



The Black Tide

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Chapter One

Sunshine.

Bright, fierce sunshine.

It bathed my body, burned into my closed eyelids, and had sweat trickling down the side of my face. Only that sweat felt as warm as the sunlight and oddly sluggish.

I frowned and tried to open my eyes. Couldn't.

Panic stirred, along with an odd sense of urgency. I raised a hand, but the movement was not only as slow as that trickle, it hurt like hell.

I carefully touched my eyes; something sticky glued my lashes together. Further probing revealed a barely healed wound that slashed my forehead, and one I couldn't remember getting. In fact, the last thing I remembered was looking back at Jonas—a cat shifter who was, like me, a surviving relic from the war that had ended 103 years ago—as I'd stepped through the smaller of the two rifts we'd found at Winter Halo, a now-defunct Central City pharmaceutical company. It had played a key part in the mad scheme to give both vampires and the creatures we knew as wraiths immunity to light, and the scientists there had not only dissected the brains of women with latent psychic skills, but had been testing unapproved drugs and pathogens on children they'd stolen from Central City. We'd put a stop to the dissection, rescued seven of those children, and had now killed two of the three people behind the insidious plot.

One of those had been Samuel Cohen—the man who'd assumed the identity of Rath Winter, the person in charge of Winter Halo, and whose death had, in my opinion, been far too quick given the pain he'd caused so many others. The other death was Sal's—a man who'd been a *déchet* like me, and someone I'd once considered my closest friend.

But two out of three was not good enough. We still had to stop Ciara Dream—the very elusive final member of that unholy trinity—before she managed to give either the vamps or wraiths full immunity.

Light—be it sunlight or the UV light that was cast from the huge towers that surrounded all cities, banishing both shadows and night—was currently the *only* thing protecting both human and shifter alike from the relentless attacks of either monster.

I scrubbed the muck away from my eyes and then opened them. The sky was an endless sea of blue. There were no clouds, no birds, no sign or sound of life.

I tried to sit upright, but pain surged and a hiss escaped through my clenched teeth. My entire body ached—even my damn hair felt like it was on fire.

Which I guess wasn't really surprising, given the rift I'd come through was one of the biggest I'd dared enter so far.

True rifts had come into being 103 years ago—after the shifters had unleashed the bombs that ended their five-year war against humanity. But such was the force of those bombs that they'd not only leveled entire cities, but had also torn drifting holes in the very fabric of our world. While a few of these were doorways between our world and another, most of them simply mauled the essence of anything and anyone unlucky enough to be caught in their path. For most, being ensnared in such a rift meant death. Those of us who survived were forever altered by the magic and the energy that were part and parcel of the rifts, though the consequences of Jonas's and my recent encounter with one had yet to be fully revealed.

But the two we'd found at Winter Halo weren't a result of the bombs. They

were what we called false rifts, and had been created by the people behind the immunity scheme as a means of transportation from one point to another on *this* world.

It was my task to uncover where the damn things led to, simply because I—thanks to my rather unique DNA makeup—had the unfortunate luck of being the only other person outside those behind their creation able to both see *and* use them.

But doing so came at a cost—at least for someone like me, who wasn't "tuned" into them. The false rifts worked by breaking your body down to atoms before transporting you to the other end, where you were reformed and released. They did at least spit me out in one piece, but my state was very definitely bloody and worse for wear.

But why would this one dump me in the middle of nowhere? Every other false rift had at least led into a building of some kind; landing in the middle of a desert was definitely outside the norm.

I took a deep breath and rolled onto my stomach. Once again various bits of my body protested rather vigorously—something that wasn't helped by the grittiness that rubbed into the sorer spots. My clothes obviously hadn't come through the rift intact this time.

When the pain had eased again, I pushed up onto my hands and knees and studied my surroundings. There wasn't much to see—just a long flat plain of yellow sand. I had no idea where I was; as far as I knew, there were no deserts anywhere near Central City or its surrounds. But my knowledge of the world was somewhat limited to the areas I'd been assigned to during the war. I certainly hadn't traveled far after it. In fact, I'd basically spent the century since living in the remains of old military bunker outside Central, along with the ghosts of all those who'd been murdered there.

As a *déchet*—a lab-designed humanoid created by humans before the war as a means to combat the superior strength and speed of the shifters—I'd had little other

choice. While the war might be a century past, the hatred and fear of déchet remained, even though I was now—at least as far as I knew—the sole survivor. Everyone else had been erased at the war's end.

I twisted around to check out what lay behind me. Twinges ran through my shoulders and torso, but it was nowhere near as bad as it had been only moments ago. My body seemed to be healing at a far faster rate than was normal for me, and I'd been genetically designed to recover quicker than either humans or shifters.

The false rift sat about forty feet away, a dark orb of oily energy that gently turned on its axis. There was no sign of the jagged strips of lightning that ran across its surface when active, but that really wasn't surprising. I wasn't close enough for it to recognize my presence, and I seriously doubted Dream would risk using it when Winter Halo's activities were currently under full investigation by both the corps and the council.

