

# **Warrior Queen**

**Renegade Star, prequel**

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## **Table of Contents**

**Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 20**  
**Epilogue ...**

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## Chapter 1

The weather was wild and harsh for the first three days of our hunt, the cold winds and heavy snow beating us back and slowing our work. It wasn't until the fourth day that our luck finally turned around and the sun came out. Its light reflected off the eternally white expanse, and I had to shield my eyes against the glare as I scanned the valley before me.

It was beautiful, the blanket of snow that covered the world, resting below a wide and open cerulean sky, but as my father had told me once when I'd mentioned such a sight, beauty didn't bring home supplies.

The landscape lay still and quiet in all directions, clear all the way to the distant mountains where one of the ancient facilities still stood, its broken towers and shattered doors hanging open for all who would come and see. I had only been there once, years ago when I was fifteen and my father insisted it was time I learned to travel. He had taught me how to hunt before, but never so far away from home where the danger was alive and hungry in the vast tundra.

I wiped my nose, sniffing in the cold air as my breath formed in front of me. Without the background of cutting wind and falling snow to conceal our movements, the four of us were forced to communicate using hand signals and hushed whispers. The last thing any of us wanted to do was spook the herd.

Cyril Visaro, the Director and leader of our colony, commanded the small hunting party. He was a tall man with wide shoulders and dark eyes.

He also happened to be my father.

We called our prey frost horns, named for the protrusions that grew out of their large skulls. They were crystalline horns, hard as stone and made of frozen water around a thin scaffolding core of hair. Our historian, Janus, said the Eternal scientists who'd settled here almost two thousand years ago had not considered them important enough to warrant naming, but we did.

The horn could break through thin layers of ice to find stores of water, score branches for out of reach lichen clumps, or spear an attacking wolf. These large animals weren't known to be overly aggressive, but they would certainly protect themselves, especially in groups.

Most of what I wore now had come from one of the giant creatures. The white fur helped us to blend in with the snowy terrain and almost matched my hair

perfectly. This was a convenience for those like me who didn't care for bulky hoods that tended to get in the way.

I wondered if the scientists would have felt differently if they could see how integral the frost horns were to our survival. Indeed, the animals provided much needed oil, pelts, and bones that we used for crafting utensils and tools.

From the size of the tracks, I estimated the animal ahead to be an adolescent. It was of no consequence. Even a smaller frost horn could yield a worthwhile amount of resources, and any animal was more practice for me to hone my skills as a hunter.

A light crunch sounded behind me and I turned to see my father approaching. I might not have recognized him under his face shield and all the layers of clothing, but his weapon was unmistakable.

He'd scavenged the rifle as a boy of seventeen, the same age as me now, and modified it with a fusion core for his Selection Ceremony project, as was customary for those in the running to be chosen as the next leader.

When the Primes picked me as *prospus*--a term that meant a candidate or prospect--a few months ago, I'd almost done the same but had decided to work on something more unique instead. With Selection just around the corner, I was nearly finished.

"Stay alert, Lucia," he warned, pulling me from thoughts of the Prime Regency, whispering so his voice wouldn't carry. "We aren't the only ones hunting today."

I whipped my gaze back to the valley, annoyed I had missed something, but it still looked empty. My father shook his head and pointed to his ear.

The other two hunters in our group had stopped and we all listened intently. My trainer, Alma, was the first to react. She gestured at the frost horn tracks, then indicated ahead and to the right.

Nero and I followed the prints down the base of the valley until they disappeared around a large outcropping of rock.

That was when I heard the clicking.

Only one thing on this planet made that noise. Boneclaws.

I could tell that Nero heard it too, because his form went stiff and his weapon jerked up a hair. It was a practical response. Boneclaws were savage monsters and even larger than the frost horns. Three lethal claws adorned the end of each thickly muscled arm that could strike with astounding speed and rip through flesh with little effort.

It had likely scented our game. With the calf separated from the herd, it would make for an easy meal. We didn't have enough supplies to stay on the hunt much longer, and if we lost the calf we'd return home with nothing.

Despite that, a little thrill of excitement swirled through me. I'd seen Boneclaws before, but only from a distance. Unless they were dead. This would mark the first time I participated in a kill, and if it went well, there would be lots of praise and congratulations from the people at home.

My father stepped forward and motioned for us to follow. We moved slowly, careful of our steps. Boneclaws were blind but had excellent hearing. To have the best chance at killing it, and saving our catch, we'd need the advantage.

Not long after, the clicking had become more of a wet grinding sound and my father held up a gloved fist to stop us. He pointed to his chest then waved a hand at the rock to say he would check it out first.

I tapped my own chest urgently, showing I wanted to go with him, but he shook his head and held up a hand. As much as I wanted to argue, this wasn't the place, so I nodded curtly.

Seemingly satisfied that I would stay put, my father eased around the rock and disappeared from view.

I couldn't help but be annoyed at being left behind, but I put it aside and focused on scoping out our surroundings for more threats.

Alma had a set of farfinders out and looked to the east. She and my father had already commented that the herd had been farther out than usual and we'd been lucky to get this straggler.

I checked the west for any sign of movement. If there was one Boneclaw, more were probably in the vicinity. Wind gusted by, its howl reminding me of a wolf baying.

Movement to my left caught my attention. Nero was crouched down digging in the snow, a concentrated expression on his face.

"Wolf scat," he announced, then stood to study the icy landscape.

Maybe the howling hadn't been the wind after all. I listened, this time turning my ear to the direction the wind had come from. I heard the sound again, but it was far from our current location.

Nero and I nodded at each other, acknowledging the information at the same time. A single snowfly buzzed in my face and I waved it away.

My father returned then, motioning us in close, and we huddled together in a tight circle.

"One Boneclaw. It's eating the calf and distracted. Let's go," he ordered.

Each of us unsheathed our blades now rather than later, here where we could be quiet, masking our sound in the wind. We left the relative safety of the outcropping and rounded the rock shoulder behind my father. Alma was directly behind him, and I took the middle with Nero at the rear.

It didn't take long to see what had taken my father so long to return. Once out of view from our previous position, I found that the path continued a fair amount before curving around again to reveal a deep gorge.

The sounds from the Boneclaw grew louder as our group moved closer. It was the terrible sound of flesh being ripped from bone, gnashing teeth, and wet chewing, and it turned my stomach. I found that my desire to see the creature up close evaporated rather quickly, but there was no going back now. Steeling my resolve, I gripped my spear and pressed forward, unwilling to let myself be controlled by fear. "Fear and bravery are two faces that every warrior should learn to wear," my father had often told me. "Fear pulls you back before the fight, and bravery tugs you toward it. Without bravery, there is only the coward; without fear, there is only the fool. True warriors know which face to wear and which to hide. Embracing them both is how you stay alive."

My heart thudded in my chest, and I wondered if the beast would hear its pounding and attack, but the squelching went on, uninterrupted by our advance. The noise seemed to fill my ears now, and I knew it couldn't be far.

Large boulders littered the snow-covered rock floor, and at first I didn't see anything. It only took a moment to follow the tracks and the path that the frost horn had forged through the drifts in search of food. From the opposite direction we had come, another set of tracks disturbed the snow.

These were from the Boneclaw who had undoubtedly caught the scent of the young calf and given chase. It was all too clear where the pair had collided; the area was marked not just by deep grooves, but by the bright red of fresh blood stark against the white surroundings.

I was thankful to have missed the scene. Though I'd taken part in my share of hunts, we always dispatched our catches as quickly and humanely as possible. The Boneclaws were not known to have such tendencies.

A smaller pair of prints caught my eye, and I realized they were my father's. It awed me that he had come so close, and alone. I vowed to be better, more like him.

The four of us crept closer, wary of the increasingly large steaming patches of blood, and edged our way around a large boulder. Based on the sounds coming from the other side, we would be face to face with our quarry in the next few seconds.

I held my breath as, at last, the Boneclaw's monstrous form became visible. It was hunched over the fallen body of the frost horn, its face buried in the corpse. The smell of copper was heavy in the air and filled my mouth with a metallic taste. It did, however, block our scent, and for that, I was thankful.

Our group fanned out slowly to surround the beast at strategic positions, just as we'd practiced. Alma and I circled around until we were behind the Boneclaw, while Nero took a position on the side not protected by the boulder.

Alma's weapon had been modified with a fusion core like my father's, but hers was what she called a glaive. It looked like a staff but had a long blade at the end, glowing blue in her hands as it powered up and she prepared to attack.

Our leader stood a few meters from the animal, his eyes fixed on the enormous claws. He had moved the rifle to his back, as it would be too loud in this gorge and draw other Boneclaws to us, trading it for a spear instead. The blade wasn't as long as Alma's, but it was certainly sharper.

We were at a critical point. If the creature heard us now, not only would it attack but it would try to alert others to the area. Taking down one was difficult but possible. Two, much less so, though not completely unheard of. More than that, however, and we wouldn't stand a chance.

Nero signaled to me and Alma that he was ready, and we nodded the same. He lifted an arm, then dropped it to start the attack.

The Boneclaw's head jerked up as we moved in unison. I heard my father's spear tip sing across the neck of the beast, and I brought my own weapon across the tendon on the back of its left leg. Alma mirrored the move on the right, spraying blood in all directions.

The animal reared and tried to take a step but fell immediately forward from the wounds we had inflicted. A strange gurgling sound followed as it began to choke, and the creature's long arms came around as if to clutch at its neck.

Alma and I got out from behind the flailing animal in case it fell, and now I could see how well our tactics had worked. Nero's attack had severed the right

arm, leaving it a bloody mess. The appendage flopped uselessly to the side of our circle, rolling in the snow.

My father's spear dripped with warm blood, creating condensation in the cold as the Boneclaw staggered from the wounds, its monstrous size still looming over us.

I launched the spear, praying that my aim would be true just as Nero flew by me, sword raised high. The spear found its mark, and the Boneclaw jerked as its arm was pinned to the torso, giving Nero time to reach my father and bring the blade down to cleave the arm in two, splattering blood on the white snow. The three-clawed hand fell to the ground and Nero moved forward to behead the Boneclaw, bringing his blade straight through the creature's flesh in a hard, clean slice, finally putting it down for good.

My father was breathing heavily, steadying himself. "Let's take care of this and get the hell out of here," he said. "I'm letting the shuttle know we're ready."

Almost nothing from the frost horn was left, but the remains of the Boneclaw would suffice. It didn't take long to dismember it and prep the harvested parts for transport. When they were ready, we placed them in tarps that would be attached to the underside of the ship.

The shine of new experience wore off and disenchantment set in as I took in the gore that now covered me from head to toe. Somehow only Nero and I had ruined our hunter's garb. My father and Alma barely had a speck of blood between them.

They had a saying, one I'd never understood when I was younger but had grown all too familiar with in recent months.

The best hunters need only one set of fresh clothes.

When the transport arrived, we secured the load and climbed in, shedding our outer layers before sitting down in the beat-up chairs.

As the ramp closed, a faraway roar echoed through the cliffs, loud and close. We all knew that sound, and we knew what it brought.

I looked sharply to Alma. The older woman's face was tense but devoid of fear. She had always been that way. Always so calm, as though nothing in the world could get to her.

I would never be that way, not when the sound of monsters made me squirm. I looked down at my hands, still trembling from the fight. There was fear still in me.

Alma leaned over and said something to my father, who nodded in response. "Get us out of here, Slates," my father ordered, tapping the back of the pilot's chair. "We don't want to be here when the pack shows up."

"Working on it," Slates grunted, lifting the small ship into the air.

I stayed quiet, but a scan of the landscape gave me pause. Four more of the creatures were running toward the gorge.

The lines went taut when it came time for the load to leave the ground, and the vessel rocked hard as it was met with the resistance. I gripped the straps of my harness and pressed my feet into the floor to keep from tossing side-to-side.

Our vessel was old and well past its prime. Despite how well our ancestors had made these ships, time had gotten the better of them all, and each had begun to show signs of disrepair.

All the seats were worn, the padding sticking out from the ripped seams. None of the display screens were without cracks, nor did the engines run as smoothly as

they once had. No matter how many fixes our engineers made, the ships always felt like they were on the edge of breaking down.

One day, my father would often tell me, these ancient machines would stop working completely. We would have to find a new way to hunt and bring our kills home.

But everyone else would say that this was a problem for later. There were too many things to worry about today, and we could only do so much.

For now, we worked with what we had available.

Not wanting to distract, I turned on the built-in display and brought up the external feed. The view was grainy, but I could see the cargo as it swayed gently below us. It was steady enough for now, but a hard and sudden gust of wind could always change that. The ship struggled with the weight of the Boneclaw, the landscape below getting smaller, meter by meter.

The engines screamed in protest, pushed to their limit in our effort to move higher, faster, and with too much weight. The creatures roared again, audible despite the engines, and their call echoed through the valley and into the gorge.

The cargo cleared the large boulder and scraped the top of it, sending vibrations up the lines and into my seat. At the same time, the group of Boneclaws broke into the gorge and galloped on all fours to our position.

They barreled toward us, close enough now that I could see them through the cockpit window. Then I lost sight of them and I had to use the feed again.

Upon reaching the body of their packmate, they stopped and sniffed the ground, finally rearing up to let loose a scream that sounded like a terrible mix of agony and rage.

The largest of the four climbed up the boulder, his eyes fixed on us, and it leapt into the air in a show of power, its claws outstretched and reaching for us.

It was in that moment that I caught sight of the creature's face. One side of it bore a horrible scar from forehead to cheek, crossing two milk-white eyes without pupils. I felt the creature's claws scratch the bottom of the cargo box, causing the entire ship to tremble, and I instinctively stiffened.

We were moving away, however, and climbing out of reach enough for me to let go of the breath I'd been holding.

"It... it had eyes," I muttered, confused as to how that was possible. Boneclaws never had eyes. They used sound rather than sight.

Alma smirked. "Ah, yes. A defect that shows up occasionally. Like how Leif Tarcher has a third nipple. Completely useless."

She settled back in her seat and closed her eyes as if this was no more exciting than plain oatmeal day.

I said nothing to her, choosing to accept what she told me as fact. Alma had always known more than most others. If she said something was true, then it probably was.

I wondered if the Boneclaws might try to follow us, but the more I watched them from the viewscreen, the more secure I grew. They didn't move from their spot, staring out at us with their heads tilted, listening to us as we flew. After only a few moments, all four surrounded the dead remains still on the ground and leaned over it.

As one, the group reared up and released a sad, keening wail that left me shaken.

“Do they grieve?” I asked my father, perturbed by the idea.

He shrugged. “Even frost horns will leave the herd to find lost young and cry out if a member of the herd dies,” he told me. “It means nothing.”

My discomfort at that revelation must have showed on my face because his voice took on a stern tone.

“It’s nothing more than a primal instinct to survive, Lucia. Every loss weakens their numbers. They know that, but not on the conscious level that we do. Don’t make the mistake of humanizing them. Others have tried and to no good end.”

“Aren’t they made from humans?” I asked. “Doesn’t that mean that they’re more than simple animals? At least partially?”

“No. They’re experiments created by arrogant people who should have known better,” he countered. “Now, I will hear no more of this. Trust in my words. I have seen enough of them to know the truth of this.”

My mouth snapped shut at that, and I nodded tightly. Clearly done with the conversation, my father turned and began speaking to Alma.

I stayed silent for the rest of our short trip across the valley, but I couldn’t get the image of the mourning Boneclaws out of my mind.

## Chapter 2

As we neared the cliffs on the opposite side of the valley, the pilot pulled the transport up. Part of the wall slid back and out, creating a wide landing space and revealing the hangar inside. To anyone who might pass, if there had been someone else on the planet to see, it would have looked sheer, all the way to the top.

The Eternals, our ancestors, had done this on purpose, though it seemed odd to me. Janus, a holographic intelligence known as a Cognitive, had taught us many things about our ancestors, although his older memories were becoming less reliable in recent years.

Still, the Cognitive said that the scientists were operating here covertly in an attempt to hide their work from the public eye. The Eternal leaders were afraid that if the public discovered how severe the degeneration had become, panic might arise, and so this research outpost had been built. The scientists needn’t have worried, though. In the two thousand years since their arrival, no one else had ever come.

There were many theories about why this had occurred, but the most accepted was that the rest of humanity had likely watched our ancestors lose control over these facilities and opted to forget them. We had no evidence of this, of course, but it certainly made for a good story.

It didn’t take long for the rock to finish its transformation, and almost at once, a group of people came out with a large hover cart. They guided the cargo onto it, released the straps, then signaled Slates to retract the lines before going inside.



The hangar was huge, built to house more than ten times our current number of vehicles. I had seen holo pictures that showed what it looked like back then, all those centuries ago.

Neat rows of all-terrain hovercrafts, indoor explorers, and ships of varying sizes, all lined up neatly. Now the room stood three-quarters empty, the working vehicles taking up only a small portion. There used to be more people here, too, Janus had told me. What an age that must have been, I remembered thinking, that they could live in such luxury and comfort, going about their daily work, never having to hunt for food or struggle to stay warm in the freezing cold.

Next to the operational vehicles, several more remained broken and in need of repair. These outnumbered the others by at least double. Beyond that, broken down and scrapped parts had been meticulously organized into their places. Our mechanics, what few there were, intended to fix all of these vehicles, but it was difficult enough to keep our existing machines in working order, so I had no illusion of the rest ever seeing repair.

On the other side of the hangar, the harvested remains of the Boneclaw were being unloaded at the makeshift processing center. It had been erected to make things cleaner and easier.

We also used the space for large community meetings and ceremonies. The next event coming up was the selection ceremony, when the new leader would be chosen from a group of six prospus, of which Nero and I were two.

Thinking of the ceremony made me nervous, so I let my thoughts wander back to the Boneclaws and their odd behavior.

Records and stories passed down through the generations told of how, not long after the Boneclaws had been created, they had broken free of their cages. The animals had fled the facility, leaving chaos and destruction in their wake.

In the early days, the scientists tried to retrieve their experiments, but those efforts had failed. The Boneclaws attacked, destroying the Eternals' vehicles, and killed anyone who approached. Eventually, all attempts had been halted and efforts were redirected to repairing the damage, which had been extensive. Some areas were beyond maintenance, particularly the section dedicated to powering the main facility. The colonists were forced to move deeper into the compound, closer to the core, shutting down unnecessary sections to conserve resources.

This had marked the end of their history, and the beginning of ours.

Within the first century, one of the three facilities had gone dark, its tritium core offline.

Once the power systems began to fail, it had become increasingly apparent that the colonists would have to find a way to supplement their resources.

That was when the hunts began.

The ramp opened and I left the ship, heading to the work areas. I saw my friend Karin Riddell, one of the other prospus, working alone at one of the stations. She was already covered in gore.

Since I was still a mess from the hunt and didn't mind getting my hands dirty, I joined her. Working with the others was fun and I always made a point to talk to as many as I could throughout the day.

My father said this was something that real leaders did, but I just liked to be social. Taking over as figurehead for the colonists seemed like a long way off. At seventeen, many of the adults still considered me a child.

He'd taken part in his own Selection ceremony around my age, then trained to take over when he was forty and the Director retired.

Karin smiled and waved when she saw me coming, and I grinned back.

We were close to the same age and had grown to be good friends over the years.

"Looks like you had an eventful hunt," she said, gesturing at the Boneclaw pelt with a hint of jealousy in her tone. "Was it exciting?"

I nodded grimly. "Yeah, but not in a good way. It took down the frost horn calf we were tracking then almost killed Father."

Her eyes went big at the news. "Is he okay?" she squeaked.

I nodded again, then began to recount the last few hours. "I threw a spear at it, which gave Nero time to chop its arm off and cut off the head."

At that, Karin arched an eyebrow. "Wait, you mean he did something besides stand there and look pretty?"

"Haha. You know he's a talented hunter, despite his other, many faults."

"They are legion," she agreed, then jerked her chin in his direction. "Look at him over there, preening. No doubt bragging about his kill, just loud enough for Maria to hear."

The young hunter in question leaned casually against one of the walls, talking to his father, Mario, my father's best friend.

He was handsome, but Nero knew it and used it to his advantage whenever he could. Extra rations, first pick of new clothes, and special gifts from his many admirers.

I disliked this immensely because he accepted it all without any promise of returning their affections. This resulted in fights between friends and hurt feelings. Enough that my father had to step in and say something.

"No doubt," I said, turning back to the work.

Karin groaned. "He'll be even worse once he starts leading hunts."

"What if he becomes the next Director?" I pointed out. "Then we'll all have to do his bidding."

"Unless you two get married." Her lips curled up into a smirk, then she winked. "I heard he has quite the thing for the current Director's daughter."

At this, I rolled my eyes. "I haven't even completed training yet. Besides, I don't want to get married anytime soon. It would just be a distraction at our age."

I meant it too. Not that I had anything against marriage or kids, it just didn't sound like anything I wanted to do now.

Before Karin could come up with a response, a young engineer named Josef Braid walked up to the table.

"Hello, ladies. How is the deconstruction going?" he asked pleasantly.

Josef had clearly been doing some deconstruction of his own, because his leather apron was splattered with flecks of blood and chunks of something I didn't want to identify. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing pale forearms covered in more of the same. Partially obscured by gross matter were his blue markings. We all had them, in varying designs, and they allowed us to interact with the facilities.

“Great, we’re having a blast,” Karin responded, making a face as her fingers slipped in some of the juices.

“Hi, Josef. Making anything interesting?” I asked.

He was always tinkering with something in his little lab, working on new ways to use the fusion cores. I’d gone to him a few times for help on the weapon I was putting together for my upcoming scavenge and made a lot of progress.

“Not really,” he replied, frowning. “The fusion cores are getting harder to find and none of the collecting parties have come back with any information on the missing tritium core. Some still haven’t returned, and it’s been months.”

Several areas across all the facilities had suffered breakdowns and collapses over the years, and the third tritium core from the fauna facility was missing. After almost two thousand years of carrying the brunt of the systems, ours was depleting.

Janus estimated it would only last for another hundred or so years, a few more than that if we were lucky. This had hastened us to send groups out in search of the replacement.

Everyone came back empty handed except for tales of their trip. They told of an overgrown compound, ripe with danger. In recent months, some of the groups didn’t come back at all. No one knew if they had been killed, attacked by the wolves or Boneclaws, or if they had simply run off.

The latter seemed unlikely. Outside, the elements could kill quicker than the animals, and unpredictable storm cells could take visibility down to nothing in a matter of seconds.

I offered him a comforting smile and would have patted his shoulder, but I didn’t think he would appreciate the blood on my hands getting all over him.

“Don’t worry, Josef. We’re marking off sections as they’re cleared. Sooner or later, someone will find it,” I assured him.

“I hope you’re right, Miss Visaro.”

I’d told him to call me Lucia, but he always said Miss Visaro. Truth be told, I kind of liked it, though I would never admit it.

The power in the hangar flickered, then came back on.

“Hate when it does that,” murmured Karin.

She wasn’t alone. The power going out was something we all feared. With no natural lighting to speak of in the caves, it got awfully dark when the power glitched. It was uncomfortable going from seeing in one instant to blindness in the next.

That was another reason we’d begun collecting oil from the frost horns. We used it to make lamps, learning the technique from Janus’ records of ancient Earth. If the power was off for more than a few minutes, we had them as back-up.

“It’s happening more often,” said Josef, looking worried. “If this keeps up, we’re going to have to start rationing power and look at ways to reduce consumption.”

I looked up in alarm. “It’s that bad? Does my father know?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s not dire yet, and Janus’ calculations appear to be correct, but I don’t like it. Anyway, stop by later. I think I have an idea for your staff.”

“Alright, I will.”

When he was gone, Karin wiggled her eyebrows at his back, then elbowed me in the side. “I think Mr. Braid has a thing for Cyril Visaro’s daughter too.”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” I teased. “Reading too many of those old romance texts.”

“I’m telling you, Luce, you should try them. Very stimulating.”

I had to laugh. She’d roped me into reading one before and it had been too boring to finish.

“No thank you,” I said, shaking my head. “Give me hunting and scavenging any day.”

“Hey, I like that stuff too,” she said, a little on the defensive side. “I just enjoy a little romance on the side. One day, I do want to get married and have a couple white-haired angels running around.”

Finished with work, I chuckled, then grabbed a towel to get the worst of the muck off my hands. “Let’s go get cleaned up. We’re starting to smell.”

Later, when I had time to be alone and think, I found myself in one of the viewing rooms, digging through the archives.

For the rest of the day, people had been coming up to me with words of congratulations on my successful hunt. They’d all looked almost gleeful. I’d been asked to recount the story more than a few times, and by curfew, I was ready to pull my hair out.

I’d smiled and nodded, as had been expected, but for the first time since Selection training began, my heart wasn’t in it. The image of the mourning animals continued to plague my thoughts until I’d finally given up on sleep and come here.

It was a place I had come to often as a child, sneaking out of my room at night to look at holo images of ancient Earth. My Nana would tell me stories of the planet, though she had never been there. They were passed down from our ancestors, like so many others.

They told of deep blue water that sparkled from the rays of a sun that actually warmed the skin. Grass that wasn’t buried under a meter of snow. Weather that didn’t kill you if you stayed out for hours. She said people went outside for fun, to play and work and enjoy nature.

I didn’t see what was so special about going outside to do something. Some of the kids liked to play a game called tag ball.

The rules of the game were simple. Janus would randomly choose one of the players to start it off. That person got the ball first. Their goal was to throw the ball at any of the other players and tag them. If they hit someone, that was a point. If the person caught the ball, they lost a point. No points were added or subtracted if the ball missed. If that happened, anyone could claim the ball.

Sometimes, if there weren’t too many adults around, we changed the rules. Like the point system. Extra for the face, if someone fell, or if the ball was slapped back at the thrower for a tag.

The concept of enjoying nature was foreign to me. All I knew was ice, dark, and perpetual danger. Still, as my mother reminded me on certain occasions, we were alive. Many couldn’t say the same. And we had fun. Hunting was fun, learning to shoot was fun.

As I’d grown older, the stories lost their appeal and I’d stopped coming.

Now I was back.

Questions burned in my mind. Were the Boneclaws intelligent? Could they be reasoned with? All this time we had been hunting them, but maybe it didn't have to be that way.

I brought up all of the files we had, dating back to the Eternals' first experiments. Janus had educated each of us on the subject before, of course, but I hadn't paid a lot of attention. As a kid, it had been completely boring and unimportant, having never seen one before.

The Eternals that had brought the fearsome beasts to life were long gone, and history lessons had never caught my attention. We were all that remained, the ones left to deal with their mess.

Not that they hadn't paid the price for their meddling.

Many from those first days of the collapse had perished. Fear and unrest had gripped the survivors, and paired with the elements of an unforgiving ice planet, the colony's numbers had dropped significantly.

Self-preservation kicked in at some point and the colonists managed to make it through the first year following the collapse, though they could never repopulate to their earlier numbers.

Now, as I scanned the reports and pictures, I couldn't help but feel some awe for their achievements. It was hard to imagine living in the compound while it ran at full potential.

None of the people in the footage wore furs or scrap metal armor. Their clothes consisted of clean, crisp jumpsuits, lab coats, and new boots. We had similar garments, but they were all worn and patched. Every so often, a scavenger team would come across a container of new clothes in the cave that were undamaged and bring them back. The contents were quickly redistributed amongst those who needed them most.

I opened a report at random and began to read in earnest. It detailed the first real success of the program and spoke of solutions to the aging problem they had been sent here to fix.

Eternals had thought themselves immortal, and for a long time they had achieved something close, even succeeding at accelerated healing. I did remember the lesson where all of their gene manipulation had resulted in the appearance that we still bore today.

Pale skin, white hair, and blue eyes. We'd kept the looks, but none of the other aspects. Our average lifespan was just about 150 years, although our eldest could live as long as 200, and we certainly still took time to heal. As a child, I broke my leg. It had taken a week to recover, even with the compounding brace that held everything together while still allowing for almost normal movement. Janus had said that we were better off than our ancient ancestors—the people before the Eternals—who took even longer to recover and whose lives were even shorter, so I tried to be thankful for what few blessings I could count.

He also told us of the transmissions between the scientists here and the Eternals back on Earth, which had long since ended.

At first, they had only sought to fix the degradation issue, but with each breakthrough, more problems arose that needed to be solved.

Enamored with their own superiority, the scientists had continued to manipulate the Eternal genetic code. Through all of their work, never had they

stopped to consider whether their methods might yield catastrophic results. Never had they slowed to weigh the value of any alternate paths. Only the goal had mattered to them, and they pursued it through all available channels.

That thinking had cost them dearly. They were dead now, long since killed by their own horrible creations.

Moving on, I discovered a file dated around the time of the disaster. Curious, I opened it and found footage from one of the experiments, as well as research notes from the session.

*Subject: BN009*

*Lead: Dr. Emanuel Curtis*

*Day: 379*

*BN009 shows no sign of degradation despite reaching maturity 299 days ago. Strength tests (previously documented) exceeded all expectations. Eyes remain vestigial. Hearing 50% more efficient than current Eternal physiology. As previously noted, the genetic sequencing of the new specimen demands attention. Dr. Tresbin believes it may hold the key to solving the degeneration problem, but more time is needed to analyze and test the subject's genetic susceptibility to the degeneration sequence.*

*Today will mark another attempt to further assess healing and regeneration abilities.*

An ominous feeling began to build in my belly, but I opened the holo file anyway.

The view room's light dimmed, and one wall played the holo feed. A large lab appeared on screen. Two scientists wearing standard lab coats and holding pads stood in front of a heavily fortified enclosure with a Boneclaw inside. They were Eternals, though they looked like any of my people.

The animal sat listlessly in the far-right corner of the bare cell. Its eyes were open, but they stared unseeing at nothing in particular. This was an early form of the Boneclaws I knew. It had eyes, although they were unmoving. Perhaps it was blind, too, despite holding onto its useless organ.

"Commence trial 380a," the scientist on the left said.

The Boneclaw's ears perked up, showing that it had heard the man speak, but it didn't otherwise react. The second man nodded and worked from his pad, tapping in commands.

A panel inside the enclosure opened and a mechanical arm slid out. There was a slight hiss of pressure being released, then the animal jerked, and something bounced off its coat and rolled across the floor.

"Up the pressure by ten percent."

The scientist worked the pad again and repeated the process. It only took another two tries before the projectile embedded in the Boneclaw, causing it to screech in pain and scrape at its arm.

I felt a gnawing at my conscience watching the video. It continued like that, the scientists trying various tests meant to determine the poor animal's limits.

"Moving on to audiometric data," said the first scientist. He seemed utterly unmoved by the suffering he was inflicting on his test subject.

