missy pointed at the bag.

Grant looked under the open ring box and saw the note.

*Please forgive me. I love you.*

Grant wiped away his tears. He sent a mental message. *Dinner in an hour.*

Ray’s answer came right back. *I’ll be there with bells on my—*

*Stop that!* Grant chuckled happily. The conversation with Cody had helped clear his confusion. He didn’t know why Ray had cheated on him, but Grant decided not to hold it against the man any more than he had to.

“Trent caused it with a dare. Eagles never refuse dares.” Marc regarded Grant through the foggy bridge window. “People make mistakes even when they aren’t fogged.”

Grant thought of his drunken mistake with Jonny and let go of his anger. This would make their relationship stronger. *We just can’t drink or get fogged again unless we’re alone.*

That wasn’t the type of relationship he’d wanted with Ray, but life didn’t always let things go

according to plan. Being broken up for just a couple of days had been awful. *I forgive you.*

Ray's happiness hit everyone.

Marc headed for the ramp with Kenn on his heels and a mind switching out of high gear. It was almost okay to relax again. He just had to get through two more stressful moments.

Marc went to the medical bay to check on Angela and hear the report from the medics. He'd ordered a full workup on her while she was too weak to protest. *Now I have to listen to the results.*

### 3

Jack was on guard over the medical bay. He spotted Marc and Kenn coming and met them in the hallway.

Marc waved him toward Kenn. "He'll take your updates."

Marc went inside as Jack opened his book. Marc already knew there was bad news waiting. He didn't need Jack to break it to him gently. Angela's pain had been hitting him as he walked through the dusty corridors.

Morgan stepped out of the shadows between two of the exam rooms. He and Cate were on duty over Angela.

Marc ignored the sympathy as he scanned the medical bay.

There were quite a few people still here. Some were medics, guards, and helpers. The rest were patients.

Daisey and Ralph were in the first room. Marc could hear a heart monitor beeping and approved of them running tests on the older woman. Marc wasn't upset that Angela had given Ralph a possible second chance, though the council would have to vote on it at the next meeting. Marc was glad that Tim was gone. He'd read Kyle's note on that removal a short time ago.

The camp was finding out about that right now as the gossip spread about him, about Amanda being Adrian's sister, and about Bernice's webbed fingers.

Marc wasn't sure yet if they might need to do damage control on that one. He also didn't know anything about water people. He had a meeting scheduled for tomorrow with Parker where he hoped to fill in some of his missing information.

Nero and Gio were in the second exam room, with Tonya. Marc paused by it to listen as Kenn caught up to him.

“Next time, the alpha might let both of you die. Stop overeating.”

“We will.”

“I'm sorry for running off.”

Tonya finished wrapping the ace bandage around Nero's ankle. “You both got lucky, this time.”

Kenn connected her words and calm attitude to things she'd said at the clinic. *She knew this was going to happen.*

Marc didn't comment on it. Tonya wasn't the only one who'd known; it was the first time Angela had let the redhead in on something like this, however. Marc thought she'd done a great job at withholding the information from those around her during the chaos.

Marc peered into the third room and saw Sadie and Panaji. Sadie was cuffed to the bed. Panaji was holding her other hand and making funny faces to improve her mood.

Erin and Greg were in the fourth room. Greg came out into the hallway with his same bad attitude. "Angie needed you to be here!"

Marc frowned at the man who was always angry now. "I thought you and Erin broke up."

"We did." Greg waved. "She did. I just wanted to make sure she was okay."

Erin had come in on her own for an upset stomach and to let the medics draw blood to check on the rage illness.

"She's in stage two, too."

"Will it affect the baby?"

Greg shrugged at Kenn. "The medics can't tell us for sure."

"There were no kids on this island when we landed. That's a bad sign."

Marc grunted at Kenn's comment. "It might be for the best."

Greg's anger flowed out of his mouth again. "You're such a dick!" His eyes flashed bright pink.

Sadie stared at Greg from her bed. "He has the rage illness." She recognized that pink glint.

Marc frowned. "We all had a dose of the vaccine on the submarine."

Greg clenched his fists, controlling his rage this time. "Erin didn't."

"And you're sleeping with her." Marc groaned. "We can get it again!"

"That's why your daughter doesn't like him, I'd bet." Kenn hadn't gotten close to the newborn yet. He didn't want to know what the baby's reaction would be to him.

Marc turned toward the front desk, where Terry was filling out a file. "I want Greg and Eric tested for the rage illness before this shift ends."

Terry paused in writing Greg's name. "Didn't Eric get tested?"

Marc wasn't sure. "Check his file. He was in a coma for a long time. We might have skipped it."

"I'll find out."

Greg went into the room where Tonya was discharging Gio and Nero. "I'm going on your run."

Tonya motioned the two lab subjects out. Then she faced Greg. "Tell me why."

"Because she got my DNA for her damn breeding tree! Even if Erin loses hers, Lisa won't."

"So?"

"So I'm dead soon. If I stay here, she'll remove me for being a threat to this camp."

Tonya tried not to be swayed by sympathy for everything the one-eyed man had gone through. “Have you considered that the run might be what kills you?”

Greg shrugged bitterly. “I’ve lost everything. Death might be a comfort.”

“Then why leave here at all?”

“I want to help you find the vaccine and save Erin. She’s in stage two. One more stage and she’ll flip into the monsters we encountered when we first landed. I don’t want her to die.”

Tonya scanned him, his one eye, and then nodded. “Third in command.”

“I’m your guy.”

Listening from the doorway of her room, Erin was touched and also terrified. She walked toward the rear of the medical bay, mind full of anger and confusion. She still didn’t want to give up her new strength, but she hadn’t considered what effect the rage illness might have on the baby. *If they find it, I’ll take it, for my baby.*

Dace wheeled his chair into the room with Tonya and Greg. “Get lost!”

Greg stomped out, muttering under his breath.

Dace hadn’t gotten a shower yet. The strong smell of smoke drifted through the exam room, turning her stomach. Tonya glared at him. “None of us are going to do it, Dace, not even if Angela orders it. Stop making us feel bad.”

“But it might work!”

“It might kill you.”

“So?!”

Tonya washed her hands in the small sink. “Maybe the diet Shawn and the others are on might help you.” She didn’t really think so, but as a medic, she wanted to offer him some hope.

“Maybe.” Dace’s disappointment and sadness filled the room. “I’m going to end things with Lisa.”

“Why? She’s very happy with you.”

“Because I can’t satisfy her like this!”

Tonya grunted. “You have hands and a mouth, Dace. Use them.” She walked out of the small exam room, leaving him speechless.

Tonya went to the counter, where Anna was adding files to the folders. All of the paperwork they’d brought from the clinic was being put away. “How are things going?”

“Fine.” Anna held up a sheet of paper. “I noticed something.”

Tonya leaned over the counter to read it.

“I put all the files of the dead in a stack to store in the rear cabinet like you told me to do.” Anna pointed. “Look how many names are the same.”

Tonya scanned the list. “Those are duplicates.”

Anna shook her head. “I thought so, too. I double checked it. The last names are different. It seems like anyone by those names doesn’t live.”

Morgan came over from his place on guard duty. “Say that again.”

Anna tried not to stare at Morgan. He was handsome and dependable. *Too bad he’s not single. He’s the type of man I could grow old with.* “There



are a dozen names on here. They never survive in your camp.”

“Our camp.” Morgan took the list and went back to his post. His mind ran ahead, jumbling the letters.

Cate smiled at Marc from her post at the other end of the lobby. “I can ask Joey.”

Marc added that to his notebook. “Good idea.” It was unlikely that Joey would give them that information the next time they went to Hell, but it couldn’t hurt to ask.

Morgan’s mind resumed working on the puzzle now that he had a new piece.

Marc keyed his mike. “Morgan’s relief needs to report to the medical bay.”

“Copy.”

Marc motioned. “Go follow that thread. Take Anna with you.”

The pair left quickly, comparing ideas.

Tonya regarded Marc. “Matchmaking isn’t your usual style.”

Marc shrugged. “Morgan deserves happiness and he’s great with kids.”

Tonya let him in on a secret. “Jennifer has other plans for him.”

“Well, we’ll see who ends up being right.”

Morgan stuck his head back through the door. “At some point, I’m going to get upset with all of you. Stop planning my future. None of you are good enough for that. Only the boss is and you’re not her!”

Morgan left while Tonya chuckled and Marc frowned.

Piper came by, helping Isabel into a chair in the lobby. “She’s all bandaged and medicated again.”

Stanley put an arm around Isabel and led her out of the medical bay without speaking to anyone. He was still embarrassed that his clumsiness had endangered people again.

Marc turned toward the rear of the medical area, where Brittani and Angela were being kept overnight.

Tonya followed, giving him an update while avoiding the bad news. “Brittani is doing great. Jennifer gave her another healing session a little while ago. As long as she stays stable, she can leave in the morning.”

“What about the other injuries?”

“Some minor burns, a lot of sprained ankles, and a couple of fractured ankles. Jennifer will give them a healing session tomorrow, after she’s had a chance to rest. Trent’s is the worst, but Jennifer is sure she can heal it fully when she’s recharged.”

Tonya eyed his limp, but she didn’t insist on treating him yet. Marc was tough. It would hold until he was ready. “Gus and Bernice just left. They’re both fine, though he needs one of those sessions, too. It’s odd how many people had ankle injuries.”

Tonya had put it down to a coincidence, but it was still lingering in her thoughts. She would spend some time later mulling it over.

Marc saw Piper lingering. “Is she okay?” He’d thought she was just helping out.

Tonya nodded. “Upset stomach. We’re waiting on a test to finish.”

Marc didn’t ask what the test was for. He was sure Tonya would put it in her nightly report if it was a problem. “You did a great job saving stuff from the clinic.”