I pushed back onto my heels and took stock. The rift's whips had indeed shredded my uniform, but the two automatics and the spare magazines were still clipped to the remains of my pants. Both my backpack and the slender machine rifle—which I'd adapted to fire small, sharpened stakes rather than bullets—were missing. After another look around, I spotted the pack half buried in the sand about fifteen feet away. Relief stirred, and not just because that pack still had the rifle attached to it, but also because it held—amongst many other things—a small geo-locating device. Without it, I wouldn't be able to record my current location or where the base—or whatever else this rift had lead me to—was. Both were important, given my main mission here today was simply one of discovery. The task of dealing with the base—and whatever evils it might hold—would fall to Jonas, his mercenary partner and human witch Nuri, and whatever government forces they were working with. *Not* that they'd ever actually admitted to working with the government on this particular case.

Of course, I was also well equipped to deal with a worst-case scenario—such as the discovery that they were far further along the road of making wraith or vampire life forms immune to light than we'd hoped or feared.

I crawled over to the pack and pulled out the geo-locator. After inspecting it to ensure there was no damage, I pressed the switch to log my position and then grabbed the water bottle and quickly swished the metallic bitterness from my mouth.

A sound invaded the stillness. It was little more than a soft whine, but it was coming toward me at some speed. I turned around. A plume of dust was now visible on the horizon, though I couldn't yet see the vehicle causing it. Which was good, because if I couldn't see them, they more than likely wouldn't be able to see me.

And I needed to be sure it remained that way.

I stoppered the water bottle then raised my face and let the sunlight caress my skin. While the bits of vampire DNA in my makeup meant I was genetically adapted to night and shadows, there was still a part of me that needed the heat and life of the sun. It was *that* part that enabled me to disappear behind a shield of light. It wasn't magic, but rather a psychic talent, one that had been enhanced in the lab during my creation. And it wasn't the only talent they'd given me. Shifters might have hated and feared *déchet* soldiers, but we lures were far more deadly. Soldiers had strength and speed; we'd been built not only for seduction but with a veritable arsenal of both psychic and shifting skill sets at our command.

I took a deep breath then called to day's brightness, drawing it deep into my body in much the same manner as I could draw in darkness. Heat flowed into every muscle, every fiber until my entire being burned with the force of it. I imagined that force wrapping around me, forming a shield none would see past. Energy stirred as motes of light danced both through and around me, joining and growing until they'd formed the barrier I was imagining. To the outside world, I no longer existed. The light playing through me acted like a one-way mirror, reflecting all that was around

me while hiding my presence.

I pushed to my feet and retreated as that plume of dust drew closer and the vehicle became visible. It was a hover, and military in design, but much older than anything I'd ever seen in Central City. For some reason, the blast shields at the front of the vehicle were up, which possibly meant they were relying on radar to guide them. If that was the case, then my light shield might be next to useless. I unlatched one of the automatics and held it at the ready.

The vehicle came to a halt twenty feet away, blasting me with dust and hot air as its skirts lost shape and it settled onto the sand.

There was no immediate indication that they'd seen me.

A door on the left side of the vehicle opened and a woman got out. She wore a combat uniform that was obviously designed for desert use, as the camouflage swirls were gray and gold rather than the black and gray of mine. A rather old-fashioned electro pulse rifle was strapped to her waist and an odd strip of thick black plastic wrapped around her head, completely covering her eyes.

My fingers twitched against the automatic, but I didn't move. I had no idea who these people were or how sensitive this woman's hearing might be. She smelled human, but that didn't mean anything when we were dealing with people who had the technology and the determination to alter DNA.

The woman took several steps away from the hover then stopped, one hand on the pulse rifle. Her banded gaze did a long sweep of the area, sliding past me without any indication she'd sensed my presence, and then returned to the rift.

Could she see it?

“Anything?” the man still inside the vehicle said.

“No.” The woman's voice was curt. “If this is another false alarm, I'm going to be pissed.”

The man snorted. “And? It's not like you'll say anything—not given how

complaints are handled. Check the other side of the thing.”

The woman grunted and obeyed. I quickly moved around the rift, making sure I kept enough distance between it and me to prevent activating the energy whips.

The woman reappeared and walked toward me. Her scent was unpleasant and acidic, but she nevertheless registered as human to my senses. If she *were* anything else, she surely would have smelled me by now. Or, at least, smelled the drying blood on my clothes.

But if she was human, then that also presented a problem. The scientists who'd designed us had made damn sure we could neither attack nor kill a human. I'd never actually tested *that* particular restriction before—it had never occurred to me to do so during the war, and there'd been no need in the 103 years after it.

