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Prologue

71AW (2084)

“Is it on now? Are we live?”

“Yes. Any radio within a hundred miles should be able to pick up the broadcast.”

“Can they hear us talking right now?” Jody asked worriedly.

“No, not until you push that red button,” Lucas soothed the younger man’s nerves. “It opens the connection.”

The two rebels were surrounded by dark, rusting equipment with dials and levers coated in seventy years of dust. Under the dust, bloodstains also remained to mark the end of the world. Around the cluttered room, microphones and panels hung from the crumbling ceiling, some with letters still visible. ‘On Air’ was the most common, but several screens held mysterious combinations of numbers and graphs that only one of the rebels understood.

“How do you know this stuff?” Jody asked admiringly. “There hasn’t been a working radio station since our grandfather’s time.”

Except for this room, the station had been cleaned out by their group. Lucas had insisted that they keep this space the same as it had been when they

arrived. It would be a constant reminder of the past to drive them on when their emotions or physical needs became a strain.

“My family always said we shouldn’t forget the old ways,” Lucas answered dryly, listening to the wind beat grit and debris against the building.

“Well, mine said they were the reason the world ended,” Jody stated, voice hardening. “Both of my grandparents voted for slavery.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Lucas stopped the coming argument and excuses. “Make the call.”

“Do you really believe anyone will come?” Jody wanted to know. He was the youngest of their crew and still had faith for the future. He was only here because his mother had sold him to a brothel that had been liberated by these rebels.

“I think we’re about to scare the hell out of anyone who hears us, but eventually, yes,” Lucas confirmed, grinning. “If you call for them, they will come.”

Snickering, the young man pushed the button. “Hello, New America! This is Jody, coming to you from New City over the radio. If you don’t know what that is, that’s okay. A radio is a way of communicating. If you’re hearing this, you have one nearby and are now a part of our network! How’s that for amazing?!”

Jody let off the button, waiting in case there was a response. Unlike his friend, he didn’t think anyone would hear the transmissions. Radios were highly sought after for their replacement parts in black

market computers and screens. Jody doubted survivors would give up that resource to listen to strange voices.

“Do it again and repeat it a few times every hour,” Lucas instructed, opening a notebook to record the first call. “We are now online, my friend. Only good things can come from this.”

Jody shrugged, willing enough to follow orders. Lucas had rebuilt the radio and then used the spare parts to get the electric flowing through this old station. Their group only had ten members, so power had made everything easier. Now, Lucas wanted other survivors to join them. They all knew ten souls alone couldn't stand for long, even if the main population was still fighting over slavery. Men who could survive the cold of the north were able to remain free if they could handle the weather and occasionally defend themselves. Most of the worst fighting was in the far south. Some small towns across the country were still trying to follow the constitution.

Lucas knew who would win this war in the end. Women outnumbered the men and they controlled the armories and complexes with the weapons stocks. There was little men could do in a battle and those like Jody even preferred the new law because as a brothel worker, they got all the sex they wanted and then some. Lucas loathed it.

“Does anyone copy me? This is Jody, coming to you over the radio network from New City. We are

in the east. You can follow these broadcasts right to us. We have power and food.”

Jody wasn't sure that last part was such a good idea, but they had all agreed it was what the northern people would need to hear to get them to come out of their holes. Humanity only existed in small pockets that were constantly tearing themselves apart through the effects of the war.

“Keep going,” Lucas instructed, gesturing to the script they'd written. “Word for word.”

Jody pushed the button obediently. “This is Jody, broadcasting from New City in the east. We have food and power here. You will be cared for. All survivors are welcome.” Jody let go of the button to peer up at his new idol. “How long before we hear anything?”

“I believe we'll see them before we hear them,” Lucas corrected. “Radios are still out there, but answering us would reveal their locations. They'll come check us out and then chatter over the radios will start. From there, we're golden.” Lucas strode confidently toward the door to the warmer lounge that had been intact except for the window glass. “I'll be around.”

Jody returned to the script, scanning to be positive that he hadn't missed anything. He liked the idea of being their radio voice. It would make him popular with the females who came in.

In the lobby of the station, a dozen nervous men were cleaning their weapons and repairing gear that had already been patched dozens of times.

Crashed on old pillows and cushions, these men weren't as hopeful about the radio transmissions or the plan, but they'd agreed—because they were desperate. Lucas was certain they would have eventually complied even without the promise of sex and good cooking. Pockets of resistance were getting harder to find and at least as a slave, these rebels assumed they would be fed. Lucas didn't care if that was true. He had come to seize the opportunity that his grandfather had told him of after they escaped captivity. His father had died in custody, but Lucas wouldn't. In fact, he was counting on the disease to help build a future that never would have been possible without female hatred of his gender. Women would rue the day they'd betrayed men.

Lucas gestured to Noah as he went through. "Let's get a post set up."

No one argued despite Lucas being new to the group. He had joined them eight weeks ago with a small stock of food and water that he'd given them in payment for safe shelter. When he'd told them his plans, the group had agreed to stick with him and provide protection and manual labor. For payment, Lucas had promised them women to care for their needs. That was the only thing they couldn't provide for themselves. Their entire group was male. The few lone girls they'd found hadn't lasted long. Lucas had vowed to find tough northern fighters that were useful, claiming his radio calls would bring those and many more. The

prospect of having their choice, as their grandfathers had, had allowed all of the escaped denizens to agree and keep to the deal. Lucas was thrilled. *Wait 'til you see what else I have planned,* he gloated giddily as he and Noah stepped out onto the rubble-covered street that had sported only animals for the last seventy years. *I'm gonna build the world that past rulers dreamed about and the masses are going to worship me for it. All I need is one group of strong women who hate men.*

Lucas brushed his black hair out of the way as the harsh wind tried to knock him off his feet. Hoping they got to make a few more transmissions before the coming storm rolled through, he scanned the devastation that was being consumed by nature. All changelings should fit that bill. Rage Walker's disease was still spreading and changing. Lucas was counting on lust and hatred to bring the monsters to these apocalypse roads in a matter of days. If he handled it right, they would become the first converts of his new American society. If he handled it wrong, he would become a slave to one of the violent new women who had inherited the earth. The weak men inside the station were dead either way. They didn't know he'd been searching for a group like theirs to use as bait. The sound of a male voice was one of the things that triggered these new women. Most survivors hadn't figured that out yet.

Lucas's grandfather had come from a government bunker. He had seen the breeding charts and

predicted behavioral changes the world was about to suffer. As he lay dying from a changeling snap, Lucas's grandfather had told him everything and then sent his only grandson out into the dystopian world to reclaim their honor. Lucas was honored. And insane enough to be sure it would work.

