



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 wraith 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.

Chapter Two

Rhea help us....

I closed my eyes and tried to contain the pulsing horror of not only what they'd achieved, but also what would inevitably come next.

Death.

Of this child, and of all the other children in the remaining cribs. Not just because of what they were, but because none of them showed any discomfort from the lab's bright lights. My stomach churned at the thought, even if I understood the necessity of it.

And yet I couldn't help but think of my own little ones, who'd never been given the chance at life simply because of what they were and the way they'd been created.

If we killed these children without thought, without even pause, then we'd learned nothing from the horrors of the past.

No doubt Nuri and her crew would say it was the horrors of the future they were trying to prevent.

The small babe gurgled, the sound so soft and merry it just about broke my heart. She reached up with chubby little fingers, and it was at that moment I realized

she could see me despite the light shield.

I hesitated, and then lowered my hand into the crib. Her fingers latched unerringly onto one of mine, and her warm touch had my seeking skills flaring to life. There was no anger in this child, no hate. She was warm, comfortable, and happy enough, but she was also desperate for human contact. She wanted to be held—to be loved.

They weren't unusual emotions for a child this young; even those of us born in the déchet program had wanted such things. Or, at least, those of us who remained capable of emotions had. Many déchet—but especially those designed to be soldiers—had been both chemically and physically neutered of any ability to think or feel.

But this little girl, with her big amber-green eyes that shone with intelligence, had *not* been mentally castrated—just as the little ones who haunted my bunker hadn't been. And, like them, her mental maturity seemed to be well advanced. She might be physically no more than five or six months old, but if what I was sensing through our connection was anything to go by, she was at least a couple of years older than that intellectually—if not more.

In fact, I'd go as far as saying there was a very old soul in this very young body.

Her grip tightened on mine, and I had this weird feeling she was trying to either tell or show me something. My seeking skills were dragged deeper into her mind, and what I discovered was a force as fierce as anything I'd ever encountered.

This child might have wraith blood, but she was also a seeker and a witch. While her power and abilities were at an embryonic stage, they were untainted and unrestrained, and promised to be a force every bit as strong as anything I'd seen Nuri produce.

But it wasn't *that* she wanted me to see, but rather the fact she'd known I was coming.

That she saw me as her friend—her savior.

Me, the woman who'd been sent here primarily to scout the location, but also to kill any such finds as these children.

What was I supposed to do now?

I pulled my finger from hers. Her little face immediately screwed up and big tears welled in her eyes. I closed mine, took a deep breath, and then touched her chest lightly. *I'll be back.*

Though I was empathic rather than telepathic, I had no doubt she'd understand me. The seeking skill we both possessed—the same skill that was in part the reason behind my ability to communicate with the ghosts in our bunker, be they young déchet or full-grown, fully trained soldiers—ensured it.

She made no further sound, but those tears remained in her eyes, a silver glimmer that threatened to tumble down her cheeks at any minute.

The door opened and two men—one of them guiding a powered medical stretcher—walked into the room. They quickly examined the man I'd drugged then placed him onto the stretcher and walked out. I hoped the medical facilities weren't close, because once they ran full blood work, they'd find the drug and the game would be up.

I quickly moved to the next set of cribs. Not only were this group of six older and sicklier looking, their features were decidedly more wraith in design. Their eyes were bigger—more almond shaped—than the little girl's, and their mouths far smaller. Wraiths had no mouths at all—how they actually fed was anyone's guess—and it once again suggested these four weren't full-bloods. I gently touched the nearest child, but there was no response from him, either physically or mentally. All I felt was pain. Terrible, terrible, pain.

I clamped down on the fury that rose and continued to the next row of pods. There were four in this group and, once again, they were a few months older and even

further along the scale of becoming wraith. Were the different rows of cribs an indication of development lots? Not only was the little girl far younger than any of these other children, she was also the most “human” looking of any of them.

But why was she the only one in her row? Had the rest of her group died, or was something stranger happening here?

I didn’t bother touching any of the children in the third group. There was no need to—not when the light screen readouts indicated that even with all the tubes inserted into their little bodies, they were barely alive.

As I moved across to the final row of cots, an alarm went off. The light screen above one of the restraint cribs—which held children who resembled full wraiths, right down to the gray, almost translucent skin, and who had no facial features other than their overly large eyes—was flashing red as the heartbeat monitor flatlined. The three scientists swore and immediately began instigating CPR and recovery procedures, but it was all for naught. His soul was already rising—it was almost as if he couldn’t wait to get out of his own body.

As was typical for the newly dead, his form was real and solid looking. All ghosts tended to cling to the shape they’d worn in life initially, but most soon realized that doing so drained their energy far too quickly.

What was interesting about *this* young ghost, however, was not the fact his ghostly flesh looked real, but rather that it didn’t, in any way, resemble the body that lay in the crib. Instead of wraith features, this ghost had black hair, blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his sharp little nose.

So why the change? It was something I’d never witnessed before and it had intuition stirring.

He continued to hover over the crib and the scientists trying to revive him for several more seconds, and then his gaze rose to mine. He could obviously see past the light screen, but then, ghosts generally saw the world as it actually was rather than

whatever front or guise was being presented, be it via magic or psychic skill.

Like the others in the restraint cribs, he appeared to be about two years old, but—as with the little girl—there was a much older soul shining out of his blue eyes.

I half reached out, unsure how he'd react or if it was even wise to make an attempt to talk to him. But I needed to know what was going on within this lab and, if he were anything like my little ones, then he would at least be able to give me some idea even if he wasn't capable of anything too technical.

He continued to study me for several more seconds and then slowly drifted forward. His hand touched mine and energy tingled across my skin as a connection formed—and that meant he was either of shifter origin, or that my inability to use my seeking and psi skills against humans had faded right along with the inability to kill them.

Who are you? I asked softly.

I don't know.

His mental tone was somewhat harsh, as if communicating was something he was not used to. But then, those who'd raised déchet hadn't exactly encouraged conversation with their creations, either.

Are you of this place?

This place is all that I can remember.

Which wasn't a surprising reply, and yet it was something else that tugged at my instincts. *What are they doing to you here?*

They test their drugs. It changes us. He paused, his gaze drifting back to his body. *It is painful. It is why they strap us down. It is why we are kept quiet.*

My fury deepened at his words. The mere fact that these kids were being used as guinea pigs suggested they weren't lab created but rather born of natural means. It also meant the fourteen kidnapped children we'd been trying to find weren't the only ones Dream and her cohorts had been experimenting on.

But the kids here weren't being used to test pathogens capable of altering the DNA of a human to make them vampire—which was a warped means of understanding the process so that they could reverse it—but rather to make wraiths.