She walked past me. I glanced at the rift; I couldn't see the hover, which meant that even if her partner had raised the blast shields, he wouldn't be able to see us. I flexed my fingers and then stepped up behind her. Though I'd been specifically designed to infiltrate shifter camps and seduce those in charge in order to gain and pass on all information relating to the war and their plans, I was no stranger to killing. Very few of the shifters I'd lain with had survived to tell the tale, but it was never something I'd done by choice—not until recently, at any rate.

But assuming this woman's identity was possibly the only way of uncovering what was going on in this desert with any sort of speed, and merely knocking her out wasn't really an option. I simply couldn't risk her coming to and raising the alarm.

I guess I was about to discover if old programming still held sway.

In one smooth motion, I covered her mouth with one hand and forced her head up and back with the other, shattering her neck and taking her life between one heartbeat and another.

And felt neither restriction nor remorse at doing so.

How could I, after what had been done to the children and the horrendous

dissections that had happened at Winter Halo? Everyone involved in the mad scheme to provide light immunity to the vamps and the wraiths deserved nothing more than death.

Everyone.

I lowered her body to the ground then released the light shield and quickly stripped her. Once I'd exchanged clothes, I shoved my two guns, the tracker, and the ammo into the backpack, and then strapped on her pulse rifle.

With that done, I bent down and studied the woman's face, fixing her sharp, thin features, lank yellow hair, and pale brown eyes in my mind. Her body shape was close enough to mine that I didn't have to do a full shift, but her features were so different that a facial change was necessary.

Once I had a firm grasp of the look I needed to attain, I reached for the part of my soul that made shifting possible. The force of the change swept through me like a gale, making my muscles tremble as my face restructured, and my skin, hair, and eyes changed. It was a process that was usually very painful, but this time, there was barely a flicker of protest from the nerve endings and bone structures being rerouted in the process.

“Banks?” the driver said. “Everything all right back there?”

“Yeah.” Even though my vocal chords had been altered and I now sounded like the woman, I hadn't heard her speak enough to catch the rhythm of her words, and that meant keeping my replies short.

After a quick check to ensure there were no comm devices attached to the woman, I dug the Radio Frequency Identity chip out of her right arm and wiped it clean on the discarded remnants of my shirt. It was law these days that everyone, be they human or shifter, have RFIDs inserted into their arms at birth. They held everything from medical records, work history, and credit information, but could also be programmed for use as a key in areas that required secure access. I currently had

two of them—one inserted into each arm—thanks to Nuri and the fact I'd assumed two very different identities in Central.

I grabbed the small tin of false skin out of the pack, positioned the chip over the one in my right arm, and then sprayed it into place. Jonas had assured me it would be undetectable and, after a few seconds, it was indeed hard to tell where my skin ended and the false skin began.

Finally, I unlatched her eye device and put it on. The world became nothing but a strange blur. I fiddled with the dial on the right side of the visor; turning it one way sharpened focus, allowing me to see the terrain but not the rift. Turning it the other made the rift jump into focus but threw everything else into an odd sort of darkness.

That was the reason she'd seen the rift, but not me.

“Banks, stop fucking about and get back here,” the driver said. “That sandstorm we spotted is getting far too close for comfort. We need to get out of here.”

“Give me a minute—I’ve got to dig the thing out.”

I set the eye device to normal vision, quickly shoved enough sand over the woman’s body to cover her, and then grabbed the pack and headed for the hover.

“Is that it?” The driver—a thin, wiry looking man with dark skin and a shock of coarse yellow-white hair—pointed with his chin at the backpack. “That hardly seems worth the time and effort to retrieve it.”

“Yeah.” I dumped the pack into the foot well then climbed into the vehicle.

“Did you open it?”

“You can. I’m not.”

He grunted and returned his attention to the craft. “Better hand it to Martin. He's paid to deal with the shit that comes through that rift, not us.”

Meaning if I wanted to find out exactly what they were using this rift for, Martin needed to be my next target.

The hover's engines kicked into gear and her skirts began to fill and lift. I

grabbed the seat belt and pulled it across my body, brushing my fingers against the driver's arm as I did so. Seeking was a psychic skill all lures had, and one that had made us very successful at uncovering information during the war. It wasn't exactly telepathy—shifters tended to be sensitive to that sort of mental intrusion—but rather the ability to see various memories as images. And while my seeking skills had been honed for use during sex, I could still snatch information from a brief touch if I went in with a simple question that needed answering.

Although in this particular case, I not only needed to know who Martin was but where we were going.

Pictures snapped into my mind, providing a glimpse of a thickset man with a flat nose and oddly shaped eyes, and what looked to be an intersecting series of round metal and sand tunnels. If the latter was part of an old military bunker, then it was one I'd never seen before.

“Are we going to beat the storm?” I asked.

He glanced at the radar and screwed his nose up. “It'll be nipping at our heels before we reach the compound, I think.”

