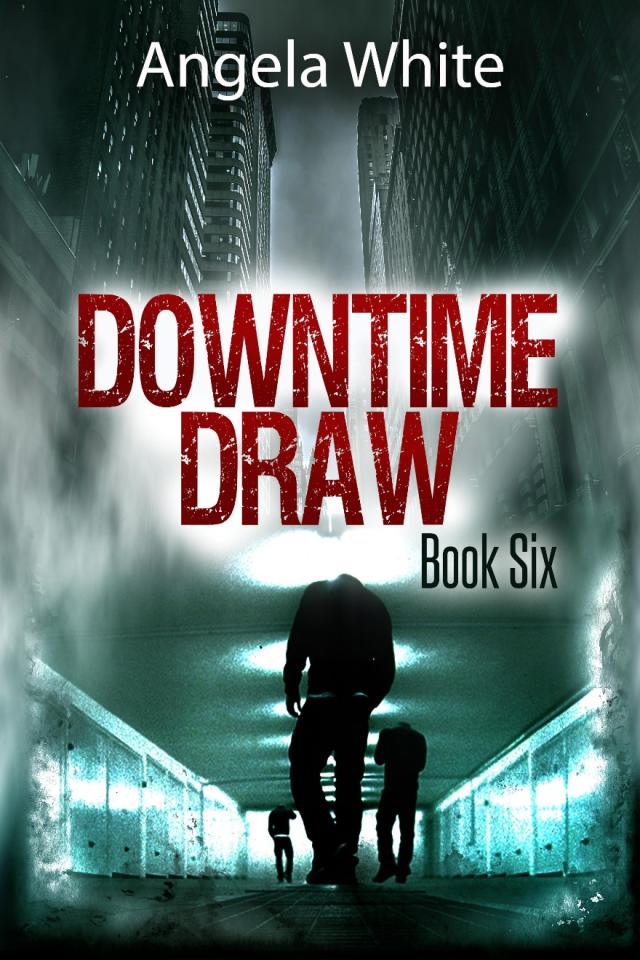
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# Copyright

**Downtime Draw**

by

Angela White

**Title**: Downtime Draw

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Thank you, Eagle Edits! John, Karen, Jim, Elizabeth, Jackie, Clara, and Crystal, you’re all amazing.

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# Chapter One

**My Pets**

GainesvilleLake, GA

**December 17th**

**1**

**“I**s everyone ready?”

All six men nodded excitedly at the prospect of doing something new.

“No guns, my pets. Whatever we pull out, we handle by hand.”

Nerves went up a notch at being denied their weapon of choice. The 40-mile reservoir lake was a murky, softly rippling mass of water surrounded by two shorelines and tall, waving weeds that limited their view. Cold wind blew over the water and the team in steady blasts. It was late and dark, but that didn’t mean they were alone.

Alexa tucked her cloak behind her guns anyway, then cast her line. It sailed roughly over the weeds and water and then dropped heavily into the lake.

Each team member did the same, except for Edward, who’d been given guard duty. Edward wasn’t upset to miss out on the fishing. He was getting his turn on watch out of the way first. Alexa would rotate it each time they came out so that every man did a shift.

The water rippled around their lures and then settled back into cold stillness. The water smelled normal and looked okay, but they weren’t taking chances. They’d boiled everything they’d collected from this freshwater lake over the last few days. They’d worked hard to outfit their shelter and now they were going to challenge whatever came out of the water.

Alexa left her line alone, unlike the teammates who tugged and reeled, trying to draw the fish. They’d spent the afternoon setting up large aquariums in the rear corner of their new den. Alexa estimated they could hold three weeks of meals, providing they could keep the fish alive over the winter. *But we’ll get more than that.* Alexa’s free hand dropped to her gun butt.

The men tensed. That was her calling card. It always let them know danger might be coming.

“Don’t lose those poles.” Alexa pulled her knife.

The water rippled near her line, swelling. It came toward the shore in a fast rush.

Alexa dropped her pole and put a boot on it to have both hands ready.

Her crew did the same.

Edward stepped closer to help if it was needed.

The night went silent but for the sound of rushing water.

Alexa saw a tentacle coming from the waves and grinned. “Kill it fast and we’ll have roasted squid for breakfast.”

Some of the team grimaced while the rest grinned.

Jacob watched for the head to emerge. As soon as he saw the two huge orbs, he threw his longest blade. It slid into the left eye and embedded in the cephalopod’s brain.

There wasn’t a cry, but all of them felt the death vibration. The squid slumped to the cold ground and began sliding back into the water.

“Grab it!” Alexa dug her hands into a tentacle, ignoring the pain and blood that immediately dripped down her fingers as she began hauling it from the water. Mark helped her while the others stared at their Preacher in surprised admiration.

Jacob shrugged, chuckling. “What? I love roasted squid and she said do it fast.”

They laughed as they helped drag the large food supply onto the shore near the livewells.

Billy got the first aid kit from his cloak and began doctoring her wounds while Mark waited for his turn. The tentacles were like barbed wire. They tore into flesh and stuck there to keep causing damage.

Alexa was pleased. The squid was a few days of food for her team. “Jacob will handle it from here. Get those poles. The fish will come up now.”

All of them had left their poles on the ground to come over and help. Alexa was glad they hadn’t lost them. Most of the fishing poles in the city stores had been rotten. They’d had to put pieces together to make these.

Jacob knelt near the squid, impressed by its size. “It’s amazing they can come out of the water now.”

“It’s more amazing that they’re in a lake and not the ocean.”

Jacob nodded at Daniel’s comment. He drew his knife so he could gut and clean his kill. “They evolved to survive, I guess.”

Alexa snorted to hide her pain reaction as Billy wrapped an ointment-treated bandage around her hand. “Or maybe everything we were told about them was wrong. Evolution doesn’t happen in only four years.”

All of them recognized that truth. Just because squids had only been observed in deep water, that didn’t mean they couldn’t survive anywhere else.

Edward felt Alexa’s need for him to drive in the lesson. He did a fast scan and then obeyed. “We had a gopher that liked leftover meat from our barbeques. It would pass up the weeds, the flowers, and the vegetables. Then the rabbits would come behind it and clean the bits of meat that were left.”

David nodded. “We had a cat who ate vegetables first. Snowball loved potatoes.”

Billy understood the lesson, but he didn’t like it. He wrapped Mark’s hands, sulking. “So if they didn’t know the full truth, why did they push it as if they did?”

Alexa shrugged as she reeled in her line and cast again. “Egos? Money? Ignorance? All of those fit.”

David reeled in his line to add a fresh worm from the can of nightcrawlers they’d dug. “I thought scientists were supposed to be open-minded and consider all the facts.”

“It paid better to have one view and stick to it.” Edward paused for Billy to ask the next logical question.

Now finished handling their injuries, Billy also rebaited his hook with a worm. He didn’t like the fake lures. “So what’s true and what’s not?”

“Us, this quest, and what we can prove through our own observations.” Edward looked to Alexa, passing the lesson back.

Alexa tugged on her line and felt the hook sink into something. “It’s easier with things that aren’t alive. You can diagnose a car problem and fix it. You can repair a leaky pipe. A living soul is much harder to pigeonhole into specific parameters.” She began reeling in her catch. “It’s best to not even try. Life will adapt because it wants to keep living. Just remember the number one rule: Everything changes, even when we don’t want it to.”

The others began reeling in their own lines, but her tone stuck with them.

Edward was once again impressed by their leader. In a few sentences she’d reminded them that their quest, their group, couldn’t stay the same. It would shrink or grow as they progressed and its members would have to adapt.

Jacob dropped the heavy chunks of squid meat into one of the empty wells, then joined his team. “Squid for bait?”

“Yes, please.” Alexa easily reeled in the fish. They were using the strongest line they’d found, along with the sturdiest hooks. It almost guaranteed a catch in this area. In the ocean, it wouldn’t have held most of what they could pull out.

Alexa grabbed her line and held it up to reveal a small bass. “Keep a count. When we hit 50, we’re done for tonight.” She slid the hook out of the bass’s gasping mouth and dropped it into one of the livewells they’d filled with lake water upon arrival.

Jacob shoved her hook through one of the squid’s eyeballs. He held the other one out to David.

David grimaced and waved him off.

Jacob laughed and used the other eye on his own hook.

Daniel held up a long, fat trout. “This one’s pregnant. Should I toss it back?”

“Her babies will serve us too. Add her to the livewell and cast again.”

Daniel did, brooding over Alexa’s choice. “Isn’t it better to put it back and let it have babies out there to make more fish for others to catch?”

Alexa wasn’t angered by his question. “Of course, but our quest is not conservation of the animals, and the waterways are teeming with life right now because of the squids keeping fishers away. We’re doing no harm in taking her. But we have helped by removing a squid. The other fish around here can mate and give birth with one less predator to avoid.”

“What about later, when we’ve gotten all the squid and the fish numbers start to drop?”

Alexa liked it that Daniel was concerned for the future. “The same as before–breeding programs and limits on how much can be culled at one time. The media liked to blame hunters and fishers for low populations, but they twisted those numbers. It was never as bad as they pretended, and most of the issues came from new laws that prevented care of the forests or diverted the water to other areas. Instead of just not farming a desert, they changed the flow of the water, ruined the previous area, and then refused to admit their policy caused it. Then they needed a scapegoat and who better than those awful hunters, fishers, and farmers they’d already taught the public to hate?” Alexa wiped her hand down her hip to dry it. “Tell me the real lesson here.”

Billy sighed unhappily. “Don’t believe what we’re told unless we verify it somehow because someone is always lying to fit their narrative, even those we believe are the good guys.”

Alexa smiled softly at Billy. “Excellent.”

Billy brightened at her praise and the invitation in her expression.

Alexa rotated back toward the water. “Let’s get those livewells filled up. Do it in two hours and we’ll have a story later.”

The air filled with the sounds of casting and lures hitting the water.

**2**

“That’s 50.” Jacob shut the lid after Billy dropped in the final fish.

Everyone else reluctantly reeled in their lines. The time here had been peaceful and speckled with good words and moments among crew members. They didn’t want it to be over yet.

“We have all winter, my pets. And if this lake freezes, we’ll learn how to icefish.”

Alexa’s words brought comfort and excitement. It also reminded them that being greedy over their special moments wasn’t allowed.

“Let’s go.” Alexa hefted a livewell and headed for their den.

They walked in silence most of the way, considering their surroundings instead of their mental wounds or curiosities. The slightly weedy sand sucked at their feet and gave beneath their weight. It was clearly underwater here at least part of the year. It required them to pay attention unless they wanted to use superspeed to get across it. Many of them did, but Alexa refused to sacrifice their humanity in every way. They could use their new gifts for training and the quest, but never for laziness.

The pier came next, creaking under their light steps as if to warn of impending doom. Then they were on crunching gravel that made it impossible to walk quietly. The trees met the gravel for a brief moment of silence that they all enjoyed.

“We’ll get quieter each time we do it.” Alexa wasn’t worried over the noise right now. They would handle whatever came.

“I see an apple tree.”

The crew stopped to verify what Jacob had spotted. Apple trees had died off shortly after the war due to a mold infection that had also killed most of the trees in the country. They hadn’t had a fresh apple in a long time. Alexa’s bone dust demonstration had been months ago and it hadn’t been natural.

Alexa walked deeper into the trees, shouldering one of the livewells without struggling under the weight even though it was full of water and upset fish. Four of the men also carried livewells, while the other two walked in the front and the back to provide protection. Billy and Edward were enjoying that responsibility.

Edward rotated for a fast scan of their rear, making sure Billy had things covered.

Billy turned back around from his own survey of their rear. He gave Edward a calm nod and kept walking. Their new hearing allowed them better distance to prepare for trouble. It also let them hear every sound Alexa made, but their eyes were still the main alert system.

Alexa stopped them directly beneath the apple tree, surprised that Jacob had distinguished it from the rest of the small thicket. The tall, wide tree blended perfectly among the shadows. “You smelled it.”

Jacob smiled in pleasure. “Yes.” Alexa was almost always a step ahead of them. It was nice to have noticed something that she hadn’t.

Alexa gestured. “Guard switch and load, by two.”

The two guards drew out their carry bags and started picking the large green apples. The rest of the crew stood in a circle around them, facing the darkness.

The trees around this one were dark, moldy forms. The healthy tree was a surprise and a good omen. Alexa took an apple from a low hanging branch and crushed it under her feet. She quickly spread the seeds out and kicked dirt over them. Maybe they would grow next spring and encourage this small, wooded area to sustain more life.

She resumed her place, enjoying the approval of her crew.

Alexa took a quick glance at Jacob; he was smiling happily. “Pie?”

Jacob shrugged. “A type.”

Alexa understood the man had something else in mind. “Jacob will cook tonight.”

The others groaned and chuckled.

Jacob beamed at her.

A piercing howl split the cold air.

The crew set their burdens down and placed hands on their guns.

The sound didn’t come again.

Alexa motioned Edward and Billy to continue gathering the fruit.

The rest of the crew kept their hands on their guns because she hadn’t told them otherwise. Their training was solid now.

*And that means it’s time for something new.* Alexa scanned the tall buildings where their den wasn’t visible even though she knew it was there and she had good enough sight to cut through the darkness. They’d done a great job painting the windows black. The dark city loomed in front of them without signs of life. Only the occasional glint of dim moonlight off a steel frame caught her attention.

*Maybe we’ll learn to climb or rappel.* She ran through the next possible lessons, but she didn’t lose focus on her surroundings. Leading by example meant not making the mistakes she grilled them for.

“Full.” Edward joined the circle as Billy finished.

“Something’s moving on the road to the south.” David was paying extra attention to his duty so he didn’t get distracted by knowing he would have an apple soon.

Alexa examined the two slowly moving forms. She saw their staggers and odd chin tilts. “More undead. Quiet now. I’m not in the mood to remove them.” She began to fade out of sight. Her crew followed.

They were at the entrance to their den a few minutes later without drawing the attention of the undead couple staggering into the city.

Edward unlocked the chain on the door and held it open for the crew to enter. Then he locked it back through the small hole they’d chiseled in the brick. The darkness around them would have been a worry to the crew before, but now their perfect vision cut through it like lasers. They walked to the stairs and climbed, listening for threats. Seeing undead here made them nervous. Where there were two, there were probably a lot more. The undead gathered together in public places. These two might be the start of a horde.

The wind beat against the tall building, making it shudder and sway in places.

The crew ignored it. Tall buildings swayed in the wind so they didn’t break or snap. Many earthquake approved foundations could withstand subterranean shaking, though not at high strengths.

Alexa stopped, smelling a scent that didn’t belong. She set the livewell down, searching for the source. *Is it sweat or decay?*

She looked at Edward, only to find him already breaking off toward the hallway entrance to this level. He eased it open and vanished into the darkness.

The crew waited, straining to hear whatever Alexa and Edward had sensed.

Jacob was reminded that she was sharper than him even though he’d spotted the tree. She found things before they came into view. So did Edward. The Preacher smiled wryly. *I want to be like that. I need to work harder.*

Edward came back a minute later, using a gentle touch to drop the bar they’d installed on all doors in this hallway. It effectively sealed off the level. He used a quick gesture to fill them in.

*Two survivors. Injured. Sleeping.*

Alexa continued their walk up the steps, stomach growling, but she refused to take those lives without knowing if they were evil.

Edward hated Alexa being denied a meal, but until she grew hungry enough to find a worthy source, they would all suffer the thirst alongside her. *We’re doing it as a team.* For some odd reason, that pleased all of them and made the wait tolerable.

“Who wants to be the ghost come dawn?”

The men realized she wanted to scare the couple out of here.

“I’ll do it.” Daniel already preferred animal blood. He was proud of his control around normals.

“Make sure they get somewhere else that might provide a den.”

“You got it, Boss.” Daniel wondered how the couple had gotten in at all. “Do you think they broke a window?”

Edward shook his head. “No draft coming through. We missed an entrance somewhere.”

“That means they’re probably familiar with this area.” Alexa made another leadership choice. “Try to flush them toward the corners so we can find that entrance and seal it when they’re gone.”

“I will.” It would make it harder to get rid of the people without them knowing there was a group already using this building, but Daniel knew that’s what Alexa wanted. They had a lot of work left to do if this was going to be a stand during a fight. Daniel hoped it wasn’t. He was ready for the break. *We all need the downtime. And we’ve earned it. Alexa said so.*

They’d claimed the top level and begun outfitting it with a cooking center, a water purifying zone, a laundry area, and other needed setups for a long stay. It almost felt like a home to Alexa as they entered.

She and the others sat the livewells in the long, deep empty aquariums, trying not to make extra noise that would carry to their unwanted visitors. The vibrations from the air filters Edward had rigged up to a car battery might be enough anyway.

The team thought it was nice Alexa was letting the injured couple stay until dawn, but that meant a few hours of them having to be quieter than usual.

Alexa stripped off her heavy coat and hung it up, glad to be indoors. The weather was getting uglier now, even for a vampire. She used her finger to bring their fire back to life under the filled pot of water, then spent a minute in front of it, warming her bandaged hands. She listened to the tender teasing and soft grumbles of the crew. *But I don’t hear Jacob.*

She found him sorting through the apples, picking out the very best. The others hadn’t noticed it yet. Alexa turned back to the fire. *He can’t cook, but he can bake. I’d bet my last few smokes on it.*

Alexa didn’t ruin his surprise as she rejoined her men at the fish tanks. They were all eager to find out if their idea would work. These weren’t small pet store fish that could survive being dropped into a new home. These large fish had lived all their lives in a lake. She was hoping life would adapt to these new conditions, at least for a few weeks.

Jacob whistled lowly and then began tossing apples that he’d just wiped off.

Laughter went through their den as each of them caught the slightly wild throws. Then the sound of crunching and moaning echoed, bringing a wave of happiness that almost everyone enjoyed.

Alexa thought of the couple on the first floor. Not knowing how they’d gotten in bothered her.

Daniel felt it. He swallowed his bite and set his apple on his corner of their long kitchen table. “Now?”

Alexa reluctantly nodded. “If you find that entrance, they can still stay until dawn.”

Daniel pulled his cloak tighter and headed for the exit. He and the others had refused her advice of wearing bigger coats for the fishing run, not wanting to give up their cloaks. Alexa had then put her big coat on and donned her cloak over it, effectively making them feel silly for refusing.

Daniel was gone a few seconds later.

Billy sighed. “Sorry, Boss.” He went after the Biker, unwilling to let his teammates do dangerous things alone yet.

Alexa didn’t call him back or scold him mentally. Billy’s wounds were still healing. Picking the scabs wouldn’t make it happen any faster.

Alexa unwrapped her hands and pitched the bandages into the fire.

So did Mark.

Neither of them examined their perfectly healed skin, but they both thought about it and were glad they’d changed.

They were also sad.

**3**

Daniel lifted the heavy door bar and eased inside the first floor level. He reminded himself not to flush the couple toward this exit as he padded into the littered level.

This had been a furniture store before the war. He and the others had taken a few items up to their den, but they hadn’t had a use for most of it. The mattresses were rotting and they all preferred to sleep on the ground. The reclining chairs had been a nice addition, however. They had seven of them lined up in front of the huge marble fireplace.

Daniel neared the sleeping couple, but he didn’t alert them to his presence yet. He studied the ground and spotted dirt from their boots. He tracked the prints toward a rear room that he and the rest of the crew had swept and then left because it was just an office.

Daniel saw the file cabinet was out of place now and realized there was an exit behind it. He eased it open and slipped into the drafty tunnel.

Designed to transport furniture or goods between the stores, the tunnel was tall and wide and led to a number of halls and entrances. Daniel quickly ruled out flushing the couple to this exit. It might put them into another section of the building instead of outside where he needed them to go.

Daniel assumed one of these doors did go outside. He tracked it, curious where it let out. They’d gone all around the building to secure these exits.

He found it by the increased draft. The floor was too dirty to follow prints. Daniel peered through the tiny window on the filthy alley door and immediately ducked. The two undead they’d spotted were passing by.

Daniel lingered, hoping they hadn’t followed the sleeping couple. That would mean the pair had literally been leaving a trail even a zombie could follow.

He took a fast glance and saw the two undead had stopped. They were paused with their faces tilted toward the midnight Cold Moon. It was eerie.

Daniel scanned the knob and saw the door was locked. He waited to see what the zombies would do, almost able to feel Alexa starting to worry about him.

*You okay?*

Daniel flinched, hand going to his gun.

Billy snorted softly.

Daniel controlled his anger. He hated it when one of the others were able to catch him off guard.

Billy peered through the window and paused. “Did they follow the couple?”

“Yes.” Daniel went back toward the first floor office, but he wasn’t sure how Alexa would want them to handle it. If they flushed the pair outside, they wouldn’t be safe.

*She said if I found the entrance, the couple could still stay until dawn.* Daniel rotated toward the steps, happy with that. Alexa would make the choice on what to do. Daniel preferred it that way.

Billy couldn’t help it. *Don’t you ever consider being a leader?*

Daniel shook his head. *I already know I’m not good enough.*

*You could be.* Billy was positive all of them could if they wanted to. *You’re smart enough.*

Daniel liked the compliment, but he didn’t stop the scornful answer. *If you think one of us can ever match her, you’re crazy. She’s been trained since birth for it. I wouldn’t be able to do what she does even if I had a hundred years of lessons.*

Billy accepted that and followed Daniel back to their den. He was glad the Biker had chosen to leave the people alone. They didn’t seem bad, but sending them out to their possible deaths did.

Daniel went straight to Alexa as they returned. “The entrance was in the office. We need to seal it off. There are too many exits from the tunnel.”

“Tomorrow’s work list just grew. What else?”

“The two undead we spotted are stopped right outside where the couple entered. I think they tracked them.”

Alexa approved his choice. She knew he hadn’t chased them off because she hadn’t heard it. “Also tomorrow’s list. For now, get comfortable.”

Daniel retrieved his apple and resumed crunching.

“What if they hear us?” Billy wanted to be clear on how they were supposed to handle it.

“Then we may have guests until you clear their path.”

Billy was satisfied. He checked his watch with an obvious movement, showing a flash of their old teammate. “We caught all the fish in two hours...”

Alexa chuckled. “Shortly, my pet. Shortly.”

David frowned from his chair on the far end. “Why do you call us that?”

“It’s a term of affection. Cool it.” Mark wasn’t in the mood for David to break their good vibes again like he had right before Jason and Carolyn had joined them.

Alexa settled into the center chair and leaned it back. “I was never allowed a pet as a child, but I wanted one more than anyone knew. I promised to love it more than myself and to keep it safe even above my own life.”

David relaxed. “I like that.”

Alexa chuckled again. “I thought you might. Come closer now. I may want to stroke your fur while I tell a story.”

David eagerly moved to the chair on her left as the others began to join them. The chair on her right stayed empty for Edward.

Edward lingered near Jacob, eager to finish the meal so they could also enjoy being near her. She was in a good mood tonight. Everyone wanted to be around her when she was like this.

Jacob motioned. “I’ve got it. Go on.”

Edward did, hoping the Preacher really had it covered. No one wanted torpedoes again.

Jacob kneaded the dough he’d mixed from his last pouch of flour and the water in his canteen. He began to hum, filling the room with a pleasant tune.

Alexa shook her head when Edward would have questioned the Preacher’s good vibes. “Hot tea or coffee?”

“Tea.” Edward hung up his cloak as Alexa rose from the chair to get him a cup from the now boiling kettle.

It felt wrong, like it always did during the few times she’d served them, but he didn’t protest. He’d figured out that sometimes she just wanted to be one of the crew, not the leader. In moments like this it was fine for her to pretend the weight and fate of the world didn’t rest on her strong shoulders.

Edward thought about Atlas Shrugged. He’d rented the movies after trying to read the book and was glad he had followed through. He was certain the films hadn’t captured all of the message, but it had been enough to make him understand no one could carry everyone else without falling themselves. Then he’d taken it further and come to the conclusion that it wasn’t always bad to let others fail. It was sometimes the only way they learned, though it felt wrong. Alexa often employed those tactics on her crew when it wouldn’t hurt the quest.

“And even when it will.” Alexa handed him the warm mug, not saying Atlas Shrugged had other, more important meanings. She was just pleased that he was familiar with the story at all. Most people weren’t. “You’ll enjoy tonight’s tale.”

Edward assumed it was a lesson for him and David. He began bracing to be corrected.

Alexa ran a calloused hand gently along his big arm. “There’s no need to scold you for using that magnificent brain. You’ve done nothing wrong to deserve it.”

David glanced over. “And me?”

“Not at all.” She returned to her seat. “Tonight’s tale is not a correction, and for once, it even has a happy ending.”

That news made all of them uncomfortable, though only one of them knew why.

Edward settled into his chair without pouting like he wanted to. *If it has a happy ending, then it isn’t about Alexa.*

She chuckled. “But it is, my pet. It’s one of the best memories I have from my childhood.”

Time seemed to slow as she began to speak of the past.

# Chapter Two

**Flipping Eggs**

Barrow

**1**

**“W**elcome to your temporary home.”

Alexa shied back from the tall man in jeans and a leather jacket who looked like her father in every way except for his brown hair and eyes. She frowned at his extended, calloused hand. “I can do it myself.”

The teenager jumped down from the bed of the truck and straightened her green shawl. She was disguised as an old lady again, but she was tired of playing that role.

Brandon skimmed her wrinkled blue dress and fuzzy gray wig, then the face of the young girl wearing them. “I’m your Uncle Brandon.”

“I was told.” Alexa swept the small farm, glad no one else was in sight. The single-story wooden home had a barn at one end and thick woods on three sides. She didn’t see any other homes or businesses around them. There were just tall trees and distant mountain peaks under a bright afternoon sun. It was peaceful.

“That’s an illusion, like almost everything else. Come November 18th, the sun will set and not come up again for more than two months. The bears are deadly and the moose hate people. Don’t wander off.”

Alexa rolled her eyes. “I’ve been making the rounds of our family. I understand the dangers of animals.”

Brandon chuckled. “It doesn’t sound like you’re impressed.”

Alexa snorted.

Brandon waited for her to babble about the parts and people she hadn’t liked. He’d heard a lot about this girl, but it sounded too outrageous to be true. Most fourteen-year-old females were not dangerous.

Alexa finished her scan of the farm, then turned her attention to her newest uncle. She didn’t care for the dirt on his jeans, the too-small blue tank top under his jacket, or the dismissive attitude being reflected on his lightly bearded face as he studied her. She lifted a brow. “See something you like?”

Now Brandon snorted.

Alexa waited, treating him to her cool stare. After spending two years visiting family, she was tired of Mitchels.

Brandon pulled her suitcase from the dented blue truck and smacked the side. Rust fell off and sprinkled the ground.

The driver held a tanned hand out the window and drove away.

Alexa assumed her Uncle Brandon was lingering for her to wave to the driver or maybe even to get upset that the man hadn’t told her goodbye. *I didn’t like him and he didn’t like me. Move on.*

Brandon blinked at the icy tone in his mind. *You’re strong for only being fourteen.*

“I’ve been told.”

“Did you like any of them so far?”

“No.”

Brandon stepped around the bushes lining the front walk. “This way.”

She followed him to the farmhouse, taking short breaths to identify each scent that came to her. She liked knowing who and what was around. She identified chickens, trees, and a waterway, but that was it.

“You’ll be here for a few months. Get settled and unpack.”

Alexa stared. “Most of my stays have only been a few weeks.”

“Your dad said you need a break from all the visiting.”

Alexa didn’t know if that meant her father had heard she was having trouble or if she’d earned a break for doing well. Both were true.

“You’ve excelled at every location.”

“But I couldn’t bond with any of them. Blood or not, they aren’t my kind.” *You probably aren’t either.*

Brandon kept his back to her so she didn’t see his amusement. “We may get along then.” He held the door open for her.

Alexa followed the mental map in his thoughts; she went straight to the rear of the large house. She admired the dust-free domicile, but she didn’t think it was his real home. The farm had the feel of a vacation residence.

The bedroom held a feather bed on a wooden frame, a wicker chair, a narrow closet, and a tall dresser that she was guessing was older than she was. None of it appeared to have been used recently.

She searched for exits from her room and found the outline of a door under brown paint that had to lead to the barn.

Brandon saw her gaze go to the window and then back to the secret exit. “Don’t use it unless it’s an emergency.”

“I won’t.” She was glad to know there was an escape route.

Brandon put her bag on the wicker chair by the door, not entering. “This is your personal space. No one comes in here without permission. Keep it clean. I don’t have a maid.”

Brandon was already certain the girl was fastidious. She would likely never be caught dirty and neither would her bedroom. Despite her messy appearance, he knew it was the disguise. He was curious about the very controlled child underneath.

“What chores do you want me to do?”

“You’ll cook one day a week, for yourself. I fish all day on Fridays. You’ll do your own dishes.”

“That’s it?”

“We’ll do the rest of it together.”

Alexa didn’t want to get lazy. “What about lessons?”

Brandon shrugged. “Your dad said this is a break.”

Alexa’s lips thinned. “My father wouldn’t waste months of my life on a break unless I was going to learn something important from it.”

Brandon heard her bitterness. “We’ll work on some things after you settle in and relax. If you don’t take a break, there won’t be any lessons.”

Alexa realized this family member knew what she wanted and how to control her through that. “Be careful. I am a Mitchel. I won’t tolerate being manipulated.”

Brandon wasn’t worried. “I’m not like the others, kid. You’re safe with me.” He went down the hall. “Brunch is in half an hour. Do whatever you want until then.”

Alexa sighed. She didn’t want a break. She enjoyed the lessons too much. She could feel herself getting smarter, sharpening, becoming what she was destined to be. She craved that.

Alexa unpacked her few things into the dresser. Then she changed into her favorite clothes, curious how her uncle would react to seeing her in jeans, a red plaid shirt, scuffed black boots, and a gun on each hip. They were her fighting clothes and she only relaxed when she was wearing them. “Because I can kill if I have to. I can use my gear and my brain. I’m Alexa Mitchel and one day I’m going to lead my own crew through hell.”

She sighed again. “Until then, I get to suffer being passed around the family like a bad penny so I can absorb everything they have to teach me. But I will remember every lesson and use it later to keep my team alive and accomplish my goals. Nothing will stand in my way, not even the love I have for my father.”

Satisfied that she had reminded herself of her duty and destiny, Alexa headed for the kitchen to observe her uncle and begin her break.

**2**

Brandon glanced up and stiffened at the sight of the young gunfighter now walking into his kitchen. Every other step revealed a new pattern or edge that rippled into a vision and let him see what she would be like in the future. He saw scars appear on her skin and fade, predicting her appearance over time. He saw an angry, bruised young woman sewing pockets into a long dark cloak that was added to her outfit. The plaid shirt became solid black and held a healthy body that ducked and spun, fired and killed.

Brandon narrowed in on the finger tapping against the butt of one Colt. He tried to pull out of the vision, already recognizing that as her patience gauge. He watched her move toward a stool with a smirk he saw in the mirror some mornings. *I was wrong.*

Alexa liked that. *This is who I really am.*

Brandon scolded himself for missing it because of a dress and a wig. He turned back to the stove.

“The others got angry and tried to make me change.”

“All of them?”

“No. Uncle Alita asked if I had enough ammunition. Grandmother gave me a lesson with her rifle.”

“And did you change for the others?”

“Of course.”

Brandon cracked three eggs into the hot skillet and dropped the shells into a large bowl he used to collect the garbage while he cooked. “Why?”

“Their house, their rules.” Alexa perched on the middle stool at the long island counter. The kitchen was huge, very clean, and smelled like fried food. She saw a large basket of eggs and assumed her uncle really liked them.

The rest of the kitchen was well stocked with boxes and bags that she assumed would keep them fed for a long time. *He’s a prepper. That’s different.* Most of her stops had been with family who lived in large cities and did their shopping every few days.

Brandon wiped his hands on a towel, then began gathering the components for a salad.

Alexa watched the eggs quickly bubble and steam. When Brandon didn’t check on them, she began to stress.

Brandon cut the lettuce he’d already washed, then dropped it into a larger wooden bowl. Then he went back to preparing the other vegetables. He could feel Alexa’s anxiety growing.

“They’re going to harden.”

Brandon shrugged.

Alexa’s scowled. “That’s wasteful.” She leapt off the stool and retrieved a small spatula from the hanging rack over the counter.

Brandon shifted slightly so he could observe her while he cut the carrots and tomatoes.

Alexa pried up an edge and shoved the spatula under it.

Yellow yolk popped into the non-stick skillet.

She looked at Brandon.

The man ignored her.

Alexa chose a second egg in the pan and repeated the move, though she was gentler as she shoved the spatula beneath it.

Yolk again spit out of the egg and ran into a puddle in the skillet.

Brandon saw her lips vanish into an angry line. He hid a smile and his thought. She was definitely one of them. Mitchels expected to be good at everything and they usually were. When something tripped them up, they got mad quickly.

“Damn it!”

Brandon turned, took the skillet, and tilted it over the garbage bowl. He used the towel to wipe it out, then put it back on the burner. “Three at a time.”

Alexa realized she had to break the eggs, but she didn’t think of refusing. She’d proven herself inept at something simple. That had to change.

**3**

“We’re almost out of eggs.”

Brandon speared another bite of the salad. He’d been eating and watching without speaking. “I noticed.”

The disapproving tone sent Alexa’s annoyance up another level. *Why can’t I do this?!* She cracked the last three eggs into the skillet without breaking the yolks or getting shell pieces in the skillet. She wiped her hands and waited, staring at the eggs in dismay. This was her last chance to prove she could do it.

Brandon sensed her trepidation. “Flipping eggs is like being the family spy.”

Alexa flinched, caught off guard.

“You have to watch and wait, and collect information without breaking the game open.” He belched, pushing away his empty bowl. “You only pry the edges until you’re ready for that pop. And what happens if you see that edge isn’t going to pop your way?”

Alexa slowly answered, understanding this uncle knew about her counter mission while visiting. “You lower it down and cauterize the edge to seal the weak spot.”

“Flipping eggs is exactly like that. If one corner sticks, don’t use that corner. If the spatula is dirty, clean it off. Be careful with the corners after you lift them because they’re now weak spots.”

Alexa understood what he meant. She was able to flip the first egg this time without breaking it. Her wave of happiness filled the kitchen and lifted both their moods.

Alexa popped the second one, though it was a small spot. “I was careful!”

“Sometimes you can’t pinch the corner and you have to roll with the outcome.” He gestured. “Cauterize it.”

Alexa gently used the spatula to hold in the yolk. The hot metal utensil steamed and seared the tiny hole shut.

“Finish up.”

Alexa flipped the third egg with grace, perfectly centering it.

She wiped mussed hair off her forehead with her free hand. “Where do you want me to put them?” She was proud of herself now.

Brandon came over and took the spatula. He began smacking the perfect yolks, popping them.

“Why did you do that?!”

“I wanted them soft fried.”

Alexa’s anger popped out. “You could have told me!”

“You didn’t ask what I wanted.” Brandon braced for her to yell again.

Alexa thought it through instead. Her lips twitched. “I thought you said there wouldn’t be lessons until I’d taken a break.”

Brandon chuckled. “We’re just flipping eggs.”

Alexa snickered. She went to the big bowl of salad and began to collect a serving for herself.

Brandon flipped the fried eggs again, then dumped them into his salad bowl. When he sat down and started eating, Alexa joined him with her salad. She swung her leg on the stool, relaxed and in a better mood.