Are those of you in this room the only ones they're testing on? I asked.

Yes. He paused, his gaze moving past me. *None of us will survive what they do to us. None of us want to survive.*

Even as he said that, another monitor went red. It was the crib next to his. Two of the scientists quickly repeated the recovery procedures, but the result was the same. Another soul rising.

You must end this madness, the first child said. *Please, you must help those of us for which there is no hope. Promise that you will.*

I hesitated. Making such a promise would go against the one I'd made to myself so long ago, and yet if I didn't accede to his wishes, I'd only be condemning these children to more pain.

You cannot save us. No one can, he said. *All of us will die; it is simply a matter of when, and in how much pain.*

His words stirred the memories of melting flesh, and tears stung my eyes. I rapidly blinked them away. *I promise.*

His form had begun to fade. At first I thought he could simply no longer maintain the fiction of his flesh, but then a smile twisted his lips, and his form began to glow with a warm, golden light.

The tears that had been threatening to tumble finally did; they came not from sadness, but rather relief and happiness.

His soul was being called on. He was being given the chance of rebirth.

It was a gift we déchet would never receive, although I had no idea why. Nuri *had* forced some of the déchet ghosts haunting a military bunker we'd been investigating onwards, but I very much suspected the place she'd sent them and the

place these little souls were being drawn to were two completely different things.

As the second soul also moved on, I raised the dart gun and shot the guard and the two men. None of them registered the attack—the scientists were still trying to bring the second child back to life and the guard was too engrossed in the unfolding drama. I hooked the dart gun onto my utilities belt and waited for the drug to take effect. As the two scientists and the guard collapsed in quick succession, I lunged forward and grabbed the woman by the neck.

“Scream,” I said, as I shed my light shield, “and I *will* kill you.”

Her eyes went wide and the stink of her fear stained the clinically clean air of the lab, but all she did was nod.

“What are you doing to these children?”

She hesitated. I tightened my grip just a fraction, and she hastily said, “Testing a series of pathogens on them.”

“Wraith pathogens?”

Her eyes went even wider and she all but stammered, “Yes.”

“And the children here? Were they created in this place?”

“No. We bought them.”

Bought them? Why in Rhea would any parent sell his or her own child? “And where exactly does one buy a child’s life?”

“I don’t know!” Her eyes darted desperately for the door, undoubtedly hoping for salvation. “I just work here.”

“And your work involves testing pathogens created from the DNA of the Others on human and shifter babies!” My voice was no louder than hers, but it was filled with the deep anger that coursed through me. The stink of her fear sharpened. “Do you expect any of these children to live?”

She hesitated again. “We do have an extremely high fail rate—”

“Define high.”

“One hundred percent so far.”

Even though that was exactly what the child had said, part of me had hoped it wasn't the case—that the death toll here *wasn't* as bad as the déchet program had been at its worst.

What was she thinking? What were *any* of them thinking? In the name of Rhea... it was all I could do to not shake her, to *not* rant and rave at both her stupidity and her inhumanity. To not end her life here and now, just as she and her cohorts had ended the life of who knew how many children—slowly, and painfully.

But there were still things I needed to know. “So you expect all the children here to die?”

“Yes.”

There was no remorse in her voice, not even the slightest hint that she felt anything close to regret for either her actions or for what they were trying to achieve here. Something within me hardened—the same something that had killed the soldier whose uniform I now wore.

“But we do have great hopes for the latest bacterium batch,” she continued. “Subject forty-five certainly hasn't shown any of the side effects we've witnessed previously.”

Which meant forty-four other little ones—including all those within this room—had been forced to bear the unbearable before their deaths. “I gather you're talking about the little girl on her own?”

“Yes.”

“And how long have you been here, doing this?”

“Me? A couple of years.”

“And this site overall?”

“Ten years, at least.”

“Does that mean the lizard men who guard this place are a result of your

testing?”

“Yes.” She licked her lips again. “It was one of our more successful development streams—just over fifty percent of the test subjects lived.”

“Because you were using DNA from this world?”

“Yes. But those men were all volunteers, and well paid.”

I couldn't imagine there'd be any amount of money that would ever make up for what had happened to their bodies. But then, as Nuri had noted, it wasn't like I was at all familiar with what it was truly like to live as one of the poor in a city such as Central.

“What was the end aim of that program?”

“To create supersoldiers,” she said. “To create beings capable of battling the Others.”

I snorted. Given Sal had told me their end game was to completely erase the stain of humanity from this place, I doubted they'd actually be creating a fighting force capable of matching blows with the Others. It was more likely they were aiming for a force capable of going where the Others could not.

“And the wraith pathogen? How long have you been testing that?” I asked.

“And why aren't you testing it on adult volunteers rather than babies?”

“That particular pathogen has been in development for close to a year, and we did initially start with adults. All the test subjects died within hours of administration. We started using children after similar explorations in other labs—but with different drugs—proved they were better test subjects.”

My fingers tightened, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to force them apart. *Nothing*. Her face mottled and her breathing became shuddering, shallow gasps, but I felt no sympathy for her. “Other labs?”

“In Central,” she somehow said. “And in Longborne.”

I had no idea where Longborne was, but the lab in Central was undoubtedly the

now defunct Winter Halo. “How long have the children in this lab been here?”

“The ones in the restraining cots have been here the longest, the little girl at the end the shortest. She’s only received two shots so far.” The woman paused, her breath wheezing in and out of her lungs. I still couldn’t ease my grip on her. I was barely resisting the urge to do the opposite. “Look, I only work here. I was just doing what I was told—”

“You were torturing goddamn *children*. You’re trying to create a pathogen to allow wraiths full light immunity.”

Her eyes widened further, and I hadn’t thought that was possible. “No, I swear, we’re trying to find a means to kill them!”

“By first turning human and shifter babies into wraiths? There’s only one world in which something like that would be acceptable, and it’s certainly not *this* one.”

“You have to believe me—”

I didn’t. Not one iota. There might be fear in her, but there was no guilt or doubt, and surely there should have been at least a fraction of either. How could anyone truly believe that testing alien-based pathogens on humans and shifters would lead to a means of killing wraiths? If that was truly their aim, why wouldn’t they be testing any drug developed on wraiths? Granted, they were very deadly and extremely hard to capture alive, but that didn’t mean it was impossible. The DNA they were using in their pathogens had to come from somewhere, after all. For all I knew, there *were* government approved lab facilities that had the Others in captivity, and that were currently researching various means of destroying them.

But this lab was *not* one of them.

Not given it was a false rift that had led me here.

“Is this lab the only one containing live subjects?”

She nodded. “We did have two other production labs in operation here, but babies have been hard to come by of late.”