Tonya enjoyed the praise, but the sadness coming from Angela’s room made it hard to feel proud. “I’m sorry.”

Marc nodded. “Me, too.”

He stepped into the room and gently shut the door.

Tonya went back to the front desk as Angela’s sobs echoed. Marc would comfort his wife as best he could, but there was nothing anyone could really do to ease her pain.

Terry met Tonya’s eyes. “Even Jennifer couldn’t heal her all the way.” Jennifer had exhausted herself trying.

“The uterus detached during the birth. It’s a miracle that she survived at all.”

“I know. Still.”

Tonya felt the same way. “Knowing she can’t ever have another child without dying is a hard blow for the boss.”

“We scheduled the operation for next week, to give Jennifer time to rest.”

“None of us have ever done a tubal ligation.” If it worked, Angela wouldn’t be able to get pregnant again.

“We haven’t done a lot of things. We’ll learn it as we go.”

Tonya sat at the desk and began sorting through the paperwork. The loss of the medical journals was still bothering her. *I’ll find replacements.* But it wouldn’t be in time to save Angela from the operation or any of their rage infected residents from the next stage. Tonya expected to be gone for a long time to gather everything on the list.

Tonya looked at Kenn as he waited nearby for Marc.

Kenn slid into the shadows to watch over her the way she liked. *Put it out of your mind, woman. We are coming back. This is our home.*

The lights brightened all the way through the cruise ship, sending out waves of happiness. People all over the boat felt it and smiled.

Except for the couple in the rear room of the medical bay. All they felt was pain.

### 3

Marc slipped into his dim cabin and shut the door a little before dawn. The first thing he saw was a large trunk sitting on the floor between the two beds.

Marc's heart clenched. Even after everything that had happened, he was still hurting over Kendle. "I know how Tonya feels."

Adrian rolled over on the small cot, stretching. "Was that really Angela's idea or yours?"

"A mix of both." Marc opened the trunk. "She picked Rico for Tonya after I gave her the hint that Kenn might not make it back."

Adrian had gotten a shower before he laid down. The smell of soap mixed with the smell of smoke that was still on Marc, creating an unpleasant combination in the small cabin that both men ignored.

"I can't believe she let you go knowing you were suicidal."

"She did it to save me, to save all of us."

"She almost succeeded."

Marc nodded, digging through the stacks of books, clothes, and weapons. He recognized the Marine issue firearm. "I had Morgan dig up some information."

Adrian sat up on the cot, rubbing his face. "About Kendle?"

Marc saw the machete and knew it had been a favorite of its owner by the stickers and the handle that had been wrapped in military tape multiple times. "We think everyone who had the radiation sickness is immune to the rage illness. The medics are going to verify that before the next run."

Adrian slid his boots on and began tying them. "That's why Kendle never passed it."

“Yes. She wasn’t a carrier, but she also wasn’t immune. For some reason, the radiation didn’t protect her. Morgan thinks it was because the rage illness had mutated a lot before we got here. Each mutation makes a virus weaker. When she was...infected, it was still a fresh outbreak. It hadn’t mutated yet.”

Adrian hated Marc’s pain. “Some people are meant to die, Marc. I know it’s worse for you because of how it happened, but it was going to happen anyway. You know that.”

“I do.” Marc dug deeper in the old trunk, catching a familiar scent. “I don’t miss her anymore. I just feel bad for cheating and then killing her.”

Adrian sensed something coming that he wasn’t ready for. “I don’t care what it is. The answer is no.”

Marc found a snapshot of Kendle standing in Luke’s bunker, wearing a white dress and a shy grin that made his heart hurt. *Okay, now I miss her.*

“Why did you save me in the tunnel?”

Marc didn’t turn around. “Do you remember the quake in the mountain?”

“Of course.” Adrian still had nightmares about it.

“You were so happy to be in there with us. Then the quake hit and you had to watch everything you’d built get torn apart. You never let on how much that hurt.”

Adrian frowned. “And?”

“And you brought Angie back to me. Then you saved my life during the quake. You did it for her, I know, but I began to hate you less because of that.”

“You felt you owed me. Cool.”

Marc put the machete back into the trunk and closed the lid. He tucked the picture into his jacket pocket. “I did it because I’ve gotten used to having you around. It would hurt her and the camp if you were gone, but I did it for me this time. I need you.”

Tears filled Adrian’s eyes. He stood up, wiping and glaring. “You’re a real shithead!”

Marc nodded. “Thank you for always trying to help me through whatever mess I made for myself.”

“You’re welcome.” Adrian went to the door. “Now just spit it out. I’m smothering in butter!”

Marc chuckled. “There is no catch. I just wanted you to know we aren’t at war anymore.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Adrian really didn’t. “You aren’t going to want to hug or anything, right?”

Marc shrugged. “I’m not against it.”

Adrian stared, mouth dropping open.

Marc laughed as he lifted the trunk. “You’re so easy to screw with now.”

Adrian opened the door as Marc came over. He shut it and followed. “So that was all a bad joke?”

Marc shook his head. “I meant every word. You’re doing good. Don’t screw it up.”

Adrian felt guilty. “Yeah, um...”

Marc grunted. “I knew you couldn’t make it two months.”

“It happened before she gave me that time limit, if that matters.”

“Do you think it will matter?”

Adrian sighed. “Not a chance. She’s going to nail my ass to the wall.”

Marc stopped by the elevator and pushed the button with his elbow. “Tell me about it while I burn this stuff. Maybe I can save your ass again.”

Adrian hurried into the elevator, grateful. “I decided to challenge Angela on something. I was hoping for your support.”

Marc rolled his eyes as the doors shut. “I’m not the only one with a death wish.”

“I thought it was a good idea at the time.”

“And now?”

Adrian thought about Tim’s demise. “Now, I’m scared for my life.”

“It must be bad.”

Adrian leaned against the wall as the elevator took them to the incinerator deck. “I broke a rule set down by the alpha. She said the penalty, at the least, was banishment.”

Marc whistled. “You are in deep shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Was it an accident?”

“No.”

“Ahh. You meant to challenge her.” Marc hefted the trunk to his other shoulder as the door opened. “I wonder if she already picked out the wall she’s going to nail you to.”

“Funny.”



“Not really.” Marc nodded at the guard on duty, stopping to show him what was in the trunk just to keep gossip from starting. “Fill me in while Raheem runs to the mess for a mug of black coffee for me.”

Raheem immediately took off.

Adrian followed Marc into the dark incinerator room. “I didn’t use protection.”

Marc spun around, balancing the trunk and his disgust. “Are you stupid?”

Adrian hung his head. “Yes.”

Marc blew out a sound of annoyance. “Well, at least you know it.” He dropped the trunk onto the counter. “The medics just ran that test. Angela will know within a few hours.”

“That’s why I need your support. I thought I’d have more time.”

“You don’t need time. You need a miracle.”

“That’s why I’m talking to you.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

# Full Dark

### 1

Charlie glanced up in surprise as a tray was sat down on the table across from him.

Margret took a seat without asking. “My mom is on duty over the den mothers and kids for another hour, and my sister is already asleep. I hope you don’t mind.”

She didn’t give him time to argue. She picked up her fork and began eating.

People around the cafeteria eyed them curiously, wondering if they were about to become a couple.

Charlie was relieved to have company. He’d been sitting by himself. After his outburst in the tunnel, most of the females who were interested in him were now afraid to approach him. Charlie was glad about that, but it was still a little embarrassing to be sitting by himself.

He also felt lonely while his son was getting bathed, fed, and a quick medical check to make sure he wasn’t suffering from smoke inhalation. “It’s okay.”

The teenagers ate in silence for a few minutes, listening vaguely to the conversations and the

thoughts in the crowded cafeteria around them. They were both tired, but still too restless to sleep.

“Congratulations on the new sister.”

“Thanks.” Charlie was relieved that both the baby and his mom were doing okay. He refused to think about the operation she would have to go through soon. He was just grateful they had both survived the birth. “My son is older than my sister.”

Margret chuckled. “I guess that would be weird.” She ate without keeping the conversation going.

Charlie noticed that with a slight ding to his ego. She’d spoken to his dad. *I thought she was interested in me.*

“I am.”

Charlie flushed. “What about you and Ed?”

He knew all about the flirting between her and the older Eagle who had been spying on the church group for his mom.

Margret shrugged. “What girl wouldn’t be flattered by the attention of one of Adrian’s Eagles?”

Charlie swallowed another bite of the fish soup, studying her. “There’s nothing going on between you two?”

“I’ve never spoken to him outside of the occasional guard duty they’ve let me do.” Margret liked being a guard. It sucked that all teenagers were only allowed to do half a shift and they had to be supervised by a senior Eagle.

“You’ll be allowed to join the rookies soon.” Charlie could already tell that was important to the girl by the way she had behaved today.

Margret shrugged again, scooping a bite of the rice at the bottom of the small bowl. “I have other things to keep me busy until I reach the age limit.”

“Like what?”

Margret kept her eyes on the tray as her heart began to beat wildly. “I have classes. I’m learning another language, and the magic class your mom insisted on for everyone is cool.” She swallowed nervously. “There’s also this guy that I like. He only recently discovered I exist, but I’ve been watching him for a year.”

Charlie couldn’t help playing along. It had been a long time since he’d felt like even mildly flirting with anyone. “What happens when you tell him how you feel?”

Margret’s shoulders sagged. “He’ll probably tell me to go away. He’s been hurt a lot and he has a kid to take care of, so he probably won’t be interested in me for a long time, if ever.”

“Maybe someone else would be.”

“A lot of guys are. I tried to give one of them a chance over the last few weeks, but there’s really no comparison.” Margret met his eyes over their trays, aware of the people around them quieting so they could listen. “I’ve never met anyone as brave. You don’t have to be my boyfriend. I just want to hang out with you so maybe some of your courage will

rub off on me and then I'll be able to follow my dreams like you are."