Brandon stored that reaction. She’d handled her first lesson well and she’d learned the points he’d been trying to teach her. Brandon liked to let his students come to their own conclusions, even if it meant hours of failure first. He would test her on this at some point to be certain it had sunk in, but he wasn’t worried. Alexa was clearly a quick study. Her father was right. *She’s almost ready for the next steps in her destiny. Three months with me will give her a cooler, calmer control that she’ll enjoy decades from now. All she has to do is pass the next test and convince me that she is indeed dangerous.*

Brandon scanned her thoughts again; she wasn’t stewing on anything but the egg lesson. He was satisfied with her as a student, just not as a fighter yet. He sent some of the kids back because they weren’t ready, but Alexa was. *She’s different than the rest of the kids who’ve come through here. She might keep me on my toes once she realizes how I do things.*

“That’s part of why the others didn’t like me.” Alexa speared a bite of the salad. “They didn’t like it that I could keep up.”

Brandon shrugged. “They weren’t good at flipping eggs. I am.”

Alexa followed her usual plan of ripping up those corners to verify her suspicions. “How long have you been the family spy, Uncle Brandon?”

Brandon sighed happily. “All my life.”

“Is that all I’ll be in the end, too?”

His charming demeanor fell to the counter. “Never without permission.”

“Alphas don’t need permission.” Alexa dug deeper into his mind. “You’re getting something out of this visit that makes you excited, but you can’t show me what it is.”

Brandon strengthened his mental walls, but he didn’t push her out. He was curious if she was as strong with her gifts as she was mentally.

“No.” Alexa stopped and withdrew from his mind. “I won’t use it for you or anyone else.”

Brandon frowned. “It’s who we are, Lexie.”

“Don’t call me that!” Alexa shoved her bowl at him. It hit his mostly empty dish and knocked them both toward the edge. Her plate fell off and dropped to the floor. Broken shards scattered in every direction. His bowl sloshed and splattered him with bits of egg and salad.

Alexa controlled her anger and stayed on the stool. “Only my father can call me that and even he had to earn it.”

Brandon wiped his arms and face with the towel, easily able to pinpoint her source of discomfort. “We’re all scarred from our time in captivity.”

Alexa tensed.

“I spent a lot of years in the labs, too. I did what I had to in there, and it followed me when I escaped.” Brandon sighed. “Or was let loose into the world, but that’s a different story.” He stood up and went to get the broom.

Alexa never tried to talk about her traumas. Being in the labs had taught her that everything she revealed would be recorded and used against her.

Brandon started sweeping. “I can teach you to accept it and move on.”

Alexa recognized a kindred in this uncle. It was odd to know that she already liked him. “I’ll try.”

Brandon was once again impressed with her intelligence. “It was intentional, in some ways. The scientists let many of our kind back into the world to keep observing us, and to spy on the others. They needed to be sure we weren’t using our gifts and drawing attention.”

Alexa decided to be honest. “I’ve wondered about that. I decided it was really to keep us from realizing we could have killed them all and taken over the world. All we had to do was band together and combine gifts for *our* greater good.”

Brandon stared. “That brain is magnificent.”

Alexa got up to collect the dustpan from the tiny cupboard where he’d gotten the broom. “That’s why my father sent me here now.”

“Why?”

“Because he knew you’d give me all the kind words that he isn’t allowed to.”

Brandon took a long time to recover.

Alexa took the broom from him and finished cleaning up the mess. She wasn’t surprised by his behavior. She was among the highest IQs in their large family and that was no easy feat. Her father had said it was because she was one of only a few born females in their line. Alexa believed it was because she was so damaged that her mind had sharpened through trying to survive. She wanted to know what this newest uncle thought.

Brandon blinked. “I think your mind is preparing you for the quest of any lifetime. You’re different because you need to be.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

Brandon picked up the empty egg bowl. “Let’s fill this up.”

Alexa followed him through the rear exit, scanning for problems like she always did upon entering a new environment. She felt eyes on them; her lips thinned. “Am I being guarded up here, too?”

“Alaska is remote. Only that single road you came in on lets land travelers enter. Everyone else has to fly or sail. All those entry ways are heavily guarded. And none of that matters. The government can come at any time to collect us. We have to be careful.”

“So it’s not just for me in case I decide to go search for my dad again?”

Brandon chuckled. “I assume it’s both, but if you decide to hunt, let me drive you. I haven’t spent time around your dad in years. I miss him.”

Alexa knew communications for trading out visitors were written or handled by phone, though codes were also used. True visits were rare. “Why do you live out here alone?”

“It’s called the downside.” Brandon led her toward the corner of the yard. “They know I’m the family spy.”

Alexa made the connection immediately. “That’s why they couldn’t like me!”

“Yes. Even those we work for don’t want to be around us because of what they’ve trained us, or forced us, to be.”

She scanned the wide yard. It was lined in trees that had been planted to form a fence with only two entrances she could see from here. The corner of the yard held a huge walk-in wooden coop, a dozen Delaware chickens, and five roosters that pecked and shit, clucked and shit, mated and shit. Her nose curled. “Have you ever been married or had kids?”

Brandon shook his head. “I’ve had fun like any male Mitchel, but I’ve never found a woman I can’t live without.”

“You could settle for a partnership.”

“No, I can’t.” He sighed. “At least, not yet. I still have some hope of finding my match. When that’s gone, I might change my mind.”

Alexa respected his honesty. “You’re weird.”

Brandon laughed. “Thank you.”

Alexa walked into the chicken yard and went to the large coop. “Out, chicks!”

The hens began to scatter, leaving their eggs behind.

Brandon waited for her to clear the coop, then he joined her to hold the bowl.

Alexa began putting the eggs in.

“My hens come when I whistle.”

Alexa groaned. “I didn’t ask again!”

Brandon took a chance. He put a light hand on her shoulder. “You’re doing fine.” He quickly released her and stepped back so she didn’t think the comfort was anything more.

Alexa didn’t want to let another person into her life that she had to care for, worry over... But it was already too late. “Thank you.” She resumed collecting the eggs.

Brandon was glad she’d been able to accept the bond with him. Being the family spy was a harsh, lonely job. He was looking forward to having someone with whom he could share that burden.

Alexa shuddered. “It doesn’t get any easier, does it?”

Brandon sat the bowl down and left the coop without answering because it was obvious.

Alexa wondered again what he was getting out of this teaching job.

“Bring those eggs to the rear sink so we can wash them off.”

Alexa filled the bowl, noticing there were enough eggs waiting to be collected to fill the large bowl every day for a week. *He prepared for me. I’ll have to flip eggs again.*

Alexa was comforted. She was young, but she understood how lessons functioned. Most of them weren’t mastered in one session. *Only repetition can create perfection.*

Alexa joined Brandon at the double deep sinks near the rear of the farmhouse. Hooked into the water pipes, it was a nice cleaning area with two tables coated in a light layer of leaves that said fall had arrived. “What do you do up here when it snows?”

“Relax.” Brandon took a scrub brush from the wallboard.

Alexa reached for the other one.

“Do it by hand first.”

“Why?”

“You won’t always have a brush.”

Alexa froze. Her thoughts went to giant mushroom clouds filling the sky. *It comes at noon just before Christmas. It kills millions and hurts millions more. Then things get ugly.*

Brandon studied the images in her mind and gave her time to recover.

Alexa shoved the future back into her mental cage. She glowered at Brandon. “Not right now.”

Brandon had no problem leaving that topic alone. He honestly didn’t know what to say about it yet. She was going to carry the weight of the world and it would happen in about a decade. She had a lot to learn or she would fail on her quest and take humanity down with her.

Alexa began scrubbing chicken shit off an egg with her fingers.

The shell exploded in her hand. Yolk dripped into the sink.

Alexa dropped the crushed shell and rinsed off her hand. “Now I see why you have so many eggs ready.”

“Yes, but the waste bothers me. Every egg you ruin is one less meal when times are hard.”

Alexa felt that deeply. She scrubbed the second egg with care.

It took a long time. Brandon had finished half the bowl by the time she was satisfied with her egg.

Brandon took it, rinsed it, and then went over it with the scrubber.

Alexa glared. “It’s clean.”

“Not really. You got a lot of shit under your nails. You re-contaminated it.”

Alexa began washing out her fingernails. “What did I do wrong?”

“It’s not wrong if you have the time or patience to do each delicate job inch by inch.” He rinsed the egg again and put it in the clean rack to dry. “Sometimes, you’ll need to hurry. In those moments, it’s okay to leave a little dirt on and account for it later.”

Alexa memorized that, connecting it to the brush warning. While she was on her quest, there wouldn’t always be time to be perfectly clean, and she had to learn how to handle being rushed. “Give me a time for the rest of the eggs.”

“Three minutes.”

Alexa snatched the first one, but remembered to gentle her grip.

Brandon counted the time, admiring her graceful fingers. She still got gunk under her nails, but she moved faster and didn’t stress over the tiny specks. He took the egg as she finished each one, scrubbed it with his tool, then rinsed it and put it on the rack to dry.

Alexa handed him the last one.

“Ten seconds left. Very good.”

Alexa washed her hands, considering what she’d just done. Going against her methodical nature wasn’t easy, but she’d taught herself a way to get over it when she had to. “What’s next?”

Brandon waved. “We need to make sure we always have eggs. The coop gets cleaned once a week. The hens get fed twice a day. When we finish that, we’ll put the tarp overtop and fill the coop with fresh straw as our first layer of winter preparations.”

“Why feed them twice a day?” Alexa followed him back toward the chicken yard.

“I want them fat and happy. After they give all the eggs they can, they end life in my freezer. Happy meat is the healthiest and has the best flavors.”

“And if you’re coming up to a short time, you can split a fatter hen into two or three meals and stretch it more.”

“Yes. Most portions are double what a person’s stomach needs at one time. Some are even triple. When you’re doing without, or preparing for hard times, shrink the portions and increase the health benefits if you can.” Brandon picked up a shovel. “Bring over the wheelbarrow. We’ll clean the coop first.”

Alexa placed the name to a picture of the object she’d been shown in lab classes. She remembered how it was operated by studying that same image. She steered it easily over to the coop entrance. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’ll dump it in my compost pile when it’s full. Next load, you’ll shovel.”

Alexa didn’t mind either way. She enjoyed hard labor if she was learning something. She spent the time observing the farm, nature, the hens, and her uncle. She came to several conclusions as she waited.

So did Brandon. He was keeping a constant tab on her thoughts. It was fascinating to watch her come to conclusions and then test those answers to factcheck herself. He’d only been around a few others who bothered to do that; one of them was his brother Adrian.

“Have you figured out why I’m so different?”

“Of course. I knew it as soon as you walked into my kitchen wearing those guns.”

Alexa smirked. “And?”

“You’re a killer.”

Alexa’s smirk fell. She’d been expecting something more important. “Other people kill.”

“Yes, but not at your age. And you enjoy it. They know you for what you are–a true Mitchel. And they fear it. You sensed their fear and it turned into contempt for them. That’s why you couldn’t like them. You were right. They aren’t your kind.”

Alexa jumped to the next logical conclusion. “You are.”

Brandon was still shoveling. “I’m also on a break. I enjoy it too much, so they gave me off time that I didn’t want and a duty I’m not sure I can handle.”

The bond between them grew at his revelation. It made Alexa willing to talk. “It’s wrong.”

“Yes. It’s also right. Someone has to thin the herds or overpopulation will destroy them.”

“Why me?”

Brandon paused, looking at her. “Female Mitchels have a little more compassion and a lot more loyalty. They’re also rare. You were born into this time and place to carry an awful weight for the rest of us.”

“Tell me what you’re getting from this visit.”

“Companionship with someone like me…and a debt your father will pay in about ten years.”

Her mind went to the coming nuclear world war again. She shivered. “You get to travel with him then.”

“If I’m perfect in all my lessons, yes. Four years after that, we’ll be joined by an amazing woman and her all male crew. For a little while, we’ll be the unstoppable power again.”

“Then we die.” Alexa’s narrow face transformed into a mask of fear and longing. “All of us die in the final battle. I’ve seen it.”

Brandon resumed shoveling. “I’ve been told.”

Alexa felt him trying to find another solution. “We can work on it together. I have several ideas.”

Brandon was glad to hear that. “So do I. Your father doesn’t believe we can change fate, but like I mentioned earlier, I still have hope.”

“Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

Brandon laughed. “You have a deal. But not right now. I need this coop cleaned and you need to think.”

“About what?”

“Duty and honor. One of them is more important than the other. Study that while we clean the coop and I’ll come back to it later.”

Alexa immediately got started.

# Chapter Three

**It Matters Right Now**

**1**

**“T**ell me the difference between duty and honor.”

They were in the two recliners in the small living room. Placed in front of the softly burning fire, it was warm and nice after a long day of chicken care. They’d both showered and come here to digest the fried chicken meal he’d cooked while she watched. They hadn’t spoken much since cleaning the coop. Alexa was glad of it. The other visits had been filled with moments of relatives trying to talk to her, to get into her mind.

Alexa closed the book she hadn’t been reading. She’d spent hours considering the topic in anticipation of this conversation. “Duty is something you have to do. Honor is one way you can accomplish it.”

“And if you have to pick between duty and honor?”

Alexa frowned. “I prefer to have both.”

“Life doesn’t allow that all the time. Pick which one is more important.” Brandon had felt her getting restless with reading time and knew it was a good moment for this lesson.

Alexa sighed. “Duty, then. It has to be done. I prefer to have honor, but it’s not required.”

“That was another reason they didn’t like you.”

“But it’s my duty.” She didn’t like his disapproving tone.

“Most of our family feels the same. It will bring us from opposite ends of the earth to defend a relative even if they don’t deserve it.”

“Then why don’t they like me because of it?”

“Because you’ll be continuing the family legacy of not having honor except when it’s convenient.”

“It’s a trap.”

“Of course. The correct answer is honor.”

Alexa didn’t agree.

Brandon came at it from a different angle this time. “Would you kill a kid to save another kid?”

“I have.”

Brandon winced. *Her lab time was like mine. That’s awful.* “You did your duty, but lost your honor in the act. That’s why it haunts you.”

“I guess I could have let them kill the smaller child.”

“Why did the smaller one deserve to live more than the other one?”

“I don’t like this lesson.”

“Neither do I, but it’s required.” Brandon put his book on the table. “You’ve been conditioned to protect the weakest and sacrifice the strongest. They do that to keep us under control. If we only protected the strong, they’d lose their power over us.”

“I still can’t do it. I’ll always make that choice.”

“What if it’s two kids of the same age?”

Alexa tensed at the memory. “I removed them both so they no longer suffered.”

Brandon was surprised by that answer. “What was your punishment?”

“I was rewarded with a bigger cell and more activities.”

Brandon scowled as the memory clicked into place. “The Livingston-Mitchel twins.”

“Yes. The scientists wanted to be sure none of our family would ever really accept me.”

He stared at her. “You’ve known all along why the family doesn’t like you.”

“Of course. I wanted to know your thoughts.”

“And?”

“I think you’re a nice man, but you have no idea who I really am or you wouldn’t like me either.” Alexa stood up. “It’s my bedtime.”

Brandon gawked at her. *She tricked me the entire day, making me believe she’s vulnerable and cares about being accepted, when in fact, she’s hardened beyond bonds and approval from everyone but her father.* “What happened whenever you refused to do their experiments?”

Alexa’s face became ugly with pain. “They used my honor against me.”

“You mean duty?”

“No. I was able to ignore the bonds and the urges to help those less fortunate. What I couldn’t take was the hatred of the other kids because I was more valuable, more protected. Their hatred broke me and I caved. It’s not easy to be hated, and I was able to help some of them by doing my duty. I did it for that reason. Honor meant nothing to me.”

“And now, when faced with that choice?”

Alexa told him the truth. “I give in immediately to be spared the hatred. Once it starts, it never completely goes away. I have to be loved.”

“And the twins?”

“Neither of them wanted to live without the other. I honored their last wish to die together.” Alexa left the room, unwilling to keep talking now that he’d pried up the corner of a scab that was still bleeding.

Brandon was impressed and horrified. “She’ll complete her quest and leave a trail of bodies every inch of the way.”

Brandon flinched as his phone rang. He hurried to it, cursing himself for forgetting to shut off the ringer. “Hello?”

Alexa listened from the hallway. She’d caught Brandon’s thoughts, but knowing she was going to kill a lot of people didn’t bother her. In fact, it was something to look forward to. She was listening to determine if her honesty had just lost her yet another relative.

“We’ll be ready at first light.” Brandon hung up the phone, but didn’t turn around. “There’s a lot of traffic on the main road. Our protectors want to take us further into the wilderness.”

Alexa knew he was talking to her. She didn’t voice a protest that he’d known she was listening or that she’d only been here half a day. “I’ll pack.”

She went to her room and got started, ignoring the body that just wanted to sleep after a day of cleaning and training.

Brandon stayed by the phone, mind racing. *The government might be coming for her and I haven’t had time to teach her the biggest lesson.* He reluctantly changed his scheduled plans and went to her room.

Alexa felt him fill the doorway, but she didn’t glance up. She could tell something important was about to happen, but she wasn’t in the mood for it. She forced herself to be open to whatever he was about to say. It was her duty to listen.

“What happens if you don’t use a skill for a long time?”

Alexa shut the suitcase. “It gets rusty and is no longer dependable.”

“Your gifts are the same. If you need them, they won’t be ready.”

Alexa looked up to fire off a new warning and found him gone. *Short lesson, but I already knew that one anyway.*

It didn’t matter. She’d gone through too much to let a few hours around the newest relative convince her to use her magic. *I didn’t have a choice in the labs. Out here, it’s different.*

Still monitoring her thoughts, Brandon sighed. *I wish that was true. I do. But it isn’t.*

**2**

“The truck’s coming.” Alexa was standing by the front window, suitcase at her feet. She’d risen an hour before dawn and spent the time considering how to react to this newest threat.

Brandon was gathering things. He hadn’t been ready to leave on a moment’s notice. “Don’t go out.”

“I won’t.” Alexa studied the truck, noting clouds of dust. “They’re in a hurry.”

Brandon joined her at the window. He scowled. “Out the back!”

Alexa went without question, glad Brandon had felt it, too. Something was wrong with whoever was driving the truck.

Chickens scattered as they ran by. Alexa jumped over one of them to keep from kicking it. Feathers shot into the air as the chicken darted away, squawking.

The barn was dim and musty, telling her it wasn’t used very often. She caught a quick glance of covered furniture and dirty windows, and then she was ushered into the corner.

“We’ve been compromised by one of our own.” Brandon was certain of the feeling since he’d caused it enough times. He drew the rifle from his kit and aimed through a small, intentional warp in the barn wall.

Alexa kept a hand on one of her guns, trying to hear what was happening since she couldn’t see it.

Brandon pulled the trigger.

Alexa heard a heavy thump. *That was a body.*

“It’s your uncle Alden. He went rogue a few years ago. They probably sent him in first to distract us.” Brandon went to the rear stall in the wide barn and pulled up a small hatch in the floor. “Come on.”

Alexa followed him into the hole in the ground, but her heart pounded. She didn’t like the dark.

The noise of an engine echoed to them for a minute and then it was lost. Sounds of topside faded with the light.

The dirt tunnel walls were layered in cobwebs that grabbed onto her hair and refused to let go. She felt the webs sticking to her skin as well and fought the urge to remove them. Natural cover might be needed. There was no way to know until her uncle led her out of here.

Alexa began to stress. *He’s been leading me since the phone warning came.* *Shouldn’t I be leading myself like in the other places I’ve been?*

Brandon reached back. “Tie this rope to your belt.”

Alexa did it with shaky hands, double checking to be sure it was tied tightly.

“Tug on the rope if there’s a problem. Otherwise, be silent.” Brandon advanced through the tunnel he’d dug by hand over three years. It was tall and narrow, and not shored up. A lot of noise or vibration could collapse it.

Alexa walked quickly to stay on his heels without letting the rope pull her along. She listened to their footfalls and breathing, using the noises to keep her mind from filling in the darkness with ugliness.

“Faster now!”

Alexa felt something wrong invade the air again, but there wasn’t another choice now. She was already in the dark ground with no idea where they were going. *I think I made a mistake.*

**3**

Brandon finally directed them toward an exit. A pinprick of light steadily grew into enough to see by.

Alexa noticed the ground prints first. Her uncle had been through here recently. Then she didn’t hear her uncle breathing hard, even though they’d been traveling fast for over ten minutes. He also walked quicker the closer they got to the light, instead of slowing in case someone was waiting for them. *Because he already knows they are.*

Alexa grabbed her knife and began sawing through the rope that connected them. It was hard to do while running.

Brandon stopped and turned.

Alexa sliced through the last of the rope.

Brandon grabbed her knife and wrapped her up in a tight bearhug. “Too late.”

Alexa fought, but she was no match for his strong arms. He carried her out into the bright sun. The tunnel had let them out in a small clearing surrounded by woods. A narrow dirt path was layered in settling dust from a fast drive here.

Alexa punched Brandon in the neck repeatedly, trying to reach his throat while she kicked him in the legs and hip.

Cold laughter greeted them.

“I told my boss you’d have trouble.”

Brandon put Alexa on her feet, but kept a tight grip on her wrist. “I didn’t, not really. She trusted me all the way to the end.”

Alexa kicked him in the shin with her heel.

Bandon knelt over, groaning.

Alexa punched with her free hand, catching his jaw.

Brandon grunted as stars exploded across his vision, but he didn’t release her.

“You should have knocked her out for this.”

Alexa scornfully raked the tall, heavily scarred man sitting on the bed of the dented truck. “You were the voice on the phone. And he didn’t shoot you.”

Alden grinned. “It was a good act, huh? I even fell and everything like he told me to.”

Alexa kicked out backward again and got Brandon in the other leg.

“Stop it!” Brandon shoved her toward the truck.

Alden’s white lab coat and white outfit told her where he worked. The red stains on his white shoes told her what he did there. “You traitor!”

Alden laughed again. “Says the newest family spy.”

Alexa reached for a gun.

Alden dropped off the truck to stand in front of her, eyes narrowing. “Why didn’t you take her guns?”

“Now’s the time to pick which one is more important, *Lexie*.” Brandon retreated a step. “Is it duty or honor?”

“Duty.” Alexa was lightning fast as she drew her gun and pulled the trigger.

Alden slid to his knees as the shot echoed. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as a huge red stain bloomed on the front of his white coat. “What…?”

Brandon nodded. “He missed the lesson even though I explained it to him. Duty will always win out over honor.”

Alexa turned the gun on Brandon. *I figured out my mistake. If I’d been using my gifts, I would have shot you in the back on the way here like the traitor you are.*

Brandon flashed a charming grin. “Are you ready for your bigger cell and more activities?”

Alexa almost pulled the trigger again. Hatred welled and demanded satisfaction. She took it out in humiliation. “You’ll never be as valuable as my father. You can’t be trusted.”

He held out her knife. “Tell me why.”

Alexa understood the lesson all at once. “Because you have no honor.” She snatched her blade from his hand and sheathed it. Then she reloaded the single bullet she’d used.

Brandon rotated toward the tunnel. “Let’s get home.”

Alexa slowly holstered and followed him back into the darkness.

Brandon used his phone. “Clean up in aisle seven.”

Alexa snorted as he hung up. “Funny.”

“It will get the body picked up and it will tell your father you passed this lesson. I wouldn’t be joking if you hadn’t.”

“He didn’t want us to fully bond.”

“No. I wanted it, but he said you’d get distracted because you’ve never had family you can trust.”

“I still don’t.”

Brandon sighed. “And yet, you do. I warned you and I let you keep your guns.”

“That’s why I couldn’t shoot you.”

“But you killed Alden without hesitating.”

Alexa scowled. “He sold me out because he hates my father. You were doing it to teach me a lesson about trusting someone just because you have a bond with them.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Yes.”

Brandon took his time leading them back. After a few minutes of silence, he paused. “I didn’t want to do it.”

Alexa stepped by him. “That’s the other reason I didn’t shoot you. You have hope that it doesn’t have to be this way for our kind in the future.”

Brandon followed her, relieved that she’d understood. He wouldn’t have let Alden take her. They’d ousted and removed a traitor in their family, and Alexa had learned not to trust anyone, but instead of being pleased, he was sad.

Alexa wiped off the cobwebs this time, running through what she’d done. She always analyzed her actions to enhance them for the next time.

Alexa’s mood improved as she considered everything that had happened. For a brief moment, she’d had a relative she could adjust to and live with. That was over now. No matter how long she stayed with Brandon, she wouldn’t get complacent and forget about her quest.

Brandon noticed she didn’t pause for directions. He assumed she’d memorized the route. Or maybe her anger was in control, but either way, she really was the quick study everyone had implied. *And she’s more than dangerous. She’s deadly.* “What gave me away?”

“The hurrying when we reached the end of the tunnel. People being hunted don’t hurry into danger.” Alexa decided it was a good time to point out all the clues. “You didn’t negotiate with Alden when he first arrived. You didn’t argue with the person on the phone. You went to sleep after the call and didn’t have trouble. I heard you snoring.” Alexa had spent the night worrying over where she was being sent to next. She’d barely gotten any sleep.

Alexa was dismayed as other signs came to her that she had missed. “You spent all day yesterday warning me you can’t be trusted because you’re the family spy. You made sure I knew about the escape route through my room, but we didn’t use it. You didn’t take a weapon. You acted angry you’d forgotten to turn off the ringer on the phone.” Alexa stopped, letting out a long sigh. “And now I’m walking into another trap, right?”

Brandon grinned. “No, but good job expecting it.”

“Whatever.” She didn’t believe him.

“How do you feel about being used as the bait?”

Alexa snorted. “Shouldn’t you be asking me how I feel about being an executioner?”

Brandon winced. “I was working up to it.”

“I know. I don’t need the therapy session. This isn’t the first time, remember?”

Brandon sighed. “That doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

“It was my duty to kill Uncle Alden. We don’t tolerate traitors or those who threaten us.”

“And?”

“And it was my honor at stake because I’d almost been caught.” Alexa paused. “If I’m put back into the lab, I might fall into the darkness and not come out. I can’t let them take me. If that means I have to kill all of you, I will.”

“So noted.” He stepped around her to retake the lead. “Come on. We have eggs to flip.”

Alexa kept a hand on her gun as she followed him through the tunnel and up into the barn.

Brandon already mourned her not trusting him, but the lies were over. He could really train her now and earn his reward. *Her shot was amazing.*

Alexa swept the barn for trouble as she came up the steps. “I could have made that shot blindfolded. It wasn’t impressive.”

Brandon veered toward the rear of the barn. He gestured at the long target range. “Prove that.”

Alexa immediately drew her gun. “Finally. A lesson I like.”

Brandon laughed. “I was told you’d want this more than anything else.”

Alexa paused, mirth fading into excitement and sadness. She holstered her gun and marched toward the exit.

“Where are you going?”

“To see my father.”

Brandon hurried after her. “We can’t leave yet. You have lessons to do. We can’t hunt right now. My jeep isn’t ready for the trip.”

Alexa ignored Brandon’s quickly sputtered protests. She concentrated on the sensation of approval and relief hitting her. “I can’t believe I missed it earlier.” Now that she’d realized what was happening, it was obvious.

“Where are you going? My jeep’s next to the barn.”

Alexa flashed a cold glare. “Stop it now. The egg popped.”

Brandon fell silent, once again admiring her intelligence. He followed her into the thick trees, eager to observe.

Twigs and leaves crunched beneath their boots; birds tweeted warnings above them. Squirrels ran from branch to branch, complaining in low chitters.

Alexa stopped. “Come out.”

Adrian stepped from behind a nearby tree, smiling proudly. “Very good, Lexie.”

Wearing the clothes and gear of a security guard, Adrian appeared younger, happier, than the last time she’d seen him.

Alexa flew into his arms. His scent filled her nose and her heart. *Father!*

Brandon fought thick tears as the pair embraced. He and his brothers hadn’t been bonded to their mother or father. Only Adrian had fond memories of a parent. It was nice to know the next generation of Mitchels might not suffer that loneliness. *God knows we’ve suffered everything else.*

Brandon wondered how Adrian felt about losing Alden. Brandon was a bit sad, but he was also glad. Alden had been the last person to know his secret. Now no one else could blackmail him.

Brandon slid a few feet over, into Adrian’s place on guard duty. He hoped they were able to visit for a while. Alexa deserved a good moment.

Adrian hated it that they had an audience. This was a moment of weakness from both of them and it was being witnessed by the family spy and a dozen cousins who’d volunteered for this duty. None of them could be trusted, but Adrian’s emotions overruled his caution. He swept the girl up and hugged her back, nuzzling her cheek like his mother had always done to him after a separation.

Alexa wrapped her legs around his stomach like an infant, then leaned back so she could see his face. For one instant, she was that baby gazing adoringly at the face that meant everything to her.

Neither of them spoke. Words weren’t needed.

Alexa reluctantly let go. Adrian put her on her feet and stepped back. The smothering, crave-inducing feeling faded but didn’t leave completely. Their lifeforces touched randomly and exchanged support, as well as energy.

Adrian dug in his pocket and brought out a card.

Alexa opened it.

*If you’re reading this in front of me, you passed this test.*

“I knew it!” She pocketed the card, grinning. “As soon as I realized Uncle Brandon wouldn’t have let Alden take me, I began suspecting you were close enough to help.”

“And why is that?”

Alexa glared over her shoulder. “Because he can’t be trusted. If you weren’t here, he might have followed through.”

Brandon flinched at her words.

Adrian was pleased. “Yes. We do our duty to the family, but they have no honor. You’re different because you do.”

Alexa frowned. “I spent the last day being certain it was duty running me.”

“You adapted to his method with the eggs because you had to and it didn’t cost you any honor. You then developed your own on-the-spot lesson on how to control the obsessive part of yourself that needs to micromanage everything. That’s honorable. You didn’t lie, though you hedged and avoided. You stuck to your way of ripping things open and handling the outcomes.”

Alexa heard the mild scold there. “I’ll work on that, a little. I’ll only go so far in any pretense, however. I don’t think I’ll do well as a family spy.”

“It’s part of your training. It’s not your career.”

Alexa waited for the rest of the evaluation, eager to hear what he had to say about her next few years. She wanted time with him, but she already knew not to ask for it.

“You proved you have the capacity to bond. Many subjects can’t after spending time in the labs.” Adrian glared at Brandon this time. “The few who *can* then use it against the rest of us.”

Brandon stiffened at Adrian’s disapproval.

Alexa kicked a rock. “I want the bond with him. Don’t do that again.”

Adrian was surprised. “Even though he lied, used your emotions, and might have sold you to the government?”

“Yes.” Alexa ignored Brandon’s happiness. “We have something in common that I doubt anyone else can match.”

“And what’s that?”

Alexa grinned at her dad. “We both love you.”

Adrian decided he could accomplish that lesson in a different way. “I’ll leave him out of it from now on.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you!” Brandon hadn’t realized how fast Alexa had gotten under his skin, but he wanted their friendship, too. “I wouldn’t have let Alden take her, just so you know.” He moved away before either of them called him a liar.

Adrian took a step back toward his post on the tree line. “Don’t come out here again.”

“I won’t. You’ll be gone; there’s no need.”

“How do you know?”

Alexa kicked another rock. “Now that we’ve had our moment, I can feel you pulling away again. You don’t like how many people are watching us, but you also want me to leave so you can consider everything and expand your plans.” She gave him a brief instant of coldness. “You’re not much of a father, are you?”

Adrian shook his head, filled with remorse. “No, but I am trying this time. I hope that matters down the road.”

Alexa ran forward for a last hug. “It matters right now.”

Adrian hugged her, memorizing the moment, and then she took off running back to the farm house so he wouldn’t be able to see or hear her cry.

*But I’ll feel it.* Adrian resumed his post, hating the way things had to be for them. *But it won’t be like this much longer. In one decade, everything about every life is going to change and I’ll be there to lead my army through it.*

Brandon glanced back.

Adrian nodded to him. *Thank you.*

Brandon beamed, mood lifting, shoulders straightening. *Anything for you, bro.*

The chickens came to Brandon’s feet, pecking and clucking as if to verify he was okay. They ignored Alexa. She wasn’t their favorite human.

Alexa observed as he stroked the birds, confused by how he could love them and then later eat them.

“It’s the way life is, but there’s no reason to be mean because I’m higher in the food chain. Every living thing deserves respect.” He grinned at her. “Also, a loved food source tastes better.”

Alexa grimaced. “That’s disgusting.”

Brandon shrugged. “It depends on the situation.”

Alexa didn’t push. She sensed she wouldn’t like his answer and she’d had her fill of being angry at him for the moment. “Say you’re sorry.”

Brandon rose. “It would be a lie.”

Alexa decided to like him anyway. She stared.

Brandon tensed. “What?”

Alexa smiled, letting him experience her happiness in full. “Thank you for making sure I passed. I know you did it so you could see him, too, but I’m still grateful.”

Brandon fell to his knees in front of her, not even trying to resist her alpha pull. “It’s my honor.”

Alexa nodded. “Yes, it is.”

Adrian watched them, proud and sad. *My daughter will come behind me and trigger the final battle that determines the fate of the survivors. I’ve taught her how to survive. Now it’s time to show her how to lead.*

**4**

“And he did.” Alexa leaned back, enjoying the memory.

“Wait. You said it had a happy ending.” David wiped away tears.

“I passed my test and got to spend a few precious minutes around my father. For my life, that was happy.”

Jacob also wiped away tears. “I both love and hate your life. Your upbringing sucked! But it made you who you are. I find the mix confusing.”

The others nodded in agreement.

Alexa’s lips twitched. “Should I stop telling you those stories?”

“No!” Jacob grinned. “I love them.”

Everyone laughed, but they understood–Alexa more than anyone. She felt the same way and it was her life.

“How did your uncle make sure you passed?” Billy wanted to be certain he grasped the lesson.

“If he was the family spy and still alive, then he was good at it–too good to give himself away to a young girl with a bad act.”

“What was your uncle’s secret?” Daniel had been storing details. “The one Alden used to blackmail him?”

Alexa was impressed Daniel knew she’d figured it out. “He did some hunting from the family line when he first started. But he was wrong. My father knew about it, too. He just forgave him after a while because it happened for a short time and the three people he sold out were other traitors. My Uncle Brandon is a complex man who never fit in among his brothers.”

Daniel made another educated guess. “Because a true Mitchel will do anything to accomplish their goals.”

“Yes. Brandon also prefers to use honor when he can. It sets us apart.”

“It sounded like you were angry at Brandon when he contacted us at the springs, and after the fight with Selma.”

Alexa nodded at Mark’s comment. “I’ve never forgotten the lesson he taught me. Mitchels hold a grudge forever; we also avoid each other. If trackers believe we’re bonded, it might get him killed.”

“I guess that makes a visit out of the question?” Edward now wanted time around Brandon to study their relationship. He found the Mitchel hierarchy fascinating.

“For now, yes. Our enemies will try to draw me out soon by using duty or honor. And I’ll let them. By the time they form a plan and enact it, we’ll all be very hungry.”

The three newest vampires in the group immediately began longing for that call.

“I think the couple left.” Daniel had been listening for it. “They heard us up here and got spooked.”

“Good.” Alexa hadn’t really wanted to chase them away, but they weren’t safe here, even around her crew.

Jacob came over, carrying a plate of turnovers. “You can have three each.”

Most of them took one reluctantly, braced for an awful taste.

Alexa and Edward took their full share. The smell of frying pie was thick and it smelled good. There were no burnt chars or edges. They both took a large bite, eager to enjoy the treat.

Jacob stayed put, positive the others would want the rest of their share once they tasted it.

Alexa groaned through her mouthful.

So did Edward.

The others took bites and stared while chewing.

Jacob lifted his chin. “I worked in a bakery when I was a teenager.”

“He can cook!” Billy grabbed two more of the warm turnovers and slapped Jacob gently on the shoulder so he didn’t make the man drop the rest of the food. “Nice.”