Lucas returned a wave from their group suck-up and thief, Wesley Malin, who was watching from the safety of the lounge. Everyone just called him Weasel. Lucas continued through the double front doors that had been repaired using clear plastic, two car trunks, and a rusty welding tank.

Sporting thick beards and tattered, salvaged clothes, this small group wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway. Lucas didn't experience guilt as he subtly studied Noah's backpack. It held the keys to the older man's truck and to their stockroom, where the guns were being kept. Lucas had insisted it would scare the girls off if they saw weapons. He smiled encouragingly as Noah carefully fought the stiff winds to climb up and watch for signs of anyone coming. He was always careful to act like what they thought he was—a leader. To accomplish that, Lucas pretended as if the world was watching him. In time, it would be.

In the parking lot of the station, a giant antenna glowed with bright blue lights that barely cut through the smog that still lingered over this city. The war had devastated New York, sparing only a few people and relics. This station was behind the skeleton of a large stadium that appeared to have

taken a direct hit, providing protection somehow. Until tonight, when they'd switched on the lights, his group had been free to work without interruption for the last month. That had been step one. The station coming online was the beginning of stage two. The final step would start as soon as the first group of angry women arrived. Thanks to the war that killed so many men in every fighting nation, women had inherited the earth. Upon learning that they were the majority, women had taken over all government facilities and claimed control of the country. Shortly after, male slavery had been voted into law and recovery had grinded to a halt. Seventy years later, there were almost no free males left to resist in the south. Lucas was certain his group was one of the last in the north or east as well. He'd been searching for the right bait and trap for almost a decade. The only area he had no information on was the west.

“In the absence of true leadership, citizens will follow a grain of sand,” Lucas quoted softly, waving to Noah, who had reached the roof. “I’m a grain of sand right now, grandfather. In fifty years, I’ll be a desert. In four hundred years, this will be an ocean of my ashes. All I need is one clan of heartless changelings with the new physical mutations and no wisdom to recognize my treachery.”

“Lucas!”

He twisted around at the shout. “Yes?”

“We got a response on the radio already,” Jody told him in a quick rush of horny eagerness. “Women are coming!”

Lucas clapped the man on the shoulder and went to help with the preparations. Mentally, he gave thanks that his prayers had been answered. As head of the Experimental Science Department, his grandfather had made it clear that the women couldn't be beaten physically. The disease was mutating every thirty years so far—once a generation. In the next decade, stage four would kick in. His grandfather said there were seven stages coming, but that by the time they reached the last, the human race would have changed drastically just to survive. The conversation had terrified Lucas with images of women transforming into monsters that had to have blood from men. That was the final mutation. There was no going back from it. Men would be hunted until there were none left, and then the human race would evolve into mammals that could fertilize their own eggs. Or they would just die out. Both options were unacceptable to Lucas. He'd promised to carry out his grandfather's plan to combat that future, but he'd also added his own twist. Instead of finding the cure that had to exist in a weapons lab somewhere in this broken land, Lucas had chosen to let the disease run its course. When the final evolution came, his council would have such a grip on this land that nothing could break it. He planned to pit these changed women

against each other in every way he could, forcing them, unknowingly, to kill each other off. A few hundred years of it would see the women cut down to only a few thousand. They would be the strongest of their gender, unfortunately, but the secret breeding programs would quietly increase the males and give them the disease so they could *change* as well. By the time anyone figured out what was really happening, there wouldn't be enough women left in New America to fight back—exactly the same situation that had allowed male slavery in the first place. Instead of continuing to fight back now, when they couldn't win, Lucas was sentencing his gender to horrible conditions for the next four hundred years and then they would have complete control that couldn't ever be broken.

He considered it a fair trade. Everyone knew without pain, there was no gain. He just didn't think it should have to be his pain. He'd been joining groups and then turning them in for a long time, but this setup was different. If his relative had been correct, the first signs of this physical mutation should be emerging right now, creating miserable females didn't care how much blood spilled as long as they got relief. Through that self-serving nature, women would die by the millions and never know they'd been tricked into it by a man. *We'll never give you another chance to betray us. Four hundred years of abuse will guarantee that.*

423 years later...

Chapter One

Troubleshooting

May 12th

1

“The cameras are working!” Terry announced triumphantly, wiping away sweat. She’d been screaming at subordinates for the twelve hours that they’d been without visual confirmation on the Network Rider. The sister train was currently being loaded with troops. It would reach the deep borderlands on a different course. The rebels there had no idea it was coming.

The ruler of the council hurried over, leaning against the woman’s sticky shoulder.

Terry tensed, controlling the need to grab what she couldn’t have. She, along with the other newer members, had been promised the cure for Rage Walker’s disease once they proved their loyalty. Until then, it was an internal struggle that the females had to be strong enough to conquer. The normally icy meeting chamber was warm and muggy, adding to the misery of the women.

“Zoom in,” Julian ordered, enjoying their discomfort even as he mentally vowed to increase electricity production. Rationing power meant no air conditioning except for their guests and certain

games, which had to be done to keep the masses from knowing how close the dome was to shutting down every day. It had been this way for a while now, though they usually diverted the power from locals. With so many out-of-towners visiting the city this month, they couldn't do that this time without raising suspicion.

Around the table, the rest of the sweating members observed nervously as the biggest screen went from static to a fuzzy view that had to be focused. As it became clearer, the images brought fear and anger.

“They broke our deal! The glowers are coming!”

“The dome won't hold! We have to go now.”

“Do we have anything to hit it with?” Julian asked, not as calm as he preferred to be, but still not panicked like the rest of his henchmen. He had hoped the rebels didn't know about the tribe of desert glowers and their big captor. Upon discovering they had sheltered Angelica and her crew, Julian had ordered troops to kill every one of the glowers that were found out of their hidden city. He'd assumed it would drive them back into that hellhole they called home, but it had obviously accomplished the opposite.

Terry pointed at the screen, where their arsenal flashed up in a short series of lists that had been crossed off. They'd already used most of it to keep control over the centuries. “We could use the smaller rocket and still carry out your plans for Canada and China.”

Straightening, Julian muttered under his breath as he realized everyone knew about his plans to strike parts of the world. It wasn't common knowledge and he glared at the only one who could have told them.

Riana had the wisdom to run, but it was much too late to avoid Julian's blade as it slammed into her spine. She hit the door and bounced off, falling in a bloody heap.

Some members scattered around the room as gasps circled the rest of the table.

Terry ran over to help the fatally wounded woman, but Riana was beyond that.

Julian retrieved his knife without speaking. It was a silent lesson on betraying the oaths people took to keep his secrets. He wouldn't allow that, ever.