Charlie's heart settled into a calm, peaceful rhythm. His demon sighed in his mind. *That is so cute and sweet! I like her.*

*She just passed the second test.* Charlie recognized it with a smile. "Tell me about some of those goals and we'll go from there."

Sitting at the center table, Marc observed in relief and a little surprise. "That's a huge step for him."

Adrian yawned. "You Bradys are having one of those days."

"It's not just Bradys." Marc directed Adrian's attention to the hallway outside the cafeteria.

Adrian saw Neil and Samantha and narrowed in to listen. He'd always skipped eavesdropping in the past unless he suspected the person of something bad. He still wasn't entirely comfortable with it now as he snooped.

Neil knew they were being watched. He didn't care. He kissed Samantha hotly, hand gripping her ass while they were alone in the hallway.

Samantha moaned against his lips. Desire took her breath away.

Neil rubbed his two-day beard against her cheek. "We have a few hours before the den mothers are done with the kids. And Wade's getting our cabin ready. ...it has a shower."

Samantha grinned. “Finally!” She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the steps.

Neil laughed, scooping her up. He took off running while she held on and giggled.

“That’s wonderful.” Adrian meant that. He didn’t trust Neil anymore, but he did trust Wade and he adored Samantha. It was great that they were finally able to put their trauma aside to resume their lives together.

“I wish they could all be happy moments.” Marc didn’t turn around as Madison entered the cafeteria.

Adrian frowned as Biff immediately rose from a table with the Eagles and hurried over to her. It was more proof of Marc’s accusation; that rumor was flying through Safe Haven.

The camp clapped as they spotted Madison. She had looked after their animals and then rescued the missing kids on her own. Kyle had already passed the word that she had done all of the work.

Madison blinked, not expecting a hero’s reception. She smiled and even waved at a couple of people, but inside, she hoped they all left her alone. She still wasn’t ready to be surrounded by well-wishers.

Madison spotted Charlie and Margret sitting together.

Charlie gestured at the seat by his new friend.

Madison wasn’t sure she was ready for another awkward moment.

Margret sighed. “I’ll have to share you, right?”

Charlie snorted. “One partner at a time is already too much for me.”

Satisfied, Margret forced a smile at Madison to let the woman know it was okay to join them.

Madison started to go that way, hoping there wouldn't be a fight. She was too tired for the battle she saw lurking in Margret's eyes.

Biff stepped in front of her.

Madison flinched. “Oh!”

Biff frowned. “I'd never hurt you.”

“I know.” But she really didn't. His behavior during the fire had finished souring her on his company.

“I'm sorry for yelling.”

Madison didn't tell him his words about leaving the animals behind had done more to dent his image than the shouting had. She concentrated and conjured a tray in her hands. It was a good demonstration and it also created a tiny barrier between them. “I didn't need to be yelled at. It had to be desperation.”

Biff bonded to her even stronger as the camp clapped again. It had been that way for him in the lab. “You had to need it.”

“Yeah.” She braced for his displeasure as she delivered news that he wouldn't like. “I don't think we should try to teach anyone else because we'll have to endanger their lives to accomplish it. Two conjurers are enough in this camp.”

Biff realized that meant he wouldn't be teaching her either. "I don't agree. And you don't get to make that choice!"

Madison had expected this. "Well, I already talked to Jennifer about it and she does agree."

Biff's fury lashed out. "You're trying to take my place!"

Madison turned away. "So stupid."

Biff's eyes flashed bright pink and then he controlled it, stomping out of the cafeteria.

Madison sat next to Margret. She flushed darkly as everyone continued to stare. "Mind your own business!"

People tried to, but Madison was a hero. They wanted to be there for the next big thing she accomplished.

"I'll get you some food." Charlie took the tray she'd conjured and went to the buffet that Thelma and her family had gotten ready.

Margret turned toward Madison.

Residents once again went still and quiet to observe.

Madison quickly cut the girl off. "We're just friends. If you start getting jealous, he'll stop responding."

Margret leaned closer, voice lowering. "Can you teach me to shoot?"

Madison grinned as she realized she'd misunderstood the vibe. "Sure."

Margret knew Charlie and his family respected good fighting and gun skills. She didn't have either.



“We could learn kai together.” Madison was now eager to have friends, but only the ones who were like her because only they would understand how hard it was for her to do any of this.

“As long as he doesn’t mind me being there. He might like the time alone with you. In that case, I’ll have someone else teach me.”

Madison scanned the handsome teenager who was even getting her a cup of coffee. She wanted to promise that there wouldn’t ever be anything between her and Charlie, but she couldn’t. “Let’s leave it up to him, okay?”

Margret had known it wouldn’t be easy to claim Charlie. “May the best woman win his heart.”

Madison chuckled. “Let’s start with friendship and go from there.”

Margret recognized the copy of Charlie’s words. “You’re better for him. I should step aside.”

Madison finally faced the girl. “Will you?”

Margret snorted. “Not a chance. I’ve been drooling over him for a lot longer than you have.”

“I’m not drooling over him at all.”

“Exactly. You don’t really want him the way I do.”

Madison nodded. That was true; there was one other man in this camp that she would give a chance to, but it wouldn’t ever happen. He was happy with his wife. “I just want friends. Anything else would have to be his idea.”

Both girls went quiet as Charlie returned.

Charlie had heard all of it. He put the tray in front of Madison and walked out of the mess, leaving both females embarrassed and regretful.

Marc wasn't surprised. Charlie wasn't ready to be crowded or claimed.

"I'm awake enough now to take over point if you want to go handle that."

Marc lifted his mostly empty cup. "He'll talk to his mom before he comes to me for a second opinion." Marc stared toward the small window, noticing the fog seemed to be lifting. "Ned and Dario didn't make it."

Adrian got his book out to make notes. "Did they fall overboard?" No one would have heard them.

"The gas got them. They hit the wrong button and didn't know how to stop it. There was nothing Jennifer or the others could do."

"Damn." Adrian didn't ask how Marc knew even though no one had been able to see that ship in hours. He knew it was one of Marc's new gifts. He'd spotted the death scan in Marc's hall of power when they'd fought the fire together. He was able to see places where a recent death had occurred. "They weren't able to avoid that green cloud."

"No. Some things are fated to happen. We can delay them, but we can't change them." Angela had warned him about that, but Marc had chosen not to interfere, mostly because he'd never trusted the two new men. Their dog, Duke, was already a favorite

in camp, but Ned and Dario hadn't made any friends at all. Marc was certain they'd been trying to steal the ship when the accident happened. "The Eagles will row over and handle that once the fog clears, but not Kyle. I want him to stay on this ship."

"You got it." Adrian wrote it down. He didn't have to ask why on that one either. Kyle was living on borrowed time.

Another group of people came into the mess. They spotted Adrian and Marc eating together and smiled. The vibe was good from almost everyone.

It occurred to Marc that he was getting a lot of approval, even from camp members who didn't really like him.

"You did a good job. People are happy with you."

Marc nodded at a camp member who congratulated him on the birth of his daughter. "A twofer?"

"I'm not sure. This started at the trial when she let Tim rant about all the mistakes she'd made. It was a set up to make you look good." Adrian finished his soup. "I'm not counting anymore, but I'm sure it's more than two anyway. She stopped settling for that low number months ago."

Marc chuckled. "Fair enough." He could easily think of half a dozen things this had accomplished, but he wasn't in the mood to count them either. He wasn't ready to face the losses.

Selina approached the center table, aware of frowns now coming her way. She knew she wasn't welcome here yet. "Can I have a minute?"

Marc nodded, but he didn't tell her to sit down. The new woman had a test to pass before she would be welcome at any leadership tables or gatherings now.

Selina lowered her voice, hoping only Marc and Adrian could hear her through the din of the eating camp. "It was poison. Not enough to kill him, but he would have been sick for a while."

Adrian stared in shock.

Marc smiled at her. "Thank you for telling me."

Selina stared when he didn't do anything or say anything else. "Aren't you going to arrest me?"

She and everyone who'd heard the confession were expecting that.

"No. You just used your favor from saving the boss." He glared. "If it ever happens again, I'll handle it. There won't be an arrest, just a grave."

Selina swallowed nervously. "What about Missy? Is she in trouble?"

"She stopped it and tried to protect you. She did what any Eagle would have done." Marc didn't say some of those Eagles would have let Kenn be poisoned. As it was, the camp around them didn't care. Kenn was not a favorite; Selina was. The choice was easy based on that.

Selina tried not to cry. "I'm sorry. He hurt Shawn and I..."

“And you love him. I get that.” Marc waved her off. “You’re in the clear.” *Until Tonya finds out.*

Selina flashed a bright smile at Marc as she left.

Marc kept his eyes on his tray. “Check out the far corner.”

Adrian shifted to be able to see, trying to be subtle.

Tonya snorted. “They’re watching us.” She wasn’t listening to other conversations like the rest of the camp was, but she felt Marc’s attention on them. Tonya was exhausted and she still had another half shift in the medical bay to finish before she could sleep.

Kenn glanced up from his tray. “Huh?”

“The new boss is watching us.”

Kenn lifted his middle finger without turning in that direction.

Marc’s chuckle floated through the crowded room, lifting the mood and drawing attention to him in longing that would never be satisfied.

Kenn focused on Tonya. “Are you ready to get married?”

Tonya hesitated, surprised. “Only if you really want it. I’m fine with things like they are.”

“I’m not. I love you. I’m ready to call you my old lady.”

Tonya laughed, happiness filling her heart. “Well, give me an orgasm I’ll never forget and then I’ll take your name.”

“Deal!”

The couple hurried out to enjoy their free time before they had to go back on duty.

