

A woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a brown military-style shirt with a dark strap across her chest, stands in a dense jungle. The background is filled with lush green foliage and trees, creating a sense of being deep in the wilderness. The lighting is soft, highlighting the woman's face and the texture of the jungle.

DUTY ABOVE ALL

**THE
WHITFIELD SAGA
THE DIVIDE**

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THE WHITFIELD SAGA

Elizabeth's Book...The Divide

Chapter One: Below the Trench *Southern Rebel Camp*

The humidity pressed against the stone.

Moisture clung to the walls and gathered in dark streaks that slid slowly toward the uneven floor. The air was thick and stale, heavy enough that each breath tasted used. Above, the steel hatch sat flush against the ceiling—no window, no vent, just a sheet of metal that gave a faint, intermittent groan whenever the temperature shifted.

Outside, the jungle moved in distant fragments—bird calls, insect buzz, leaves trembling somewhere far beyond the pit. None of that air reached her. Down here, everything was close, hot, unmoving.

The prison was not deep—only hidden. Hidden from Phoenix. Hidden from the PMC. Hidden from anyone who might ask where Elizabeth Whitfield had vanished to. This was not a holding cell.

This was the place people were meant to disappear.

Elizabeth sat in the centre of the chamber, wrists tied together with coarse rope. Another length bound her ankles to a wooden stake driven into the stone floor. Sweat gathered at her temples, slid down her neck, and soaked the thin cotton shift she had been forced into. Her hair, once tied back with military precision, hung loose and matted around her face.

She had not spoken in days.

Her throat burned. Her shoulders throbbed. Her legs had long since gone numb. When her back straightened, it did so on stubbornness alone.

But she was listening.

Footsteps above came and went without rhythm—too light, too casual, too undisciplined to belong to any Phoenix-trained force. Their voices were slurred with drink, their movements sloppy. Whoever held her answered to no authority she recognised.

That alone should have been the warning she saw coming.

She closed her eyes briefly.

You underestimated him. Again.

She had known Lionel was ruthless. Underhanded. A man who could twist law into wire and bind anyone with it. But she had not believed—even in her worst calculations—that he would hand her to foreign enemies simply to remove her. That he would risk Eurussian security. That he would betray the trench, Phoenix, and the stability of the continent for a single political purge.

She had allowed herself a moment of faith. A moment of assumption.

And Lionel had used it.

Regret settled cold in her chest, colder than the stone.

She thought of the trench ridge—of issuing orders with Quinn at her side, of wind cutting against metal, of the sense of certainty she had once carried. Now that world felt narrow, distant. She had commanded one of the most fortified front lines on the continent—and now her world was ten feet of stone and heat.

A shift of sound above pulled her back.

Voices—closer than before. Sharp, clipped, unmistakably foreign. Solari. The southern dialect spoken far beyond Phoenix borders.

A man called down, voice carrying through the cracks around the hatch:

“Tan Solan?”
(Is she calm?)

Another answered immediately:

“Yes.”

A crate scraped—wood on stone.

A third, irritated voice muttered:

“Kolm Brak.”
(Give me the food.)

Elizabeth shifted slightly, the rope biting deeper into her wrists.

The hatch groaned.

Metal scraped. Bolts dragged aside. A seam of bright jungle light cut across the chamber, stabbing into the darkness and outlining her seated form.

The hatch rose fully.

A silhouette appeared—controlled, composed, unhurried. No guards flanked her. No orders were barked. The descent was silent, deliberate.

Boots touched the ladder rungs.

Elizabeth lifted her head.

She knew the figure immediately.

Nikita descended the last rung and stepped onto the stone floor. She carried herself with the same quiet authority she always had—steady eyes, measured posture, no wasted movement. In one hand she held a small piece of bread, torn unevenly from a larger loaf.

She approached and crouched just close enough to place the bread into Elizabeth's tied hands.

Elizabeth's fingers twitched around it, stiff from disuse.

“Eat,” Nikita said softly. “You'll need your strength.”

Elizabeth raised it slowly, bit off a corner. Her jaw protested the effort—stiff, sore, resisting. She forced it anyway. The taste was bland, slightly sour, but it was the first solid food she'd had since the ambush.

The jungle hummed faintly outside. Sweat slipped down her spine. The ropes dug deeper as she shifted her weight.

Nikita watched her for a long, assessing moment.

Then she spoke quietly.

“Lionel thinks you're dead.”

Elizabeth didn't move at first. The heat, the ropes, the days of silence—all of it seemed to settle into her bones at once. But beneath that, something shifted. Not hope. Not relief.

Clarity.

If Lionel believed she was gone, then he would not be looking for her. He'd think the problem was solved. He'd think he'd won.

He always underestimated what he couldn't see.

Elizabeth straightened as much as the ropes allowed, breath steadying.

“Good,” she said under her breath—more to herself than to Nikita.

And this time, when she lifted her chin, the smile that formed was small, deliberate, and cold.