Jacob enjoyed the warm feelings from the crew, but the respect and pleasure coming from Alexa was the best part. *I’ll always crave that from her now. I hope she knows.*

Alexa smiled at him. *It’s a two-way street, my pet. I need you to crave it. We feed off each other.*

Jacob grinned. “Good, cause I’m hungry again.”

“So am I.” She leered at him, and then Billy.

Both men leered back eagerly, telling her they were ready to satisfy her whenever she gave the word.

Mark remembered another part of her story. “Hey. What did you two come up with for stopping the war?” It clearly hadn’t worked, but Mark was still curious because it was one of her early plans and it hadn’t worked.

Alexa’s happiness faded. “We didn’t. After a very lengthy discussion, we agreed that the world would be better off if it ended.”

Most of her team didn’t know what to say to that.

Edward knew, but he refused to let the words through his lips. Alexa didn’t need to hear that she’d turned out a lot like her father in ways. Edward was positive she already knew. *The difference is she tries hard to avoid anything that forces her to lose honor. The minute she stops caring, she’ll lose her team with it.*

Alexa glanced over, blue eyes flashing hotly.

Edward slowly smiled, shaking his head. *I’m yours forever.*

Alexa lifted her chin. “I’m not my father. Ask me why it deserved to end before you judge me guilty!” She shut her eyes, shuddering. “But not tonight. I’m done reliving the past for your bitter inspections. Worry about the future, for it comes quick and has no mercy for any of us.”

# Chapter Four

**I Want Her Alive**

Near Tuscaloosa, Alabama

**1**

**“I** can camp right here for a long time. I have enough food, tents, and protection. You might as well let me in so we can talk.” Marcella kept a calm tone, but inside, the rage was growing.

They’d reached this smaller bunker an hour ago, but those inside were refusing to answer her calls through the speaker or the radio. Her winter coat clad group was lounging in their trucks, watching and listening for trouble. The hound was napping in the rear of one of those trucks, hidden by their gear. They’d traveled hard to get here; they were all tired and eager to be inside out of the stiff wind blowing down from the north.

“Fine.” Marcella pointed at two of her bored descendants. “Find a level spot and set us up. They’ll either come out to hunt or they’ll starve in a couple months.”

“Wait.” The speaker by the steel door blared at them, shedding dust from the cracks and crevices. “Give me a reason to let you in.”

Marcella had several reasons ready, but she wasn’t certain which one to use. This small bunker was occupied by former UN forces who’d never gone home. What did they need most?

She scanned the bare ground around the entrance that was set into a hillside. She saw no debris, a lot of tree stumps, and a few animals skeletons that were going white under the December afternoon sun. “I’ve brought enough food to feed fifty people for a week. You can have it.”

“No one gives away food. What’s the price?”

“A conversation and lodgings overnight. If we can’t come to an agreement, I’ll leave.”

The small camera above the door rotated to take in her party.

Marcella had made sure they looked like peaceful, unarmed women with a single male slave. Their gear hid the weapons and blank minds hid their power.

“How do I know you?”

“You’ve heard my voice giving radio addresses from the other bunker. I’ve also communicated with you through the computers. As I’ve told you, I’m the President of these United States.” Marcella smiled sweetly at the camera. “Let me in. I don’t rule with violence. There’s no need for it when so many have already perished.”

Marcella could almost hear the conversation taking place inside. Some would argue against it, but the offer of food would win out. To speed things along, Marcella waved at her group. “Bring that barrel of dried meat up here first.”

Lorey swept their surroundings while the two Malins carried the food up. Debbie and Chris had spent the last four days getting reacquainted. He wasn’t refusing any order now and Debbie’s rage was under control for the moment, but it wouldn’t take much for that situation to explode again.

If it did, Chris might not survive the encounter. Debbie liked his screams. She hadn’t shown signs that leaving her twin sons behind bothered her. Most of the crew believed she was one of those rare few who survived without any emotional ties. Half of them wished they could be like her. The rest resented her. Anyone who could abandon their newborns was someone to watch out for.

Not that Lorey was worried. Her skill with charms had given her top ranking among Marcella’s defenders. She could fire them faster than most people could fire a gun.

The lock clicked on the thick steel bunker hatch. “Stay in the hallway. An escort is on the way to meet you.”

The door slowly opened, shedding leaves and dirt over the entrance.

Marcella stepped inside without fear or responding. She didn’t worry about the unknowns inside. Outside was another story. She’d been able to sense the evil creatures in the woods around them as they traveled. She’d refused to stop while it was dark. They’d done all their sleeping under a bright sun.

Dim light flooded the dark entrance. Marcella slid her sunglasses back into place. She’d been in the last bunker for months and even the four days it had taken to get here hadn’t been enough to desensitize her yet. *My eyes are changing from the vaccines. Sometimes my vision goes pink.*

UN troops walked toward them, scanning for trouble.

“It’s a hound!”

“Attention! A hound is in the compound!”

Guns came out; fingers tightened on triggers.

Marcella whistled, bringing the hound to her side. “Down!”

The huge dog dropped to its belly at her feet.

UN guards came forward quickly.

“She brought a hound in here!”

“Throw her out now!”

“Move and we’ll handle it.” A bald, stocky woman came through the angry guards.

Marcella stroked the hound’s muzzle. “It’s my pet.”

Kiya cheeks reddened in disgust. “You’ve tamed a hound?”

“I bred her.” Marcella slowly held out a hand. “I’m the President. And you are?”

“Kiya.” The woman shook her head. “You have to be decontaminated before we’ll touch you.”

Marcella’s hand dropped. “What a great idea. Is it a hot shower?”

“Yes.” Kiya kept her attention on the hound as she pointed. “Go through that door and follow the instructions on the signs. We’ll talk when you’re done.”

Marcella patted her hip.

The hound rose and stayed by her side. “Will you send someone out to collect our gear and vehicles?”

“Already happening.” Kiya had sent that crew before joining the guards here.

“Through another exit, I presume?”

Kiya didn’t answer.

Marcella turned toward the door at the end of the short tunnel. “I’m going to like you.”

She assumed the trucks would be emptied and sanitized. The UN troops were giving off an impression of being very careful. It was comforting.

Kiya and the guards watched the small group in suspicion, but also in curiosity. They hadn’t had visitors here, ever, and they didn’t leave the compound very often. It was a nice change from the monotony, even if they ended up having to kill their uninvited guests.

The damp floor echoed with steps and movements, bouncing off walls that wore a permanent green stain from the growing mold. It was clear this area wasn’t cleaned very often. Marcella hoped that wasn’t the case in the rest of the bunker.

She took the stall in the middle of the concrete showers, keeping the hound with her. She scrubbed herself and the reluctant dog, humming happily.

The bunker was cool, but not cold, making the showers pleasant. Marcella wondered if they had fuel to run the heater in here and stored that question for when it mattered.

The descendants around her finished quickly. They all donned the waiting jumpers and paper shoes, though they refused to put their old things into the garbage bins.

Marcella tossed her bag down the chute without a second thought. She was certain they would be reoutfitted with proper attire, but the thick jumpers and slippers weren’t bad. She waited by the opposite door of the one they’d entered, wondering if they would get a medical exam, too. *Do they have doctors? I can use that if so. I need people who can continue my experiments.* She’d left her scientists behind.

“Shield your eyes. We’re using ultraviolet light in three…two…one.”

Marcella slid her hand over the hound’s eyes.

Blinding light flashed slowly over the room, traveling every inch of them.

Dimness fell again. Everyone stepped toward the opening door.

Marcella smiled at Kiya. “Very nice.”

Kiya didn’t want to feel the burst of pleasure, but it was impossible to avoid. She already liked how it felt to please the new woman. “Follow me.”

She led them down another short hall and took them through a wide archway.

Kiya stepped to the side as they entered, letting Marcella get a good view of the long, wide living lounge.

It was easily two hundred feet long and half as wide, with multiple tunnels and exits leading to other areas. Marcella had studied the map of this bunker weeks ago. She knew it only had this one floor. She walked calmly into the room that held over a hundred UN troops who all stared at her. They were healthy. Their almost chubby bodies weren’t starving and she didn’t hear coughs or see signs that they were ill.

Kiya pointed. “We’ll sit over there.”

Marcella went to the comfortable looking rocking chairs in the far right corner. She smiled at some of the curious people as she went by. Most of them had been reading, sewing, or napping, but they were all studying her now, evaluating her against what little they knew.

“We need a drink.” Marcella motioned Lorey to her right, letting the others settle wherever they wanted. There were a dozen chairs on her side of a small coffee table, but there was only one across from them.

The hound laid down behind Marcella’s chair, ears up and nose in the air to take in all the new sights and sounds. When it didn’t attack, it was quickly forgotten about.

Kiya took the single chair, confirming Marcella’s suspicion of who she was. She liked it that the UN leader had answered her own door.

Marcella got started, not giving the other leader time to take control. “When Safe Haven returns, you’ll be attacked and probably all die.”

Kiya stiffened. Their witnesses murmured or muttered.

Marcella brought out her soothing voice. “Unless I swear you all in as citizens, or send you home. I can do either of those.”

Kiya wasn’t going to be bluffed. “Do you have any proof of who you claim to be?”

“Do you have any proof that you’re allowed to be here? I could consider you a hostile entity that invaded.”

Kiya snorted. “You have no power over us.”

Marcella didn’t mention the magic in her group, though it was already being used to calm and charm. “I feel your fear and I smell the hope coming from your people. You’ve heard my radio addresses.”

Kiya changed tactics. “Did you really have the vaccine?”

“I do have it. The earthquake didn’t destroy my lab. I’ve brought enough to vaccinate all your women.”

Kiya peered around at her group, judging how they felt.

Marcella noticed Kiya didn’t insist the males get the vaccine. “I see some of your people don’t want to be cured.”

Kiya sighed. “They like being stronger. It keeps them alive.”

“Then you’ll love the truth.” Marcella leaned forward, voice lowering so only Kiya heard her. *“I have two shots. One takes away the rage. The other increases it.”*

Greed ran over Kiya’s face. “I could take it from you. You’re no match for all my guards. The UN trained us well.”

Marcella leaned back, chuckling. “I doubt you have as many as you assume. Not all your people are foreigners.”

Kiya was surprised the woman knew that. “How could you tell?”

“The males do not have accents. They’re Americans. I assume you’re keeping them against their will?”

“Some of them.” Kiya already knew Marcella wasn’t going to demand their release. “We do a yearly round up of mates and members to replenish our ranks.”

Marcella stored that idea, instantly sure she would do something like it in the future. “I need to hire someone for a big job. I’ll pay with vaccines and food, and strong leadership that you can count on when things get ugly.” Marcella held up a hand before the UN woman could deliver scorn or doubt. “I’ll prove that in time. For now, tell me how you came to be here so long and I’ll decide if I want to offer you the job.”

Kiya was tired of hiding here. She decided to take a chance. “We got here late. Our ship hit debris from the war and almost sank. We lost half the crew. By the time we repaired the damage enough to get moving again, Safe Haven was setting sail. Because of our accident, top speeds were not available. There was no way we could catch up.”

Marcella didn’t take her attention off the busty bald woman who was wearing her UN clothes and gear; it had all been patched or repaired multiple times. Her magazines were full and had been topped off recently according to the smell of gunpowder and the sight of reloading equipment in a far corner. “Keep going.”

“We didn’t have a ship that would make it to the International Detention center for that fight. We decided to take over this bunker and put together a radio while carrying out the seizures and captures on our lists.”

Marcella grinned. “Don’t stop now.”

Kiya hid a frown and kept the same groveling tone the new woman clearly expected. “We tried to contact our base, but equipment was lacking. It took a long time. When we finally assembled a radio that would reach, a year had gone by. There was no answer.”

Marcella laughed and clapped.

Kiya stiffened, then continued, not sure what was funny. “The winters here in the east have been awful, and the waters freeze for a mile around the shores. We have been stuck here, longing for word on our leaders and our mission.”

Marcella laughed at the woman. “You are a great liar. You should write fiction.”

Kiya started to protest.

Marcella stood in a swift lunge, voice rising. “I will not tolerate a liar! Speak one more and I’ll go. You can be found here by Safe Haven and executed.”

Kiya’s lips thinned, but she gave a curt nod.

Marcella chuckled coldly this time. “That sullen aura is who you really are. No need to hide it from me. I have my own nastiness and so does everyone else.”

Marcella swept the room. “I believe your ship hit something. I see old scars and I can tell shrapnel caused them, but not just any debris. They were struck by heavy nets, barrels, and flying wood that splintered as it went in.”

Kiya stared in surprised. “You see a lot.”

“Shall I continue?”

Kiya respected intelligence. “Yes.”

“After almost dying, you may have lost your captain…” Marcella smirked down at Kiya. “Or maybe you killed him and took his spot.”

She was rewarded by Kiya’s flinch.

Marcella shrugged. “Some people need to be killed or replaced. That’s probably what will happen to you as well in time.” She went on as Kiya started to protest again. “You didn’t want to join any of the battles. You also didn’t want to go home. This country, especially back then but even now, is littered with electronics and ships. Those are two things people don’t need after an apocalypse, except for a couple of exceptions. You *chose* to stay.” Marcella’s tone deepened. “What I want to know is why.”

Kiya snorted softly. “Finish my story first.”

Marcella snickered. “Getting your money’s worth matters to you. You’re driven, harsh, and determined to achieve your goals. You’ve kept your crew fed, clothed, and armed, and you’re in the middle of enforcing my slavery law.”

Kiya laughed this time. “You do see a lot.”

Marcella took the cup of water from Lorey. “Two last observations and then it will be your turn to amuse me.”

Kiya took the other cup and drank from it without fear that it might contain poison.

“You’re not afraid of anything.”

“I have two fears. Finish your observation.”

Marcella sipped the water as she scanned the rest of the people she could view from here. She swept their men as she slowly rotated, verifying her word before she gave it.

The men knew not to beg her for help since she’d enacted the slavery law. They hid glares and hoped a fight broke out so the females would kill each other.

Marcella looked at Kiya. “Your males are layered in scars that came from you and the other women. You have the rage illness. They were slaves long before the law went into effect.”

“Arrest her.” Kiya waved.

Marcella whistled.

The fire hound rose while Lorey brought up a shield around her.

“Magic users!”

The UN troops jumped to their feet and drew weapons instead of fleeing, though a few of the males retreated behind their women. They didn’t have weapons, but they were wearing gun belts.

“You use the men to reload during battle because they can carry more.” Marcella ignored Kiya’s furious stride forward.

Kiya put her gun to the shield. “And I have enough ammunition to shoot through this shield until she can’t hold it anymore. You do not scare me, American!”

Marcella remained still as the dog leapt and Kiya began to shoot at it instead of her.

Bullets flew through the room, ricocheting off the hard walls and ceiling. The few that hit the carpet embedded into it or skidded off and slammed into boots and boxes.

“Stop!” Marcella concentrated on the angry dog. “I want her alive.”

The hound released the shouting woman and retreated. Its orbs were blood red.

Kiya scrambled back, holding an ugly gash in her arm. Her knife was covered in red to the handle.

Marcella motioned at Lorey. “Heal my dog.”

Lorey did, not releasing the shield.

Marcella was impressed.

Kiya was angry.

The rest of the people were scared. They stayed still now that it was over, hoping not to draw attention to themselves.

Those who’d run didn’t come back.

Guards came from other areas and waited, blocking the doorways.

Marcella ignored all of them in favor of studying Kiya’s reaction. “If she doesn’t bleed out, do the liar after her troops. Get help.”

Lorey motioned the other descendants to assist. It made Marcella appear invincible.

Lorey tossed charms as she healed people, making sure the atmosphere calmed. Marcella had told her what to do on the ride here, but Lorey would have anyway. She saw the advantage to having the UN troops serve as their army until the defenders from the west arrived.

Kiya’s pain kept the charm from working on her. “Get out!” Blood ran down her arm and began draining her strength.

Marcella’s voice hardened. “That’s not going to happen.”

Kiya watched Lorey heal three of her crew at the same time, while still keeping her shield over Marcella.

Libby watched from a nearby doorway, wondering if this was the moment where she inherited leadership. She didn’t consider helping her boss. As second in command, Libby oversaw the cooks, the guards, and the bunker while Kiya did whatever she wanted.

Libby scanned the new people in disappointment, but without fear or concern. All she cared about was easing her misery. The strangers only had one man in their group and he was used up. Libby wasn’t interested in bones without flesh. Her men needed to be able to take what she dished out. *Maybe we’ll go on a scavenging trip soon. These bones are all bare.*

“I could have tricked my way in and taken over.” Marcella waved off the next defense. “You forced it, not me. I had no intention of claiming your burial box, so your other fear is groundless as well. I’m going further north to set a new base in a bunker ten times bigger than this. And I need security guards. Tell me why you didn’t leave and I’ll consider all of you for those positions.”

Vanessa, the powerful healer with a stripe shaved through the side of her long hair, kept their witnesses happy with mood charms as Lorey tended wounds. Only blood splatters and debris on the floor would clue these troops in to what had happened.

Lorey didn’t think it would matter. The floors were filthy. Most of them wouldn’t even notice that a little more had been added.

Lorey saw the others in her group had the rest of the injuries covered and approached Kiya. “You’ll get used to us. You’re female. Your life won’t change much.” Lorey blasted the woman with a loyalty charm. Then she used a weak heal spell that closed most of the jagged wound on Kiya’s pale arm. She didn’t heal the woman all the way, however. Marcella might want to use that reminder later to keep the woman in line.

Kiya made a face at the pain. “Equality.”

Marcella was pleased with how things were going. “What do you mean by that?”

“If our bosses survived, they will demand everyone be treated equal. They won’t permit slavery. There’s a chance we will be locked up or put to death because we’re ill and we can spread it.”

Lorey and the others withdrew to corners and walls so they could keep the entire room under watch and reach all areas if they needed to.

Marcella motioned. “What else?”

“We like it here.” Kiya rubbed her arm and winced. “We were all hurt during our reeducation period. We hate men.”

The healed hound settled on the ground at Lorey’s feet and rested its massive paw on her boot.

“What of your families?”

Kiya shook her head. “We were a suicide squad. We don’t have family alive.”

“And who were you sent to kill?” Marcella watched Kiya’s blood sink into the carpet as she waited for that very important answer.

“Adrian Mitchel.”

Marcella gave a genuine smile this time. “That’s perfect.”

“Should we assume the public will come here?” Kiya didn’t want that unless it benefited them greatly. “Or will they go to the other bunker and swear allegiance to the woman called Jeanie?” Kiya enjoyed Marcella’s angry expression. “We have heard her calling people to Evening Town while claiming to now run the country. You forgot to mention that.”

Marcella cursed herself for leaving the bunker. She could have hidden until it was over and then resumed control. Marcella’s confident tone faltered. “I don’t know yet. The false woman in my old bunker might decide to keep them. It’s what I would do if I lucked into an opportunity to rule the world.”

“You mean this country.”

Marcella nodded soothingly. “Of course, this country.” She looked around. “Perhaps I need to make a radio call and encourage them to go there. Maybe someone will kill her.”

“How would this situation have been handled before the war?”

Marcella rolled her eyes in disgust. “A judge would have scheduled a trial and then listened. Then he would have sent it to a different court to avoid having to make the choice. That would have continued until the case reached a judge running for reelection and then he would have taken the case and ruled in whatever favor would seal the number of votes he needed. Eventually it would have been passed to the Supreme Court, who would have probably refused to take the case for some minor technicality. Once the lower court fixed that issue, then the Supreme Court would decline to take the case until enough of their donors had weighed in on which direction they wanted it to go.”

The hound glanced up at her angry tone, but it quickly dropped back to dozing as it understood she wasn’t in danger.

Kiya chuckled at the rant. “It was much like that in all of our countries, too. Legislators cannot be trusted.” Her tone dropped into a warning. “And you’re one of them.”

Marcella shook her head. “I was only a secretary before the war. I’m one of the common citizens who should have been in charge all along.”

“Maybe you can use that in your claim.”

Marcella sighed. “Maybe. Until we have a conversation, I don’t know enough about my opponent. Her name rings a faint bell, however. I stopped at three libraries on the way here, but they’d all been looted too much or were burnt to their frames.”

Kiya kept track of the magic users who were now spread out. “This area is heavy on damage. We had to travel north to supply our needs.”

Marcella stilled. Then she leaned forward. “How far north?”

“One of our scavenging trips took us all the way to the edge of New York.”

“Were the radiation levels too high to keep going?”

Kiya stared at her. “No. We found what we needed before having to enter the state.”

“And you didn’t explore farther.”

“No, not with winter coming on that second year and all our gear wearing out.”

“Understandable either way.” Marcella soothed her new acquaintance. “There is no sense in possibly killing your crew just to explore.”

“Yes… Wait. Did you say you haven’t spoken to the woman trying to take your place?”

Marcella wasn’t happy that Kiya kept retuning to that topic. “No. She answers my calls, but won’t talk to me directly. I can hear her welcoming refugees into my bunker and giving out my supplies.”

“So you’ve been run out and replaced.” Kiya smirked a little. “It sounds like you’ve been conquered.”

“Not at all.” Marcella sprang her own surprise information. “The earthquake sent me on the road, that and a promise I gave to your boss.”

Marcella was rewarded with gasps of fear and glares.

“What promise?” Kiya didn’t doubt their bosses were alive and well. Almost her entire story had been a lie.

“Ah. You know they’re waiting for word on Safe Haven.”

Kiya shrugged. “Everyone who had contact with Safe Haven is waiting for word. Only the idiots act like they never existed. The rest of us know we might be living our last season here.”

“I could make you all citizens so Safe Haven can’t run you out or torture you. It only takes a few words, but it has to be official and I can’t do that until I’m officially in power.”

“What was the promise?”

Marcella smiled cruelly. “If you fail to kill Safe Haven’s leader, you’ll be put down for failure to perform the duty you volunteered for.”

Kiya paled. The witnesses muttered; a few of them shouted curses.

Marcella wasn’t worried. “I can simply tell them you died. I haven’t checked in with them in weeks.” She didn’t say those envoys would be here by spring, though some might even show up sooner to prepare for Safe Haven’s return.

“Do they have our location?”

Marcella nodded. “Of course. You’ll be much safer in my northern bunker.”

Kiya’s anger flared. “You tricked me and trapped me. You lied! You are a legislator.”

Marcella shrugged it off. “I’m one of the best, but my words are not lies. I was no one before the war. Now, I’m the President of this country and I need your help. The United Nations was always a light in the darkness of corruption.”

Kiya snorted. “They were a crime wave being protected by other crime waves.”

“Then why did you volunteer?”

Kiya’s face darkened. “I hate Mitchels. So does everyone here.”

Marcella recognized the familiar sense of obsession mixed with mental conditioning. All the UN troops she’d had contact with put off that vibe. “You didn’t volunteer.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as I get to kill a Mitchel.” Kiya snapped out of it, tone lowering back into normal. “It’s too bad you can’t get the bounty hunting Mitchel to vouch for you. She could say you’re the President. Everyone would take her word for it. Then I could kill her and go home in honor.”

“Alexa Mitchel isn’t the leader of Safe Haven.”

Kiya gestured. “That’s what the others will be hunting as soon as that cruise ship is sighted. None of them will make it to land. I want both heads from that snake.”

“Alexa is beyond dangerous.” Marcella’s mind went into overdrive with a new plan. “But she also has a great love for this miserable hunk of dirt. She might agree to mediate the coming dispute. Or maybe I’ll ask her to decide the fate of the UN troops I’ve captured.”

“You’re ruthless.”

“When I need to be.” Marcella motioned before Kiya could try to shoot her.

Lorey sent another strong spell, hitting nearly every person with invisible bonds of loyalty. She’d been hitting them since they entered this bunker. As long as Marcella was in sight, these troops would be her biggest supporters. When distance got between them, they would plot her death.

“Did you say you hold a nightly matchup?”

“That’s how we control the rage.” Kiya smiled eagerly, madness flashing again. “As soon as we eat, we’ll fight.”

Their witnesses cheered, already forgetting about the tension thanks to Lorey’s spells.

Marcella frowned slightly. “Doesn’t that add to the mess you need to clean afterward?”

Kiya snickered. “This bunker had a swimming pool. We drained it and now we fight in it. We use planks for the fighters to stand on. We toss in lye afterward to eat the bodies. We call that cleaning.”

“Interesting.” Marcella forced herself to sound eager. “Well, when do we eat? I want to watch the matchups.”

Kiya clapped her hands.

Women carrying trays of something that steamed came through the entrances and began serving bowls to everyone. The food Marcella had brought was already locked in a quarantine room. It would be inspected, cleaned where possible, and then put into rotation of their rations. They ate well, but they were also careful with those supplies where other survivors weren’t. Most scavengers sucked it down as fast as they found it. Kiya believed in making her troops wait for the little treats and great meals. They appreciated it more.

“Why are the servers wearing silver and black?” Marcella admired the somber outfits. “Nice colors.”

Kiya smiled at the serving women. “Those are the cooks. They’re not allowed to fight or be challenged. We need them too much. They get extra gear and rations, and time off whenever they want it.”

“So the cooks get special treatment, but not the hunters or your defenders?”

Kiya snorted. “Anyone can fire a gun or throw a knife. Someone who can make bugs taste like crunchy potatoes of the past is a genius who deserves to be protected.”

Marcella laughed. “Well said.” She took a large bite of the cricket soup and crunched it down.

Kiya did the same.

# Chapter Five

**Still Healing**

Bunker 11

**1**

**“T**his is President Marcella Pruett, calling my southeastern bunker. Is anyone there?”

Jeanie glared at William. “I thought you switched the radio off.”

They were near the main entrance and busy processing people. Both of them were eager for the sun to finish setting so they could shut the doors. Refugees had started arriving yesterday and hadn’t stopped. When they’d risen this morning, people were camped all over the grounds, waiting for the doors to open. Their plan to rally the public around Jeanie was underway, but it was going slowly. They were beginning to understand that a voice could rule the country and never show the face it belonged to.

William rose and headed for the room behind them. “I’ve been planning for this.”

“Why? You haven’t answered her for four days. You’d be better off telling the other target that we have two of her family members here. She’d come right over.”

“And we will do that, but later.” William slid into the communications cubby and shut the door as the radio call repeated.

“This is President Pruett. Come in, eastern bunker 11.”

William keyed the mike. “You are not the President.”

There was a surprised pause before Marcella responded. “Who is this?”

William lowered his voice so those outside couldn’t hear the conversation. “Your worst nightmare, Marcella. The next time you make an address, tell the public you’ve abdicated your job to the *real* President. If you don’t, I’ll come up there to the UN den to visit you. I only took the baby last time. This time, I’ll leave with your severed head.”

The line went dead.

William was satisfied. He still planned to visit her, but he needed a few more days here to help Jeanie and Donna finish setting things up.

They’d gotten the doors to function and most of the lights were on. All the bodies had been taken to the furnace for fuel and those areas had been cleaned. As people showed up, Jeanie was giving them a job or what they’d come for. The line waiting to get in was growing by the hour. Most people were choosing to stay here until winter was over, which was perfect since they needed all sorts of jobs filled.

William went out into the reception hall and resumed his place at the middle table.

The women in line gave him dirty glares for holding a position of authority. The bound men at their feet did the same.

“You can’t be out here much longer.” Jeanie waved at the next woman in line. “Don’t you have two other jobs to do?”

William grunted, also waving a woman forward. “I pushed her buttons. She’ll either run again or strike a blow. I’ll know how to handle it when she reacts.”

“And the other one?”

William scowled. “Haven’t you been paying attention? You can’t rush in and just hope against a target like Alexa Mitchel. You have to have a solid plan.”

Jeanie held out a hand to the dirty woman wearing tattered clothes and fear as a coat. “How can I help you?”

The woman shivered, but didn’t touch her. “Everything. I need all of it.”

“No problem. Write your name at the bottom of this paper. We’ll get the rest filled out later.” Jeanie slid the pen closer to the woman’s shaking hand. “You’ll go to the cafeteria first and eat until you’re full. Then follow the signs for whatever you want to handle next.”

The woman scratched her name and dropped the pen. She refused to look at William.

Jeanie pointed toward the hall. “The cafeteria is at the very end. Just follow your nose.”

William chuckled. “Do you think Donna’s having fun?”

Jeanie nodded. “I do, actually. She has the kids and she’s cooking for needy people. It’s perfect for her.” Jeanie waved the next woman forward.

William slowly slid the same signup sheet to the woman perched nervously on the edge of the hard chair across from him. “Isn’t my owner great? She even lets me help out here!”

The tall, thin woman relaxed, assuming he was a slave.

Jeanie snickered. “That’ll hold us for a bit.”

William still hated it that he couldn’t read Jeanie’s thoughts, but he’d figured out why. *She’s an Invisible. When she pops, I may take her as my mate and see if we can breed a time controller.* William hadn’t forgotten that he only had two of those but needed three.

William hadn’t slept well. He’d spent most of the night dream walking to find his target. His normal charm was muted and his glowing green eyes were narrowed against the noise and the annoyance of having to pretend he was a slave.

Jeanie felt William’s bad mood, but she had pockets full of powders and potions that she’d chosen carefully. If he got out of line, she would handle it. The odd bars she’d entered on her journey had held amazingly useful people of odd origins who’d admired her courage and recognized her name. She hadn’t been harmed at all.

William tensed as cold wind whipped through the open entrance. He buttoned his coat, feeling something coming. He scanned the dozen big women Jeanie had drafted last night to stand guard. “We should shut the doors early.”

Jeanie refused to rush. “We’ll handle whatever comes. Hush now.” The sound of his voice was aggravating the women in line.

She studied the woman in front of her holding two ropes and two small male children. The ropes went to their drugged fathers presumably. The two men were bruised, barely clothed, and drooling slightly. “Would you like to be paid in dust, gold, credits, or food?”

“I’m Ginger Ganes.” The famous bounty hunter ignored the squirming boys, but her hold stayed tight. “I want ammunition and a contract for hunting loose men.”

Jeanie scanned Ginger’s tool belt of reliable weapons and the long brown braid that hung next to her hip. “I love bounty hunters. Sign up and visit any room you want for free.”

“And these?”

“Feed them at the cafeteria, then drop them in the correct zones. Just follow the signs. There are workers in each area, but they’re new, so give them time to figure out how to give you want you want.” They were following the instructions Marcella had posted for her own workers.

“Deal.” The woman was gone a few seconds later, dragging the males along. She showed no guilt at all.

William shook his head when Jeanie would have questioned it. “You already know, remember?”

“Ah, yes. I am the boss.” She stored her question for later.

Noise overwhelmed them for a few seconds with the sounds of people going through the hall, males shouting, male kids crying, and new employees wandering around lost and looting.

The speaker in the corner of the ceiling crackled loudly in anticipation of an announcement coming through, bringing most of that din to a pause.

Jeanie frowned at him. “Why did you leave it on?”

“So we can keep track of her. You won’t win this fight by keeping people in the dark.” William got set to react as the situation deserved.

So did Jeanie.

“Good evening, New America. This is your President, Marcella Pruett. I have updates for you.”

Jeanie scowled as the large group in front of her swiveled toward the speakers. “She has no claim. She’s not the rightful ruler!”

The citizens ignored her. That voice had told them to come here and now they were having their needs met. It gave proof to the voice, not an unknown face.

Jeanie slammed her mug onto the check-in table. “I’m on a break!”

She marched into the main bunker and took the elevator to the lower levels. Those were guarded by her hounds and off limits to the public. Jeanie had claimed it for her personal space. “A President goes in the bottom, where she’s protected. Having a residence on the ground floor is probably part of why I’m here and the last resident is not.”

No one watched her go, not even William. Everyone listened to the radio address.

“There is a winter storm traveling south. Heavy snow has delayed my return to bunker 11, but it is open and taking in people for all of the items I’ve outlined in previous addresses. You can get clothes, food and water, the vaccine, shelter, and you can unburden yourself of all males. Please treat those running that bunker with respect, but beware of males pretending to have authority positions. I do not allow that. If you see such a person, restrain them and alert security. That is all.”

William shifted in his seat as two dozen hard glares turned to him. *She’s clever. I’ll have to account for that.* “I’m a slave. My owner told me to handle these check-ins.”

Most of the new people had already heard that from Jeanie. No one approached with intentions of restraining him.

William’s mind began flying over his plans as he resumed handling the refugees. *She hopes to overwhelm us and maybe get me killed, but she doesn’t know who I am.* William smiled shyly at the next woman. “How can we help you?”

“Vaccine and rentals.”

William slid the sheet over. “Just follow the signs, miss.”

She brightened under his subservient tone and signed her name.

William kept his thoughts calm as he worked, but anger was lighting up his brain. Marcella had defied him. *She has to die soon. I can’t take that now. When Safe Haven left, so did my patience.*

William inspected the woman and kids, hoping to discover the third time controller he needed, but there wasn’t any magic in this group. *I need help with the hunt and it has to be someone who wants the reset.* William smiled as a plan popped up. *I know where to find someone like that, don’t I?*

The radio crackled again, making William tense as he realized he’d overlooked someone in all his plans.

“Marcella, is it true you’re holed up with UN troops who came to this country to enslave all of us?”

Gasps and mutters filled the bunker.

William applauded Jeanie’s effort, though he doubted it would be enough.

The radio crackled again. “I challenge your right to rule us. I demand an investigation of treason. I also demand a public vote be held to elect a President properly. Until then, I claim the right to rule through succession. I was the Secretary of Transportation when war came. As the last surviving member of the government, it falls to me to lead this country.”

Silence reined for a moment, and then Marcella’s cool voice echoed through the radio. “I claimed this position by conquest. If you want it, you have to take it from me.”

Jeanie snorted angrily. “That’s not how America works.”

“America *didn’t* work. That’s why it fell. This is New America and it belongs to the citizens you abandoned for your cushy life belowground. You don’t get to show up four years late and claim anything.”

“We will hold a vote. Until then, I’m here and in charge.” Jeanie shut off the entire radio system for the bunker to prevent Marcella from making another address, but people had their own radios. She couldn’t stop it completely. She concentrated. *Shut it down. We’re done for the night.*

William began directing people away from the entrance.

Jeanie sat in her chair. She rocked hard and fast, trying to burn off some of the anger. “It’s not enough. If there’s really a vote, that bitch will win.”

The room around her had been a lab. Much of the equipment was undamaged, though she didn’t know what it was for. She’d added her chair and the sleeping bag in the corner, but left the rest for later examination. The woman she’d just challenged had been running a complicated operation here. Jeanie wanted to know what each and every part of it had been.

She concentrated, digging for a solution. “I need to verify my claim.” She stopped rocking. “I need someone to tell them I belong here by right of succession.”

She grunted, tone growing cruel. “I’ll bet they’d listen to a Mitchel. We can get her here, get her to say I’m legit, and then cut her throat to hurt Safe Haven. It’s perfect.”

Jeanie ignored the hounds coming over for her attention. “But if it doesn’t succeed, we’ll go to war with Marcella and I won’t stop until every one of her fighters are staked out naked on my lawn. I’m the ruler here and I’ll slaughter anyone who gets in my way.”

Jeanie rose and went to tell William the new plan.

**2**

Donna put the last bowl of soup on the counter, then wiped sweat from her forehead. She’d volunteered to run the cafeteria before considering how much labor was involved.

The cooking side of the kitchen was narrow and vented poorly. She was pouring sweat from making a simple soup and bread meal, but the dozens of tables on the other side of the immense cafeteria were in the draft coming through the door. “I wish I could flip it around. They need the heat and I need the draft.”

“Excuse me.” Ginger smiled at Donna. “Can you tell me where to go next?”

Donna saw the woman had dropped her burdens off after feeding them. “Depends on what you want.”