Sitting nearby, Shawn leered at Selina. “In the mood for a private moment?”

Selina nodded eagerly. “Where?”

Shawn took another drink of the hot tea that Thelma had brewed for him. It tasted awful. “It’s foggy on the top deck...”

Selina took his arm as he held it out like a gentleman. “Sounds scary. You’ll have to hold me close.”

“That is what I had in mind.” Shawn doubted it would be successful, but he was determined to keep trying. He shot an ugly look at Marc as they headed for the exit.

As that couple left, more partners began exiting to have downtime, including Ray and Grant. The men had made up and were now discussing the wedding again.

Marc was pleased by most of it. Angela’s breeding tree was in full swing, but it wasn’t just people being horny or the idea rubbing off. It was almost winter in this part of the world and that had always been a time for sex.

Adrian finally brought up the topic he wanted information on even though it might ruin the peace between them. “How is she?”

Marc sighed. “Not great, but not as bad as the last time. The baby lived. She’ll adjust.”

Adrian pushed, carefully. “What happens when she’s ready to come back?”

“We’ll share.” Marc was sure it would get tense at times, but he also knew Kenn’s suggestion wouldn’t work. Angela couldn’t be reduced to den mother duties. After leading this camp, Marc knew it would never be enough to make her happy and that mattered to him more than his need to be in control.

Before Adrian could ask another question, Mike came hurrying into the mess. He came straight to Marc. “We’re getting calls. The radio is full of traffic!”

Adrian frowned at the boy for revealing that information in front of everyone. Mike had just lost his job.

Marc eyed the curious camp and decided it didn’t have to be a secret anymore. “Soldiers, right?”

Mike nodded. “There are bunkers still! They’re all talking about seeing the fire on satellites. They were gathering for another attack!”

People all through the mess tensed as they overheard Mike’s report, muttering.

“I thought we killed them all!”

“Soldiers are like roaches. You never really get rid of them.”

Adrian stared at Marc. *He isn’t surprised.*

Marc looked at Mike calmly. “And now?”

“They think we’re dead! They sent out an order to resume normal operations and to start taking control of topside. They’re coming out of their holes!”

Mike's excited voice got the camp worked up. They were almost glad the fire had happened now.

"It's not just the soldiers. William is all over the channels, hunting for word, and Tilly from Australia has been calling. They all think we're gone." Mike hadn't been able to answer William because there were too many calls coming in. Someone would have heard it. That was also why he had to report it.

Adrian lifted his mug. "And that's the real reason she allowed it to happen." The jungle would be clear now for them to build and rebuild, and the camp would accept Marc's leadership easier, but the threats from other people were always Angela's top priority.

"Can I let Tilly know we're okay? I'll use the private channel." Mike knew William would hear it and know they were okay.

Marc shook his head at Mike. "It's time to go quiet."

Mike scowled. "What? They're our friends."

"Are they?" Marc delivered Angela's choice on that. She'd given it to him just a few hours ago and he agreed completely. "We're weak right now. If we let them know we survived, it's possible we'll have to fight. Angela never trusted them."

"I didn't know that." Adrian had thought the opposite.

"She played a great role because we are weak and she can't fight for a while. Tilly let us go in there and handle Reicher for her. What was she doing all those years on the run?"



“Building connections...” Adrian couldn’t think of anything else.

“Or maybe she was biding her time for a takeover. Angela couldn’t be sure, so we’re not taking the chance.” Marc focused on Mike. “You are off of radio duty permanently. You’ll be assigned a new job. You did good, but we’re going full dark. We will no longer be monitoring the channels at all. All radios will be stored in a cargo locker.”

“No!” Mike stopped another shout as people turned to stare at him.

Zack came over from his post. “Problem?”

Marc shook his head. “His job has been changed. He isn’t in trouble.”

“You shouldn’t do this! We need that information.”

Zack pulled Mike away from the table. “He’s the boss. It’s his choice.”

Mike jerked away and stomped toward the exit. He glared at Leeann as he went by.

Zack recognized that from all of the moments with his late wife. *Whenever I got pissed, I always took it out on her.*

Zack followed his son into the hallway. “Wait up. I want to talk to you.”

Leeann let out a sigh of relief and then resumed eating.

Marc scanned the murmuring camp. “I want all radios handed over to the Eagles before you go to

bed. Don't make me send the enforcers to search you, because I will."

No one liked hearing that, but considering the new information, they didn't argue.

Clicking noises outside the ship grew louder for a moment and then faded as more fog moved in to cover the windows.

## 2

Zack caught up with Mike and grabbed the boy's arm in a painful grip. "Stop it!"

"What?!"

Zack leaned in close, furious. "I'm going to be watching every move you make, Mike. Leave that girl alone!"

Mike realized his father knew what he'd been doing, or at least he suspected. Mike immediately acted innocent. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." Zack used the harsh tone that had always cowered his sons in the past. "Do you want me to go back to how I used to be?"

Mike quickly shook his head. He still had scars from it. "No."

"Then stop it right now or I will. You'll be in the medical bay constantly. Don't put a hand on her, ever!"

"I won't." Mike hurried off, anger and fear battling in his mind.

Zack wasn't convinced. He went back to his post while making plans to be sure it didn't happen. *I can't let him turn out like me.* Zack's biggest regret was how abusive he'd been before the war. He hoped Mike hadn't progressed into actually hitting the girl. *I'll make sure they're never alone.*

The people in the mess were busy talking about the soldiers. No one caught Zack's thoughts.

Gus came in with Bernice and Crissy.

People stared at them, curious about the new type of descendant in their midst.

Gus kept his body between her and the camp as they went to get their trays. He didn't think there was going to be an issue, but he still stayed ready to fight for her right to live with them.

Adrian regarded Marc. "The church group hid it for Parker. Will they be punished?"

Marc shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. I'll talk to Angela about it."

"And you'll talk to Bernice?"

"Yes, but not for a while. Let her adjust to being exposed and then we'll determine what gifts she has. We might be able to use her in that final battle."

"I don't think she wants to be like us." Adrian remembered Bernice's fear upon being found. "That's why they were able to survive in a floating garbage dump!"

Marc had other concerns. "They were in a radiation pile. Maybe they're immune."

Adrian wrote that in his book. "The medics might be able to test for it."

Marc stood. “I’ll be up in six hours. It’s all yours.”

Adrian’s happiness flew out and filled the crowded room with so many good vibes that even Zack felt better.

Marc went to the exit, yawning. It had been a very long day. *And I hope there are many more to come. This is the best I’ve felt in months.*

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

# Close

### 1

“**T**he sounds are getting louder.” Kyle met Marc at the steps. “The fog’s clearing out. We’re about to get a view.”

Marc followed Kyle up the ramp wearily. He didn’t talk to Cody and distract him, but he sent a wave of affection that made the boy stand straighter as he walked behind Kyle.

Marc had assigned a guard to Kyle as soon as everyone was back on this ship. Jennifer’s panicked thoughts had come through clearly. He hoped she and Amanda would have time for that sit down soon to discuss options.

Marc also planned to talk to Angela and Adrian about it, but not until Angela had been given a little recovery time. He knew she wouldn’t be down for long, however. *And I’m glad.*

He’d expected to be happy about her being out of commission for a while, but just one day of her being unresponsive and weak had brought his fear back to the surface. *I’d much rather have her breathing fire and directing the future at my side.*

Kyle snorted. “That’s a huge difference.” He hadn’t been sure Angela could get Marc to change that much.

“It wasn’t her.” Marc confided because he knew he could trust Kyle. “It was the baby.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither of us will be able to handle her alone. She’s a lot like this camp. I made the connection and it sank in. That’s why Angela put me in charge instead of you and Jennifer.”

Kyle had expected that job. It was a relief that he hadn’t been chosen for it. Kyle didn’t want to lead the camp. *I’m perfectly happy being the top Eagle and the top tracker.*

Marc smirked. “You have competition for that role.”

Kyle shrugged. “I’d be bored if it was given to me.”

Marc heard the tone and gave in. “Fine. We’ll redo the shooting competition and I’ll kick your ass. Happy now?”

“Yes.” Kyle went to the side of the ship facing the island. The fog was almost gone from around the boat. Even now, it was pulling back, revealing the beach and hundreds of shapes swimming through the water along the shore.

Kyle revised his estimate. “Thousands.”

Marc watched the turtles lumber onto the shore, hearing their grunts and clicks as they dug in the sand to bury their eggs. The entire beach was

covered in nesting females. “They followed the fog.”

Kyle nodded. “It was probably a signal to them.”

Marc thought ahead. “Wait until they’re gone and collect a few days’ worth of eggs. That won’t take even a quarter of what they’re laying, but it will be a great protein boost for the camp.” *Not to mention a mood boost.* Real eggs were mostly a thing of the past.

“I’ll handle it.”

Marc tried to determine if the fire was still burning, but the fog over the land was still too thick to see through. *It smells like it is.*

Marc wasn’t looking forward to the camp viewing the barren ground once the fog cleared. All of their buildings and the work they’d done had been erased. If not for Angela making them keep the majority of their stock on the ship, they would be in dire straits.

“Damn.” Marc’s tone drew several people to the side of the ship, including Wade, who was on duty on the top deck as point man while the bridge was empty.

Kyle stared at the glittery wall of the cliff over the cove. “And it was here the whole time.”

Wade stared. “That’s why the pirates wanted this island. That’s why they dug the tunnels!”

Marc was flashed to something Angela had told him months ago.

*“Why is this island so important, Angie?” he asked in a whisper. “I know you considered others. Why there?”*

*Angela made a motion with her hand and walked away.*

*Marc stared in surprise. Why do we need silver?*

*When Marc worked out a short list on his own, the uses at the top of it didn't fit. As he went, he realized none of his reasons did and he'd covered everything related to the apocalypse. Then it isn't, he decided. It's about us, the descendants. As soon as he had that thought, Marc understood. “For the final battle.”*

Kyle turned toward Marc as the others stared at the silvery flecks running all through the cave. They'd been hidden by the vines and the jungle. “What do we need silver for?”