Julian cleaned his hands and blade on the towel by his seat. The fading rag had once been streaked in blood daily. He obviously didn't use it often enough anymore.

Julian placed the knife on the table and glared at those who had fled their stations.

Rusty quickly motioned for the women to take their seats. Terry and Shelly were faces they used with the public. To lose them, and Riana, would mean a cover-up and large hassle to find quick replacements for the media crews to fawn over.

Blood pooled around the oddly shaped white chairs, running into the cracks of the white tile floor. Shelly was careful not to ruin her pink shag

boots by stepping in it as she nervously returned to the table.

Unlike the guards, the council dressed in what they wanted, giving the sterile meeting area an ugly mix of shades that made odd shadows on the windows. Julian especially hated the scarves, which were bright and glittery. The mess on the floor had to be swept nightly. That meant an extra ten minutes before he could be alone with a control method. The council didn't understand how on edge he was, not even Rusty. If they'd known, none of them would have eaten complex food or slept in complex rooms.

Terry lingered by the body, heart ripping apart at Riana's murder.

Julian pinned the teary woman with a dark glare, deciding her fate. The moment was tense and silent.

Terry remained crouched by the body, terrified that she'd just lost everything. Being Riana's lover was more than enough reason for Julian to kill her.

"Sit down. Do it right now." Julian did the same, eager to address their problems outside the dome. He would kill her later, when they were alone and he could extract a more satisfying pound of flesh on behalf of her lover's betrayal.

Terry knew it wasn't over. She slunk into her damp seat and tried to avoid Julian's line of sight.

"Send the smallest rocket we have," Julian ordered. "Calculate where they'll meet and blow it up. Send half our troops to round up survivors, half

by land, half by sea. No public warnings to tip them off.”

“What are we telling the reporters?” Rusty inquired, grinning at Terry. She had rejected him for Riana. Her misery was pleasing.

“Tell them the rebels rigged the train to blow up when it hit the city. They didn’t know what they were doing and it went early, saving thousands of lives, including ours. The Press will eat it up.”

“In the meantime?” Shelly asked, writing down the orders so they wouldn’t miss anything. Julian sometimes went for complicated schemes that required attention to detail and she wasn’t going to be caught slacking or lacking while he was in this mood.

“We keep going with the plans that everyone here obviously knows,” Julian ordered in annoyed tones. “We’re bombing the leadership meeting, which will devastate the power structure in the west, allowing the remaining half of our soldiers to take over during the chaos. On the way, wipe out all known rebel strongholds in the borderlands. Thanks to an insider in their group, we now have two new locations of rebel dens. Then, we tell the UN that the meeting was hit by the rebels, an example of why we can’t sign the Recovery Treaty yet. Our rebels are too violent and have to be captured first. As for the remaining Pruetts, we’ll kill the one coming in for her game. The others will be hunted down or lured in. After that, we let

the UN inspectors enter. They can watch from a game cell while we destroy their homelands.”

The deep bass of his voice had the miserable girls mesmerized, shoved into a place where there was only heat, voices, and the fight for control. It kept them out of the way so the men could work.

The rest of the secretive council immediately began drafting their parts of the plan to complete the world takeover now that Julian had laid it out. He didn't do that often.

Julian exchanged glances with Rusty, his right hand man. Rusty was already supervising the evacuation efforts here, in secret. His helpers were loyal, but it wouldn't be much longer before the others figured out that they would have to leave the dome. Julian had hoped the glowers and their ape master would never be found, but now that they had, another awful part of their past would be eliminated. The contagious tribe wouldn't be missed. The deaths that might stir public support against network control were the troublesome Pruetts, but once Sam died during her game, it would demoralize the rest. From there, they could be squished like the insects they were.

“Do it soon,” Julian ordered, uncaring about sweat dripping from his big arms onto the table. He was studying the screen again, where the giant ape and the glowers, along with known rebels, were running alongside the train. The Network Rider appeared to have been seriously damaged, but it was still chugging northeast at a steady pace.

Julian estimated that it would reach his city within two days. In the front car, where the broken glass provided no shield, were several Pruetts. Candice and her valuable prize were clearly leading this charge, but there were also half a dozen other members of that wild clan standing behind them or hanging from the handrails—including Mary, Horace, and Sophia. Julian felt a second tremor of unease. They'd gone south for help. Those last two rebels were Cubans. Known for their inability to work together, those enemies hadn't been heard from in twenty years and only sporadically before then. Everyone assumed South America had died out, and the network had been relieved. The ruthlessness of southern people had become well known during the first hundred years after the war, but regular trains of poisoned food and diseased slaves had gradually conquered them. It should have done the same for the west coast, but it hadn't yet.

"Is that Chester Pruett?" Zinn, one of the lower members, asked incredulously as he leaned forward to adjust the screen.

"Yes, it is," another man, Beck, confirmed. He was reading the files. "He hasn't been heard from in ten years. Chester vanished after blowing up a hub in the swamp that killed three dozen defenders and four rentals. Our notes say kill first."

"Yes, I know," Julian murmured. His attention was on Shelly, who was typing quickly. "I wrote it."

“Predicted area of destruction contains three hundred settlers, four wheat plantations—”

“Just do it.”

“Yes, sir,” Shelly responded, also not caring about the losses. She might mourn the wheat if the kitchen ran out of bread, though. She hit the warm buttons carefully, not trusting the old technology that they all enjoyed having. It didn’t always work the way they needed it to.

“There’s another wave of refugees heading for the city,” Shelly pointed out, switching the view. “It’s very close to where we’re aiming.”

They’d known something was going on in that sector by the panicked citizens flooding in. Multiple reports had been filed, claiming battles were happening on their property and squatters were carrying off their slaves. There were more than a thousand people in the crowd around the dome now, though many had come in for the games—for Sam. Her popularity was disconcerting. Julian leaned back, staring intently at the screen. The rebels and their ape weren’t far away compared to a rocket. It wouldn’t take long for it to get there. “No public warning,” he repeated.

Shelly nodded. She didn’t care one way or the other. “This is a Network command for all sentries in the east. Those not under orders will immediately report to the nearest hub for instructions. Those with orders will carry them out now, effective immediately. I repeat: this is a

command communication, coming from the control room of the dome...”

Around the table, the men shared glances of approval. The females kept their expressions tolerant, positions precarious at best. They’d sold out their own kind for these power seats, if they could keep them. The males up here in the control area didn’t resemble the fragile creatures kept in the pens below. These men were every bit the monsters of the past. If the vaccine or cure ever went public, this was the future and these women secretly rejoiced each time Julian delayed the release that might heal their society. At least while they secretly ruled the council, females openly ruled the rest of their world. It was immensely better than the alternative.