The hover slowly spun around, and then the big engines kicked in and we rumbled forward. Thankfully, it was too damn loud in the cabin to allow much talking, so I looked through the door's small portal, trying to find something remotely familiar. But even the few stunted trees we passed bore no resemblance to anything I'd seen before.

The wind picked up, buffeting the big craft and sending it sliding sideways. The stabilizers kept us upright but from the little I knew of these types of hovers, they weren't designed for use in any sort of dust storm—a fact borne out a few seconds later when an amber light began to blink on the console. The intake valves were losing efficiency.

The driver responded by increasing our speed. Maybe he thought he could

outrun the problem, even though the storm was a huge red mass that now dominated half the radar screen.

As a red light joined the amber one, the comms unit on the console crackled to life, and a harsh voice said, “Identify.”

The driver hit a switch. “Pickup three, Lyle and Banks.”

“Code?”

“Two-five-three-zero.”

“Access granted, guidance on. Open in five.”

Lyle punched another button on the console, switching to auto mode, and then leaned back. “It's going to be a bitch of a night to be on surface duty.”

Which suggested we were headed underground, and that meant we might indeed be dealing with another old military base. The three bases in which we déchet had been created had certainly used the earth as protection and, though I hadn't seen any of them, I knew other human military installations had also buried their main centers deep.

The hover swung left and slowed. Up ahead, an odd sort of turret emerged from the ground. Sand poured off its domed top and slithered down its metal sides. As it rose higher, I realized it was some sort of elevator. Two guards wearing breathing apparatus stood on either side of the open doorway, but there didn't appear to be any cameras or scanners in the shadows beyond them—which didn't mean anything given my companion's comment. I might not be able to see any other security measures, but they were obviously around here somewhere.

The hover came to a halt and settled onto its skirts. The driver rolled the neck of his uniform up over his mouth and nose, then opened the doors and got out. I recorded my position then grabbed the pack and followed. The wind hit me immediately, throwing me several paces sideways before I could catch my balance. Sand stung my face and hands and felt like stones as it pounded my body. The air was so thick that I

could barely see the hover, let alone the driver or the elevator. Then I remembered the eye visor and quickly flicked the switch. The world sprung into focus again.

I slung the pack over my shoulder and followed Lyle into the elevator. One guard stepped out into the storm and headed toward the vehicle. The other placed a rather gnarled-looking hand against the control panel; his prints were scanned and the elevator began to descend.

I returned the visor to normal vision and looked around. There definitely weren't any security measures aside from the guard, which was odd—just as there was something decidedly odd about the guard. While the breathing mask covered his entire face, his domed head was almost reptilian, and the stray tufts of pale yellow that poked out from the top looked more like the strands found on a wire brush than any sort of hair. His uniform was bulky and loose, giving little indication of his body shape, but his spine was so badly curved the top part of his body angled sharply away from his lower. His scent rather reminded me of meat left too long out in the sun, but the undertones were once again human in origin, even as his reptilian dome suggested otherwise.

Of course, smelling human didn't mean he was. We lures had been designed with the ability to alter our base scent, and if either Dream or Cohen were a surviving déchet scientist or a handler—as we now suspected at least one of them was—then they'd be aware of that skill.

The one thing this man couldn't be, however, was a surviving déchet—not when he was so deformed. The scientists involved in the Humanoid Development Program had been merciless; if a déchet had been imperfect in *any* way, they were killed and their DNA carefully studied to see what had gone wrong.

Which meant he was either a life form I'd never come across before—and surely nature could not be that cruel—or the trio had been playing around with DNA and pathogens far longer than we'd presumed.

And *that* was a scary thought.

The elevator continued to drop. I had no idea how deep we were going, as there were no level indicators. Maybe this base only had the one, although that would be rather unusual if it was another repurposed military base. Most did have several levels, if only for security reasons.

The elevator finally came to a bouncy stop. The guard pulled his hand away from the console and the doors opened, revealing a small landing and stairs that led down to a massive circular room with a domed ceiling supported by thick metal struts that arched across the space and met in the middle. There were five tunnels leading off it; the one directly opposite looked big enough to take large vehicles, but the other four were smaller in diameter. There was a multitude of wooden boxes and pallets of plastic-wrapped items stacked in haphazard piles, and rusty-looking forklifts were scooting about, some of them driving loads into the smaller tunnels and others returning from them. This area was obviously some sort of receiving bay.

What I didn't see were any sort of additional security measures. Did they believe the sand hid them so well nothing else was needed, or were the measures here, but simply very well disguised?

Instinct suggested the latter. And that presented a problem, given I couldn't get around what I couldn't see.

Lyle had paused at the bottom of the stairs to allow a forklift to pass, so I clattered down to catch up with him. "Where's Martin likely to be at this hour?"

"Where he always fucking is—in supplies." He made a vague motion toward the tunnels on the right then threw me a sour look. "And don't forget it's your shout at the bar tonight. No feigning illness again."