CHAPTER TWO – Broken Promises

Southern Rebel Camp

The heat pressed against the walls of the shipping container, bending the thin metal with soft clicks that echoed through the cramped interior. The air inside was thick and unmoving, heavy enough that every breath tasted of rust and dust. A low generator hummed outside, its vibration travelling through the floor.

Nikita stood at the centre of the container, the stale glow of the monitor casting a harsh light across her face. Sweat gathered at her brow but never quite fell, trapped by the humidity. Behind her, a pinned map of the trench corridor shifted slightly as the metal walls expanded in the heat.

The signal crackled once.

Then Lionel's face appeared.

Polished. Calm. Smiling.

"Commander Nikita," he said, voice smooth. "It's been a while since your last communion, anything to report."

"Lionel," she said, voice tightening, "you made me a promise."

He lifted his brandy with a lazy grin. "Did I? You'll have to remind me. I make so many promises—usually to people who want something."

"You said I get Settlement for my people, Inside Eurussia. Southern province access in exchange for Whitfield's fall. And she fell—exactly where I said she would."

"Oh, I remember," Lionel said, smiling wider. "I simply changed my mind."

“You said once Elizabeth was dealt with, my people would have a place.”

“Yes,” Lionel replied, swirling his brandy. “And then I decided they won’t. That’s how leadership works, Nikita. Conditions change. So do decisions.”

Nikita’s jaw locked. “You gave your word.”

“My word,” Lionel said smugly, “is not a contract. It’s a tool. I use it when it benefits me. And right now, it doesn’t.”

He turned briefly off-screen.

“Hussain, send word to Ryse, he’s to begin locking down the trench.”

“Yes mr Brady.”

Lionel’s face appeared again, amused.

“You used me,” Nikita hissed.

“Of course I used you,” Lionel answered, almost laughing. “You were willing, eager, and cheap. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I have ten thousand civilians waiting behind that trench,” she snapped. “Children, elders, workers—”

“Yes, yes,” Lionel waved a hand, bored. “And they’ll stay exactly where they are.”

“You’ll regret this,” she said darkly.

“I doubt it,” Lionel replied smugly. “Regret is for people with conscience.”

“We kept Elizabeth alive.”

That made him pause—but only to smile sharper.

“No, you kept her breathing because you wanted leverage. Now you have nothing.”

“We kept her alive because we never trusted you.”

Lionel leaned forward, eyes narrowing with pleased arrogance.

“Good. Trust is wasted on me. And since we’re being honest—Eurussia will never make room for her, you or your kind. The trench exists to keep you out. And that is exactly where you will stay.”

“You confuse brutality with power,” Nikita said. “You’re a coward hiding behind guns and walls.”

“And you,” Lionel replied, “are a woman with tents, a dying name, and a fantasy of relevance in my continent. Push across that trench, Nikita... and I’ll burn your entire camp to the ground.”

The screen went dark.

Nikita stood still. The air settled heavily around her, thick enough to cling to the skin. Outside, voices drifted faintly from the tents—children murmuring, pots clattering over fires, men sharpening tools in the shade. The jungle hummed with heat and distant insect noise.

Her hands, clenched at her sides, trembled slightly.

Nikita stepped out of the container.

The wall of humidity hit her at once. Smoke from low fires drifted lazily through the clearing. Children sat in tight clusters beneath the tents, faces streaked with dirt. The jungle pressed close on every side—dense, wet, unmoving.

She moved across the camp, past crates stacked beneath sagging canvas, past men repairing rifles in the shade, past women sorting water rations with weary, mechanical patience. No one spoke to her. They could read her expression too easily.

At the far side of camp, the hatch to the pit waited—heavy steel, bolted, sunk into the earth exactly as she had left it.

Two guards straightened when she approached.

Nikita jerked her chin.

“Open it.”

They swung the bolts aside. The metal groaned. A thin shaft of jungle light cut through the darkness below.

Heat rose from the pit, damp and stale.

Elizabeth Whitfield sat tied exactly as before, wrists bound with rope, ankles fixed to the floor stake, hair hanging loose and damp across her face. She lifted her head slowly, eyes finding Nikita’s without flinching.

Nikita stared down at her for a long, silent moment.

Then she spoke.

“It’s time you saw what we’re fighting for.”

CHAPTER THREE – Through the Forest

Southern Rebel Settlement

The hatch groaned open.

Heat surged from the pit as Nikita descended the ladder, untied the ropes securing Elizabeth's ankles, and hauled her upright. She left her wrists bound.

“Move,” Nikita said.

Elizabeth climbed into the daylight.

The clearing outside was cramped and harsh. Smoke drifted from small cooking fires. Children crouched near a pile of scrap and froze when they saw her. A boy snarled and hurled a bent piece of metal. It struck her boot. Another child lobbed a shard of broken plastic with a hissed insult under his breath. More children gathered, whispering, glaring, fingers curled tight around stones and debris.

Nikita stepped between them, blocking the next thrown piece with her forearm. She didn't scold them. She didn't even look down. She simply waited—an immovable wall—until the children backed away, muttering.