Both men donned earpieces before a shrill tone filled the room. It increased in decibels every ten seconds until the Boneclaw's ears began to twitch. It swiveled its head as if trying to figure out where the offending sound was coming from.

As the pitch continued to rise, Subject BN009 began to exhibit more signs of discomfort. It tried to cover its ears, but the awkward length of its arms and clawed hands offered no relief. It finally began to stomp around the cage, banging its fists on anything it could reach, roaring as it went until it finally collapsed on the floor, writhing in agony.

I shut the recording off, unable to stomach the rest. I left the view room to try and get some rest, but it took a long time to finally sleep, and when I did, the animal's tortured screams followed me into my dreams.

## Chapter 3

When my alarm went off the next morning, I woke feeling more at ease than I expected, given the subject of my midnight studies. The Boneclaw and its plight seemed far away now, and I pushed it from my mind.

Or tried to.

The footage of the tortured creature was over two thousand years old. Even if they had been more human-like back then, they were killers now.

In my mind's eye, I pulled up the picture of the Boneclaw's razor-sharp talon racing toward my father. It had come so close to killing him. If not for Nero, he'd likely be dead.

I ignored the little voice in my head that said we'd attacked first. It was survival of the fittest on this frozen world. If we hadn't killed the Boneclaw, it would have gladly ripped us to shreds and gobbled up the pieces.

This wasn't news, so why couldn't I get their sad mourning song out of my head? My father, as usual, had been right. Thinking of them as anything but monsters was a sure way to second guess myself and get killed.

My datapad beeped again, telling me it was time to get moving. I sat up and gave my space a cursory glance. The room was small, just over two and a half square meters. Not that any of us did much more than sleep in them anyway.

Each of the three facilities in the sprawling cave network had been built to house more than three times our current number. Even after the collapse, when some of the living quarters had been destroyed, they still outnumbered the bodies available to fill them.

Despite that fact, many colonists still chose to sleep in communal areas. On some level, I could see the appeal. At times, the underground compound had a claustrophobic effect and the shared areas were more open.

I preferred to have somewhere of my own to go, at least to sleep.

To conserve energy, the lights were set to ten percent and cast a dim glow in the small space, not enough to do more than get dressed and stumble out into the slightly brighter hallway, but that was fine with me.

According to my data pad, it was well into the morning. If I didn't get into gear, all the good helpings would be long gone. Another hunting party had returned after ours, and they'd brought in an adult frost horn.

Our food machine recycled edible material into full meals, and Janus did a decent job making different offerings. Not that I had anything to compare them to. In any case, the food quality went up several notches after feeding the synthesizer frost horn meat.

It didn't take me long to realize that I was far too late and the few people that remained in the dining hall were chowing down one of Janus' synthesized oatmeal dishes. With a reluctant sigh, I grabbed a bowl and sat down at an empty table.

I wasn't alone for long, though. Before I took my first bite, Josef sat down and placed his tray next to mine without preamble.

"Good morning," he said, and spooned up a mouthful of the oatmeal. "Mmm, strawberry."

"Morning," I replied, digging in with more enthusiasm. Strawberry was my favorite flavor and it took some of the sting away from missing out on frost horn.

"You look tired," I said, noting the circles under Josef's eyes and his rumpled jumpsuit.

Josef shot me a glance and his lips twitched up into a teasing smirk. "You're not looking so fresh yourself, Prospus Visaro."

"I was digging through the archives," I said defensively. It came out a little ruder than I intended, and Josef's smile faded. Grinning broadly to lighten the mood, I rambled on. "With Selection around the corner, I want to be as prepared as possible. Can't have Nero beating me."

I grinned, but Jo didn't seem amused. If anything, his expression darkened, and his tone went uncharacteristically flat.

"If he becomes the next leader, we are in for some trying times indeed."

"What do you mean?"

"He's irresponsible. You're clearly the better choice." Josef winked at me, but his harsh words surprised me.

The engineer was usually soft spoken and uncritical. To hear him speak like that about Nero made me wonder if he knew something. But that was ridiculous.

"Oh, come on," I chided. "You don't think he's holding a grudge or out to get me because his dad lost to my dad?"

Josef just shrugged.

I wrinkled my brow at that. It was true, though. During the last Selection, the choice had come down to our fathers. Even though Cyril had been the ultimate champion, chosen by the Primes as the next colony leader, the two remained friends and I'd never even seen them argue.

"No. I just wouldn't put anything past him." Josef's response interrupted my thoughts and I refocused.

"I won't," I promised. "Besides, we're a long way off from my dad's retirement."

"Yeah, you're right. Forget I said anything," said Josef, and he scrubbed at his face. "I'm just tired. Elias had me researching the grid all night."

"Oh. Any news?"



Josef shook his head. "Not really. The predictions are still holding. Without the other tritium core this facility will be in the dark within a hundred years. Two if we're careful."

"I remember," I said with a nod. "That's why we have to keep hunting the frost horn."

"For as long as we can, yes."

Something about his tone was unsettling and I studied his face. Josef was a year younger than me, but it didn't show. Like everyone else in the colony, he had blue eyes, white hair, and pale skin with the markings of our ancestors.

He was usually pleasant, radiating an air of calm, but not today. I could see now that there was something more than weariness in his features. Worry creased his forehead, prompting me to dig deeper.

"What do you mean?" I asked, homing in on the cryptic phrase. "Is this something we need to bring to the Prime's attention?"

Josef waved my concern away. "It's not a crisis or anything. At least not yet. It's just that..." He trailed off as a small group walked by our table, then started again. "Have you noticed anything different about the herds lately?"

I thought back to my most recent outing, unsure of what he meant. Then something Alma said on the hunt came back to me.

"We had to track longer than before to reach a herd. Almost out of the valley."

He nodded. "Their numbers are beginning to wane."

That made me frown. "Isn't it normal for this part of the year? We assumed they were migrating."

"They are," agreed Josef. "But they are going farther and farther each season."

"Why?" I asked, confused by what he was saying.

"Before we came here, the frost horns only had one natural predator," he answered.

"Yeah. The wolves."

The image of the animal that came to mind wasn't an exact match for their Earthly namesake, but it was easy to see the similarities. Like the frost horns, the wolves sported thick white fur that helped them blend in with the snowy environment. Four long claws protruded from each of their six well-muscled appendages. They were faster than any human, often standing on two legs and using their heavy tail for balance.

It was an odd sight when they did. I'd seen it for myself on a few hunts and it always unnerved me. If they were standing upright and you were squinting from a distance, they could almost pass for one of us.

Until you got up close.

In addition to a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth, there was a single tongue-like organ. To take down prey, the wolves would latch on to their backs with four legs and rip at the thick frost horn hide with the remaining two. Once through to the meat, the tongue would worm its way inside, attach to the poor animal, and release a paralytic agent.

It usually took a pack of wolves to take down a full-grown frost horn and it wasn't a pretty sight. Not as bad as a Boneclaw at feeding time, since they sucked their meals dry, but still gross.

The original colonists had collected a few samples upon their arrival, but when the tests didn't yield anything they deemed useful, the animals had been forgotten. Thinking of the footage from the night before, I couldn't say that was a bad thing.

I could see where Josef was going with the conversation now.

"Then came the Boneclaws," he continued.

"And us," I finished for him. "You think they're being over hunted?"

He nodded. "With three apex predators around, they can't reproduce fast enough."

"Without the oil we harvest from them, we'll be forced to find an alternative."

From the pinched look on his face, I had a feeling that was the root of the problem.

"What alternatives are there?" I asked.

"As far as we know, there aren't any other animals like them on the planet. Scans have shown that their numbers are greater elsewhere, but..."

"Leaving isn't an option," I said.

Now I understood his fear. If we didn't figure out a way around this, then the colony wouldn't survive.

"Well, you said we have two hundred years to figure it out, right?" I asked, trying to be cheerful.

He nodded but didn't look convinced. "If we're careful."

I nodded firmly. "With our best engineer on top of it, I'm sure it will work out."

Finally, Josef cracked a smile. "Best engineer? I'm hardly a Prime. But thanks, Luce. Anyway, I noticed you found my notes. The staff is looking good. I can help you with the coding later if you want."

I couldn't help but smile at the thought. We'd been working on my weapon together for the last few months and it only needed a few more things to get it working.

Josef had a fusion core in the lab that we used for testing, but if I wanted to have a working staff to bring to the Engineer Prime during Selection, I'd have to find my own during the scavenging test that would take place in the caves.

"Yes, if you have time."

"For you, always." Jo's datapad beeped, so he pulled it out of his pocket, then frowned.

"Elias wants me. Catch up with you later, okay?"

Having already been chosen for engineering, his studies were over. Now he worked closely with Elias Doyle, the Science and Engineering Prime, and was being groomed as his successor.

"Sure," I said, scraping the last of my oatmeal and standing up. "I'd better get going too or I'll be late for Janus' class."

He laughed as we walked to drop off our trays. "For an artificial lifeform who has all the time in the world, he's pretty strict about keeping a schedule."

"Tell me about it. Last time Nero was late, Janus gave him extra homework. I think he had to cancel a date."

We chuckled, then said our goodbyes and split up. He went toward the engineering lab and I headed for class.

I slipped in and took a seat next to Karin just as Janus turned down the lights to play something on the wall screen. Our classes were always held in one of the viewing rooms since it was easier when we had to watch a holo recording.

This time, the image depicted our own cave system. I perked up instantly. The current view was of an empty tunnel, partially obscured by debris. The camera was operating on infrared and the picture was green. Nothing moved and I wondered what our teacher had planned.

"The caves," Janus began, "are a massive network that runs through the mountains in the valley. For Selection, you will be required to navigate them. In order to do so safely, each of you must learn the dangers."

"Like what?" asked Nero. "The wolves?"

The Cognitive inclined his head. "Among other things."

Janus was always cordial, even if someone was rude to him. I didn't know if it was possible for him to be anything else, but I appreciated his calm demeanor.

He flicked his wrist and the view on the wall changed. Now the feed showed a bony pack of wolves roaming through a tunnel. I raised my hand.

"Yes, Miss Visaro?"

"What section is this in?" I asked, pulling out my datapad to take notes.

Janus smiled, his hard light simulated clothing giving off a light glimmer. "Quadrant D, near Facility 1. I'll send the coordinates to everyone."

A second later the information appeared on my pad. I opened a map of the tunnel system and studied the area.

Before we arrived on the planet, the wolves had roamed the caves freely. It had been their home. Many disappeared when the facilities were constructed but returned after the collapse.

"As we've learned," Janus said, turning to sweep a gaze over the group, "communication outside this compound is spotty. With the other facilities down, we have no way of keeping the signals strong."

Another dot appeared on my map, then a few more. The first one blinked brightly, then each subsequent one leading away from our position faded until the last one barely lit up at all.

"Can anyone tell me what you're seeing?"

I raised my hand again, but so did Karin.

"Ms. Riddell?"

"A fading signal?" she answered.

Janus smiled. "That is correct. Take note of the signal radius. If you should find yourself in trouble outside of it, you will need to rely on your education and wits to make it back. Now, listen closely." His voice took on a grave tone and he flicked his wrist again.

A large hole in one of the tunnel walls dominated the scene and I leaned forward. Others mirrored the move as we tried to make sense of the image.

"What is that?" asked Nero, sounding annoyed.

"It is a hole, Mr. Costas."

I grinned at Janus' response, though I know he didn't mean it in any way.

"Yeah, but what made it?" Nero pressed on. "I mean, couldn't it have been a cave in, or the wolves?"

“Excellent question. This appeared a few days ago. One of our scavenging teams found it and took this picture. Unfortunately, there isn’t any footage of what caused it. With the power restrictions in effect and the lack of functioning recorders, there won’t be.”

The image changed to a closeup of the rock where the hole stopped. Striations had been cut deep into the surface.

“Boneclaw markings,” said Nell Thompson. Nell was the best tracker in our class, and it didn’t surprise me at all that she spoke up. She was small and wiry, but what she lacked in size she made up for in scrappiness.

Janus nodded. “Yes. The wolves lack the strength and the tunnel extended beyond the 50 meters the team explored, ruling out a cave in. It seems the Boneclaws are the source, but it is unclear why.”

“Will we still enter the caves for training and the Selection Trials?”

I didn’t see who spoke, but process of elimination told me it was Mark. There were only a handful of us in Selection Training, and only he and Allan hadn’t spoken. Allan sounded gruff compared to Mark’s nasal timbre.

Mark was our resident know-it-all. He was a nice enough kid, but he spent most of his time studying, saying he preferred reading the study texts to people.

Allan was just the opposite. I wasn’t sure the guy ever studied, preferring to get through as many tasks as he could with brute strength. He also had the annoying habit of following Nero around and agreeing with almost everything he said.

“Oh yes,” said Janus, and he turned on the lights. “It is perhaps more important now than ever that all of you hone your skills. Fusion cores and other resources will still need to be scavenged from the other facilities.”

My earlier conversation with Josef was still fresh in my mind and I couldn’t help but wonder about the future. What would life be like when the last frost horn was gone from the valley, there were no more fusion cores to be found, and the tritium power was completely drained?

My datapad pinged again. A large red marker pulsed outside the radius of communications, then a few smaller blue dots appeared at different locations in the other two facilities.

“The red marker is the Boneclaw tunnel. Cyril has deemed it off limits until the area has been cleared by a hunting party. Known wolf dens are shown in blue. You will pair up in teams of two and enter the caves with Alma or another seasoned hunter for practice in a few days’ time.”

Karin and I exchanged a knowing look. We always partnered together, if given the chance. I could honestly say she was my best friend.

“That’s all for today,” Janus continued. “I must meet with Cyril and the Primes to discuss colony matters. If your weapon projects are not complete, I suggest using this time to work on them.”

The Cognitive blinked out of sight, leaving us to talk freely.

“Do you really think there are Boneclaws in the caves?” I said excitedly, pushing my datapad aside and leaning over my workspace.

Mark looked up with wide eyes and stared at me before sweeping a frantic gaze over the others. “They don’t ever come this far into the caves. There had to be a cave-in or something and they just dug it out,” he said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Nero said, a hint of smugness behind his words.

Every head in the room snapped to him, waiting for an explanation.

He hesitated, then shook his head. “I’m not supposed to say anything.”

Nell huffed and rolled her eyes. “You can’t just say something like that and not follow up.”

Across the connected tables, Allan grunted his agreement.

“We all know you wanted us to ask you for more information. Now just tell us,” sighed Karin. We exchanged a smirk and stared at Nero expectantly.

He hesitated a moment longer then sat up a little straighter, looking at each of us in turn to make sure we were listening. “I heard my dad and some of the other hunters talking before I left this morning. They think the Boneclaws are organizing.”

“Get real,” Karen scoffed. “We’ve been here nearly 2000 years, and not once have they done anything sentient. How could they suddenly be *organized*?”

I thought back mourning Boneclaws. It suddenly didn’t seem too farfetched after all.

Nero shrugged. “I don’t know. Evolution? Look at us, for example.” He spread his arms out in an encompassing motion.

“That was gene manipulation, not evolution,” Mark pointed out. “The Eternals were trying to get back their immortality. They wanted perfection, and they got it, just not the way they wanted.”

“Yeah, they’re the perfect murder machine,” I added.

“And now they’re in our caves,” Nero said gravely.

“Which is why that area is off limits,” Karin commented.

Nero sighed. “For how long though? Something needs to be done.”

Everyone was quiet for a beat.

“You don’t mean us?” Mark asked, going even paler than usual.

“Honestly, Mark. How are you even a prospus?” Allan snickered.

Mark went red. “I’m just saying, it would be ridiculously dangerous to go. Not to mention stupid.” He tossed Allan a pointed glance, but the barb went over the other prospus’ head.

Nell spoke up next, a trace of pride in her tone. “The colony is constantly on the verge of extinction. Part of that is because of the Boneclaws. It might be dangerous, but what do you think we’ve been training for?”

“Exactly!” agreed Nero, slapping a hand down on the table, which made Karin and Mark jump. “If it gets left to roam, it might come to the compound next.”

“The key word there is *training*. None of us is actually a hunter yet,” Karin argued. “We’re not equipped to take on a Boneclaw by ourselves. Or more than one, if it comes to that.”

A snicker came from Nell’s side of the table. “Speak for yourself.”

“Do you know how much trouble we could get into for going against the Director's orders?” She looked at me for help.

Nero turned and focused on me. “What about you, Visaro? Scared as well?”

I tended to lean in the same direction as Karin and Mark. If we got caught, the Primes would not be happy, especially so close to Selection. Plus, I actually wanted to make it to the ceremony. Still, I had to admit it was interesting.

“She’s too much of a daddy’s girl,” Allan guffawed when I didn’t answer, then he turned to slap hands with Nero, who just shook his head. Crestfallen, Allan let his hand drop awkwardly.

Everyone was quiet, waiting for me to say something.

“Well?” Nero prompted.

“I’m not a daddy’s girl,” I said, slanting a look at Allan, who smirked. “But I am the Director’s daughter. I know the caves are off limits until the problem is resolved, for everyone’s safety. For all we know, a team is already gearing up to go. You really want to run into them and explain why we’re there?”

Everyone seemed to consider that for a few minutes.

“Well, I guess if you’re too scared,” Nero started to say, but I stood up, the legs of my chair scraping loudly on the floor.

“Fear isn’t the issue,” I told him, gathering my datapad. “I’m just not willing to get kicked out of Selection just to go exploring.”

## Chapter 4

As Janus had suggested, I made my way to the engineering lab to work on my prototype. Part of the Selection evaluation centered around our projects working. Josef had been helping me here and there with some of the electrical components, and I’d created the initial design, fabricated the shaft from pieces of scrap found in the caves, and written the code.

The lab door slid open as I approached, revealing the darkness inside. That meant Jo wasn’t working or had become so absorbed in a task that he hadn’t bothered to reactivate the bright, motion-activated lights.

It turned out to be the former as the lights blinked on to expose the empty space. I’d half expected to find Josef hunched over one of the workspaces doing calculations, but he wasn’t there. I preferred his company to almost anyone else’s, besides Karin, but I also enjoyed working alone. Sometimes I just thought better with no one else around.

I walked over to the biometrically locked storage area to retrieve my nearly complete weapon. The storage area consisted of variously sized lockers, with one large portion dedicated to fusion core storage.

Only the Science and Prime Engineer or his apprentice had access. Everyone else had to send a request to Acquisitions, which was a pain. Supervised students could study the cores in class but couldn’t request them unless Janus signed off.

My staff looked good, though it couldn’t activate on my touch without a source of power. I carried it hurriedly to the table.

I’d chosen to build a directed energy staff for a few reasons. Primarily, I didn’t think anyone else would think of the same thing, so I’d get points for creativity. It would be much harder to build than a rifle or spear, but could be more versatile. If it worked as I intended, once a fusion core was integrated to the power housing, it would be capable of firing beams of energy pulses of varying strengths.

It was nearly ready. I grabbed a test energy cell and brought it to the table. Though not as powerful or long lasting as a fusion core, the cells were still a precious commodity here in the caves.

When I inserted the cell, the staff reacted by lighting briefly. Then, I laid my hand on it and watched my tattoos light up in tandem with the markings I'd painstakingly etched into the metal shaft. I picked up the staff and held it in my hands. A thrill whispered through me at the sight, only to sputter and die when the power running through the staff pulsed red and faded to nothing.

This had been an ongoing problem I'd asked Josef to let me solve alone. I needed to know my weapon inside and out. He wouldn't always be there to help me fix it.

The staff was tied to my biometrics and designed to react to me alone. I'd used the data from my tattoos to code it, and it worked until I used both hands. It had been a point of frustration for the last week and I had yet to figure it out.

I opened the schematics and began studying the notes again on my datapad. The bio locks used the unique identifier of my tattoos and I'd taken that directly from a scan of my signal. Everything worked perfectly up until a few seconds after the point of contact from my other hand.

An inspection of the data showed a discrepancy between the origin signal and something that was identified as a handoff process.

If I took the bio coding out of the sequence, it worked fine, but not just for me. Anyone with the Eternal skin tech could access most of the equipment because that made sense for day-to-day activities. For my weapon, however, I wanted it to respond to no one else.

I kept coming back to the handoff process. A deep dive into the subject revealed that when two individuals came into contact with the same piece of tech that was designed for a single user, the coding was written to allow for dual contact as long as one person let go within an allotted time.

This had to be it. I spent the next few minutes tweaking the algorithms for signal detection then did another test run.

I held my breath and willed the staff to work as I laid first one hand, then the other, on the shaft. It pulsed red again, this time faster than before. When I checked the fault code, the problem was different. It now read "identical identifier detected." Still an error, but it was progress.

After another hour of tweaking, I was ready to try again.

The staff sat propped up on a stand and I curled one hand around the grip. It glowed to life and my tattoos followed suit. I didn't move right away and made sure the connection held. The lights went out, since I hadn't made any big gestures in a while, but the light from the staff was bright enough. With one last deep breath, I laid my other hand on the staff.

There was a single pulse as the handshake completed its process and the staff continued to glow. I couldn't stop the grin from spreading over my face and satisfaction flowed through me.

I was about to wave the lights on again when a voice sounded outside the door and I waited, expecting Josef. My first thought was that it would be funny to startle him. A voice chimed in and I realized if it was Jo, he wasn't alone.

The pair spoke in low tones, obviously not wanting to be heard, but I could make out some of it.

“We can talk here; the apprentice is with Elias and the prospus are in class with Janus. What did you hear?”

So it wasn't Josef. I remained still and kept listening.

“The hunters didn't make it back. Only Mario, and he said that they were attacked by a Boneclaw in the caves,” said the second man.

“This is the third attack and yet Cyril does nothing. This cannot continue,” replied the first.

“It won't. If things go according to plan, he won't stay in charge for much longer.”

I didn't recognize who the voices belonged to and leaned forward trying to catch more.

“There's a meeting later. Tell the others. Go to—”

The lights turned on from my movements and cut off the speaker.

“What was that? Never mind, let's go talk somewhere else.”

Damn, I thought, as two sets of feet shuffled away from the door. That hadn't sounded good at all. My earlier elation from the staff's success had faded and been replaced by worry. I put my tools away and placed the weapon in a storage locker before heading out of the lab. I had to tell my father what I'd just heard.

I found him with Janus and my mother in one of the conference rooms. The conversation looked grave and I wondered if he already knew about the plot forming against him.

“Lucia dear, come in,” he said, waving me inside. “This concerns you as well.”

I entered the room and made my way around the battered table to stand with them. Janus inclined his head in greeting and offered me one of his kind smiles. I returned it, then kissed my mother on the cheek before turning my attention to Cyril.

“Father, I've just heard something disturbing.”

He sighed and nodded. “The missing hunting parties?”

“Yes—” I started to say, intending to tell him about the rest of the conversation I'd witnessed, but he cut me off.

“The colony is getting anxious, but I don't want to make a move until we understand fully what is going on.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Mario believes that the monsters are waging a war on us.”

“Aren't they just doing what they've always done? Killing when we get too close?”

“That's the problem. We don't know that they're killing the hunters. At least not all of them. There's little blood where they are going missing.”

“I've never heard of them doing that,” I said incredulously.

“It's never before been recorded,” confirmed Janus. “Nor have they ever exhibited a desire to enter the caves. Certainly, tunneling has not been used as a method.”

“Mario thinks they're testing out our defenses. Response time and all that,” finished my father.

I looked at my mother for confirmation, and she shrugged. She was just as involved in the colony as my father. A tall woman who commanded respect from



her actions as much as her imposing stature. Worry now marred her features just as it had with Josef. I began to feel uneasy.

“We know the Boneclaws are smart,” she said. “That’s how they escaped in the first place. If they’re entering the caves, there has to be a reason.”

“What is Mario proposing?” I asked, already fearing the answer.

“He wants to exterminate the Boneclaws.”

“Father... there’s something else you need to know.”

I told him about the conversation outside the lab, but he only frowned.

“I think you misunderstood. There is a meeting tonight to discuss all this. The Boneclaw incursions. That must have been what they meant.”

“What if it wasn’t?” asked my mother.

At least she was taking it seriously.

My father just shook his head. “You’re talking about Mario going behind my back. He may not always like my decisions, but he would never do that.”

My mother didn’t argue, but I could tell that she didn’t share the same belief. I didn’t either.

“For the time being, the caves are off limits to anyone not scavenging or hunting,” my father said.

“What?!” I protested.

He held up a hand. “You and the other prospus will continue your training. But no more hunts until after the ceremony.”

I relaxed a little at that. It wasn’t ideal, but I’d take it over nothing.

“I have to go prepare for this meeting,” he said, walking to the door with my mother following behind. “Lucia,” he said, pausing before they exited.

“Yes?”

“How’s your weapon coming along?”

I grinned. “It’s only waiting for a fusion core.”

“Excellent. I knew you would figure it out,” he said, then they were gone.

“Is everything all right, Miss Visaro?”

I’d forgotten Janus was still in the room and nearly jumped when he spoke, but I managed to contain it.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just worried about the Boneclaw situation.”

“Ah, of course.” The Cognitive nodded sagely. “It is troublesome to be sure. I noticed you accessed the old records last night. Did you have a question I could answer?”

I looked up, expecting to find some kind of accusation in his eyes, but of course there wasn’t. Janus was the only Cognitive I’d ever met, but all the Eternal’s data explicitly said the AIs would only ever be of service. He didn’t have the capability of getting angry or trying to deceive us.

Janus had been around from the very beginning, created for the sole purpose of helping the Eternal scientists figure out their gene degradation problems. He’d fulfilled that purpose until the Boneclaws escaped and wreaked havoc on the facilities.

After that, his objective changed to aiding the remaining survivors. Two millennia later, he was still here, doing just that. He’d helped the people come up with a governing system based on old Earth. From that, the Primes had come into power.

Primes were chosen by their aptitude and expertise in five different fields: computing and information sciences, physics, chemistry, geological and environmental sciences, and biology. Together, they chose the leader of the colony from a pool of prospus who had expressed an interest in leadership or demonstrated natural ability.

During the ceremony, the prospus would answer questions to display their knowledge on whatever their specialization happened to be. Afterward, each would enter the caves in search of items that might be useful to the colony. Those who were successful were scored against each other, with the person on top becoming the next leader. Years ago, most people had returned with whatever they could find, never wanting to venture too far from home or risk exposure or death. Sometimes a prospus would come back with something truly extraordinary, but that sort of thing was rare. In recent years, due to the growing energy crisis, and for as long as I could remember now, the search had evolved into a hunt for fusion cores.

Their term of service lasted for 50 years or until death. Whichever came first. Fifteen years before they were set to vacate the position, the successor was chosen and began training. If anything happened to the leader before their term was over, the next in line would take their place until the original term was complete.

It was a good system and Janus was rarely involved anymore since it ran smoothly. Now he acted as educator, from the very young all the way to the elders who simply wished to fill their days.

It was easy to forget that Janus wasn't made of flesh and bone because he'd always been around. I also thought it had something to do with his natural movement and speech, even temperament, and guileless eyes. You couldn't help but feel comfortable around him.

Still, I didn't know if I wanted to share my thoughts on the Boneclaws with anyone just yet.

"No, thanks," I said. "Just doing some research."

"A prudent use of your time with the ceremony just around the corner. As always, I am here if you need assistance."

"Thanks, Janus."

He bowed his head slightly, then disappeared.

Alone in the room, I thought of the conversation I overheard. Despite my father's explanation and dismissal of the men, I felt deep down that something was very wrong. Janus had been quiet through most of the exchange.

A thought came to mind that chilled me. If Mario was plotting to take over the leadership, he could challenge my father. Then it would be up to the Primes to decide what to do. For all we knew, they were already aware of Mario's plans.

In that case, would Janus be forced to follow their directive, or would he be able to side with my father? I supposed that depended on who he felt would be the best leader for the colony.

I left the room feeling grim and went in search of Josef.

The hangar buzzed with the overlapping voices of over two hundred people. The entire community had gathered for the meeting and used the time before it to socialize.

It was hard to blame them. Daily life in the facility could get tedious. Besides meetings, the only time we got together like this was during weddings, funerals, and Selection ceremonies.

My father and mother waited for the meeting to start with the Primes on a slightly raised stage made out of material from the tear down area.

I couldn't really make out their faces, but the tone looked serious.

"Hey, Lucia!" a voice called out behind me.

I turned to see Karin threading through the crowd and waving at me. I lifted a hand and waited for her to reach me so I didn't have to yell.

"What are you doing all the way back here?" she asked, slightly out of breath.

I didn't want to say that I was keeping an eye on the crowd and shrugged noncommittally. "It's not as packed back here. Why do you look like you ran here?"

She blushed a little and wiped at a bead of sweat.

"Don't tell me you had your head in a book again," I teased, narrowing my eyes in mock suspicion.

"Not this time. I was finishing my project. It's—"

"Shh..." I said, lifting my hands to quiet her. "We're not supposed to talk about them to each other, remember?"

Karin rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. Who's going to say anything? It's not like Elder Bara can even hear us." She gestured at the old man who looked like he had fallen asleep standing up. "It's not like it matters. I'm not going to win. Everyone knows it will come down to you and Nero."

I stared at her open mouthed for a few beats. My friend grinned at me playfully and I didn't see any anger from her, but the words surprised me.

"What do you mean everyone knows?"

"Like you don't know."

She laughed at my blank look and opened her mouth to say more when the hangar's single working speaker crackled on.

"I'll tell you later," Karin whispered as the crowd went silent.

I nodded and turned my attention back to the stage, focusing on my father.

"As you all know, there have been some recent developments in the cave system. Mario Costas has also brought word of a missing hunting party. The third this month."

Murmurs broke out from the crowd, prompting him to raise a quieting hand. Janus sometimes did the same thing when class got too rowdy. Apparently, it worked on bigger groups too, as the noise level dropped again.

"I know some of you have loved ones among the missing. In order to find them, I will assign two groups of senior hunters to the task of discovering what happened. There is hope that they are alive."

A movement to the left of the crowd caught my eye and I saw that it was Mario. He strode to the stage with an arrogant expression that I immediately disliked. Nero trailed behind him but stopped short of climbing the steps.

If this irritated Cyril, he didn't show it and instead swept an arm, motioning for Mario to join him.

"Mario will lead one of the groups while I take the other and track down our missing people."

Mario nodded and addressed the crowd. “The attacks from the Boneclaws are not usual. They have become coordinated and systematic.”

His words caused another outburst of chatter from the crowd, but from the grim satisfaction on his face that was his intention. Mario didn’t use the amicable gestures to quiet them that my father had. Instead, he let the crowd talk amongst themselves until the din became a roar.

I realized what he was doing. Fear was a powerful motivator, and from the looks of those around me, there was plenty to go around. Some anger too. I had to hand it to Mario—it was a smart tactic, but I didn’t like it.