Before I could reply or respond in any way, the door into the lab from the antechamber opened and another scientist walked through. “Betts, I need you to—”

He stopped abruptly, his expression shifting from confusion to horror in quick succession. I snapped a gun from my belt and fired, but his reactions were just as fast as mine. He dove out the closing door, and the bullet pinged off the metal and went who knew where.

My time here had just moved into the red zone.

I shifted my aim to the scanner that controlled entry into the room and blasted it. Sparks and black smoke flew as the screen went dead. Though the door was now locked shut, I doubted it would keep anyone out for long.

As a siren began to sound, I killed the woman then stepped over her body and walked across to the chemicals cabinet. I'd made a promise to the soul of a dead child, and I intended to keep it. Had there been *any* sort of hope for the little ones within this room, I might have hesitated, but the scientist had basically confirmed what the child had told me. It was far better that they die a painless death now than spend who knew how many more weeks or months in unremitting agony.

I was all too familiar with such a death. I would rather break a vow than allow it to happen again.

If this lab was anything like the labs that had developed us, then there would be some means here of putting down unwanted test subjects. After a moment, I found what I was looking for—pentobarbital—a newer, swifter-acting form of an eons-old drug. It was basically both a sedative and an anticonvulsant, and in higher doses it gently put the subject into a deep sleep even as it shut down heart and brain functions. I'd seen déchet injected with it, and knew it to be a quick and peaceful death.

I clipped the gun back onto the utilities belt and then grabbed the bottle and several syringes. It didn't take long to inject the pentobarbital into the feed lines of all the children.

In all the lines but one.

I just couldn't do it to the happy little girl. She, out of all of them, had some hope of survival. She deserved a chance, and I was going to do everything in my power to give it to her.

I put the pentobarbital back into the cabinet, dumped the syringes into the medical waste chute, and then primed two of my remaining four RTX devices. I stuck one under a bench near the cribs, and another on the wall behind one of the metal cabinets. As the sound of approaching steps began to echo in the antechamber, I pulled off my stolen jacket, detached the drip feeds from the little girl, and carefully constructed a sling so that I could carry her.

She made no sound. She merely placed one little hand on my chest, right above my heart, as if drawing comfort from the sound.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. I hurried across to the guard I'd darted and quickly stripped off his body armor. I loosened the side straps, then carefully pulled it over my head. The guard was much taller than me, so not only did the heavy vest drop past my hips, it completely protected the little girl. Once I'd tightened the straps, I wrapped a light shield around the two of us and hurried over to the internal door. Fortunately, this one wasn't scanner locked, and it opened to reveal another laboratory—one that appeared to be at the epicenter of their pathogen development. I concealed another RTX and then drew a gun and walked over to the corner of the room near the door that led back out into the antechamber.

Even as I stopped, five soldiers quickly but silently entered the room. Three moved toward the other lab while two positioned themselves either side of the open door. My fingers tensed around the gun, but attacking either man really wasn't the best option right now. To have any hope of getting out of this place in one piece, I needed to slip past without being sensed.

I eased off my boots and hung them on the back of my belt. I was no master at

walking silently, and the combination of the boots and these floors meant there would at least be some noise, no matter how quiet I tried to be. It might not have been obvious when everyone had been intent on helping the fallen scientist, but there was no such distraction now.

I drew two guns and then sucked in the light shield as tightly as I dared. It would shimmer if it touched either man and that would be enough to at least raise suspicion. They might not know what a light shield was, but they would undoubtedly suspect something odd was happening and react accordingly.

After crossing mental fingers and praying that the luck I'd been gifted with so far continued, I headed for the door. But just as I was going through it, a third soldier appeared and tried to do the same. I had little choice but to thrust him out of the way and run.

The two soldiers guarding the door immediately spun and opened fire. One bullet caught my leg and sent me stumbling, but I somehow retained balance and jagged sideways, running to the right and around the outer ring of the antechamber rather than directly across it. Bullets pinged off the walls, floors, and ceiling, deadly missiles that came very close but didn't hit. The noise of all the gunfire was deafening, but the soldiers themselves were quiet.

As was the child. She just gripped my shirt fiercely, as if intent on hanging on no matter what happened next.

A gruff order was barked, and the gunfire immediately ceased. I slid to a stop, trying to control both the sharp rasp of my breathing and my surging fear. The tunnel—and the safety it represented—was close. So damn close. If I could get into it, become nothing more than shadowed particles, I could avoid the worst of the gunfire by rising to the ceiling and moving swiftly out of this place.

But there were still soldiers piling out of the tunnel; some formed a line in front of it, blocking any hope of an easy exit, while others were beginning a methodical

sweep of the antechamber. If I remained still, I'd be caught. Not just by those soldiers, but by a lack of strength that would surely happen sooner rather than later if the amount of blood now soaking my pants was any indication. Even if it wasn't currently dripping onto the floor, it soon would be. And that, in turn, would be a very easy path to follow, shield or no shield. At least there weren't any shifters amongst the soldiers—there couldn't be. They would have scented both the blood and me by now.

Not that it really mattered, because the soldiers were drawing closer and my options were fast running out.

I took a deep breath, raised my guns, and unleashed metal hell as I ran full pelt at the tunnel. Even as some went down, others returned fire. A bullet grazed my cheek, another my lower thigh. Others thudded into both the sides and back of the body armor, and it felt like someone was pounding me with a heavy wooden bat. But even though each successive bullet hurt like hell, and breathing was becoming more and more difficult, the armor was working. So far, there'd been no hits to my chest. The little girl remained safe and untouched in her cocoon.

But blood from my other wounds splattered beyond the boundary of my shield. It didn't matter—nothing did but getting us both safely into that tunnel.

Two soldiers ran at me. I shot one, dodged the other, and continued. But they knew where I was now and it would only be a matter of seconds before they took me down.

I had one chance, and one chance only.

I reached back, grabbed the remote, and pressed a button. The lab to my right exploded into a ball of fire, heat, and chaos. Such was the force of the explosion that it engulfed the men nearest it and sent others flying. I ran, with every ounce of speed and strength I could muster, at the two men who still blocked my way. They must have sensed my approach because their guns rose as one. Even as their fingers tightened on the triggers, I threw myself down onto my back, firing both guns as I

skidded through the small gap between them.

The light shield disintegrated in the heavy darkness of the tunnel, and I immediately reached for the shadows. As the force of it surged through me, I touched the top of the little girl's head with a bloody hand and silently said, *Don't be afraid. What happens won't hurt you, but it is necessary to escape.*

Again, she seemed to understand, because she made no sound even though the switch to particle form was as fast and as brutal as anything I'd ever experienced.