"Shout" wasn't a term I was familiar with but it obviously had something to do with drinking and alcohol. While shifters did drink, they didn't do it to excess, as the humans seemed to. Which was probably just as well given a drunken shifter could

cause a whole lot more damage to flesh and furniture than a human ever could.

“Right,” I said, and walked off.

Aside from the buzz of the forklifts, this place was strangely quiet. The yellowish lights dotting the dome high above lit some sections of the sandstone walls but cast others into shadow. The air was cool and somewhat stale, suggesting the purifiers weren't working at full capacity. Maybe that was why the guards had been wearing breathing apparatus—although it didn't explain why everyone else wasn't.

I reached the first of the two tunnels on this side of the room and paused. There was no guide to tell where it went, and the tunnel itself curved sharply away from the entrance, making it impossible to see what might lie up ahead. I moved on to check the other tunnel. It, too, was decidedly void of any useful information.

I pulled the small dart gun from the pack and then headed in. I couldn't afford to linger, given the woman I was impersonating would obviously know her way around this place. The last thing I needed was to attract unwanted attention.

Once again the ceiling lights were dull, creating small pools of yellow surrounded by shadows. There were no doors cut into the thick metal walls and no sound other than the soft echo of my steps.

Then, from somewhere up ahead, came a sound so soft human hearing wouldn't have caught it. It was nothing as clear as a footstep, but more a scrape, as if something had dragged briefly across the metal flooring. I frowned, my gaze sweeping the shadows, seeing nothing, sensing nothing.

The odd sound came again. Unease stirred, and my grip on the dart gun tightened as I continued on.

The noise echoed a third time. Tension wound through me, but I resisted the urge to stop. The tunnel began to curve to the right, and the shadows became thicker—so thick, in fact, that they chopped off the pool of light that puddled underneath one of the overheads.

That darkness wasn't natural, I realized abruptly. It was someone hiding behind a shield of shadows. *That* was why this place was so oddly lit.

My fingers twitched against the dart's trigger, but I resisted the urge to fire and continued past that odd patch of darkness. Once I was sure there were no cameras or other guards hidden in the shadows further along the tunnel, I turned and fired. The drug on the dart's tip was fast acting. In little more than a couple of seconds, there was a soft clang as something—someone—hit the metal floor.

The shadows remained clustered around the guard, but a quick pat down revealed the presence of some sort of device connected to his chest plate by several wires. Once I broke that connection, the shadows evaporated, revealing him to be another of the masked guards. I pulled off his breathing apparatus; his features were a twisted mess that was half human and half reptilian, and his skin was brown with odd patches of scales that were almost fishlike.

Whatever else this man was, he *wasn't* a product of natural selection. He was either a rift survivor or a result of human engineering.

If the latter applied, then maybe the only reason Sal and his partners hadn't acted on their mad plans before now was the simple fact that they'd been unable to recreate the success of the *déchet* program. It also meant that these lizard men, however ill-formed, might not be the only ones successfully raised to adulthood.

He was beginning to wheeze, his body shuddering as he struggled to suck in enough air. Either his lungs were malformed or the weird mix of his DNA meant he simply couldn't survive on regular air. And while I had no desire to let him suffer any longer than necessary, I also needed information. I couldn't keep wandering around this place aimlessly. I hesitated, and then touched his face; his skin was cold, clammy, and unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

I shuddered, even as information began to flow. Within seconds I had a somewhat fractured mental map of the base; this tunnel led to the bunkhouse and the

medical facilities, which was perhaps why my approach hadn't been challenged. The stock and supplies area was in the first tunnel, but it was the information on the largest tunnel that snagged my immediate attention. It apparently led to what the guard's memories simply knew as research and production.

I pushed a little deeper and caught various images of needles being injected into his arm. We knew the trio had been intent on developing a pathogen capable of altering a vampire's base physiology so that they no longer had to fear sunlight, but maybe they were also trying to find a shortcut to creating an army with the strength and speed of the déchet.

I could only hope that this poor man was an indication of how far they'd yet to go with the latter.

But maybe *that* was only because they were, unfortunately, a whole lot closer to achieving the former. The children they'd stolen—all of whom were either rift survivors or the children of survivors—had been their test subjects for such a pathogen. And at least one of those children—Jonas's niece, Penny—had recently developed vampire-like tendencies while showing no fear of light.

If they'd developed a pathogen capable of turning a shifter or a human into a vampire, how far off could they be from being able to do the reverse?

Not far at all, if the recent attack on Chaos—the ramshackle city that clung to Central's metal curtain wall—was any indication. Neither firelight nor regular light had affected the vampires who'd gone there to retrieve Penny, but at least the UVs had still turned them to ash.

I removed the spent dart from his arm then replaced his breathing apparatus and sat him upright against the wall. Hopefully, given his restless movements earlier, he'd put his collapse down to exhaustion and wouldn't report the incident. Even if he did, how likely was it that he'd connect his collapse to Banks, given it had happened after I'd walked past him?