Elizabeth kept walking.

They moved through the outer fringe of the camp—canvas shelters patched with wire, stacked crates used as walls, barrels repurposed for water distribution. Weapons leaned against rusting supports. Every surface was coated with dust and heat.

A group of Southerners watched their approach, tension sharpening the air.

One soldier spat at the ground and barked, “Tovan.”

(Enemy.)

Another jabbed a finger at her, stepping forward with a sneer.

“Dem vek mek.”

(You want a knife — threatening to stab her.)

Others joined in—voices overlapping, aggressive, volatile.

Voices muttered, “Maru sot... Maru sot...”

(Child murderer.)

A chorus of disgust rippled through the group. Shoulders squared. Hands tightened around tools, makeshift weapons, anything nearby that could become an extension of their anger.

Elizabeth’s expression tightened, but she stayed silent.

Nikita did not slow. She knew the situation could break at any moment. There was only so much she could do against an angry mob. They walked past the tents into a wider opening where the treeline broke apart—revealing the settlement below.

Elizabeth stopped.

The remains of a city sprawled beneath the rise, but not in wide avenues or towering skylines.

It was compact—tight clusters of low residential blocks, three to five storeys at most, their concrete frames half-collapsed and drowning in foliage.

What had been courtyards and walkways were now a dense tangle of green. Trees grew straight up through old stairwells.

Bushes burst from window frames.

Vines draped from every ledge in thick, hanging veils that swayed in the heat.

Between the buildings, the ground level had become a shaded forest corridor—roots breaking through cracked paving, fallen beams overgrown in moss, sunlight filtering weakly through layers of leaves.

The blocks were damaged, but lived in.

Wooden planks bridged gaps where walls had fallen away.

Fabric sheets stretched between exposed supports to create shade.

Small fires burned within hollowed-out rooms, their smoke curling through the open floors.

Crates formed steps.

Rope ladders climbed up broken balconies.

Families moved with practiced familiarity—stepping over tangled roots, ducking under hanging vines, carrying water containers along narrow ledges reinforced with scrap metal.

Children played in pockets of shade, using bits of pipe and old wiring as toys.

Women washed clothes in metal tubs wedged between tree trunks and fallen concrete.

Men stripped copper from exposed walls, passing the coils down through improvised chutes made from guttering.

The air was thick and humid—dense with the scent of wet leaves, warm earth, and old concrete.

The sounds were muted, swallowed by the overgrowth: a distant pot lid, a child's cough, a rusted beam creaking as it warmed in the heat.

Elizabeth took it all in—the closeness, the ruin, the forced ingenuity.

This wasn't neglect.
This was survival built on bones.

"I never knew," she whispered.

"No," Nikita said. "You didn't."

They descended into the settlement.

Humidity wrapped around them like a grip. The overgrowth brushed Elizabeth's arms as she passed, rough leaves scraping her skin. The smell—earth, rot, sweat—was overwhelming after days in the pit. A woman paused at a washbasin and stared at her without blinking. An older man leaned on a beam and spat at the ground as she passed.

Elizabeth kept her gaze ahead, but every pair of eyes felt like a weight.
A verdict.
A sentence she had never stood to hear.

A group of teenagers perched on a broken balcony above, their legs dangling over a sheer drop. One of them tossed a pebble that narrowly missed her shoulder. Another laughed and called down another slur in Solari.

The sound stuck to her like grit.

She had commanded soldiers. She had ordered trenches dug. She had defended Phoenix without ever seeing what existed at the other end of her borders.

Now she walked through it.

Nikita led her deeper between two fractured residential blocks. A rope bridge swung overhead, children crossing it with buckets of water. A man welded scrap onto a broken frame, sparks stinging the humid air. A mother pulled

her crying toddler close when Elizabeth passed, shielding the child with an instinctive flinch.

Elizabeth's chest tightened.

They think my family did this.

They think Phoenix did this.

They think I did this.

And for the first time, she could not dismiss it as ignorance or propaganda.

The city had suffered.

And the trench had cut it off.

They stopped beneath the shadow of a collapsed roof where a makeshift fire ring glowed faintly.

Nikita turned to her.

“That outpost you saw near the jungle,” she said. “It’s nothing. A checkpoint. Soldiers and storage.”

She gestured wide—toward the broken blocks, the overgrowth, the people moving through ruin.

“This is the settlement. This is where we live. All of us.”

Elizabeth swallowed. Her voice came quieter than she intended.

“You live like this because of us.”

The guilt wasn't sharp. It was slow... spreading like heat under the skin. A realisation that settled heavily, uncomfortably, refusing to be pushed aside.

Nikita continued walking, and Elizabeth followed.

They reached a burnt-out stairwell still partially intact. A cloth canopy stretched overhead for shade. A few people sat nearby, watching, listening, judging.

Nikita stopped and faced her properly.

“While you are in my custody,” she said, “you live as they live. No exceptions.”

Elizabeth nodded faintly.

“I understand.”

But Nikita saw the truth in her eyes.

She didn’t.

Not yet.