“What does that mean?” someone called out.

“I’m not sure yet,” he admitted. “But I do not think it is in the best interest of the colony to send our leader into unknown danger. For that reason, I propose that the panel approve only sending one group.”

He smiled respectfully at his leader, then turned to the Primes, who began to talk amongst themselves.

The crowd stayed quiet this time as we waited to see what the Primes would do. It didn’t take long for them to come to a decision in Mario's favor.

## Chapter 5

A week had passed since Mario and his group left in search of the missing hunters. Every day they didn’t come back, the tension grew within the compound. A few fights broke out over food rations, people seemed to always be in a rush, and my father’s office was flooded with aggrieved colonists.

The Selection was only days away and that only added to the stress for the prosopus. Even Karin, who was usually happy as a rule, had begun to show signs of strain under the added pressure. She changed out the romances for study material and spent more time in the lab, often coming to the breakfast table bleary-eyed and sluggish, as she did today.

“You alright?” I asked her, setting my tray down a little hard and bobbling the orange juice.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Just tired from studying,” she said, not bothering to stifle a yawn.

“So, what were you going to tell me at the meeting?” I asked, spooning up another of Janus’ concoctions.

This one he called “eggs,” which I’d always thought was a weird name. The yellow appearance and runny texture didn’t make it one of my favorite breakfasts, but I couldn’t say it was the worst.

That prize went to—

“Huh?” said Karin, confused.

“You said you were going to tell me something about the Selection,” I reminded her. “Something that ‘everyone knows’ about me and Nero.”

“Oh that,” she said, smirking. “People are placing bets on you two.”

“Bets? What are they betting?” I laughed.

“The usual. Chores, extra shifts, trinkets.” Karin shrugged. “It’s just for fun. Anyhow, you and Nero seem to be the ones it’s down to.”

I scoffed at that. “Please. That doesn’t mean a thing. Besides, anything can happen during the tests.”

She looked pensive and I nudged her. “No matter what happens, we’ll stay friends, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. Nothing could change that.”

“Good,” I said, standing up and gathering my mess. “Look, I want to make sure I’m prepared. Talk to you later?”

Karin nodded sleepily.

Deciding there wasn’t enough organic material to bother with the recycler, I took my dishes in the wash pile to rinse them out. A lot of people just left them there, but I’d scrubbed enough dried, caked oatmeal to have a healthy respect for those in the kitchen.

“The ration count is off again,” said Mary Reynolds, the kitchen boss, from around the corner.

“Are you sure?” The second voice was Jacob Abbot, the Sustainability Prime. “Maybe you should count it again.”

“If you would like me to, but I assure you there’s no mistake. I’ve already counted it twice and asked another person to as well. The number of ready meals in storage doesn’t match what we’ve produced and sent out.”

“Perhaps the initial counts were off,” suggested Abbot.

“I suppose that’s a possibility,” Mary replied, though she sounded doubtful.

*Why would anyone want to take ready meals?* I thought to myself as the voices receded.

I kept trying to figure it out as I went to do a final check on my staff when I spotted Nero coming my way.

He slowed as he drew closer in the corridor and I groaned inwardly. We hadn’t spoken since the day of the meeting and I wouldn’t have minded if it stayed that way.

“Hey, Luce.”

One of my eyebrows winged up involuntarily. He never called me anything besides Lucia or Visaro. Nero’s use of a nickname and winsome smile told me he wanted something.

It reminded me of how Mario had addressed the crowd during the meeting. He’d used evocative language and took control with a confidence that spoke volumes. I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Both my parents had been reserved and talking in hushed tones, stopping abruptly when I came within earshot.

The uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach had only grown, and though I couldn’t explain it, I knew it was just the beginning.

Resigning myself to a talk with Nero, I nodded and stopped walking. “Nero. What’s up?”

He looked around conspiratorially then motioned me off to the side.

“You up for a hunt?”

“What are you talking about?” I folded my arms across my chest and looked at him expectantly.

He stepped closer and leaned in to speak without his voice carrying.

“All the prospus are going into the caves tonight to check out the Boneclaw tunnel.”

I just stared. My father had instituted a curfew and put out the order that no one was to go in the caves unless he approved it. We’d gone with Alma as planned, but not very far and definitely not anywhere near the tunnel.

“Unless you’re too much of a coward to go against your dad?”

My temper flared at his words, even though I knew it was what he wanted.

“I am not,” I said hotly. “But Selection is almost here. Do you really want to get caught going against leadership right now?”

Nero smirked. “No, but what are they going to do, kick us all out?”

Much as I hated to admit it, he had a point. Still, my stomach churned at the idea.

“Everyone is going?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yeah. As soon as you convince Karin. She won’t go unless you do.”

That gave me pause. If I wanted to avoid a potential catastrophe, I could refuse to pressure Karin, though it probably wouldn’t take much to get her to go. Part of me wanted to explore the tunnel. Being confined to the facility had started to make me a little claustrophobic and it would be interesting to look into the mystery of the tunnel.

He must have sensed I was close to agreeing because Nero pressed on. “C’mon Luce. With my dad out there, I could use the distraction.”

That tipped the scales for me and I softened at his plea. Nero might be a jerk at times, but I could understand the worry.

Giving in, I let my arms drop. “Alright, fine. When?”

He grinned. “A few hours before curfew. We’ll say we’re studying so no one will come looking for us.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll talk to Karin. You better hope we don’t get caught, Costas.”

Nero waved my warning away with a flick of his hand and continued down the hall. “Make sure you two aren’t late, Visaro,” he called over his shoulder.

I rolled my eyes at his back and sent Karin a message to meet me.

A few hours later, the six of us were standing inside a room near one of the entrances to the cave dressed in hunting armor. It had taken a solid ten minutes just to make our way through the maze of corridors to get to this point. I was a little concerned that we wouldn’t be back in time for curfew, but we’d come too far to go home now.

Surprisingly, Karin hadn’t balked at the idea. I figured she felt cooped up like I did and wanted to expend some energy. The excursion had already taken my mind off the apprehension that gripped the compound. Unfortunately, it had only been replaced with anxiety of getting caught.

The room was large and filled with broken furniture and equipment that had been too much of a hassle to haul into the compound.

Nero pulled out his datapad and motioned for us to do the same. We’d planned the route beforehand and our progress showed in the form of a green marker on the screen.

“Make sure we stick together,” he said, pausing when his voice echoed off the walls in the empty space. “Nell,” he continued in a quieter tone, “you’re the best at tracking. Once we get there, you take point. I’ll take the lead for now.”

Part of me wanted to object and ask why he should be leading, but I held my tongue. This wasn’t the time or place to start an argument. Besides, it gave him something to focus on other than the fact that Mario still hadn’t returned.

“Are you sure about this?” whispered Mark, looking anxious.

“Put a sock in it, Nagata.” Even though Allan spoke in a low undertone, his voice seemed to carry in the room. Unlike Nero, he didn’t pause. “We’re already here. You can go back if you’re going to be a coward. The rest of us are leaving.”

With that, he brushed past him and stood next to Nero. One by one, we followed suit until Mark was alone. He glanced furtively at the way we’d come then scurried to catch up once we’d started to leave.

Nero led the way in silence, traversing the pathways that had been constructed to near geometric perfection by our ancestors. I’d been in sections of the caves that hadn’t been touched and it was a shock how different they were.

Here, the walls were smooth and etched with lines in a design that showed up in all of the facilities. The original parts were rough and bumpy, uncut and wild-looking.

As we moved farther away from our starting point, the scents began to change too. The air had a dank quality, but it wasn’t altogether unpleasant. It was different from the unchanging smells of the compound and made me think of the outdoors.

It was mostly quiet, except for our movements as we made our way through the wide passages. Once or twice, I thought I heard a thumping sound, but no one else said anything and I ignored it.

Our location dot moved past the blue lights demarcating the transmission signal limit on the map. I tried not to think about what could happen if we got into trouble. No one had wanted to look for information on the tunnel in case Janus noticed and logged the search. We’d be traveling blind soon.

When we passed the final transmission marker, the datapads stopped tracking our location, unable to connect to a signal. I’d anticipated this and suggested that everyone bring something to help us mark our way.

The best we’d been able to come up with was infrared reactive paint. If a Boneclaw did tunnel through the rock wall, it was highly unlikely that they’d taken the time to create false trails or passes that branched off from the main one enough for us to get lost. Still, when our group reached the entrance made by the Boneclaw, I made the first mark.

Our plan was to make a mark every ten meters.

Nell stepped forward and studied the two-meter-wide opening with a handheld flashlight. It didn’t take her long to inspect both sides, and soon she was turning around and nodding.

“Definitely a BC,” she murmured. “You guys ready?”

When she had our collective acknowledgement, she moved quietly into the tunnel.

“Engineers, the Boneclaws are not,” muttered Allan.

“Really, Allan?” Karin snorted.

“Sorry, it just looks so...” His voice trailed off as he tried to find the right word.

“Uncivilized?” I offered.

“Yeah, that.”

Nell turned and glared at us. “Will you guys shut up? Kind of hunting something that wants to rip us to shreds and eat us for a snack.”

We stopped talking and continued to follow her through the crude passage. She paused every so often to inspect a wall or mark on the ground then would continue on.

After we’d been inside for a little while, my pad buzzed. I pulled it out and saw that the alarm I’d set had gone off.

“Guys,” I whispered, trying not to be louder than I had to. “We’ve got an hour before curfew.”

Nero looked at everyone with a pensive expression. “I say we follow it to the end.”

Allan nodded almost instantly.

Nell shrugged. “None of these tracks look new. I see one set going in and one going back. It’s like they dug until they were inside then walked back out.”

Karin and Mark looked nervous but didn’t say anything.

“If we don’t go back now, we’re probably going to get caught,” I warned. “Is it worth it if we find nothing?”

Nero focused on me with a piercing gaze. “We won’t know unless we keep—”

At that moment, a loud thump sounded. It was impossible to tell which direction it came from because the acoustics in the tunnel distorted the noise. We all froze and looked at each other.

Before anyone could speak, Nero took off down the passage on the path we’d been heading. Nell and Allan joined him, jogging to catch up. Not wanting to be left behind, I gestured for Karin and Mark to follow.

They did so reluctantly, both of them wide-eyed and unsure.

“It will be better if we stay together,” I reminded them. “Safety in numbers.”

Karin nodded. Mark didn’t seem convinced but followed anyway. I doubted he wanted to stay by himself in a dark tunnel made by a Boneclaw.

Nero and the others had disappeared around a bend and we had to jog to catch up. The thumping grew louder with each step and I felt the fear give way to a hunter’s mentality now that the threat had been realized. Anticipation was always the worst part.

I came to an abrupt halt when the tunnel veered sharply to the left and barely stopped short of running into Allan’s broad back. He, Nell, and Nero stood perfectly still, staring down the tunnel.

Their stances put me on high alert and I instinctively lifted a fist to halt Karin and Mark. I edged around Allan’s wide frame to see an adult Boneclaw baring its teeth at us. I unslung the spear I’d brought and readied myself, expecting the Boneclaw to charge, but it didn’t.

Instead, it backed away in a slow movement, swinging its head from side to side.

I looked at Nell, who shrugged. She had to be thinking the same thing as me. Boneclaws never retreated.



“What’s it doing?” asked Karin under her breath, voicing what we all seemed to be wondering.

“Can it tell how many of us there are? Maybe it doesn’t think it can take us all on,” whispered Nero.

“Have you even been studying?” I hissed. “The gene manipulation? Heightened aggression?”

Nero stared at me blankly.

“There could be a hundred of us and it would keep coming,” I explained in an exasperated tone. “It’s wired to kill.”

“She’s right,” said Mark. “There would need to be a stimulation that overpowers the instinct to attack.”

“So, what’s causing this?” growled Allan.

No one had an answer for that.

“I say we follow it,” Nero announced.

“That’s not a good idea,” whispered Nell. “We have no idea where it’s going. For all we know, it’s got a nest nearby. If we get too close, it’ll go berserk.”

“I’m with Nell on this,” I inserted. “I say we go back and report what we’ve found.”

“No,” said Nero fiercely. “If those things killed my dad... I just need to know where it’s going.”

Before we could object, he took off again.

Allan sighed. “He’ll get himself killed if he’s alone. I’m going with him. You coming, Nell?”

For the first time since we’d left, she didn’t look so confident. Her brow creased with uncertainty and she chewed on her bottom lip.

“I... I don’t think so.”

“Figures,” snorted Allan. “What about you guys?”

Karin shook her head and turned to look at Mark, but he wasn’t there.

“Where did Nagata go?” I asked, whipping my head around, but I didn’t see him.

“Probably off wetting his pants,” sneered Allan. “Whatever, I’m not letting one of our friends go after that monster alone.”

*Friend is a bit strong*, I thought as he turned to leave. He might be a jerk, but Nero was still one of us and we couldn’t just leave him alone.

“Fine, I’ll go with you,” I said.

“Lucia—”

I held up a hand to stop Karin from protesting further. “Hang back here for five minutes. If we don’t come back, go for help.”

Without waiting for a response, I tore off after Nero. Allan’s clomping feet pounded the cave floor next to mine, bouncing off the rough walls and echoing like rifle blasts through the passageway, but we weren’t worried about making noise anymore.

A roar echoed from somewhere up ahead and a scream followed. It had to be Nero. Allan and I exchanged a look, nodded, then dug in and went into a full run.

The tunnel widened into a cavern and a blast of icy wind hit us, blowing in from the entrance. The Boneclaw stood at its full height near the opening, surrounded by weak light, but I didn’t see Nero anywhere.

As soon as we stopped running, the Boneclaw let out an ear-splitting scream that shook me to the core. Not wanting to drop the spear, I cupped one hand over my right ear in an attempt to dampen some of the noise.

When it stopped, a muffled yell came from the center of the cave. It took me a moment, but I was certain it was Nero.

“There,” I said, pointing. “Do you hear it? Listen.”

There was silence, followed by Nero shouting. We couldn’t understand what he was saying, but I was certain it was him.

“I’ll go,” said Allan.

Not arguing, I nodded. “Okay. I’ll go around the far wall and distract the BC.”

I moved away from Allan and started stomping to attract the Boneclaw’s attention. Its ears perked at the racket, and I started yelling. “Over here, you overgrown hairy icicle!”

The Boneclaw didn’t come, though, but only stood there.

“Why isn’t it charging?” I muttered, looking quickly behind me to find Allan.

“That’s weird,” he said. “Is it hurt? What do you think it—”

He took a step forward, but as his foot touched the floor, I felt a quake beneath us. I watched Allan fall down into the layer below us, reaching out my hand to try and grab him. It was too late, and I felt my foot slip a second later.

We tumbled into the darkness below, disappearing with the stones as they fell.

## Chapter 6

I awoke to the sound of a raging battle. Blasts echoed in the cavern, cut with shouts and the roars of the Boneclaw.

Had Karin and Nell come to help us? Groaning, I tried to sit up and was treated to instant pain at the back of my skull. My hand came away bloody and I groaned.

*Must’ve cracked my head pretty hard.*

My vision was a little hazy and I shook my head to clear it. I scrambled to my feet. The walls of the crude pit curved up around me to meet at the small hole I’d fallen through, too high to reach, even if I jumped. I found a few good handholds but once I’d climbed high beyond a certain height, gravity won, and my fingertips couldn’t hang on.

In the back of my mind, I knew that the situation was all kinds of wrong. The Boneclaws had set a trap, and we had walked right into it. It shouldn’t have been possible. I shoved the thought away to deal with the immediate problem of being stuck at the bottom of the pit.

Voices rang out somewhere out of sight and it finally clicked that they didn’t sound like Karin or Nell. Before I could process that, twin roars erupted, one closer than the other.

Shit. Another Boneclaw had arrived.

The ground shook and I grabbed my spear as one of them came near. Its white fur, streaked with dirt, came into view first, followed by claws that scraped at the ground. It paused at the edge of the hole and drool dripped from the corner of its

mouth. I didn't move as it sniffed the air, presumably trying to figure out if anyone was near.

It leaned in and I backed up a step, which turned out to be a mistake. My foot caught on the uneven ground and I stumbled back.

The Boneclaw stiffened at the sound and growled deep in its throat before swiping out with one of its powerful arms. I leapt back to avoid the razor-sharp claws and ran into the back of the pit.

With nowhere to go, I did the only thing I could think of in the face of certain death.

Spear lifted above my head, I let out a battle cry and charged forward, leaping up and slashing at its face. The creature yowled and jerked back, but the damage was minimal.

From the sound that came out of it next, I'd only angered it more. The beast pounded the ground with both fists and moved closer to the edge as if it would climb down.

I was done if it did that.

My heart sank as it gripped the edge and began to lower itself. Gritting my teeth, I lifted the spear again.

"Lucia! Take my hand!" a familiar voice yelled from behind me.

"Dad!"

He hung over the edge above and extended his hand down into the pit.

A quick glance told me that the Boneclaw was almost fully into the pit and I crossed the few meters back to my father's hand in bare seconds. Pushing off the balls of my feet, I jumped as high as I could and managed to connect. He pulled me up and over as the monster landed at the bottom.

"Now!" he ordered.

Hunters circled around the trap and took aim. Rifle blasts rang out and found their marks, pelting into the Boneclaw's thick hide. It screamed in pain as its fur went dark, stained with blood from the multitude of rounds it had taken.

It chuffed a few times, then groaned and fell forward in a heap.

"Gods, Lucia." My father wrapped his big arms around me and squeezed before letting me go and inspecting me for injury. "Are you hurt?"

"Not really, just hit my head when I fell in." I frowned as I gestured to the trap, then remembered why I'd fallen to begin with. "Nero and Allan—"

"Are safe," he finished for me. "Along with Karin and Nell, thanks to Mark."

"That's where he went," I muttered.

"Yes," he said darkly. "And you kids are damn lucky he did. What were you thinking?"

I didn't get the chance to answer. One of the hunters stepped forward and spoke.

"Cyril, there are more headed this way. About three kilometers away."

My father sighed and nodded. "Let's move out before they get here. We'll finish our conversation at home," he said to me, eyes ripe with meaning.

I was in deep shit.

Nero stomped up to where we were standing, his face contorted in anger.

"We can't just leave!" he shouted.

Cyril turned a stony look in the young man's direction. "Yes, we can," he said in a low voice, drawing himself to his full height. "And we will. That's an order from your leader, Prospus Costas. Abide it or you will be removed from Selection."

Nero balled his fists at his side and a muscle ticked in his jaw, but he nodded.

With that, my father signaled for everyone to move out. I stole a glance at Nero and didn't like what I saw there. Rage showed in every feature and hate burned in his eyes.

Then I was being urged along and herded back to the compound. Questions swirled in my mind about what had just happened. What did this mean? Why did the Boneclaws suddenly decide to start strategizing against us? How, for that matter? As far as I knew, they'd never exhibited this level of intelligence.

By the time we returned to the compound, I hadn't come up with any answers, just more questions. I had to stow them for later because our collective parents waited inside the common room inside the facility.

My mother didn't look as anxious as I'd expected, probably due to the message we'd sent once back in transmission range, but I saw the raw fear hiding behind the anger, mixed with relief.

It wasn't an emotion I was used to seeing in either of them, and guilt stabbed through me for having caused it.

Like my father had, she pulled me into a tight embrace before leaning back and giving me a stern look. "Young lady, you are in so much trouble."

I sighed. "I know. Sorry for making you worry."

She blew out a breath and hugged me again. "When Mark told us what you all did, I almost came after you myself. Your father stopped me. Barely."

The man in question laid a hand on her shoulder and slated a glance at me before addressing the room.

"As you're all okay, the Primes want a word," he said ominously.

Big trouble turned out to be kitchen duty for a whole week. Nero had been right, surprisingly. The Primes couldn't take us all out of Selection or there wouldn't be any candidates left.

They did postpone the ceremony until our punishment was up. I had a feeling this was also to give Mario time to come back.

Nero grew more agitated each day and I wondered if he'd be focused enough to go through Selection. A small part of me hoped so, but the better part wanted to beat him at full strength. Otherwise, it wouldn't feel like a true win.

The day of the ceremony came without further incident and I found myself standing with the other prospus after the first aptitude test.

It had been completed on our datapads and was supposed to be the easiest part of Selection. I'd studied hard in preparation, but it hadn't seemed easy. No one looked particularly confident, with the exception of Mark, who'd probably aced it.

The test only accounted for part of the score awarded by the Primes. We still had four more to go.

The door opened and the Computing and Information Prime, Keyan Lambert, stepped into the room. On Selection day, all the Primes wore more formal attire in the form of a black jacket over the standard jumpsuit. A silver pin, shaped like a heart, was fastened over the right side of his chest as it always was. Lambert's

hooded eyes searched the group until they landed on me. He smiled kindly and gestured me in.

My stomach twisted into knots despite his friendly demeanor as I followed him into his office. It would serve as the testing area and was, before today, a comfortable space I'd been to a few times before. The nature of this visit made it feel somehow foreign.

"Have a seat, Ms. Visaro," he said, motioning to one of the two chairs in the middle of the room.

They were old and showed their age with the many cracks and repairs that had been done over the years. Still, I sank into the deep cushion and tried to relax.

Lambert sat opposite me and pulled his datapad out to study it. After a few moments, he put it placed it on a small table next to the chair and folded his hands in his lap.

"No need to be nervous, Lucia. This is just a simple interview." He looked pointedly at my hands.

I'd been unconsciously twisting them, so I forced them to be still and nodded. "I'm ready, Prime Lambert."

"Very good. We will begin, then. How do you feel about completing tasks beneath that of the Director?"

My brow wrinkled in confusion at the question. "I don't know that any work in the facility is beneath anyone."

Lambert smiled and I realized that must have been the answer he wanted. "That seems to be in line with reports. I'm told you frequently help others with a variety of tasks and have a generally friendly attitude. That's a good quality in a leader, don't you think?"

I nodded. "Yes, I do. A leader should be willing to do what they ask of anyone else."

"Does that include following orders?"

He slid the question in so smoothly I almost spoke without considering meaning behind it.

"I try my best," I said carefully, "though at times have made the mistake of not using my better judgment."

"Such as the other night? When you and the other prospus entered the caves?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Like that."

"The archive records showed that you recently accessed footage of the early Boneclaw experiments. Tell me, why was that?"

His question took me by surprise, and I had to work to remain at ease. Did he know about my misgivings?

"The Boneclaws that attacked during my last hunt exhibited unusual behavior," I said, deciding to go with a half-truth. "I wanted to make sure that I understood their behavior so as to be a better hunter."

Prime Lambert regarded me for a moment but seemed to accept the answer.

"Janus and Apprentice Braid speak highly of you. A number of others have come forward to express similar sentiments. Only a small number of complaints, though I can't share specifics."

"It's not always possible to make everyone happy," I admitted. I wanted to know who had complained, but he obviously wasn't going to give that up.

“That’s true. Well, that’s all for this portion, Ms. Visaro.” Lambert stood and picked up his datapad. “I wish you luck on the rest of your tests.”

“Thank you, Prime Lambert.” I completed the interview with a small ceremonial bow and exited the room.

My weapon was under scrutiny from the Engineering Prime Elias Doyle. It was only part of the assessment, though. If they didn’t work, a prospus wouldn’t be able to enter the caves. It passed muster, but I hadn’t expected any problems. All of my trials had been successful since I’d gotten past the coding hurdle.

Now all that remained was to retrieve our fusion cores. They would be the ultimate test of our bravery, tracking skills, and teamwork. Once we found them, they would be brought back to the Primes and inserted into our weapons to complete the ceremony.

Then the Primes would choose the next Director.

“You have each been given coordinates. These are not the exact locations of the cores, but a general location. Once inside that radius, you will need to use the skills you’ve acquired to locate them. In light of recent events”—my father cast a meaningful look at us— “you’ll go in groups of three instead of pairs.”

He stood flanked by the Primes, along with Alma and another senior hunter, at the main cave entrance. As was customary, none of our parents were there to see us off. As the Director, my father was the exception to that rule. They had wished us luck at the start of the day and would be there for the final ceremony, but for now, we were on our own.

Alma stepped forward. “Prospus Nagata, Visaro, and Riddell. You’re with me.”

“You have three hours. Good luck, Prospus.” With a final grand sweep of his arm, we were motioned forward. Though my father couldn’t say anything, pride shone on his face when we walked by.

Then we were through the door and in the dank darkness of the cave.

## Chapter 7

“Remember, I’m here for evaluation and emergencies. You can’t ask me for help,” said Alma. “Treat me like I’m not here.”

Taking her words to heart, I pulled out my datapad and turned to Karin and Mark without responding. It was reminiscent of our situation only a week ago, but the circumstances were much different this time. Even though our last excursion had nearly ended in disaster, the stakes seemed higher now.

“There’s wolf activity here and here.” I pointed to the markers lit in blue. “One is inside the radius. I say we go around and enter from the north. That way, we don’t run into them unless we have to.”

I was careful to sound confident without taking charge. We needed to work as team, but at the same time, we each needed to prove our ability to lead.

“It’s a smart idea,” agreed Karin. “Mark?”

“Yes, that should work,” he said, then tightened his grip on the weapon in his hands. “We’ll have the rifles if we run into any of them, but I’d rather not.”

I knew the other prospus was incredibly smart and had been chosen for a reason, but sometimes I wondered if he would be a good leader. The guy seemed scared of almost everything. Then again, he'd come through the caves alone and brought back help. We almost certainly would have been killed otherwise.

"Okay, ready when you are," I said.

The other two nodded and we started walking, Alma following a short distance behind. The older woman moved quietly, and it was easy to pretend she wasn't there.

We wound through the labyrinth of destroyed and abandoned rooms, pausing only to check our location. Evidence of our ancestors was everywhere, most of it trash. Our people had picked through most of the items long ago and now scavenging teams poked through unexplored areas in search of anything usable.

It was easy to discern areas that hadn't been searched. If they had, the teams cleaned up as they went, creating neat little piles and paths through the rubble.

Our little trio stopped in a large chamber that forked off into two separate paths. One led to Facility 1 and the other looped back around and eventually led to Facility 3.

The devastation seemed to be concentrated here. The archives showed that the facility's security team attempted to detain the escaped Boneclaws here, but what followed had been destruction on a critical level.

Parts of the wall were still pocked and scarred with black from what must have been a terrifying battle. Twisted pieces of metal had been pushed and piled along the walls in heaps, along with the charred remains of unrecognizable debris.

A loud thump sounded from somewhere deep in the cave system, although it was impossible to know where.

We all froze, straining our ears, but it didn't happen again.

Mark swallowed audibly from my right. "Wh-what was that?"

"Something far away," Karin reassured him.

"Let's keep moving," I said. "It's already been forty-five minutes and we haven't even started looking. Besides, I don't want to stick around and find out if whatever that was is headed our way. If we go through there, it should take us to a corridor that will run into the radius of the cores." I pointed to the path that went left.

"Sounds good to me," Mark whispered, as though someone were listening in.

I started to move but stopped when Karin didn't. "Karin, everything okay?"

She nodded but stopped halfway and shook her head. "I... I don't know if I want go through with this."

My mouth dropped open and I stared at my friend in disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, I never wanted to be a prospus, okay? Someone nominated me and I couldn't back out. But after last week, I just know this isn't for me."

"Okay," I said, trying to think fast. "Okay. You don't have to be leader, but we need you to come with us."

"Why? You're all but guaranteed to be the next Director. Mark is absurdly smart. You don't need me."

Another thump reverberated through the large space and Karin jumped.

“That’s why. If you stay here, we’ll be worrying about you and that will make us vulnerable. Besides, remember what you said? Safety in numbers.” I placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and met her eyes. “I need you.”

She held my gaze for a moment, then nodded. “Alright. I’m with you.”

We entered Facility 1 to find more of the same damage and disarray. I kept an eye on Karin, but she seemed to be holding it together after my little pep talk. Mark looked nervous as usual but seemed determined to see the last test out and stayed quiet.

As soon as the datapad indicated we were in the radius of the fusion cores, we started working our way through the empty rooms and labs.

“If we keep going like this, we’re going to run out of time,” Mark said, annoyed. “There has to be a better way.”

“I’m all ears,” I said, equally frustrated.

We’d been at it for some time but had barely covered a quarter of the possible locations.

He groaned and slapped a hand to his forehead. “I’m so stupid! The fusion cores emit radiation. We should be able to detect it.”

Mark pulled out his datapad and began working it furiously, his fingers flying over the screen as he typed. We let him work in silence until he smiled and held it up triumphantly.

“Got it. Each of the facilities is tied into Janus’ main network. I was able to access a few working scanners and narrow down the location.”

“Lead the way,” I said in relief.

The discovery seemed to have bolstered his confidence and Mark strode away without any of his usual hesitation. Karin, too, had lost most of the trepidation that had been dogging her and I felt a surge of hope. We might just make it after all.

Mark led us through a series of passages, some empty and clean and others in various stages of disrepair, until we came to what looked like a mess hall.

“Through there,” said Mark, gesturing at a door at the other end after consulting his pad.

“You guys ready?” I asked.

After they acknowledged that they were, we crossed the room together. The door wasn’t coded shut so it slid open noiselessly as we approached. I went through first, letting the other two file in behind me.

What I saw stopped me in my tracks and had me backpedaling as fast as my feet would carry me.

“Hey!” said Mark when he ran into me.

I whipped around and pressed a finger to my lips, cutting him off. He must have seen the look on my face because he turned and waved off Karin, who hadn’t quite made it into the room.

Once we were outside again, Karin looked at me quizzically. “What was that all about?”

“Wolves,” gulped Mark, speaking for me. “Three of them. I saw when Lucia turned around.”

“There shouldn’t be any wolves,” said Alma from my side. I had actually forgotten about her and almost jumped at her sudden appearance.



"I thought you weren't here," I said with a slight smirk.

"Don't play games with me, girl." Her tone didn't quite bite, but it had a serious ring that told me something wasn't right.

"They aren't part of the test?" I asked, sobering.

"No," she replied, looking worried.

"I'm pretty sure all three are asleep," offered Mark. "It looked like the fusion core container was against the far wall."

"That's where we put it. How the hell did those vermin get in there? The doors shouldn't have opened for them. They don't have the markings."

I knew the answer but hesitated to say. I didn't want to risk Alma ending the test and sending us back. But if I didn't, and something bad happened, it would be my fault.

"There's an opening in the far-left wall," I supplied.

Alma looked at me sharply. "A hole?"

I nodded reluctantly. "Yes. Like the one in Quadrant D."

"You lot stay here. I'm going to try and make contact with the compound."

"Sorry," whispered Karin when Alma had moved out of earshot. "They're probably going to make us go back. I know how bad you want to finish."