“Launching in three...two...one...”

Julian didn’t watch the screen as the rocket flew into view, headed for a centuries-old abomination. He shared another long look with Rusty, his XO and best friend, while everyone else was distracted.

Rusty nodded subtly, telling Julian that he would speed up their private plans. They didn’t believe a small rocket was enough to kill the creature and even wounded, their troops would be less than effective against it. Leaving the dome was now a foregone conclusion. They hadn’t told the others it might happen because Julian hadn’t decided if they were going to be killed by rebels or not. Rusty expected his boss to remove a few people, but not

all. However, he didn't mind the thought of it being just him and Julian again for a while. The last time they'd done this, they'd gotten six months before having to replace the others by using premade clips. It had been great.

Rusty made a subtle sweep of the keyboard and began recording all their voices. He would start making short clips whenever he was alone so it would be ready when Julian told him to do it.

In the corner, another screen had been running continuously. Still waiting for word that Samantha Pruett had checked in for her time trial, hopefully with her sister there to support her, Julian scanned the information being relayed to the observing world. Samantha had twelve hours to check in. If she didn't, that would be more wild Pruett unaccounted for—something that would cause him to lose sleep. Julian wanted to know where his enemies were and what they were doing, at all times.

“Where are you, my black sheep?” he murmured, studying the fuzzy screens. He would have to make adjustments soon unless she showed up. If Samantha and her sister had gone off-grid to get the weaker slaves to the UN delegation, four hundred years of planning was in grave danger.

2

“You don't have to do this.”

In the middle of sliding to her knees, Sam peered up, smiling. “Why? Do you stink?”

Baker chuckled, holding still. Her eyes held glossy tints of red that implied she was very tired. He knew better than to trigger her with sudden movements. “You always know what to say.”

Sam laughed, rough hands running over his strong, chilly legs in quick swipes to clear him of any ticks. They’d come through the bramble fields last night and couldn’t light a fire to check themselves or cook a meal. Now that they could see, she was doing a better check. Ticks were the same as they’d always been—nasty, dangerous, blood-sucking parasites that carried any number of diseases.

Around this small valley set among the hills, sentries were on the move. Coming and going from every direction, it had forced the rebels to take cover. Apparently, the enemy had learned of their ambush and theft of the train. Sam hoped her family was careful. It had been three days. Defenders could have reached them by now.

“All good,” she stated, standing. Heat flared as she stared at Baker’s bare chest. They’d stripped down to almost nothing when they took shelter, hoping any ticks they’d picked up would stay with the clothing. She and Baker had spent the night in a corner of this hillside cave, where her heat had warmed the walls so much that he had switched positions with her. Outside, their escort was enjoying the remaining cool drafts of the

Changeling Winds. The dust had finally settled too, but it had left gritty traces everywhere. Sam tried to shake some of them from her hair, knowing it was lost cause. As soon as she got on her mopar to drive to Adelpia, she would be coated again. The borderlands were constant battle with nature that few won.

Baker tried not to respond to her standing in front of him in black shorts and a tight black top, but he had to shut his lids to keep from making a sexual advance. They didn't have a pair of cuffs along. She also had to be at the trials in a few hours and though they were close now, they didn't have time to waste unless she had another method of transportation set up.

"I mean it, Sam. You don't have to play their games. Come with me. You're more useful *alive*." Sam refused to go down that road with him, though she wanted to. When she'd told Angelica that she hadn't found a man she hurt to be away from, she hadn't been lying, but she sensed splitting from Baker might test that record. She both longed for it as a confirmation of her feelings for him, and dreaded it for the same reason. Had she really fallen for this sexy rebel? Now, when they couldn't be together and she was about to have her pick of the bachelor prizes? Talk about irony.

Baker growled as he stepped on a sharp edge, missing his shoes. They'd trudged through mud on

the way here and left them outside last night after clearing the small cavern.

Sam finished her own check, and then went to the rear of the cave to collect the bedding. Almost completely round, the cave would have held them and their escorts, but her runners had insisted on watching for problems. Sam assumed they were giving her privacy, but she hadn't used it. She had the fight of her life coming up. She had to get set for it.

Understanding she wasn't going to renounce the choice, Baker sat on a cool rock, wishing he could at least feed her before she left. "Anything I should know about the women in the west?"

Sam's gut churned, making her frown at the emotion. She didn't like being jealous. "Meaner, faster, more instinct driven. Just be yourself." She couldn't stop the flare of heat between them as they locked eyes. The pleasure she'd experience with Baker during their two nights would never be forgotten even if she did find a more suitable match in the complex.

Unbroken, she reflected, flushing a bit at her own snobbery. She wanted a mate that hadn't been passed around the family.

Baker had brushed off enough renters after sex to recognize the moment. Humiliation flooded him.

Sam felt the coldness and sighed. "If you keep reading my mind, we'll have to make an agreement, Baker."

He snorted at the half teasing, half longing tone. “You don’t want that. You’ve tried my flavor and now you want to taste the new stuff. I get it.”

Baker stood up, anger drawing her like his flirting never could.

“Just remember, Miss Hardass, anyone can make you cum. It takes a mate keep you satisfied. Those boys can’t do that for *you*.”

“How would you know?” Sam demanded, hating to be put into a corner over something a slave wasn’t even supposed to discuss.

Baker angrily jerked his pants up. “I just do. Mark my words, Sam. You’ll be bored after the first visit.”

Sam refused to deny that. It was definitely possible. Just because Candice and Angelica had gotten good men, didn’t mean that she would. It was especially true when she considered how hard the enemy would try to kill her while she was in the dome. She might not even get to the first visit.

Sam waited for fear or the urge to withdraw, but the eagerness didn’t abate. She wanted to fight for her life. It was a challenge that she hadn’t conquered yet, but most of her current family had. It was pride and honor, need and heat, adventure and danger—she needed all of that to be satisfied.

Baker knew. He didn’t speak on the subject again, but Sam feared he was right. The rebel leader had already given her all of those emotions, had satisfied her enough that she’d been able to sleep next to him for a few hours—a big no-no in her

past. Sleeping with a rental was a bond that she wasn't ready for and yet, she'd broken that rule, but the worst part was that she'd been thinking about the bachelors at the complex while lying in his arms.

Baker gestured to the rebel who had just come to the entrance of the cave. "Everyone set to go?"

Greg nodded happily. He'd spent the night squeezed between Rosa and another runner, listening to their snores and mutters. It had almost felt like he was in the bachelor cells again, near his late mother. It had been nice.

"Rosa said half an hour to let the rest of the fog lift. She doesn't like the smell of it."

Baker frowned in confusion. "The smell?"