“Ammunition.”

“Bounty hunter?”

“Yes.”

“The armory is down the main hallway. You’ll see the signs.”

Ginger lingered by the counter as the last person got their bowl and headed for a table. “Who’s in charge here?”

“President Jeanie.” Donna had given that answer a lot since the radio call. “Marcella didn’t conquer anything. This bunker was empty when we came here.”

“But she does have a bunker in the west that she fought for.”

“We’ve heard that, too, but we haven’t received any proof of it.” Donna wiped her hand on the towel stuck in her belt. “Not that it matters. This is America. We have a constitution.”

“And yet, you’re following her law on male slavery.”

Donna sighed. “Something had to be done. I agree with that law, and so does President Jeanie. Women have to be protected from wild men.”

“True.” Ginger turned toward the door. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“My pleasure.” Donna assumed the woman was making sure things were on the level here. They were, as far as Donna knew, but William and Jeanie weren’t sharing their plans. She had picked things up here and there by scanning their minds, but neither of them were letting her in.

Donna scanned the small storage pantry in the rear of the cooking area, where the orphans were napping. They’d played, eaten, and enjoyed having a warm shelter. In a little while, she planned to take them all to the showers, get cleaned up, and then settle into the main living quarters on this ground floor. Jeanie didn’t want it and William hadn’t stated a preference, so Donna was claiming it for herself and the kids.

Her gaze settled on Andrew. William had locked their memories, but Donna was still scared of the little boy. *I hope Alexa sends him away again. Abigail is a sweetie, but her brother is dangerous.*

“Don’t let him hear that.”

Donna glared at William as he came to the counter. “I’m not stupid.”

“No, you’re dangerous because you hate men.” William stared at her, making plans. “Can we trust you?”

“I would ask you the same thing.”

William gave her his most charming smile. “We’re a team.”

Donna admired his straight, white teeth and the hard work it had to have taken to keep them that way during an apocalypse.

William smiled wider, unable to help the vanity. He took good care of himself and always had.

Ginger paused by the door to listen. She was eager to score points with the people running this place.

Donna glared at William as she realized he was trying to charm her without using magic. “Why are you planning to tell Alexa we have two Mitchels here?”

“To draw her out.”

“You could just ask her to meet you.”

“Maybe, but after all the fighting she’s been through in the last month, it’s unlikely she’d agree.” William didn’t want to say it hadn’t been his idea. *It would have been if I’d thought about it.* “When she finds out we have two of her relatives, she’ll send them somewhere safer.”

Donna frowned. “She can have the boy. The girl should stay here.”

William didn’t argue. He needed Donna on his side, for now. “I’ll make sure she knows you want to adopt the girl. In the meantime, what can we do in here to help you through tomorrow?”

Donna scanned the filthy kitchen that she now needed to clean and prep for the next meal. “More hands. If you keep letting in refugees, I won’t be able to cook enough food to keep up.”

“Jeanie just drafted a few dozen of our new residents. A group of them will be here in the morning. She made it clear that you’re in charge.”

“Yeah, about that.” Donna smiled, but it was cold. “I’m more valuable than a cafeteria worker. I want more out of this. I can walk and leave it all to you two.”

“There’s no need to get bitchy.” William grinned at the fire coming into her eyes. “How does Chief of Staff sound?”

Donna brightened. “It sounds like something I’d be good at.”

“Get the volunteers toiling, then we’ll switch you to the next area to set up. You’ll get the bunker going and we’ll handle Marcella and Alexa.”

“You make that sound easy.”

William left without answering. He didn’t think anything about Alexa would be easy, but it could all work out in the end. “I just have to act like I give a shit about who gets the title and the kids. While she’s distracted, I’ll shove in the knife and make a painting with her blood.”

William ducked into a storage room and shut the door. He concentrated, scanning the surrounding area for a familiar signature. “Where are you, Selma? I need a right hand for this plan to succeed and you’re it.”

Ginger waited until William was out of sight, then she stepped back into the cafeteria. “Maybe I can be of assistance?”

Donna realized the bounty hunter had been listening. She frowned. Then she slowly nodded. *Join me.*

Ginger was scarred and strong. The muscles under her tank top said she spent a lot of time working or fighting. Donna needed someone like that.

Ginger leaned on the counter as Donna whispered in her ear, hiring her for a very dangerous job. Both their gazes lingered on the sleeping twins in the back room.

**3**

“You have to let me go.” Selma stared at the woman who was no longer wearing the filthy red robe. Her torn jeans and plaid shirt said she was a gate hunter. “I’ll go north and find you a blessed blade, just let me go!”

Rachel didn’t respond to Selma’s begging, but she was pleased by how weak the magic user sounded. She pushed the bowl of food closer to the chained woman and left the chilly tent.

They were still camped at the convent, but not for much longer. Rachel felt things changing around them, including the weather. They either had to get indoors or get better gear.

The convent buildings weren’t an option. The bodies in those solemn rooms deserved to be left alone. They’d tried to heal her kids and failed, but at least they’d tried. Rachel wanted to stay until the anniversary of the war. It was only a couple more days, but the weather wasn’t going to allow it. Her day of mourning would have to happen in a different location.

“Any luck?”

Rachel glared at her former husband, but she didn’t shout.

Jerry moved by her with hatred in his heart. If not for the hope of the reset to get their kids back, he would have already killed Rachel and moved on. *She deserves to die for letting the kids get sick.*

Rachel delivered a glance of contempt. She didn’t need to hear it to know what he was thinking. “If you’d been there to help me instead of playing soldier, it wouldn’t have happened!”

Jerry went to stand watch instead of continuing the old argument. They both blamed each other instead of the flu, the war, and bad luck.

In the tent, Selma forced her withered body to move, grateful for the thick coat they’d left her. She didn’t have the strength to pick the bowl up. She stuck her face into it and tried not to choke on the warm pig gruel. There was no water with it. The moisture in the food was all she was going to get.

Selma knew the situation was bad, but she didn’t beg Nature for help. She used her sharp mind as she ate, kneeling on the mud-tracked floor of the tent like an animal. *I will get out of this and when I do, everyone will pay.*

Selma paused as her stomach cramped and her heart thumped. *Especially the Mitchel who left me here!*

Selma swallowed her bitterness and resumed eating. She understood Alexa’s choice, but that didn’t help her right now. Later, when she was strong again, she would trap Alexa and her crew in a corner and then call for Nature to help her. *You should have killed me. That mistake will be your downfall. Now that I know you’re scared of me because of my protector, I’ll use it against you.*

Outside the tent, Rachel sat in a folding chair to have her meal and to keep people from going into the tent. The magic user was dangerous to anyone who got in reach. If she grabbed someone and took a lifeforce to recharge, none of them would be able to keep her here.

Rachel belched quietly. “None of us will survive, either. She knows what we want and that we’re not her guardians like she assumed during the fight with the Mitchel. She’ll kill us all if I’m not careful.”

Rachel swept the quiet, cold landscape vaguely. For the first three days after the fight, there had been a lot of traffic that they’d deflected with a show of force, but today had been quiet. Scavengers had finished looting what little was left and then they’d gone. The weather was getting ugly and they still had hopes of finding safety in bunker 11.

“Where are we going now?” Jerry shoved his glasses back up onto his nose as he stopped by Rachel’s chair. He kept his other hand on his gun. He wasn’t worried about her, but there were shadows in the early morning fog. Any of those animals or creatures could be a threat to their captive.

“North.”

Jerry stared at her in dismay. “Winter is setting in hard up there.”

“Yes. And people avoid those areas. It’s the perfect spot for a portal.” Rachel shrugged. “Or a quiet winter while we search for the rest of what we need.”

Jerry hated Rachel’s short brown hair but the soft face with those amazing green eyes reminded him of the attraction that had once existed between them. “I thought we needed a magic user.”

Jerry’s wide shoulders and narrow hips in those bootcut jeans tried to tempt her, but Rachel wasn’t able to accept that offer. If she let him back into her bed, no matter how good it had been, it was like accepting his blame. “We need a blessed blade to go with her.”

Jerry wanted to ask where they would find it, but he realized she’d already given him the answer. He motioned toward the rest of their eating group. “Finish up and get us packed. We’re heading north.”

Rachel ignored the few grumbles that came. Her group wanted the gates secured and they knew nothing would stop her from accomplishing that. If she’d chosen to travel north, there was a good reason for it.

Rachel spent a minute mourning having to leave their small cemetery behind, but there was no way she could dig up the bodies and take them along. Her group was loyal, but even they wouldn’t tolerate traveling with corpses. *Momma will be back for you. My word on it.*

Rachel didn’t know exactly where in the north to take her group, but she was positive she could convince Selma to tell her in exchange for a small amount of water. Magic users needed it to recharge, but humanity needed it to survive. After four days of only the liquid in her food, Selma would soon be frantic for it. Answering a few questions would be a small price to pay.

Rachel’s thoughts returned to Alexa. “She didn’t tell me about the blade. She doesn’t want the portals closed or time reset. She likes her life and that makes her the most dangerous person on the planet to my plans.”

And yet, Alexa knew what she was doing. *She read my mind and left Selma here anyway.*

Rachel paused. “It’s not just a blessed blade, is it? I’m missing something else.”

Rachel rose, tossing her mostly empty bowl into the weeds. She stomped into the tent and dropped the flap.

Selma cringed away from her.

Rachel knelt so they were eye-to-eye, though she remained out of reach. “Tell me everything you know about closing the gates and resetting time, and I’ll give you my canteen. It’s full.”

Selma licked her cracked lips, parched throat stinging. “Those are two different topics.”

Rachel slid her canteen across the dirty floor and settled into the corner. “Tell me everything.”

Selma chugged a few drinks, then forced herself to stop so she didn’t get sick. “You need a blessed blade for the gate.”

“I know that.”

Selma took another long drink, feeling her body starting to strengthen from just the small amount. She wiped her mouth slowly, making it look like she was still shaking. “Time needs blood to reset.”

Rachel’s mind went into overdrive. “Your blood? My blood? A Mitchel?”

Selma drank again, groaning at the cramps. “Kids. My kind.”

Rachel scowled. “Capturing a magic user took me a year. Finding one of your kids will be impossible.”

Selma capped the canteen and put it down. She swallowed a moan as her witch returned. Energy swarmed her body, making her shiver. “Not one. You need three and they have to control time.”

Rachel’s nostrils flared. “Where do you suggest I hunt for them?”

“In plain sight.” Selma stared at Rachel, deciding her fate in that instant. *I want her lifeforce.* “We hide in big groups where we’ll go unnoticed.”

Rachel’s mind went to the radio calls that had given them brief hope and then crushed it.

Selma nodded. “The bunker has kids.”

Rachel didn’t care that Selma had just read her thoughts. “The bunker was attacked. It’s empty. We stopped listening for calls.”

Selma didn’t grieve for Marcella. “The leader had an escape route. She’ll hurry to her other bunker and restart the addresses.”

“When?”

Selma tried to concentrate as her body began to demand sleep. “How long has it been?”

“Four days.”

“She probably already restarted them. You missed it.”

Rachel believed Selma was telling the truth. She stood up, expression darkening. “I can’t trust you. If I could, I’d give you a lifeforce and we’d travel to the bunker together.”

Selma curled onto her side as energy kept strengthening her weak body. “Give me a reason to support the reset.”

Rachel snorted. “It would erase your defeat by the Mitchel, and give you another chance to kill her before she gathers her family.”

Selma shivered.

Rachel grabbed the single thin blanket and tossed it at the magic user.

Selma burrowed under the cover. “I’ll consider it.”

“I won’t wait. We’re going north to find the blade. Tell me where to search.”

“Wrong choice. If you reset time, the gates will close.”

“I have better odds of finding the blessed blade than to find three time controllers.”

Selma fought the need to sleep to give a final answer. “Only Safe Haven can do that. Hunt the kids and you stop them, too.”

Rachel froze as those words rang in her mind. Safe Haven wouldn’t want time restarted even if it didn’t require innocent blood. “They won’t be the superpower anymore if time resets.”

“No. You will.” Selma let sleep claim her.

Rachel went to get her radio. She waved at Jerry. “We’re staying right here until the next bunker address.”

“What?”

“Our plans have changed.”

**4**

“Someone’s coming toward us.” Jerry squinted through the evening shadows. “It’s a man, by himself.”

Rachel stood up, hand sliding to the gun hidden by the edge of her shirt. She observed the lone man as he strolled into their camp with a charming smile and no fear.

William stopped a few feet from the woman. “You have something I want.”

Rachel knew what he meant. “I captured her. She’s mine.”

William slowly opened his hand to reveal a large chunk of gold. “I’ll pay you one of these a day for her rental.”

“Not enough. You could take her away and leave me hanging.”

“Or I could hang you for hunting my kind.”

Rachel drew her gun. “Get lost.”

William ignored the others who were also lifting weapons. “I can give you what you want most.”

Rachel paused. “How?”

“I have two of the time kids. I need Selma to help me hunt for the third. Then we’ll reset it and you’ll have your life back.”

Rachel knew not to trust him. It was obvious he was lying. She slowly nodded. “Give me your terms. And the gold.”

William tossed the large nugget to her. “Come to my bunker and sign up. You can keep your prize. I’ll come by each day and use her gifts.”

Rachel stored the gold. “As soon as you give her energy to search for you she’ll escape.”

“Or kill you all for holding her captive.”

“Yes.” Rachel knew what she’d done by taking Selma from that battlefield.

“Let me talk to her. We’ll hash something out.”

Rachel stepped aside to let William enter the tent.

William didn’t move. “You first.”

Rachel smirked at his show of reluctance. “Big, bad warrior man.”

William wasn’t offended. He patiently motioned for her to go through.

Selma threw the spell, hitting Rachel full on.

Rachel sank to her knees; blood trickled from her lips.

Selma stepped forward and brought up her shield around Rachel, trapping the woman inside it so she couldn’t flee when she recovered.

“Don’t kill her yet.” William stepped by the gasping gate hunter. “We might need her later.”

Selma stopped a second spell, fury making her shield crackle like a live wire of the past.

Outside, Rachel’s group fled or aimed weapons at the flap, preparing for whoever came out of the tent. No one believed it would be Rachel.

Jerry got ready to die in a revenge attempt.

Inside the tent, William approached Selma. He held a hand out to her. “Temporary partners?”

Selma dropped her shield and touched her fingers to his; she quickly pulled away, shuddering. “You feel like death.”

William glanced at Rachel, who was still trying to recover from the pain spell. “For a lot of people, I am.” He looked back, giving Selma a charming smile. “But not for you. We have work to do.”

Selma brought up her mental gift and began searching. She knew what he wanted without asking. His mind was full of it.

William gently pulled Rachel to her feet and pushed her out of the tent. “Enjoy that gold.” He shut the flap in her face.

Rachel staggered to her chair, hoping she survived whatever the man had planned, but she didn’t consider fleeing. *Even if it costs my life, I will reset time and bring back my babies!*

Selma blinked. “It’s hard to hate her.”

William nodded. “Agreed. She wants what we all want–for time to reverse and return the things and people we loved most.”

“It won’t work.” Selma opened another mental door, glowing with William’s energy. “As soon as time resets, new wars will happen and the deaths will restart.”

“I know.” William beamed. “I’m the one who will cause it.”

Selma tensed. “I’ve got two of them. Twin boys.” She blinked, breaking the connection. “The vampires have them.”

“That’s perfect.” William didn’t ask why she’d been able to sense the kids, but he hadn’t. He didn’t care.

Selma frowned. “They’re a formidable foe. How do we get the kids from them?”

“We use the Mitchel.”

Selma saw the plan in his mind and chuckled. “You’re ambitious. I admire that.”

William held out his hand again. “You’re powerful. I admire that.”

Selma cupped his wrist this time and let him pull her closer. The power of a byzan surrounded her in smothering, delightful waves.

“Let’s go piss off two Presidents so they demand a mediator.”

“You got it.” Selma walked from the tent, not looking at Rachel or any of her group.

William gestured at the whimpering woman. “Come to my bunker and sign up. Our deal stands.”

Selma glared dangerously. “She doesn’t own me.”

William grunted. “Ah, but she does. Until you kill her, our deal stands and I don’t want her dead yet.”

Selma owed William a debt for coming for her, for giving her enough energy to recover. “Fine, but I won’t tolerate much of it. Keep her away from me or I’ll take her lifeforce and dump her corpse.”

“Agreed.”

Rachel snapped out of the dream. *I saw what’s about to happen.*

She scanned her camp for the angry descendants and found her group watching her with worried expressions.

Rachel didn’t comfort them; she got them moving. “Get packed. Our invitation to ride is on the way.”

# Chapter Six

**Let It Roll Off**

Gainesville, AL

**December 24th**

**1**

**“I**t’s snowing.” Edward stepped away from the window so the others could come over and view the beautiful scene. The mood was still a bit down after mourning their old lives yesterday. Each of them grieved in their own way, but they tried not to dwell on it most of the time. The four-year anniversary of the war had been hard to ignore.

Alexa didn’t move from her spot by their smoldering fire. She didn’t find snow beautiful the way they did, but she didn’t discourage them from enjoying it. She continued to mend the small rip in her cloak and think about the airport she’d scanned from these windows.

The other males took turns peering through the frosted window. Each of them examined their surroundings, then the fat flakes falling over the dead city.

Edward joined Alexa by the fire. He sank down and pulled out his sewing kit to copy her actions. His cloak also needed mending and they had a lot of time to kill right now.

Alexa felt Edward’s restlessness, but she didn’t try to comfort him or the others who were feeling that way. Action always seemed to find them. She doubted they would be bored for long, but even if they were, her crew was well trained. They would suffer it gracefully.

Jacob stayed at the window after the others had gotten their fill of the view. They didn’t have anyone officially on guard duty and it bothered him. He kept scanning for trouble with his sharper gaze. Being changed was all he’d hoped for, but he hadn’t understood how thirsty he would be all the time. He’d taken blood from his team, but he hadn’t had an official meal yet. Neither had Mark or David.

Jacob stared harder, feeling something coming their way. They hadn’t seen the refugee couple again, and they’d sealed off the first floor office by filling it with furniture they didn’t need, but that didn’t mean the couple wouldn’t try to come back here.

“You’re drawing it to us.” Daniel frowned at their rookie. “Settle in and let it roll off.”

Jacob’s lips tightened, but he didn’t argue. He also didn’t leave the window.

Billy tossed his gun cleaning kit to David before the man could ask for it. He’d felt the request coming. All of them kept their weapons in pristine condition. This quest had kept them hopping until now, but that was no reason to slack off.

Mark picked up his stool and put it right in front of their main entrance. They were on the 10th floor of the Hampton Inn. They’d set traps below to let them know if someone else arrived, but this city had been silent around them for a week now, other than creaks and thuds of rusting structures. Mark sat and leaned against the door, nerves firing up.

The tension spread through their den at a fast pace.

Alexa approved of their caution even as she shook her head. “We will not interfere.”

Jacob tensed as he spotted movement. “Survivors, boss.”

Alexa kept mending her cloak. “Not for long.”

Jacob forced himself to get away from the window so he wasn’t spotted. The small group below was being followed by hungry dogs or wolves. He didn’t view any uniforms, robes, scales, or anything else that would identify them as a known enemy. They looked like normal Americans just trying to find safety, but it was unlikely they would make it through the encounter.

Jacob wanted to help them, but Alexa’s tone and words implied it was a bad idea. Jacob assumed they weren’t good and therefore weren’t worthy of help.

Alexa didn’t explain her choice, though she was aware of his curiosity and slight disapproval. She’d felt the small group enter the city. She’d also felt the sense of wrongness that accompanied them. She didn’t know what was wrong with the people; she did know it would cause problems for her crew.

They’d been here for seven days now. They had things set up to fit their needs, from training to sleeping, but they hadn’t spent much time on pleasure. Alexa tied off the thread and snapped it with her roughened hands. “We’ll make a trip out tomorrow for gear.”

Every man there perked up and began wondering what she meant by gear. They’d fully outfitted their needs. They were all heavy on beans, bags, and bullets.

Tomorrow was also Christmas, though none of them mentioned it or thought about it directly. The men weren’t sure if Alexa wanted to give presents or receive them, and they hadn’t found a way to ask without feeling like they were pushing for it. They’d agreed to wait and see how she handled it.

“We’ll go to the library first. Then we’ll stop at the sporting store.” She glanced at Mark. “Then the dojo?”

Mark grinned. “Sounds great.” Mark loved Karate. At the local dojo, he might be able to find training books so he could advance another level.

“After?” Alexa lifted a brow at Daniel.

“A toy store.” Daniel flushed at the snickers. “They’ll have model kits.” He loved building things.

Billy shrugged when Alexa’s gaze fell on him. “Modeling kits sound good. As long as it has wheels, I’m hard for it.”

Companionable laughter filled their warm den.

Satisfied she’d given them something to look forward to, Alexa added a stop for herself. “We’ll end with the history museum.”

Jacob thought about the reason he’d wanted to come to this city, but he didn’t bring it up. The military museum for the USS ALABAMA was the actual battleship. He’d always wanted to tour it.

The others assumed she wanted to enjoy the exhibits that were left.

Alexa didn’t tell them she wanted to collect a few of those exhibits before they were completely lost to the apocalypse. Those items were irreplaceable. She would hide them and hope the future allowed someone to retrieve them and put them on display again for the survivors. Leaving them here in this dead city would ensure they were lost for good.

A faint scream echoed, making half of the team tense.

Alexa waited for one of them to ask her to change her mind. That was the only way she would get involved.

Jacob refused to open his mouth. He was tired of being called the rookie. The only way he would get rid of the title was to stop acting like one. If Alexa said they weren’t going to help, then they weren’t.

Alexa was proud of him. She delivered a brief smile that sent warmth through Jacob’s scarred body. He sank down under the window and pulled out his Bible to continue reading about the ark. It was his favorite part. The end of the world was a fascinating topic for him in any form. Reading about it wasn’t as good as living in it, though. Jacob couldn’t imagine being this strong at any other time.

Edward threaded his needle and tied it off while subtly scanning Alexa’s face. She looked tired in the dim firelight.

“I’m fine.” Alexa didn’t like it when they saw her as weak in any way. “Watch your six.”

Edward slapped a hand over the large spider about to crawl onto his leg from the floor. He wiped it onto a hot coal, chuckling. She hadn’t even glanced at him, but she’d known something was approaching. “You’re amazing.”

Alexa snorted. “I saw the shadow on the floor.”

Edward was even more impressed. The entire floor was alive with shadows from their movements and the fire. She’d been able to tell which one didn’t belong. “How did you get so sharp?”

All of them stilled to hear her answer.

“Awareness was something my father drilled into me until I could pinpoint a spiderweb blowing a quarter mile away.” She examined the hole she’d sewn up. “Would you like a short lesson?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.”

“Of course.”

She tugged on the stitching to make sure it was solid. “We’ve drilled in the dark. I’m sure you remember.”

The males chuckled. Their time in the basement in Point Pleasant was the only fond memory of that zone.

“Now we’ll train in silence. Put in your earplugs.”

The team did it quickly, curious how she would instruct them when they couldn’t hear her. Mental gifts were off-limits for this.

Alexa didn’t do anything. She put up her sewing kit and listened to the screams outside while the men watched her and each other, waiting for her lesson to start.

Edward quickly realized this was the lesson. Without his hearing, his sight picked out the smallest movement to make up for it. He narrowed in on Billy’s chest as the Driver belched lightly. He saw Mark shift to let out gas. He spotted tiny ashes coming from their fire. *This is remarkable.*

The others kept waiting, watching Alexa for the lesson to start. They also noticed more movement, but they didn’t register it until Alexa signaled for them to take out the earplugs.

“Satisfied?”

Edward nodded. “We’ll practice that.”

The others caught on, snorting or scolding themselves and each other for not understanding sooner. They also admired Edward for figuring it out. His position as her right hand was well earned.

“My father had me start every day that way for weeks. Then he took away my sight and taught my ears to be as sharp. Then he took away both and made my mind adjust. It was the toughest part of my training. There were times I doubted I would ever learn what he was trying to teach me.” Alexa yawned. “Now I can do it while I sleep if I have to.”

Daniel and Mark put their earplugs in for another round.

Jacob resumed reading, but he was distracted.

David and Edward listened to the fading screams outside. Like Jacob, they were unhappy that she wasn’t sending them out to help the people, though they also believed she had a good reason.

Edward took his bandana out and tied it around his eyes.

David followed his lead.

Both men tensed as the screams seemed to become louder, closer.

Billy tossed another log onto the fire, then headed for their sleeping area though it wasn’t even midnight yet.

Alexa rose and followed, suddenly exhausted. She’d rested and relaxed here as much as she could stand, but she was still lagging.

Billy groaned in pleasure as she climbed on top of him and snuggled in.

Alexa chuckled. “We can do more if you like.”

Billy was tempted, but he could feel her weariness. “Sleep, Boss. You can attack me when we get up.”

Alexa got settled and dropped out almost immediately.

Billy held her and slowly followed.

Edward and the others listened for the sounds of sex. When it didn’t come, he and the other fighters put away their blindfolds and ear plugs.

“She isn’t doing well.” Jacob shut the Bible and stored it. “She needs blood.” The fish, squid, and apples were healthy, but it wasn’t enough to really fuel them now.

Edward could still hear people screaming below. It sounded like that fight for survival was coming closer. “Who wants to break a rule with me?”

David stood and began checking his gun.

“She’ll be pissed.” Jacob tapped his watch. “We can hunt when we make our trip out. It isn’t that long.”

Mark nodded. “Listen to the rookie. Follow orders.”

Edward wanted to tell them he had the right to make his own choices. He glanced toward the sleeping area, then sighed.

David grunted, hating it that they were going to let her suffer and that they were leaving the people below to die. But he didn’t go anyway. His place on this team meant more to him than a group of strangers, and Jacob was right—they could hunt on the way to the stores.

Daniel scanned them all. “We really are hers, you know? Even when it’s over. We’ll all end up with her.”

“Most of us, anyway.” Edward refused to say it when brows lifted toward him. Billy’s destiny was different. Edward assumed Alexa would try to save the man, but Edward doubted it would succeed. *Some things are meant to happen and not even a byzan can stop them.* “Let’s listen to the nightly address. I want to hear the newest catfight.”

Men snorted and chuckled at Edward’s words. The bunker woman was claiming to run the country even though she’d lost her den and been forced to relocate. The new woman running bunker 11 was getting nasty in her replies, often threatening to start another war.

Mark tuned in his radio, happy that each of them now had their own. Gainesville was full of treasures.

Static came through the speaker.

Mark left it on, but turned it down in case the women were running late.

After checking his watch, Edward shook his head. “They might have given up or been attacked.”

Mark left it on anyway. Time and schedules didn’t mean as much in Afterworld.

“Why do you think the boss brought us here?”

Silence fell through the plush, warm penthouse.

Edward lifted a brow at David, always eager to have another of their crew on the same level as him and Alexa when it came to figuring things out. “Why do you think?”

David lowered his voice even though he was sure Alexa could hear him if she was still awake. “I have several ideas, but I’m positive that I’m missing something.”

Edward nodded. “Let’s hear it.”

“We’re near food.” David frowned a little despite loving the gift she’d given him. “We need blood and the soldiers are an easy source. There are survivors from all the groups we fought, too.”

“Go on.”

David did. “I wondered if she might want to finish wiping some of them out.”

“Perhaps. What else?”

David sighed. “We’re bait.”

Daniel immediately agreed. “What he said.”

Edward was pleased. Daniel had clearly already figured it out. “Why does that one matter? We’re always a target.”

David shrugged. “She could have hidden us somewhere, but she picked a place where people will come to scavenge, and where we might even get trapped and have to fight.”

“We’re not trapped anywhere.” Mark leaned back. “But I agree about us being the bait. She’s dangling us here in hopes of catching something.”

Daniel shook his head. “Not something. Someone.”

Edward lifted a brow. “Who?”

Daniel gestured back the way they’d come. “One of her kind is out there slaughtering normals. She’s drawing him in.”

“Very good.” Edward waited for one of the men to correct that by reminding them all they were also descendants, but only Daniel understood it was a byzan issue.

David gestured in confusion. “Why is that good? She’s scared of him.”

Edward put another notch in David’s intelligence column, too. “And yet, we’re here. What does that tell you?”

“It says she’s not going to let fear stop us from doing the right thing.”

Edward nodded. “Exactly. We’re the line between good and evil, and even if it costs our lives, we will stand and deliver safety to the future normals he might kill.”

“I thought this was supposed to be downtime.”

“Alexa rarely does anything singular.” Jacob shrugged at David’s frown. “Think about it. You’ll see what I mean.”

David grunted as he stood, stretching a spine that could now take rough positions for a lot longer. Grunting at the soreness was just a habit he hadn’t shed yet. “So it’s downtime, but it’s also to draw in a threat that she wants to eliminate to save the normals he might kill.”

Edward decided it was time to reveal the rest of her true motives. “It’s mostly for her father. When Adrian returns, this threat won’t be here, like the other choices she made. Alexa loves the normals and protects them because it’s her duty, but everything she does has one main underlying root–pleasing or helping her father.”

The team fell silent for a moment. The fire crackled comfortingly.

Mark didn’t agree with that being the only reason they were here, but he voiced something else that had been weighing on him instead. “Safe Haven won’t let us join like this. What if they see us as a threat?”

Edward refused to lie. “We *are* a threat.”

All of them exchanged glances that said they’d considered it, but they hadn’t come to good conclusions.

“Then Alexa will be forced to pick between her father and us.” Edward waved off the protests. “She’ll find a way to make it work. She’d never forsake us, not even for him.”

“Are you certain?”

Edward’s voice was grave as he nodded at David. “I’ve bet my life on it and so have you.”

Jacob decided it was time for a topic change. “How do you think Brian’s doing on his quest?”

Edward thought of the rumors they’d been told, then shrugged. “He sounds busy handling a new partnership. I think he needs more time.”

Jacob was hoping Brian’s mission went well even though he didn’t want to give up being changed. “Should we have heard from him yet?”

“No. He won’t contact her until he has a confirmed success or failure.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s what his mother would do.”

Silence fell again. Alexa’s soft snore echoed to them.

“Maybe we should make it easier on her.” David had stewed long and hard on this one before bringing it up. “If we leave her, she doesn’t have to pick between us.”

All of them wanted to argue, but it was a solution that would spare the leader they’d come to love and respect.

Edward sighed unhappily. “It might be the right choice, but I can’t do it. I’m with her until one of us dies, no matter by whose hand.”

“Same.”

“Me, too.”

“You know it.”

Each of them confirmed that, including David. He went to peer into their sleeping room.

Billy met his eye. *I’m not going to be with the team at that point. I don’t have to make the choice.*

David hated the way that felt. *Can’t you give her up? Surely a teenage romance interest can’t compare to your slot on this team?*

Billy shut his eyes and didn’t answer.

David resumed his spot against the drafty wall. He enjoyed the cool breeze now, where it would have been an annoyance before.

Edward had felt the moment with Billy, as had the others. None of them brought it up. Just knowing they would have to put Billy down was too much. They didn’t want to talk about it, too.

Billy tried to sleep. With Alexa’s comfort against him, he felt calmer about his future, but there was no changing it as far as he was concerned. *Maybe she charmed me.*

Alexa shifted restlessly as a dream tried to trap her.

Billy rubbed her shoulder. “Easy, Boss.”

Alexa settled down, comforted by his presence.

Billy sighed as sleep finally started to claim him. It didn’t matter if Leeann had charmed him or if he was just a problem man with a problem mind. When they got to Safe Haven, he expected Leeann to have a boyfriend, if not a husband. *And I’m going to shoot him in the head right in front of her. Edward will kill me then and Leeann will be safe.*

Billy didn’t want that future for any of them, but he agreed with Edward. Some things were destined to happen and little could change them.

Alexa sank deeper into the dream, determined to find the answer she was searching for. “Show me!”

Billy jerked, startled. He rubbed her shoulder again.

Alexa pushed harder, watching the future fly by. If the girl had waited for Billy, then Edward didn’t have to take his life. “Where is she?!”

Billy stilled, suddenly sensing what Alexa was doing. He held his breath, heart pounding.

Alexa spotted the cute teenager. Her stomach twisted. “No. Don’t do it.”

Billy knew from that. He carefully shifted so Alexa was on her side. He rose and went to the window to watch the snow fall.

“What if you don’t set sail with us?”

Billy turned to find Edward in the doorway. “I’ve considered that. Marshal or Jason could take my slot.”

“And?”

Billy fingered the card that stayed close to him at all times. “One of the things that got me through the fanatics and snakes was the thought of seeing her again. If I give her up, I might as well have died in captivity.”

Edward understood that; he mourned the choice Billy had clearly already made. “I don’t want to do it.”

Billy glared at him. “But you will.”

Edward nodded curtly. “The instant she gives the order.”

Billy shook his head. “Don’t wait for her call. Alexa might hesitate because we’re bonded. As soon as you feel me snap, double tap my brain and toss me into the ocean.”

Edward scowled. “We’ll bury you! You’re an honored member of this team.”

Billy turned back to the window. “Toss me into the ocean. If you bury me in honor, neither of those females will ever let me go and move on. It’s my final request.”

Alexa kept her breathing even to prevent the two men from realizing she was awake. She didn’t want them to know about the sudden hope she now held in case she wasn’t able to pull it off. The teenager Billy had been charmed by had hesitated before saying yes, and she’d walked too slowly up the aisle. Whoever she was marrying wasn’t the one she really wanted and that meant there was a chance to stop it.

*I need to get Billy there before the wedding. I saw Easter decorations. That’s how long I have* *to get us to their island. If I can’t, I’ll lose Billy to death at my order and never recover. I adore all my men. If I can’t give them happy futures, it will crush me.*

Alexa began rearranging her plans. *I hope you’re ready to leave when we get there, father, because we can’t stay long. There are no corrupt souls to be taken from that herd…except yours, and I refuse to do that. If you need to be put down, you’ll have to do it yourself.*

The radio crackled, drawing the men.

“This is President Marcella Pruett, calling out to Alexa Mitchel. Are you there? Come in, Alexa.”

Alexa slowly rolled onto her feet. “We’ve had seven days of peace. It’s honestly more than I expected.”

“The snow slowed them.”

She nodded at Edward’s comment, yawning.

“This is President Marcella Pruett, calling to Alexa Mitchel. Please answer. I need your help.”

Alexa took the radio from Mark. “I’m here.”

“Excellent! I want to hire you to verify my claim to the Presidency.”

“Why me?”

“The public will listen to you.”

Alexa yawned again. “Can you prove your claim?”

“I conquered the bunker. It’s mine by right of force.”

Alexa paused, already sure what would happen now.

The radio crackled with an angry third female voice. “I claim it by right of succession! This is America! I demand Alexa Mitchel settle this once and for all.” Jeanie was clearly angry that Marcella had called her first. “I also have an update for the public. Marcella is shacking up with the UN troops in bunker 14. They have two of the time kids we need to close the gates. She won’t use them because she’s handing them over to the UN leaders who will be here come spring.”

The radio went crazy with answering shouts and threats from gate hunters. Marcella’s denial was lost in the blur.

Alexa settled in her chair. She waited for the radio to clear, then continued. “Why should I interrupt my break for either of you? Do this country a favor and kill each other off in your coming war.”

Marcella got through first. “It’s your duty, Miss Mitchel. As a public face known for honor, I trust you to judge fairly so there doesn’t have to be another war.”

“I second that.” Jeanie smiled into the radio. “We’ve already shed too much blood, and I can prove my claim. Please come meet me and you’ll see it. While you’re here, you can visit Andrew and Abigail. I believe they’re your relatives.”