"We're so close too," I said, unable to hide my disappointment.

"Do you really think there are Boneclaws here?" asked Mark.

"No. The wolves wouldn't be there if a Boneclaw was close by," I answered with a shake of my head.

Alma came back a few seconds later looking grim. She didn't appear to be happy with whatever she learned.

"The Primes want you to go ahead with the test," she announced.

"I thought comms were down this far out?" said Mark.

The older woman just gave him a withering look. "It's the Selection, boy. You think we wouldn't have taken steps to maintain communication? Six of our best and brightest are out here."

"Oh, of course," Mark replied.

"You each have weapons," she said, regarding us. "And I'm to go in with you."

It was irritating to hear that the Primes thought we needed help. "But we can handle—"

"That's non-negotiable, Prospus Visaro." Alma fixed me with a stare that brooked no argument.

"Alright," I said reluctantly. "I don't think we woke them. At least not that I could tell. Mark, can the sensors pick them up?"

He pulled out his pad and started working it again. "No, sorry," he said after a few seconds.

"What's the plan?" asked Karin. "Just go in shooting or are we going to try and get the cores without waking them up?"

"Not sure that last part is possible," muttered Mark.

I agreed with him on that point. "I've got an idea," I declared. "Two of us should attack while one grabs the cores. Then when the cores are out, we can back out and shut the door. Can you program it to shut from the pad?"

The last question was directed at Mark and he grinned. "Yeah, that's easy." The prosopus tapped on his pad then gave me a nod. "Done. It'll open and close on command now."

"Okay, then. I guess the only question is who wants to attack with me and who wants to grab the cores."

"Mark should grab the cores so he can deal with the door," said Karin. "I'll attack with you."

"Sounds good. Let's get it done, the clock's still ticking," I said, pulling my rifle from my back and going to the entrance. "Open it."

The door slid smoothly open, revealing the interior of the room. A few machines still connected to power blinked weakly and our lights cast a glow over the sleeping animals.

Just as we'd been taught, I fanned left and Karin went right to approach from the sides, then we opened fire. The room erupted into chaos. The wolves awoke and immediately hopped up into hunched, aggressive stances. Our initial volley of fire seemed to do little to slow them. They screamed, high-pitched and painfully loud, before attacking in return.

One came at me, mouth open and tongue dripping venom. I continued to fire, but it was on me in an instant. Its mouth closed down on my arm and I felt something give way. Unable to stop a scream from the pain, I felt panic in the moment. Helplessness. Then I remembered my father, my mother, why I was here, and what I was going to do for the colony in the future. Just as quickly as it had flared, my fear was replaced with clarity and intent.

I brought my gun hand up, pressed the weapon to the side of the wolf's head, and fired. I felt the pressure against my arm of the bullet's path through the wolf's head, then relief as its jaw went slack. I rolled with the body as it fell to the ground and pried the dead animal's teeth free from my arm.

I rose to my feet, my arm burning like fire, and saw that the fighting wasn't even close to done. Across the room, Karin was cornered in a struggle with her own wolf. Alma had stepped into the fray, taking on the last animal, which was substantially larger than the other two. Likely an Alpha.

I'd seen Alma participate in hunts and train prosopus and hunters, but I'd never seen her like this. Her glaive was alight with blue, same as the markings on her skin. She bared her teeth at the Alpha and let out a battle cry that seemed to give it pause, then she attacked in a blur of movement.

Mark had the box and was moving for the door. He paused when he saw me and flicked a glance at my injured arm.

"Go!" I yelled, sprinting for Karin.

Her gun lay just out of her reach and she was fending off the wolf with a broken pipe. Her hair had slipped out of its bindings and fell into her eyes.

"Get out of here!" She swung the pipe in an arcing motion, and it whistled through the air, cracking across the wolf's snout. It whimpered in pain, but the blow didn't seem to do much and the wolf recovered almost immediately. It bared its fangs and growled.

Finally in position for a clear shot, I raised the gun, aimed, and fired. The first shot tagged the animal in the shoulder, drawing its attention to me. I kicked

Karin's gun back to her and squeezed the trigger again. The rifle clicked. I was empty.

The wolf tensed and readied to jump me, venomous tongue lolling from its mouth. Suddenly, a blast sounded, and the wolf's face split open. It slumped to the ground with an audible thud.

Karin stood behind it, arm raised and gun in hand, a ferocious look on her face. She fired three more shots into the back of the downed animal's head.

I turned to check on Mark and Alma to find him gone and her still embroiled in combat, grinning of all things. A smear of blood crossed one cheek and she circled the wolf, glaive steady in both hands.

My left arm was pretty much useless, so I fumbled to release the spent magazine and put a fresh one in. Karin was at my side now and we moved in to help our trainer, only to be waved back.

"Stay back!" she commanded. "This one's mine."

The wolf surged forward, low and fast. It was going for her legs, like it would with any other prey, but Alma pivoted and kicked her foot high behind her. The wolf slipped beneath her and snapped at empty space. In the same graceful movement, Alma brought her glaive down into the beast's side. Her blade slipped into the flesh of its middle shoulder and found purchase in the socket. The wolf howled in shock and agony as she placed a foot on its back and twisted the glaive.

The wet, grinding snap as the joint came out of socket could be heard even over the raucous screams and flailing as the wolf tried desperately to free itself. Alma planted both feet on its back and braced herself with the weapon buried in its side as it tried to stand upright.

It stumbled forward, managing only to raise itself into an awkward hunch, before falling onto its face. Seizing her opportunity, Alma ripped her weapon from the wolf's shoulder and plunged it higher into its back. Her glowing blade slipped between the creature's ribs and the room fell silent. The animal let out a hoarse, watery breath, and then was no more.

With the wolf crumpled on the ground in a heap, Alma looked down in satisfaction. She dug a heel into the fatal wound to loosen her blade before pulling it free with one hand, then she stepped off of the body, barely breathing hard at all. I didn't think I'd ever seen anything more fearsome or awe-inspiring.

## **Chapter 8**

Back at the compound, Mark and I had to get first aid before the ceremony could begin. The Alpha had gotten hold of his leg, which had been what prompted Alma to step in. Thankfully, nothing was broken and we were to get back without any more problems. My arm had a strong brace and I wasn't feeling anything but a dull ache from the injury.

We'd arrived after the three-hour time limit, but I wondered if any concessions would be made for the unusual circumstances. Nero and his team had returned long before us, not having encountered wolves or any major problems.

Now the six of us walked into the hangar with our final projects to climb the makeshift stage and stand in front of the five Primes and my father, our parents, and the rest of the community.

My mother had a spot in the front, and I was surprised to see Mario next to her. He had returned with some of the missing hunters sometime after we'd headed to the caves. Details were sparse since prospus weren't allowed to talk with anyone but each other until after the choosing was completed.

"Prime Doyle will distribute the fusion cores to your weapons," my father announced when we were all assembled, "then fire at a target to ensure they are in working order."

He gestured at the training dummies, fashioned to look like crude Boneclaws, that had been built to withstand our weapons and were standing behind us at the back of the stage.

Doyle stepped forward, flanked by Josef, who carried a case that I assumed contained the cores. They worked their way down the line, inserting them into the power housings of each weapon.

Nero was first in line and produced a rifle. It looked like he'd spent some time on upgrades and painted it white. When the core settled inside it, he wrapped a hand around the grip, and the weapon glowed with energy. Then he offered it to the Prime. Elias removed it from his hands and took aim at one of the six targets. A round erupted and struck home, then he nodded and moved on to Karin.

Her spear reminded me of Alma's glaive, but the blade and shaft were much shorter. It hummed with the fusion core's power, and when she lifted it, a second blade extended from the bottom, crackling with energy.

I couldn't help but smile. It was impressive.

Allan had made a shotgun that reflected his personality. Big and powerful, no frills. I liked it.

Mark had gone for something less traditional but effective nonetheless. It looked like a handheld scanner, barely big enough to put the core in. Doyle nodded at him and Mark closed his hand around the base so that just the top was exposed, lit by a blue ring.

A high-pitched screech emitted from the small device and we all jerked. It shut off a few seconds later and Elias turned to the crowd.

"This device will repel a Boneclaw by assaulting their sensitive eardrums. Impressive indeed."

A collective ooh came from the crowd, but they quieted when Elias and Josef moved on to Nell. At first, I thought she had something like Mark because it was about the size of a baton. When the core went inside, Nell closed her hand around it in a firm grip and held it away from her body.

The baton extended out from itself until it took the form of a bow. Not the most powerful of the projects, but it got major points for awesome.

Then it was my turn and I presented my staff. The familiar thrill rolled through me again as it lit up with the core I had retrieved. It seemed more brilliant than when I tested it with the practice core in the lab and I had to force myself not grin like an idiot.

The energy glow dissipated when Doyle took it from my grasp, and he gave me an inquiring look. The crowd went still, unsure what was happening.

I smiled and gave a little bow. "Prime Doyle, as part of my project, the weapon has been encoded to react only to me."

"Interesting," he said, handing it to me. Then he stepped back and gestured at the last remaining target. "If you'll please demonstrate."

Nodding, I turned and stood in fighting stance, squaring my shoulders, then leveled it at the target and cleared my mind of everything else. The end of the staff began to pulse, and a ball of light formed. I released it with a loud *boom* and the dummy disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The hangar was completely silent for a beat before breaking into applause. Even Nero looked impressed. I returned to the line to stand with the others and waited for it to quiet again.

"You have all finished your *prospus* training and stand before us as proven warriors, all fit for leadership," my father said. "But only one can be the next Director. The scores have been tallied and the Primes have made their decision. Janus?"

The crowd was nearly silent but for a few murmurs and the odd cry of a child that was quickly hushed.

Janus stepped forward. I couldn't see his face, but I imagined he was smiling genially at the onlookers.

"The Primes have chosen Nero Costas as leader when the time comes."

The expected cheers and handclapping followed but were drowned out by the dull roar of blood rushing in my ears. I nodded and joined the rest of the *prospus* in congratulating him, but inside I was reeling.

I hadn't realized just how important succeeding my father as Director had become to me. It also stung that they'd chosen Nero, even with his hot-headedness and impulsive behavior.

Someone squeezed my shoulder and I looked over expecting to see my father, but it was Karin.

"Should've been you," she whispered as we exited down the steps to give Nero the stage.

"Thanks," I said, checking to make sure no one could hear us.

We stood off to the side, a group of five. Nell only looked mildly disappointed, while Allan looked downright pleased, neither of which surprised me. Mark just looked relieved.

Mario walked by us, smiling, to join his son and our eyes met for the briefest of moments. I couldn't quite explain it, but something in his expression unsettled me. It spoke of the kind of smug satisfaction that came from a plan going off without a hitch.

I brushed that thought away as fast as it came, though. That wasn't fair to Nero. The Primes had made their decision and I had to live with it.

Movement from the side of the hangar caught my attention and I turned to watch as a handful of hunters entered. Karin noticed my gaze had wandered and turned to look.

They were dressed for a hunt in armor and weapons. It didn't take long for me to recognize a few of them as among the missing. Or previously missing. I stared curiously as they crossed to the crowd.

Other people began to notice as well, and I saw some of the happiness fade into confusion.

“As you can see,” said Mario from the stage, “I found a number of our missing people and brought them home. Something the current Director was unable to do.”

“If you have a problem with my leadership, Costas, you should bring it up at a more appropriate time,” said my father, democratic as usual.

Mario scoffed. “That’s part of the problem, Cyril. Some problems can’t be cast aside. There are times when action is needed *now*.”

My gut tightened at the words and uneasiness settled over me again. It was becoming an all-too-familiar feeling and I didn’t like it. What was going on?

The hunters reached the stage and stood looking up at Mario and the Primes.

“I believe they have something to say,” Mario announced. “Will you hear it?” He directed the question at the Primes, who nodded and moved forward.

“We don’t want Director Visaro as our leader anymore. His constant inaction has led to unnecessary death. We brought the Boneclaw concern to his attention and were ignored.”

A few people in the audience made noises of approval.

“Wait just a godsdamn minute!” My father’s tone had turned colder than the valley outside and the hangar went dead quiet.

Mario smirked at his word choice. “No, I don’t think we will.”

Jacob Abbot, the Sustainability Prime, walked up to him and placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

I couldn’t quite catch what he said, but I could have sworn it was something like “this wasn’t the plan” or something like that, but it was impossible to tell.

Mario ignored the Prime. “I, Mario Costas, challenge you here and now for the title of Director.”

Anger flared on my father’s face at the absurd timing of Mario’s proposal, and he flicked a glance at the Primes.

They held up a hand and conferred together for a few moments before breaking apart. I could tell immediately from the look in Prime Doyle’s eyes and his grim expression what they had decided.

“The challenge may stand,” said Jacob.

This wasn’t the way things were done. Challenges were presented to the Primes and planned, not issued like some teenage brawl.

The two men moved to the empty center of the hangar where they could carry out the challenge without putting the community in danger.

I tried to get closer, but my mother, who had worked her way to me and Karin during the confusion, placed a hand on my arm and shook her head. Frustrated, I stayed put as the Director prepared to take on his childhood friend.

They circled each other and it didn’t escape my notice that the pair forewent the usual ceremonial bows and words. Then they were lunging forward in a flurry of fists.

Weapons weren’t allowed in challenges because the winner needed to triumph using their own strength and hand-to-hand skills. The general consensus was that if they could defend their position and title, they were still fit to lead.

Mario landed a blow that knocked Cyril back and I tried not to cringe at the sound of hard fist hitting flesh. He recovered quickly, though, and returned a punishing volley of strikes that sent Mario reeling.

Blood streamed down where his right cheek had been split open. Mario didn't bother to wipe it away but shook his head a little, presumably to clear it, and raised his hands again.

Even from this distance, the hate was evident on Mario's face.

A collective gasp went up around me and my mother's grip on my arm tightened, telling me I'd missed something important.

It only took a quick glance back at the two fighting to see what had caused the commotion. Mario had produced a blade from somewhere and had gone on the defensive. The man must have lost his mind. Even if he won now, the Primes wouldn't accept it and he'd be cast out for his actions. That would likely be the case if he lost too.

A group of hunters that hadn't been with the missing descended on the fight, but my father waved them off.

My breath caught as he danced away from the blade, narrowly avoiding an injury that would have ended the fight and likely killed him.

On the one hand, I understood why my father had waved off the help. It showed that he wouldn't back down, even with the odds stacked against him. If he won and the gamble paid off, there could be no doubt that he was a true leader.

But on the other hand... if he lost, he'd either be dead or, at the very least, no longer the Director.

At that moment, Mario leapt forward and succeeded in getting the blade past my father's defenses. I watched helplessly as it sank in deep, almost to the hilt.

For one long, terrible second, I thought it was over. Then my father rallied and pushed Mario. He stumbled back long enough to give Cyril the chance he needed to yank the knife out and hurl it back.

It struck Mario in the neck.

He clapped a hand to the wound even as the blood began to fall, and he sank to his knees.

Then all hell broke loose.

## Chapter 9

The hunters who had spoken out against my father now attacked the ones still loyal to him.

"Go check on Dad!" I yelled to my mother, struggling to be heard over the chaos.

She nodded her head curtly and started pushing her way through the crush of people to reach him. Just before she turned, I'd gotten a good look at her face and didn't like what I saw there.

Pure, unadulterated fear. Then the survivor in her took over and her features changed to grim determination. Despite my own terror, I did the same and directed my attention to Karin and Mark.

From their expressions, they were both still recovering from the shock of what had happened.

“We have to help,” I told them.

“How?” asked Mark.

Before I could answer, Janus appeared. “I believe there are some citizens attempting to flee,” he said calmly, motioning toward a group of people. “They would benefit from an escort. I’m sure there are more as well.”

“Alright,” I said, inclining my head. “Mark, see if Nell will go with you to find others while Karin and I help them.”

For once, he did what I asked without arguing or sputtering nervously, and I was grateful.

“Janus, do you see anyone else in distress?”

“Yes, there are many. At the moment, no less than five altercations have broken out among members of the community.”

The Cognitive’s expression had turned. His forehead wrinkled, and the features of his mouth drew down into a frown. I’d never seen him that way and it didn’t bode well for us.

“What do you think we can do?” I asked. “They’re taking sides between Mario and my father. I might make it worse just by getting in the middle.”

He nodded, taking that into consideration. “Astute observation, Miss Visaro. There is a small group of expectant mothers on the other side of the crowd. They are not under attack, but it would be best if someone made sure they got out safely.”

“Gods,” said Karin, speaking for the first time. “This is madness.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “But we don’t have time to waste right now. Training’s officially over with.”

I gripped my staff tightly and started to make my way around, then stopped. “Janus, see if you can help calm things down. And let me know if something serious comes up.”

After he acknowledged the statement, Karin and I continued on to the women. It didn’t take us long to find them huddled together. There were only four of them and I wondered if they had come to the ceremony together or if they had sought each other out.

Not that it mattered. Each one looked terrified, but they had linked hands and were scanning their surroundings. I felt a small surge of pride that the little group wasn’t cowering. Then again, we were a colony of warriors and survivors.

I recognized one of the women, Jodi Baxter. She was one of the gardeners that tended to the greenhouse. I’d helped her a few times carrying organic material to Janus’ food synthesizer. She was in her late forties and looked aggressively pregnant, at least to my eyes.

“Jodi, we’re here to get you guys to safety inside the compound.”

At first, the woman glared at me, her gaze falling suspiciously to the powerful staff in my right hand. Then my voice seemed to register because her eyes snapped to my face. Recognition set in and relief shone in a sharp exhale.

“Lucia. It’s good to see you right now. We tried to push our way through, but...” The soon-to-be mother laid a hand on her abdomen and threw a fierce look at the



ruckus. “These idiots are so caught up in brawling with each other that they’re not paying attention. We were afraid one of us would fall.”

I nodded at her. “Understandable. Don’t worry. Karin and I will clear a path. You all just stay close and keep holding hands, okay?”

“We can do that,” said one of the other women. I’d seen her around but couldn’t recall her name.

“Alright. Karin, let’s part the way.”

Together, we moved forward. It would have been easy if I could just fire off one of the staff’s power-charged attacks but doing so would put people at risk.

Instead, I started yelling, “Get out of the way! Women carrying unborn children coming through!”

At first, it was like Jodi had said. Nobody wanted to listen. Deciding I would have to get physical, I turned the staff horizontal and started pushing. Thankfully, the brace on my arm did its job and the action didn’t hurt.

This got people to move. They jumped at the feeling of something hard pressing into their backs and came around swinging to face us. Once they got a good look at the women behind us, they tried to give us room.

Finally, enough took notice of what was happening and began to help. Soon we had enough space to walk through with the quartet of mothers behind us. It had the added effect of dispersing much of the fighting.

Karin and I escorted the women all the way to the nursery.

“Will you be okay here?” I asked Jodi.

“Yes, thanks to you two,” she replied. “I’m—we’re so grateful.”

“Happy to help,” said Karin, smiling at the other woman. I thought I detected a hint of longing in her expression, but that seemed doubtful under the circumstances.

“If you need anything, reach out to Janus. He should be able to get someone here.” I hesitated a beat before continuing. “And secure the door behind us. Just to be safe.”

Jodi nodded and did just that as soon as we were out of the room.

Without the encumbered group in tow, we made it back to the hangar in time to see that most of the skirmishes had died down completely. My gaze tracked to where my father had been, but neither he nor my mother were there.

“There’s Janus,” said Karin, pointing at the stage.

The Cognitive stood there with Alma and Josef. I started for them at a brisk walk since things seemed to be calm now. Once we were closer, it became apparent that something was wrong. Josef looked stricken as he spoke to the other two while making a lot of hand movements.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is it the Director?”

Josef shook his head and I relaxed. “All the fighting was a diversion,” he said.

“A diversion for what?” asked Karin, looking from him, to Janus, to Alma.

“Fusion cores,” Alma supplied.

I stared at her in confusion. “What do you mean? What do fusion cores have to do with anything?”

“It appears that Mario’s followers raided the engineering lab and took our supply of fusion cores,” Janus explained.

“How many?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“All of them,” said Josef.

Now Josef’s current state of unrest made perfect sense. A jolt of anger lanced through me and I thought of the upheaval Mario’s had just delivered to the community. And for what? Fusion cores? It didn’t make sense.

“Where is the traitor?” I spat. “He needs to pay for what he’s done here.”

“I believe his men carried him to safety,” Alma said with a look of disgust. “Nero was among them.”

“We have to go after them,” I declared, looking at the rest of them. “Where are the other hunters?”

“Protecting the Director, along with your mother,” answered Alma. “A few are in the infirmary. Some... didn’t make it.”

I swallowed the fresh anger that threatened to erupt and tried to think. “And the prospus?”

Alma grimaced. “Prospus Thompson and Folson appear to be working with Costas. Nagata is missing.”

A glance at Karin told me she was just as stunned as I was. It didn’t surprise me that Allan had chosen to side with Nero’s father. I supposed Nell doing the same made sense too. They had both been so willing to follow him into danger when we’d gone down the Boneclaw tunnel.

“I’ll come with you,” announced Josef, drawing himself up.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You need to keep an eye on things and make sure nothing else was taken.”

“There are only the three of you,” he argued. “You could use another body. Janus can monitor what’s going on here.”

“What if something happens to the power?” Karin pointed out.

Janus laid a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Apprentice Braid, I think she is right. If the traitors attempt to shut me down, then this facility will be vulnerable. At the moment, only you and Prime Doyle have the knowledge to fix any serious issues.”

Josef looked like he might argue, but he relented. “Alright. How do you plan on finding them?”

“Actually, I have an idea on that,” I said, clearing my throat and pulling out the datapad. “When we found the fusion cores for the ceremony, Mark was able to detect them using scanners in the area.”

“Clever,” murmured Josef.

“Yes,” agreed Alma. “I was impressed when they pulled it off.”

“Can you do a widespread scan and find out where they are?” I asked Janus.

His form flickered for a moment as he processed the data, then it went solid again. “Facility 3. I’ve sent the information to your pad.”

“Facility 3?” I asked, somewhat dubious. “Most of that is closed off. Isn’t the power shut down too?”

I vaguely remembered something Janus had taught us long ago about the facility being blanketed with radiation. As a kid more interested in exploring, I’d tuned it out not wanting to hear about someplace we weren’t allowed to go.

It didn’t seem like the best place for a rebel hideout if you had to worry about radiation poisoning.

“Yes,” answered Jo, his brows knitting together. “Though the signal isn’t inside.”

An orange dot appeared on the map and I smiled. "None of the other prospus know about this, so we have the advantage."

"Okay, then." Karin blew out a breath. "Let's go get our fusion cores back."

The three of us stood in the darkened cave system on the path that would take us to Facility 3.

It reminded me of the final part of our Selection tests only hours before. My body was exhausted. Karin and I had been up since the early hours of morning to prepare for the day, as I was certain Alma had been, but there was nothing to be done about it.

We'd learned after a stop to the armory that Mario's men had already been there. Not much was left except a few bio-coded guns and short blades.

Josef re-coded them for us, but with a limited supply of ammunition, they wouldn't last long if we got into a fight. Our hope was to at least scout the area Costas had taken the cores and report back.

As we moved silently down the deserted corridor, I was taken back to my youth. The Director often brought me along on scavenging trips once I was old enough, and I loved it.

Back then, the wolves had mostly kept outside and Boneclaws coming into the caves was almost unheard of. Wandering through the caves with my father had been an adventure.

Now he was receiving medical care and fighting for his life.

A hand on my arm pulled me out of my thoughts and I came to a stop to see Alma. She and Karin looked at me with concern when Alma spoke.

"Girl, you are distracted," she observed. "You are the leader right now. Put away all the emotion and think like one."

The older woman was right. I hadn't even been paying attention to where we were going. The three of us stood at a fork and Alma had stopped me from walking down in the wrong direction.

"You're right," I acknowledged. "We need to go the other way. Sorry about that. I'm good now."

Alma stared at me as if deciding whether to believe me, then nodded. "Good."

I moved off, taking the left fork, and pushed all thoughts except the mission out of my mind. Now that I was paying attention, it became clear that the rebels had come this way.

Mario's people had not been careful. The whole area was cluttered and disturbed, as though it were almost intentional.

Could this be a trap? Or was Mario so confident in his men and the success of his coup that he simply didn't care?

The former troubled me. I signaled to Karin and Alma to stop. Consulting the pad, I ushered them to a room, and together we slipped inside.

"We're getting a little close to be talking out in the open," I explained.

"That makes sense. What's wrong?" Karin asked.

"It's just... doesn't this seem a little easy?" I asked.

I could tell neither of them had considered that possibility from their sudden looks of concern.

“A child could follow the trail they left,” I explained. “I have a bad feeling we’re walking into a trap.”

“But they don’t know we’re tracking the signal,” reasoned Karin.

“That is true,” agreed Alma. “And it’s likely that they assumed no one would be coming after them so soon. The only missing hunters that came back were with Mario. With the amount of injuries sustained and protection for your father and the Primes, there aren’t enough other hunters to mount an attack.”

“You have a point,” I conceded. “Still, I don’t like it. We should find an alternate route.”

“Good idea,” said Karin. “There has to be another way to where they’re holed up.”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t. Mario had chosen his hiding spot well. The orange dot marking the fusion core’s location had stopped moving in Quadrant S. It was situated on the far side of the facility, close to the outside, and the only way to get to it was to keep going. Anything else would take us out of the way and eat up time we didn’t have.

Agreeing to keep moving, we left the room.

As I was about to take a step in the direction the map said to go, a loud thump sounded in the distance.

## Chapter 10

“Uh, what was that?” asked Karin, fear plain in her tone.

“If I had to guess,” I replied, “I would say that it was a Boneclaw.”

“I’d say you’re correct,” whispered Alma. “We need to move.”

“It sounded like it came from the compound,” said Karin worriedly. “Maybe we should go back? They might need us.”

“We don’t know that it came from there,” I pointed out. “For all we know, it’s headed this way.”

“And if we go back, we’ll just run into it,” she realized.

“Exactly. Let’s go. No more talking until... until it’s safe to do so.”

Alma’s mouth twitched as if she might smile at my awkward wording, then another thump sounded, closer this time, and we began to move in earnest.

The older woman had let me take the lead on our scouting operation, even though she was not only the elder, but outranked both me and Karin. If Nero had taken part in the rebellion—and with his father their leader, why wouldn’t he have—then the Primes would revoke his standing.

At least I thought they would.

I recalled Mario’s exchange with Jacob Abbot, the Sustainability Prime. If they had planned this together, the Prime was in a position to help keep Nero as the next Director. Still, Abbot had appeared unprepared for the arrival of the missing hunters.

The events of the last few weeks all started to run together, even as I struggled to make sense of them. The fatigue was starting to take over and I caught myself stumbling more than once.

The distant thumps continued, and though none of us said it out loud, I was sure we were all thinking one thing. Whatever was making them was getting closer.

I checked the map constantly, both to make sure the orange didn't move and to keep myself calm. We'd long since passed the point where communication with our facility was viable and that didn't help the uncomfortable feeling in my gut.

The thumps stayed with us, getting just a little louder each time, but it almost began to fade into background noise. Almost.

They had to be Boneclaws. Frost horns certainly couldn't make that kind of sound. Now that we knew for sure that they weren't attacking the facility, it made even more sense to keep going.

We walked another thirty minutes before the first signs of Mario's hideout became evident. Barriers had been constructed from the debris. Mario and his people had taken anything they could find to create the makeshift barriers. The result was imposing.

Their staggered formation would prevent a large group from launching an effective attack because it wasn't wide enough for more than one or two bodies to fit through. Moving fast wasn't an option either. Pieces of sharp, twisted metal stuck out at odd angles sporadically. If you didn't pay attention, one of them would leave a nasty gash that would likely stop any pursuit.

*Or escape, I thought dryly.*

All in all, it was a smart move.

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

I'd been so busy studying the barriers that I hadn't noticed the thumps had gotten closer. A lot closer. And I was pretty sure there was more than one Boneclaw making them.

From the pallid look on Karin's face and Alma's set jaw, they had drawn the same conclusion. We all tightened our grips on the weapons we carried.

"Maybe we should hide until the creatures pass," Karin suggested nervously, speaking under her breath.

"It might be a good idea," I agreed, pulling out the pad to look for somewhere we could get out of sight. "I don't feel good about going through those barriers just yet. We have no idea what's waiting when we get past them."

Taking down a single Boneclaw was hard enough to do with a full-size group of seasoned hunters. With just the three of us, I didn't think we stood much of a chance against one, let alone more than that.

The map showed that the only way to bypass the barriers at this point was to double back and take a small tunnel that had been used for transport between the facilities. It did a kind of loop through the cave system and had once sported a hover rail system that shortened travel time between facilities to minutes.

Now it was a series of cave-ins and rubble, passable but dangerous. Without the rail system working, it took hours to get from one point to another. Nothing of value had ever been found in them and our people tended to avoid the tunnel altogether.

Unfortunately, it also looked to be our only option.

We jogged back toward the split, trying to move fast but stay quiet. Inside, my fight or flight instinct was going into overdrive. My body seemed to move jerkily, as if protesting running toward the danger. The good thing about the fear was that it was dumping adrenaline into my system. Sure, I was terrified, but at least I no longer felt exhausted.

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

The thumping no longer sounded like it was far away at all. Now I could discern the scraping of claws and make out heavy breathing.

“Move!” I hissed to the others.

They didn’t need to be told twice.

The Boneclaws were already in sight when we arrived at the antechamber that would take us to the tunnels.

Three of them.

Our feet hit the cave floor with loud slaps that might as well have been a holo reading “We’re right here! Come eat us!” If they’d had eyes to see.

One of the animals stopped moving and stood erect, swiveling its large head in our direction. Its ears perked as we rounded the curve and it took off at a dead run, letting out a terrible roar that echoed all around us.

“Go!” I yelled, no longer worried about being quiet.

I didn’t have to steal a glance behind me to see that they were giving chase. The ground shook beneath us and the bellowing was starting to hurt my ears.

“There!” cried Alma, pointing.

I followed her gaze and saw the opening was barely 50 meters ahead. We all dug in, closing the distance to the tunnel, its darkened hole acting as a beacon of safety.

The Boneclaws were just behind us now. I slowed a fraction to let Karin and Alma go ahead and gripped my staff, urging it to power up. If anything, I could act as a distraction and give them more time to get away.

Not bothering to aim, I pointed it over my shoulder and let loose with a round of blue energy. There was a loud crash then an awful screaming. I couldn’t be sure if I’d hit one of the Boneclaws or knocked a part of the cave loose on top of them.

“Stupid girl!” Alma chastised me when I caught up to them. “They could’ve killed you.”