I reattached the wires on his chest unit and, as the thick shadows wrapped around him again, thrust up and strode back down the tunnel. No one paid me any attention as I walked across the loading bay, but the minute I drew close to the entrance to the larger tunnel, a light flashed on, bathing the entire entrance in eye-watering brightness. A burly, pale-skinned man stepped forward and held out a small scanner.

“Present your chip, soldier.”

I raised my right arm and watched as the screen flashed red.

“You haven't the clearance to proceed into this area,” he growled.

“I know, but I've been ordered to take this bag to Martin.”

The guard pointed with his chin at the tunnels behind me. “Martin is over in supplies, not here.”

“And they told me I'd find him in research three.”

My gaze swept the shadows hugging the other side of the entrance. There was a second guard standing watch, but the fierceness of the lights made it impossible to see what other security measures might be here. Which meant I *could* risk wrapping myself in light to sneak past them, but if there were bioscanners set into the walls of this entrance, I'd be in all sorts of trouble.

“If they said that, they're fucking idiots,” he said.

“So, he really hasn't come through here?”

“No, but it wouldn't matter if he had, because your ass can go no further.” The guard's tone was impatient. “So leave, before I decide to report you.”

I didn't argue. I just spun on my heel and walked back to the tunnel that led to the supplies area, but stopped the minute the shadows wrapped around me again.

What in Rhea was I going to do now?

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall, studying the loading bay and the movements of the various forklifts. Rather interestingly, none of them went into the

larger tunnel. In fact, right now they seemed to be doing nothing more than shifting the various pallets and boxes into a stack on one side of it. Given the tunnel was obviously designed to allow trucks passage, perhaps the intention was to transport it all at once rather than piecemeal.

But what was in those boxes, and where exactly were they being taken?

There was only one way to find the answer to either question. I pushed away from the wall and sucked in the energy of the shadows, just as I had the light earlier. It filtered swiftly through every inch of me until my whole body vibrated with the weight and power of it. The vampire within my DNA swiftly embraced that darkness, becoming one with it, until it stained my whole being and took over. It ripped away flesh, muscle, and bone, until I was nothing more than a cluster of matter. Even my clothes and the backpack became part of that energy.

Now that I was hidden from ordinary sight, I swept out of the tunnel but kept close to the wall and the shadows that hugged it. Light was the enemy of this form—while it would never harm me as it did the vampires, it could certainly tear away the shadows and revert me back to flesh and blood.

I slowed as I neared the stack of boxes. It wasn't exactly surprising to discover that most of them bore government and military IDs. Both Cohen and Dream had inherited the ability to body shift from Sal when the three of them *and* a wraith had been caught in a rift. While Cohen had taken over the identity of the man who'd owned and run Winter Halo, Dream had usurped the position of someone in Central's governing body. Unfortunately, we currently had no idea whether she merely worked in Government House, or if she was on the ruling council itself. I rather suspected the latter, if only because an audit would have surely picked up the amount of missing equipment and who knew what else lying in both these boxes and the ones I'd discovered at the other old military bases.

I detoured around a puddle of light to inspect the half dozen pallets stacked at

the end of the boxes, and discovered the one thing I'd been hoping not to. Intrauterine pods. Six of them, in fact.

A deep sense of horror stirred. While I'd discovered similar pods in other bases, I'd thought—perhaps foolishly—that with the deaths of both Sal and Cohen, Dream would put aside that part of their plan and just concentrate on the immunity portion. But the transfer stamps on these pods held yesterday's date, which was two days *after* I'd exposed their machinations at Winter Halo.

Rhea help me, there could be *babies* in this place. Youngsters. Just as there'd been in my bunker when the shifters had unleashed the gas that had killed them all.

I took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to ignore the painful rush that always rose when I thought about that dreadful day. But the memories would not be ignored, and once again I witnessed the disintegrating features of the little ones who'd been in my charge, heard their screams as the Draccid gas that had been fed into our air systems ate at their tiny bodies. Could feel the weight of them in my arms as Cat, Bear, and I tried—and failed—to get them out of the nursery and save as many as we could.

We hadn't known it was useless, that there was no safety to be found anywhere in the bunker. Not until the Draccid began eating at me, anyway, and Cat and Bear had crawled into my arms to die. I was the sole survivor that day, and only because lures had been designed to be immune to all known toxins and poisons. We had to be, because that's how we usually killed our targets once we'd bled them of information.

Tears stung my eyes, but it wasn't just the memories. It was the knowledge that if the déchet children who were being created in this place in *any* way contained wrath blood, then I would be forced to commit an act as unthinkable as what the shifters had done to the children in my bunker. It didn't matter if that death came to them now, while I was here, or later. Didn't matter if it was far kinder than the death the shifters had given to my little ones—the fact was, I'd be killing children when I'd

sworn on that day so long ago to never, ever let harm befall a child if I could at all stop it.