"Beetles sometimes travel under the fog. They eat their food as they go. It stinks," Sam explained, not happy with the delay. It meant another half an hour of trying to avoid the conversation that Baker wanted to have.

"I'll be around," Sam said, ducking out into the cool wind. He wanted a commitment, but he wasn't going to get it yet. If he was right, he would be the real winner. If he were wrong, one of her runners would be lucky enough to earn his attention. Baker might not know it yet, but he wasn't ready to settle down. Her crew was. They were all sick of being on the move, of never being at peace. Now, that was possibly over and she was happy that her girls would finally have those years of normal life, but Sam wasn't expecting much for

herself. Helping to bring down the network would be enough. If she won a nice prize while doing it, then that was a bonus for a job well done.

Greg sensed the conflict, but wasn't sure what to say that would help. Rosa had answered his questions about the mysterious Pruetts, except the answers hadn't cleared anything up. Despite trusting them with his life, Greg was still scared of Candice and her cousins, with Sam being the most terrifying.

Greg helped Baker clear the cave of evidence that they'd been there, both aware of two hulking women guarding the entrance. At the complex, it would have made them nervous and prevented conversations. Here, it was a relief and a temptation. Anything they said would be repeated to Sam or Rosa.

Baker resisted the urge to plant information, but Greg had no such qualms. He wanted to help his friend.

"I've heard the west has families like hers."

Baker blanched at the thought. "Won't be Pruetts."

"Is that all that matters to you?" Greg asked sharply, scowling. "I know your dad was big on them, but they aren't that special. There are other families who are great."

Baker didn't reply. He knew Greg was right, but he didn't want anyone else. He'd never really viewed Angelica that way, despite offering her a service that she'd refused, and Candice had never been his in the first place. With Sam, there was the

sense that she was perfect for him. He wanted time with her to prove or disprove that theory. However, the family name did give him peace of mind. Was he intentionally marking off all others because the Pruett name meant honor? Unhappy with the revelation, Baker grunted, "Let's get out of here. They might need a hand on duty."

Greg hid a frown as they joined the runners. The guards would tell Sam and she would believe Baker was after her name. *Could be the problem now*, Greg reflected. He would ask Rosa to help. He wanted Baker to be as content as he was and Sam was a terrific match for their rebel leader.

Baker avoided Sam's post, walking stiffly to their bikes to offer help with cleaning debris from the tires and compartments. He felt Sam's eyes boring holes into his stiff spine, but he didn't acknowledge her. She'd ended things, was moving on. He was man. He would accept her wishes and search elsewhere for his needs.

Sam understood she'd hurt him, but until she was positive of what she wanted, she couldn't claim him. It wouldn't be right.

"Fifteen minutes," Rosa called over the wind. They were in northern Ohio, with the family homestead nearly half a day behind them. Rosa was sorry they hadn't gotten to stop there to resupply. The Pruett family always had great gear. Sam twisted around so that her attention was on their surrounding and not the males. She demanded it of her crew and she followed the same rules.

Rosa saw both of their attempts to fight fate. She couldn't get Sam to reverse her decision—they'd ridden together long enough for her to know Sam well—but Baker was innocent in so many ways that Rosa was sure he would be receptive to her plan. She leaned over the bike, ignoring the immediate tensing of every other female, including Sam.

“You smell good.”

Baker blushed, staring in surprise. “Uh. Thank you.”

Rosa's hand reached out to stroke Baker's big arm, honestly experiencing the heat, but not the terrible fire that was so dangerous. Being with Greg had already helped her control. “You and Greg get along... I'm almost a Pruett.”

Baker realized she was offering to claim him. He hesitated, torn. He assumed she was doing it to keep him from being harassed during their trip west. Now that Sam had ended things, he was once again single. “Can I think on it?”

Sam's growl echoed across the dusty campsite. She marched toward them with an expression that Rosa immediately ducked. She'd known what it might do, but she couldn't take Greg being upset over his friend.

“You little bitch!” Sam grabbed Baker by the arm and dragged him toward the cave. “Let's get some things straight!”

As she disappeared inside with a now meekly obeying Baker, the runners and Greg gave Rosa grins and approving nods. They all wanted the

black sheep and the rebel leader together. The combination was perfect.

Baker stayed standing when Sam let go and stalked to the opposite end of the cave. The anger coming off her immediately began to warm the stone.

Now that she'd shown signs of that Pruett possessiveness, Sam didn't know what to say. She wasn't going to claim him, but she also didn't want him free to be claimed.

Baker waited as patiently as he could, eager to hear her offer. She had to give him something after displaying emotions in front of her crew like that.

“Why?”

Baker didn't feign understanding. “It's not for your name. Other families are strong.”

Not like mine, she thought, studying him. “If we were at the complex, how would you convince me?”

“I'm a man, Sam. They're all boys. I wouldn't need to do anything.”

Drawn to the confidence, Sam inched a few feet closer. “And if there were other ‘men’ there?”

Baker scowled, hands clenching. “When you left, I'd make it clear who I am.”

“What if they refused to get out of your way?” she pushed.

Baker grunted. “I could kill for you, Sam.”

She grinned, giving him that harsh games expression. “I feel the same way.”

“Then why won't you claim me?”

“Because it may not be enough,” she hedged. “I’ve always needed more than the rest of my family. I won’t put you through that. You deserve better.”

Realizing she was trying to protect him, Baker growled, capturing her lips.

Sam allowed him the liberty, shivering at the need a simple kiss could bring. She wanted him. There was no denying that. “Will you wait for me?”

“And be your secondary source if you find one you like more in the complex?”

Sam dropped her head in shame. “Yes.”

Baker slowly retreated, voice sad. “Then I have to give the same answer as back in the den. When you decide I’m the one, come find me. Until then, I’m a renter and I make my own choices.”

When he turned away from her, something in Sam snapped. A tear rolled over her cheek and fell to the dirt.

I love him, she realized. How did that happen?

Baker felt her terror. He kept going, proving he was strong enough to do so if that’s what she wanted. His heart might never heal, but that was a small price to pay for the freedom of his gender. The Pruetts always marked a man in one way or another. He’d known that when he agreed to play with them. Now he had to live with it.

“Rosa, I’m still considering your offer. I’m under your protection until I chose not to be. Let’s roll.”

When Sam’s growled protest came this time, Baker and the others ignored it.

Chapter Two

Spooked

1

“Impact in five, four, three...”

Julian and the others stared in concern as the rocket reached its target. It had been long hours of waiting where the most exciting thing to happen had been viewing Terry’s agony as Rina’s body was taken away. And the air conditioning had come back online. Julian had ordered the hound pen cooling to be diverted to the tower. The old equipment couldn’t take so much heat.