“But they didn’t,” I pointed out. “And we need to keep moving. I don’t think whatever I did will hold them back long.”

She gave me a dithering look but nodded.

“There’s only one way to go,” Karin said, gesturing toward a path. “The other one’s caved in.”

Something about the pile of rubble looked off to me, but there wasn’t time to check it out and we took off at a run again.

The thumping had resumed but didn’t sound like it was in the tunnel, and I wondered just how much damage I’d done.

Within a few minutes, the adrenaline seemed to have worn off and we’d all slowed to a fast jog. The tunnel curved, then split in two directions.

Again, there was only one way to go.

As we passed the second cave-in, I finally realized what was bothering me about the natural blockade and stopped.

“What is it, Lucia?” asked Karin, looking exasperated. “We don’t exactly have time to stop and study the scenery.”

“This looks recent,” I said, turning to them both. “I think someone did this.”

“What for?” she asked, the exasperated look giving way to one of trepidation.

“To herd us,” Alma supplied.

“You’re exactly right,” said a familiar voice. “That was easier than it should have been.”

Bright lights flicked on in front of us and I was temporarily blinded by their sudden appearance. I blinked until they adjusted then stepped back.

Mario stepped out of the open tunnel and aimed a rifle at Alma. The blast echoed in the tunnel and her body jerked backward with the force of the round.

“No!” I screamed, turning and dropping to her side. Blood covered the ground next to her and her eyes fluttered from the shock of the ruthless attack, but I could see it wasn’t fatal. She was still breathing.

I didn’t see what happened next. One second, I was moving to stand, then someone howled in rage at the same time, another echoing blast filled the passage, and I found myself in the dirt next to Alma.

Disoriented, I pushed up on my knees, groping for my staff. Karin stood in front of me, holding her gun in Mario's direction. I realized she must have shoved me down because he was standing in a similar fashion, his face pulled tight with rage.

“That was very stupid, Miss Riddell.”

Without another word, he squeezed the trigger.

Karin jerked back like Alma did, and then fell.

I felt frozen, unable to move, even after her body landed with a heavy, limp thud.

I scrambled over to her and tried to staunch the flow of blood coming from the gaping wound in her chest, but it was useless.

Her eyes went wide as her breath rattled and came faster. I gripped her hands. “Karin!”

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing but came. Her hands went still in mine, and I watched as the life left her.

## Chapter 11

“You bastard.” I could hear the anguish in my voice but didn’t care. “I’m going to make you pay for this.”

Mario barked out a laugh, as though I had told him a joke. “All by yourself? I doubt it.”

The sheen of unshed tears collecting in my eyes obscured my vision, but I found the staff in the dirt and used it to push into a standing position.

“Ah ah, don’t do anything rash,” Mario warned me. He tilted his head at his men then pointed at Alma. “Get her up.”

Two of them rushed forward and helped her to her feet. I was both surprised and grateful that they didn't manhandle her. Apparently, she still commanded respect due to her status as an elder and skilled hunter.

The older woman groaned with the movement but stood proud. Our eyes met and Alma nodded slightly to let me know she was alright. Then her gaze drifted downward and went wide with shock before going hard with fury at the sight of Karin's lifeless form.

I felt the same pain and anger but her earlier words came back to me.

*Put away all the emotion.*

So, I swallowed the maelstrom of rage inside me and turned to Mario with a flat stare. I had a plan but no way to communicate it to Alma without alerting him.

"All of this is going to come crashing down around you," I told him, gesturing wide with my arms outstretched in an encompassing motion and hoping she got the message.

Mario shrugged in a manner that suggested my threat didn't worry him, then winced. I could just see a bandage poking out of his jumpsuit from the wound my father had inflicted using the traitor's own knife. "We have all the cores that were in the facility. My followers have been scouring the caves for more. Without an energy source, the colony will be forced to turn to me. And now that I have you, Visaro has even more incentive to surrender."

I had to admit it was a good plan. Disgusting and shameful to be sure, but smart. As soon as my father learned that Mario had me as a bargaining piece, he would do whatever it took to get me back.

"You're no leader," I spat. "Forcing people to obey you will never work."

A few of his guards exchanged knowing looks behind him.

"I won't force them. Everyone will have a choice. If they don't want to follow me, then they can try their luck outside the compound." His eyes dropped to my weapon.

"That staff was impressive at the ceremony. Give it to me," he ordered.

My grip tightened possessively on the weapon and it took all of my training not to accidentally activate it with my murderous thoughts. Even if Nero had been chosen as the next Director on his own merit, I had earned my place as a hunter. The staff was mine and no one else's. Least of all, Mario.

"The ceremony you rigged," I accused, trying to keep him talking. I stole a glance back in the direction we'd come. With all the racket I hadn't heard the thumping, but the beasts couldn't be far.

Mario laughed again, a deep arrogant sound, telling me that my suspicions had been correct. "Yes, of course. The son taking the Regency from the daughter just as Cyril did from me was a sweet moment indeed."

Part of me still hadn't believed that could be the reasoning behind the man's actions. To hear him say it now still was baffling in its simplicity.

"That's what all this is over?" I asked incredulously. "Just so you could make your son the next leader over some stupid grudge?"

Where were the Boneclaws? Surely, I hadn't taken them all out with that one minor attack. Mario wouldn't let me stonewall for much longer.

"Of course not. I only want what's best for the colony. Your father had every opportunity to act like a leader, but he refused to fulfill his duty. To take action.



Even after Nero led you to those traps and he saw what the Boneclaws were capable of.”

The older man shook his head in disgust, and I angled slightly to catch any hint of the Boneclaws.

“You can stop looking for the monsters,” he said. “They aren’t coming. They’ve been...diverted.”

“I’m not,” I lied, trying to think quickly. “There are more hunters coming.”

“Even if that were true, they’re poorly armed. I made sure of it,” he said cockily. “Now, the staff, girl. Stop stalling, and don’t do anything stupid. Alma will suffer for your mistakes.”

Mario turned his greedy eyes back to the staff. I wanted to shoot him, but his men would kill me and Alma before we’d be able to get away. I couldn’t take that chance.

“Just promise me you won’t hurt her or my parents,” I said in my best pleading voice, even though inside I bristled at his casual use of the word “girl.” Alma was the only one allowed to call me that.

“You have my word,” he sneered. “So long as they fall in line.”

It was now or never. Saying a quick prayer to gods I wasn’t sure even existed, I adjusted my grip on the staff and shuffled forward, shoulders sagging in defeat. Then, between Karin’s fallen body and his outstretched hands, I made my move.

The staff’s true power had never been fully tested before. It had all been low power experiments in the lab, and even during the demonstration at the ceremony I’d only given it enough juice to take out the dummy.

Now I concentrated intently, bringing the staff to life in my hands, its blue light flowing up the shaft and into the barrel. Sparks of plasma coalesced to form an orb, small at first, then it grew steadily larger.

“Stop her!” bellowed Mario even as he dove for cover to protect himself.

They didn’t get the chance.

By now, the energy sphere was the size of a Boneclaw’s fist and glowed brilliantly, washing the tunnel in pale blue light.

With a single, focused thought, I unleashed the staff. The orb of fusion energy punched into the air above us with a resounding *boom*.

The resulting shockwave knocked me backward, along with several others. For a terrible moment, I lay there thinking that my plan had failed. Then a crunch sounded, drawing my attention to the icy ceiling where the blast had hit.

Cracks rapidly webbed out from the epicenter and a large chunk of rock broke free, falling to the ground and shattering in a thunderous burst. I jumped to my feet to look for Alma as tremors loosed more pieces of the ceiling.

To my relief, I spotted her about twenty meters away, struggling to stand. One of the two men that had been guarding her lay unmoving on the floor, partially obscured by a pile of boulders. The other was nowhere to be seen.

I took a step toward Alma, only to be stopped by a loud, grating noise from above. Another section of the ceiling began to splinter and rained down more debris, cutting off my path. A large metal support came down nearby, followed by a high pitch scream and a streak of red across the ground.

With no other recourse, I was forced to leap back or risk being crushed to death. Alma disappeared in a cloud of dust and rock while shouts echoed as everyone in

the vicinity tried to get to safety. As it collapsed further, I sprinted toward the open tunnel ahead and threw myself inside. My feet slipped out from under me and sent me into a sideways tumble. The staff flew from my hands as I shoved them in front of me to break the fall.

As rubble continued to rain down, I crawled deeper into the tunnel and thought maybe I should have scaled back the power of the blast.

The cave finally grew quiet but for the moans and occasional sound of shifting rock. I tried to stand and found that my foot had become wedged between two large boulders.

Impossibly, some of the oil lamps still stood, but the weak light was made dimmer by the dust now filling this portion of the tunnel.

I felt around in the gloom, looking for anything that might help free me, but there was nothing useful. The staff had fallen somewhere out of sight and reach. If I'd had it, I could have just blasted myself free.

*Some warrior you are*, I thought bitterly.

Stuck, I decided to wait in silence. If luck was on my side, Mario was dead and the survivors wouldn't bother looking for me. I hoped Alma had gotten clear. The woman was usually spry, but she'd taken a round to the chest and that was enough to bring a man in his prime down. Still, I knew the older woman to be scrappy, and if anyone could find a way out of that mess, it would be her.

When my eyes finally began to adjust to the darkness, I twisted around to check out my surroundings and spotted my staff. It didn't look damaged at all and lay a just few meters away.

Excitement coursed through me at the sight and I stretched an arm out toward it. My elation didn't last long. It was still another arm's length away. It remained out of reach, no matter what I did.

I'd just resigned myself to failure when overlapping voices came from the entrance behind me.

"I want her found, dammit!" yelled Mario, dashing any hope that my stunt had taken him out. It hadn't been the goal but would've been a nice benefit.

With nowhere to go, I lay completely still as multiple sets of footsteps tracked closer to my position. They must have had lamps because the gloom turned a kind of yellow color and grew bright enough that I could make out the moving shapes as people.

Someone passed by on my left side but didn't see me. I hoped that meant I was in the clear, but they were soon joined by another of Mario's men.

"Here!" one of the men called out, alerting the others. "I've found her!"

It didn't take long for Mario to make his way through the destruction, and he was soon standing over me with a grim expression. "That could have killed all of us, you stupid child."

"I thought you wanted action?" I asked snidely, despite my current helpless position.

"Hah!" he snorted ruefully in response. A gash was evident on one cheek, but that seemed to be his only injury, much to my disappointment. "Excellent point. You must take after your mother. Maybe you would have made a passable leader after all, though I suppose we'll never know."

Mario unslung his rifle from his back and stared down at me with unconcealed hatred. My last thought before everything went black was wondering how I had never noticed it before.

I woke sometime later in a state of confusion, though it soon became apparent that I was on the floor of a room. My head throbbed painfully where Mario had hit me with the butt of his rifle, but it wasn't bleeding. A quick self-assessment didn't reveal any other injuries except for my ankle, but even that was just a dull ache.

I took stock of my surroundings. The room was lit with more oil lamps casting the same dim light, but it was enough to see that I wasn't alone.

There were perhaps two dozen others crammed into the space. Most appeared to be sleeping and I could only make out a few familiar faces, though none of the prone forms looked like Alma. Perhaps she had made it out after all.

"Lucia!" a familiar voice whispered from somewhere in the semidarkness.

"Mark? Is that you? We thought you were dead." A shape moved close and a wave of relief washed over me at the sight of a friend.

"Yeah, it's me," he replied, keeping his voice low and studying me carefully with one eye. The other was swollen shut, bruised a dark shade of purple, and his top lip looked puffy. "You had us worried when we couldn't wake you up."

"Just needed a nap," I joked. "How long have I been here?"

"A couple hours at least," Mark answered, then gestured around him. "Hard to tell in this room."

"Did Alma come in with me?" I asked, not sure what answer I hoped to hear. If she'd been brought along with us, that would mean she was alive, but captive. If not, then her fate was uncertain, but hope existed that she had made it out and would be coming with reinforcements.

Mark shook his head. "No, was she with you?"

I nodded, then found the movement made me dizzy and stopped. "Yeah. Mario led us right into a trap. I tried to give her a chance to escape by causing a cave in."

Mark stared at me in disbelief. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"Didn't know what else to do," I said, offering him a weak smile. "I just hope she's okay. Mario shot her before it all went down." My throat closed at the memory and I had to blink away tears thinking of Karin. I hated the thought of her body being left there alone in the tunnel, probably buried under the debris in a rocky tomb.

"I'm not surprised," Mark replied tightly. "But Alma's tough. If anyone could survive something like that, it's her," he promised.

"Funny, I thought the exact same thing," I said, forcing a smile. "I have to tell you something. Karin..." I trailed off, unable to form the words.

Mark's expression grew concerned and he looked at me with searching eyes. "What happened? One of the guards said..."

I grimaced and he trailed off, his own features taking on a hard look I didn't know the prospect was capable of.

"Mario killed her," I said angrily. "He didn't even have to. They had us trapped and outnumbered. He could have wounded her instead." The words sounded wobbly as I said them, and I could feel my face burning. I paused, trying to calm

down and get my emotions under control. I was no good to anyone like this. “That traitor needs to answer for what he’s done. How many other people are locked up here?”

“A couple dozen, give or take, in another room. All of us refused to join Costas so they threw us in here. Got the same story from those that were here before us. A few were taken prisoner on hunting or scavenging trips. They said he gave them the choice of joining the rebellion or becoming a captive.”

“Have you heard anything about the Boneclaws?” I sat up too fast in my urgency and the room spun again, but I ignored it.

“No, though I have heard them.”

I went still at his words. That meant they were still close by and I had a bad feeling they weren’t just exploring the caves. Mario had something to do with them, I just didn’t know what. “Heard them how?” I asked, hoping he could shed some light on the puzzle.

Mark quivered and his next words came in a rush. “Just before you got here, the guards came and took someone. Then the thumping started. And the shrieking. It sounded really close.” His voice went even lower, so I had to lean in to hear him. “According to everyone else, that’s been happening every day. Something they called a Reckoning. I don’t know what Mario is up to exactly, but I think it involves them.”

“Me too,” I agreed, relieved he’d come to the conclusion on his own. “It was like they herded us right where Mario wanted us. Then he said something about diverting them. Is it possible he’s found a way to control them?”

His eyes widened for a second at the thought. “I don’t think so. Maybe—”

The door to the room opened and the lights went bright, stopping Mark mid-sentence as Nero entered.

## Chapter 12

Allan and another man named Claude Benson filed into the makeshift prison. Claude was one of our mechanics and someone who had never shown any kind of disloyalty before.

It was disheartening to see just how many people Mario had convinced or forced to join him. Were they really so unhappy with Cyril’s leadership?

“Nero said to get her and meet him back at the lab in five minutes. She’s over there,” said Allan, pointing in my direction before turning and exiting the room again.

His cronies made their way over to me and I stared defiantly up at them. “I see you’re still following Costas around like a little brother, Folson.”

“Don’t make this hard, Visaro,” Allan advised, holding up a pair of restraints. “He just wants to talk.”

I snorted at that but held my wrists out and allowed him to pull me up. All the commotion woke some of the other prisoners, one of them another face I knew very well.

Prime Keyan Lambert. I had to control the shock I felt at seeing a colony member of the highest respect being held prisoner and sitting on a dirty floor. He seemed out of place, especially with his proper attire. The Prime was even still wearing his shiny silver heart pin, though his black jacket was now dusty and rumpled.

"That is the Director's daughter you have in cuffs, Prospus Folson," he said sternly, seemingly unaware of his current predicament. Or maybe he just didn't care.

"Shut up, old man. You have no power here," Allan retorted, then grinned. "I have always wanted to say that."

"He's still your Elder," I snapped, pissed at my peer for his treatment of Lambert, who had only ever been kind to me.

"You're no one either, Visaro. Now get moving," he ordered, shoving me forward.

Murmurs of protest rose up around the room when I stumbled.

"Coward," someone muttered.

"Pushing around a defenseless girl like that, you should be ashamed!" another person called out.

"Quiet, or you'll be next for the Reckoning," Allan threatened.

There was that word again. Whatever it meant to them, it was enough to have the room falling silent again. With Allan to one side and Claude the other, I was escorted out.

Fatigue, paired with a pounding headache, had me dragging my feet as Allan led me through a maze of corridors. We'd been tracking toward the fusion core facility before the altercation with Mario, so this had to be the outer fringes of it.

I wanted to be more observant, maybe memorize all the turns we took or keep an eye out for the stolen cores, but it was a struggle to just put one foot in front of the other. Allan needn't have bothered with the cuffs, though he seemed to take great pleasure in dragging me forward if I slowed down too much.

We arrived at another room that looked like Josef's lab. It was mostly bare, stripped of anything useful, but it did boast a few functional tables and sufficient lighting.

Nero stood at one of them, my staff in his hands. If I hadn't been so exhausted and sore, I might have tried to rip it from his grasp, though knowing him, that was exactly what he wanted. The fact that he was even touching my weapon boiled my blood, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of reacting.

"Hello, Luce." He smiled disarmingly, but he had to know it was wasted on me.

It was no secret that I'd never found the guy attractive as so many others had. Now my indifference had turned to something very near hate.

"Don't call me that," I bit out. "We're not friends."

"Come on, don't be like that," he said, almost wearily. "It's not like I planned for this. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, but they brought it on themselves."

I didn't trust myself to speak so I clenched my jaw to keep from screaming at him.

"Look," Nero said with a hefty sigh, "just tell me how to work the staff and you can go back to hanging out with the other exiles."

The cuffs prevented me from crossing my arms, but I lifted my chin defiantly and didn't deign to speak. When it became obvious to him that I wasn't going to

respond, Nero's eyes narrowed. "Okay, have it your way. If you refuse to help, Mark and all the other prisoners will go to their Reckoning sooner rather than later."

"Whatever that means," I replied indignantly, hoping he would explain.

Nero was a lot of things, but I couldn't see him ruthlessly murdering helpless people just because I refused to give up my staff. Still, there was something in his eyes that gave me pause. He looked... unhinged.

"You'll find out the hard way if you don't do as my father asked." The charming smile melted away as if it had been nothing more than a mask, and it was replaced by an unpleasant leer.

"What, you want the fusion core out of it?" I asked in attempt to distract him. "Sounded to me like you have enough already."

"Actually, no. My father told me what you did with it in the old hover rail tunnels. He wants it to use against the people opposing him."

The words, and the casual way with which he said them, chilled me to the core. I knew with every ounce of my being that he and Mario couldn't get their hands on the staff.

"I won't help you," I said.

"Get Prime Lambert and one more," he ordered Allan and Claude.

Allan grunted and left the room with Claude.

"You've taken a Prime as one of your prisoners," I said sharply. "That's insane. You've really gone off the deep end."

Nero lifted a shoulder in a perfect imitation of his father. "The old man voted against me in favor of you. Almost turned the others too. Now, move," he said, pulling out a handgun and jerking the weapon sideways.

I eyed it warily, not wanting to turn my back on the less than stable prospus. "If you're going to kill me, at least face me."

"Quit being dramatic. I'm going to show you exactly why you need to rethink your loyalties."

Deciding I was probably safe for now, I obeyed.

Outside the lab, we waited for Allan and Claude to return with their charges: Prime Lambert and an old woman I recognized as Laurell Kimble. Neither looked to be in bad shape, though I wanted to say something about them keeping an elderly woman locked up.

Laurell was a retired elder who had been a legendary hunter in her heyday and the previous Defense Prime. At 159, she was the oldest person in the community, but she shuffled along at a spry pace that belied her advanced age and I kept my mouth shut.

We moved out of the main corridors of the facility and into one of the many smaller passages. It didn't take long to reach a large cavern that had been lit with more floodlights.

Mario and a group of his followers stood just inside the mouth of the cave. I recognized all of the faces, though I didn't know any of them by more than a first name.

Except for one. Prime Elias Doyle stood with Mario, who grinned broadly at his son when we entered. Together, they walked over to meet us, and Mario clapped Nero on the back.

“Son, Tiberius will be here soon. Make sure the new recruits are prepared.”

Nero nodded and moved off, stopping at a small cluster of soldiers not much older than us.

“Elias, what are you doing?” asked Lambert coldly.

Prime Doyle ignored his peer and turned to Mario. “I need to get back to the compound before my presence is missed. I don’t have the stomach for this anyway. Let me know when it’s all done, then I will inform Visaro of his daughter’s... disposition.”

Mario gave a slight bow. “Of course. I’ll see you out.”

The pair walked off, leaving the three of us alone to await whatever they had planned. A few guards, Allan among them, blocked the exit. Averting my gaze, I scanned the area in hopes of finding a means of escape.

The first thing I noticed were the tunnels leading into the cavern.

Too many to be natural. Over half a dozen of the openings dotted the walls, with perhaps 20 meters between them. I wondered if some led back to our compound but quickly dismissed the idea. Even if we all took off at a dead run, the rebels would catch us before we’d even made it halfway.

The second thing I noticed was the blood.

Dried splatters of it coated the floor in the middle of the cavern and the tightness in my belly only grew. It looked like I had been wrong about Nero ruthlessly killing people.

“Are you okay, Miss Visaro?” asked Lambert, drawing my attention away from the macabre view.

“Yes, Prime Lambert.” I nodded at him, then Laurell. “Though I should be the one asking you and Elder Kimble.”

Laurell scoffed. “Elder? I’m still in my prime!” The old woman smirked at her own joke, then grimaced. “Though I have to admit that this place gives me an inauspicious feeling.”

*You and me both*, I thought.

“We’re fine,” Lambert assured me, smiling kindly at Laurell. “The rebels pretended to escort us to safety after Mario issued his challenge, then they forced us to come here.”

“Once their intentions became clear, I told them if they wanted a fight, I’d give them one,” Laurell said vehemently. “But they wouldn’t. Too scared, I suppose. Instead, they threatened to hurt my granddaughter, the cowards. I couldn’t have that.”

Fierceness burned in her eyes and I had a feeling the old hunter wouldn’t take kindly to me patting her on the back, so I crossed my arms and nodded in agreement. “Yes, they are cowards. However, as much as I hate to admit it, the attack was well coordinated. They must have been planning this a long time.”

“I should have seen this coming,” Lambert said wistfully. “The Prime Doyle had been acting oddly this last month. He had been introducing ideas to the others that concerned me. When I confronted him, I was ostracized.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” I told him. “Mario is mad for power and will do anything to get it.”

“Not quite anything,” Mario said, having returned with Nero. “Prime Lambert, you are here for a reason. I realize that you were asked to betray your chosen

leader without being given all the facts. Forgive me, Elder. I regret that you will be part of the demonstration, but it is for the good of the entire community.”

A thumping echoed in the distance. Everyone tensed, shifting nervously and exchanging anxious glances. The feeling of dread took root inside me and every instinct I possessed told me to *run*.

“Take the Elder to meet her Reckoning,” Mario ordered.

Two guards came forward and made as if they were going to grab her.

“Young men, if you lay a finger on me, I will break it.” Laurell spoke in a light tone and smiled at the men, but no one could mistake it for pleasant. Both men hesitated, then reached out again.

“Leave her alone!” I shouted. “Take us back now and I promise to unlock the staff for you.”

Allan and Claude stopped me from springing forward and I grunted in frustration until Laurell shushed me.

“Quiet, child. I’m old and bored. You, on the other hand, are just beginning.” She shook her head at my desperate look then lifted her chin at Mario. “I’ll go to my death on my own two feet.”

The thumping was growing steadily louder, but the old hunter didn’t look bothered in the least.

Mario nodded at the guards who were looking at him for direction. “You are a true warrior indeed, Elder.”

“Shut up, Costas,” the old woman said, then turned her back on him and followed the men to the center of the cavern.

“Stop this, please!” I begged, throwing Mario and Nero a pleading look. They ignored it. I didn’t even know exactly what *this* was, but I had a pretty good guess.

Murmurs of dissent sounded behind us, causing Mario to turn and glare. From the looks of fear and troubled expressions it seemed not everyone was on board with this madness. I remembered what Mark had said about the choice everyone had been given and felt a sudden surge of hope. Maybe some of them could be convinced to turn against their new leader.

The cavern shook then with the all too familiar sound. Laurell stood in the center of it, back turned to us. She rolled her shoulders and straightened so that she no longer hunched and I was impressed even as my heart filled with sorrow.

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

Fear filled my belly as the thumps grew louder. It sounded like they were coming from the largest of the other tunnels. As I watched, the ground visibly jumped under my feet, bouncing smaller rocks into the air, and it dawned on me that the tunnels weren’t Eternal made.

I gasped as a massive forearm broke through the dark, followed quickly by the rest of the large body, and flanked by two smaller ones.

The heaviest Boneclaw I had ever seen stood before us, its colossal body seeming to fill the cavern, so tall its head almost touched the ceiling. It swept a gaze around the area then directed a hungry look at Laurell.

*Wait, that can’t be right.*

She hadn’t moved an inch. How did it know where she was?



I looked on in horrified awe as the monster walked directly to stand before Laurell's small form. Like the rest of the creatures, it had long arms and short legs, powerfully built to carry the animal's massive weight in the Boneclaw's signature loping gait. Its elbows bent outward as it lowered its head to sniff at Laurell. The old woman didn't flinch.

While it seemed to inspect her, I tried desperately to wrap my head around what I was seeing. Why hadn't the beast attacked yet?

Then the Boneclaw snorted and straightened, its thick back and arm muscles bunching visibly even beneath taut skin and thin fur with the movement. It swung around to face Mario and took a step closer.

As it came toward us, even the cavern seemed to yield. The ground rumbled and the walls trembled with each step, just as surely everyone else did.

That was when I saw the monster's face clearly. It had eyes. Not the empty sockets of its smaller counterparts, nor the milky vestigial organs of the one I'd seen in the archive footage. These were the same blue as mine and every other person in the compound.

It wasn't the fearsome glare, or even the fact that it had eyes that terrified me. What sent a shiver down my spine was the intelligence behind them. His eyes weren't darting around the room searching for threats or prey. He was looking with calm intent. He was regarding Mario.

Instead of the usual three talons, this creature had razor sharp claws closer in composition to fingernails. The appendage closely resembled my own hand, complete with four fingers and an opposable thumb.

I was still taking everything in when the Boneclaw settled down on his haunches with something like annoyance on its face.

And it *spoke*.

"You insult me, Mario." His voice—a decidedly male tone—reverberated through the cavern, the deep timbre strident and as penetrating as the darkness from which he'd emerged.

No one made a single sound. Either everyone in the cavern was already aware of the creature or they were too scared to speak.

Except for Mario, who stepped forward, though I noticed he didn't stray far from the tunnel we'd come through. "One person every day. That's the agreement, Tiberius."

My brain exploded with questions. Had Mario done this somehow? Was this some kind of hybrid? Could there be more than one?

I may have hated the man but the fact that he could talk to the hulking creature without shaking was impressive.

The Boneclaw, whose name was apparently Tiberius, looked back at Laurel and curled its lip. "The old one hardly qualifies."

Something like a snort sounded like it came from the Elder, but I couldn't be sure.

"She's a retired hunter who has killed many of your kind in her lifetime," Mario assured him.

"Bastard," I snapped, unable to stay quiet. The impressed feeling I'd had a moment ago faded with his words. "Only a coward would sacrifice an Elder like this."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I saw that my outburst had drawn the Boneclaw Tiberius' scrutiny.

He studied me for a few heartbeats before shifting his gaze back to Mario. "I want this one."

"I'm not his to give away," I said. "But, I will trade places with Laurell. Gladly."

"No, she is instrumental in making Cyril surrender," answered Mario.

This seemed to interest Tiberius more than my outburst had. "His offspring?"

Mario nodded.

"Very well. I will take her when this is over," said the monster.

Mario shrugged evasively. "We'll see."

Satisfied for the interim, Tiberius emitted a series of clicks and grunts to his soldiers, then picked up Laurell in a single, giant hand. She fit easily inside it and I prayed this experience would soon be over.

To my relief, the Boneclaws returned to the tunnel they had emerged from, shaking the cavern with as much force as when they had arrived.

## Chapter 13

The walk back to the part of the facility Mario and his rebels were using as a base of operations felt heavy and tense without Laurell's presence. Even Prime Lambert had a shell-shocked look, walking as if on autopilot. No one spoke and the only sound was that of dragging feet on the ground.

I no longer cared that I was exhausted and sore. The event in the cavern had rattled me, but it had also opened my eyes. On the surface, it looked as though Mario was only looking out for the colony's survival, but I believed there was more to it.

The appearance of the Prime Engineer had been disconcerting, to say the least. I doubted that anyone at the compound knew of his deceit and I had no way to warn them. He would be able to feed the people there selective information and sway opinions. Doyle could make Mario the hero in all this.

That last thought both scared and angered me. The Prime had not only failed to uphold the responsibility of his station, but he was also going out of his way to betray the sworn leader of the colony and its people. The question was, why?

Everyone's lackluster attitude only added to my suspicion that Mario's hold over them was out of fear, not loyalty. Seeing him so easily sacrifice a member of the community as revered as Laurell had to have bothered others as much as me.

Now that I knew what the Reckoning entailed, it was more important than ever to get everyone out of here. I wanted to get back to Mark and fill him in.

When we left the caves and entered the facility again, Mario ordered everyone to stop. "Put Lambert back with the others," he instructed. "I want a word with Miss Visaro."

Allan did as instructed, and Nero remained by his father's side.

"Alone," Mario said pointedly, turning to his son.

"Do you think that's wise?"

Mario glared at him. "Don't question me, Nero. Father or not, I'm in charge."

Nero nodded tightly, then spun on his heel and left.

Two guards stayed with us as he led me to a room, presumably to protect Mario, but remained outside. Either he didn't see me as a threat or didn't think I'd try anything to avoid putting anyone else at risk. He was on the mark about the latter. I had indeed learned the lesson, though it only added to his list of crimes in my head.

Inside his office, Mario waved a hand genially at a chair facing a large desk as though we were having a casual meeting. The space he had commandeered was overly large, and nearly half of the room was empty. When he took the big chair on the other side of the desk, I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes at his own sense of self-importance.

"Do you understand now?" he asked, leaning forward and steepling his fingers, imploring me with excited eyes.

"Understand what?" I retorted. "That you sacrificed your own people to the Boneclaws?"

He sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair. "I had hoped you would see it differently. Then you could have gone to your father and made him see reason."

"What reason?" My tone was rife with disdain. "You didn't have to do any of this. Innocent people are dying under your command here. Purposefully. Why didn't you bring this to the Director?"

"I did," he replied flatly. "Cyril didn't believe me. I don't suppose I can blame him there. A seeing, talking Boneclaw? It sounds preposterous."

I thought of my own shock, first at realizing that Tiberius had working eyes, then again when he'd spoken. The two of them seemed to have a civil relationship, which told me this had been going on for some time.