“The final battle isn't the only challenge we'll face when we go home. Just reaching the location for it will be a struggle.”

“But silver?” Kyle only knew a few things it was good for and he didn't see how antibiotic properties would matter. If they were injured, their healers would handle it.

Marc stared at the water behind the ship, eyes growing dazed. “A group of gunfighters are coming. They're like us. And they're very, very different. They will reveal another enemy that can only be defeated with strong minds and pure silver.”



Kyle shivered, crept out. He'd never been around Marc when the man had a premonition. "Are they friends or foes?"

Marc gave the answer that he always hated when it came from Angela. "That has not been revealed."

## 2

"They're sleeping." Jennifer took Marc's arm as he entered the medical bay. She led him over to a chair near the front desk. "Charlie crashed on the couch by her bed."

Marc was glad. The pair hadn't spent much time together since arriving on the island.

Marc sat in the chair and extended his aching leg. The painkiller he'd taken had worn off a short time ago.

Jennifer used her new healing gift on Marc's ankle. Bright green glows lit the room, drawing attention from the few people who were still here.

Pain ran up Marc's leg and then faded as the damage was repaired. He grunted in relief. "Thank you."

Jennifer yawned as she stood up, cradling her stomach. "Yep." She pointed. "There's a fold out chair waiting for you." Jennifer had made sure Angela's room had a lot of space, supplies, and furniture. "Try to keep her in bed for a few days."

Marc snorted.

Jennifer sighed. “I know, but try anyway. She really does need to take it easy for a while.”

“I know.” Marc limped toward the door and then remembered he didn’t have to be careful on his leg. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “Are you okay?”

Jennifer smothered her worry. “It can wait. He’s on the ship now, where he’s safer.”

Marc nodded. “I sent a guard with him. He’s not allowed to go anywhere alone.”

“Thank you.” Jennifer knew Cody would do everything he could to keep Kyle alive. “I’ll be in the mess and then on rounds.”

Marc eyed the girl. “Pass it to Amanda and get some sleep.”

Jennifer didn’t argue even though she was still a little jealous of the new enforcer. In her opinion, Amanda was being given too much authority too quickly. “I will.”

Marc opened the door to Angela’s room.

Immense power surrounded him in a thick barrier that he doubted he could break through without using the rest of his energy. He’d never felt anything like it.

The baby recognized him and dropped the odd shield.

Charlie looked over sleepily from the chair. “She’s cool like that.”

Marc chuckled, shutting the door. He felt better about having to leave Angela alone while he ran things. The baby was already protecting her.

Dog didn't move from his place on Angela's legs. He'd come in with Charlie and hadn't budged since jumping up on her and lying down. He'd inhaled a lot of smoke during his travels.

Marc saw the foldout chair was ready for him. It even had a blanket and a pillow on it. He went to the bassinet next to Angela's bed.

The baby stared at him with blue eyes that glowed brighter than the fire had. He gently picked her up and then went to the chair.

Marc settled the newborn on his chest and then covered them both up. Peace flowed over him in thick waves. "Daddy loves you, too."

The baby gurgled and went back to sleep.

Charlie did the same. He was exhausted.

Angela didn't wake at all. The pain medication Terry had given her had knocked her out. She wandered the fog in her dreams.

Now peering into the room through the window in the door, Jennifer muttered a protection spell.

"That's nice of you, but it won't work."

Jennifer joined Amanda by the front desk. She'd called the woman mentally, but it was still surprising that she'd come so quickly. "What did you see?"

Amanda shivered. "There's still a long road ahead, for all of us."

Jennifer went to the exit. "We'll handle it together."

Amanda smiled as the girl left. "Yes, we will." Amanda felt like she had a home for the first time

in her life. *I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize it.*

Jennifer kept her thoughts blank until she was on the deck below and out of range. Then she handled one last piece of business that Angela had assigned to her weeks ago. “You’re getting a promotion. Congratulations.”

Bret lowered his shield, grinning. “I’m a real rookie now?”

Jennifer nodded at the boy who’d been her guard for the last few hours. No one had known he was there. Bret’s ability to go quiet was amazing. He and Jack were better at it than everyone else. “As of right now, you are an Eagle in Angela’s army.”

Bret beamed. He had everything he wanted. “What should I do first?”

Jennifer held out a brown envelope, suppressing a shiver at memories of the first time Angela had handed out envelopes like this. “There’s a set time on there. Don’t handle it until then.”

Bret read the date and time on the front of it. “Tomorrow? What about today?!”

Jennifer pushed the button for the elevator to go to the descendant deck. Isabel and Stanley were in her cabin with all of their kids. “You can open it, but you can’t tell anyone until then, not even the target.”

Bret got excited again. “Another secret mission!”

Jennifer waited patiently as he ripped it open and read it.

Anger filled the air.

“This is a joke, right?”

Jennifer shook her head as the elevator door opened with a faint ding that also gave her bad memories of fighting the radiation sickness. “It’s a test of your loyalty, Bret. If you can’t do it, you’ll be out of the Eagles and out of this camp.” She didn’t say anything else as the door shut.

Bret stood there, glaring at the paper. “I can’t do this!”

Angela’s handwriting glared at him in a challenge he was doomed to fail.

*Someone has broken our laws and needs to be arrested. Cuff them and take them to the brig. Do it openly, and remember that you’re always an Eagle first.*

Tears came to Bret’s eyes as he read the name.  
*Adrian Mitchel.*

### 3

“I’m very sorry for your loss.” Rico kept a loose arm around her so she didn’t trip or fall. It was entirely possible to be hurt during a dream walk.

Angela leaned against his strength. “Thank you.”

Angela wasn’t in pain right now. She was grateful for the relief. Almost dying once again had barely registered on her mental radar. All that really mattered was that the baby had survived. *I have orphans all over this planet who need a mother. I don’t have to birth them myself.*

Rico could feel her pain. He couldn't think of anything to say to make it better.

Angela didn't tell him that his presence alone was a comfort. She wasn't going to reveal this weakness in front of Marc or anyone else. It was a relief to have someone to share the burden with.

“Is it because he already has too much grief?”

Angela tried to ignore the odd feeling of the fog around them. She would never be able to be around fluffy clouds again without thinking of her time on the submarine. “It's more about them needing me to be the strong one. I broke down in the mountain. I can't let it get that bad again or I might not be able to pull myself back up.”

“You have Adrian to lean on.”

“He's the one I don't want to burden with my grief. Every time he helps me through an emotional crisis, we become closer. I don't want that relationship to grow.”

Rico glanced around, starting to recognize some of the shapes through the gray matter. “We're on the island.”

“Yes. There's an area back here I've never been able to reach.”

Rico didn't know if that was because of her pregnancy or because the jungle hadn't allowed her to get through. He stared in surprise as the fog began to clear. “You're controlling it.”

“Yes. I had another evolution. I'm no longer prevented from using my gifts in this realm.”

Rico's quick mind made a connection. "What about in Hell?"

"I should be stronger there as well." Angela had been able to use part of her gifts when they'd gone visiting, but there had been limits. She hoped that wouldn't be the case next time.

"Why did you pull me in for this?" They hadn't had contact since he left her camp, and Rico was positive she didn't do this very often. It was dangerous to dream walk anyway, especially over such a long distance, but he sensed that once someone left her camp, Angela was usually done with them for good.

"Your pain drew me. If you don't control it, it will eventually get Marc's attention."

"I don't want him to know I'm alive."

"I know." Angela stopped, concentrating.

The fog in front of them parted, creating a clear path and a clear view to the small cave at the very rear of the island that no one had been able to reach yet.

Rico stared at the glowing cave, but his mind stayed on their conversation. "I'll try harder to control it." In the past, Rico never would have admitted to feeling such an emotion. His time in Safe Haven had changed him completely.

"I'm sorry for your pain."

Rico sighed. "If I had known that love would hurt this much, I never would have opened my heart to her."

Angela hugged him as they walked toward the cave. “They say distance makes the heart grow fonder. In your case, it may become bitterness. Always remember that this is a temporary separation.”

Rico had always known what Angela had planned for him and Tonya. It had been hard to keep it from everyone while he’d been in their camp. Here and now, alone in Angela’s dream, Rico still tried to do the right thing. “She loves him as much as I love her. I don’t want her to feel this way. Perhaps you could change the plan.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Rico took that as a no. His love for Tonya made him push even though he knew it wouldn’t matter. “People are capable of great change. It doesn’t erase the mistakes in their past, I understand that, but it should matter in some way.”

“It has mattered. I gave him back years of his life, years that I’m still not sure he deserved.”

Rico frowned. “He’s reverting?”

“Marc and the others will try to pull him away from that edge, but Reicher did an enormous amount of damage to Kenn’s self-confidence. That’s not something that can be easily repaired. And frankly, I’m not sure that I want to. He’s a weak man who always has to depend on others to function in a polite society. If there ever comes a time where he doesn’t have that support system, Kenn will immediately resume the lifestyle he led before the war. Some things just cannot be changed.”



“It’s very decent of you to spend so much time trying.”

Angela sighed this time. “My oldest son spent too much time around him. I’ve always been worried that he’ll follow in Kenny’s footsteps. Saving Kenn is a blueprint for how I may have to handle Charlie in the future. It has nothing to do with the Marine and everything to do with my son.”

Rico tried not to be eager, but he couldn’t help the excitement in his voice. “When will you do it?”

Angela stopped in front of the cave entrance, eyeing the bright silver veins that were running all through the walls. “After the final battle.”