Alexa sighed.

Alexa’s crew waited for her choice, but none of them were eager to go.

“I’m in Gainesville.” Alexa refused to abandon the den they’d worked hard to outfit. “Come to me with your claims and I’ll check them out. *Don’t* bring the kids. I’m not in the mood for a visit.”

“I can’t leave. I have too many projects going on.”

“And I’m being surrounded by gate hunters. I can’t leave either.”

“It sounds like you ladies have other issues to settle before I need to get involved. Call me with your arrival dates and I’ll have my crew clear out space for you. Goodnight.” Alexa shut off the radio, not in the mood to listen to whining or begging.

“It won’t take them long to figure out they have to come here. Each of them will try to gather staff and paperwork, I assume. We’ll do some prepping for that over the next couple days. For now, try to rest. You’ve earned it.” Alexa shut her lids and drifted off right there in the chair.

Her team considered the coming meeting and began making plans to protect her from whoever lost.

“Yani and his clan could use a good meal.” Billy glanced at Edward from the doorway. “We’d be good on security posts, at least during the nights.”

“How do we do that?” Jacob liked the idea of getting to know their other family. All of them were bonded to the blood drinkers now.

“Maybe we can just call them. I bet Yani has been listening to the radio to stay informed on a number of topics.” Edward took his cloak from the wall and brought it over to cover Alexa. It settled over her from chin to toe, bringing a low groan to her lips.

Edward took the chair on her right. “I’ll talk to her about it in the morning. What else?”

“If we let them have access to our den, they’ll know the layout and we may not be able to keep track of everyone. I say we switch locations to the museum since it has so many exits and hiding places.” David yawned. “We can come back here after it’s over.”

“We should plan some escape routes in case this is a trap.” Mark hadn’t forgotten what it felt like to be tricked. “Let’s make sure she’s covered. Then we’ll handle everything else.”

Every man there nodded in agreement. They assumed there would be a fight at some point. All of their encounters with other survivors ended that way. There was no reason to believe this one would be different.

“Added to the list. Next?” Edward kept them pulling up ideas so when they rose, it would be planned and all Alexa would have to do was approve it. Each of the men knew she would like that. They also wanted to judge if their plans were as good as hers yet. They’d been learning tactics and strategy all along from her.

“If she doesn’t like either of them, she could appoint someone to run things while there’s a vote.” Daniel didn’t know much about politics, but if the women believed Alexa held that much power, they could use it. “She can also reverse some of the laws.”

Edward shook his head. “Only if she appointed herself President Pro Tem.”

“The other woman put bad laws in place. They weren’t constitutional. Why do we have to follow them?” Jacob had been simmering on that for weeks now. “Alexa can tell everyone those laws are illegal.”

“She won’t. She’ll follow procedures.”

Jacob scowled. “I don’t get it.”

Edward also hated it that they had to follow the old ways while their opponents didn’t. “To repeal a law, there’s a process.”

“But not to put one in place?”

Edward shrugged at the rookie. “I’ll talk to her about it.” He already knew that wouldn’t matter to her. The public had accepted the law. It had to be repealed.

Jacob sighed. “Sometimes she has too much honor.”

Edward snorted. “There’s no such thing.”

# Chapter Seven

**Try Harder**

**1**

**T**he library was dirty and held some debris, but it was otherwise undamaged. Alexa and her crew entered the main door with hands on their guns, but it was clear the building was empty. It felt old, gone.

They went up the steps with ice and snow falling from their boots and the edges of their cloaks. All of them were wearing the big coats under their cloaks this time, but it still hadn’t been enough to prevent their cheeks from turning bright red in the icy wind. Their hands were in their pockets. They weren’t using the gloves yet. Gloves interfered with drawing guns. Even well covered, the late afternoon sunlight hurt their fragile skin as much as the icy wind.

Water drips from melting ice hit the porch as they entered, leaving splattered prints.

Daniel wondered suddenly if the couple who’d been spooked out of their den had found shelter or if the undead following them had caught up again. They hadn’t seen a sign of the couple since that night. He hoped they’d had better luck than the group who’d lost the fight with the wolves. They’d found that bloody scene a little while ago.

The library was dim, dusty, and quiet. All of them thought of past times where this learning center would have been packed with readers, researchers, students, and staff. The team preferred it like this, though none of them said so out of respect for those who’d died.

Alexa motioned. “Half an hour. Spread out and find something you like.” Alexa went straight to the fiction section, following the dusty signs on the walls and above the tall shelves.

Billy frowned. “No guard post?”

“No.”

Billy fought his scars and went to the non-fiction section without protesting. He understood Alexa was trying to teach him to trust her again, but it was hard. The thought of any of them being kidnapped formed a hard pit of acid in his guts.

David and Daniel went to the magazine section, then split off between the cars and home improvements.

Jacob went to the audio section, hoping a few of the files on the thumb drives would play on his phone.

Edward headed for the newspapers. He liked reading about current events, but old papers were the best he could do now. Before the war, he’d often begun the day by reading the paper.

The mood settled into calm boredom as they all began to browse the selections. Alexa enjoyed the moment. She’d had too much stress in the last month. She was honestly ready for the break this time. She hoped the weather got worse so no one would be able to get here for a while longer. The snow outside was half a foot deep, but it wasn’t enough to stop travel yet. They needed a lot more and rougher temperatures to go with it.

Alexa sighed silently. *And even that may not be enough to keep us isolated.* Snowmobiles would still let people get around.

Alexa turned for a scan of her crew.

Each of them nodded to her, then resumed what they were doing.

Except for Billy. He stared, trying to fight the demons in his mind. *It was quiet like this when I was taken.*

Alexa didn’t comfort him. Some horrors had to be fought alone. Billy would keep doing the work and eventually his mind would release some of the fear, but he would never really be the same. Alexa’s hatred of the fanatics grew hotter.

Billy forced himself to keep browsing the selections. *I’m safe. She’s safe. We’re all together. It’s okay.*

“It is, you know.” David hated it that Billy was unhappy. “We’re all changed now. Don’t forget to factor that in. What happened before can’t happen now. It’s part of why she changed all of us. We’re stronger this way.”

Billy was embarrassed but comforted.

Alexa didn’t scold David. She liked it that they were bonded enough to want to ease the pain of a fellow team member. She took a thick novel from the shelf and stored it in her cloak.

The half an hour passed slowly. By the time it was up, all of them were ready to go. This crew made fast choices and stuck with them. They didn’t need time to browse.

Alexa motioned. “We’re heading for the sporting store. Hit the bathroom right now because I’m not stopping the car on the way.”

The men chuckled at her double joke. Their bodies needed to eliminate waste once a day or less unless they had a large meal of normal food and even then, there wasn’t as much. Their bodies weren’t dead, but they were very different.

Alexa led them across the street to a small strip mall that held the sporting store, the dojo, and a toy store. She waved. “Split up and get what you like.”

Billy again tried to force himself to obey.

He failed.

Edward watched him enter into the toy store behind David.

Alexa understood his concern. “Wounds take time to heal.”

“That’s why you’re doing it this way, right? To help him recover.”

“Not just him, my pet. It scarred all of us.” Alexa went to the door of the sporting store and held it for Edward as the others vanished inside the dojo.

Edward saw the gun shelves in the rear of the store and went there, mood lifting. “It’s amazing that this city wasn’t stripped. I never thought we’d find this much gear in one place.”

“Fate provides.”

“And mankind takes advantage.” Edward chuckled. “How about a new Colt, boss?”

Alexa joined him, but shook her head. “My rifle needs to be rebuilt. My Colts are good.”

Edward wondered then if the Colts were special to her in some way, but he didn’t ask. He scolded himself for not making that connection sooner.

“My father sent them to me for a birthday gift.” Alexa pointed. “Take the AR-7 for Mark.”

“He’s not good with a rifle like we are.”

“Exactly.”

Edward assumed Mark would get new lessons. He cleared the shelf of the parts he would need to rebuild several rifles.

Alexa glided toward the hunting racks, ears listening for sounds from the rest of their crew. *Like I said, we’re all scarred. Moments like these will help that terror fade.*

The dojo had a large main floor flanked by several offices and smaller stock rooms. Glossy photos behind dusty glass grinned at them in welcome. Mark and Jacob took several books and videos, then went to the rear rooms to scan the stock.

“Do you know how to use nunchucks?”

Mark shook his head. “I’ve almost knocked myself out trying to learn.”

Jacob chuckled. “Want to try again? I’ve always wanted to be able to do those crazy moves.”

“Sure.” Mark took three sets of the nunchucks and one pair of brass knuckles.

Jacob’s nose curled. “I smell a body.”

They found it in the far corner.

“Hasn’t been here long to be stinking.” Mark inspected the elderly woman for injuries. “Looks like she slit her wrists.”

“Is that her?” Jacob pointed at a photo on the wall.

“Yes.” Mark sighed. “She worked here.”

“Yep. One of the kids was probably hers.”

“I don’t understand suicide.”

“I do. I just don’t agree with it.” Jacob covered the woman with a dusty tarp from the corner. “They hope the pain will end, but no one knows for sure what’s on the other side. It might just be more ugliness.”

Mark headed back to the main training room, being careful not to slip on the highly polished, damp floor. Snow was caked all along the sides of their boots. “I wonder if we can take some of those mats in the corner for our workouts.”

Jacob followed, but his mind stayed on the dead woman. He wondered if her child had been lost in the war, or if she’d just been lonely. He’d been shocked to discover many suiciders had suffered from lack of companionship and not a horrible trauma. Those who failed the attempt often gave awful details to their preachers.

“Let it go.”

Jacob nodded at Mark. “I’m trying. I just have questions I can’t answer.”

Mark snorted. “Don’t we all?” He began rolling the smallest mat. “You can carry this one.”

Jacob laughed. Before the change, it would have taken them all day to transport a few mats to their den. Now they could carry them along like a duffle bag. “I love my life.”

Mark chuckled. “Same. Now get over here and help me. I’m ready to be back with the boss.”

In the toy store, David and Billy had picked several models and moved on to the other crafts section. Billy was distracted by the prize he’d found. He couldn’t wait to start building the bright orange Hummer.

David thought it was gaudy, but he didn’t say that. It was nice to see Billy happy.

The toy store held fully stocked shelves of dusty, fading packages, and all the glass was in the front windows. It made sense to the two men. People didn’t need toys after an apocalypse.

*Scratch…*

Both men froze for an instant, then they spun around, drawing guns. Their other hands put their boxes down without making noise.

“It’s a rat.” David holstered as the large rodent scurried behind a shelf.

Billy also holstered, but his happiness was gone and his heart was pounding painfully. He hated the feeling. *How do I get rid of this?!*

Alexa appeared at the glass door. She opened it, frowning deeply. “The easy way or the hard way?”

He hesitated. “Both?”

“Easy is how we’re doing it now. Hard is to let you be taken again so you can face that fear and do things differently.”

The listening men grimaced, but Billy gave a curt nod. “I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t bother.” Alexa stared at him in regret. “I won’t use the hard way.”

“Because you aren’t sure I’ll survive it a second time.”

“No. I can’t take that again. We’ll heal our wounds with time. Come along now. I have another stop to make.”

The men followed Alexa while storing their choices in their cloaks.

Billy was angry she wouldn’t do it the hard way, but he was also relieved. *I don’t want to experience that again either.*

“Good.” Alexa dropped back next to him. She waved at Edward. “Point.”

Edward took the lead in pride. Alexa rarely let anyone else assume this position. He did it with his chin up while scanning everything for danger. The city was hardly damaged at all. The weedy pavement wasn’t cracked and there was glass in most of the windows, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t dangerous.

Alexa walked next to Billy, letting her mind wander where it wanted now that someone else was in the lead. Time wasn’t moving very fast. She felt safe and that was a dangerous sensation. Edward would stay alert and make sure they weren’t surprised by anything.

Billy tried not to dwell on his bad thoughts. He attempted to get in the old rhythm of walking with his crew, but it wasn’t the same anymore.

“Do you wish to be released?”

Everyone tensed at her curt query.

“No. Please.”

“Then try harder!”

Billy relaxed at the scold. He fell into his place with a clearer mind.

Alexa hated her methods, but there was no denying they worked. Her men didn’t need to be mothered. They needed to be led.

**2**

“We’ll be here for a while. Leave the mats outside to air while we explore.” Alexa walked up the steps of the Gainesville history museum, stepping over debris that had come from nature. The leaves and sticks didn’t hide blood or bodies, though the Kudzu plant climbing around the ivy was slowly smothering it and creating a double layer of covering over the walls of all the buildings on this side of town. It was a good sign of what the inside might be like. “We’ll pick a base and set up a meal.”

Edward checked on their rear man, then got set to enter the two-story building while Mark and Jacob sat the dojo mats along the railing.

Alexa tugged on the handle. It opened easily, and let out a loud creak.

Alexa stepped in and slid to the side so her team could enter. She stomped snow from her boots, hoping to draw out any threats quickly but also to clear her footwear. These polished floors would be slippery when wet.

Mark shut the door and stopped, letting his sight adjust. The dirty front glass was letting in a little light, but the rest of the room was dark.

Alexa swept the reception area, the entry paths lined in velvet ropes, and then the dark tunnels leading from the huge square room. She made a fast choice and took them toward the offices.

“What are we hunting, Boss?” Edward had sensed her mood change as they arrived.

“You tell me. Two options each, starting with the newest.”

Jacob was ready. “Things we’re out of or things that don’t need power to run.”

David also had answers waiting. “Founding documents, or maybe rules for the right of succession.”

Alexa smiled at him over her shoulder. “Very good.”

David grinned at the feeling.

Alexa took them into the long hall that was lined in doors to various offices. “As long as they’re not lying, both women have a claim. Jeanie may be a surviving member of the government, but the Presidency can’t be handed over under Martial Law unless someone dies. She’ll need to prove all those ahead of her in the line are indeed dead. As for Marcella, the right of conquest is the law of the world and has been used since the beginning of time. She can also hold a vote–she mentioned doing that in a previous address–and get elected officially.” Alexa motioned them to continue.

Billy’s voice was firm in anger. “Emancipation documents and proof that *all* citizens should be free.”

Mark paused for a second in case Alexa wanted to say something. Then he gave his answers. “Evolution and origin documents or artifacts.”

“You guys took all the good ones.” Daniel went on as some of the others chuckled. “Famous art or objects that can’t be replaced.”

Edward covered the basics. “Weapons and instructional materials.”

Alexa peered into the offices but didn’t enter any of them. “We’re hunting all of those and more. We’ll collect loads and bring them to our base, once we pick a location, for labeling, packaging, and decisions.”

Alexa finally stopped at the end of the hall. She pushed open the door to the steps and took them upward. “This is the private area where they would have stored stock items that can stand the heat. We’ll find another area like it in the basement for the items that can’t.”

“You plan to explore every exhibit?” Daniel was willing. He loved museums.

“Maybe. For now, we’ll go through these off-limits floors.”

“Body.” Billy scowled. “Another suicide.”

Alexa paused. “Another?”

“We saw one in the toy store.”

“We saw one in the dojo.” Jacob studied the corpse. “All women, right?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

The Preacher pointed. “She’s holding a picture of a young teenager. Maybe their boys were taken in the Draft and they couldn’t handle it.”

“Or maybe they sold them and felt bad for it.” Alexa kept walking. “That picture is after the war.”

David peered closer. “How could she tell?”

Mark saw the error and chuckled lowly. “There’s a dark city skyline. Damn, she’s good.”

“It’s also printer ink.” Edward jerked a curtain down and covered the woman with it.

“Why show respect if she sold her kid?” Billy’s grudge wasn’t fading.

“Because she’s innocent until proven guilty.” Edward stared at the Driver. “Get it under control and remember how to evaluate things fairly!”

The others tensed at Edward’s tone. He wasn’t usually harsh with the team.

Billy sighed roughly. “I’m tryin’, man.”

“Try harder.”

“I will.”

Alexa hadn’t stopped. “Come load up.”

All of them hurried to catch up, realizing they’d broken the formation.

Alexa didn’t scold them.

The long attic was lined in pallets meant for the vending machines downstairs. The dusty supplies were a welcome sight.

“We’ll take all of it. This will be enough to hold us for two months.”

“Will we get to stay that long?” Jacob wasn’t ready to be back on the road yet.

“Yes. I’ll see to it.”

“Is there another reason you brought us to Gainesville?” Mark knew he wasn’t the sharpest of the team, but he’d been dwelling on this one for weeks and he was finally ready to prove he could keep up. “Beyond it not being stripped.”

Alexa paused, staring at him. She ran it through and decided the conversation could take place if she wanted that. *Do I? Am I ready for them to know?*

Alexa waved a hand. “Tell me what you think and I’ll decide from there.”

Mark was aware of the confusion of the team; he liked it that they didn’t know. “You came here specifically. I saw you scan the neighborhood due west of our den. You know this area. I can tell from how we’re running the formations when we walk. You only switched us into alert stance in a couple of place–places you knew were dangerous.”

Alexa perched on the edge of an old desk. “And?”

“You’re positive the suiciders sold their sons. You usually tell us there are a lot of possible explanations. And you were polite to the Pruett woman. It all means something.”

“Yes.” Alexa motioned. “You figured it out. You deserve the right to speak it.”

“Alexa, are you hunting for your mother?”

All the others stiffened in surprise or annoyance, but Alexa relaxed, smiling. “I’ve never regretted taking you onto my team, Mark. You continue to honor the slot.” She nodded. “I told you the perfect combo was a Mitchel and a Pruett. I also told you I was born in the labs. I never knew my mother. However, my father did. He gave me the name and a possible location.”

“And you came here, hunting, before the war.”

“Many times. But she stopped using the name the government had on file. Tracking her was hard. I had narrowed it to a few neighborhoods before the war.”

Jacob was shocked. “You went through every female of the right age in Gainesville?”

“Yes. Public voting rolls were open to everyone. And I had my father’s details to narrow the search. I kept the list in a safety deposit box right here in the city.” She glanced out the window. “Once a year, I came here to search.”

Mark was thrilled that he’d guessed her secret. “For how long?”

“Most of my life between fifteen and the war.”

Daniel also swept the city through the window. “I say we go blow a bank and get your list.”

Alexa chuckled. “A simple walk through those homes so I can view photos would suffice. But I don’t want to get distracted from our break. I’d planned a short trip out here and there.” She smiled at Mark. “I also assumed I’d be sneaking out alone. Thank you for sparing me that.”

Mark grinned. “Just glad to have caught it. So, what’s her name?”

“Merissa. Her twin’s name was Marcella.”

Silence fell as the men considered that. Then Mark broke it again.

“Are you sure she’s old enough?”

“No. Voices often sound different over a radio. It could be a sucky coincidence.” Alexa kept going so they would understand. “I don’t need more family members. I’m already spoiled for choice on that. I’m hoping to put a face to the title. I’m hunting for a photo, nothing more.”

Edward thought of the photo of his old family that he kept in his pocket.

Jacob touched his cloak pocket where he kept a picture of the parents who’d tried hard to turn out a good son.

Daniel refused to consider the photograph in his cloak of the trailer park girl he sometimes dreamed about.

David thought about the picture of his old army fire team that had been taken during a drunken, wild, victorious mission in South America.

Billy only had the card from Leeann, but it meant just as much to him.

Mark felt Alexa’s ache. He didn’t have any pictures or even good memories of childhood. Their pain was nearly the same, though at least her father had tried to show her some love over the years. Mark’s parents had dropped him with an aunt and hadn’t come back.

Alexa went to the first stack of plastic wrapped pallets. She drew her knife and began slicing through the covering. “Gainesville was supposed to be a communications hub if we were invaded, if a meteor struck, or in the event of nuclear war. I knew it would be heavier stocked, and I saw the military influences while I was clearing neighborhoods. I do believe most of the men and boys were taken in the Draft. I also saw the activists and felt their power growing. When the woman running the bunker near here began enacting slavery laws, I knew which side had won the battle for any survivors. Logic led me to the suicide by sale theory. People were desperate and they were being offered a great deal. Boys eat a lot more than girls, so it was another burden they didn’t have to handle.”

“They were telling everyone the slaves would be well treated.” Billy had heard a lot of stories during his time in captivity. He remembered it all vividly. “But these women and all the others had to have known the truth.”

“I believe so, too, thus their deaths. Guilt finally won.” Alexa began handing out packs of the noodle cups. “Two each of these in your cloaks now. We’ll sort and store the rest later. Edward and Mark will open the other pallets.”

“Is that why this city isn’t looted or damaged?” Jacob had noticed what the rest of them had.

“I assume so. The Draft pulled most of the people who might have looted. Those left were likely family of the military and they’re more disciplined.” Alexa worked faster, heart easing another notch. She hadn’t felt right telling them about the coming search, but she’d been fine leading them here to do it. *I’m complicated, I guess.*

“Is that why you agreed to hear Marcella’s claim even though you know the right of conquest doesn’t supersede our constitution?” Edward had caught up to Mark and quickly outpaced him.

“Yes, but not for the reason you may think. My father said Merissa’s twin was an Invisible. That means the woman trying to make you all slaves might be a descendant and that is not allowed. We can help humanity, but we cannot lead them or we’ll end up taking over their world and they’ll be the slaves. They wouldn’t stand a chance now. If Marcella is one of us, she has to lose even if her claim is good.”

“Your father could have led them.”

Alexa shook her head at Jacob. “No. He’s not worthy of that role either.”

Mark scowled. “I don’t understand why your father didn’t do things differently. Why didn’t he save your mom or you? Why did he abide by bad rules when he knew it would hurt you?”

Alexa’s tone deepened into contempt. “Haven’t you been paying attention? He isn’t much of a father.”

“But he is an amazing leader.” Billy favored her with a rare smile. “No one but you might be better.”

Alexa was flattered, but she couldn’t let that stand. “I’m not. Adrian can bring people together and get them to labor toward common goals in ways that I have yet to learn.”

David scowled. “I missed out then. The Adrian I met was a traitor who sacrificed everything to chase after a woman who was already with someone.”

“I wonder if he’s still like that.” Daniel shrugged at the doubtful looks. “After everything we’ve gone through, we’ve changed. Why wouldn’t he?”

Alexa hoped that was true. “We’ll find out when we get there, my pets. For now, let’s load up. I want us finished long before daylight so we can sleep.”

Reminded of time passing by, they all got to work and put those tantalizing thoughts aside for another time.

**3**

Three hours later found them in the center of the museum, surrounded by their loot. Stacks of items lay all around the wide hall that had once been the gateway to other exhibits that weren’t reachable from the main entrance.

Alexa oversaw the fire and Jacob, who was preparing some of the food they’d found. There were no apples. She had to be sure it was done correctly so he didn’t waste too much of their stock.

Mark finished laying out the last bedroll beneath the huge sign declaring this the rotunda. The rotunda held a large reception desk and a few tables sporting long dead plants and faded instruction sheets to let visitors know where to go next. The bare wooden floor was perfect for their needs. “The courthouse here might have a list of government employees at the time of the war.”

“Same for Mayor’s office.” Daniel sorted the last box of candy bars into the seven piles.

Billy deposited the final 6-packs of small water bottles into each stack. “I’ll volunteer for that. Alone.”

Everyone looked over.

Billy fought the wave of fear. “You told me to try harder.”

Alexa was proud of him for trying. “So I did. Pick a partner. You have three hours.”

Billy lifted a brow at Jacob. “You in?”

Jacob grinned from ear to ear. “Awesome.”

The two men grabbed their cloaks and left.

David started to ask if that was wise. He caught himself this time and came over to take Jacob’s place. He was next in line for meal prep; it was his duty to fill in.

“Why did he pick the rookie?” Daniel yawned, finally getting tired.

“He’ll have to make sure Jacob gets back here alive. It’s another test he’s giving himself.” Edward didn’t approve.

Alexa shrugged. “It might be because Jacob’s the fastest draw among us.”

Her words made sense.

Alexa felt something coming. It wasn’t hard to guess where it was coming from. “Turn on a radio.”

Mark did it quickly, hoping nothing bad was about to hit while two of their team was on a run.

“This is Jeanie Hornsteader, acting President. Come in, Alexa.”

Alexa keyed the mike. “Go for a Mitchel.”

Her team snickered.

They could hear Jeanie frowning through her answer.

“I will be coming to you in two days. Please give me your terms.”

“No violence against anyone. You can bring ten guards or staff. Accept my choice and leave when I’ve had enough of you.”

“And?”

“That’s it.”

“Will there be accommodations?”

“Yes. You’ll bunk in my den while we sort it out.”

“Does that also apply to me?” Marcella had been listening.

“Of course.” Alexa used an ugly tone. “Don’t make me kill you, ladies. Be on your best behavior and one of you may leave here with the right to rule this country until my father returns. Piss me off and I’ll hang your heads on my door like holiday wreaths. Alexa out.”

The men laughed, positive both women were cursing her right now.

Alexa didn’t join their amusement. “We have a lot to do to get ready.”

Edward cleared his throat. “Yeah, about that, Boss. We talked and we all agree we need a few more hands to cover everything.”

David added his support. “We were hoping Yani and his clan might want to spend some real time with us. Afterall, the outcome of your choice will affect them as much as the normals.”

Alexa nodded. “I agree. Call them, quietly. It’s time we encouraged our other half to join in the fun.”

“When they see our security, the women will know better than to try tricks while they’re here.”

Alexa chuckled harshly.

David shrugged resignedly. “It’s okay to hope it stays peaceful, right?”

“Of course. Without hope, life isn’t worth living.”

# Chapter Eight

**This Is Not Dinner**

**1**

**J**acob stayed next to Billy as the Driver went down the steps and hurried out into the cold night air. The city was still dark and motionless; full winter had arrived. Icy wind blew their cloaks around and tried to push them off their feet. Hardened snow banks crunched beneath their boots, echoing loudly.

Billy paused.

Jacob waited, but he began prepping for what was coming. A huge grin lined his face.

Billy allowed himself to feel excited this time instead of worried. “Straight there. No shortcuts.”

Jacob nodded. “On your mark.”

“Go!” Billy took off running.

Jacob had no trouble staying next to Billy as they ran down the street using their faster speed. The two men swallowed laughs and went faster through the icy darkness. The speed allowed them to stay on top of the snow, eliminating most of the noise of their passage.

Billy enjoyed the moment, mood lifting. For a little while, he’d forgotten how to live.

Jacob slid to a stop in front of the court house, laughing lowly while scanning the building and the structures surrounding it. It didn’t look like anyone was here. But it felt like it. Jacob sobered, straightening.

Billy flipped into alert mode as well, studying the tall skyscrapers and dead office windows that glared at them like crazy eyes.

The one-story brick courthouse had been painted white and blue. Jacob thought it had probably been charming before the war, but the paint had chipped off over the last four years, revealing gray bricks lined in green mold. Faded blue and white paint chips littered the steps and porch. “We’re being watched.”

“Let’s get under cover.” Billy led the way up the steps and opened the door.

The court house didn’t smell musty like it should. There weren’t any prints in the layers of dust, but not all of the floor was dusty, thanks to objects above it that had caught the tiny particles. Those flags were coated in thick layers, making the state and federal tributes look like giant cobwebs.

Jacob frowned. “That door should have been locked. Someone might be in here.”

“Not necessarily.” Billy examined the dark reception desk. “A few days before Christmas, this court house might have still been open to the public. Vacation schedules varied among towns and cities.”

Jacob accepted that, but he didn’t believe it.

Dim moonlight fought through the clouds to flow into the few uncovered windows. The vampires had no trouble seeing even when the clouds recovered it.

A quick shadow darted for cover behind a desk, making both men tense.

“Do you think there are rats here because of the fresh bodies or because there’s a large water source nearby?”

Billy kept a hand on his holster as he began to search for what they needed. “I think there hasn’t been a lot of activity in this city in a long time, allowing them to increase their numbers.”

Again, Jacob accepted that, but he didn’t think it was true. He didn’t argue, however. There was no point in it. He’d asked for Billy’s opinion; it would be rude to get mad at the man for giving him what he’d asked for.

“It’s only rude if you asked the question just so you could argue your point.” Billy knew the rest of their team would be giving Jacob dirty looks right now, but Billy was glad for the distraction. “What’s your issue, tissue?”

Jacob snickered at the joke. “No issue. Just trying to make sense of a world that doesn’t, I guess.”

Billy skimmed the thick, glossy volumes on the shelf. They contained numerous codes and laws that this city had enforced without question. “Come on. Let me hear it.”

“The rats were flushed out by someone…or something.”

Jacob’s words gave Billy a chill. “And?”

“We felt someone watching us. We know the undead are around.”

“You think we’re being stalked.”

“Maybe.” Jacob took the book Billy pulled from the shelf. “It feels familiar.”

Billy made the connection all at once. He let out a long sigh. “The couple from a week ago.”

Jacob stored the heavy book in his cloak. “That’s my guess, but I have an alternate theory.”

Billy studied the other books in case they were something Alexa might want. “Creatures?”

Jacob nodded. “Maybe they knew this was coming and they’re staying close to be sure their side is heard.”

“That’s possible.”

“The couple theory is stronger, but not by much.”

“Why?”

“Because they should already be dead.”

Billy nodded. “Agreed. Either they’re special, lucky, or it isn’t them.” He gave Jacob what he clearly wanted. “Trap or flush them out?”

Jacob chuckled. “Let’s go with trap. If we flush them the boss might get upset.”

Both men stilled, looking at each other. If they’d figured it out, Alexa had known for a while.

“Guess we should leave it alone until she triggers the action.” Jacob shrugged. “Unless she knew we would do it.”

Billy grinned. “Hoping for an excuse isn’t proof.”

“I know. I’m just bored.”

Billy was relieved to find he felt the same. *I’m recovering.*

Jacob smiled. “Awesome.”

“Yes, it is.” Billy took another of the big books and stepped toward the exit. “Let’s get back. We’ll have action later. We always do.”

Jacob followed the man out into the cold darkness. That one he agreed with completely. Want it or not, they always got it.

Billy walked calmly, taking time to prove to himself that he didn’t need to hurry back to Alexa’s protection like a man who couldn’t defend himself. *I’m stronger now. David was right. What happened before can’t happen the same way again.*

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jacob knew Billy had refused the others when they’d made the offer, but he felt like this was a good time to try again.

Billy sighed. “I keep attempting to forget it, but the moments flash in my dreams. It haunts me.”

“Because you made mistakes or because you were helpless?”

Billy grunted. “That one.”

Jacob understood. “I don’t think you can forget it. The therapy sessions I held with trauma victims never made it go away. It allowed them to deal with the effects.”

“How?”

“By facing the mistakes and the helpless feelings. Life doesn’t allow us to be in constant control. It spins around us and sometimes sweeps us up.”

“There weren’t many mistakes.”

“But there had to be at least one big one or you’d be able to let that part go.”

“Yes.”

The snow crunched as they walked and talked, but neither man cared this time. They did mind the icy wind, but there was no way to avoid it.

Jacob didn’t push. If Billy wanted to tell him, he would. Trying to force it out of him was a bad idea.

“I had a brief chance to kill Cedrick, but I didn’t take it.”

Jacob was surprised. “Why not?”

“Because men don’t rape other men! He wasn’t a threat!”

Jacob remained silent. Billy had learned that lesson. He didn’t need to be reminded that evil people did evil things to both sexes. “So it’s more him than the women?”

“He’s the one I hate.” Billy forced himself to continue. “I fear the others because they made me like some of it.”

Jacob shrugged. “Fear is often stronger than hatred. Maybe you should try to switch those feelings.”

Billy considered that. “Is it even possible?”

“Of course. Every time you get scared, make yourself get angry. Those feelings will transfer to the fanatics.” Jacob slowed as the museum neared. “But don’t let it eat you up like the fear was doing. You’re stronger than that.”

Billy let out a relieved sigh. “Thanks, man.”

Jacob clapped him on the shoulder. “Happy to help.” He waited, feeling eyes on them again.

Billy entered and paused while Jacob fastened the door. “I think you’re right about it being the couple. I don’t sense hostility or fear. They’re curious about us.”

“They know what we are and they haven’t fled. That’s dangerous.” Jacob headed for their base. “It might also be useful. If we’re wrong about them being good, it will be a fresh meal. We’re all ready for it.”

Billy nodded, following. His stomach rumbled lowly. “I’ll bet the groups coming here have plenty of evil in them. We’ll get our fill and then some.”

Jacob winced at a hunger pain, then nodded. “I hope they hurry up. I feel like I could swallow a lake of blood and not be satisfied.”

Billy chuckled. “Well, we do seem to make a mess wherever we go. No reason to think Gainesville will be different.”

The two men were still chuckling as they entered the rotunda and joined their team.

The team nodded in relief at the sight of the two men and no evidence that there had been trouble. All of them had worried over it and refused to let the others know, including Alexa.

Billy sat his book near her, then began taking off his cloak and heavy coat. It was a lot warmer in here.

The messy stacks of supplies and artifacts were now halfway sorted into seven neat piles along the wall, and one neat stack in the far corner. The other men resumed working, eager to be finished and relax for the rest of the night. Alexa had kept them working continuously without a break today. They all assumed it was to build on their already impressive stamina.

Jacob lingered by the dark entrance, still wishing the action would hurry and find them.

Edward frowned at the rookie. “Patience.”

Jacob dropped his head and dug the other book from his cloak. He sat it on top of Billy’s, then went to help David serve the meal he’d finished while they were gone.

Alexa stilled. “Something’s coming in.”

Edward reached for the mike as the radio lit up.

“We have heard your call and will answer soon.”

“Good. Just follow your nose.”

Yani laughed into the radio and then hung up.

Alexa leaned against the wall and began thumbing through the top book while her team got comfortable. Now that they were all back together, it was okay to relax until their guests arrived.

Alexa grimaced at the hollow grinding in her stomach. Like Jacob, she hoped their coming visitors weren’t all good. She was eager to gorge herself on blood.

She tensed again, nose lifting into the air.

Hunger slapped her viciously, changing her eyes to bright red. “You were followed.”

Billy and Jacob froze, dismayed.

The rest of the team went to the main entrances and waited for the fight to begin.

“Normals.” Alexa relaxed her stiff posture. “Invite them in for a meal.”

Edward assumed they would be dining on the intruders. His mind protested, but he didn’t argue. “We know you’re out there. Come down the hall and into the light.”

Soft footsteps echoed. “Don’t shoot.”

Their fire in the center of the rotunda was mostly burned down. It had served them a meal for lunch and then helped them prepare some of the food and gear they’d gathered. Now, it provided enough light to show them three human forms coming through the tunnel with worried expressions.

The team studied the dirty, thin forms intently. The trio was wearing sturdy clothes and carrying bags that likely held sturdy gear, but the prominence of their bones declared the biggest threat to their survival. Food was hard to come by for normals and for picky vampires.

Alexa studied Billy and Jacob. She was surprised they hadn’t known they were being followed.

Jacob dropped his head. “I tried to hold a therapy session during a run, Boss. It’s my fault.”

Billy narrowed in on the refugees. “I was team leader. It’s my mistake.”

The other men waited for Billy and Jacob’s punishment. When she didn’t do anything, it bothered all of them. This was a serious breach of conduct for their team.

The three humans entered the rotunda and stopped, scanning the gunfighters.

Alexa waited for them to spot her in the center of the room. She fought the urge to grab them the entire time.

Edward felt it next. Thick thirst made his throat go dry and start burning.

The rest of the team stiffened as it caught up. The normals smelled good!

“That’s how I knew they weren’t evil.” Alexa rose and retreated. “Remember your training, my pets. This is *not* dinner.”

Billy scanned them hardest. The man had bandages, pink scars, and healing scabs all over his arms. They were defensive wounds. Billy wanted to know if he was a slave. The fact that the women had no scars on their clear skin implied he was.