The change had barely finished when the second of the bombs went off. As smoke and heat billowed into the tunnel and sprinklers dropped from the ceiling and began spraying the entire area with water, I pushed upright and kept going, keeping as high as possible.

Gunshots pinged around us, but, as I'd hoped, the main barrage was not aimed high. They didn't know what I was, didn't know what I was capable of. I could only pray it remained that way, at least until I managed to get out of this place. If anyone thought to contact Dream and tell her what was happening, I was in deep trouble.

Not only was she well aware just what I was capable of, but she'd also be desperate to stop a repeat of Winter Halo's destruction.

I continued to speed along the darkened tunnel but slowed as I neared its scanner-packed entrance. There was no movement in the receiving bay beyond, but it was far from empty. There were at least two squadrons within the room; while some were positioned in front of other tunnel entrances, the majority had their weapons aimed at this one. I paused and studied the bay's roofline. Thankfully, there were still enough shadows to hide within. As the final bombs erupted and a heavy rumble filled the air and shook the walls around me, I slipped past the scanners and moved to the tunnel that led to the main receiving dock.

The intensity of the ominous rumbling increased until the noise of it overran even the screech of the alarm. Cracks appeared in both the walls and the ceiling, fine

lines that seemed intent on racing me through the darkness. Jonas had warned me that the RTXs packed a serious punch, so maybe using so many in a relatively small area had created enough force to compromise the integrity of at least *this* part of the base.

I couldn't help but hope so. It would make getting out a whole lot easier.

The end of this larger tunnel came into sight and, once again, I slowed. There were still guards on either side of the gateway, and both had their weapons raised and ready to use. But they were scanning the walls uneasily, probably wondering—just as I was—how far the destruction would go before those in charge of this place ordered something done.

I slipped through the gateway and made my way around the shadowed wall. An ominous crack appeared in the center of the loading bay's ceiling, and dirt and debris began to rain down. People were now bolting for the side tunnels, but I wasn't entirely sure that was wise. Given the noise and the multitude of fissures appearing absolutely everywhere, it really did seem possible the whole base was now in danger.

I dodged the debris as best I could and continued to make my way toward the elevator. As I drew near, the indicator light flashed on and the doors opened. Light poured out of it, and in an instant, the shadows were torn from me.

I dropped heavily to the ground and staggered forward several steps, fighting to keep my balance against the rush of people now racing for the elevator. If I went down, I might not get up.

Someone hit me side-on and threw me against the wall. My head smacked against the stone and stars danced as my legs threatened to buckle. I forced my knees to lock and wrapped my arms around the body armor, giving the little girl an additional layer of protection against the tide of hits and bumps as people continued to rush past.

Another siren went off, and then a metallic voice grimly gave the evacuation order. People pushed and shove even more fiercely in their desperation to get into the

elevator. But, beyond it, a red light flashed and then a section of wall slid aside to reveal a stairwell.

The elevator doors began to close, even though people were still trying to get in. Others were racing up the stairs. The quake was now so fierce that the floor buckled and large parts of the ceiling started to drop. It surely wouldn't be too long before the whole lot came down.

I gathered my strength, and then forced my way into the thick throng of people running for the stairs. No one paid any attention to me, let alone the tightly wrapped bundle I carried. They were all too busy avoiding the debris and trying to escape.

Just as we reached the stairs, there was a huge crash behind us, and then a fierce blast of dusty air hit, knocking several people over. I stumbled as someone ran into my back, but somehow kept my balance and kept on moving. The screams of those who *had* fallen were quickly cut off.

We raced upwards, a human mass of fear and desperation. I could see neither the top end of the stairs nor daylight, but given the length of time the elevator had taken to get down to this level, that wasn't really surprising.

Though we were tightly packed, no one was pushing. Everyone was too intent on keeping their balance and their position. But those cracks were beginning to chase us upwards, and the stink of fear, of desperation, became so fierce it filled every breath.

A shudder ran through the metal stairs and then the lights went out. The man next to me hesitated, only to be sworn at and shoved forward by the people behind us. He stumbled, and I instinctively reached out to steady him. He thanked me and kept on going.

The earth's rumbling was now fierce. While the walls and stairs in emergency exit tunnels were generally built to withstand great force, they *could* be destroyed—something I now knew all too well, thanks to the bombs that had all but obliterated

the two tunnels I'd used to get in and out of my bunker.

This place, like the loading bay and the laboratories below us, wasn't going to last.

I didn't even think about it. I simply sucked in the shadows and once again became one with them. And then, with every ounce of speed I could muster, I surged upwards.

I reached the exit in a matter of seconds but the storm still raged on the surface, and it almost tore me apart. Panic surged and I hastily regained human form, hunkering down on one side of the exit and shielding the babe with my body as I tried to see where we were.

The elevator appeared out of the ground, sand falling like water from its roof as people scrambled out. They all headed to the left and, after a moment, I saw why.

Transporters were waiting for them.

I kept as low as I could and ran toward them. There were over a hundred people trying to cram into each of the first five trucks—trucks that had been designed to carry an eighth of that. I ran past them. There were another three trucks parked beyond them, as well as a number of hovers and sand barges. I went to the very last vehicle in line and jumped into the main cabin.

“Sorry, love,” the pilot said, without even looking at me. “We're not cleared for takeoff as yet. Hop into the back and wait.”

I didn't bother replying. I simply hit him over the head with the butt of a gun, and then dragged his unconscious body out of the pilot's seat and dumped him into the storm.

Once I'd closed and locked the door, I stripped off the armor and used it to create a rough sort of pouch to hold the little girl secure in the passenger seat, and then slipped into the pilot seat. I'd never been at the controls of a barge before but they didn't look all that different to the truck I'd recently driven into Winter Halo.

After a moment, I located the starter switch and kicked the engine into action, then pulled out the geo-locator and transferred the rift's coordinates into the GPS.

As the big machine rolled forward, I leaned back in the seat and finally allowed myself to relax.

The minute I did, a red tide of pain hit, threatening to overwhelm my senses and sweep me into unconsciousness.

I fought it with everything I had and, after a few minutes, the threat receded, allowing me to do a quick wound check. There was a large and painful lump on the side of my head, a graze on my cheek, several surface wounds on my left arm, and a deeper one on my right. Blood ran freely down my side and hip, and my left thigh burned. Though my pants were soaked in blood, it didn't feel as if the blood was still running. All in all, despite the pain, I'd been pretty lucky. I took a deep, somewhat quivery breath, and then checked the little girl. No hits at all. There wasn't even a speck of dust on her. Rhea really *had* been watching over her.

I secured her once again then glanced at the radar. The storm was a big black blob in the middle of it but there was no indication of pursuit. We'd gotten away, at least for the moment.