“I’ve always wondered why you waited at all. Your blueprint answer doesn’t quite cover it.”

“I can’t allow my people to know how vengeful I really am. If I do that, I may lose leadership.”

“But they all know what he did. Wouldn’t they agree with it?”

Angela shook her head against his big arm. “Not when they’ve committed crimes that they were never punished for. They’ll see my vengeance and understand they were never really forgiven. At that point, they will either run, which will decimate this camp from all of the magic users leaving or they will try to remove me from power so I no longer have authority over them. Either way, Safe Haven will fall.”

“Won’t that still happen after the final battle?”

“It would, but I won’t be here at that point, so it doesn’t matter. Doug has a place saved for me and

Marc at the Weigh Station. I'm going to ascend and then spend the rest of eternity digging for answers about creation."

Rico was disappointed. "Everyone believes we'll get those answers at the final battle."

"I still have a small hope for that, but like I've always done, I've made plans to cover every possibility. At the very least, Marc and I will be up there controlling and directing the fates of the good souls on this planet. What I need to figure out is how to get Hell under our control."

"Maybe you can use little Cate. Joey definitely likes her."

"I would, if I thought that would work, but Joey is like his father. Joel wanted to control everything. He tricked me into sending him there."

That was a concern for Rico, considering that Angela knew everything. Finding out she had doubts about so many issues was a surprise. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I love your nephew, but I can't share everything with him yet. He's not ready for some of these revelations. You grew up in that damn lab. You can handle all of this and more." Angela hugged him again and then let go. "Thank you."

"For proving that not all Reichers are bad?"

Angela snorted. "I have Marc. I've always known that one. I'm grateful for your friendship."

Warmth entered Rico's heart and eased a little bit of the pain from his separation from Tonya. "It's my honor."

Angela stepped into the dark cave to determine how far back it went. “Remember those words and there can still be a happy future for you with the woman you love. But it can’t just be her. You also have to be able to love her children even though you hate their father. Practice on any kids you run into during your travels between now and the final battle.”

“I already know I have to treat them fairly.”

“No, Rico Reicher, you have to *love* them. It’s very likely that Tonya is going to end up in a leadership position after that battle. You have to be able to love her children and every other orphan on this planet. If you can’t do that, you can’t be with her, ever.” Angela stepped into the darkness and vanished from his sight.

Rico’s first reaction was to say he wasn’t capable of it, that the love he felt for Tonya was all he had room for.

Light flared in the tunnel ahead of him as Angela struck a mental torch. It sent more warmth into his heart when she motioned for him to catch up.

*Maybe I can do this. After all, I have the alpha to guide me.*

Angela smiled as Rico caught up and put his arm around her to resume their walk. “We’ll always be friends. You can find me in the fog any time you need me.”

Rico felt a warm weight against his other arm. He stopped, letting go of Angela to cradle the infant.

“If you can make friends with her and then learn to love her, every other child will be easy in comparison.” Angela had figured out the safest way to handle her daughter was to never leave the baby alone while she and Marc were busy or sleeping. The baby needed to be wherever they were.

Rico stared as the little girl opened her eyes. He saw her glowing blue orbs and gasped. “She’s part of the Creator’s line!”

“She is special, powerful, and very dangerous. Care must be taken at all times to ensure that she is surrounded by honor and not evil.”

Pain ran up Rico’s arm. He quickly adjusted his hold on the infant, lifting her against his chest.

The baby settled against his warmth happily, drifting with them through the foggy cave.

More warmth entered Rico’s heart. *This is what it would feel like to be a father.*

“She will want more children in the future. There’s a chance that one of them could be yours.”

Excitement and a little bit of dread filled Rico’s mind.

The baby shifted uncomfortably, sensing it.

Rico automatically offered a correction. “You have to get used to feeling other people’s emotions. Until then, lock yourself in a shield so it doesn’t get through.”

A shield appeared around Rico, thick and incredibly tough. He didn’t know what it was made of, but it wasn’t like any other descendant shield he’d ever seen. “I meant around your mind. Try not

to let anyone get through and then you don't have to feel their pain."

The shield around him vanished. Nothing else happened, but Rico no longer had the warm connection to the baby in his arms. "Very good."

Angela smiled at him over her shoulder. "These lessons will be good for both of you."

Angela had never met anyone during all of their travels who was as good at shielding their mind and controlling themselves as Rico was. If not for some of the moments she'd arranged between him and Marc, Rico would still be a completely unknown figure in their camp. He excelled at hiding and lurking.

Rico realized she was using him to teach the infant to control herself. Once more, love and warmth filled his heart and mind. It was amazing to be accepted and to be needed. "Thank you, Alpha."

Angela glanced over her shoulder again, toward the ship where Marc was supposed to be sleeping. Then she resumed her walk into the cave, also allowing some of her pain to be healed by the moment. "It will always be my honor."

#### 4

"I knew it!" Marc kept his special shield up to prevent being detected. It was the shield that didn't let smoke or water through. He had perfected it by watching the man he was now trailing.

“I knew he wasn’t dead.” Marc wasn’t angry about the deception. He agreed with everything he’d heard so far; he was actually thrilled about Kenn’s coming death, but he was disappointed that he wouldn’t be able to let Rico know that he knew. *I still can’t spend time with him.*

*But I can follow them in her dreams and be close to him that way.* Marc knew it would be enough. Like Angela, he didn’t have many real friendships. It was hard to let anyone in. He was trying harder these days because he knew it would improve his leadership, but it was difficult. He hadn’t been in the lab all of his life, but he had always been a loner. “I think that’s why I was able to accept Rico so easily; he’s like me. Or I’m like him.”

In the past, Marc would have been jealous of Angela spending time with any other man, especially alone in her dreams. Now, he understood what she was doing. “She’s teaching Rico how to love again, how to be a part of humanity.”

“He isn’t the only one.” Neil walked by Marc with Samantha inside his shield and Wade on his heels.

Marc rotated in surprise as more people came through the dream fog. A dozen descendants trailed after Angela and Rico, glowing brightly as they absorbed the lesson.

In the distance, other forms were also walking through Angela’s dream. Marc felt William searching for them and attacking those other lifeforms for information.

Samantha sent a thick wave of her fog gift in that direction to disorient William so he couldn't find them. She planned to tell Angela not to go dream walking alone anymore.

"She's not alone." Marc was thrilled that his uncle was alive; he adored his wife for still caring about Rico enough to have a moment like this with him.

"She's trying to heal the world, a few of us at a time." Charlie stayed near Marc as he walked, cradling his son against his chest. He had the same special shield that Marc did.

Marc noted who was here and who wasn't as he kept walking. "Will it work?"

All of the winged forms around them listened for the boy's answer.

Charlie walked closer to his dad, merging their shields. He didn't let his wings out like the others were now doing. He wasn't comfortable with that new evolution yet. "If it was anyone else, I'd say no."

"But?"

"But she's done the impossible several times. If anyone can heal the world, it's her. We just have to keep her alive while she leads us into a better future for everyone."

Marc put his arm around his eldest son. "We'll do it together."

Charlie was glad Marc understood he couldn't be the only leader of their camp, but he still shook his head. "You're not the alpha. You have to find a

way to be okay with following. She wasn't put here to serve anyone. We are hers to command."

Marc slowly nodded. "She'll keep teaching me. It will work out."

"Not for everyone."

Marc thought of Kenn. "No, some people will fight this with everything they have."

"And those are the people we have to protect her from." Charlie's recent dreams had been awful. "Things are changing in America. Nightmares now roam the land, searching for blood. It will be a very different place when we return."

Marc's visions had also started to reveal that. He pretended he wasn't scared of what was waiting for them. "We have the silver. We have everything we need now."

Far ahead and still able to hear them clearly, Angela's mood dipped. "If only that were true."

Rico scowled. "What's wrong?"

Angela didn't tell him they had observers. She revealed her biggest fear instead. "I don't know if we can win that final battle."

Rico carefully followed her, enjoying carrying the baby, but it also felt odd. He'd never had contact with children. "You have massive power, and the silver now. What else do you need?"

Angela trailed her hand over the bright flecks all along the cave wall. "That battle will be massive. Nature will have tens of thousands on her side."

"So?"



“So, there’s only about 50 of us who can really fight, Rico. We’re more than outnumbered. I might be leading us into a slaughter that sends the rest of humanity into extinction.”

“Shit.” Rico hadn’t considered that.

No one who was listening had either. All of them stopped in shock, filling with dread.

Angela kept walking. “We need more fighters and I have no idea where to get them.”

Rico hated her fear. It encouraged his own. “I’ll work on that every day from now on.”

“As will I, but it won’t be enough. I’ve exhausted every possible source of power that might be on our side.” Angela had spent months trying to find a solution.

A light flared in the cave ahead of her. Conner appeared with his wings fully extended and a smile on his face. “Talk to my dad.”

Angela was surprised to see Conner here. She hadn’t known he could track her like the others. “Why?”

Conner enjoyed not having to hide his newest evolution. “He and Dog have been building a plan since we left America. I didn’t know what it was for back then, but I do now.”

“A plan to do what?”

Conner’s smile widened. “They’re trying to figure out how to draw in all of the lost souls and convert them to the light. All of those souls will want to defend my dad in gratitude for the redemption he’ll give them.”

Angela groaned as the piece snapped into place in her mind. “Damn him.”

Conner’s smile faltered. “Shouldn’t you be happy about it?”

“I am. I’m also screwed.”

Conner frowned along with everyone else who was still listening. “I don’t understand.”

Angela handed the torch to Rico and gently took her daughter from him. “Your dad is about to be arrested, Conner.”

Conner didn’t ask what rule had been broken. He was used to Angela letting Adrian off the hook. “You can give him a pass on this one, right?”

Angela forced herself to wake up so no one could hear her answer.