"How long have you known?" I asked.

"Months. Just after the first group went missing. I was sent to track them down. And Tiberius. He was just sitting there as if he'd been waiting for me to come along."

"He left the trail, didn't he?"

Mario nodded. "Of course, but I didn't realize that until later."

"What did he want?" I asked. "In the cavern, you mentioned an agreement."

"Tiberius wanted us to stop killing the Boneclaws for good. I told him I wasn't in charge but that I would talk to the person who was."

"And he understood everything you were saying?" I asked, remembering how Tiberius had spoken our language flawlessly.

"Oh yes. Tiberius told me that he had been born different, though the ability to speak came later. He learned by observing us for years."

I looked at Mario sharply. "He was watching us?"

He nodded, a note of admiration in his expression. "It's quite impressive, really, learning our language by ear alone. Although I'm amazed no one spotted him before."

I thought about that for a moment. "I guess it would have been easy for him to hide in the valley, especially in a snowstorm. We already knew their hearing was superior. All he'd have to do was sit back and blend in. Are there any more like him?"

I swallowed my distaste since Mario was being so forthcoming. The dialogue between us had turned almost conversational. The way he spoke reminded me of someone who had been dying to tell a secret, and finally could.

“Not that I know of. Tiberius is one of a kind. At least as far as we can tell,” he answered, looking pensive. “When I tried to tell your father and the Primes, they brushed me off. Thought I was delirious from being outside too long.”

“And we kept killing them,” I guessed. “But we don’t actively hunt them, it’s only in self-defense,” I pointed out.

Mario raised an eyebrow and gave me a pointed look. “So, the Boneclaw you killed on your last hunt attacked you first?”

“No,” I admitted. He had me there. That particular Boneclaw had been eating the frost horn we were tracking.

Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t remember a single instance of a Boneclaw attack that didn’t start with us. Had it always been that way?

I shifted uncomfortably at the memory of the keening wails coming from the four Boneclaws that had entered the gorge. It irked a little to know that my misgivings had been correct. Even if they didn’t all speak like Tiberius, there had to be some familial connection between the creatures.

“When Tiberius learned that the killings were still going on, he attacked a hunting party. The next time we met, he showed me the tunnel they’d created. He said the cave systems and our compound were no longer safe until we stopped attacking and repaid our blood debt. He wanted a tribute every day until our dead equaled theirs.”

“Which you agreed to,” I said, disgusted again.

“What choice did I have?” Mario asked, throwing his hands up. “It’s better to lose a few than to die out completely.”

“Where did Karin fit into that plan?” I said bitterly.

“That was circumstance. A mistake I deeply regret.” He paused, a mournful expression on his face, then continued. “I have it on good authority that your father will make a full recovery. That means he’s still the Director.”

“I know what you’re going to ask,” I said, holding up a hand to stop him. “And the answer is no. I won’t help you kill more people.”

“What if the death of one could save the colony?” Mario asked quietly.

“What do you mean?” I didn’t like the gleam in his eye.

“If I deliver your father to Tiberius, the debt is settled.”

“No!” I whispered, feeling sick to my stomach. “There has to be another way.”

“See? You are just like him. Unwilling to make the hard decision for the good of the whole.”

“Would you give up Nero?” I countered.

Whatever civility we had during our conversation vanished and Mario fixed a hard stare on me. “That’s irrelevant, Miss Visaro. And you’re going to help, whether you want to or not. Now, as far as the staff goes? You will do as you’re told.”

I glared at him. “I don’t understand why you need it. You seem to be in control of everything here just fine with the other weapons you stole.”

Mario blinked, then his lips twitched up into a hunter's smile, as if he had prey in his sights. "As intriguing as Tiberius is, he's too dangerous to be left alive. With the power we saw on display in the hover tunnel, I think he can be killed with it."

Mario leaned back in his seat. "If you refuse, I will send someone you care about for each Reckoning until you agree. I think I'll start with Mark. Do we have a deal?"

I nodded, furious.

"Good. I'm aware you've had a long day. Get a few hours rest, then you can start."

I caught sight of Nell on my way from Mario's office, but she wouldn't meet my eye. In fact, the other *prospus* kept her head down and pretended not to notice me at all.

One of the guards handed me food and a container of water before ushering me back into the room they were using as a jail. When I stumbled in, the people nearest to the door cringed back.

*What's going on?* I wondered, then scanned the faces looking for Mark. When I didn't see him right away, I worried Mario had done something with him.

"Lucia, over here."

I let out a sigh of relief at the sound of his voice and made my way over to one of the far walls. He was sitting on a mat and patted the empty one beside him. I took it gratefully and sank down next to him.

"I was worried when you didn't come back," Mark said, giving me a searching look.

Not wanting everyone around us to hear what I had to say, I told him in hushed whispers what had transpired in the last few hours. By the time I'd finished, my friend looked stunned.

"And here I thought they were making it up," he said.

"Making it up? You knew about this?" The question came out like an accusation, which I instantly regretted.

"Only just after you left," Mark said, his voice taking on a defensive tone. "Will Butler heard the guards talking when they let him out for a restroom break."

Recalling the discontent I'd noticed in the cavern, it made sense that the guards would have been talking about what happened. It also explained why everyone had been so jumpy when I entered. No one wanted to be next.

I opened the ready-to-eat meal that had been shoved at me, recognizing it as one made by Janus' food synthesizer. It annoyed me that on top of everything else, Mario had raided the compound's food supply. What else had he taken?

Dim light provided by oil lanterns didn't offer much of a view, but I didn't see Prime Lambert anywhere. As cramped as the room was, they probably had another.

"Look," I said, talking around a mouthful of food. "I only agreed to help with the staff to buy some time."

"You want to come up with a plan," Mark guessed. "Do you have anything in mind?"

"Not yet," I admitted, then finished off the meager meal before speaking again. "My brain is running on vapor right now."

“I’ve gotten some sleep here and there. Why don’t you do the same and I’ll try to work on something in the meantime.”

“It feels wrong to sleep in the middle of everything going on,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip.

“You’re no good to anyone in your current state,” Mark said loftily, reminding me of Prime Lambert. He always had a precise way of speaking that sounded stuffy, though not in a bad way.

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that,” I said, trying and failing to suppress a yawn.

The events of the day were certainly catching up to me. Whatever energy I’d gleaned from the forced power nap was long gone and exhaustion had me struggling to keep my eyes open.

“Sleep. I’ll wake you if anything important happens,” Mark promised.

“Alright. Don’t let me sleep too long, okay?”

He smiled wryly. “With these mats it won’t be a problem.”

Unable to fight it any longer, I curled up and let the weariness take me under.

This time when I woke up, the first thing I noticed was the smell. With so many people together in close quarters without bathing, the air had taken on a certain pungency.

Sitting up, I wrinkled my nose and checked to see if Mark was still sitting next to me. He was.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“A little better. You?” I stretched to work some of the kinks out and felt a satisfying pop somewhere deep in my back. No one in the community was a stranger to hard floors and uncomfortable nights, but this one had been rough, even for me.

Mark too, was showing signs of wear. Dark circles marred the skin under his eyes and gave them a hollow look. The swelling around the injured one had gone down, though the bruising was a dark mottled purple, and the fat lip had shrunk back down to normal size. His white hair stuck out at odd angles as though he’d been tugging on it.

“I haven’t come up with much,” he replied, brows furrowed in frustration. “I tried to get my bearings during the last bathroom break but it’s only down the hall.”

“It’s okay,” I said with forced cheerfulness.

“No, it’s not,” Mark said listlessly. “They came and took Wendy Cooper while you were out.”

“What? Why didn’t you wake me up?” I hissed.

“Because you wouldn’t have been able to stop them,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper, before nudging a chin discreetly at the other prisoners. Our conversation was starting to draw attention.

I wanted to argue but he wasn’t wrong. We didn’t have any weapons and most of us were beaten to hell from the chaos at the ceremony, but I didn’t have to like it.

“Fine,” I relented, trying to think logically. “Nero will probably send for me soon. I’ll see if any of the rebels will talk to me. Not all of them looked very accepting of Mario’s leadership style in the cavern.”

“That’s a good idea,” he agreed. “I don’t see how we’re going to find a way to escape without help though.”

“Why don’t you work on rallying our people,” I suggested. “Maybe the next time the guards come we can overpower them. It’s not like a bunch of them can come in at once.”

Mark seemed to perk up at that idea. “That could work. It’s worth a try at least, and better than sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves. I just wish I could get my hands on a datapad.”

I did too. My fellow prosopus might not have been the gutsiest person I knew, but if he could get his hands on one of those our chances of escape would improve drastically.

The door opened, prompting some of the other prisoners to stir nervously.

Allan’s large form stepped into the room, eyes scanning until they fell on me. He jerked a thumb wordlessly at the door and waited to see if I would comply.

Deciding to save my breath and energy, I did.

“Hold it,” he said, grabbing my arm and holding up the restraints when I tried to walk past him.

“Is that really necessary?” I asked, giving him the beady eye.

“What do you think I am, stupid?”

Yes, I thought.

“Of course not,” I said sweetly. “It just seems a little overkill.”

“I’m not going to be the one responsible for you causing problems,” said Allan, not budging.

“Fine,” I sighed, holding my wrists out. “Lead the way.”

## Chapter 14

Allan put a guiding hand on my elbow, and I had to resist the urge to shake it off.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked lightly, trying not to be obvious as I studied our surroundings in my peripherals.

He gave me a sidelong look. “You really want to know?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly.

“Mario has the right idea, working with that Boneclaw. It’s for the good of the whole colony. A few now to spare the many.”

“So, you’re okay with offering up our people?” I challenged, incensed all over again.

“Not really,” he confessed. “But you saw what they’re capable of. Someone had to do something.”

“And how are the sacrifices getting chosen? It seems to me that anyone not falling in line is going, and that’s bullshit,” I said, ignoring the obvious jab at my father.

Allan didn’t have an answer for that, and we continued on in silence.

This part of the fusion core facility didn’t look too much different than ours except for the state of disrepair. Mario and his people had obviously been hard at

work getting portions of it in working condition, but some areas looked untouched. Still, survival here would be impossible without the advantages our compound provided.

Janus had worked with more than a dozen generations of our people to create a sustainable place to live. Which, I realized, was likely why Mario had chosen to attack at the ceremony. Most of the community had been gathered together, relaxed and unsuspecting.

Between the missing food, people, and other resources, someone was bound to have eventually noticed. In order to avoid that scenario, he had made his move. Which, as it turned out, had been a smart one.

Having the “missing” hunters speak out with their concerns had been particularly clever for a few reasons.

Their sudden arrival had caused confusion and prevented any opposition. Their words held clout and surely swayed some of the community to Mario's side. It also had the added bonus of getting his men close enough to attack without arousing suspicion.

I hadn't seen anything useful by the time we made it back to the lab from before. As he had then, Nero waited inside.

He looked up when we entered, and his lips turned up into a smug grin. “My father says you'll be helping after all.”

In that moment, I wanted to punch him. “Is this some kind of game to you?”

Nero's smile faltered at the venom in my tone, but he tried to save face. “Don't be tetchy just because you lost, Lucia.”

“Tetchy?” I asked, incredulous. “People are dying and you think I'm being tetchy? No wonder Mario had to rig the Selection.”

His fists balled up at his sides and I thought he might actually strike out at me. Then he visibly relaxed and waved a hand at the table.

“Just get to work,” he grumbled, then stepped back and pointed to where the staff lay on the table.

It had been secured to the table with the barrel end pointed directly at where I'd be sitting.

“I can't work on it if I can't move it,” I told him bluntly.

“You'll have to make it work. And this way we know you won't be trying to activate it. If you do—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, waving my still manacled hands and cutting him off. “I'll just kill myself; I get it. It's just impractical to do it this way, and besides, I'm going to need tools.” I said that last part thinking that he would have to send someone to search for some, thus giving me more time.

“Already taken care of,” he said with a smirk, dashing my hopes. “They should be arriving shortly.”

Allan came and fixed my restraints to the table with a long length of chain. I had just enough room to reach up and to most of the staff, but not enough to make any type of escape.

By the time he was done, the tools had arrived. I recognized the bag as being one from Josef's lab and figured they must have sent someone to steal it. If they were able to get into the lab that easily then Josef must have been somewhere



else. I tried not to think of the possibility that he had been killed or taken prisoner in order to get them.

"I can't make any promises," I told Nero, still jockeying for more time.

"Oh?" He had the gall to look amused and I knew that he knew I was stalling.

"Josef helped me with a lot of this. If you send Mark to assist, it will get done faster."

"No," he said, drawing out the word. "I don't think so. Good ol' Jo couldn't stop going on about how impressed he was with your work on it. Nice try though." Nero turned to leave, then paused. "Luce, don't take too long, okay? Lives depend on it."

Oh, how I hated him in that moment. The statement had a double meaning. Instead of giving me a time limit he'd put everything in my hands. If I took too long, people would still die, offered to Tiberius as a blood payment. Smart bastard.

He left me staring daggers into his back, taking Allan with him. I was alone in the room but knew there were at least two people guarding the door.

I tested the limits of my restraints first, gauging reach. My estimate had been pretty close and I found it was easy to get to the parts I would need to work on.

The staff itself bore no visible damage from the cave-in, which I was grateful for. I tried a few different angles and maneuvers to see if it could be activated without blowing a hole in myself but couldn't. Without being able to walk around the table, I was forced to lean over it in order to reach the energy core housing and put some part of my body in the line of fire.

Remembering the tool bag, I snatched it up thinking they might have been careless enough to leave something inside that would help me take off the restraints.

The contents were delicate, made for precision work on small components, though I did find a datapad. I pulled it out without much excitement since they hadn't slipped on anything else so far.

As I'd anticipated, it had been heavily modified. I spent some time digging through it but couldn't send any messages or access anything besides the diagnostics program for the staff.

Deciding to at least pretend to work while I worked out a plan, I synced the pad to the staff and did a basic system check. Everything came back clean, with no errors, not that I'd expected any.

Though I knew exactly where to alter the algorithm for the biometric lock, I went through it all, line by tedious line. Even if there was no way around eventually making the staff usable for Mario, maybe I could alter something else in a more subtle fashion.

The hours slipped by as I worked, largely uninterrupted except when nature called. Once, I thought I heard the thumping start again but I tuned it out.

My stomach growled audibly after a while and I realized that I hadn't eaten since the ration meal, which now seemed like days ago. My mouth felt pretty dry too, and I was considering the merits of making a racket to get the guard's attention when one of them entered carrying a tray.

It was Nell.

"Hey," I said in a friendly voice.

She strode over to me without meeting my eyes and set the tray down without answering. On it there was another vacuum sealed ration meal, a bowl, a napkin, and a cup of water.

“Can you at least tell me why you’re going along with this?” I asked, still keeping my tone casual.

“Just eat your food, Lucia.” Then in an act completely unlike her, Nell knocked the water over. “Oops.”

I cursed and jumped back, stopped short by the restraints. Nell left without saying if she was going to bring more and I was left to clean up the sopping mess, which had gotten on everything.

The napkin wasn’t nearly large enough to soak up all the water and most of it went onto the floor.

“What a bitch,” I grumbled, still surprised at her antics, then I picked up the ready-to-eat meal.

As I was about to open it, something on the plastic wrapping caught my eye. They were usually blank except for the use by date. This one had a strange marking on it. Curious, I studied it a little closer and saw that it was a message.

*Be ready in ten minutes. P.S. eat the food.*

I read it again, just to be sure my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me. Someone had written it using hydroink. When Nell spilled the water on it, the message had appeared.

Nell. Of course. The spill had been no accident. This made me feel better. While Nero’s behavior hadn’t been much of a surprise, the knowledge that Nell was part of the rebellion definitely was. I didn’t know what prompted her assistance, but I was glad all the same.

Eat the food.

Why would that matter? I didn’t want to waste any of the ten minutes but decided to eat while there was an opportunity.

The message became clear when I tipped the bag into the bowl and a piece of metal fell out. Fishing it out of the food, I discovered it to be a key. Using the soggy napkin, I cleaned it off and inserted it into the keyhole on my cuffs.

They sprang open, and I let them drop to the floor with a surge of excitement. I started working on getting my staff free from the table.

The room was mostly bare, and I couldn’t find anything that would help me break the metal bindings that had been drilled into the table’s surface.

There was a sudden commotion outside, and I whirled around, ready to fight. The dull thud of landing blows and grunts met my ears, then it went quiet. When the door slid open, Nell poked her head inside.

“Here,” she said, holding up a hammer and a screwdriver. “Don’t know if it will work, but it was the best I could find. We have to hurry though.”

“Okay,” I replied, taking the tools gratefully.

Together, we worked on one of the bands until it finally cracked under the onslaught. With one half of the staff free it was a simple matter to rotate it and pop the other band off.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome. Now let’s get the hell out of here. There are a few others, but I suspect they’re gone already. Mario is drunk with power and a lot of people are scared.”

“They should be,” I said gruffly. At Nell’s pained expression, I softened a little. “We have to free the others first, you up for that?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Wait, do you have a working datapad?”

She shook her head. “No. Mario is too afraid one of us will try to contact the compound.”

I snatched the hobbled one from the table. “Maybe Mark can do something with this one,” I said, stuffing it in a pocket. I followed her out, watching as she snagged a short spear from one of the fallen guards.

We took off at a run down the empty corridor toward the prisoners. We hadn’t traveled very far before two rebels blocked our path.

Angie Davis, an older hunter, and Roric Abernathy. I didn’t know Roric very well, only that he worked in the greenhouse with Jodi. “We’re not letting Visaro get away,” Angie said, taking a step forward and lifting her hunting spear.

Roric took up the same stance. Neither had a gun, which I was glad to see. Mario had probably been too paranoid to give them one.

“Use the staff,” Nell whispered.

I gave a little shake of my head. “I don’t want to kill them.”

“The floor,” she said urgently.

Getting her meaning, I pointed the staff at the ground in front of them and loosed a bolt of blue light. The small blast sent up a shower of sparks and they jumped away.

It gave us the distraction we needed to rush them. I took Angie, who was closest to me, and swept the staff low, trying to knock her off her feet. She danced away and sneered at me.

“Come on, Daddy’s girl. Is that all you got?” She twirled the spear expertly in her hands and began to circle me.

I grinned back and raised the staff again. “No.”

Angie stopped spinning her weapon in response and we exchanged a flurry of strikes. The older, more experienced hunter was fierce and jabbed the spear at my face. I knocked it aside, but she pulled it back and drove it at me again.

I countered again and again as she tried to slice me open, her spear bouncing off the more robust staff each time until she grunted in frustration. Angie slowed her attacks and I took the opening, bringing the staff down hard. It must have been what she intended though, because she sidestepped and used the shaft of her spear to connect with mine then performed a circular motion where her spear tip hooked the barrel of my staff and pushed it into the ground momentarily.

The move allowed her to get close and kick out at my knee. She connected and I grunted, stumbling back. Angie, thinking she had me, took her spear off my staff and lunged forward. I jerked my arm back and let the staff slide through my grip, then thrust it at her. It struck her in the chest, and I delivered a miniblast that sent her lurching backward and collapsing ungracefully to the floor.

When Angie didn’t get back up, I turned to check on Nell, mostly spent from our short altercation.

She was handling the other man pretty well, at least in my opinion. Nell didn't have the man's height or muscles, but he was soft from working in the greenhouse. She ducked his unpracticed swings easily, delivering short jabs of her own and dancing away before he could react.

The technique worked for a little bit, but Roric soon caught on. The next time she came within reach, he snagged part of her jumpsuit and yanked her back before she could bound away.

He brought an arm around her neck, yanking Nell to his chest. Roric lifted her off the ground in a headlock as she kicked out wildly and tried to loosen his grip.

I stepped forward, ready to strike, when Nell reached into one of her pockets and produced a stick. No, I quickly realized. It was her bow. She swung her arm up, the grip turning blue in her hands, and extended it, and hit Roric in the face, just above the eye.

He cried out and let her go, clutching the spot that would soon become a bruise.

"You bitch!" he snarled, reaching into his back pocket. The handgun he produced made every muscle in my body tense and I activated the staff on reflex, but Nell beat me to it.

Her bow glowed with power and she set an arrow to it.

She released it, and the projectile struck Roric in the hand. He dropped the weapon with a howl, backing away slowly before turning and running in the opposite direction.

Nell retracted the weapon with a questioning look in her eyes.

"Let him go," I said. "We've got more important things to deal with."

She was breathing heavily, her blood pumping at the fight.

"You did well," I continued.

"Thanks. Wasn't sure if it would go that way," she said. Her gaze focused on Angie. "Is she..."

"Dead? No, just knocked out. She's still breathing."

We began moving again, heading for the makeshift prison in good time. There was no one to stop us. Not yet, anyway, and I was glad for that.

I put my hand on the door pad, but it didn't open. Doors at the compound were hardly ever locked, so I wasn't quite sure what to do. I felt a rush of panic but tried to calm myself. When the pad beeped angrily at me and went red, I realized the rebels must have modified it. Maybe they'd done so from the other side. I hadn't even considered the possibility of them re-coding it.

"Here, let me," said Nell.

I stepped aside and let her try, a little nervous she too would be locked out. Then the pad blinked green, the door slid open, and I stepped inside with a short-lived sigh of relief.

The room was dark. Using my staff as a light, I stepped inside. An empty room was all that greeted us.

## Chapter 15

"Where the hell did they go?" I demanded, staring at the vacant room.

"I don't know," replied Nell, looking just as shocked as I felt. She kept looking around the room as though the missing prisoners might reappear out of thin air.

Unsure of what else to do, I walked around the space, looking for any clue as to where they might have gone.

"Maybe someone else let them out," Nell suggested, though she sounded doubtful. "We should go to the compound and get help. Maybe they are on their way there."

I didn't answer, mulling the idea over in my head. It had its merits, but I sincerely doubted it was the case. "But what if they aren't? Then maybe Mario kills them all before we can come back."

Nell shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. But we can't exactly stay here."

Knowing she had a point, I cast a final glance around the room. The cots were still there, along with a few ration wrappers, but not much else. I went over to where Mark and I had sat, thinking he might have left me some breadcrumbs to follow, but it too was bare.

"Alright," I started to say, then stopped when the glint of something shiny on the floor caught my eye.

I bent down and picked the object up, studying it in the weak light. My eyes widened when I realized what it was. "I don't think they're at the compound," I announced.

"What did you find?" asked Nell, coming closer.

"Prime Lambert's pin," I said, holding it out to her.

"What, are you sure? He never takes that off. None of them do." She took the pin from me and inspected it.

"It's his," I confirmed. "He would never leave it on purpose. I think it's a message. Mario wants me to know he has him."

Understanding bloomed on Nell's face. "Oh, shit."

We both exchanged a glance, then spoke at the same time. "The cavern."

It was a small thing, but in the moment I was reminded of Karin. Pain filled my heart, but I couldn't allow myself the luxury of grief.

"I haven't actually seen a Reckoning yet," Nell admitted as we left the room.

Her confession made me stop and I put a hand on her arm. "There are a few things I need to tell you about then."

She listened intently. I studied her face for any indication that she was lying but found none.

"I knew it was bad," she said when I finished. "People were getting taken away and not coming back."

"Tiberius is... terrifying."

"I really thought he was just something Mario made up to make everyone fall in line," she whispered.

"No," I told her. "This isn't going to be easy. Are you sure you can do this?"

She nodded fiercely. "I owe it to them."

I didn't disabuse her of the notion because, frankly, she was right.

"Let's go," I said, taking off at a jog.

The rest of the encampment looked abandoned. Was *everyone* at the caves? Or had that many people fled, unable to serve Mario? The latter seemed possible, given what Nell had told me and my own experiences with the man.

It wasn't hard to see how he had gained his initial following. I'd known him my entire life, and he'd always been levelheaded, a respected hunter, and my father's closest friend.

If he'd brought his concerns to the other hunters, I could understand them taking him seriously and moving to unseat my father as Director. Mario had said that no one had taken him seriously when he tried to tell them about Tiberius, though. What had he told the hunters to make them believe him? They were now part of his inner circle, for sure. The ones who had spoken against Cyril at the ceremony. There had to be more to how this all began, but I didn't have time to puzzle it out. We had arrived.

As soon as we cleared the passageway, Mario, Nero, and a dozen or so of their rebels came into view. All of them were armed, not with spears, but with rifles and handguns.

*Just great*, I thought, noting how outnumbered we were. From the smirks on their faces, they knew it too.

The prisoners stood in the same spot Laurell had the day before. A few more of Mario's men had weapons trained on them, I assumed in case someone tried to run. I scanned the group until I found Mark and Lambert.

"How did you know?" I asked Mario, tightening my grip on the staff.

He scoffed. "Stupid girl. How could you think I wouldn't be watching?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth I felt like an idiot. Why hadn't I thought of that? Of course, he would have a camera in the lab to keep an eye on me. As soon as Nell showed up, he probably took action.

"This is a job for adults," he told me snidely. "Give up now, you're barely a prospus out of training."

"And you're crazy," I shot back, not caring that it sounded juvenile.

"Nell, dear," he said, ignoring me and turning his attention on her. "Retrieve the staff and I'll forgive you."

I tensed, more than a little nervous that she might sell me out, but she shook her head. "No. I'm done following you."

His eyes flashed in anger. "Then you want to die? So be it."

He lifted the rifle and I stepped in front of Nell protectively. I wasn't going to let him kill again.

"How can you be a leader if you have to make others do your dirty work?" I sneered. "If you want the staff, come get it. Unless you're afraid of a prospus just out of training."

That caused a stir among his hunters and Mario looked around nervously, but his response was cut off.

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

"Sounds like Tiberius is on his way," I said. "I bet he'd love to hear all about how you plan to use this staff on him."

All the color seemed to drain from his face.

"That's what I thought. Let us—all of us—go now and he won't hear it from me."

"Father, you can't seriously be—"

"Shut up, Nero," Mario ordered.

THOM.

THOM.

THOM.

“You’re running out of time,” I said lightly.

“Fine, take them and go,” Mario seethed. “We won’t stop you.”

“If you shoot us in the back, know that I will use my dying breath to bring this entire cavern down around us,” I warned him.

To show that I was serious, I activated the staff, a blue light forming around the tip.

Mario scowled, clearly offended by the insinuation that he lacked honor. This man, who thought he was doing the right thing in all of this. “I won’t,” he said, simply.

“Let’s go,” I said to Nell.

We were almost halfway to Mark and the other prisoners when Tiberius entered the cavern, followed closely by three of his kind. His cold, blue eyes took in the scene before him.

“What is this, Mario?” he asked, the words echoing loudly.

“Run!” I yelled, grabbing Nell’s hand, but she seemed rooted to the ground.

She was looking at Tiberius in horror, her mouth agape, body frozen. Nell wasn’t the only one. A few of the prisoners stood stock still, unable to move. Others scattered like insects, some of them screaming, and made for different tunnels.

“No!” I shouted, panicking in the moment of chaos.

Nell still wasn’t moving, so I did the only thing I could think of and slapped her.

That seemed to jolt her. She flinched and stared at me.

“Nell, we have to move. Now!”

“Ri-right,” she stuttered, still terrified but at least out of her trance now.

“Tiberius!” Mario yelled above the mayhem. “These Boneclaw hunters were the ones acting on Cyril’s orders and killing your family. They’re trying to get away!”

*Orders?* I thought. What was he talking about? More than a few of his captives were not hunters.

Tiberius swung his head sharply to fleeing prisoners and let out a series of fast clicks and chattering noises to the other three Boneclaws.

All at once things became clear.

This was how Mario had achieved an Alliance with the talking Boneclaw. He had told Tiberius that my father was purposely killing them. No wonder he wanted payback.

Cyril had never issued an order like that. His and every Prime’s decisions were balanced toward the preservation and sustainment of every species of life on this world. It was the only way to maintain a future for ourselves. Mario, as Tiberius’ only direct contact with humans, had convinced the creature that my father was to blame.

I’d have to worry about that later. For now, we had to get out.

I needed to slow the Boneclaws down. I fired a volley of small blasts from the staff at the cavern walls, careful to avoid Tiberius, his soldiers, and our people. My hope was that it would bring down enough debris to give us at least a few meters distance, but the walls held and it was all for little more than a few bursts of dust.

But Boneclaws covered their ears. I suddenly remembered the video from the archives. They were sensitive to loud noises.

“Everyone head for the smallest tunnel!” I yelled, raising the staff and shooting again as we ran.

Mark heard me and started shouting at the people around him. A few caught on and changed direction, heading for the small opening I’d pointed out, but many had already scattered.

Tiberius snatched a fleeing woman who was trying to escape and tossed her aside, as if she weighed no more to him than a datapad did to me.

My blasts were starting to have an unanticipated side effect. As they struck the rock walls in quick succession the vibrations shook the ceiling. Stalactites began to break loose, arrowing into the ground and bursting, sending small stone fragments in all directions.

I stopped firing when a hunk of rock came crashing down nearby, narrowly missing one of the running prisoners, but it was too late.

Another piece fell and struck one of the smaller Boneclaws in the shoulder. It howled in pain and scrambled back, unsure where the blow had come from.

Tiberius roared again and searched the cave for the source of the blasts. His icy blue eyes landed on me and held my gaze. Then he charged.

I ran with everything I had, eating up ground and wishing like hell Tiberius would trip and fall on his face. I made it into the tunnel just behind Nell and Prime Lambert, who didn’t move as fast as us younger ones.

“Don’t stop!” I bellowed.

It was a good thing I did too, because the tunnel wall shook as the massive creature struck the opening. His size prevented him from giving chase, but I looked behind me and saw his clawed hand arcing through the air.

My muscles were on fire, but I dug deep and found more, running faster than I’d ever thought possible.

Something hit me in the back, but not hard, and I realized it was a spray of dust and rock from Tiberius’ hand missing me and digging into the ground.

When I turned around, he was dragging it back, leaving deep grooves in the rocky floor. I heard shouts and recognized Allan’s voice. Mario must have sent them in after us when he saw we were getting away.

“Everyone keep going,” I ordered. “I’m going to head them off so they can’t follow us.”

“You can’t face them alone,” Nell protested.

“Don’t worry, I’m not,” I assured her.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to do what I think you’re going to do,” asked Mark, who must have noticed the grim look of determination on my face. “That didn’t turn out so well last time, remember.”

“It’s the only play we’ve got,” I grunted, lifting the staff and creating another sphere of energy. “Here we go again,” I said under my breath.

This time I was careful not to overdo it and took the time to aim before releasing the orb.

I still wasn’t entirely prepared for the shockwave, but at least I managed to stay upright as the ceiling began to fall.