“Sir?” Robert, the man stationed at the city monitors tried to get Julian’s attention. “Sir, we got a minor security breach in sector five.”

Julian came over to peer at the display, annoyed at the constant interruptions. He did a quick evaluation. The group that had overrun the security posts appeared to be more farmers and locals who lived around the city. They were trying to avoid the path of the troops and the coming rebels.

“Put them with the other refugees,” Julian ordered, moving to the next monitoring station. He focused on Shelly. “When?”

“But, sir,” the man at the security display protested. “Two of our defenders were killed. The

group that came through was too big for us to handle in that area. We have a lot of fighters out of the city right now.”

Julian twisted around to regard the subordinate, causing silence to fall again. When he didn't reach for his knife, all of them were relieved.

Julian glowered at Shelly, who was running the security monitors with the ape. “How long? Tell me now.”

“Any second, sir.”

Everyone studied the largest screen intently.

“There!”

The blast hit the train in a perfect shot, sending metal and debris flying. Wildlife took off as the rocket approached, fleeing in vain from the explosion that smothered the area with a gray and black cloud of smoke. As the shockwave reached the cameras, their view of the scene abruptly cut off.

“Yes!” Julian pounded his fist on the table in satisfaction. “We got them!”

The rest of the council was relieved, but they didn't understand why Julian was so happy. Until the smoke cleared, they wouldn't know for sure how many of the rebels had been killed.

Rusty concentrated on the static-covered display, hoping the camera would come back online. They would be in the dark about the rebels until the team Julian had already sent out reached the area.

“I wish to address the public,” Julian ordered. “Get me a channel.”

Robert began hitting buttons on the monitor, doing as he was told even though he didn't believe it was a good idea. He knew what Julian was about to do. However, Robert thought it would've been better to wait until they had confirmation that the threat was actually gone before declaring it. Things like that had a way of coming back to bite you in the ass when it was least expected and could be least afforded.

Robert motioned to Shelly to read the script that Julian had written. Terry was still sulking over her lover's death and shuddering occasionally as she fought to control the rage. She certainly didn't need a hot mike right now.

"This is a network communication," the computer announced over the New City Radio Network, as it had first been called. *"Pay attention!"*

Those outside the dome quieted, peering up in suspicious fear as the giant screens switched from clips of old episodes to static. Seconds later, the monitors came to life with Terry's victorious façade and cheerful voice.

"Hello, my friends. Good day to you! There have been developments in our battle against the resistance. A short time ago, we launched a counteroffensive against the rebels who had hijacked the Network Rider. We have won! Sentries are in route now to collect any survivors and bring in bodies for identification. I repeat: the threat in the eastern country is now over. Citizens

may return to their homes and resume resource production.”

In the hot crowd of muttering, murmuring, constantly shifting citizens, a small group listened to the recording with well-hidden smirks of satisfaction and victory.

Candice motioned Daniel closer. There were a lot of hard women around them. Some of those closest were Pruett supporters, but with the disease, deals often came second. She wasn't about to lose her mate in this battle for freedom. Daniel kept his chin down, almost completely hidden by the cloak that Candice had given him as they hit the city an hour ago. Wearing Bruce's old clothes, he blended in well with the other slaves who were trailing obediently behind their fleeing masters. All around them was heat. A lot of it came from the changelings pressed in around the dome so tightly, but there was also rebellion in the air—supported by hatred for the rulers who had allowed all these bad things to happen.

Candice felt the warm air shift into something dangerous, but it was too late to hide in the crowd as three large Diva gang members came up behind Daniel. Before she could switch to a safer position, another half-dozen leather-wearing slave traders approached from her side. Aware that things could get ugly, Candice glanced to where the rest of their group had blended into the crowd. Although she didn't spot them, she felt their response to her need and knew they would help.

Candice quickly pinpointed who she thought to be the main fighter of the gang. She locked a hand around Daniel's wrist and turned to confront the family enemy. "Can I help you?"

Before the diva could answer, screens around the city switched to the view of a missile hitting a train. The destruction increased the tension in the throng of people instead of dissipating it.

As the camera went out and the view switched back to the council woman, Candice ruthlessly controlled her expression. *It looks real*, she thought. *The train males and Daniel did a great job doctoring that film.* By the time the troops got there and discovered they had been tricked, it would be too late to prevent all of those fighters from entering the city. Quite a few of them were already here, now, with her.

In a second of Pruett judgment, Candice held out a hand to the diva in front of her. "Let's make a deal. I'll take down the dome and I won't kill you afterwards."

To her surprise, the woman immediately shook her hand.

"That was what we wanted to talk to you about!" Naomi gushed. "We don't have a leader anymore. You keep killing them."

Candice snickered. "So you think I should replace them? That's funny." She dropped her hand, openly wiping it down her tattered decoy cloak. The diva's sweaty, slightly charred skin was layered with weeks of grit and grease. That came

from eating food around cook fires, implying they had been traveling for a while.

“Anyone caught aiding the rebels will be placed into Vulture Run.”

As the council woman continued to expand upon the consequences, the crowd grew louder with muttering and comments, snickers and fighting, arguing and growls. Normally, the shops in this city saw steady traffic during the day, but with this many citizens in town, all of the stalls were being overwhelmed in shouts from those trying to bargain for supplies and entertainment. Candice scanned the rental clerks, particularly loathing those big females. They had no sympathy for their slaves, only greed. Even their clothes, made of fine fabrics and bright colors, stood out from everyone else.

I've never understood that, she reflected. Shouldn't the product look as good as the owner does?

In the crowd around her, finery was absent. Most of the locals wore shirts and pants sewn from animal hides or long cloaks that hid threadbare jumpers purchased secondhand from the network. Few of them were armed, but with changelings, that wasn't necessary for them to be a threat.

“Refugees are being given a two-day pass for the work they've missed. Do not use the new train to return to your homes. It is off-limits to the public,” the council women informed them sternly. “No loitering calls will be answered during this time. Anyone caught in illegal areas will be brought in

for questioning. Civilians are required to report rebel sightings immediately.”

As the crowd continued to swell, so did the odors. Blood, feces, and sweat were the strongest, but there were also tempting aromas of males walking through the crowd and fresh food being offered by the vendors.

The diva gestured toward the old subway system. “You can stay with us until her train arrives.”

Candice signaled to the rest of her main group to follow. “All of us?”

The diva scanned Daniel, and then Candice’s companions who were revealing themselves to be all around the divas. She paled, nodding. “Yes. We’re all on the same team. We’ve been waiting for this moment for centuries. We’re not going to lose it to internal fighting.”