I dropped the backpack onto the floor and then settled into a more comfortable position. While my body might be healing at a far faster rate than was normal, I still had to do something about the wound on my side. I really couldn't afford to lose any more blood.

I closed my eyes and slipped into the healing trance. I had no idea how much time passed before I woke, but the storm was no longer battering the barge and sunlight now glimmered through the cracks along the edges of the storm shields.

I hit the release button and, as the shields slowly retracted, the little girl made a sound that was part surprise, part laughter. I quickly glanced down at her. The sunshine pouring in through the thickened glass bathed her entire body, and though

her eyes were little more than amber-green slits, there was a look of what could only be sheer joy on her face as she reached upwards with chubby little fingers.

She was trying to catch the sunbeams.

I smiled and touched her hand. Her fingers once again wrapped around mine and the link surged to life. What I sensed was belonging. Homecoming.

I might be comfortable in either daylight or night, but this little girl was very definitely a child born of the sun. Who knew how the drugs she'd been given would affect her in the future, but right now, she was bathing in her element and simply happy to be.

“Raela,” I said softly. “It’s a shifter word meaning little sunshine, and it’s yours from here on out.”

A smile touched her lips and found an echo on mine. I had no idea what was going to happen to her once I got back to my bunker, but one thing was certain. Neither Nuri nor Jonas nor anyone else was going to get near her until they could guarantee that she would be safe, that she would *not*, in any way, be placed into another military installation, to be monitored and watched like some unusual animal. She deserved more than that.

The barge rolled on, its progress slow and very tedious. After a while, I pulled out the small flask and carefully dribbled some water into Raela's mouth. She was too young for the protein bars I was carrying, and I didn't have anything else. I might not have had—or ever would have—children of my own, but I'd been around enough déchet nurseries both before and during the war to know hydration was the key in a situation such as this.

After what seemed an eternity, the GPS finally indicated we were approaching our destination. As the barge automatically slowed, I leaned forward and peered out the windows. Dust devils were lazily pulling at the sand, creating gently spinning funnels that clouded the immediate horizon. I couldn't see the rift, but the alarm that

stirred was as sluggish as those devils.

The rift *couldn't* have gone anywhere, after all. The only person capable of either moving or destroying the things surely wouldn't risk doing either when Winter Halo was filled to the brim with officialdom and security forces, most of whom were intent on figuring out what had been going on in that place as much as who might have been responsible.

We hit the coords I'd fed in and the barge stopped. There was nothing but sand for as far as the eye could see. That stirring of fear grew stronger, but I clamped down on it. It was no use fearing something until I knew there was something to fear.

I hit the door release and jumped down onto the sand. The air was warm but the wind that teased the back of my neck hinted at the coolness of the oncoming evening.

I walked to the front of the barge and then stopped, my hands on my hips. The rift had to be here somewhere. *Had* to be. But there was absolutely no sign of it. Nor could I feel the caress of its poisonous energy against my skin.

I pulled the geo-locator out of my pocket and double-checked we were at the right location.

We were.

It was the rift that wasn't.

Chapter Three

I'd been expecting something to go wrong—things always did whenever I stepped through a false rift—but the possibility of it disappearing hadn't even occurred to me.

I walked around the barge, just to be sure I wasn't being blinded by the bright sunshine, but the result was the same.

No damn rift.

I thrust a hand through sweaty, blood-caked hair and squinted up at the sun. It might have begun its journey toward night, but I couldn't risk waiting for the stars to come out to see if any of them were familiar. Dream knew I could traverse the false rifts, and the minute she was informed of the attack, she'd order a search made of this area.

I needed to move. Trouble was, I had no idea where home was in relation to our current location. I hadn't thought to input Central's coords into the geo-locator when I'd left, and I didn't have any sort of comms unit with me—a totally stupid move I'd rectify the next time I went through a rift.

Or anywhere else, for that matter.

I climbed back into the barge, brought up the GPS, and scrolled through the screens until I found the tracklog. While the two rifts within Winter Halo had been large enough to cater to a barge this size, the sand base surely couldn't have been getting all of its supplies from them. There were simply too many people working and undoubtedly living at the base for someone in either Winter Halo or Central City not to notice the steady stream of trucks going in and out of the building.

The list of previous journeys that appeared on the screen was relatively short, which suggested the log was overwritten regularly. I scrolled down but didn't immediately recognize any of the names—until I got to the last two.

Longborne and Carleen. The latter had been one of Central's five satellite cities before the war, and the very last one to be destroyed at its end. These days it was little more than a broken wreck—a place filled not only with shadows, alien moss, and human ghosts, but also rifts, both real and false.

But it was only an hour's walk out of Central.

I'd just found my way home.

I imputed the saved route into the GPS and then pressed the start button. Lights flashed across the panel and, as the barge trundled forward once again, I went back into the log and brought up the Longborne record. While it made me none the wiser as to where it was actually located, I nevertheless manually entered its coordinates into the geo-locator.

After that, with Raela asleep, there was nothing I could do but eat some protein bars and watch the landscape roll by. Somewhere along the line I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, it was not only night but there were red lights flashing across the control board, Raela was crying, and a proximity alarm was going off.

I muted the alarm, then picked up Raela to comfort her and peered out the front windows. The desert had given away to a thickly treed forest, and the vehicle was

barely scraping through an increasingly narrow roadway. I glanced across at the GPS and realized we'd somehow gotten off course. I knew some of the more modern vehicles were programmed to detour around potential hazards, but the barge could never be described as modern. Besides, I doubted there'd be a hazard much worse than a forest this vehicle was ill equipped to traverse.

I hit the kill switch but the barge didn't stop. It just kept trundling deeper and deeper into the forest. I frowned and hit the switch again.

Still no response.

Foreboding stirred. I ran a full system check and soon realized what was going on—an external force had taken control of the vehicle. It didn't take much effort to guess who that might be.

I swore and bought up the terrain map. The reason for the proximity alarms immediately became obvious. It wasn't because we were bashing our way through a forest, but rather because we were drawing ever closer to what looked like a goddamn cliff.

I immediately swung around and hit the door open switch. Once again, nothing happened. The bastards were remotely controlling *everything*.

Another light flashed up on the control screen. This time, it was warning of approaching vehicles. What it didn't tell me was who the vehicles belonged to. It was always possible that they weren't from the sand base, but I really couldn't afford to take that chance.

Besides, even if they *were* friendly, they were still a couple of miles behind us, and wouldn't reach us before we hit the cliff.

Which was now altogether *too* close.

I ignored the thick thrust of fear and looked around for another means of escape. The front windows were too thick to shoot out with any of the weapons I had on hand. There were no side windows in the barge's cab, but there *was* a rear-facing window,

which I guessed was used to check whatever cargo was being hauled. It was little more than porthole barely bigger than my fist, but that was all my shadowed form needed.