I drew in another shuddering breath, then resolutely turned away from the pods and went back to the crates. To know for sure what I might be dealing with, I first had to get into the research area. My best chance of that was hitching a lift. While all the crates were well battened down, my energy form didn't actually need anything more than a small hole to squeeze through. After a quick search through the various stacks, I found a crate with a small knothole and slipped inside. It was jammed with smaller boxes, most of them seeming to contain various chemicals, none of which I was familiar with.

There was no room to regain flesh form, so I hovered in the small, dark space and hoped I didn't have to wait too long before the crates were moved.

Eventually, the growing splutter of an old engine indicated a vehicle was finally approaching. Light speared through the small knothole and sent me scrambling backward, but it disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared. Headlights, I realized. The truck must have been turning around. After another moment, gears ground and brakes squealed as the truck came to a halt. A door opened, and then a second engine started up, this one more a whine that spoke of an electrically powered vehicle.

One by one, the crates were loaded up, mine included. A quick check via the knothole revealed the pallets holding the pods were being placed into the truck. With that done, the tailgate was lifted into position, and a canvas curtain dropped back down, though not secured. I slipped out of the crate but didn't immediately regain flesh form, still worried about the possibility of biosensors hidden within the walls. There were some parts of my bunker—parts that had once only been accessible to our creators—that had certainly had them, as had the labs in the other old bunkers that Dream and her cohorts had been using.

The driver climbed back into the truck, and with the gears grinding in protest, the vehicle was soon rolling forward again. As we drove under the arch and into the tunnel, I peered past the curtain again. I'd guessed right—there were sensors. Given they hadn't gone off, they must have been tuned to flesh intrusion rather than matter.

The tunnel swept around to the right and darkness dominated for some time. I couldn't see any guards but I had no doubt there were. And if this tunnel *did* lead to the laboratories, there'd surely be other measures, too.

Gradually other sounds intruded over the rumble of the truck's engine, all of which suggested we were nearing a secondary loading dock.

Time to risk leaving the truck.

I slipped past the heavy canvas and moved to the thick shadows that lined the left wall. Up ahead, the tunnel gave way to a brightly lit circular receiving bay—although, just like the first one, there were still spots of darkness hugging the outer walls and the various exits. There were also people and forklifts everywhere, and plenty of visible guards. I stopped at the tunnel's mouth to get my bearings as the truck swung toward a small loading dock on the right. The information I'd taken from the guard's mind had been rather sketchy when it came to this area, but it didn't really matter. These tunnels were all signposted. The one I wanted—nursery and development—was the second tunnel on my left.

I flexed fingers that held no flesh and pushed away the trepidation that rose within me. It was no use fearing what I might yet have to do without first knowing if there was any reason for that fear.

I slipped around the corner and rose to the ceiling, where the shadows were thicker and there was less chance of guards—hidden or not—sensing my presence.

The entrance into the nursery tunnel was packed with sensors. Two guards stood on either side of the gateway, their expressions bored and stances relaxed. I hesitated, and then sped through the gate, pressing myself flat against the rooftop in an effort to

avoid the biggest mass of sensors that lined either side of the tunnel.

No alarm sounded. Relief flowed through me, but it was a fleeting thing. The goddess Rhea might have favored my mission so far, but even *she* could only extend so much good fortune before the axe fell.

This tunnel, unlike the others, ran straight, and I sped along it, my fear and trepidation increasing the deeper I got.

In the distance, light flared. It wasn't the puddled yellow lighting that was everywhere else, but rather a bright light that held a bluish tinge. I knew that light. It was the same one they'd used in all the nurseries at my own bunker.

Please, please, don't let these nurseries be occupied....

The tunnel opened into a small antechamber. There were four metal doors leading off this, and above each was a simple number. There was no indication of what might lie beyond any of them, and all the windows were opaque. There were no cameras, either, and nothing to suggest this place was, in any way, being monitored.

Which was decidedly odd—and rather unnerving. Luck was a fickle thing at the best of times, and Jonas and I had certainly had our fair share of it over the last few days. I couldn't help feeling it was about to run out, and I could only hope that was born of fear and pessimism rather than instinct.

I halted in the shadows and listened for any indication that there was someone nearby. If they *were* breeding déchet, then there would have to be technicians and doctors here, at the very least, even if the place looked and felt empty.

After a moment, I heard a faint rasp—someone breathing a little too heavily. It came from the darkness hugging the right edge of the antechamber. I reformed my right hand then raised the dart gun and fired.

I waited, my gaze on the antechamber and the doors rather than the shadows. After a minute or so, there was a soft thump as the guard collapsed. Tension knotted my particles as I waited for some kind of reaction, but the silence stretched on, empty

of both life and threat.

It shouldn't have been this easy to raid this place. Not after Sal's death and the loss of Winter Halo. Even Dream couldn't be so sure of this place's location and invisibility that she'd kept security at a minimum rather than ramp it up.