Almost convinced, Candice followed the diva through the hot crowd. She almost recognized the woman. She had been in the crowd for Angelica’s matches. Candice and Daniel had watched those from the borderlands, rooting and worrying.

Behind them, more of Candice’s group faded into the crowd and trailed them without revealing their presence.

The clip of the train explosion was being replayed again, but Candice didn’t try to find flaws with the tape. She had little doubt the network would do that when they found out there were no bodies. Not even the ape was still there. That furry relic was enjoying the rivers and ponds on the trip. He

hadn't been free since being captured shortly after birth and his enthusiasm for nature was causing ripples. Locals were fleeing ahead of him, horrified by the monster splashing through the river to chase meals that usually hunted human anglers.

As Candice and her group vanished into the old subway system, screens around the city switched back to the clips of old shows that had been interrupted. Most of the crowd was satisfied the ape had been eliminated, but they didn't leave. There was a sense of something about to happen and no one wanted to miss it—especially not if it meant network control might weaken.

2

“Why aren't they leaving?”

Julian didn't answer, though he knew. Before Alex could repeat the question, the buzzer sounded, signaling an incoming transmission.

Instead of taking it in his private chambers as he usually did, Julian gestured for Rusty to put it on speakerphone. As the connection went through, Julian barked, “What do you want now?!”

There was a brief pause where it was clear that the person hadn't been expecting such a hostile greeting.

“This is Claudette Fife from the UN delegation. We have recorded an explosion of minor magnitude in your eastern sector. Are you aware?”

“We’re still handling our rebel problem!” Julian shot back. “It would be a lot easier if I wasn’t constantly being distracted with calls like these. We still have 4 weeks. Mind your own damn business!” Julian gestured for the line to be cut off. “As you know,” the delegate continued brusquely over the speaker. “the UN has a responsibility—” The line went dead.

Julian stormed from the meeting. The UN was a big problem. Plans were in place for it and he needed to be patient, but the rage had almost consumed him now. Men had only carried Rage Walker’s disease in the past, but it had mutated again a decade ago, finally making males angrier. Experimenting with various chemicals over the last ten years had given Julian a mental black hole. He wasn’t stable.

Council members shared uneasy glances of concern—all of them. Though Rusty was firmly in Julian’s corner, he often wondered if he would be found dead after one of Julian’s psychotic rages. It was almost as if the disease had mutated again and was now changing the men. Rusty wouldn’t know. Only Julian had access to those records.

Rusty shuttered. If that were the case, he would rather be dead. Watching the women suffer through it was bad enough. He certainly didn’t want to experience it firsthand.

Claudette Fyfe, representative of the UN, hung up the dead connection with an annoyed scowl. Julian and the council had been stalling the UN for years. The rest of the world was recovering, but they had no idea about the conditions in New America—except for the small tidbits that they'd been able to glean from timid lads who swore they had escaped slavery. The rest of the world, with the exception of two Middle Eastern nations, had outlawed slavery nearly three decades ago.

Claudette increased the volume on the screen that was currently highlighting their rare connection into new America. An episode of the Bachelor Battles was starting next week and the time trials were being run for it. Feeds like this one were almost impossible to hold onto. The network had a sophisticated communications system based on the old world internet. After the war, the rest of the world had lost access to that precious resource when it was locked down by the American military. The network was using it to evade broadcasting proof of broken international laws. Despite the technology, some clips had been transmitted by locals, unknowingly providing a feed for bordering countries to pick up the shows. This one coming in so clear meant there was someone on the American side of the wall observing the Time Trials.

Claudette narrowed in on the line of players waiting for their run, frowning. *Is that another Pruett?*

“Samantha J. Pruett!”

Samantha didn't respond emotionally as her name was announced. At this moment during the Time Trial introductions, Candice had probably glowered at everyone. Angelica might have waved, but Samantha didn't do either of those. She wasn't going to waste herself in any way during this experience. They were only going to get as much of her as she wanted to give and right now, she didn't want to give them anything.

Enjoying the cool winds that preceded a storm, Samantha stepped forward to take the front spot for a brief moment while the crowd screamed eagerly and the other contestants swallowed jealous snarls.

“Samantha has been a borderland bounty hunter for more than a decade. Without a mate or children, she prefers to spend her time challenging the harsh environments left by the war. She and her crew, the Runners, are now the most feared group since the Ring was killed. As I'm sure you know, Samantha's little sister, Angelica, is one of those wanted for questioning about those murders. She is on the run.”

Sam winced internally.

The players behind her grew more nervous at the family reputation being displayed. When Sam

considered how it might give her the edge, she let her eyes phase red before rotating to glare at them. “No fear in that one, folks!” the announcer on the speaker gushed excitedly. “Don’t you just love her short, curly blond hair?”

The opponents in the line behind her tried to answer her challenge. More than half of them began changing or advancing. The damp, cool air couldn’t put out the fires she would start while here.

Sam smirked as sentries rushed over with clubs and electronic batons. She faced the laughing crowd, the citizens who were about to bet their fortunes on her. She slowly opened her cloak to reveal a fighting outfit. It was what she wore on runs. The plain shirt and unimpressive top were overlooked for the full tool belt of Pruett weapons that no one had gotten to view during the other games.

“That is a lot of killing tools!” the announcer called. “I’ve never seen so many on one belt. How did she fit them all?”

Sam rotated slowly as the announcer gushed, giving the camera time to capture it in detail. Some were still stained with blood from the train fight. Under these killing devices, Sam’s muscular skin was tanned, beaten, and scarred with more damage than her family had. It was obvious that she’d earned each blemish and knew how to handle each tool.

The players behind her stopped fighting with the guards and began thinking of withdrawing. Any player could still do that. Until they signed in at the dome, anyone could renege, but almost no one ever did. For most of them, coming here was the last straw. They either wanted a cure or to die. *That's why we usually come here*, Sam amended, closing her cloak. She retook her place in line, no longer needing to worry about being attacked. The other players were now using the troops between them as a shield.

The time trail stadium was gigantic. It held fifty thousand seats and contained too many entrances and tunnels to count. Most of the stands and booths were thick with sentries and citizens who were fighting, stealing, stabbing, and doing all other sort of activities that the Pruetts frowned upon in public. It was like being in an animal den, making Sam's stomach flip eagerly. She liked the way the field was set up in a long oval lined with concrete barriers to mark the lanes. She assumed the workers used the lack of nightly races to set up for the different runs. She also admired the top boxes of the stadium, where the rich and the reporters enjoyed 10'x10' glass booths that allowed them to catch every minute of the excitement.

As the other racers in this set were introduced, am kept studying her surroundings. It was rumored that the town behind the stadium was controlled by a branch of the divas. Samantha had never been there. As far as she knew, none of her family had.