Thankfully, the porthole's glass didn't appear to be as sturdy as the front windows. I glanced around, spotted a tool kit secured in a storage space to the left of the door, and pulled it out. Inside was the usual assortment of tools, including one rather large wrench.

I covered Raela's face to protect her from flying glass then grabbed the wrench and swung it, as hard as I could, at the small window. It took three blows before the glass shattered.

By that time, it wasn't just the flashing red lights telling me we were closing in on the cliff. I could actually see its edge.

I had to get out of here, and fast.

I dumped the spanner and then properly secured Raela's sling around my body. Once she was safely tucked close, I grabbed the body armor and the pack, and then called to the darkness. Even as the power of it tore through the two of us, the barge's treads rolled into emptiness and the vehicle's front end tilted alarmingly.

Once again panic surged, threatening to overwhelm my control and halt the change. I braced my body against the ever-increasing decline, then closed my eyes and concentrated on nothing but becoming shadow. The second I was, I surged through the shattered porthole.

Just as the rear of the barge went over the edge and began a tumbling descent down the cliff face.

I got out of its way and then hovered in midair for several seconds, watching it crash through the treetops and come to a sudden stop upside down on the rocky ground below. The barge's treads were still in motion and there was steam and smoke coming from the engine bay, but it didn't erupt into flame. Maybe it wouldn't—I

guess it depended on whether the fuel tank had ruptured or not.

A light speared the darkness, almost catching me in its beam. I thrust away and glanced up. There were figures lining the cliff top, but the spotlights they were holding were so bright that they were little more than silhouettes behind it. It was impossible to tell whether they were friend or foe—although I seriously doubted they were the former. Even though I wouldn't exactly call some of Nuri's people friends, I doubted any of them would simply stand there if they'd thought I was in the vehicle.

And if Jonas had been up there, he certainly would have been scrambling down to check for survivors.

I surged upwards and discovered my instincts were right. They weren't friends—they were wearing the sand base's uniform. There was also at least thirty of them here—either Dream was overestimating my combat abilities or she was absolutely determined that I would *not* escape this time.

I rose higher to get above the cliff top's tree line and slowly turned around. Given I'd been traveling for some time before I'd woken off course and in the middle of this forest, there was a good chance I was a whole lot closer to Central than I had been. If that were the case, then her lights should be visible, even from a distance.

And they were.

Or, at least, the night sky was lit by a glowing sphere of light some distance away to my left. Even if it wasn't Central, I'd be able to find a means of contacting Nuri there, as well as a source of nourishment for Raela. Aside from the one bout of crying, she'd been amazingly quiet, but that wasn't likely to last once her belly started to rumble. Even *déchet* babes had made it thoroughly clear when they were hungry.

Between those lights and us was a wide, wooded valley that swept up the foothills of another mountain range. The only mountains I could think of anywhere near Central were the Broken Mountains, where the few remaining nomadic shifter clans lived, and where the other military base we'd invaded was located. That would

certainly explain why this entire area—and the desert I'd woken up in—was unfamiliar. I'd never been stationed beyond the Broken Mountains during the war, and I certainly hadn't ventured very far from Central after it.

Movement caught my attention—the soldiers had begun to rappel down the cliff. It wouldn't be long before they realized I'd escaped. Time to get moving.

I dropped to treetop level and arrowed forward as fast as I was able, desperate to put distance between those soldiers and us. Time passed, but the spherical glow of the city didn't seem to be getting any closer. It was obviously a whole lot farther away than I'd initially thought.

Tiredness rippled through my particles, gently at first but gradually increasing in intensity, until it felt as if every part of me was afire. I might have rested and healed on the barge, but it had still been a very long day, and the protein bars I'd eaten weren't really enough to fuel me for long. Not after everything I'd been through. I glanced over my shoulder to check the distance I'd put between the cliff and us, and decided to drop to the ground and resume normal form. I could always shadow again if necessary, but right now, it was better to conserve some strength. I might not be able to move as swiftly in flesh form as I could when shadowed, but I did have tiger shifter blood in me and could run a whole lot faster than most humans. And at least it didn't tax my strength quite as much as maintaining particle form.

I dribbled some water into Raela's mouth to keep her hydrated, drank a little myself, then stoppered the bottle and moved on. Though the forest was dark, it was far from silent. There were night creatures in this place, rustling through the scrub and scrambling up trees as I ran past. That at least meant I didn't have to worry about a vampire attack. We appeared to be a long way out from any sort of human habitation, and those night creatures would have been the vampires' only means of sustenance had there been an infestation here. All the forests close to Central had been stripped of life for decades; in fact, I hadn't even seen any birds for a least twenty years, if not

more.

The night rolled on and the moon rose ever higher in the starlit sky—something I could feel more than see, thanks to the thickness of the overhanging canopy.

My muscles—unused to running so fast for so long—were beginning to ache, but I didn't slow down and I certainly didn't rest. A niggling sense of danger was beginning to creep across my psychic senses and the need to be out of this forest was growing.

The ground started to slope upwards as we neared the foothills of the other mountain range, and my pace slowed. It didn't ease the muscle burn. Nothing short of a good massage and rest would.

Then, from behind, I finally heard what my senses had been picking up on for the last hour or so.

The whine of engines.

They were coming at me, and fast.

But how in Rhea had they known where we were? Aside from the fact this valley was vast and there had to be more than one path through these trees, I'd traveled in particle form for at least the first hour and had left no trail for even the most experienced hunter to follow.

And yet they were behind me.

I could understand them locating the barge, as it was easy enough to trace a vehicle's location via its GPS signal. Of course, Dream was not only one of the evil trio, but a witch of some power. I didn't know a whole lot about witchcraft and the use of earth magic, but I did know that anyone who stepped on the earth could be traced by it. The minute I'd regained normal form, she could have pinned me.

But that thought was quickly chased away by another. I briefly closed my eyes and cursed my own stupidity. They didn't *need* a witch. Not when I still had Banks's RFID chip stuck over my own.

I slid to a stop, sending a spray of small stones and dirt scattering through the darkness, and pushed up my sleeve. The false skin covering the RFID chip was visible thanks to the grime now lining its edge. I slid a nail under one side and peeled the entire thing away from my arm. The RFID chip clung to the fake skin like a limpet, and gleamed brightly in the darkness, as if mocking me. I dropped it onto the ground and stomped on it, and then glanced down at Raela. While I'd blown up the labs, it was still possible they were aware that one of their test subjects was missing, especially if she'd been chipped. Most *déchet* had been implanted with a tracker or a control device—in some instances, both had been used. Their handlers had not only needed to know where they were at all times, but had also required a means of control if their charges flipped out or started attacking the wrong targets. Not that the chips had always worked—one of the reasons we lures had been installed into the nurseries as guards when not in service was because a *déchet* soldier had gone berserk and killed a number of *déchet* children before he could be stopped.