She looked down at her daughter with a scarred mother’s fierce determination. “If I let him go on this one, there’s no one else who will challenge me. I’ll enslave the normals and they’ll stay that way. For the next four hundred years.”

Dog glanced up at her from his warm and cozy place across her ankles. *Just don’t do it.*

Angela leaned back against the bed, stomach aching. “If I don’t, someone else will and the normals won’t be treated as well. With me, they’ll at least be safe and cared for.”

*Like a zoo.*

Angela nodded.

Dog used his growing brain to understand her dilemma. He’d also had an evolution. *If Adrian stops you, then someone else will enslave them.*

“Yes.”

*Then do what his pup wants and give him a pass on whatever rule he broke.*

“If I do that, he’ll see he has no limits here. He’ll pursue personal goals and slide into the dark side. He’ll take half of our best people with him. In the end, we’ll destroy ourselves and the normals before we can make it to the final battle.” Angela kept searching for a solution while fighting the depression that came from losing Ned and Dario. “I don’t know what to do, Dog. If I save him, I doom him.”

*And if you don’t, he will still die and you doom the final battle.*

“Yes.” She thought back to her first weeks of leading this camp. “I knew it back then. I waited, hoping that future would change, but it hasn’t at all. It’s the only vision I’ve ever had that didn’t change over time.”

It was too much for Dog to wrap his head around. He gave her the only advice he could think of. *Tell them all and hope one of them has an answer.*

Angela nodded. That might trigger things to happen sooner, but at this point, it didn’t matter. “We have to save him, Dog. Every breath of free air we get to take is because of Adrian. We owe him everything...even their lives.”

Dog was shocked. *You’re not putting the normals first!*

“No.” The V popped out on Angela’s chin as she spoke. “I’m going to save Adrian. And my husband is going to help me.”

Dog chuffed. *How will you get him on board with that?*

Angela smiled sweetly. “I’ll put them in leadership together as equals and let Adrian work his way into Marc’s heart like he did to mine.”

## **The End of Book 22**

What would you like to do now?



[See the next book in this series.](#)

[Deleted Scenes](#)

[Print](#)

[Audiobook](#)

[Book 23](#)

[Place a Review](#)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#)

Would you like to be notified when I have a new release? [Take this link to my website](#) to pick the option that works best for you! No email address required.

## Deleted Scenes

Greg and Kenn exchanged glances as the rest of the crowd turned their attention to the men who were being brought out of the tunnel now. Marc and Adrian were fine, though they were covered in bits of dirt and mud. The tunnels were still surprisingly damp after all this time without rain.

Greg turned toward the restaurant.

Kenn quickly caught up to him, mind racing furiously to find a solution.

“She’s pissed.”

Kenn nodded. They needed to make amends and they needed to do it right now. “What do you have in mind?”

Greg shrugged. “I really don’t. I just know that’s the only thing that’s going to save us.”

Amanda watched the two men leave, eyes narrowing.

Still standing next to her, Jennifer caught the vibe and frowned. “She’s not going to get rid of them. Don’t waste your breath.”

Amanda didn’t deny that she had thought the camp would be better off without both of them. She was positive that Angela already knew it.

## Deleted Scene 2

“It’s your move.”

Angela studied the chess board. “Soon.”

Somchai leaned back in the rocker, enjoying the gentle waves breaking against the ship. “I’ve enjoyed our nights together.”

“Same.”

Somchai frowned. She usually spoke more when they played. “Are you okay?”

Angela nodded. “Peachy.”

Somchai made a face. He knew what that word meant. “You can tell me if something’s troubling you.” He’d found that using a kind manner with Angela often yielded good results.

“I’m deciding the fate of camp members again. It’s not easy to choose who lives and who dies.” She moved her pawn forward to challenge his line of defenders.

Somchai quickly took her pawn. “You don’t like death.”

“No one likes death.”

“It is your job.”

“And I do it.”

“But?”

“But some people are harder to remove than others.” Angela nudged another pawn up.

Somchai took it without checking the board again. “I assume the person isn’t fully bad.”

“Oh, they’re bad. It’s the others they’re drawing into the darkness that I’m trying to save.” She moved a third pawn up, keeping her mind blank.

Somchai was distracted by the conversation. He took the third pawn with a slight frown. “You can’t save everyone. Some people are destined to die no matter what plans you make to save them. Try not to let it hurt you.”

Angela smiled. “Thank you.” She slid her queen into the empty space left by his moved pawns. “Checkmate.”

She rose to leave as he studied the board. “How did that happen?”

Angela left without answering. Somchai was experienced enough to figure out she’d distracted him. *But he isn’t smart enough to know I was talking about him and his group of hiders. He won’t see that one until death is sitting on his shoulder.*



# Place a Review

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

# Bone Dust

If Alexa Mitchel and her crew of hardened gunfighters complete their quest, they'll earn a chance to heal the rift in reality. If they fail, the monsters will be here to stay and humans will become the myth.

[Bone Dust Page](#)

# Locations List Update

I wanted to be able to put the locations list from the entire series into this section. Obviously, it's not here. I'm getting ready to release the second volume of the Character Guide that will cover all the way up to book #22. Because I have to read through every one of those books to verify the locations list, I've decided to do it at the same time as the guide. I'm sorry for the delay, but I just don't have time to do things twice. I'm sure you understand. Doing the same work twice induces brain bleed in most of us.

When the locations list is finished, it will include all named locations that Safe Haven and the Eagles have gone through, as well as links to the map features that were placed in some of the previous books. You'll be able to access the list on my website as well as in the extras section of the next character guide. If I have time, I will also update the voting forms for Adrian and Conner. I believe they're full right now. Just give me a little more time and it will all be there for your reading pleasure!

-Angie

## Book 23



### [Dealing with the Dead](#)

#### 1

“**Y**our numbers all look good.” Terry put the blood pressure cuff back on the shelf and then took a bottle from his pocket. He handed Angela one of the pain pills, ignoring her imposing guard. For some reason, Amanda was more intimidating than the other Eagles who usually did protection duty over the boss.

Angela took the little cup of water and acted like she swallowed the pill. She slid it into her pocket with the others that she hadn't taken. She didn't

want to be drugged up right now and not just because the baby would get some of it through the breastmilk. They were low on all of the main medications. She would slip these back into the medicine cabinet when no one was looking.

Amanda also acted like she didn't know what Angela was doing. She stood near the open door, scanning the medical bay. It was almost empty. The medics were waiting on a couple of last-minute tests to come back and then they would be off duty unless Angela needed something.

Terry went out into the lobby, shutting the door in relief.

"They'll get used to me." Amanda hoped they would, anyway. She had chosen the right side during the situation with Somchai. She hoped that would be enough to convince people she was one of the good guys.

"Everyone knows you still have another test to pass before they can accept you."

Amanda faced Angela with a small grin. "I already know you plan to sneak off." The medics had warned her that Angela would try it. "Where do you want to go?"

Angela rubbed Dog's ears. He was lying on her bed, watching over the baby sleeping in the bassinet. "I want to go to the chapel, with a stop at the guard post along the way."

Angela flipped on the baby monitor sitting next to her bed and then put the other part of it into her pocket. The baby had just been changed and fed.

She wouldn't have long, but she needed to get out of this room for a little while.

Over in the corner, Jack dropped his shield, scowling. "You should still be in bed."

Angela smiled sweetly. "And you should still be in prison."

Instantly humiliated and furious, Jack brought his shield back up and leaned against the wall. He already knew Angela wanted him to stay here with the baby.

Amanda frowned as she quietly opened the door. "Somchai was wrong to think you're all nice inside."

Angela shrugged. "People see what they want to see."

Amanda knew that was true. "What's the plan here?"

A loud noise echoed at the front of the clinic as Stanley came through with a stack of lunch trays. Two of them slid out of his hands and splattered all over the floor, creating a mess and a distraction.

Amanda chuckled quietly, now pushing the wheelchair out of the room. "I'm starting to see why everyone wants you back in charge. It's easier to keep track of you that way."

Amanda pushed Angela through the rear of the medical bay and out into the hallway.

Jack gently shut the door behind them so the medics would think she was still inside.

Amanda got the chair out into the hallway. She pushed Angela toward the nearest guard post. "Are

you checking up on Marc to make sure he has everyone accounted for this time?”

Angela locked eyes with the guard at the post as they approached it. “I’m having a vengeance moment while testing two of the camp members people are leery about. Marc won’t do it. This one has to be me.”

Amanda stopped near the guard post, looking around. “Who are the two camp members?”

Angela stared at her pointedly.

Amanda stiffened. She and Bret were the only ones here and they were both Mitchels. “This is about Adrian.”

Angela shifted in the chair as footsteps echoed down the hall.

Bret pulled the envelope out of his pocket, stomach churning. “This isn’t right.”

Angela didn’t answer. She smiled sweetly as Adrian came down the hallway, spotting them.

Adrian was in a great mood. He’d gotten good sleep and then he’d been woken by a blow job from Piper. It was an amazing way to start the day. “Hiya, Boss.”

Adrian was thrilled to see her spending time with his family. The more time they spent around Angela, the faster the camp would accept them.

Angela looked at Bret.

So did Amanda as she read his thoughts in dismay. “This really isn’t right.”

Angela rested her arms on the chair and watched Adrian as he looked between them, trying to figure out what was happening.

Bret keyed his mike because his orders had been to do it openly. Only the guards had radios now, but it was still enough to make sure the story would spread. “Adrian Mitchel, you are under arrest for a violation of the magic laws. Hold your hands out so I can put the cuffs on.”

Adrian stared at Bret as he understood what Angela was doing.

Bret put the envelope down and pulled the cuffs off of his belt with his free hand. “Please come quietly. I don’t want to do this. I don’t have a choice.”