Edward scrutinized the black man too, and was satisfied the women were with him out of love. *He’s too ugly for it to be slavery.*

“I think he’s beautiful.” Alexa didn’t explain herself. She had faith that Edward would figure it out.

Edward stayed still, but it was hard. “State your business.”

The three people were staring at Alexa in awed fear. The man smiled. “I’m Marlin. Thank you for not killing us. We didn’t know the hotel was your den.”

Alexa nodded as her men realized there had been three refugees, but they’d only spotted two of them. “You could go there now and hide. This building won’t be safe for you two days from now.”

The man glanced at his companions.

The two women refused without speaking.

Alexa’s team was relieved when Marlin kept speaking for the group. It refuted the theory they were all building that he was a slave.

The man sighed resignedly. “We want to stay with you. We’re not safe anywhere, and my wives are both pregnant.”

Neither of the women were showing yet, though both had the faint glow that accompanied motherhood. They were all armed, but the high hang of those guns said the people were low on ammunition or maybe even out.

“Why didn’t we see all three of you at our den?” It bothered Daniel that he’d overlooked one of them.

“Mindy sleeps in high places.” Mandy shrugged, face darkening. “She thinks if she’s up high, she’s safer.”

Daniel and Billy scolded themselves for not looking up when they’d gone through. It was a standard part of Alexa’s training, but they’d forgotten it from lack of use.

Alexa made a mental note to drill on that again, but she didn’t add to their unhappiness. *I missed it too, my pets.*

“Why are the undead following you?” Alexa had already figured out the problem. “Who are you?”

“This is Mindy and Mandy.” Marlin didn’t look away from Alexa. “We can pay for your service with family dust.”

“You’re in as much danger from us as the undead.” Alexa hated it that those words were true, but they were.

“We’d rather den with vampires than zombies.”

Marlin’s answer brought surprise.

“You know, and yet you came anyway.”

Marlin smiled at her again. “Mitchels are always different. It’s to be expected.”

Alexa chuckled. “That, we are, my new friend.” She waved toward the cook fire. “Have a meal and I’ll consider your request.”

The two women flew to the cooking area and began diving into the meal with their fingers.

Alexa denied Daniel when he would have stopped them. “Four stomachs need to be filled. Let them be.” She motioned at Marlin. “Go get a share or you’ll have to wait until the next meal we make.”

Marlin wanted to say the women had to eat first, but there was plenty of food in the pot. He joined his wives, exchanging smiles as they groaned and swallowed bites.

“Thank you!”

“That’s good!”

“It’s our honor.” Alexa made several quick gestures.

Billy went to the dark tunnel and vanished down it to be sure their guests had closed the main doors.

Jacob began gathering supplies to make another meal as soon as the normals got their fill.

Edward held his hand out to Marlin. “Let’s see your Glock.”

Marlin slowly handed it over. “It’s empty.”

Edward dug in his cloak and brought out his cleaning kit. “I’ll fill it after I service it.” That wouldn’t take long. Marlin’s Glock was spotless. Edward just wanted to swab it out. He started breaking it down in record time.

Marlin began to relax and put off good vibes that were like a buffet to the vampires.

Daniel felt it, too, but it wasn’t as strong for him. He really did prefer animal blood. He stayed close to Alexa and waited for orders.

“As you were.” Alexa resumed sorting the pile at her feet while deciding what to do with the fragile relics of a different time, a different world.

The team also resumed what they’d been doing, but they watched their guests in longing while their stomachs growled.

Marlin felt the tension thicken. He rotated toward Alexa. “I can donate, but not my wives.”

“No. Thank you for your offer.” Alexa frowned a bit. “How did you know?” She assumed they’d given themselves away.

“We came through Manchester. It was busy with that kind. We learned to recognize the signs.”

“Such as?”

“You walk differently.”

“You’re too still at times, and then sometimes you move too fast.”

“You’re paler than most teams who walk through the daylight.”

“You work during the night.”

The two women shot out answers between bites of food, revealing a lot of tells that Alexa hadn’t realized they had.

“You don’t eat much or very often.”

“You sniff the air a lot.”

“You aren’t afraid like the rest of us.”

“You don’t seem human.”

That last one bothered the entire team, including Billy, who had just returned from securing the main entrance. Silence fell again except for the eating noises.

Edward realized the man hadn’t answered all of their questions. “Why are the undead following you?”

Alexa was pleased he’d caught it and kept her from having to repeat herself. She hated to do that. *And that’s a story for another night.*

Marlin swallowed and scrubbed his sleeve over his mouth. “We don’t know. It started in Murfreesboro. We stopped in a clinic for some medical gear. By the time we finished gathering what little there was, three zombies were outside the door. We went out the rear, but they tracked us somehow.”

Alexa connected that to the women not showing yet. They’d probably stopped in the clinic to find pregnancy tests. This was the most dangerous time for the two females. Anything could go wrong and end those precious lives. Then the births would endanger them all again and make their group even more vulnerable. Breeding during an apocalypse wasn’t an easy feat and this family was doing it two at a time.

“They tracked you by your scent.”

“Yeah. No offense, but you’re…pungent.”

“Very.”

Alexa frowned at the men who’d spoken, silently reminding them the normals weren’t going to be dinner.

Marlin was embarrassed. “We’ll clean up. I’m sorry.”

Alexa waved it off. “Dirt is fine. They’re smelling your blood. The undead don’t care about either of those things.” She studied the mystery, then brightened. “They’re following you because you’re going to medical places. They’re trying to get help.”

“But we went out the back. They didn’t see us.”

“They probably heard you. Their hearing is amazing.” Alexa refused to consider how that was possible when all the organs and nerves needed to accomplish that should have rotted away.

Marlin clearly wasn’t convinced, but he liked her answer more than the others he and his wives had come up with. “What can we do about it?”

Alexa had an answer for that. “When our guests arrive, the noise will draw them away from you.”

Marlin stared. “And after?”

Alexa slowly shook her head at his begging tone. “You can have our den until we’re done here, and then you can stay here for the winter if you can stomach the mess we’ll probably make, but you cannot den with us. You’re in danger every second you’re in our sight. Don’t you feel it?”

Marlin reluctantly nodded. The glassy-eyed vampires were hungry. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“It is my honor, and maybe your death if you insist.” Alexa said that for the two women who were swallowing mouthfuls so they could start begging. “If you want those children, stay away from me and my men as much as you can.”

“We will.” Marlin swept the many dark tunnels. “Where do you want us for tonight?”

Alexa’s lips thinned at the man’s assumption that she didn’t mean they had to split up now.

Marlin knew. “Please. They’re exhausted. We’ll go come sunrise.”

Alexa gave a curt nod. “Fine. If you’re staying for protection, pick an exhibit nearby with multiple exits. If you’re staying for the food, we’ll pack you a bag from the next meal and you can go where you like.”

Marlin immediately marched toward the nearest tunnel to explore.

His wives sank down near the stove and devoured everything in reach.

Jacob drew in a deep breath and then forced the hunger away. He told his mind to only smell the food. “Stop now. You’re making a mess, and you’ll get sick.”

The two women ignored him until he slid between them and what was left of the meal.

The females finished chewing and swallowing, but they didn’t retreat or attack. They waited for him to deliver more of their rations.

Jacob scowled. “I’m not cooking until you clean up your mess.”

He flinched aside as both females hurried forward and started grabbing the crumbs, wrappers, and chunks of food that had splattered.

David studied them, hoping *they* weren’t slaves. Their immediate obedience was disturbing.

Alexa had been observing those signs as well. “There was no hesitancy on his part to leave them among predators or possible new owners. They’re not starving, though he might be.” Alexa motioned at Billy to continue the burden of proof.

Billy didn’t mind. “He’s covered in scars and old wounds. They aren’t. They didn’t flinch from him or us. They’re all willing; they’re just desperate to survive.”

Edward understood all at once. “He’s beautiful because he earned those scars in defense of his family.”

Alexa favored him with an approving blast of heat.

Mindy and Mandy hadn’t been around civilized people in a long time. Hearing those things aloud helped to remind them of who they’d been.

“I’m sorry.” Mandy kept cleaning, stomach now clenching uncomfortably around the food. “We’ve been hungry since the war.”

“And yet, you decided to have babies.”

Mandy nodded furiously. “Humanity has to breed or it will die out.” She glared at David over her shoulder. “Your kind are just as deadly to us, remember?”

David flushed.

Alexa intervened when David would have argued it was wrong to bring new life into a dead world. “Extinction is not some far-fetched theory being used to scare us into submission. Humans are fragile. You know that or you’d still be one.”

David saw her point. “It’s still cruel.”

“As is life itself, yet they all have the right to live, to continue. It has often been an ugly struggle. Do not begrudge that fight to ease your sympathy pains. Instead, encourage it to flourish so a dead world may be brought back to life.”

Properly instructed, David nodded and let go of his disapproval. He went to the food kit and began pulling out enough supplies to help Jacob make a triple meal for all of them. He hadn’t forgotten Alexa said they would send food.

Mandy smiled at Alexa, hand coming to her stomach. “It’s our honor to help humanity survive and to continue our lines. Marlin is a strong, kind man. We chose him.”

Everyone was glad to hear that.

Mandy put an arm around Mindy’s shoulders. The slightly younger girl leaned against her arm. Standing that close, it became clear the two dusky women were related. “Mindy doesn’t talk anymore. She went through a lot since the world ended, but she’s strong and kind, too. Our family deserves this honor.” A shadow crossed over her face. “I just wish it was a little bit easier, you know?”

Alexa glanced at Billy. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Jacob started cooking, now flashing small smiles at both women. He hated it that they’d been hurt, that anyone had been hurt, that the world had ended and crushed so many lives. He held it all in and prepared the huge meal in two big pots.

Alexa and the others felt the mood shift. Edward glared at the women. “You’re trying to guilt us into protecting you. It won’t work.”

Mark bared his fangs at Marlin as the man returned through the tunnel. He hurried to get between them and the women who were now glaring at Edward for figuring it out. “They don’t mean you any harm. They’re desperate.”

Alexa motioned. “Go about the chores I gave you earlier. We will not be distracted from our quest, for any reason. I have said it, and it will happen.”

Each of her men relaxed and did as instructed.

Marlin and his wives watched them in regret, understanding they couldn’t change her mind.

Edward decided the topic needed to be changed. “Why were the vampires in Manchester active? Are they having a problem?”

Marlin took his cleaned, loaded gun back from Edward. “They’re having meetings. Apparently they made a deal, but they think they’ve broken it and will now be punished. They were deciding what to do about it.”

“They’re panicking over nothing.” Edward knew Alexa had planned on Yani’s tribe taking out half the soldiers and conquering the bunker.

“There are also whispers of rage children and young vampires so destructive they have to be held in a deep pit.” Marlin took his unfinished bowl from Mandy when she held it out. She’d refused to consume his share.

“Whoever they made the deal with scares them. That’s some feat to frighten an entire tribe of blood suckers.” Marlin grinned to show he was teasing.

Alexa chortled, lightening the mood, but her mind went over the words in anger. If Yani was building an army, she needed to get details so she could pass that information to her father. “Go on.”

Mandy quickly nodded, eager to get any help from them that she could. She knew the coming struggle to survive would be the hardest thing she’d gone through, even more so than living through the war. Back then, a homebirth had never crossed her mind. Now it was the only option available. “They didn’t kill us for the same reason you haven’t–we’re good souls. They gave us shelter for a night and then sent us on our way like you plan to do.”

Marlin paused, considering. “We only know what we’ve seen. We don’t have a radio.”

“Wait.” Alexa held up a hand. Her mind spun pieces into place and brought regret to her face. “You have to go now.” She looked to Edward. “They have to go–right now.”

Edward immediately approached Marlin, taking the man’s arm in a firm grip.

“Go out the back. Get them settled in the hotel. Do not converse about any topic but how to survive in our den. Food will be delivered. Immediate return. No talking!”

Edward gently pulled Marlin toward the exit while trying to figure out what Alexa was doing.

Jacob and Mark approached the angry women.

Jacob’s scars didn’t scare them. Marlin was covered in old war wounds, but Mark’s hulking form and hungry fangs convinced them to join Marlin.

“Why?” Marlin walked slowly, trying to understand. “What did we do wrong?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem.” Alexa wanted them to think it was because they were in danger from seven vampires. “May good evenings settle over all of you.”

“Whatever.” Mandy held her upset stomach and followed her husband toward the exit.

# Chapter Nine

**As You Wish**

**1**

**D**aniel looked at Alexa, brow lifting. *Are they bait or burden of proof?*

Alexa laughed, delighted. “You’re all getting smarter. Have you noticed?”

The men wanted to say yes, but they were smart enough to know it wouldn’t sound modest. No one answered.

Alexa snickered. “I love it when you prove my words. It’s part of what makes our bond special.” *The humans aren’t safe here now.*

Alexa felt danger approaching from the front. She gestured, effectively stopping their promises of being strong enough to resist draining the normals. “Full team escort. Get on it!”

The rest of her team hurried after Edward, Billy, and Mark, but all of them cast concerned glances back at their leader.

Alexa waited until they were gone to retrieve her kit. She took out six small packages and placed one in each man’s sleeping roll. She then slid into the shadows of the rotunda and stood with her hands on her gun butts. “Come out now.”

Yani chuckled as he glided into the firelight. He was wearing all black beneath his black cloak. Decay and death oozed from him in waves. “Your father did an amazing job training you.”

“It was my entire family, actually.” Alexa thought again of her childhood visits. She had hated them, but she’d craved the lessons. Every moment had brought her to this time and place. *But I never would have believed in vampires.*

Yani mistook the smile on her lips. He glowered. “Do not gloat that you got me to come out of our den. I have brought my strongest fighters along. If you value your team, do not play games with me!”

Yani appeared older than the last time she’d seen him. She assumed Zaro’s death was the reason. Alexa sighed, forcing her mind away from the past. “I assume those fighters could use a last good meal before winter sets in and makes hunting harder.”

Yani didn’t answer because it would imply a weakness.

“Why do you think I’ve called you here to kill you?”

Yani flinched, giving away his fear.

Alexa rotated so she could view through the tiny window behind the reception desk for this area. “Almost everyone always assumes I’m out to end them. It’s tiresome.” She thought of the normals who were on the way to her den. “The humans have more courage than the creatures. Amazing.”

Yani bristled. “They don’t know you like we do!”

Alexa bobbed her head. That was certainly true. “I have a proposal for you, but we have some unpleasant business to handle first.”

Yani knew what was coming. He just didn’t know how she’d found out. “We made the best choice given the situation.”

“I expected you to put them down. It wouldn’t have violated our deal because it was a way of stopping their illness from spreading.”

Yani hadn’t considered that. “We didn’t want to take a chance on it, as you clearly know.”

“And the others in your cave?”

“We chose to keep them.”

“Why?”

“The twin boys are special.”

Alexa knew from that. Her eyes narrowed. “Split them up immediately. If you keep them together, the odds are higher on you losing them.” Alexa waited to see which side of the future the vampire was on.

Yani inched closer to the smoldering fire, craving the warmth. “We do not support the reset.”

“But you will use it if Safe Haven decides not to recognize your right to exist.”

Yani’s voice became smug. “Perhaps we do not need them. The woman at the bunker we destroyed says she has a claim, as does the woman in the bunker northwest of here.”

Alexa nodded. “I’ve promised to verify their claims and make a call on it, if I can.”

“We will wait for your call. Then we may make contact and avoid a possible dead future.”

Alexa wasn’t upset. “As I would do in your place. But there’s no need to wait. I’ve called you here to assist with this meeting; you’ll have the chance to show both possible leaders your kind should be allowed to exist.”

Yani was nearly speechless.

Alexa went on, aware of how fast time was going by now. “While you consider that, escort my team back here as if you’ve just arrived.”

“Why?” Yani assumed it was another lesson for her men.

“It’s a protection. One of the males coming to this meeting is powerful. He can’t steal that knowledge from their minds if it isn’t in there.”

Yani bowed and retreated from the rotunda like a ghost.

Alexa wanted to be amused by his actions, but she was too worried. There were four time-controlling kids in this zone and a dangerous byzan was hunting for them. Once Selma joined forces with William, the advantage would be his.

Alexa listened to the wind grow stronger, angrier. She was suddenly sure it had already happened. “And what would I do next if I held that advantage?”

The answer came easily. “By now, I would know where all four of them are and I’d have made a plan to collect them during the coming drama. I would only be two or three days away from resetting time and taking over the world.”

Alexa began searching for a plan that would thwart even herself.

As time ticked by faster, she recognized the connection. “I have to get him off guard from the first meeting and keep him that way. If I give him time to regroup, we may not all survive his wrath.”

**2**

Outside, the three team members caught up to Edward, drawing frowns.

All of the men considered sending someone back to be with Alexa, but no one spoke it. She made the choices and they obeyed.

Edward increased his pace, wanting this over with quicker now.

“Why did she make us leave?”

“What did we do wrong?”

“Why can’t you talk to us?”

The team suffered those three questions over and over on the march to their tower. The upset voices drowned out the crunching snow and howling wind. Nature was preparing for another winter blast. The temperature was hovering at freezing and thick white clouds were bunching together over top of the city.

David handed Marlin his pouch of medications.

Jacob gave the man his bag of extra food.

The rest of the team watched and waited for the run to be done. They hated being away from Alexa.

Edward opened the door while showing Marlin how to do it himself so the trio wouldn’t be locked in.

Marlin paid attention, but his face showed his confusion.

Edward had sympathy for the strangers, but he refused to break Alexa’s rules. “Go easy on the fish and be careful with the water. It should last you a couple weeks.”

Marlin grumbled as he started up the steps behind his wives. “We haven’t stayed in one place for two weeks since the war.”

“Have a good night.” Edward stopped himself from saying more. He didn’t know how long Alexa would want them to stay in the museum or how long she now planned for the trio to stay in their den. She would handle it.

Edward circled a finger and locked the door. He fell into the rear of his team, glad when Daniel set a pace that would get them back to Alexa twice as fast as it had taken to get here.

The Biker felt the mood shift. He slowed, holding up a hand.

The team stopped, scanning.

Daniel pointed, indicating he’d spotted the problem.

The team swept the alley in annoyance, unhappy to be delayed.

Yani stepped from the alley with four vampires who were dressed like him, moved like him, and put off the same sense of menace. Even the regal woman with red orbs and hungry fangs was clearly deadly. They created a half ring of menace that hissed and bared their fangs.

Edward was pleased that Yani had brought vampires who were intimidating. He was certain it would be needed at some point.

Yani growled, eager to see if Alexa’s men could be frightened while she wasn’t around.

Edward rolled his eyes and resumed the lead. “Let’s go.”

The team followed him while sneering at Yani for the attempted hazing.

Yani shrugged without moving. “I guess they don’t like to be scared.”

The big woman at his side chuckled deep in her throat.

Jacob and David stiffened at the sound, both looking back at her.

The rest of the team grimaced. To them, the noise was revolting.

To David and Jacob, it was sexy.

Yani and his group followed without speaking, becoming aware of the team hurrying. They scanned for trouble and didn’t find any.

Edward hurried to the rotunda, suddenly worried it would be empty.

Alexa glanced over from her place in the shadows.

Edward dropped his head, but he refused to apologize in front of their company. “Yani’s here.”

Alexa got started as soon as everyone was in the rotunda. “Yani will suggest rules for this mission and we’ll pick them apart. We’ll agree on a plan and stick to it.” Alexa waited to be obeyed.

The team got settled on their bedrolls. All of them noticed the lump under the blanket and assumed it was a Christmas gift. No one had gotten to their gear while Alexa was here.

Yani and his group lined the wall by the entrance they’d come through. The four men and one woman studied the team, fast minds sorting through the pros and cons of everything in seconds.

“You can’t be left alone. All those coming here want you dead despite needing your voice.” Yani’s words told her he had been listening to the radio conflicts.

“Agreed, though we’ll draw that line when we think it’s gone too far.”

Yani had expected worse. “We’ll den with you. We wake from sleep easier. We’ve been doing it for a long time.”

Alexa shrugged. “We body pile most nights. You and yours can have the edges.”

Yani grimaced. “We need to prep a sleeping area.”

Alexa gestured. “We’ll be right here. It has the same time response to any corner of the building.”

Yani understood her point. “We’ll want the fire out. The dark is our friend.”

“Agreed. Next?”

Alexa’s men realized she was handling the bargaining, giving them time to listen while opening their gifts.

Edward admired the beautiful black diving watch. He noticed it was already set. He flashed a quick order to the rest of the team. *Don’t change anything on them.*

The men nodded, exploring the features while Alexa and Yani went on with the negotiations.

“My father will be told you changed the rage kids in an attempt to control them and keep our deal.” She was satisfied he wasn’t amassing an army of victims or vampires.

Alexa enjoyed the happiness of her men about the gifts, but she didn’t get distracted. “Is there a bond now? Are they responding?”

Yani shook his head in that eerie manner where he barely moved. “None. Their illness is stronger than our blood.”

“I assume you’ve tried a complete transfusion?”

Yani slowly nodded, in normal time. It made him look old.

“You have them contained?”

“In our deepest pit. They are fed and cared for, but they are also chained. When we let them loose, they hurt each other.”

Alexa didn’t plan to interfere, though she hated that. “If you put them down, document it for later.”

“So noted.” Yani was eager for a different topic. “Lines of refugees are splitting between the bunkers. The groups are picking sides.”

“Tell me about them.”

“There are no Snakes that we’ve seen…”

The team with Yani bared their fangs and moaned angrily.

“And only a few fanatics…”

Now Billy bared his fangs and growled.

“Those were traveling toward the invaders.”

That told the team Yani didn’t like Marcella’s choice to employ UN troops.

“The soldiers who didn’t stay in their new town fled to Safe Haven mountain.”

Alexa shrugged. “We’ll know when they find a way in. Bragging was always part of the military.”

Yani’s lips vanished. “Along with splicing the fabric of life.”

Alexa didn’t want to be drawn into that discussion. “How long can your kind be in the sun?”

“Minutes at a time for most of us, like yourself.”

Alexa didn’t tell him differently. “We’ll outfit you with some gear to extend that a bit, but we mostly need guards while we sleep. Our guests are sure to take advantage of the vulnerability.”

“As long as you remain indoors, we can remain awake. We do not require as much sleep now.”

She studied his companions. “Mature adults, I assume?”

Yani grinned, flashing ugly, jagged fangs. “My first converts.”

Alexa studied the group, now viewing the similarities. “You changed your family.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t you?”

Alexa snorted. “Never in a million years.”

The big woman next to Yani laughed aloud.

David stared, hair on his arm lifting. He assumed she was Yani’s much younger sister. Her long white hair and creamy skin was nice, but the light of promise in her sparkling gray eyes was what caught him.

Jacob smiled at the woman, drawn. She wasn’t beautiful physically, but her soul was a flame to the Preacher.

Reina licked her lips and groaned. “We’ll sleep soon, yes?”

The rest of the team chuckled as David and Jacob flushed in tandem.

Yani let out a long sigh. “You have enough admirers. Stop it now.”

Reina smirked. “A woman can never have too many.” She leered at the two men again. “And I do enjoy *fresh* vampire meat.”

Laughter spilled from the rotunda and echoed through the halls.

Yani and Alexa tolerated it because amusement was always better than anger. They were wise enough to know it wouldn’t last. They went on with their conversation.

“What do you hope to gain from agreeing to mediate their dispute?”

“A Pro Tem the citizens can count on to lead them well until Safe Haven’s return.”

“That’s a tall order.” Yani studied her thoughtfully. “Will you get it, do you think?”

Alexa snorted again. “Never in a million years.”

No one laughed this time. Her tone told them she had no faith in either woman.

“Why don’t *you* do it?” Yani had been wondering why she hadn’t claimed that position. “Safe Haven will return without you. This quest is a waste of your talents.”

“This quest is as necessary as breathing, as blood, as life itself.” Alexa stopped herself, not in the mood to break it down for the old vampire. “Do not speak such again. That job is not for me.”

Yani bowed his head obediently, but he clearly didn’t understand or agree with her decision.

Edward and the others knew her reasoning since she’d told them descendants weren’t allowed to rule, but they all agreed with Yani. Alexa was perfect for the job. As for the quest, they agreed with their leader. The final battle would see all of them dead if they weren’t strong enough and this quest was giving them strength with every encounter and lesson. Without it, they were all doomed.

*I hope Safe Haven has been training as hard as we have.*

Jacob nodded at David, now ignoring the big woman. *They are. We’ll be well matched when the time comes.*

David wanted to believe that, too. He hid his doubt and stole another glance at the mysterious woman with Yani.

Reina patted the ground by her side.

David looked to Alexa.

Alexa shrugged. “As you would.”

David rose and went to join the woman.

Jacob followed him.

Reina immediately tuned out everyone else as the men approached her, smiling in open invitation. “Shall we go for a walk?”

David held out a hand and pulled her to her feet.

The trio vanished into the dark tunnel.

Billy took out his model kit and began opening it. He wasn’t envious. Random sex no longer interested him.

Mark took out a chunk of wood and started working on a carving.

Edward checked on the boiling pot and took over the meal.

Daniel contemplated the little girl from the trailer park and tried not to let his mood go sour.

Yani began instructing the rest of his group on security while they were here.

Alexa just waited for the killing to restart. It was the only constant in this new world. *Without it, I wouldn’t know my place.* “How are you adjusting to leadership?”

A shadow crossed over Yani’s face. “Slowly. I had no idea what a pain in the fangs it was to make everyone follow simple rules.”

“Such as?”

Yani was careful with his answer. “All of them. We’re doing it, but not all are willing.”

Alexa understood he meant feeding from the human survivors. “Forcing them to obey usually causes rebellion.”

“True. The alternative is killing them and I won’t do that.”

“So you force them to bend to your will and put them down when they rise up.”

Yani glowered. “It’s easy for you with only six enchanted males.”

Alexa laughed. “You think my men are under a spell. That’s amusing.” The mirth dropped from her tone like stone. “It’s also insulting.”

Yani swept her now glaring team and was forced to revise his theory. “How do you make them so loyal?”

“I earn it with everything I do, with everything I say, with every lesson I teach.”

Yani grunted unhappily. “My father was the same. I’m not him.”

Alexa allowed him a small comfort. “You haven’t given up yet. That can sometimes be more valuable to plans than even cooperation.”

Yani followed her lead. “Would you be inclined to instruct me during our time together? I’d happily pay for it.”

Alexa’s team assumed the vampires weren’t going to be paid for protecting them, but they weren’t sure why.

Only Edward realized it meant Alexa was collecting on a debt. He stewed on what the debt was for. He couldn’t think of anything the vampires owed her.

“It would be my honor.”

“And the price?”

Alexa locked gazes with him. “No matter what happens, do not let those children loose on the world.”

Her team assumed she meant the rage kids.

Yani knew she meant the children who had power over time. “You have my word. Mother and I will put them down before we allow that to happen.”

The team smiled at the thought of Yani having a mother.

Alexa ignored the guilt to nod at him. “First lesson. Ready?”

Yani braced, expecting something ugly. “Fire.”

“Things get awkward when only one side is satisfied. Awkwardness will quickly become anger and violence if left alone to simmer. Draw out those poisons with fairness and force in equal measures.”

Yani thought of the two clan leaders he’d met with before coming here. “And if one has all the right and no wisdom, while the other has wisdom and no right?”

“You decide based on what’s best for the citizens under their rule since they can’t make that choice for themselves.”

Alexa’s team flinched, winced, or grimaced. Her words reminded them of the end of their world.

*I did it for my country because she could not do it for herself.*

Yani missed it. “Those under their rule deserve different leaders.”

“Then make that happen.”

Yani stored her advice. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for telling you to kill two of our kind to get what you want. It’s wrong. Does that matter to you?”

Yani nodded. “Of course. I want what my father had.”

“And what did he have?”

“Love. We all adored him. I want that, too.”

“Then that is the only advice I will give you during our time together. Do your plans openly and face your combatants in public with logic, then force. Your citizens will respect it.”

Yani got settled without moving, once again making Alexa’s men stare. “Would you tell me more?”

“One for now and then we’ll decide on quarters for my guests.” Alexa paused to consider her words. She wanted Yani to put a lot of thought into this one. “Mistakes happen when we least expect them. Often, that causes chaos and we struggle to survive it. But sometimes, a mistake leads to a method or plan that wouldn’t have been possible otherwise.”

Yani’s tone was regretful. “We are sorry. It wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Edward got it. The vampires killed soldiers who didn’t deserve to die. That was the debt they were trying to pay off.

“And yet, it did happen and now we can use the upside.”

“What upside?”

“The woman who fled bunker 11 is coming here. The woman who cleaned up after you sacked bunker 11 is coming here. I doubt either of them will be pleased to see you. The reputation you didn’t seek to build is still growing.”

Yani chuckled. “Mother will love this. She enjoys acting out the roles given to us by normals and their Hollywood.”

“Scaring citizens into submission is not acceptable. Intimidating the enemies who want you dead is recommended. A good leader uses manipulations carefully or they’ll be corrupted. It’s a fine line.”

“One I’ll walk in as much honor as I can.”

“That’s all I ask of any student.”

**3**

Jacob retreated, gasping. He kissed the woman’s cold, wrinkled cheek.

He listened to David finish, heart thumping. He wiped blood from his neck punctures. Mating with a full vampire was a bit different than he’d imagined. It hurt more.

The hallway reeked of death now, changing the mood.

David groaned lowly and staggered back from the woman’s squishy body. His mind struggled to form words as he viewed the object of their lust.

An old woman winked at them as she straightened her long dress. Gray hair fell over her naked, flabby shoulders as she covered up.

Jacob froze as he began to understand.

David sucked in oxygen and fixed his clothes. “Don’t think about it.”

Jacob replaced the images in his mind with something hotter, younger. “It won’t hold.”

David glowered at the snickering old woman. “That was a dirty trick.”

Reina shrugged, still smirking. “You wouldn’t have taken me any other way.”

David wiped blood from his wrist punctures as he blew out a satisfied sigh. “It was still a dirty trick.”

Reina glided toward the tunnel, cackling as she recast the spell that made her young and beautiful to eyes that wanted to be deceived. “It’s my favorite way to welcome new members to our tribe.” She wasn’t sorry. She was enjoying life now, before Safe Haven returned. *There might not be a later for my kind.*

The gunfighters followed her back to the rotunda. Both men were upset, but it was hard to be angry.

“Because we got laid?”

David shuddered as another ripple of pleasure went through his body. “Because it was so good.”

Jacob sniggered. “No lie there.”

The lovers rejoined their groups with flushes and head shakes to lifted brows. They settled onto their bedrolls and listened to determine what they’d missed.

Yani frowned at Reina. “One day you’ll be killed for it, Mother.”

Reina cackled again as the rest of Alexa’s team stared in surprise. “It’ll be worth it.” She let go of the glamor spell and turned into an old woman covered in wrinkles and age.

Alexa laughed.

The rest of the team gawked in revulsion or rotated to David and Jacob in confusion.

Mark was beyond surprised. “She’s like…two hundred or something! How could you miss that?!”

“The same way you did until this moment.” David decided he had nothing to be embarrassed about. “She’s very…distracting.”

Jacob nodded. He flashed a smile at the woman. Then he glared. “But don’t ever do it again. He’s right. It will get you killed.”

Reina nodded at the truth. “But I stand by my words. Finding death with cum dripping down my thigh will be a good way to go.”

Laughter filled the rotunda.

Jacob realized what it all meant. “Isn’t she in mourning?” He stared at the woman. “Aren’t you in mourning?”

Reina’s expression was haughty. “Vampires do not mate for life. We do not live for our children or search the past for our mistakes.”

Jacob didn’t know what to say.

Edward began packing half the meal into a kit.

“You and Billy will handle that shortly. If we wait until tomorrow, the normals will have slaughtered all the fish we caught. We’ll drop other supplies later.” Alexa had no illusions about the state of their den. When they returned, it would have to be cleaned and restocked.

“Why are you helping them?” Yani hadn’t expected Alexa to have compassion. As a fighter she was ruthless. He’d thought she would be the same way during downtime.

“A leader without compassion isn’t a leader for long.”

Yani nodded to show he understood that was another lesson. “I’m always considerate of my people’s needs.”

“And what of those who can do nothing for you?”

Yani tried to cover his dislike. “I leave them alone to live. Isn’t that enough?”

Alexa shrugged. “You have to be the judge of that.”

“I only have time for my tribe.”

“Another struggle of any leader.”

Yani wasn’t sure if she was displeased with his answers. “I can try harder to be compassionate of strangers.”

“Trying harder is good. After a while, you’ll be able to see progress and know you’re making strides toward your goals.”

Billy knew that was for him as well as for Yani. He nodded at her. “Thank you, Boss.”

Alexa smiled. Then she looked at the tiny window again.

“Is there something out there we should worry over?” Yani was ready to fight if needed.

Alexa shook her head. “Not yet. The undead are gathering on our doorstep.”

“You don’t want them cleared?”

“In good time. For now, it will give the normals a night of peace.” She glanced at Edward.

Edward nodded. “We’ll be careful to lead them back here after our trip.”

“Good.” Alexa stared at the cloudy sky, nostrils flaring as she took in the deeper smells. “Snow will arrive with our guests and prevent any of us from leaving. We’ll begin prepping areas for them shortly.”

Alexa’s men nodded, eager to use up the energy from not doing much today except exploring the museum.

Yani frowned. “When do you sleep?”

“When there’s time.”

Yani didn’t argue. He scanned the men who were either playing with their new watches or the entertainments they’d gathered. “They are on their own time now?”

Alexa nodded. “It is Christmas.”

Yani grimaced. “Yes, the cross and all that. Should we leave until your meeting?”

“There’s no need.” Alexa didn’t turn, though she heard each of her men rise and go to her bedroll. “Do all your people share your feelings about the holidays?”

Yani nodded. “We’ve never been welcome to celebrate them.”

“So you grew bitter and scorned those traditions.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Alexa shrugged. “Perhaps. How do you feel about the relics of our world?”

Yani scanned the neat piles, voice dropping into regret. “I believe many of them should be saved for a better time. How can anyone learn from history if it is removed and hidden away?”

“Perhaps some of it needs to be.”

Yani sighed. “Even the ugly parts of history need to be remembered. We just don’t need to celebrate them.”

“And what of those who would say they did nothing wrong and should be left alone to enjoy their history as they see fit?”

“That is a freedom all normals enjoy in this country. I would not change it for the sake of my offense or disbelief.”

Alexa was satisfied Yani and his tribe would protect these things. “Do you have a place where the items can be hidden until Safe Haven’s return?”

Yani nodded. “Absolutely.” It would be another good moment where he could tell Safe Haven’s leader they’d protected something valuable and earn points toward their desire to be left in peace.

“My thoughts, too.” Alexa finally turned as the last team member returned to his bedroll. “You may transport them at your leisure during this meeting. However, I would prefer our guests didn’t see you do it. They will believe it’s gold, jewels, or weapons and follow you to your den.” Alexa’s eyes turned red. “That can never happen. If someone from these groups finds your lair, keep them forever or kill them. If you don’t, your tribe will be wiped out within the season.”

Yani hid a shudder at her cold prediction. “It will be as you say.”

Silence fell for a moment. Edward handed Mark the new AR-7.

Mark examined it in delight.

“I wonder how Claudia and her group are celebrating.” Jacob hoped it was peaceful and full of fun.

“Quietly, I would imagine.”

Mark’s confident tone drew Jacob’s attention. He smiled at the Convict. “She liked your gift. Maybe next year you can give her a matching butterfly. We’ll be back by then.”

Mark kept admiring the rifle. “I already gave her something she wanted. We’re good.”