I released the shadows that hid me and regained form as I dropped to the ground. But as I stepped into the light and started to create a light shield, the door to my left slid open and a man stepped out. His gaze swept past me then abruptly returned. "What the hell are you doing here, soldier? This is a restricted area."

Though he was frowning, his expression was more annoyed than suspicious.

I quickly hid the dart gun behind my back. "I know, but I was ordered to bring this pack down to you. We retrieved it from the rift this morning."

"This is well outside usual protocol." His frown deepened as he motioned me forward. "Who gave you the order?"

"Martin."

"He hasn't the authority to issue such an order. Give me that pack immediately."

I stopped and held it out. As he took it, I surreptitiously fired. He must have felt it, because he immediately looked down, but thankfully the dart was hidden within the folds of his coat.

He opened the pack and pulled out the geo-locator. "Why the hell would Martin have sent this down here?"

I shrugged. "I'm just doing what I'm told. If you want answers, you'd best talk to him."

"And I will. You're dismissed, soldier."

He started walking back toward the room, but stumbled and would have fallen had not a second man—this one wearing a white medical coat—caught him as he exited the room.

"What the fuck?" he said. "Soldier, help me get him back into the lab, will

you?”

I did. Once I was sure there was no one else in the room, I darted the second man. When he collapsed to the floor, I looked around.

There were no intrauterine devices and no cots in this lab, but my gut nevertheless twisted. It might not be a nursery, but I'd seen the equipment like this before and knew it to be a creations lab—the place where the DNA of tiny embryos was sliced and diced. I walked over to one of the many cryonic cylinders and unlatched the lid. Inside was a veritable test tube forest, all of them cells that could never be allowed to become anything more.

I closed my eyes for a second, the need to destroy the DNA within these tubes before they could become life warring with the knowledge that my main task here had to be uncovering how far along the creation scale these people were. The guards I'd ambushed certainly suggested they'd at least been partially successful in altering life, if not creating it, but lizard men who couldn't breathe without assistance weren't what Dream and her cohorts had been after. They wanted to erase the stain of humanity and shifter from this world. They wanted it to belong to the wraiths and vampires—the two races they now saw themselves as, thanks to rift intervention and at least one of them being a rare vampire survivor. And to do *that*, they needed a fighting force that could walk without fear in daylight.

But a creations lab generally *wasn't* a part of that process as far as I was aware. It was about life—or rather, the manipulation of it. I owed my existence to a lab such as this, but I'd been one of the lucky ones. I'd survived into adulthood, when hundreds, if not thousands, of others had not.

This place—and these cells—had to be destroyed. *Had* to be. But I had no doubt alarms would sound the minute I took any direct action to either destroy or otherwise interfere with the cylinders. I needed to uncover what other horrors might lie in the remaining laboratories before I decided what action—if any—I took next.

But not before I took some precautions. The feeling that my time was swiftly running out was growing, and I needed to ensure this place—and the other labs—was destroyed if the worst happened and I was either captured or killed.

I dug one of the RTX devices out of the pack and pressed it up into the bottom lip of the nearest table. Like all plastic explosives, this one was extremely pliable but had the advantage of the detonator being inbuilt. I linked it to the remote firing mechanism then called the light to me and walked out to the next lab. There was a security panel to the right of the door—one that was both a fingerprint *and* iris scanner. I swore and headed back to the first lab. While such security measures weren't surprising, it was nevertheless frustrating. The longer I spent in this place, the more likely it was that my presence would be discovered.

I hauled the first man upright and half carried, half dragged him across the antechamber. I shoved one hand against the scanner then forced an eyelid open. The scanner did its work and the door opened.

The room beyond was large and bright, filled to the brim with medical equipment. There were also another two doors, one that led into an office and monitoring area, and another that led into a second lab. This room was also occupied. Not only were there three scientists and a guard, but also four rows of neonatal cribs and a final row of what could only be described as restraint cots. Any hope that they were all empty quickly died, not only because I could see small forms in the cots, but because the light screen monitors above each one were emitting the soft sound of heartbeats.

I let the scientist fall to the floor, half in and half out of the room, and then quickly stepped over him and moved to one side. My light shield shimmered slightly as it adjusted to the bluer light within the room, but none of the four people noticed—they were too busy looking at the unconscious scientist.

“Greg?” one of the other scientists said, then, when there was no response,

swore and ran over. He bent and felt for a pulse, and then grunted. “Mark, help me get him into a chair. Betts, call the medics.”

As the woman walked over to a comms unit and the two men picked up the drugged scientist, I walked across to the nearest crib.

What lay inside was everything I hadn’t wanted to find.

It was a child. A physically perfect child.

A child with coffee-colored skin and the biggest smile I’ve ever seen.

But her almond-shaped eyes dominated her face and her nose was squashed so flat it was almost nonexistent. They were features I’d seen before. Features I feared.

This beautiful, happy little girl was born of wraith DNA.