As enemies of the divas, they hadn't felt it wise to invade their turf. Sam studied that mysterious skyline, suddenly eager to gaze upon something she hadn't before. Until now, Pruetts had always left eastern explorations to their enemies, but that could change during her time here.

Samantha scanned the racers last. The snake and the diva were going to be solid fights, but there was also a rare desert glower and a mountain brute still waiting in the tunnel to be introduced. Sam had walked by the pair without reacting, but she'd been aware of them and they'd been aware of her. Everyone in the corridor had felt the tension. They just hadn't known exactly where it was coming from.

"And here is our next group of potential players!"

Sam exited at a wave from the guards. The others hung back to give her a clear path.

As they reentered the cool tunnel that led below the old stadium, four large guards approached them.

The other racers scattered as if they knew Sam was the target.

Sam also assumed she was and stopped. She kept her hands still, not wanting to provoke a fight that she couldn't win. Four guards were no trouble for her, but this zone housed and transported more than four hundred. She'd never make it out if she fought them.

"Come with me," the shortest sentry ordered cockily as she walked by Sam. "Run and die."

“A Pruett run?” Sam snorted as she followed.
“You must not know my family.”

“I saw them both at the complex,” the woman countered. “Great games. Terrific ratings. Will you be as entertaining?”

Sam wondered if the guard wanted a scoop for a favor. That could be arranged. “More so.”

The sentry chuckled, lip curling. “Good, good. Been boring at home since your sister took her prize and fled.”

Sam was taken into the lower corridor. From what Angelica and Candice had said, potential players were kept in the bowels of the stadium. Used to communal living with her girls, Sam wasn't concerned over having to sleep in the same cell as those who were going to try to kill her. In fact, she thought that might put her more at ease. Life in the borderlands was no bed of exhumed roses.

Aware that the escort wasn't normal, Sam stayed ready to react. They walked by racers waiting for their introduction and other players who should have been resting until their run was called. The lines thickened into angry, snarling changelings around a dank tunnel that reeked of sweat and rage.

“In here,” the guard directed.

Sam went first as the defender opened a rusty door.
“Miss Pruett!” a cheery, familiar voice called.

“How good to finally meet one of you in person!”

Sam listened to the door shut, shocked to find a council member standing in the center of the dirty,

bunk-lined basement. She scanned for exits first, then evaluated her visitor.

Sam and the tall woman were dressed much the same, with long cloaks that covered most of their body and gave the impression of a muscular form underneath. Sam assumed the brunette was as armed as she was. The theory was confirmed when Terry came forward and her cloak shifted, revealing three knife blades in the front of her belt. Noting the same things about Sam, Terry beamed graciously. “So attentive to details, to survival. You are a credit to all who have died trying to accomplish what you and your family has with the rebels”

Sam tensed further. *How can she know I was there?*

She doesn't, Sam cautioned herself. She's bluffing. Like a Pruett would. Be careful.

Sam moved toward an empty bunk along the wall and dropped her kit onto it. Dust flew up. “What do you want?”

Terry frowned. “So abrupt. Is there no time for politeness?”

“Not if you guys want me to die in the dome instead of here,” Sam warned. “You know how hard it is to keep the disease in check in a place like this.”

“I do understand,” Terry commiserated earnestly. She'd fought her way up instead of inheriting a place on the council. She was the only person who

had. “But we really don’t want you to die. Just the opposite.”

Sam heard the tone and braced.

“We want you to work for us.”

“My family has been employed by the council for centuries,” Sam pointed out, hedging. Candice hadn’t expected this when they’d sat down with the rebels and finished their plans.

“We would like a tighter relationship with your wonderfully talented clan,” Terry confessed, still wearing a huge smile that looked out of place on her. “We’d like you and your girls to take over the yearly round up.”

Sam stared in disgust. “You want a Pruett to lead the Ring?”

“Yes.” Terry shrugged, voice cooling. “It was your girls who killed the last crew.”

“That hasn’t been proven,” Sam defended, but only lightly. “I still can’t believe any of them did it. I was only away for a couple weeks on my last solo run.”

“Perhaps there doesn’t even need to be a trial for your sister,” Terry offered. “If we knew you were loyal to us, Samantha, there wouldn’t be a need for us to wipe out your family like the annoying bugs you all really are.”

Sam grinned harshly. “Honesty! I like that. In return, I’m going to give you some advice. You ready?”

Terry nodded. Her facade was now a wall of ice as she braced for bad news. “Do tell.”

“Get out.”

Terry frowned. “We’re not done talking.”

“I mean out of the city and out of network control, you twit,” Sam corrected with a sneer. “They sent you to deal with the black sheep because you’re expendable. They knew their messenger might not survive the conversation, and you didn’t know that, so there’s no way you’ll survive whatever else they have planned for you. If you value your life, get out now.”

Terry would have argued, but Sam went to the bed she’d chosen and curled around her kit, not worrying over bugs or the new layer of dust that flew up. “Have a nice trip.”

“Same to you,” Terry murmured, reluctantly inspecting the concern that Sam had put in front of her. *Did Julian send me out of the dome for that reason? He said I was forgiven for not telling him Riana was spilling his secrets, but am I really?*

No. And that’s why I came with my private security team and not complex troops. The Pruett is wrong. I do know how much danger I’m in.

Terry strode to the door. *I’m going to have to do something about Julian.*

Sam smirked as the woman left and angry players began pushing in to claim a bunk. The council was scared. That was the only reason Sam could think of that they would offer her family a pardon and better jobs. They knew the Pruett could take them down. That made this game even more dangerous

than it already had been. The network knew she was coming for them. They would be ready.

So will I, Sam swore. She appeared to be resting even though she was still tensed for defense. There would be a few hundred diseased fighters in here with her over the next few days. Sleep would come later.

The drafty bunkroom continued to fill until all of the beds were taken. There were two minor fights during the hour they had to wait for the first timed runs, but troops outside the door shut them down quickly. The network wanted the blood to spill upstairs, not down here where they couldn't get much from it in the way of ratings. There were cameras in each corner, but only the main guards in the control chamber could view them. The cameras down here went live to the public only when something big happened.

After a few minutes of waiting for problems, Sam realized word had spread of the visit. Some of the racers probably assumed she'd been offered a job or a threat, but everyone knew not to interfere with any deals the network had going. If you screwed something up for them, it could very well be the last thing you got to do before you were tossed into Vulture Run. With that knowledge in hand, Samantha went to sleep.

A short time later, her snores echoed loudly through the area, drawing snickers and annoyed frowns at the arrogance.

She wasn't disturbed.

End of Sample Chapters

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