## Chapter 16

“You’re either brave or crazy,” Mark coughed in the dark.

This tunnel had been dug by the Boneclaws, and as such, it had no source of light. When the cave-in blocked off access to the cavern, it had also plunged us into total darkness.

“A little of both,” I replied, releasing enough energy to turn the staff into a light source.

“Come on, “I said. “I think I can hear the others up ahead. We need to clear out in case that didn’t stop everyone following us.”

The other two nodded and we followed the tunnel until the small group of survivors came into view. I tried not to wince when I only counted seven forms.

“What’s going on?” asked Don Hardy, his voice unsteady.

I couldn’t remember what his job was in the community, but I’d seen him around plenty. He was bald and always wore a thick cap to stave off the cold. At the moment, he looked skittish. His eyes were wide with fear as though he’d run away at any moment.

“I had to close off the tunnel entrance to stop anything from getting in,” I explained.

“No, not that. *Her*. She’s been helping them, I saw it.”

He was looking at Nell accusingly.

Even in the dim light I could see her pale face turn red and she twisted her hands together nervously.

There were a few grunts of assent from the others, but I focused on Don. “Nell is the reason you’re not still in that room or Boneclaw dinner. I trust her,” I said, fixing a cold stare on him.

“Who put you in charge?” His voice was rising, his fear becoming something else. “You’re a child barely out of training.”

My temper flared. Mario’s words from Don’s mouth.

“I did,” declared Prime Lambert, appearing from somewhere in the back. “As the highest-ranking citizen among you, that is my right. Miss Visaro is more than qualified for the task.”

Don looked as though he might protest but must have thought better of it.

“Mark, can you do anything with this?” I asked, shooting Lambert a grateful glance, then pulling the datapad out and handing it to Mark. “It’s been restricted.”

He took it from me with an *of course I can* look, then started working on it with a series of complicated finger taps.

“We can’t stay here long,” I reminded him. “If you can get it working, we’ll have the map and you can try to get a message out.”

“It’s done,” he announced less than a minute later, not hiding his pride. “But it’s useless right now. Wherever we are, it’s not close enough to the facility to get any kind of signal.”

“Will it still work to modify the staff? I don’t think using the core’s energy like this for long is a good idea. If something catches me off guard, it’s liable to cause another cave-in. I want to put a cap on the power output to prevent that.”

He performed a few more taps and handed the pad over. "Yeah, it can still connect. Just remember if we get into trouble, we'll have to stop and recode it again."

"I know, but it's either that or we walk in the dark. Unless someone has a light?" I asked, glancing around at the others.

Don shook his head and averted his gaze, clearly still upset about Nell. When no one spoke up, I made the necessary alterations on my own, capping the energy draw at 18 gigajoules. I reasoned that it would be enough to stop any trouble we ran into without killing us in the process.

I was about to disconnect the pad when I paused, quickly making a final alteration. "Mark," I said, waving him over. "I don't want to advertise this, but I took off the bio lock in case someone else has to use this."

He nodded. "Hopefully it doesn't come to that."

After it was done, I walked away from the group a few dozen paces and tried an experimental shot. The staff produced a small stream of blue light that dissipated as soon as it left the barrel.

"Okay, we're good," I said crisply, trying not to show my annoyance at hobbling my weapon.

A loud bang came from the caved in area, and everyone froze. Then it came again, louder this time, followed by the sound of falling rock.

"They're trying to get through," Don whispered, stating the obvious.

"Everyone, move!" I ordered, leading the way at a brisk pace.

The racket continued as we moved farther into the tunnel, but I took that as a sign that they hadn't made it through yet. This tunnel mirrored the one Nero had lured us to—empty, with deep grooves in the floor and walls where the Boneclaws had dug.

"Hey, got a signal," Mark said after a little while. "It's not strong enough to send a message, but the map is working."

"Where are we?"

He showed me our green marker in an unmapped part of the cave system and shrugged. "This tunnel wasn't exactly part of the original design."

"It has to end soon," I pointed out. "That's the encasement assembly line of the fusion core facility."

"Which has been deemed off limits by the Primes and your father," he reminded me.

"Somehow, I don't think we're going to get reprimanded for breaking that ordinance," I said.

"Of course not, dear," said Lambert, walking faster to catch pace with us.

I waited a beat to see if Nell would as well, but she hung back and kept quiet. In fact, I realized she hadn't spoken since Don's outburst, and I had a feeling it was to keep the others' attention off of her.

Part of me felt bad for her, but Don hadn't been altogether wrong. She had made a choice to follow Mario, at least for a time. There was bound to be some fallout from that.

"You know why it's off limits, don't you?" asked Mark, a touch too peppy for my liking.

“Yeah,” I said, waving a hand. “Unstable materials, structural damage, lots of broken machinery. We were in the same class, remember?”

Mark looked a little deflated, as though I’d scored higher on one of Janus’ quizzes or something. “Don’t forget about the radiation,” he said, perky again.

“Right,” I said, slapping my forehead in mock dismay. “How could I forget the radiation.”

“Well, I did some studying on the facility.”

“You don’t say?” I muttered. My patience had begun to wear thin from the subject.

“Yes, of course,” he continued, not catching my sarcasm. “In case we had to go there for the fusion core task. Anyway, there’s a tank of water under the assembly line area.”

“So?”

Mark blinked. “It’s contaminated, likely from the up-channel flow from the production line.”

“How contaminated?” I asked, a little more curious now. “Like melt our faces off contaminated? Instantaneous death?”

“Death wouldn’t be immediate,” he replied seriously. “The opposite actually. It would be slow and agonizing.”

“Well, let’s avoid that, then,” I said quickly, before he could launch into a detailed description of the side effects and scare the others more than they needed to be. “It’d be a shame to come all this way only to die from exposure.”

“We should be out of here soon,” he commented a few minutes later. “The facility is less than a hundred meters away. I think it will be around the next bend.”

Mark’s prediction turned out to be correct and we were soon standing in a large space that had clearly been built by the Eternals.

Where the tunnel had been crude and simplistic, the advanced architecture of our ancestors was prevalent here. Metallic surfaces and abandoned equipment abounded, though there was no evidence of power. My staff remained the only light and it wasn’t bright enough to illuminate the entire area, giving the space an unsettling feel.

“What’s the best way through here?” I asked Mark.

The rest of the group huddled close, looking unnerved by their surroundings. I couldn’t blame them. Besides the lack of power, the place looked as if all the workers had gone on a break and would be back at any time.

Industrial vehicles had been parked haphazardly, some with loads still raised into the air. A conveyor meant to transport materials throughout the facility still had half-filled compartments, waiting to be loaded and sent on their way to destinations unknown.

“Okay, I’ve been looking it over and did the same thing we did when looking for the fusion cores. The red areas are high levels of radiation. Yellow for medium, green for safe.”

From what I could see, there was overwhelmingly more red than yellow and green. “Looks like there’s only one way out,” I remarked.

“Hopefully it’s all passable,” said Nell, finally speaking again.

My lips tightened into a frown. I hadn’t thought of that.

A slight tremor shook the ground and I looked up sharply.

“Did you feel—”

The roar of an enraged Boneclaw echoed from the tunnel we’d just exited.

“Break time’s over,” I said, turning to Mark. “Take point since you have an idea where we’re going.”

He nodded and took off in the direction of the first green marker I’d seen. The rest of us followed close on his heels.

“At least Tiberius couldn’t fit in the tunnel,” Nell said to me.

“Maybe not him, but Boneclaws created it,” I said darkly. “At least one of them is small enough to get through it.”

We fell into silence, trailing after Mark as he led us deeper into the darkened facility.

“Is there any way to get the power back on?” asked Jennifer Murphy, a woman I recognized from scavenging jaunts.

We were backtracking for the third time after hitting another dead end of collapsed rubble. I knew we weren’t lost, but with the snaking path through identical rooms, I was having trouble keeping my bearings.

“No, Janus had the power off for safety reasons,” Mark explained.

“How are you getting a signal then?” asked Don.

It was a fair question and I waited to hear Mark’s answer.

“Different system. The Eternals wanted to have a way to communicate in case they lost power, so each facility had its own tritium core. Our compound was the one that handled communications,” he said, rattling off the information as if he’d been waiting for someone to ask just that question.

Knowing Mark, that was probably the case.

“Which way now?” I asked when we reached a junction with three connected passages.

He studied the map for a second then pointed left. “We came from the right. It’s a dead end behind us. That way leads to a yellow area though.”

“Not much of a choice,” I said, waving my arms wide to indicate he should take the lead again.

This passage took us through a series of small rooms that looked like the office portion of the production facility. The map took us through the maze of cubicles and communal areas, most untouched.

“Anybody hungry?” Don joked after we passed a vending machine with packages of food still inside.

Even Lambert snorted at that.

“If you want to chance nearly two millennia old food, be my guest,” I said, then made an exaggerated gagging noise.

The exit led to the warehouse that held the assembly line, and we entered it warily, unsure of what we might find.

“Stay behind me,” Mark warned us. “The radiation is higher to our left and right, but if we stay on this path, it should be okay.”

Even with the map and Mark leading the way, progress was slow. Unlike where we entered, most everything was in shambles. Judging from the wide-scale destruction, fallout from the collapse had been the worst here.

“Watch your step,” I told the others. “Not all of this looks stable.”

A far-off thump reminded all of us that we weren't alone.

We'd left the Boneclaw tunnel behind in a hurry, wanting to put as much distance between us and the enemy as possible, and gone into the large warehouse that Mark promised would lead us out. Perhaps ten minutes after that, one of the creatures ran out of the tunnel, alerting us with its thunderous steps.

The video Janus showed us from the era when the assembly line was up and running looked nothing like the scene before us now. A few areas were blackened and burned out husks, the site of some kind of explosion.

Robots tasked with the handling of radioactive material lay twisted and broken, their protective shielding cracked or completely destroyed.

To my knowledge, the facility had been checked for a potential explosion, but none was found. At the time, no one wanted to risk radiation poisoning, and this was one area that had never been scavenged.

The cores we scavenged currently were completed units that had been shipped from this facility and were already stockpiled at the other two. The Eternals had built the fusion core compound with catastrophe in mind, making sure to include a layer between it and the rest of the cave system. That way, no radiation could leak out. We had treatments of course, in case of emergency, but had never had to use them.

The ones who survived the chaos after the Boneclaws' escape and the ensuing destruction had opted to just close it all up, turn the power off, and forget about it. Nothing had been salvaged, including the dead.

We discovered that last part when a resource handler named Alix Thurman squealed, making the rest of us jump.

She stumbled back, pointing at something behind a vehicle used for transporting heavy loads of material.

I eased over to her and shone the light on the dark lump she was staring at. It was a person, or had been once, lying facedown on the ground.

“Nothing but clothes and bone,” I told her. “It can't hurt you.”

She grimaced, looking embarrassed. “I know that. Sorry, it just freaked me out.”

“It's okay,” I replied. “But something might have heard that. Mark, are we getting closer?”

He nodded. “Once we get through here, we just have to go down three levels. From there, there are a number of exits that will take us to the main cave system.”

We started walking again, only to pause once more when Nell signaled for us to stop.

“What is it?” I asked, thinking she might have seen another body.

She put a finger to her lips and pointed the other one at her ear. “It's getting louder,” she mouthed.

I went still and strained my ears. A few seconds later, I heard it: clicking noises, like Boneclaws talking, then a soft thump.

My eyes widened. “They must be moving carefully so we don't hear them as well,” I whispered. “Mark, you have to pick up the pace. They're closer than we thought.”

Mark started speed walking. I jogged a little to catch him so he had the light to see by. He almost tripped over some debris.

“Steady,” I told him.

We had almost cleared the warehouse floor when a crash came from behind us. A loading door crumpled inward with the force of something smashing into it then started to tear away from its track.

A hairy white arm stuck through the opening and swiped with its clawed hand.

“Go!” I yelled.

Mark ran first, checking to make sure the rest of us were behind him, then sprinting forward again. We followed him through piles of ruined building as the Boneclaw screeched and broke through the rest of the door.

I was out of breath, dragging in great gulps of air when at last the end of the warehouse came into view. Everything hurt and my lungs were on fire, but we were too close to stop now.

“It’s there!” Mark yelled, pointing at a wall coming up fast.

As we drew closer, I could see what he was talking about. A derelict elevator stood half open, as if it had been trying to close when the power went out. That wouldn’t do us any good, but where there was an elevator there had to be stairs.

Scanning, I saw the emergency sign to the left of the elevator, its red arrow pointing the way to a manual door. If we could cross the fifty meters to it, everything would be fine. There was no chance in hell even the smallest Boneclaw could make it in there.

A transport lift sat to one side, along with a few overturned cases of fusion cores, but not much else. If we kept to one side, it would only take a few seconds to cross.

“Wait!” Prime Lambert was waving his hands frantically and yelling to get our attention.

I skidded to a stop, searching for the source of his concern, and saw it immediately.

The expanse of floor we stood on shook and groaned. At first, I thought that was what he was warning us about. Then Lambert pointed at the ground and I saw it.

A fusion core lay there. It wouldn’t have been a big deal under normal circumstances. The core housing had been designed to be safe to handle without protective gear, which we did regularly. Unless the protective casing was damaged, as this one appeared to be. Whatever had happened to break the casing had also torn through the floor. The metal sagged and groaned with every step, and the glowing core rattled with every motion.

“It’s okay,” Mark said, pushing his hands down in what he probably thought was a calming gesture. “No sudden movements. Ease your way around it.”

Everyone did as he asked. I barely dared to breathe, and I guessed we were all thinking the same thing.

*Please don’t go off.*

Nell had just made it around to the other side of the damaged core and Alix was moving centimeter by petrified centimeter past it when a Boneclaw stomped around the corner. Alix froze, too terrified to move as it barreled toward her.

I watched, horrified as it reached the edge of frail ground. It seemed to realize immediately that it was in danger because the Boneclaw attempted to leap backward, but it was too late.

The floor began to crumble, and the broken fusion core disappeared into a deep fissure.

## Chapter 17

Mark had the door to the stairwell open and was guiding those nearest to him in first. I left him to it and focused on Alix, who still hadn't moved.

Without knowing which part of the floor might be safe, if any, I tested every step before putting my full weight down.

"Alix! Snap out of it!" I yelled, trying to get her attention.

The girl finally looked around, her eyes widening as she took in the disintegrating ground beneath her. "I don't think I can do it," she said hoarsely.

I held out my staff like a lifeline. "There, that's almost two meters you don't have to go," I told her, forcing my voice to stay calm.

Alix nodded and took a step toward me. Then another. Her features were pinched in fear and concentration as she crept along at a maddeningly slow pace.

I was almost about to urge her to move faster when the Boneclaw fell through the floor where it stood, catching itself on the firm ground it had come from.

This threw Alix off balance and she tipped back, then leaned forward again, flailing in an attempt to right herself. One foot came down hard on a cracked portion of paneling, splitting it open. She scrambled to climb the falling section as it went vertical but couldn't do more than hang on as it fell into the now wide-open crevasse.

Her eyes met mine, wide with terror, then began to slip out of view. Her scream echoed from the dark below then was suddenly cut off.

I wanted to rush headlong after her, but I knew it would be useless.

Forcing myself to turn away and head for the stairwell, I spotted Nell. She'd fallen a little way from safety and struggled to stand back up.

The Boneclaw roared and kicked, doing everything in its power to not fall into the now gaping hole behind it. Every movement sent vibrations through the already weakened flooring and almost sent me toppling.

I ran the last few steps to her and hauled her up. It wasn't pretty, but she got her footing again and stumbled her way to where Mark still held the door open.

Another rumble sent me to my knees, and I used the staff to push myself back up. It jerked me back a step and I looked down in confusion to find that the bottom had gotten wedged into the shifting floor.

"Lucia, don't be stupid!" Nell yelled from the door. "Leave it!"

She was right, the staff was a material thing and not worth dying over, but most of the floor was already gone and I just needed a second to get it loose.

It popped free and I grinned triumphantly despite the situation. My success was short lived though, because in another spectacular instance of bad timing, an explosion rocked the area from underneath us.

As I was falling, I had a moment to grasp that the unstable fusion core had gone off, no doubt from being jostled and having a ton of falling concrete land on top of it.

Then the moment passed, and I had to focus on not dying. I thrust the staff forward, trying to find purchase on something, anything, but it slid off uselessly.

The single stroke of luck I had was that where I'd been standing broke off in a large slab and dropped straight down rather than tipping back like with Alix.

On the other side of the room, the Boneclaw was losing its fight as well. It hung perilously onto the edge of the hole by only the claws of one arm when the material gave way and crumbled under its weight. The animal and I fell almost at the same time into the darkness below.

Not again, I thought when I opened my eyes to a pile of broken rock and darkness. This was becoming an all too familiar feeling. The first thing on my to do list when this was all over would be sleep without getting knocked out.

Forcing myself into a sitting position, I checked for injuries. Aside from another layer of cuts and bruises, there didn't seem to be anything wrong, though my previously injured arm ached in its cast.

Rock shifted around me and the sound of falling water came from somewhere nearby. I felt around in the darkness, afraid the staff had been thrown out of reach. If it had, I might never find it in the total darkness.

Then my hand brushed the familiar etched metal and I closed desperate fingers around it. The staff moved but didn't come away in my hands. The shaft glowed at my touch, a beacon of something not quite hope, but close. It revealed a few small rocks I easily moved, then the staff was in my grasp once more.

I turned the light up as bright as it could go and got to my feet. Turning in a slow circle, I studied my surroundings. It was an underground cavern filled with slabs of broken floor and rubble. The warehouse lift had fallen in and now lay on its side, a hunk of twisted steel and shattered glass.

All the debris in one area had been completely pulverized. From the fusion core, I guessed. It would explain why the blast hadn't killed us all when it exploded. If it had been under a pile of heavy rock, that would have blunted the worst of the blast.

Looking up, I judged the fall to have been about twenty meters. The piece of floor panel I'd been on had landed on an already high mound of debris, which must have broken my fall.

I clambered up the mound, backsliding on some of the less secure bits as they came loose. Once I reached the top I called out above.

"Mark! Nell! Anyone up there?" I yelled, cupping my hand around my mouth to project the sound.

No one answered. I hoped that meant they were in the safety of the stairwell and not dead.

A groan cut through the silence and I whirled around, thinking it was Alix, but didn't see her.

"Alix?"

No response.

I tracked left to right with the staff, moving around the area where she might have fallen. Its light fell on an outstretched hand and I almost tripped over the loose stone in my haste to get to her. When I reached Alix's broken, lifeless form, I knew the noise hadn't come from her.



She lay half buried under the wreckage. No one could have survived the damage her body had sustained, not even the immortal Eternals.

Something shifted behind me and released a heavy breath that lifted the loose strands of hair on my neck. Moving slowly, I pivoted on my heel and came face to face with the Boneclaw.

“Not Alix,” he whispered.

I backed up several paces until out of its arm’s reach and cocked my head at him. “Not Tiberius. Yet you speak,” I returned, trying to keep my composure.

This was not at all what I had expected.

A long scar on one side of his face looked familiar. Had I seen this Boneclaw before? He didn’t have Tiberius’ size or human-like hands. He had eyes, but they were milky and unseeing. I wondered fleetingly if they all had the ability to talk but we had never realized it.

*So much for Tiberius being the only one*, I thought. This Boneclaw seemed younger, and I wondered who he was to Tiberius.

“Are you here to finish me?” the creature asked, ignoring my statement with a note of derision in his voice.

“No. I fell down here, just like you. Besides, you chased us, not the other way around,” I pointed out.

He jerked a shoulder in a decidedly un-Boneclaw way. “After you attacked us in the cavern.”

I spread my hands in a peaceful gesture, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t see it. “A misunderstanding. I wasn’t trying to hit anyone, only cause a distraction for my people to escape.”

“You can’t escape what you’ve done,” he replied harshly. “I know who you are. Your scent was on her. I recognize it now.”

*Who was he talking about?*

It hit me like a blast of cold water. The Boneclaw from my first hunt. He’d known her, had been to the kill site. I stared at him in horror when it clicked. The four Boneclaws who had come running to the gorge.

“She was my mother,” he finally said. It was unnerving to hear what I could recognize as grief in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I mean that. Our people...We didn’t know—”

“That we are intelligent?” he finished for me. “Why should that matter? You kill life. You destroy.”

“Your kind hunts the frost horn, don’t they?”

He didn’t respond.

“We hunt to survive, just like you. We fight to defend ourselves when in danger. Your people have been that danger. You’ve killed us, too.”

The Boneclaw fell quiet again and I got the feeling he was thinking over what I’d said.

“What’s your name?” I asked. “I’m Lucia.”

He scoffed at the question, then moaned when the movement caused him pain.

“You’re hurt,” I said, trying to get a better look at him without getting too close.

One of his legs bent out at an odd angle and a claw from his right hand had been torn out. A gash on his chest bled freely, the green streaming down his white fur.

“Your observation skills are unparalleled, Lucia, Daughter of Cyril,” he said wryly.

I sighed heavily. This creature was frustratingly hard to talk to. “Do you want my help or not?”

“Yes,” he said after a long pause. “Call me Othello, the name my father gave me to speak with your kind.”

“Who is your father?” I asked.

“Tiberius is his name,” he replied.

“Okay, Othello. I’m going to help you. Let’s get one thing clear, though. While I have no desire to hurt you, I will protect myself. You know the power of my weapon. You felt it firsthand in the caves.” He didn’t have to know that the staff was currently a glorified flashlight.

This time he stayed so quiet I thought he had passed out. His breaths came slow before he finally answered. “You have my word.”

I still didn’t trust him and kept an eye on his claws as I drew closer, then I stopped short. Othello lay in a shallow pool of water. I’d bet my rations it had come from the contaminated source Mark told me about.

“Othello, besides the obvious, do you feel alright?”

“No,” he admitted. “This water is poison. I can smell the death it carries.”

I stepped back again in case my next words set the big guy off. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to pull you out myself,” I told him. “But I can bring back help.”

Othello clicked in a way I quickly realized was a laugh. “It is as I suspected.”

“No, you’re wrong,” I insisted. “I will come back. Then you’ll see that we aren’t what you think.”

I started a search of the pit. It was possible that no natural passage existed, but there might be an artificial one, perhaps built by the Eternals themselves.

For the first time since I was old enough to attend Janus’ lessons, I regretted not paying more attention to them. I was careful not to touch the water as Mark had warned but worried it wouldn’t matter. Was it possible that the whole cavern was contaminated, and my very presence here already meant a future illness? Would my children, if I ever got around to having any, come out of me with misshaped faces and a shortage of fingers and toes?

I decided it was best not to dwell on it. With Othello practically taking a bath in the irradiated water, he was going to need help, and fast.

As I’d suspected, a passage leading out of the cave looked Eternal made. It had precision-cut stairs and a darkened monitor on the wall. If someone had been down here long ago, there was a path out.

“I’ll be back,” I called out over my shoulder.

Othello made a noncommittal grunt but said nothing else.

I climbed the stairs, careful not to touch anything, and came out onto a platform of sorts. There was a door that looked like it belonged to an elevator shaft, so I ignored it and continued up.

The next level had a manual door like the one the others had gone through, so I tried to open it. It turned out to be locked, so I trudged up another flight.

This time the door opened easily, and I poked my head out to take a peek. It was hard to tell without the map, but I figured it had to be the same building we’d been headed for when the floor decided to collapse.

The door shut behind me with a snap and I cringed a little, even though the danger had passed with Othello injured below.

Something clanged in a different area of the building. It had to be Mark and the others. I set off, looking for a way out. This part of the facility didn't appear to be in the untouched condition of the office space we'd previously gone through.

Whereas the offices had clearly been for more mundane work, with tiny cubicles and drab décor, this place looked sleek and upscale. Except for the destruction.

All the furniture and equipment were in disarray, knocked over or broken into pieces when the people working here had fled. At first the debris looked chaotic, as if everyone in the vicinity had run in all directions at once. Then I looked closer, noticing there seemed to be a pattern to the mayhem.

I could almost imagine the scene unfolding in this area. Stampeding people, all pushing and shoving, knocking things over in their efforts to flee. The abandoned belongings and equipment highlighted the Eternals' path out of the building. If I remembered Mark's map correctly, it was the last stop before the caves.

The trail thinned out as there wasn't as much debris to follow in less occupied areas. Every so often I would spot a lone shoe or bag that someone had dropped and continue that way. So far, I hadn't seen any bodies, for which I was grateful.

At a split in the corridor, noises came from the left, like people running. Unless I'd been wrong, these came from a different direction than before. Frowning, I stopped, unsure which way to go. Something told me not to call out and reveal my position, so I stayed silent and turned left, winging it.

Some of the doors were still open, like the elevator that had been half open, and I peeked inside one of them. It was a lab, still wrecked, but not quite in as much disarray as the rest. When my light fell on a neat stack of fusion cores, it occurred to me that there was a treasure trove of untapped resources here.

I stepped inside and went to the table, intending to liberate them from their forever prison, but I stopped when I realized they wouldn't be easy to transport. Deciding that now wasn't the time to scavenge, I let them be, making a mental note to come back later.

"I'm telling you, I heard someone down here," a voice whispered from out in the hall.

Unsure if it was friend or foe, I cut the staff's power and looked around for somewhere to hide. If they had any kind of light, they'd have to be blind to miss me in here.

The number of footsteps didn't seem to match the number of our group and I feared more of Mario's men had followed us into the facility.

As they shuffled closer, a beam of light fell across the open doorway.

One of them mumbled something half a meter away. I raised my staff high, ready to bring it down on the skull of whoever entered.

## Chapter 18

"Hey, watch it!" yelled Don, bumping the light stick in his hands. I angled the staff away just before it collided with the man's face.

“Sorry, thought you were someone else,” I said, propping the shaft on my shoulder. “Is it just you?”

Don shook his head and stepped aside to reveal Jennifer.

“Lucia!” she squeaked. “You’re alive! We thought you were a goner.”

“You weren’t the only one,” I told her. “Where’s everyone else?”

The pair looked at each other with equally grim expressions. My heart plummeted at the thought of losing more people. We couldn’t have gone through hell and back only to fall at the finish line. The staggering injustice of that scenario was almost too much to bear.

“Guys?” I prompted. “What happened?”

Jennifer spoke first. “After we made it into the stairwell the only way to go was up,” she explained. “Without your light, Mark used the pad.”

She flicked a glance at Don’s light, pausing.

“What did you find?” I asked, unable to puzzle it out.

“Wolves,” Don finished for her, gulping. “The biggest den I’ve ever seen.”

“Everyone freaked out,” Jennifer continued. “Then I was stumbling alone in the dark until I saw Don’s light. Good thing you found that utility closet,” she told him.

Something in her tone caught my attention and Don nodded but looked at the ground nervously.

“What are the chances of that?” I wondered out loud. “Can I see it?”

“Sure,” he said, handing it over with a guilty expression.

I studied it for a moment then stared hard at the man. “This is one of our greenhouse lights. You didn’t get that from here.”

“I knew it,” scoffed Jennifer. “Your story just didn’t make any sense. How long have you had that on you?”

He didn’t have to say anything for me to guess the answer.

“From the beginning,” I said irritably.

Don nodded.

“Why did you let me disable our only weapon if you had that the whole time?” I demanded.

I knew this wasn’t the best time for an interrogation, but his actions had put everyone at risk, himself included.

“I was saving it in case I needed to break off from the group,” he muttered, then nudged his chin up in defiance to look at Jennifer. “Look, I’m the one who got it past the guards. And lucky for you I did. You’d still be running around alone in the dark if not for me.”

“Don’t turn this around to make yourself some kind of hero.” Jennifer fisted her hands on her hips and stared daggers at him.

Recognizing that the argument could draw attention, I waved my hands at them. “We can talk about this later. For now, let’s focus on finding the others.”

“I’m not finding anyone,” Don asserted. “Between the wolves, the Boneclaws, Mario, and radiation, they’re probably all dead by now. No, we should go home and send a hunting party to find them.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Fine,” I said, handing the light stick back. “If you want to be a coward, I’m not going to try and convince you otherwise.”

When he took it, I turned on my heel and stalked out of the room, taking off in the direction I'd originally been headed. I couldn't understand how someone could be so devoid of concern for his people. Then again, maybe it wasn't so surprising after all, considering the uprising that Mario had facilitated.

Not everyone had been forced into it, I reminded myself. Some, whatever their reasons, had joined him willingly.

The idea made me question everything I thought I knew about my fellow colonists. Sure, most everyone was selfish, at least a little. You saw it every day in the compound. People arguing over whether some item belonged to them or cheating at a game. Even Nero's romantic antics garnered him extra favors.

But this behavior went beyond getting an extra ration or being crowned this year's tag ball champion. It spoke of an unrest that had to have been festering for a while.

Janus taught us about Earth history in detail—wars that had been fought, entire civilizations erased, and collapsed empires. Each one began with failures of leadership.

What mistake had my father made?

"Slow down," Jennifer said, breaking into my reverie and coming to my side. "I never said I wouldn't come with you."

"Sorry," I told her.

"It's okay. He was being an ass," the scavenger declared in a low voice. "Besides, I'm pretty sure he'll come back."

"What makes you say that?" I asked, doubtful at her words.

"He's not going to stay here alone with the wolves on the hunt," she said smugly.

We'd almost rounded the next corner of the long hallway when the sound of jogging feet came from behind us.

Just as Jennifer had predicted, Don had joined us.

I raised an eyebrow at her, and she grinned.

Don didn't say anything. As I was about to make a crack about him changing his mind, something or someone squealed.

"Do you think that was one of the others?" Don squeaked.

"I doubt any one of us would be stupid enough to make that loud of a noise with wolves on the hunt," I pointed out.

"That definitely wasn't human," Jennifer whispered urgently, no longer smiling. "I've heard that before in the caves. It's a wolf, no doubt about that. I still don't understand how they even got in here though."

Don just looked terrified.

"Time to go," I ordered, walking again.

"We came this way," Jennifer said. "Didn't find anything."

I told her about my theory regarding the trail of mess leading to an emergency exit.

"That's pretty smart," she said, giving me a nod of approval.

We followed the path a little longer, and sure enough it led us straight to a bank of elevators. To the left of them was a stairwell, and I felt a swell of relief when it came into view.

The door opened smoothly and the three of us trudged our way down to the next level. We would have kept going if not for the demolished steps leading away from the landing.

"Guess we're going out this door. Hopefully there's another way down," I whispered, opening it a crack to check for danger.

The way looked clear, so I motioned the others forward.

This level held more of the same disorder as upstairs, but a quick search showed that it lacked another set of stairs. I was ready to go back the way we came when the elevators caught my eye. The doors were open, but the cars themselves were missing.