Alexa shook her head when Jacob would have questioned that. It was a reminder not to spill their personal lives in front of anyone but their team.

Jacob grinned at Mark as he figured it out, but he didn’t speak it.

Alexa’s small gasp of pleasure drew every head toward her.

Alexa didn’t fight the tears as she opened each small pouch and drew out the photos of her team. The polaroid images came from near the beginning of each man’s journey with her. *Now I’ll always have a picture of my new family.* “I’m honored.”

“Heads up, Boss.” Edward tossed her a pouch.

Alexa caught it and pulled out an empty photobook from the museum gift shop. Now she would have a memory of their downtime here as well.

Alexa immediately began putting the images into the photobook, smiling fondly at each one. There were minor differences in the photos versus the men in this room, but it was a relief to see they weren’t as changed as she’d thought. Even Billy in his photo had been pensively staring at the cameraman. Because he’d covered it well with his jokes, they hadn’t viewed that side of him enough to know it had existed before his ordeal.

Edward lifted a finger and counted silently. *Three…two…one.*

“We love you, Alexa.”

Alexa’s red tears flowed freely. “Hit the first button on your gifts.”

The men did it curiously.

*“I love you.”*

Alexa’s recorded voice echoed, lifting the mood.

All of them enjoyed it, even Yani. The more time he spent around Alexa, the more he liked having her as part of the family. *I just wish I could count on her to defend us the way she can count on her team to defend her. If she has to pick, we’ll burn in the sun while they enjoy the darkness.*

Alexa looked at him. “My team is just as important to me as this quest. It would take a lot to say the same for you.”

“Then a lot of time shall be spent ensuring that bond.”

Alexa shrugged. “As you wish.”

# Chapter Ten

**Don’t Make Them Angry**

Bunker 11

**1**

**“A**re they clear on what to do?”

“Yes.” Jerry shifted in the seat of the jeep, trying to find a comfortable spot for the ride. The jeep was warm but old and dented. It had gotten a lot of use. The springs in the seat continued to poke him. “The other gate hunters will take over this bunker and transport the two kids to the convent.”

“They know to wait until we’re at least an hour gone before doing it?”

“Yes. I made it clear that William may kill us all for this betrayal.”

Rachel shrugged. “It’s not a betrayal. I don’t trust Donna. She doesn’t want the reset.”

Jerry didn’t answer this time. They were in the backseat with their driver listening to every word.

Rachel gestured dismissively. “Selma wants the reset as much as we do. It was her idea to relocate the kids to a safer place.”

Selma’s hands tightened on the grungy steering wheel; she smiled in the mirror. “I’m still going to kill you.”

Rachel wasn’t as scared of that now. “As long as we reset time, I don’t care how ugly it gets.”

“Remember you said that.” Selma glanced at Jerry. “Do you share your wife’s views?”

Jerry wasn’t stupid. “No. I want to get out of this alive.”

“And so you might.” Selma connected mentally to William. *Let’s roll!*

In the bunker, William frowned at the demanding tone. *Yes, mother.*

He motioned to Jeanie. “We need to get going.”

Jeanie lingered near Donna, not sure if this was a good idea now. “We’ll be back within a week. My hounds will help you, I think. Will you be able to handle things here?”

Donna was eager for them to be gone. “You’ve hired reasonable women for security and they don’t appear to have any desire to replace us. The kids are happy, and we have enough food even if the bunker fills up. I’ll be fine.”

Donna nodded to refugees going by, aware of them watching in speculative silence. Jeanie had been good to them so far. They were worried Donna might not be.

The bunker was alive with early morning activity, including the new cooking crew who was already turning out acceptable meals without much waste. Jeanie had picked good people for that job, freeing Donna to supervise setting up their quarters and security. “Really. You can go.”

Jeanie felt Donna’s impatience with this long goodbye. “Fine. Use your radio if you get in trouble. We’ll send some of the gate hunters back to help you.”

Donna didn’t answer. She didn’t like Selma, Rachel, or any of their group. *Gate hunters are dangerous.*

William knew that to be true. He tugged on Jeanie’s arm. “She’ll be fine. We have to go now or we won’t get there first.”

Jeanie followed him out of the bunker’s main entrance and into the cold wind. “Why do we have to get there first? I have the strongest claim.”

Wind blew debris in front of them, forcing William to leap over the wet, filthy plastic. After four years, the bags still littered the country. “Because that doesn’t always matter. Questers can be hired under certain circumstances. We need to get there first and prevent Marcella from doing that.”

Jeanie got into the jeep and shut the door. She waited for William to get into the driver seat. They both ignored the ten gate hunters they’d chosen for security.

Those big, angry women, and a few men, lingered impatiently in and around their own vehicles in the cold 7 a.m. breeze. They’d been ready to go since dawn.

William started the engine while doing a final sweep of the people in the bunker. It was important that no one conquered it while they were gone or they would be in Marcella’s position.

Satisfied with what he found–relief that they were leaving was okay. It meant they knew he was dangerous–William eased forward over the fresh snow that had fallen last night.

Jeanie resumed their conversation, glad they were alone in this jeep. “What circumstances?”

“Pity. Great need. And with some questers, power.”

“You mean charms.” Jeanie’s gloved hand went to her coat pocket. She never traveled without her potions.

“I doubt we’ll have that issue with Alexa. She’s a hardcore patriot bent on proving she’s honorable. If it was anyone else from that family, I would have made us leave last night.”

“Even her father?”

William scowled darkly. “Adrian Mitchel is as untrustworthy as they come.”

Jeanie accepted his word on it. She’d only read the files. She’d never met a Mitchel in person. “How can I help my claim?”

“Don’t act desperate. Stay cool and reinforce succession and the constitution.”

“That’s it?”

“Until I read the situation, I can’t give you better advice.” William forced himself to be patient with her. Jeanie was a mystery in most ways, but she also had a dangerous desire to remain an American President instead of a world ruler. “You’ll do fine. Try to rest during the trip. It’ll take us four hours to reach Gainesville.”

“Good idea. I want to look my best for this.”

William gave Jeanie the expected leer and kept his thoughts on the icy road until they were out of range of the bunker.

Inside the bunker, Donna let out a sigh of relief. William had been scanning minds every few minutes. She’d almost been caught working on her plans more than once.

Donna checked her watch. Ginger would wake soon. “I have to get ready.” Donna went into the main chamber, smiling at the two sleeping children in the colorful playpen. She loved Abigail already, and she’d always loved Andrew even though she was unable to control him. The rest of the kids were visiting with lonely women who’d lost their own children. The orphans were getting plenty of care and attention now. It was a relief.

Donna began packing bags for both children. “William thinks I don’t know what he has planned for you. And I didn’t until he brought those gate hunters here.”

Donna was horrified that William was okay with killing kids. “I hope Alexa takes care of him during their meeting. With any luck, none of that political party will return.”

Donna packed faster as one of the kids shifted, starting to wake. She’d drugged all three members of her plan to make sure William didn’t find out what she was doing. “He can’t hurt you if he can’t find you.”

Ginger heard that as she approached the doorway. “It’s dangerous to go against someone like him.” She stayed in the entrance to guard it from looters or explorers. Both types of people were still roaming the dirty halls of this bunker.

“I know.” Donna put an extra blanket into Abigail’s kit. “I can’t let him hurt the kids.”

Ginger didn’t like her old life. Going back wasn’t an option for her. She had no intentions of betraying Donna for the reset. Having unlimited access to any ammunition, weapon, or supplies in this bunker had bought her loyalty. “Are you sure about this? Once I drop them off, you may never get them back.”

Donna nodded. “They’re her kind. When they find out they have two young Mitchels, they’ll guard them with their lives.”

The bounty hunter was dressed for the road and fully armed. Her gear hung heavy, telling Donna the woman had loaded up like she’d been told to. Donna thought about the four large slaves she’d drafted from their bullpen of renters. She hated using males for anything, but after careful consideration, she’d decided they would protect her better than any of the women who’d turned in their husbands, sons, cousins, and friends. As soon as she finished with Ginger, she had to go cut a deal and give the men instructions. She assumed most of them would ask for freedom. If they did the job well, she planned to make sure they got it. Donna believed in keeping her word. *I’m not a monster like the others here. I don’t want to hurt men. I just don’t want to be scared of them anymore.*

Ginger took the two kits and put them over her shoulders. “Where are my wheels?”

“Down in the escape tunnel.” Donna held up two sippy cups. “You’ll have ten hours to get them there before they wake after this feeding, though you should only need seven. If you run late, they’ll probably kill you.”

“They’re just little kids.”

“Keep believing that and I’ll say a prayer for you this time next year.” Donna began mixing the powdered milk and sleeping draught she’d gotten good at using over the years. “Pretend you’re transporting small magic users.”

“I am, right? They have their gifts.” Ginger had made it clear she didn’t usually handle that type of cargo.

“Sort of. If they get angry, they can do things.”

“So what should I do?”

“Don’t make them angry.”

**2**

**UN Bunker 14**

“Hurry up! They’ll be able to see us in a minute!” Kiya and her troops marched around Marcella while casting nervous glances toward the hillside. The front of their bunker was surrounded by gate hunters who’d already tried to break in by setting the main door on fire, and then by trying to blow it up. They hadn’t found this secondary exit, but it was only a matter of time before that changed.

Marcella walked calmly next to Lorey, who kept a shield over them both. The rest of her descendants were staying here to help Kiya’s troops hold down the fort. Marcella wasn’t worried about them. As soon as the gate hunters saw she’d left, they would follow. The people inside this bunker had little to fear from the mob.

Kiya held the door on Marcella’s truck. They were only taking one of their sturdy vehicles for this trip. As the woman got inside and slid over to make room for her magic user, Kiya hurried to the other side to get in.

Marcella unbuttoned her coat and got comfortable. The truck was cold, but she ran warm most days. Menopause was keeping her hot enough to fry food. She assumed the chemicals in her shots were helping that along, but she didn’t care. It was worth it to get the results she needed. Taking over the world wasn’t easy.

“Here they come.” Lorey kept the shield tight around them, leaving Kiya’s group to depend on the sturdiness of the truck.

The gate hunters had been gathering for the last week, drawn by Jeanie’s repeated messages insisting they had what everyone needed to shut those portals. Marcella didn’t, but the gate hunters refused to believe it.

Libby got the truck rolling before Kiya’s door was shut. She was unhappy to be leaving their safety for the unknown of this mission. “They’re going to follow. How will we reach Alexa without fighting them?”

Marcella focused on the woman in the mirror. “Who said we wouldn’t have to fight?”

Libby’s lips thinned, but she didn’t protest. There would be time for that later. Right now, she needed to concentrate on getting out of here. The roads hadn’t been cleared, on purpose. Before, it had kept refugees away from them. Now, it was almost blocking them in.

The angry mob charged around the hillside as they pulled away. Bullets and knives hit the truck and flew into the dirt. The armored vehicle was perfect for this, but most of the people inside the truck still cringed and yelled for the driver to go faster.

Marcella studied the gate hunters who tried to surround them. They created a body wall that Libby plowed through, sending screaming people into the air. Blood squirted; bones crunched under the tires.

A few seconds more and they were in front of the mob that finally thought to run to their own transportation.

Lorey kept track of them mentally, searching for others like herself. So far, the gate hunters didn’t appear to have power of their own.

Kiya glared at everyone as they bounced along, but it was hard to hide the fact that she was enjoying herself. She hadn’t been out of the bunker in months.

Marcella recognized the mood. “That’s why I chose you.”

Kiya’s pudgy lids narrowed. “There are others.”

Marcella nodded. “Several bunkers survived the war and the aftermath, though most of those only hold small groups of weak soldiers or refugees who can’t fight. A couple others might have suited my needs, but your group intrigued me.”

The bald woman was stained by bits of food and her broken, black teeth gleamed at everyone as she grinned. “Your shots have helped, I think.”

Marcella didn’t tell the woman she’d given them a double dose. The patients didn’t need to know the details.

Lorey let go of her shield. She sucked down the water bottle Marcella handed her, not stopping until it was gone.

“Why aren’t they vaccinated?” Kiya had been wondering that since realizing Marcella’s descendants weren’t infected with the rage disease.

“The vaccine doesn’t work on them.” Marcella didn’t add more. Again, patients didn’t need the details, only the results.

Kiya assumed it would interfere with their gifts. She stored that dangerous knowledge and got out her map. “It will take us about four hours to reach Gainesville. What happens then?”

Kiya’s body odor in the truck was rough. Marcella leaned back against the seat to avoid it. “Alexa agreed to host us. She’ll have the road covered.”

“Have you considered this might be a trap to draw us there so she can kill us all?” Libby glowered at Kiya for insisting she come with them as their driver.

Marcella nodded. “Of course. I consider everything.”

“And?”

“And she has honor. If she didn’t, she’d be one of the combatants and not the mediator.”

“I don’t understand.” Libby flipped a piece of dead skin from her bulky, scarred hand into the unused ashtray of the truck. She was dotted in tiny injuries.

Libby had huge arms and two pink ponytails that stuck out from her skull like leashes falling to her shoulders. Pink ribbons were twined through the dyed hair and wrapped around her head like a sweatband. It clashed horribly with the UN uniform and made Marcella dislike her even more. “Alexa could have declared herself the ruler and challenged us to come take it from her. Instead, she’s picking one of us to rule. She doesn’t want the job; she has honor.”

“Meaning you don’t.”

Kiya grunted at Libby. “Shut up now.”

Marcella smirked. “I never claimed to possess that limiting trait. Perhaps this Jeanie person does and you can switch loyalty to her.”

“I wouldn’t!” Libby clamped her lips together and refused to say anything else.

Kiya now studied Libby, wondering if Marcella’s prediction was true.

Lorey chuckled quietly. When Marcella wanted to screw with someone’s mind, she did a great job of it.

*Bang!*

A bullet slammed into the front window and bounced off. Everyone in the truck jumped.

Lorey scanned, narrowing in. “Sniper in the tree to your right.”

Marcella examined the trees. “Most of those are thin. Run them down.”

Libby steered that way, heart thumping.

Kiya grinned hugely as they neared the stand of weak trees. This truck could take it. “Faster!”

The truck sped up. It hit the first tree and snapped it in half, sending the top flying. A body lurched into the air, trying to avoid being hit.

Wooden shrapnel plunged into the other trees, the ground, and the body now flying through the air. Blood sprayed the windshield as they cleared the thicket and kept going. Haunting screams faded behind them.

Libby grinned at Kiya. “That was fun!”

Kiya laughed.

So did Lorey. *Marcella always knows how to pick her troops.*

Marcella was pleased. She settled in to rest while they traveled, hoping Jeanie’s defenders weren’t as wild as her own. *The element of surprise is nice, as is having well trained soldiers, but making them bloodthirsty will gain me leadership–in one way or another.*

The mob began to catch up with the truck.

Libby increased speed, plowing through debris piles that were no longer recognizable. Bits of garbage flew onto the windshield and stuck to the blood.

Libby activated the wipers and sprayed the glass.

The mob stayed behind them, unable to go as fast as the truck that had been sheltered for years. All they’d needed to do was add fluids and change a couple of belts and it was good as new. Those chasing them were driving dented wagons, small compacts, and other vehicles that were easy on gas but vulnerable to the rough terrain.

“It looks like most of them followed.” Kiya was glad to know there wouldn’t be an army on her doorstep when they returned.

Lorey and Marcella exchanged a brief glance but didn’t respond. Marcella had called her western bunker a month ago for reinforcements. When she’d fled north, she had contacted them and provided a new location. When they were finished with this meeting, they would return to the UN bunker and join the hundred defenders from the west who had orders to get in and take over.

Marcella had only brought six of her descendants from bunker 11, but they were the strongest and most loyal. Even now, Vanessa was getting ready to take over the UN troops and put them to work on Marcella’s projects.

They would all probably travel to bunker 11 after that, even if Alexa awarded Jeanie the title. Marcella knew how to get in; she had the codes. Bunker 11 was open for use, but the inner workings of the security system couldn’t be changed without the passwords and only Marcella had those. Even if she won, Jeanie was doomed.

**3**

“We will join you shortly.”

“You’ll hear us.” Alexa led her team away from the museum while Yani and his group began transporting the first load of relics to the truck they’d secured. Everyone was distracted by the speed of the vampires as they flew toward the corner and disappeared without making a single sound even though the ground was covered in snow and ice.

The wind blew more of the white powder over the team as they followed Alexa.

No one wanted to be out here in the afternoon sun and freezing weather, but she’d insisted it was needed. The men had hoped their next battle would be indoors, but Alexa wanting to train out here said that hope was futile.

The team was eager for this lesson, however. They’d gone to the hospital and taken those items to Marlin’s group upon rising. Then Alexa had come out here to train her bored fighters.

Alexa didn’t talk as she walked. Her mind was on the next half hour. Something had to be revealed and she was dreading it. If not for their coming guests, she wouldn’t have mentioned it at all.

Alexa waited until she was sure they were out of hearing range of Yani and his family. Then she stopped.

Her expression told her team it wasn’t good news.

“You’ve all noticed I’m distracted and off my game. I’ve heard you whispering.”

The men around Alexa stiffened at her words. They slowly rotated toward her, bracing to be scolded for not minding their own business.

“I have a problem. Until I can fix it, I can’t teach you how to deal with it.” Alexa walked backward, clearing the space she needed for a demonstration. “Watch closely. I’ve duplicated this eighteen times now and the end is always the same. Help me find a solution.”

The sun came through the clouds. Alexa lowered her hood.

She immediately cringed from the bright light. “I can’t fight like this.”

She lifted her hood and trembled under the waves of fading pain. “It’s almost certain one of our many enemies will use light against us. Our condition is well known. My first reaction is what you see here.” Alexa lowered her hood and groaned at the agony. “It’s getting worse each time.”

The bright morning sun seared her skin. She quickly covered up. “Whatever the wizard did, it wasn’t permanent. I’m like you again when it comes to the sun–I can’t stand it–but something changed a few days ago. Even the smallest beam becomes debilitating very quickly. Repeated exposure increases the effect.”

The men waited for more and tried to come up with a solution. There was no way they could guarantee all fights would take place in the dark. Alexa was right–they had a big problem.

“I want you to fire at me. I’m going to force myself into a different reaction, if I can.”

“Boss?” Edward and the others stared at her, suddenly sure they would refuse this order.

“Use rocks, then.” Alexa was too concerned about the issue to discipline them for their rebellious thoughts. “But throw them hard. I can’t force it if I don’t feel threatened.”

All the men picked up frozen stones, choosing the smallest, dullest ones they could find.

The sun’s strength increased.

“Now!” She lowered her hood.

The small projectiles slammed into her arm, leg, and hip as she cringed away from the light.

Snow caught the glare and flashed over her body like a bomb blast.

Alexa couldn’t move. The heat of the sun began to fry her alive.

Edward ran over, dodging rocks to flip her hood up and pull her cloak shut. He swept her off her feet and hurried into the nearby sewer.

The others followed, dropping rocks and muttering.

Alexa stayed that way for long minutes where the team began to realize she had really done this part eighteen times. Each of them were able to recall moments where they’d seen her freeze and left her alone so they didn’t break her train of thought. They were horrified that they hadn’t known what was happening.

Alexa slowly returned to herself, mind lighting up with anger at not being able to conquer this without help. “I wasn’t going to tell you until I’d figured out the solution.”

Edward rubbed her icy hands, now understanding all of her recent mood swings. She wasn’t disappointed with her team.

“No. I’m disappointed with myself.” Alexa drew in a deep breath and pulled away from Edward. “We’re going to train like normal today, outside to help build a tolerance, but you need to be working on this every spare moment. There’s little doubt this will be used against us. We have to get ready for it.”

“We will, Boss.” Billy scanned and found Yani coming toward them. He stepped in front of Alexa so the vampire wouldn’t detect her weakness.

Alexa grunted as she picked up the conversation the vampires were having in low tones that even a normal standing right next to them wouldn’t be able to hear. “He knows.”

Jacob brightened. “That’s good, right? Maybe he’ll have a solution.”

David joined Billy on guard duty. “Or maybe he’ll know how to kill us where everyone else has failed.”

Yani didn’t speak as he and his family surrounded the team, but it was clear by his sympathetic profile that he felt bad for them.

Reina didn’t hold back. “Now you know how to kill us, as well. We’re on equal ground.”

None of the team was comforted.

Alexa regained full use of her body and mind. She shivered in relief and regret. *Maybe Brian will find a way to reverse it.*

Alexa walked toward the exit of the dry, cold sewer. “Let’s make some noise. The undead need a target.”

She was followed without question by eleven worried vampires. If not for the dilemma, it would have been an adventure for her team. They hadn’t worked with other vampires before. Because of her revelation, concern replaced the excitement and made it a somber march to her chosen training area.

# Chapter Eleven

**Playing Nice**

**1**

**“C**an everyone see the targets?” Alexa walked behind the men who were lined up at the brick wall. It was higher than Alexa, but all six men were taller. The blowing snow was their hindrance.

The brick wall had once been part of a house. The destroyed home lingered all around them, putting off ugly vibes that said ghosts liked it here. The moldy furniture and bones in the corners added to the effect.

“Working with rifles isn’t like a handgun. They’re heavier, longer, and they fire differently. You’ve learned that well over our time together, but we haven’t drilled during weather like this.” Alexa tugged her cloak over her front instead of fastening it. She wanted to be able to reach her Colts if needed. “There are seven targets half a mile from here. You’ll know which one is yours when you sight them up. Don’t miss. Fail this and I’ll drill you for hours.”

All the men tensed at her warning. It was freezing out here and the bright sunlight glinted off the snow in waves of agony. The white powder had started falling late last night and still hadn’t stopped.

Mark barely held in a groan. He was last in rifle skills. The AR-7 on the wall mocked him silently.

“On my call, I want five slugs in those centers. Go!”

All six men hurried forward and rested their rifles against their shoulders. They aimed and began to fire.

Alexa stayed by Mark, spotting issues to correct. She couldn’t fix it if she didn’t know what was broken.

Mark tried hard, but he didn’t love the rifle the way he did his handgun. He pulled the trigger and groaned.

Alexa stepped forward and put her hands over his, ignoring the wet feel from melting snow. She directed his aim and helped him get a bulls-eye.

“How do you do that?”

Alexa ignored Mark’s approval. She put his arms in the right place again, then nodded.

Mark didn’t verify it. He trusted her.

The slug went into the center of his target, hitting the first bullet and driving it deep into the brick wall where she’d hung the paper targets with their names an hour ago.

Yani and his group hung back and watched their surroundings. Covered in the gear of gunfighters, Yani’s family looked like members of Alexa’s team now, even his mother who was once again using her glamour spell. They felt like it every time Alexa swept them to verify they were paying attention.

“Close your eyes.”

Mark did it reluctantly. He understood the lesson, but he didn’t think it would work.

“Can you see the targets in your mind?”

“Sure.”

Alexa frowned at his flippant tone. “Put a slug into each man’s paper.”

Mark turned to look at her. “I can’t do that. No one can do that.”

Alexa held out a hand for his rifle.

Mark moved so she could take his place.

Alexa stood on a small broken brick to view over the edge of the wall. She shut her eyes and began firing his rifle.

Edward and the others watched in admiration as Alexa nailed the center of four targets and got the next ring on the fifth. She paused before firing one last time.

“Five centers!”

Alexa handed Mark the rifle for reloading, but she wasn’t happy. “Five of six, huh? You aren’t the only one who needs this. We’ll all drill now.” *Until our guests arrive.*

Mark and the others realized they’d failed. They didn’t protest as Alexa drew her rifle and began peppering the targets in annoyance.

The sound of firing filled the air and echoed across the city. It began to draw the undead from their stationary places around the museum. There had been three last night. Now, there were eight walking corpses, with more coming through the city.

Yani kept track of the undead as well as the living, the weather, and the shadows near them that might be hiding threats. He didn’t slack in his duty.

Alexa drew in a calming breath and reloaded. “We’ll go one at a time now. Fire as fast as you can. On round two, take your time and then compare the differences.” She nodded at Edward.

Mark waited for his turn, hating it that he wasn’t as skilled as the others. “What else can I do?”

“Practice every day.” Alexa didn’t tell him that’s how she’d learned. She didn’t need to.

Mark nodded. “I will.”

Alexa shoved the magazine into place, tugged to verify it had fed in correctly, and watched the others take their shots.

Yani didn’t want to interrupt the lesson, but he felt something coming.

Alexa grunted. “I know. Hold your ground.”

Yani snorted at the insult. “As if we would flee!”

Alexa didn’t answer as Mark stepped to the wall for his shot.

Mark fired fast and then stopped, slowing his mind. His second shot missed the center by an inch.

Alexa wasn’t surprised. “You did better while rushing. You can use that to improve your skill.”

Mark saw her point. If he started out rushing and slowed at the last minute, it would retrain his hand-eye coordination.

“Do it again.”

Mark took another turn, with the same results.

“You’re pulling too hard when you think about it. Pretend it’s a cold nipple that’s tired from overuse.”

Mark snorted out amusement. “You got it.” He fired and hit the center.

“Very good.” Alexa motioned Billy to take his shot.

Yani stepped closer to them to provide better protection. “One minute away.”

Alexa ignored him. She didn’t need someone else to count the threat. She was already doing that, but it was a good test of Yani’s estimating skills.

Yani braced to fight. So did his family.

**2**

“We’re arriving.” William slowed as heavier snow dropped onto the jeep and the ground. Thick flakes stuck to the windows and made it hard to view the dead city in front of them. Tall buildings and empty parking lots appeared without signs of welcome or threats.

Jeanie straightened, yawning. “I was dreaming about the war. There was a lot of gunfire.”

*Bang-bang-bang!*

Jeanie flinched at the nearby noise.

William kept his eyes on the slick road. “It wasn’t a dream. There’s a battle happening around here.”

Jeanie grumbled. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because it’s Alexa clearing our path through the undead.” William hadn’t been getting panicked thoughts from victims.

“Oh. Well, that’s okay, I suppose.” Jeanie began smoothing her hair and checking her makeup in the mirror on the visor. She paused as she caught sight of the next big street. “Marcella’s here, too.”

William nodded. “They brought one truck and four people. She’s less of a threat than we estimated.”

Jeanie stared hard at the black truck flying up the snowy street. Hatred flashed across her face. “Any chance you can just kill her right now?”

William had already considered it. “She has too much public support. We have to play this safe for a little while.”

Jeanie shrugged. “But if you get the chance…”

William chuckled. “Yes.”

“Good.” Jeanie resumed making herself presentable. “What about the gate hunters rolling along behind us like they belong here?”

William chanced a fast glance in the mirror. He knew she meant their protection as well as the mob following Marcella’s truck. “Selma will handle them when it’s time.”

Jeanie scowled again. “I don’t like her much. She’s too quiet.”

William sighed. *I wish you were.* “She’s one of us.”

“One of *you*, you mean.”

William didn’t answer. Jeanie would figure out her status. He expected Alexa to detect it right away. The Mitchel was smarter than any of his companions. *I should have supported her and put her in charge of the country. Instead, I have a demanding, entitled princess or a man-hating slaver.* William sighed. *I need to search their group for the other kid. As soon as I find it, I may slaughter everyone for making me go through with this farce.*

**3**

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” Libby didn’t slow as they reached the edge of the city. Heavy wind pushed against the truck, forcing her to manhandle it down the center of the snowy road. “We may all die here.”

Kiya frowned at Libby, but she was starting to agree this might have been a bad idea. They’d hoped the mob of gate hunters would fall off after a couple of hours, but some of the cars were about to catch up.

Kiya greedily studied the buildings they were passing. “I wonder why these stores aren’t stripped.”

Lorey pointed at an Army sign. “Maybe they took the survivors belowground.”

Marcella spotted movement. Four snow covered jeeps were flying through the slush toward them.

“I assume that’s your competition.” Kiya made a face. “We could ram them right now. Those weak ass Army jeeps won’t stand up to this armored truck.”

Marcella hated to defend the former military, but honesty insisted on it. “Those jeeps are tougher than they look. They’ll still be running when this truck’s engine seizes and leaves us on the side of the road. Don’t pick a fight you can’t win.”

“Do you hear that?” Libby slowed a little to pinpoint the direction. “It sounds like gunfire.”

Marcella knew who it was. “Follow the sound. That’s our host.”

Libby exchanged a glance with Kiya, who nodded. They had put their faith in Marcella. It was already too late to call it off.

**4**

Alexa and her men continued the rifle lesson, but the time went by fast. She could feel it whizzing past as snow continued to fall over them.

“Empty those magazines and reload!” Alexa kept shouting to be heard over the rapid firing. “Mark will lead us a quarter mile northwest in seven…six…”

The men who had half a magazine left fired faster as adrenaline lit up their nerves and brought their senses closer. Even over the gunfire, the noise of undead staggering their way was audible.

Mark slammed in a fresh magazine, acutely aware that he only had two more. He stepped to the lead, leaving space behind him for the team to line up as each man finished and reloaded.

The wind whipped flakes around them and created a whiteout effect in various directions as snow blew off the buildings and showered the team.

Alexa fired again. “Move out!”

Mark obeyed, marching straight to the intersection even though a small horde of undead was streaming toward them from that zone. He ignored the snow and the wind as he scanned everything else.

“Pause at the intersection and clear all directions.” Alexa slammed in a fresh magazine and fell into the rear of their line.

Mark fired ruthlessly, hitting brains, chests, and legs. Rushing now, he didn’t hesitate or miss.

Alexa walked backward to clear their rear as the undead reached their practice area.

Yani stayed with the team and waited for orders. He knew not to interfere with this lesson. He was enjoying being outside during daylight, however. The clothing modifications Alexa had made were good.

His family didn’t understand why Alexa was taking these risks, but they were also well trained. Until Yani told them to attack, they would only provide protection for the gunfighters.

Mark fired shots in rapid succession as he strode forward. The pleasure of the job filled his hand and came out through the rifle. He cleared a path and led his team into the center of the snowy intersection.

Alexa slid the empty magazine out as she knelt in the slush.

Jacob knew she was reloading. He rotated to cover her and their rear.

Yani was impressed by their way of moving, of fighting on the go, and all of it being done without words. It was clear this type of drill wasn’t new to them.

The team formed a shoulder-to-shoulder circle, facing the snowy streets. All of them registered movement.

“Four jeeps.”

“One truck and a snow cloud behind it.”

“Small horde.”

“Four undead.”

“Five nervous vampires.”

Alexa and the others burst out laughing at Billy’s quip.

Yani stared, no longer impressed. “You’re crazy.”

Billy grinned and made a face. Then Alexa’s hand circled and the Driver lifted his rifle and began firing at the targets in front of him and David.

Yani saw they didn’t shoot at the truck or the four jeeps.

Alexa slung her warm rifle over her shoulder as she looked to Yani. “The gate hunters want to reset time.”

Yani narrowed in on the snowy mob behind the armored truck. “Do you wish them all removed or just the front line?”

“That front line vanishing should turn them around. If it doesn’t, keep going until it does.”

Yani and his group took off toward the tall black truck.

In the truck, Libby and Kiya had spotted the gunfighters and the undead. The sight of half of Alexa’s team flying toward them made Libby’s stomach twist. “What should we do?”

Marcella didn’t spot any guns coming up. “Not our problem. Keep rolling.”

Fear filled the truck as the running group reached them.

Yani bared his fangs at the women. He ran a hand along the window, scratching his nails across the snowy glass and metal to produce the sound all humans hated.

Everyone in the truck cringed or reached for weapons.

Yani ran faster so they didn’t have time to aim. He and his family met the front line of the snow cloud; they punched through windows and shoved vehicles into each other. Cars flipped into the air and landed on survivors and dead alike. The crash was horrific.

Alexa sighed. “Perhaps I didn’t word it correctly.”

Edward wanted to chuckle, but between reloading and watching the jeeps now reaching their location, there wasn’t time.

“Half team escort per group, by rank. Edward and Mark will lead. Go!”

Edward, Daniel, and Billy split off to meet the two jeeps of strangers while Mark, Jacob, and David took up a three-point stance around the armored truck as it slid to a stop in the slush.

Alexa swept for more undead and found the roads still and bloody. She completed the sweep while Yani and his group took vengeance on the mob of gate hunters. The vampire tribe hated all the groups who’d been in Bridgeport when Zaro was killed. Alexa wasn’t sure if any of the gate hunters now trying to avoid them would survive. Debris and bodies lay in every direction, leaving gory messes in the snow banks.

Marcella recovered first. She evaluated the woman in the front jeep. She was positive who it was.

Jeanie immediately got out. She didn’t fear creatures of the night or bodies that should have returned to dust by now. She marched toward the truck, finger lifting. “Hey! You!”

Edward stepped in front of her. “Wait by your vehicle or leave.”

Jeanie stopped, but she didn’t go back. “I just want to talk to her.”

“I’m sure there’ll be time for that.” Edward took her arm and led her back to the jeep as the rest of her group got out.

Bundled in a thick coat, it was hard to distinguish features or details that might help them later, but every man on Alexa’s team was instantly jealous of William. He was handsome, powerful, dangerous. All six men wanted to be like that, but they’d only achieved parts of it.

Marcella pointed at Selma. “Traitor!”

Selma shoved her headband higher to hold the mass of long brown curls that wanted to spill over her vision. She’d left it loose to draw Marcella. “I was trapped. It’s not willing.”

Marcella understood, though she wouldn’t forgive it. “You have too much honor.”

Edward scowled. “There’s no such thing.”

Marcella’s spiked hair and tattooed skin was attractive to Alexa’s men, who approved of body art, but the coldness in those dark orbs implied she would slit their throats and laugh while doing it if she got the chance.

Jeanie stared between them. “How do you know Selma?”

Marcella fired the first verbal shot. “Selma was in charge of my scientific level. She organized things, picked the kids, and rotated them through the programs.”

Selma’s face hardened as she realized Marcella was already trying to pay her back. “I didn’t betray you!”

“That’s your perspective; it isn’t mine.”

“You experimented on kids?” Rachel stared at Selma in shock. “You’re evil.”

Selma moved away from the gate hunter while Marcella chuckled cruelly.

More screams and crashes echoed to them. No one watched. They didn’t want to see the vampires killing the mob of gate hunters even though they were glad that group was being decimated.

Even William was a bit disturbed by Alexa’s choice to include the monsters. He stared at the most attractive of them, aware that something wasn’t right. *She’s pretty, but it’s not real, I think.*

Reina paused in ripping out the throat of a squirming gate hunter. She grinned at him in invitation.

William grimaced. *No.*

David saw it and snickered silently. *I don’t think his cum will drip anymore, Mother.*

William was too shocked at the thought to respond.

Reina laughed in her throat, making most of them shudder and three of them stiffen.

William exchanged a curious glance with David this time. *Really?*

David nodded. *It was great.*

Jacob chuckled now, catching onto what was happening.

Alexa let them go. If William was so easily tricked, then all of her dangerous plans hadn’t been needed.

Cold wind brought the scent of fresh decay to the group, making noses curl and stomach’s churn. All the strangers were wearing big coats that hid their real shapes and any weapons they were carrying. A layer of snow quickly gathered on the people and added to their discomfort.

William faced Alexa. “Thank you for giving us an escort.”

William was a handsome threat smiling at her while lying about his intentions. Alexa knew him for what he was.

So did her men. He put off more vibes of danger than Yani. The two women exchanging glares and ugly gestures appeared innocent in comparison.

Marcella’s big defenders had needy gazes that traveled Alexa’s men continuously in longing. They’d been without for a while.

Yani and his group returned in quick blurs that made it clearer what they were. They joined Alexa and waited for orders.