But could I afford to waste the time checking her?

Could I afford not to?

I glanced over my shoulder, trying to guess how much time we had left before they found us. The hum of the pursuit vehicles was definitely closer than it had been only minutes ago, but there was little point in running if Raela did have a tracker in her.

Besides, if she also had a control chip in her, they might well decide to take her out rather than risk her falling into the “wrong” hands.

I moved across to a fallen tree and carefully unwrapped her. She giggled lightly and waved her hands at the sudden freedom, making me smile even as I caught one of her arms and gently checked for implants.

It wasn't until I reached her feet that I found the chip—it had been embedded into the heel of her right foot.

And *that* meant I'd have to cut it out. There was no other choice—not if we wanted to escape. I took a deep breath to gather my courage and then lightly placed a hand on her chest. *I'm about to hurt you, little one, and I'm sorry. But bad men are chasing us, and there is a device in your foot that is leading them to us. It needs to come out.*

She should have been too young to understand either the words or their import, and yet her happy expression melted into one of solemnity, and the old soul I'd glimpsed before once again shone from her eyes.

She placed her hand over mine and the size difference oddly reminded me a grain of sand against a rock. And yet that grain was offering *me* both strength and courage.

She couldn't—*wouldn't*—go back to any sort of military or governmental organization or lab. I might not have been able to save either her companions or even my own little ones, but I would do everything in my power to give her the one thing they'd never had: the chance of a *real* life.

I pulled my hand from under hers then swung the backpack around and pulled out both the small medikit and the knife. If I'd had anything smaller, I would have used it, but I didn't. The blade's tip was fine, but even so, against Raela's tiny foot, it looked like a carving knife.

There was no deadening spray in the kit, only a sealing antiseptic, so I simply located the chip in her heel and pressed the knife's point against her skin. Then, with another of those breaths that didn't do a lot to calm the turmoil inside, I pushed it deep.

She screamed. I closed my heart to the sound and sliced sideways until the edge of the chip was revealed. Then, using the tweezers from the kit, I carefully grabbed it. In the past, heel-inserted control chips had often been connected to small vials of quick-acting poison. They could be detonated from a distance, and killed the host

quickly but not exactly painlessly. We lures had been designed to be immune to all sorts of poison, so they'd used a different system on us—a miniaturized but extremely powerful incendiary device buried under our ribcage. It was no longer in my body, of course, but I hadn't destroyed it, as tempting as it had been at the time. In those early years after the war, when I'd been so uncertain as to what was happening in the world above our bunker and whether another attack would come, I'd thought it prudent to keep hold of every weapon I could.

As I drew Raela's chip free, I saw the wires and swore. They were the same sort of wires that had been in me and meant this little girl was basically a flesh and blood bomb.

"I'm sorry, Raela," I said, my voice barely audible over the sound of her sobbing, "but I've got to get the rest of it out."

I dug the knife deeper, and again she screamed. The blade tip hit something solid, but the welling blood meant I couldn't tell if it was bone or whatever device had been placed in her.

I swabbed the blood away then used the tweezers against the edges of the wound to widen it. That's when I spotted it—a small silver tube.

Though it was microscopic in size, it nevertheless looked to be the same type of device that had been used in me. I carefully pulled it free from her body then threw the entire thing as hard and as far as I could. It eventually buried itself in the leaf matter that was banked around an old elm's feet, lost from sight but not from memory.

I quickly sprayed the sealer onto Raela's foot to stop the bleeding, then wiped away the rest of the blood and hugged her close. Even as I whispered words of comfort, I hurriedly reattached her sling and the body armor. Crying or not, we had to move. The pursuit was now close enough that I could hear the different engine notes of the various vehicles; if I delayed much longer, they'd be on us.

I snapped the water bottle, guns, and remaining ammo clips to my utilities belt

and then slung the rifle over my shoulder. As Raela's sobs quietened to hiccups, I set the remaining RTX and walked back to place it at the base of the old elm. Between it and the incendiary device, they should not only bring the old tree down but also start a fire big enough to cause problems for those who chased us.

I wrapped my arms around Raela and once again called to the darkness. It surged through me, but its force was muted, a warning I was very close to reaching the limits of my strength.

It didn't matter. Nothing did, as long as we escaped.

I flowed on through the night, keeping very close to the ground just in case my strength went. The old road grew ever steeper and narrower, and the roots of the trees that lined either side crept across its surface like thick wooden fingers. I had no idea where this road had once led, but it very obviously was no longer in use. Even the old barge, with its thick caterpillar tracks, would have had some trouble traversing the ever-growing wildness.

On and up I went, but the tiredness was growing and my particles were once again beginning to burn. I'd never really pushed myself to the utter end of my strength in this form—I'd never dared, as I'd always feared doing so would simply mean a loss of coherence. That rather than reforming and becoming flesh—as I did whenever light hit my shadowed form—my particles would simply unravel and float away, leaving me without the possibility of even a ghostly form.

Then, from behind, came a *whoomp*, and an orange glow suddenly lit the night sky. The RTX had just exploded. I spun around but couldn't really see anything through the thick scrub surrounding us, so I pushed up past the treetops into the starlit night.

To discover a huge swath of forest was now on fire.

The combination of the two bombs had obviously created a force far greater than I could ever have hoped for, and it surely would have taken out at least a good

portion of the pursuit.

Would it be enough?

The pessimistic part of me said no.

I dropped back down and became flesh again, but my leg muscles gave way and I dropped to my knees, grunting as pain rippled up my spine.

Rhea help me, *everything* hurt.

I sucked in air, trying to at least ease the burning in my lungs. One thing was becoming very obvious: I couldn't go on for much longer. I just couldn't. Not without help.

I closed my eyes and called, with everything I had, for Cat and Bear. I had no idea if my two little ghosts would hear me from this distance, but I had to try. Though it was highly unlikely they'd provide much of a front against whatever force was still pursuing us, they could at least contact Jonas and get him out here. Ever since he and I had gone through the rift together, he'd been able to hear, if not converse with, them.

Raela somehow wriggled a hand free from the confines of the sling and armor, and gently patted my face. Once again it felt like she was comforting me—telling me that everything was going to be all right.

I smiled down at her. Saw her answering smile.

And knew in that instant I would *not* release her into the care of anyone else. That it had, indeed, been a foregone conclusion from the moment her tiny fingers had grabbed mine.

Somehow, someday, I would raise her.

If we survived the current situation, that was.