I stuck my head inside one and swept the staff's light around. It looked sound, or at least I didn't see any obvious concerns. The elevator car sat two levels up and the bottom wasn't quite visible in the staff's light. When I turned around, Don jerked his head back and forth.

"There is no chance you're going to get me down there," he said.

"If you know of another way, I'm all ears." I waited for him to say something.

"That settles it then," Jennifer said, trying to conceal a smirk at Don's discomfort and failing hard.

"What if the car gives way?" Don asked nervously. "Or we fall?"

"Then it will be over so quick you won't even feel it," Jennifer replied.

"Those cars have been sitting up there for almost two thousand years," I reminded him. "I think they'll keep a little longer."

"What about your staff? You can't climb down with one hand," he pointed out in a last-ditch attempt to stall the inevitable.

He did have a point there.

Nothing on this level suggested the wolves' presence, so I felt comfortable leaving them for a few moments. I'd seen an oversized bag with a long shoulder strap attached to it among the fallen items and went back to find it.

When I returned, I had the staff tied securely to my back. It wasn't pretty, but it would work.

"Don't drop the light, Don. With the staff on my back I can't activate mine," I warned him.

"Maybe you should hold it," he told Jennifer, trying to thrust it at her.

"Oh no, Don, I couldn't," she said sweetly, pushing it back. "You earned it since you got it past the rebels."

Though her little jabs were funny, they only served to rile up Don more. I gave her a warning look.

She rolled her eyes and nodded, saying she understood. "I'll take the light and go first," she offered. "That way you can follow me down, Don."

"Yeah? That's probably a good idea. You being the experienced scavenger and all. I bet you deal with this sort of thing all the time," he rambled anxiously.

Jennifer held the light in her teeth and eased down into the elevator shaft. She gave me a brief nod, then began her descent in slow, careful movements.

Don and I stood at the edge and waited until she was on the next level. "Okay, you're up," I said, patting him on the back.

He swallowed hard, already sweating profusely, but did as I instructed. By the time it was my turn to go, the light had almost receded completely and I could barely see Jennifer.

I felt around for hand holds and lowered myself down, hoping I'd told Don the truth about the car not moving.

When I caught up to the other two, Jennifer had stopped. "How far down should we go?" she asked. "This could go down to sublevels we don't even know about."

"Did Mark say anything about that?" I asked, wracking my brain for the information.

"I don't remember," she admitted. "I kind of tuned him out after a while."

"Three," answered Don, surprising me. "He said when we got into the building, we would have to go down three levels to get out."

Now that he said it, it did sound familiar. "Okay, so the floor I met you on, was that the level you came in on?"

"No, we came up one level," Jennifer said from below. "We've come down two already, so two more to go."

A squeal echoed somewhere above, and I peered into the darkness looking for the source. It was nearly impossible to see much of anything so far above us.

But even in the meager light, I could see the car suspended above our heads shudder with a metallic clang as something heavy landed inside. A scratching noise came from it, followed by another squeal.

I kept an eye on Don so I didn't accidentally step on his head, but he was already shimmying down the shaft quickly, spurred on by a healthy dose of fear. Jennifer must have been on the move, too. I couldn't see her light anymore.

The noises continued in the elevator above, but the brakes held, much to my relief. I thought we'd gone too far and was about to say as much when something reached out of the inky darkness and grabbed my arm.

"It's me," whispered Jennifer from outside the shaft.

"What the hell?!" I hissed. "I almost—"

"I know, sorry. My light died and I was keeping an eye out for you. I think there are definitely more wolves here."

Once my heartbeat was more or less back to normal, I retrieved the staff from my back. I brought the light back gradually until our eyes were used to it again and did a silent check of our new surroundings.

"Looks—"

Before I could finish, shouting voices came from somewhere nearby, then they were mixed with baying and growling. Gunfire erupted next, in a series of loud, reverberating pops.

"Either of you have a weapon?" I asked sharply.

Don shook his head then held up his hand at my pointed stare. "Hey, don't look at me like that. I haven't even touched a gun in years. Don't like 'em."

Somehow that information failed to surprise me. I was beginning to wonder how the man had even stood up to Mario in the first place.

"Me either," said Jennifer, worriedly. "I didn't think anyone did."

"Okay," I said, blowing out a breath. "You two should hang back. No sense going into a gunfight with no weapon."

"Your staff isn't exactly up to snuff at the moment," she pointed out.

"It'll have to do," I told her.

"We'll stay with you," she said firmly. Then she nudged Don, who nodded.

"Sure. Run toward the guns and wolves, no problem," he said sarcastically.

I didn't bother to respond, just turned and did exactly what he'd said.

A few minutes later, the three of us stopped in a large room that looked like a receiving area. Our compound had something similar, but it was used for storage.

The fighting had stopped before we got there, but the slap of boots on the metallic flooring signaled someone's approach. I disabled the light after motioning Jennifer and Don to hide behind a large pillar.

I looked out from behind my own and watched as a trio of bobbing lights came toward us. As they got closer, I could see that they were mounted flashlights on rifles.

My nerves jangled at the view because, as Jennifer had said, none of our people had weapons when we separated. If these were Mario's men, we were virtually at their mercy. That thought hadn't occurred to me when I'd decided to run headfirst at the danger. Maybe there was something to Don's cowardice after all. It made him more cautious, that was for sure.

"We need to find Jennifer and Don," someone said as the group passed by my pillar.

"What about Lucia?" asked a familiar voice. It was Nell.

"There's no way she survived that," came the weary reply, who I recognized as Mark.

"About that," I said, stepping out.

The three of them whirled around, bringing the rifles up.

"Gods, Lucia, what is wrong with you?!" yelled Mark. "We almost shot you."

"I'm not sure if there was any way to show myself without causing some kind of reaction," I said. "That's why I waited until you passed. I've got Jennifer and Don."

The pair came out from behind their pillar and gave a little wave.

"Is there another separated group?" I asked, noting that it was only Nell, Prime Lambert, and Mark who remained.

"No," said Prime Lambert sadly. "The wolves took them when we got separated."

"How did you get out?" wondered Nell, staring at me in awe.

"Long story," I replied. "There is something I have to tell you though. But first, Mark, I need to get the staff working again. Can I have the pad?"

He winced, then kicked at something on the ground and my heart sank. "It kind of broke when we got into that last fight. I had it in my hand looking for the way out and dropped it. Sorry," he said.

I tried not to let my disappointment show and smiled at him. "Don't worry about it. I can fix it when we get home. Though I don't suppose you have any more of those rifles?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope, fresh out. We found them in a security room with the door wide open. The wolves were right behind us, so we only grabbed a few things then took off again."

"You can have mine," Nell said, moving to unclip the strap.



“No, you keep it,” I said, waving a hand at her. “My staff is still pretty dead, even without the firepower. So, Mark, how about a way out of here?”

“That I can help with,” he said with a grin.

## Chapter 19

“We’re nearly there. This used to be the main entrance to the laboratories. The emergency exit should be right over there.” Mark pointed with his flashlight.

The beam landed on a pile of broken pillar. To the right of it, the auto doors were shut, but I didn’t see any sign of the emergency exit he was talking about.

“If we can get to it,” muttered Jennifer.

A sudden scratching came from down the hall and we all turned to stare in that direction. The baying of more approaching wolves finally snapped us out of our stupor and had us running where Mark directed.

We came around another pillar and skidded to a stop. There in front of us stood the most beautiful thing I had ever laid eyes on. The exit. A few beams of light tearing through the cracks told me this was the way out. I felt a swell of joy in my chest at the sight of it.

“Let’s get out of here!” I yelled. “Come on!”

I grasped the handle and pulled. The door didn’t budge.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Nell.

“Dammit,” I cursed, then kicked the door in anger. It nosed open an inch and I froze, then cleared my throat.

“Push, don’t pull,” commented Nell.

“Let’s just go,” I said, throwing my weight against the door. This time, it opened easily, beset by the outside light.

We exited into a kind of courtyard, squinting at the bright sky above us.

“If we just go straight, we’ll find the ingress to the main cave system,” Mark said, stepping forward. “Then we’re almost home.”

“Everybody ready?” I asked.

They all nodded back. Even Don had relaxed, the perpetual look of fear plastered on his face these last few hours gone, replaced by an expression that could even be called a smile.

The courtyard itself didn’t look too bad, though there was still the occasional dropped item. A piece of twisted metal rose out of the ground in the middle with a short wall around the bottom, creating a kind of basin. It didn’t look like any of the other wreckage. Its smooth construction was too perfect, and I wondered at its purpose. When we walked by, I saw that water had collected inside the base.

“It’s called a fountain,” Jennifer told me, noticing my puzzled expression. “Water would have come out from it, landed in the pool, then been recycled in a constant loop. I’ve seen similar designs in the fauna facility.”

“Seems kind of useless to me,” I said.

Yet another example of the Eternals’ opulence. Shaking my head, I moved on. We were through the rest of the courtyard in under a minute and facing more

glass doors that led to the outer cave system. I didn't hesitate this time, though I did give the handle a little jiggle to check which way it opened.

Then we were out of the fusion core facility and back inside the main cave system. A wave of fresh air hit me, and I breathed deeply. It wasn't the same as being out on a hunt, but after being in a radioactive compound for the last few hours it felt pretty damn close.

"Grrr."

"What?" I looked back at the others, but they looked confused as to who had made the noise.

The *grrr* came again and was soon joined by more. A lot more. At least a dozen wolves lay on the ground. I hadn't seen them because in the dark they'd just looked like large rocks or more piles of debris.

One by one they began to stir, rising from sleeping positions and giving a little stretch before standing on all six legs and eyeing us hungrily.

"Back up, slowly," I said out of the side of my mouth. "Let's go back in."

I kept my eyes on the creatures. Now that they were fully awake, they turned their attention to us. A few had already begun to stalk forward, mouths open and venomous tongues lolling.

One of them whined, eliciting a few excited squeals from the others. A tiny yip sounded from behind her, and a pup teetered into view on uncooperative legs. It was almost cute, except for the sucker sticking out of its mouth.

Prime Lambert opened the courtyard door but quickly shut it again. "No good," he said, a slight tremor in his voice. "There are more out there."

Right about then I really wished I hadn't put the power cap on my staff.

"How much ammo do you guys have?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the now advancing wolves.

"Not enough," Mark replied. "I'm an idiot. This was one of the spots Janus warned us about."

"Anyone got a bright idea? Because now's the time," I said.

The corridor beyond the wolves spanned left and right, but if we tried to make a break for it the wolves would no doubt be on us in seconds.

The wolves suddenly stopped moving and pricked their ears, all turning to face the same direction. A deep rumble sounded, louder than the wolves' growls and squeals, and I flicked my gaze back and forth, trying to find the source.

The ground shifted beneath our feet, smaller pieces of stone and debris bouncing slightly as the thumping came closer.

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

*THOM.*

If I hadn't been so petrified, I might have laughed. The whole situation had either just gotten a lot worse or some kind of miracle was in the works.

"Is that what I think it is?" hissed Jennifer, glancing at the rest of us.

"I'm pretty sure it is," I answered.

The cave walls trembled and the ceiling groaned in protest as the Boneclaws advanced, so near now that I could hear their clicking.

The wolves slunk back, emitting keening noises low in their throats. The one with the pup picked it up gently in her jaws and carried it away.

The rest of the wolves followed suit when Tiberius burst into view—a frenzy of white fur and heavy limbs the size of tree trunks.

Tiberius slowed to a stop in the middle of the passageway as he stared at me.

Mario, Nero, and a few dozen rebels came in moments later from the opposite direction, all heavily armed.

“Put down your weapons,” Mario ordered, moving closer.

I nodded at Mark, Nell, and Prime Lambert to tell them it was okay. Slowly and cautiously, after some hesitation, they laid down their guns.

“You too, Visaro,” Costas said, motioning at my staff. “Don’t do anything stupid this time. My men will kill you before you can get a shot off.”

I almost spoke without thinking but remembered that he had no idea the staff was nothing more than a glorified flashlight at the moment. “Fine,” I said.

Resisting the urge to smile, I tossed it to him.

Mario caught it in one hand and dropped the rifle, letting it hang around his shoulder. Shock, then calculating glee registered on his face when it glowed blue in his grasp.

*Come on, I thought. Do it.*

For the first time, Mario did not disappoint me. The fool immediately turned the weapon on Tiberius.

“What are you doing?” the creature asked, fixing a piercing gaze on Mario.

“Taking control,” the man replied, aiming the staff at the Boneclaw. “Once I kill you, I’ll be lauded as a hero.”

The staff glowed and the tip lit, emitting nothing more than a few useless sparks. He stared down at it and I knew he was trying to figure out what was wrong.

I stepped forward. “He told me he planned to betray you. I modified the staff for a different purpose. It can’t hurt anyone. Now you know just how untrustworthy he is.”

Tiberius grabbed Mario with his massive hand before the rebel leader could even raise his rifle. “Your people are no better,” he growled.

The staff clattered to the ground, but I didn’t pick it up. I wanted to show Tiberius I meant no harm.

“You might be right,” I said, spreading my hands in an open gesture. “Still, I mean you no ill will today. I have to talk to you about Othello.”

Tiberius showed his fangs at the mention of his son. “What have you done?”

“Nothing, though he is injured and needs help. I can tell you where he is.”

“In exchange for what?” he snarled.

“Nothing,” I said, maintaining my calm. “I would prefer to live after this, but that’s up to you. I’m not demanding anything.”

I could tell the Boneclaw didn’t know what to make of me. In a show of good faith, I told him everything about my encounter with Othello.

A moment later, once I had finished, he gave a simple grunt. “Very well,” he said. “What of this one?” Tiberius glared at Mario. “You would prefer he live as well?”

“Not really, but I don’t want any more blood on my hands. You have my word he will pay for his crimes. We will no longer attack your people, so long as you don’t attack ours.”

“You cannot ensure such a thing. This one is merely the leader of some of your kind. You are not the leader of any,” the Boneclaw replied.

“She will be,” Prime Lambert said, edging forward. “Nero should never have been chosen, and the Primes involved will answer as well. I bear witness to her promise and she has my blessing.”

Tiberius did not answer right away but was instead silent. I could sense his mind working through it, taking all of this into account. He was, as far as I could tell, wiser than most men, and it would not do us well to keep him as an enemy.

Perhaps he felt the same of us. I hoped that was true, anyway. The last thing we needed was a war between two species, with one vying for the death of the other, a never-ending conflict that went on for generations, until only half of us remained. What would be the point of so much loss? What could any of it bring?

I prayed the Boneclaw saw what I saw. I hoped his dealings with humanity had not broken him yet.

Finally, the old beast’s eyes fell back on me, and he blinked and took a heavy breath. “Very well,” Tiberius decided. “Break faith with my people again and it will be the end of all of you.” He tensed his heavy fists and narrowed his eyes on me. “I swear it now, to each of you. I will wipe this land clean of Man should you betray your word today. Do not test me, now or tomorrow.”

I nodded my acknowledgement and stepped back. “You have my word.”

The Boneclaw dropped Mario. “Very well, Lucia Visaro.”

I helped the others to relieve Mario's men of their weapons. With their lack of Boneclaw support, the coup stood no chance of success. These people knew that. They understood it was over, and now things could get back to normal.

No, not normal. We were far beyond that now. Whatever came next would be something new.

Better, I hoped.

“I must go now,” informed Tiberius. “Othello waits for me, but you and I will have much to talk about in the coming days.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

I watched the creature leave, each step shaking the very ground beneath my feet.

“Lucia!” a voice called out. I watched as Josef threaded through the mill of people to reach me.

I motioned at him as he approached. “I’m sorry, but we didn’t find the stolen cores.”

“What?” he asked, confused.

“The fusion cores we were sent to retrieve,” I reminded him.

“Oh, I’m not worried about those.” He waved the thought away then produced a datapad from his jumpsuit. “I’m just glad you’re alright. Mark told me your staff needs to be fixed?”

“Yes, please,” I said gratefully, holding it out.

We made quick work at bringing the staff back to full function and I felt more at ease for it. I told Josef all I had learned, with Mark and the others filling in the occasional gaps.

“This is disturbing,” Josef said when we had finished. “Something like this should not have been allowed to happen.”

“There will need to be new Primes brought forth, after the current apprentices have been investigated,” Prime Lambert said, then looked apologetically at Josef. “Not that I don’t trust you, Apprentice Braid, but after this disaster we must be sure.”

Josef nodded. “It is necessary. I know where my loyalties lie.”

“We’ll have to do a check of all our people,” I said abruptly. “I have a feeling Mario has more men we haven’t found.”

Lambert sighed. “You’re very likely right, Prospus Visaro. It will no doubt take quite a long time for the community to recover from this devastation. We must do our best to set things back to normal sooner rather than later. The people will not do well if things are dragged out.”

“You said she will be the next Director?” asked Mark, looking hopeful.

“Yes, Prospus Nagata,” Lambert replied. “She would have been chosen if not for the corruption that befell the ceremony.”

“Good, I have to confess that I don’t feel up to the task anymore. Working with computers is more my pace,” Mark said.

Everyone chuckled at his relief.

## Chapter 20

As much as I wanted to fall into bed and sleep for a week, some things could not be left waiting.

Prime Lambert and I met with Cyril and my mother to debrief on the events in Mario’s stronghold and the fusion core facility.

Mario had been locked in a room alone until his fate could be decided. We didn’t know what to do with him, but the fact was that he was a traitor, and we couldn’t let that go unpunished.

Most of his men were released, however, to show mercy and hopefully return things to normal. They were pawns in this, it was decided, and most would not move against the colony again. If they did, then we would deal with them in a decisive and justified manner.

Besides, our colony was small. There were only a few hundred of us, which meant every loss of life took its toll on the greater whole. Less people meant a smaller genetic pool. It meant less viable parents. Fewer children to keep us going.

By the time everything was settled and the day was spent, my entire body ached, shouting at me to rest. I would in time, but not yet.

There was still one last thing I needed to do.

“No. I won’t allow it,” my father said from his bed in the medbay.

“Dad, I have to do this. I made a promise,” I countered. “You taught me to keep my word, and that’s what I gave him.”

“Send someone else,” he said firmly.

I exchanged a glance with my mother.

She gave me a nod before turning to my father. "Cyril," she began. "Think about it: if she doesn't fulfill her promise, this Tiberius creature will consider that a betrayal. It puts the colony at risk. Again."

He harrumphed, but his forehead creased in thought.

"Alright," he relented after nearly two minutes of silence. "But you'll take a few other hunters with you. Between the wolves and Boneclaws roaming around, it would be madness for you to go alone. More than a few of our people have yet to be accounted for, and I can only imagine what has happened to them."

"I'll be back soon," I said, embracing them both with a hug. "I'm glad you're still not a fool."

"I might be," he replied. "Letting you go off like this. I'm probably the most foolish man in the colony."

I kissed his cheek. "I can't argue with that."

A few minutes later, Josef met me in the medbay, bringing the cast I'd requested for Othello. The boy's lips quirked up into an easy smile when he saw me. "I'm coming with you."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I answered.

"It'll be fine," he assured me. "Besides, you'll need me to fit this cast on the Boneclaw, right?"

I sighed but nodded. "Fine," I said, causing him to smile. "But if we run into any animals, don't try to be a hero. Let the rest of us handle it."

"I know where my skills lie," he assured me, lifting the cast in his hand. "I—"

A woman screamed suddenly from down the hall, causing us both to pause. With a brief, exchanged look, we darted toward the noise, hoping to help.

As we arrived, we found Mario standing with a young woman in a chokehold, forcing her across the room. A flash of light at her throat drew my eye to the piece of broken glass he was holding.

"Stay back, all of you!" he yelled, jerking her from side to side.

My grip tightened on the staff and it began to glow.

"Lucia," Josef warned. "Don't."

Mario was inching toward the door to the caves. He looked desperate and afraid, probably anticipating the worst possible punishment that our people could provide.

"Mario," I said calmly, hands raised in a peaceful gesture. "Let her go."

His eyes flashed to mine, wild with fear or madness, maybe both. He shook his head. "No. Get back. I'll kill her! I'll kill all of you if you try anything."

He no longer seemed terrifying, not like he had before. Not in his desperation. The man standing before me was weak, consumed by stupidity and a primal need to live. He'd reacted emotionally and without reason, barely a thought in his head, and that made him a fool.

"No one needs to get hurt today," I said, moving a few centimeters closer to him.

Mario's breaths came in pants and he flicked a glance around the room. A small crowd was quickly gathering, many armed and all of them angry.

"Give me the glass and stop this," I said, holding out my hand.

His nostrils flared, the muscles in his neck bulging. "You want the glass?" he asked. "Why? So you can kill me yourself? That's what you want. It's what all of you want!"

“No one wants that,” I said, still trying to stay calm. “But you have to see there’s no way out of here. We can’t let you leave. Even if you did, you know the caves are too dangerous. You’d be killed within the week. Be smart about this. We can work all of it out. You don’t have to—”

“Shut your mouth, you idiot child!” he barked. “These people already have it in their heads that they want me dead, and that’s never going away. I’m not staying in a place that hates me, where every day I’m cursed. Look at the way they stare! *Look!*”

He shoved the woman roughly to the ground before lunging toward me.

My senses were a little dull from the fatigue and my reaction equally slow. I threw a forearm up to protect my face and grunted at the burning sensation as the glass tore into my flesh.

Mario slashed again, but I twisted to one side and grabbed his wrist as it whipped past my face. I tried to break his grip on the sharp object but couldn’t manage a hold.

He had perhaps fifteen centimeters on me and a lot more muscle, with years of practical experience. Crazy or not, he was still a highly skilled hunter.

Mario broke my grip easily, jerking me forward and delivering an elbow strike to my chin. My ears rang and my vision blackened as my head reeled.

Shaking it off, I stepped in when he expected me to pull back, then stomped on his foot. It worked, loosening his grip, and I slammed my fist into the still-raw knife wound on his chest. Mario yelped and pushed me away.

“This is all your fault,” he wheezed. “Things were going to change.”

Guards arrived, weapons trained on him.

“You need to take responsibility for your own stupidity,” I snapped at Mario, waving away the guards with my clean hand.

Mario snarled and launched himself at me again. This time, I sidestepped his attack and delivered a kick to the inside of his right knee. He went down to one leg and I caught him in the throat with a hard right jab, knocking him to the floor.

His empty hand went up to his throat as he gasped for air.

I placed a knee on his chest and a foot to his wrist, quickly wrestling the shard from his grasp, then I flipped the glass in my hand and stabbed it into his chest until he groaned.

“This is directly over your heart,” I said between gritted teeth as I leered over his snot-covered nose. “It is *over!*”

Mario's lips twisted. “Yes... it... is...!”

He grabbed my fist with both hands and pushed the glass into my knuckles. I gasped and let go as the sharp edge sliced into my palm.

I fell back and crawled to my feet, half-expecting him to get up. Instead, he did the opposite, lying there for a moment and staring up at the ceiling as the blood began to pool out of him.

“Doctor!” I yelled to the crowd behind me. “Get the doctor!”

But it was no use.

The bastardized grin was still on his face when the last breath left his body.

Shortly after Mario's forced suicide, Josef and I, along with a few of our best hunters, went to meet with Tiberius, who had gone through the work of

moving Othello to a better location. I instructed them to wait outside and keep an eye out for wolves while Josef and I continued.

"You came," Tiberius said when we entered the courtyard, the air crisp and clear, and the bright light of the sky shining down.

"As I said I would," I replied. "This is Josef, an engineer and a trusted friend."

Janus had activated scanners in the area and come up with a proposed radiation treatment plan, which I held out for the massive Boneclaw to see.

"Medicine for Othello," I said when he didn't answer. "I would give it to you, but it is made for human hands."

"I thank you." Tiberius nodded at me, then gestured behind him to where Othello waited.

The other Boneclaw lay listlessly on the stony ground inside the courtyard.

I walked over and put a hand on his large forearm. "This might pinch a bit, but you'll be back on your feet in no time."

"Get it over with," he wheezed.

Pushing the injector down to get it close to the skin, I pressed the button. Othello jerked slightly but otherwise didn't react.

"Josef," I called over my shoulder.

A warning growl came from Tiberius and I glanced up to see him blocking Josef's way with one arm.

"What is this?" he asked, eyeing the case suspiciously.

I sighed. It would be a long road to trust for us both.

"A brace to set Othello's break. Josef helped me to create it." I strode over and opened it slowly. "See?" I held up my arm to show him the similar construction.

Tiberius peered inside at the contents. He grunted and let us pass.

Together, Josef and I assembled it around Othello's injured leg. When it was ready, Josef activated it. The brace retracted and snapped the bone back into place with a crack that echoed in the small yard, and Othello roared in pain.

"Sorry!" Josef said quickly. "But it should be alright now."

Othello said nothing as he moved into an upright position. We backed up to let Tiberius help him to his feet until he stood awkwardly on one leg, slowly lowering the other.

After a few successful practice steps, Tiberius nodded to me and Josef. "You've kept your word," he said, watching Othello. "We will meet again to discuss the future for both our people, but today you have done well."

"When will we see you again?" I asked.

"Six days at this time," he answered. "That is when we will forge our peace."

Another Selection Ceremony took place soon after the events involving the coup.

It went pretty much the same as the first, although without the interruption afterward. The newly appointed Primes officially chose me as the next Director, though the announcement was bittersweet.

Aside from myself, only Mark and Nell had been allowed to grace the stage. Allan had chosen exile with Nero and a few others.

Karin...well, I'd hoped she was watching from somewhere. We'd retrieved her body, along with any others we could find. In the days after Mario's death, a mass



funeral had been held in the hangar to celebrate the lives they'd lived and mourn their passing.

Elder Laurell Kimble had shuffled in, eyes bright with mischief and completely unharmed.

Every time someone asked her how she had survived, the old hunter would launch into a story about how she fought off Tiberius and two of his kind with a slingshot she fashioned from the bones of the dead in their lair. Funnily enough, the number of Boneclaws always seemed to increase with each retelling.

Tiberius himself told me that the killing of an Elder didn't sit well. Unsure of what to do with Laurell, he had indeed taken her to a cave, though not their lair, and certainly not one filled with corpses.

To hear his side, Laurell had reprimanded the King of the Boneclaws for falling in with the likes of Mario to begin with. Tiberius had returned her before our meeting, where he had planned to hand her back to us in a show of good faith.

Prime Elia Doyle still awaited judgement for his actions, though I wasn't convinced he had worked alone.

But there had been a silver lining when Josef took his place.

He had even put the pin on me, a silver design like the Primes wore. A trio of right-facing chevrons, the last of which winged out. It had been crafted from scrap metal and I wore it proudly.

My father had balked at first to my agreeing to meet Tiberius, which would become a weekly event, but he had been convinced by my story and the other primes. Now, he beamed proudly and presented me to the gathered colony. "This is my daughter," he said to the world. "The next Director of our people." His words were met with applause and cheers that filled the hangar, and I felt a swell of pride at the man who had trained me, loved me, and raised me.

When it was over, the people feasted, and we all played games to celebrate. Children laughed and played chase while adults ate and gossiped, whispering of the Boneclaws and the girl who had spoken to them.

It was one of those rare days outside, clear skies and calm winds, and someone had opened the hangar door slightly to let in the fresh air. A lone figure stood looking out and I knew it was Nell.

She'd mostly kept to herself since our return and a number of the community still avoided her. I approached her side, both of us standing in amiable silence.

For a long time, we stared out at the white valley, the fields of our ancestors.

Beyond the quiet, however, a storm brewed along the horizon, and I felt a chill in my chest.

"We've entered new territory today," Nell finally said. "An intelligent Boneclaw leading the rest. There's no telling where things will go next."

"A better place, maybe," I said.

"Maybe," she replied, quiet for a moment before continuing. "But how long can peace really last, I wonder?"

"As long as it can, I suppose," I answered, placing my hand around her shoulder. "But that's a question for tomorrow. In the meantime, what do you say we have ourselves a drink?"

She smirked. "That doesn't sound too bad."

We turned, and I looked up to see another friend. Across the room, Josef locked eyes with me and smiled.

The future looked bright indeed.

## Epilogue

Twenty-three years had passed since I became Director, and now I cupped a hand around my heavy, pregnant belly as I leaned against one of the smaller boulders to my side.

Snow fell gently around me, and I tipped my head back to let the flakes melt on my face. With the power glitches happening even more often, it was a treat to be outside without worrying it would go dark at any moment. Even if one of our wild snowstorms flared up, I had the shuttle to take me home.

Josef didn't exactly like the idea of his wife going to meet with the King of the Boneclaws, but he understood the importance of treaties. At least, I hoped he did.

Tiberius and I still met every year to discuss the affairs of our communities. Many things had changed over the years, but never this.

The ground rumbled to announce his arrival, and I craned my head to look for him against the white backdrop of the valley. The giant Boneclaw wasn't hard to spot when he was moving. To this day I had yet to meet one of his kind of a comparable size.

It seemed to me that his lumbering gait was slower than usual, and I wondered if he had been injured. When he drew near, I stood and gave him a once over with my hands on my hips.

I raised an eyebrow when he finally came within a few meters. "Why are you walking like that?" I asked.

He scoffed and waved the question away, reminding me of my father, who had made a habit of doing that since his retirement, particularly at the young ones who caused a ruckus or asked stupid questions.

"Not you, too," Tiberius complained. "It's as if, because I'm showing my age, everyone thinks I am too weak. I assure you, Lucia, I am still myself. I could tear apart six frost horns right now if I wanted to."

I chuckled lightly. "I'm sure you could, old man."

He returned my laugh with one of his own, and it was so loud I felt it in my chest. "That thing in your belly," he said, changing the subject. "Othello tells me you are to be a mother soon. Have you decided on a name for the cub?"

"I have," I replied. "They tell me it's a girl."

He nodded approvingly. "Then she will be strong, as you are."

"I hope she is stronger," I said, smiling a little. "I've chosen the name of a great warrior who once saved my life. She will have much to live up to."

"If she is your kin, then I have no doubt about it," said Tiberius. "So, what is the name?"

"My daughter will be Karin," I answered, gracing my stomach with the palm of my hand.

“A name to give her courage,” said Tiberius, nodding his understanding. “She will be a fine warrior, like her mother, and a great leader, I am sure.”

“You are too kind,” I said, and in that moment I felt a kick. “Oh, there she goes.”

“Does she move?” he asked. “Already the spirit wakes to fight. It is a good sign. She will be strong and fierce.”

I smiled at his words. “You might be right.” I cleared my throat and waddled closer to him, taking a seat on one of the larger stones. “For now, the child will have to wait. You and I have matters to attend to.”

“That, we do,” he said, shifting where he sat to better face me. “Speak, Director, so that I might hear you.”