Adrian was immensely proud of his son for making the right choice. He was furious at Angela for putting the boy into this position. He held out his hands.

The sound of the cuffs clicking echoed loudly over the radios on their belts.

Angela stared at Adrian. “It’s entirely possible that you’re going to be executed.”

Adrian had no choice but to stick to the original plan. “Name the law that I broke.”

Amanda saw Greg and Gus coming down the hallway and assumed they would be escorting the prisoner. She barely stopped herself from lifting a shield around her brother.

“You are not allowed to procreate because of your family’s history. Piper is pregnant.”



Adrian celebrated on the inside. On the outside, he pushed through with his plan. “That’s against the constitution.”

“New laws have already been added.”

“I challenge your right to make such a law.”

“I’m the alpha and the elected leader of this camp.”

“Then I challenge the law itself. Magic laws should not come before the constitution of our country. In fact, magic laws shouldn’t exist at all!” That was the real reason Adrian had done this. He didn’t want any of them to be ruled by magic. If he won this challenge, it would prevent Angela from taking over the world and enslaving the normals.

Angela’s vengeance faded as she stared at him. “I love you for doing this.” She didn’t really want to enslave the normals either.

Anger returned to her tone. “I also hate you for it. When the vote happens, I’ll be putting my mark under execution.”

People throughout the hive were paying attention now.

Adrian was aware of Piper heading his way along with several others to give him support, but most of the people listening agreed with Angela.

Angela gestured as Gus and Greg reached them. “Gus will be your lawyer. Greg is going to be the prosecutor. The trial will be held as soon as Marc says we’re ready for it.” She motioned. “Lock him in the brig and post a 24-hour guard.”

Greg and Gus both took one of Adrian's arms and led him away.

Bret went back to the guard post with tears rolling down his cheeks. This was the hardest thing he had ever done and he'd survived for years in Reicher's lab.

Amanda fought with herself. A rescue attempt right now might not go well, but there wouldn't be any chance at all for it later.

Angela looked up, delivering another sweet smile.

Amanda tensed, expecting real pain this time.

"You can't serve two masters, Amanda. You either belong to me or you belong to them. Make your choice and do it now."

"What happens if I pick my family?"

"You'll be sent out on the next run, along with your daughters. You won't be allowed to come back."

Amanda was already going to transfer one of her daughters away from here. She was positive that she could find a place for her and Margret to hunker down and hide where they would be safe for a while. But the need to serve Angela had already settled into her heart. "You're a hard, cruel bitch."

Angela smiled at the compliment. "At least now you recognize it."

Angela motioned toward the hallway. "I want to go to the chapel."

Amanda knew it was another test as she slipped behind Angela to push the chair, but she didn't

consider attacking the woman. Even if she were going to rescue Adrian, she would still try very hard to make sure no one got hurt. Amanda didn't like violence even when it was needed.

“In time, that will change.”

Amanda shivered. “That's part of what I'm afraid of.”

“And the rest of it?”

Amanda admitted what had been holding her back all along. “I'm afraid I'll turn out like the rest of your damn army. I'll want it more than anything else you can hit me with.”

Satisfied, Angela leaned back against the chair and let Amanda push her to the chapel. She didn't look at Bret as they went by.

He and Amanda would now have to make a hard choice. If they went the wrong way, Angela didn't plan to have any mercy. It was entirely possible that there would be three executions instead of one.

## 2

“It's all gone.” Jennifer leaned against Kyle, fighting back tears. “All of the work we did was for nothing.”

Comments like that were running through the entire camp, along with small remarks about Adrian's arrest. Almost everyone was up here on the top deck together for a first view of the island since the fire.

It had been a full day now. Marc had kept everyone off of the top deck to give them all a chance to calm down, but also to make sure no one bothered the turtles that were still nesting all along the beach, but he hadn't been able to wait any longer. If he had, people would have thought he was hiding something. A lot of them had already gotten the depressing view from the windows on the ship, but it wasn't the same as standing up here and staring at the smoldering remains of what had been their home.

As far as Marc could tell, the fire had burned itself out. It was approaching evening and he didn't see any orange or yellow glows that implied it was still going. Smoke was still rising from several places, however. It would be another day or two before they would be able to set foot on the island to view the damage up close. Marc wasn't looking forward to it. The mood was already rough from seeing it.

Standing nearby, Kyle glanced at him. *Mood spell?*

Marc shook his head. In moments like this, the camp needed to be allowed to express their grief. It wasn't causing panic. *And sadness is a part of life that we all have to adjust to.*

Marc's mind went to his wife. Angela wasn't up here. Amanda was on duty over her in the medical bay. *But I already know she's not there.*

Marc pointed at Kyle and Jennifer. "You two have point until shift change."

Jennifer stood straighter, happy with the choice.

Kyle was happy for her, but it didn't matter to him if he was in charge of the shift. That wasn't his position in this camp.

Marc headed for the ramp. A few people also moved that way, unable to take any more of looking at the devastated island.

Marc scanned the guard posts as he walked through the dusty ship, while also making mental notes of things they needed to accomplish while they were here. He was positive Angela wanted them all back on the island as soon as possible. Until then, there was a lot to do. All of their normal cleaning was already underway by small crews, but there were bigger issues to handle, like making sure the water tests were clear. Marc needed to check his notes to see when that had been done last. Being on the island had caused them to be lax about more than just security.

Marc skipped the elevator and jogged down the stairs even though his body protested. The kai lessons and shooting competition, combined with the evacuation, had produced several sore spots that were lingering even though Jennifer had healed his ankle. Activity would ease that. He didn't want to take a painkiller like a lot of people were doing. He hadn't checked with the medics about it yet, but he was certain they were running low on all of the things people used most. *We need more than one supply run.*

Marc took the steps down to the chapel, nodding to Parker as he passed the man coming up the stairs. A lot of people had already spent time in the chapel since getting back onto the ship. Now that they had paid their respects, the entertainment floor would be the busiest deck for a while.

Marc stopped in the doorway, spotting Angela sitting near the crated memorial. She was crying.

Marc didn't send a mood spell to stop her sadness either. He sensed she was saying goodbye to more than just the people they had lost. She was also mourning the children she would never have.

Wade was kneeling next to the memorial with a small jar of paint and a brush, adding names to it. "How are things up there?"

Marc came over and kissed Angela on the head. "The same as here."

Marc didn't mention the live radio arrest of Adrian. That was Angela's pet project and he wasn't going to get involved until he had to. The camp was finding out now from guards who couldn't resist such juicy gossip.

Marc scanned the names on the memorial, seeing that Harry and Mr. Sneaky had been put at the top where no one could miss them. Marc gestured. "Put Mel's name on there."

Wade found a small spot to do that. "Amanda tried to keep her in the medical bay, but well, you've met her."

Marc chuckled. "Once or twice."

Angela wiped away her tears. “Give us a minute, will you?”

Wade immediately got up, passing the paint set over to Marc. He and the other guards went out into the hallway, shutting the door.

Mark looked at Angela, hoping she wasn't about to deliver more bad news.

“I want you to add Kendle's name.”

Marc scowled even though he wanted to. “She wasn't a hero.”

“She saved lives in our camp, including yours. Put it on the back if you think people will disapprove.”

Marc stopped arguing. He found a spot on the back of the memorial and began adding Kendle's name while pain went through his heart. *But it's not as bad as it used to be.* Marc recognized that in relief. Time was starting to ease that ache, though he doubted the wound would ever actually heal.

Angela looked toward the window, not getting out of the wheelchair. The odd clicking noises were still echoing. She'd been told it was the turtles, but she had no desire to go up and see them. She didn't want to view the island yet.

“What's up?”

Angela smiled. “When your mind is on it, you really are good at this.”

Marc waited, finishing the name and then touching up a few of the others that were starting to flake off.

“I think you missed something.”

Marc stiffened, understanding she meant about the camp and not the memorial. It matched the feeling he'd woken with. "Do you know what it is?"

Angela shook her head, fighting a yawn and the dull pain in her stomach. She would need another healing session before she was able to use any of her energy to look ahead. "I dreamed about Hell. I assume it's connected."

Marc put the lid on the paint and stored it in the crate. The laminated pictures hadn't been put up on the walls yet. Parker would do that later. Marc slipped the picture of Kendle into the pile with the others. "They can't attack us except through new births and we don't have any of those yet."

"I know, but I'm absolutely positive that we missed something."

Marc didn't doubt her. He sat in the chair next to her and got his notebook out. He began scanning it, looking for the mistake.

Angela stayed still and quiet, letting him work while her mind also went over everything that had happened, trying to help him find it.

In the hall outside the chapel, Wade listened mentally while also trying to figure out what it could be. He knew they had made mistakes, like letting Ned and Dario be on the ship by themselves, but other than that, he didn't know what it could be. *I thought Marc covered everything pretty well.*

A feeling of panic came down the hall toward them.



Amanda immediately lifted a shield and stepped in front of the door to the chapel to keep anyone from getting through.

Wade spotted the little boy running full out toward them and froze. Terror went through his mind, transferring to him from Cody. “It’s about Cate.”

Marc came to the chapel door and opened it right as Cody reached it.

Cody flung himself into Marc’s arms. “You have to go save her!”

Marc held the boy, heart thumping. “Where is she?”

Amanda went into the chapel to stand with Angela. “I’ve got her covered. You guys go ahead.”

Cody shook his head, shedding tears all down the front of his wrinkled shirt. “She needs the alpha!”

Marc frowned. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Cody glanced up at his father in terror. “Cate went to visit Joey and now he won’t let her come back!”

Marc looked at Angela in anger and fear. Now they knew what he had missed. “Joel just took his first hostage.”

Angela nodded at the fury and desire for vengeance that was filling Marc’s mind. “It’s time for us to deal with the dead.”



[Dealing with the Dead](#)  
Book 23