And that didn't mean just *this* pursuit, but the whole matter of tracking down Ciara Dream and dealing with her mad scheme to give the wraiths and vamps light immunity. Until we found and destroyed both that final lab and *her*, her evil scheme was still very much in place and active.

I drew in another of those deep, somewhat shuddery breaths that did little to ease the pain or give me strength, and then pushed up and on. Progress was slow, though, and not just because of my weariness. The road was now so bad that I had to watch every step lest I stumble or fall.

The night rolled on. For a long time, there was little sound other than the chirruping of insects, the rustle of animals through the undergrowth, and the harsh rasp of my breathing. Raela was asleep, but she'd now gone quite a long time without any sustenance, and the fact she remained so quiet was beginning to worry me.

I trudged on, forcing one foot in front of another when all I wanted to do was stop and rest. But the stars were at least growing brighter and the scrub around me was beginning to thin, which meant that even though I couldn't see the mountain's ridge, it had to be getting closer.

Then, once again, came the sound I'd feared.

The hum of engines, closing in fast.

I cursed their persistence but didn't call to the darkness or even increase my speed. Given the incline and instability of the road, I didn't dare the latter, and I simply couldn't risk using the last of my strength on becoming shadow until it was absolutely necessary.

I trudged on, keeping my eyes on the ground but acutely aware of the rising rumble behind me. If that noise was anything to go by, they were no longer just coming directly along the road but had spread out, possibly to cut off any prospect of a double back.

I unclipped one of the guns and held it by my side. I doubted it would have the power to cause much damage to any of the vehicles I'd seen on the cliff top, but short of running me down, they couldn't actually harm me, as none of them had been armed.

A small oversight I was fervently grateful for.

Then the engine noise stopped. I paused, listening. There was no indication that anyone was coming after me—no bouncing rocks or crunch of leaf matter to indicate we were being chased on foot.

And yet they were coming.

Fast.

Shifters, an inner part of me whispered. I closed my eyes and hoped it wasn't true. Or that the shifters belonged to one of the groups who still lived in these mountains rather than from those who pursued us.

But it wasn't like I dared hang around and uncover the answer.

I called to the shadows, let them wrap around me, then raced on upwards, taking the most direct route rather than following the tangled, meandering road.

Just as I hit the ridge, I felt the unraveling begin. I quickly called to flesh and fell, twisting as I did so that it was my back that took the force of it rather than Raela. Déchet were made with very strong bones but we were not unbreakable. And break I did—the snap was loud, and seemed to echo across the night.

But for several rather terrifying seconds, there was no pain—absolutely nothing—and the fear that I'd broken my back surged. I moved my neck, my arms, my right leg... but the moment I tried to move my left, the pain hit, and so fiercely I had to bite my lip against a scream.

I wrapped a hand around Raela to ensure I didn't squash her, and somehow found the strength to push upright. And discovered that I'd broken both my tibia *and* fibula—a nasty break at the best of times, and certainly not one I could recover from in a matter of minutes.

Which was all I had left.

I tried to ignore the throbbing, heated agony that threatened to consume me, and looked around. I'd been fairly lucky when I'd fallen—three feet in either direction and I would have landed on top of a range of wickedly pointed rocks. Those same rocks

formed a semicircle-shaped cave behind me, and were probably my best—and really, only—place to make some sort of stand. If I could reach them, that was.

I unclipped my knife, cut a small section from a nearby tree root, and shoved it into my mouth. I needed something to bite down on—something that would smother the screams, if only a little.

And scream I did. Moving was agony itself. My body went hot, and then cold, and sweat slicked every bit of skin and made gripping the rocks and pulling myself backward even harder. The blackness of unconsciousness loomed large and it was tempting—so very tempting—to give in to the serenity it offered. But the minute I did, any hope of freedom—of a future for Raela—was gone.

Somehow, I reached that cave. But I was a quivering, sweating, stinking mess, with little strength to do anything more than lean back and close my eyes.

They were near.

I couldn't hear them, but I could feel them.

And I could do nothing. Nothing more than grip my weapons and hope I had both the strength and time to use them.

They were not going to take me alive.

They were not going to take Raela back to her prison.

If nothing else, I would ensure *that*.

I waited.

Closer and closer they came, a wave of determination and anger that burned my skin and made breathing even more difficult.

Sound scraped across the night—a rock, bouncing lightly across the ground only ten feet away from the entrance of my small cave.

I opened my eyes and raised the guns.

For several heartbeats, nothing happened. They were out there—I could smell them now. There was six of them, and they tainted the air with the thick need to kill.

But they didn't. Not immediately. Maybe they were waiting for someone, or maybe they were simply being cautious. After all, they had no idea what weapons I might yet have with me.

A tremor ran through my arms, but I locked them in place and kept my fingers pressed against the triggers.

A footstep. Just one, and then nothing.

The tension within me was becoming so bad I could barely breathe, and part of me just wanted to scream at them, to make them attack and get it all over with.

But I'd never been one to give up, and I wasn't about to now. I kept the guns raised and my mouth shut.

Stone scraped lightly against stone—not from in front, but rather above. Someone was crawling across the roof, making their way toward the entrance. I scanned the ceiling, but there were no breaks or fissures he could see through, and no way to appraise the situation other than dropping down into the cave's entrance.

More movement, this time from both the left and the right of the cave's entrance. They had me surrounded. Time had just run out.

I closed my eyes and contemplated doing the unthinkable. But until there was absolutely no other choice, I would not go down that path.

They didn't attack.

They didn't get the chance.

Energy spun around me, energy that was warm, familiar, and filled with a mix of both happiness to see me and concern at my state.

Against all the odds, Cat and Bear had not only heard my call but had brought help in the form of the Broken Mountain shifters.

Relief flooded through me, washing away the last of my resistance and strength.

As the sound of gunfire broke the silence, I asked my two little ghosts to protect Raela, and then finally slipped into the welcoming arms of unconsciousness.

New York Times bestselling author Keri Arthur brings her Outcast series to a breathtaking conclusion as Déchet supersoldier Tiger races against time to save humanity from darkness and total annihilation....

Though Winter Halo—the pharmaceutical company behind the evil experimentation on both children and adults—has been destroyed, the danger is far from over. Not only do seven children remain unaccounted for, but some of the vampires are now able to walk in light.

The key to stopping the unthinkable lies in finding Ciara Dream, the last member of the trio behind the plot to give full light immunity to both the vampires and the Others. But Ciara, like Tiger herself, is a shapeshifter, able to take on any human form she desires.

To find her, Tiger will need to use every skill in her formidable arsenal, and even *that* might not be enough to save the city and the people she has started to care about.

Because the vampires are coming, and this time, the lights won't stop them.