Alexa saw there were survivors, but they were all fleeing away from the city now. She didn’t praise Yani, however. She hadn’t forgotten those were Americans who just wanted their old lives back.

“I can’t believe you brought them here.” Marcella avoided looking at Yani. “This is a terrible insult.” Libby’s hulking form next to her would have been a comfort in another situation. Here, it wasn’t nearly enough to make Marcella feel safe.

“I agree.” Jeanie wiped snow from her arm as thick flakes continued to fall. “But it wasn’t my bunker they destroyed. I came along after.”

Lorey slid her coat back to be able to reach her weapons if it was needed. The movement drew attention from men and women in all the groups.

William stared at Lorey. Marcella’s leather bound protector was a surprise. He hadn’t expected Marcella to have a descendant.

Lorey felt William’s pull. She ignored him, positive it would drive him crazy. She could tell he was powerful, but deep down, he was just another sexy man who didn’t know his place.

Lorey became aware of several men admiring her thick blonde curls and leather clad body, but she wasn’t interested in most of them. Only brunettes attracted her and even then, only those who had scars pulled at her. Those with pristine skin hadn’t been broken in and she had no patience for that. Her men had to enjoy being ridden while knowing how to survive the ride.

Rachel didn’t shy from Alexa’s hard gaze when it got around to her. “You should have killed us.”

Alexa nodded. “Perhaps I’ll remedy that while you’re here. The second chance I gifted you with obviously means nothing.”

Rachel didn’t like it that she wasn’t the smartest person in the group, but there was no denying it was true. Her companions were brilliant and ruthless. It made her feel small and vulnerable. Alexa’s threat didn’t help.

The small group behind her glowered at Alexa for not being on their side.

Alexa regarded Selma.

The nature controller fought the urge to open fire on her enemy. William had made it clear they needed Alexa’s call on the Presidency before anyone was allowed to challenge her.

Alexa moved on to Marcella, aware of all the hostile thoughts and wishes of her guests.

Marcella gazed back without fear, but with caution. She knew what was at stake here.

Alexa felt the kinship then and smothered the need to verify it. Edward was right. There would be time for drama later.

William met Edward’s eyes as he dug into the man for clues on Alexa’s choice. He shoved through Edward’s defensive mental wall as if it wasn’t there.

Edward drew his gun and aimed at William’s chest. “Would you end it all right here?”

Alexa grunted. “Play nice. For now.”

William withdrew from Edward’s mind.

Edward slowly holstered.

Jeanie smiled at Alexa and held out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you!”

Alexa snorted and turned toward the museum. “Let’s go.”

Jeanie followed, not protesting the snowy walk like she wanted to. “Are we leaving our vehicles?”

“Yes. You can collect them later.” Alexa didn’t wait for any of them to gather their gear or ask more questions. She marched toward the museum, taking the path that let them view all the bodies. As she walked, she studied the only one of the group who mattered to her at this moment.

William felt her scanning his thoughts. He opened his mind and invited her inside. *I didn’t know you were beautiful.*

Alexa snickered as her guts rolled over. *It’s funny you think flattery works on me.* She brought up her shield and held it for the rest of the walk, hoping it would settle her stomach.

“She’s a magic user, too!”

William flashed a warning glance at Jeanie.

Jeanie ignored it for glaring at Marcella as Lorey also brought up a shield around her.

“They’re all magic users!”

William sighed. “This isn’t going to be fun.”

Edward laughed. “It’s funny that you thought it would be.”

William recognized the words and connected the man to Alexa as a lover. He stored the information and followed them inside as the wind blew harder and more snow rained down on the dead city.

# Chapter Twelve

**I Object**

**1**

**N**o one spoke as they walked through the dim, cold museum. Each group stayed together, staring, pointing, scheming, or doubting their plans were going to work.

Alexa’s crew stayed close to their charges and kept their minds blank. Alexa had told them the descendants would try to read their thoughts. They weren’t supposed to let it happen.

Yani and his family walked near those six men and used deep red stares to cower the strangers into obedience. They knew the best way to maintain Alexa’s support was to be sure her team was safe. That bond was set in stone. Even if something happened to her, the team had to be covered. Yani had already decided the men would join his tribe if Alexa died. Their strength was amazing and they were smart. Those two traits didn’t usually go together.

Alexa entered the rotunda and went to the chairs near the tiny window. She didn’t tell anyone what to do as she took the center seat.

Jacob and Edward joined her while the rest of their team stood on either side.

William saw the bedrolls in the corner and understood this was Alexa’s sleeping area and main den. He examined the rotunda again and found the chairs broken into three groups. He guided Jeanie to the center chair in the set closest to Alexa. He and Selma sat with her, leaving Rachel and the other gate hunters to stand behind them.

Marcella and Kiya sat in the opposite chairs. Lorey and their driver stood, sweeping everyone the same way Alexa’s team was now doing.

People took off their heavy coats or at least unbuttoned them in the warmer center chamber where Alexa had a small fire burning. The normals among the groups were grateful for the heat.

Jerry’s thin but healthy body drew attention from the UN women as he removed his plaid jacket and gloves.

Jerry ignored them. Only his wife’s slender body drew desire from him, but it had been years since they’d given into those feelings. Jerry considered himself celibate, like a monk. He’d enjoyed staying at the convent for that reason. It was the only bond he’d found with those odd religious people who’d been dying by the time he’d found his family.

For a full minute, the thick silence held as they all made adjustments to their plans.

Then Yani and his family glided to each of the exits and hovered like malevolent ghosts waiting for the right moment to strike.

Marcella stared at the vampire closest to her. “Why did you attack my bunker? I did you no wrong.”

Yani’s face darkened with his anger. “You sent the killers to Bridgeport. My father gave his life in that battle.”

Marcella wasn’t sorry. “Do vampires have lives to give?”

Jeanie snickered.

Yani and his family hissed.

The gate hunters recoiled. They’d had dealings with vampires and they didn’t want to repeat those moments.

William snorted. “We have more important issues than blood drinkers and bunker battles.”

“Agreed.” Jeanie looked at Alexa. “Have you made a choice?” She was hoping this could all end right now in her victory.

“No, though I have done some research.” Alexa gestured to Marcella. “You’ll get an opening statement in a few minutes. You’ll provide your residency, family line, number of supporters, and so on.”

Marcella had already worked on most of that before leaving the UN den. “I’m ready.” She swallowed a protest about the men being allowed to stay for this. Slavery wasn’t a good topic to bring up right now.

“Do you want the same from me?” Jeanie was also prepared to lay out her details. She hung her coat on her chair and sat with her legs crossed and her mind closed to every descendant who tried to read her.

Marcella did much the same, frustrating the mind readers. They also tried to read Alexa, but she shoved them out while mentally laughing.

“No.” Alexa pointed to two large books stacked near her chair. “I verified the line of succession. I want proof that you are Jeanie Hornsteader, Secretary of Transportation.”

Jeanie pulled her wallet from an inside pocket. She tossed it at Alexa.

Edward caught it without moving from his spot. He gave it a fast scan before handing it to his boss.

Alexa knew the woman was telling the truth from the lack of hesitation, but she still took out the pieces of identification and compared them to the female sitting smugly between her two powerful magic users. Alexa didn’t sense magic in Jeanie and she was the next person in the line of succession. The odds on her went up.

Marcella felt it. “I challenge the right of succession.”

“On what grounds?” Alexa didn’t mind the side trip. Mediators didn’t conform to set rules, though they were supposed to have stellar ethics.

“It’s irrelevant. The constitution ended when the public went years without a leader. The right of conquest comes into play now. For the last ten months, I’ve been the law. I have thousands of supporters across this country. My family is running the only working radio stations and airfield.”

Jeanie shook her head. “Even if that were true, you were run out of your bunker. You admitted it by confronting the…blood drinker.”

Marcella smiled coldly. “Ask him if he ran me out.”

All eyes went to Yani.

Yani was trapped. He had to tell the truth. “She was not there when we attacked. This is the first time I have seen her.”

Marcella was smug as she crossed her arms over her thin chest. “I left because of the earthquake. I found out about the attack after the fact.”

Alexa heard the half lie there, but she didn’t call the woman on it. She tossed the wallet back to Jeanie. “I’ll hear Marcella’s opening statement now. Jeanie will speak after that. Then I will show you to your flats so you may rest and prepare for the trial that will take place after dinner.”

Both women and their groups paused, making faces.

Alexa frowned right back. “The trial will determine your fitness to lead this country. If you fail, you will be removed to prevent another war.”

The standing gate hunters shouted or started advising Jeanie to leave. Smells of perfume and cologne wafted through the room, but Alexa wasn’t impressed by the attempts to clean up and act presentable. The gate hunters didn’t seem like it right now, but they were just as dangerous as everyone else gathered here.

Jeanie’s calm façade faltered. “That wasn’t our deal.”

“You don’t make the rules here. The mediator does and I’ve decided my country will not be torn apart again this way.”

“That’s not fair.” Jeanie relied on the luck that had gotten her this far. “I understand you removing the conqueror of our country, but I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Your objection is noted. You may plead your case when it is your turn to talk.” Alexa motioned to Marcella. “Proceed.”

Marcella didn’t like being told what to do. She forced herself to obey as resentment grew.

“Wait. I challenge the right of conquest.” Jeanie had decided if Marcella could use it or do it, so could she. “The Nuremberg Principles require that states refrain from threats or the use of force against each other. Right of conquest hasn’t been recognized since 1945.”

Alexa regarded Marcella. “Your response?”

“Conflicts between large bodies became rarer after 1947, but not because of the Nuremberg crap. Most able-bodied men were in the armies that fought in WWII, or they were already in peaceful nations. There wasn’t enough warm bodies left to start another massive conflict, but numerous smaller groups and states have been involved in constant warfare since then and our government always recognized the winners because they had the most logical chance of ensuring peace through obvious force. Also, this isn’t a large state. I’m a small operation, so her objection is moot on both ends. It doesn’t apply to me.”

Jeanie started to argue.

Alexa held up a hand. “The Nuremberg Principles don’t apply to us since there was a large war between large states and we are part of that aftermath. All treaties and agreements made through the United Nations paused when Martial Law was put into place. Only our constitution and Martial Law rules apply.”

Shouts filled the air again.

Yani and his family stepped forward, mouths opening, fangs descending.

The audience fell quiet.

“I object!” Jeanie hated only getting part of what she wanted.

“On what grounds?”

“Those agreements were put in place to protect smaller populations from being conquered. Our constitution encourages us to protect those who are weaker.”

“Do you wish to put a specific passage into evidence for me to reconsider?”

Jeanie faltered. “Well, I don’t know exactly where it is in there, but I know it is.”

“You will have a chance to introduce more evidence later. For now, my ruling stands and we will continue.” Alexa nodded to Marcella. “Proceed.”

Alexa’s team was impressed by how she was handling things.

Yani was confused. He didn’t know many of the terms they were using. Court proceedings hadn’t been studied by the vampires as they hadn’t spent time in front of judges unless they were having dinner.

William’s group was unhappy. It felt like Alexa was already biased against Jeanie.

Marcella was encouraged. Alexa seemed exactly like she’d heard–patriotic and hardass. “I was born in Dover. My family have been pilots, plumbers, and planters. We’ve driven trucks, hunted fugitives, and hauled garbage. We’ve served in all branches of the military. We’ve owned homes, paid taxes, and spent time in jail. We are Americans at the very core. This isn’t a foreign invasion. This is a takeover by a citizen who has every right to determine the future of this country.”

Marcella’s words sent anger and chills through the room.

“I have already been recognized by thousands of survivors as the leader of America. I have created laws that are being followed, and programs that are being used.” Marcella waved toward Jeanie’s stiff form. “She’s been in *my* bunker distributing things and carrying out those rules and programs. It’s happening as we speak. As such, you can’t take leadership from me and gift it to someone else. Our constitution requires a vote and until then, I already have control. Taking it away would throw the country back into disarray, which, on a side note, is why the law of conquest was used for so long. Under that right, other powers recognized the winner as the legal leader in order to keep more citizens from dying. If they won, they clearly were stronger and likely to win again. We have peace right now, in most ways. If you replace me, even while we wait for the vote, it will end that peace, making *you* the aggressor.”

Silence fell as Alexa considered, Marcella sat down, and Jeanie tried to find a defense for the clever trap.

Wind smacked snow against the window as it howled through the alley between the museum sections. The temperature dropped noticeably.

Alexa focused on Jeanie. “You may proceed.”

Jeanie stood up, arm swinging angrily. “Our constitution comes before conquest, UN agreements, or any other outside influence.” Jeanie pointed at the troops with Marcella. “This woman has conspired with our enemy. We all know the United Nations tried to invade our country right after the war. She’s aligned with them. Letting her have control would be the same as handing America over to the enemy right when our people are most vulnerable.”

Marcella spoke up over the agreeing shouts from the gate hunters. “I object. The United Nations came here to offer help and supplies after the war. They did not invade.”

“Liar!”

“Enough.” Alexa’s tone became stern. “We will be civil or the fines will suck.” She bared her fangs.

Her team, and Yani’s family, did the same.

Everyone tensed or leaned away, even William. He hadn’t expected Alexa to have such strong guards. He also hadn’t considered that her entire team was like them or that they were descendants. Even for a byzan, it could be a hard fight if Alexa ruled against them.

“Do you wish to provide evidence that the UN troops with Marcella invaded this country?”

Jeanie nodded triumphantly. She drew papers from her pocket and walked them to Alexa. “These are messages I printed from the computer at my new bunker.”

Alexa scanned them, not surprised that Marcella was making deals with the enemy.

“How do we know she didn’t make those up?” Marcella was sure Jeanie would do that if she thought it would help her cause.

“Good question.” Alexa lifted a brow at Jeanie. “Can you prove these are valid?”

“Yes.” Jeanie was already drawing her phone out. “I took these photos over the last four years.” She held out the phone. “I also took pictures in bunker 11. You can clearly read the messages on the screen.”

Alexa began swiping through the pictures of the government compounds, members of the old government, and bodies of those people after they’d died. “The messages are entered into evidence, as is this phone.” Alexa placed it in the basket next to her that she’d brought in for this reason. “My preliminary ruling is the messages are genuine. We will proceed under the assumption that the UN did indeed invade this country.” Alexa’s voice grew louder as Kiya and Marcella both objected. “However, you have not proven that *these* UN troops are here for that intention. I saw none of them in your evidence.”

Marcella supported that. “They landed after the war and took no part in any conflict.”

“We’re asking for citizenship. We agreed to come to America so we could apply.” Kiya wanted that clear. “We’re refugees who’ve done nothing wrong. We’re here to become Americans. We don’t want to go back.”

“So noted.” Alexa was becoming concerned now. Both women had a strong claim and neither of them deserved it. This wasn’t going to be as easy as she had hoped. “Proceed.”

Jeanie was still disappointed only half of her argument had been accepted. “It doesn’t matter when you examine our constitution. I’m the rightful President. Under the rules of Martial Law, there doesn’t even need to be a vote. It was never lifted and I’m the only one left.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Mostly. The pictures on the phone are eleven of the thirteen people who were above me. The other two were the President, who was strangled by one of her guards, and the Vice President, who was killed by Safe Haven. Benjamin didn’t get to pass leadership before females sacked his bunker and killed everyone.”

Mark and Marcella both flinched.

Alexa knew Mark felt bad about killing the President now. Their identical reactions told her Marcella had been there for the other moment. “Fair enough. My preliminary ruling is for Jeanie. She is so recognized as the official next in line for the Presidency.”

Marcella couldn’t protest because Jeanie had brought too much proof. She stuck to what she was sure of. “The right of conquest doesn’t care who official leaders are or were, since those positions are almost always dissolved when the new rulers take over.”

Jeanie returned to her chair. “Nothing she said or has done matters. This is America. We have a ruling document and it says I’m the President. Everything else is bunk.”

Everyone waited for Alexa to speak. Each of them hoped she would make a ruling right now, but none of them were ready for the chaos if she did.

“I will consider both your arguments. This preliminary meeting is adjourned.” Alexa stood amid the grumbles and glowers. “You’ll be taken to your flats now. Don’t go searching for trouble. If there’s fighting, it might sway me in a direction you don’t want. To avoid that, stay where I put you.” Alexa motioned.

Edward and the rest of the team split between the groups and began escorting them out through different tunnels, leaving wet spots on the wooden floor from the snow melting off their boots and shoes.

Yani’s family went with them, worrying. They weren’t sure if they should have spoken up about their own needs, like the UN troops had done.

Alexa caught Edward’s attention as he followed the gate hunters out. “Play nice is still in effect.”

Edward sighed in disappointment. “Whatever you say, Boss.”

Alexa chuckled, but she was already sure the two men would end up fighting before this was all over. It didn’t matter right now. They had bigger issues to handle first. William had spent the entire time scanning the minds of her men and Marcella’s troops, but he hadn’t been hunting for a way to make sure Jeanie won.

Alexa let out a sound of annoyed worry. *I wish my father was here. He’d kill them all and install someone with American values that haven’t been twisted into a useless hunt for power.*

“Are you okay?” Yani’s brother, Trenton, had stayed to watch over Alexa.

Alexa began to slide into the zone. She regarded the old vampire with eyes that didn’t see him. “William is still hunting for time kids. Which means he doesn’t have all three. I thought I had to go slow and be careful, but that isn’t the case, is it?”

Trenton waited, aware that the gunfighter wasn’t talking to him.

Alexa shook her head. “None of this will work. I’ll have to kill them all and I can’t. One of those bitter bitches is the rightful ruler of my country. Mark’s choice isn’t an option for me.” She sighed deeply, coming out of the thought zone. “I really hate leaving survivors.”

Trenton nodded. “I understand completely.”

**2**

The late afternoon sun came through the windows and gave them enough light to see by as they walked. It didn’t warm the halls, however. Cold wind blew over the groups, bringing shivers and the smell of decay.

Jeanie couldn’t resist a parting blow as the groups separated into the drafty hallways. “Isn’t it funny that a week ago you were sending killers to end her and now you’re here begging for her help?”

Jeanie sniggered at Marcella’s nasty look. “What? Just giving some truth to the moment.”

“You pick truths that support you and deny the others. Hypocrite much?” Marcella followed David without saying more as the groups split up behind their escorts.

Reina studied the woman as she floated next to her. “She’s right, though. You had your shot to kill Alexa and failed. Now maybe she’ll take her turn.”

Marcella moved away from the vampire. “Why did she pick creatures for protection?”

“Yani and his family are part of our tribe.” David glanced back at her. “You remember having family, I assume?”

“Of course. My sister was dear to me.”

“What was her name?”

“Why?”

“To verify you’re telling the truth, of course.”

Marcella stiffened at the challenge from a male, but she couldn’t refuse. “Merissa.”

“Do you have any proof? Jeanie brought identification and photos.”

Marcella handed over her own wallet without touching David’s hand. “There’s a picture in the smallest pocket.”

David stuck the wallet into his cloak, thrilled with how easy that had been.

Howling wind echoed loud enough to reach their ears. The storm was growing.

Marcella ignored their escorts. “Why did she pick this tomb for a den?”

David laughed this time. “Where else should vampires be?”

Marcella chuckled, drawn to his personality. She hated it that he held authority, but there was no denying he was sexy. “Are you for rent?”

The good mood fled. David delivered a warning glare. “Don’t ask any of us that, especially Billy. He’ll slit your throat and face Alexa’s anger afterward.”

Marcella leered at him, aroused by his defiance. “If you change your mind, I have dust, gold, and gratitude.”

David stuck his nose in the air and controlled his need to strike out. For a little while, he’d forgotten this woman made the slavery law that had gotten Billy hurt. He made a mental note to thank Jeanie for the reminder.

Lorey’s brows drew together. “Why would you thank her? She intends to expand the slavery laws to include women and teenagers who owe debts. You’ve heard of indentured servants, right?”

David stored that information for Alexa as he opened the wide double doors. “This is your suite.” He retreated and waited for them to enter the cold flat. “You can build a fire in the fireplace, but keep an eye on it.”

Lorey went first before Kiya or Libby could rush in and trigger any traps. The UN troops were handling the vaccines well, but not perfectly. The need to hurry and find trouble wasn’t good right now. Later it could be useful.

“One of us will be by in a few hours to escort you to the dinner party.” David shut the doors and moved down the hall. He was eager to get the wallet to Alexa.

Marcella’s group took in their surroundings.

The flat was long, with narrow hallways at each side that led to two other narrow, long chambers with the same decorations and furnishings. One of those was a parlor for entertaining guests. Marcella assumed the third space was another bedroom, but she didn’t go check it out like Kiya and Libby were doing. The ride here had tired her. She didn’t feel like exploring.

Marcella read the ornate tag on the small platform by the first window. “This is the recreated Mayflower Society Bedroom. The stunning wooden framework highlights the superb craftsmanship. The rough stone fireplace exemplifies the rugged ingenuity of this period.”

She glanced around at the wooden furniture, checkered cloths and curtains, and long, flowery floor rugs. A wall radiator and several tables with chairs completed the furnishings. A cheery set of wildlife and nature photos on the walls made her uncomfortable. The flat was too nice for a group of killers. “It could be worse.”

Libby returned to the first room. “I wonder what exhibit Jeanie got.”

“We aren’t here for the luxuries.” Marcella was just glad the windows appeared to be real. If they needed to run, they had an exit.

Lorey stared at the doors, searching minds and moods.

“What is it?” Marcella trusted her protector’s instincts.

“They didn’t agree to this meeting just for the reasons we were told.” Lorey dug deeper. Her eyes widened. “I’ll be damned.”

Marcella waited impatiently, aware of the UN women rifling through the exhibit. Marcella had little interest in the revolutionary furnishings, jewels, or displays explaining who’d resided here and when.

Lorey smiled. “What do you know about your family lines?”

**3**

Jeanie walked behind Edward, unhappy with their escorts. She wasn’t scared, but it forced her to consider their forms, the way they moved, and how much they disliked her. She decided to get it over with. She smirked at Bradley. “I saw you at the soldier camp. Does Alexa know you killed innocent men?”

Bradley stopped, nodding in regret. “We are paying that debt. My father, Yani, has pledged our services in exchange.”

William and the others waited, listening. Jeanie had brought up a touchy topic that could be used to their advantage if she was smart enough to recognize how.

“Can your services be hired?”

Bradley drew up in offense. “That is not for me to decide.”

“Of course it is. She has you here in our faces. It’s obvious she has a reason for it. All of you are important.”

Bradley didn’t know what to say.

Jeanie patted her pocket. “I have dust to trade.”

“What do you want us to do?”

“Stop Marcella from invading my bunker.”

“You mean her bunker.”

“Not anymore. My people are there now. But I don’t trust Marcella to abide by Alexa’s choice. I’d like to hire you to defend me.”

“I will speak to my family about your…job offer.”

Satisfied, Jeanie smiled at Edward, who’d also stopped to hear the conversation. “And what about you? I’ve been told questers can be hired.”

“I’m not for sale.”

Jeanie’s smile grew brighter. “Not all men will be slaves in my America. Many of you will perform the same chores you’ve always done.”

Edward hid his anger at her calm pronouncement. “And what job would you hire me for?”

“Protection. And not just you. I want your entire team.”

“You wouldn’t need us if you have Yani and his family.”

“I’ll need you when I travel. I can’t very well take blood drinkers to rallies and town hall meetings.”

“You really believe Alexa will give it to you.”

Jeanie nodded. “She’s a patriot, like me. She sees the way it needs to be to restore our country to glory.”

Edward pegged her for a fanatic then, just a different kind than the ones who’d taken Billy. He rotated toward the flat Alexa had chosen for this group. “Someone will be by to escort you to the dinner party.” He held the doors open and refused to think of anything they might pick up.

Jeanie wasn’t upset. Convincing people to do what she wanted had often taken time, but she always got what she wanted in the end. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Edward stiffened. “Don’t play with my honor. It’s not yours to mock.”

Jeanie entered the large suite. “I’m not mocking your honor. In fact, I’m counting on it.”

Rachel and Jerry followed the others into the flat, but they kept track of the vampires. They hadn’t expected to face this type of threat. In the past, they’d avoided the supernatural beings now roaming their world. When they couldn’t, they’d removed them and gone about their business. That wasn’t possible here.

“You can build a fire for your normals, but be careful. Alexa will be upset if you burn down our winter den.”

William was the last one to enter. He met Edward’s eye.

Edward grunted. “Soon enough, I’m sure.” Edward shut the door before the man could reply.

William found himself amused by Edward’s courage. *Maybe I’ll let that one live. I could use a hired gun to travel with me. Jeanie has a solid idea there.*

Selma chuckled. “Already sure about how this is all going to end, are you?”

William began removing his coat. “No, but it never hurts to be ready for things to go the way you want them to.”

“We have a state room exhibit.” Jeanie examined the plush blue furnishings eagerly. She’d always enjoyed going to museums and viewing how people had lived in the past. The huge fourposter canopy beds were covered in bright blue silk damask with gold lace. The three room apartment was filled with chairs and couches in the same colored fabric, while a stately marble fireplace greeted the normals with the promise of warmth to cut the draft rolling through unopposed. Golden framed paintings bigger than William adorned the high walls and complemented the bright blue wall paper. It was a luxury suite.

“Wow.”

Selma nodded at Jeanie’s admiration. “I wonder what accommodations Marcella got.”

“Who cares? This is great. Alexa’s treating us like dignitaries. Enjoy it.”

Selma sank down in a fragile rocking chair, grimacing as a cloud of dust flew up. “This isn’t going to be easy. They’re all descendants and they know we can’t be trusted.”

William went to the first bed. He did a long stretch and then rolled onto his side. “Wake me in an hour and I’ll try to look ahead. Maybe we can win this battle without firing a single shot.” Looking ahead was something William hated to do. It took a lot of energy and it wasn’t reliable because every ripple of action changed the next moment until it was nothing like what he’d foreseen.

“How?” Jeanie was eager for that. She ignored the gate hunters who had spread out to explore the exhibit and steal.

“By giving her what she wants.”

“What does she want?”

“To be left alone so she can continue on her quest. If one of you dies, we’ll leave and she can do just that.”

Everyone assumed that meant he was going to sneak out and kill Marcella.

William wasn’t sure yet which woman would die, but he was certain at least one of them would. Alexa’s mind had been full of anger and the little show they’d put on had made it worse. *When she snaps, I may help her take out the trash. Then I’ll grab one of her men and force her to tell me where the other time kid is being hidden. I know that she knows. I just have to convince her to tell me. If that means killing a few of her men, so be it. She has extras.*

Selma caught the thoughts, but she didn’t react. William’s plans didn’t concern her.

Jerry didn’t like the mood. “What do you think will happen next?”

Rachel sat in one of the fragile chairs. She hadn’t come here to steal. “We’ll eat and argue some more and then Alexa will send us all to bed like good kids.”

Everyone frowned at the gate hunter, including her husband.

Rachel was too tired to care. She hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep since capturing Selma. “You saw how she plans to play this. We’re having a trial, with evidence and all that shit. Then she’ll deliberate and finally, the master will make a call and we’ll obey it.”

Jeanie didn’t like how that felt. “I assume we’re all making our own plans. Maybe we should work together. Individuals haven’t stood much of a chance against her.”

“You told the gunfighter you expect to win.” Jerry was still surprised to be here among the powerful descendants who could kill them without much effort. He went to the fireplace.

“And I stand by that. But it doesn’t hurt to have a backup plan in case fate doesn’t agree with how things should be.” Jeanie was pragmatic about all of it. “Even the…creatures can be bought. I think we need to find the right price.”

William nodded. “We can each keep trying to hire them, but it won’t work on her team. They already don’t like us.”

Selma locked gazes with William. “One of us has an edge.”

William glanced at Jerry, who was now building a fire in the marble fireplace.

Jerry flinched. “What?”

William grunted. “He’s an innocent, mostly. She’s right. We can use that.”

**4**

“What do you think?”

Edward wanted to be objective, but it wasn’t possible. “We’ll end up killing all of them.”

The rest of the team nodded. They’d all had that feeling upon meeting the two groups.

Alexa had been hoping it would go better. “We’ll try to avoid that.”

“Why?” Edward didn’t like any of their guests, and the chores Alexa had just handed out were adding to his bad mood. “Send us in, Boss. Then we can resume enjoying our downtime.”

Alexa pointed at the two books Billy and Jacob had brought from the courthouse. “That’s not the way we do things, even if we know how it’s going to end.”

Edward hadn’t expected a different answer. “Neither of them deserve the honor of leadership.”

“Agreed, so far.” Alexa listened to the wind and snow, but her mind was on their coming dinner. “Maybe one of them will surprise us.”

“Backstab us is more likely.” Billy was furious that Marcella was right here and he couldn’t do anything about it.

“Billy and I will get the meal rolling. The rest of you will get the table set. Then you’ll all go get ready for the chores I gave you.”

“We’re hosting a dinner party for two slavery-supporting tyrants. Sounds like fun.” Jacob headed for the tunnel exit closest to them. “Maybe one of them will choke on the food. Are you sure you don’t want me to cook?”

Alexa chuckled. Then she put a stop to the whining. “Move out.”

Her firm tone ended the quips and snips. The six men got to work, letting go of the resentment.

Alexa was proud of them. In their place, she wasn’t sure she would have obeyed. They were right–the two women were slavers and no good would come from their leadership. The only difference between them and the fanatics was the clothes they wore.

Billy lingered with Alexa.

Alexa put a hand on his arm and leaned close.

Billy’s eyes widened at her whisper.

Alexa waited for him to protest or celebrate her choice.

Billy slowly withdrew a vial of white powder from his cloak pocket. He handed it to her without speaking.

Alexa put it in her pocket. “Do you understand why?”

Billy nodded. “We’re doing it for our country, because our country can’t do it for herself.”

# Chapter Thirteen

**It Feels Wrong**

Bunker 11

**1**

**“S**he’s in there! Get her!”

Donna lifted the shotgun as the door to her chamber opened. She didn’t wait to see who it was. She fired both shells.

Rachel’s gate hunters had breached the front entrance, killing several guards and scattering to different areas. Most of them had ended up here to challenge her. That meant she was the target. *Someone wants me dead!*

The gate hunter bodies dropped to the floor and began bleeding onto the filth.

“She’s armed!”

“Watch out!”

Donna reloaded and jerked the gun upward to close the chamber. She waited this time, ready to grab her handgun next. She doubted the killers outside the door would give her time to reload the shotgun again.

“Come out of there!”

“You can’t kill us all!”

Donna whistled.

Jeanie’s large fire hounds ran toward the attackers, snarling and drooling. They loved human flesh.

Donna followed the dogs.

“Look out!”

“Help!”

“I’ll help you.” Donna fired at the man on the ground beneath the dog, freeing the animal to chase the other gate hunters who were trying to take over the bunker.

Donna entered the hallway and fired again.

The closest gate hunter exploded in a shower of red and blue gore.

Donna dropped the shotgun and kept walking as she pulled her handgun and a magazine. She fired at figures in doorways waiting for her to go by. Bodies fell all around her as she spun and fired, ducked and spun, reloaded and fired again.

Small caliber slugs hit her armored trench coat and stuck or pinged off to ricochet into walls and fleeing hunters.

“Kill her!” The gate hunter in charge marched toward Donna, lifting her gun to fire.

The other hound lunged from a dark corner. It’s large jaws clamped down on the woman’s wrist and snapped it off in one huge bite.

Screams filled the hallway and rolled over the bodies.

Donna kept walking as she drew out another magazine. Her empty casings littered the floor as she walked the bunker and killed everyone who wasn’t on her side. She scanned their minds where she needed to, but it was easy to tell her people from the intruders. Hers were tied and gagged, dead, or cowering in corners, hoping to not be hit.

The cold bunker was loud with shouts, shots, and blaring alarms that Donna wasn’t sure how to shut off. She suffered the noise as she finished clearing every room.

It took Donna a while to clear the bunker. Her fear for the kids grew with every minute that passed, but she didn’t skip any place where someone might be hiding to try again later.

Donna finally made it to the nursery, where she’d left the kids in hopes they would be safer behind a thick steel door with five men who’d been sold to the bunker. The kids were behind the counter, behind the line of men she’d armed against the rules.

“Stop there!”

Donna gestured at the bloody blond man who’d clearly had to fight for the kids. “I hired you.”

The man relaxed, relieved as he recognized her. “Thank god you’re–”

A hole opened in his forehead. Blood sprayed the wall next to him.

Donna spun around and fired repeatedly at the two gate hunters who’d snuck up behind her.

“We’re protecting you from the men!”

Donna knew not to believe that. She killed them both while they tried to aim and fire. They didn’t have the experience she did with defending themselves. They were used to being the aggressors.

Donna listened hard, picking out shouts of refugees being knocked aside as the rest of the gate hunters fled the bunker. She waited, getting her breath back.

The men behind her surrounded the body of their fallen friend.

“Do you have to burn him?”

Donna thought about how the man had agreed easily and hadn’t asked for anything but mercy from Marcella if she won the Presidency. “I’ll help you bury him later.”

“Thank you.” Lucius closed Todd’s lids. Sadness filled the room.

Donna felt it, too. She considered offering the males comfort, but she wasn’t sure what to say. She settled for a kind tone. “Bring the body and the kids to the main chamber and get settled for the night. You can stay with me until Jeanie and William return.”

The men were relieved. They obeyed quickly, thrilled that they weren’t being put back into the rental rotation. The females coming to the bunker right now were desperate and cruel. Even Todd, who’d been eager to come here for the sex, had been glad to get Donna’s offer. They all needed a break.

Donna kept listening for more trouble, suddenly unsure if she should have sent the twins out of here. She’d been worried about William using them for a time spell, but sending them out alone with only a heartless bounty hunter might not have been the greatest option either.

Donna sighed. *I did the best I could to keep them alive. Alexa will understand.* “She knows how dangerous this situation is. And if she doesn’t, after spending time around William, she will. Anyone near him is walking on the edge of their own death.”

**2**

**Ciemus**

“That is one big-ass wall.” Ginger put the Pinto in park and studied the moldy, mud covered wall. She hadn’t known this town was here until Donna marked it on her map. It didn’t seem like anyone was inside. She didn’t see any light glaring through the cracks.

Ginger scanned the twins who were buckled into big-kid car seats. Confident they would sleep for a bit longer, she got out and locked the doors, taking the keys. She went to the wall and began searching for a way to get in. Even if it was empty, they needed a place to stay for the night. Evening shadows were creeping over the woods around the wall. It was time to be under cover.

“Hello?” Ginger didn’t yell it. She knew better than to draw attention she wasn’t ready to handle. She’d been a bounty hunter for a long time. She’d learned how to survive.

A small red light appeared on the wall, drawing her. She moved closer, recognizing the light of a security camera. “Hello? I need to talk to the Mayor.”

The light blinked at her, but no one responded.

Ginger gave in to her annoyance. “Look, I’ve got these two Mitchel kids and it isn’t safe out here, so can you…”

She jumped as the wall began to move.

The tall barrier rolled to the side, clearing enough space for her to peer inside.

Blazing brown eyes appeared in the crack. “What do you want?!”

Ginger flinched, then glowered at the man. “I was paid to bring two kids here to the Mayor and her new man. I don’t know their names, but I think one of them is a Mitchel.”

The man scanned her deeply, then switched his attention to her vehicle.

“Come on. It’s getting darker.” Ginger was suddenly sure someone was watching her from this side of the wall.

The man vanished; the wall slid open further.

Ginger hurried to the car and quickly got them inside the safety of Ciemus.

Brandon helped his men shut the entrance and secure it before facing the bounty hunter who hadn’t gotten out of her car yet. “Who paid you to come here?”

“She’s from the bunker. I doubt you know her.” Ginger handed him an envelope through the lowered window. “She said the kids are Mitchels and they need to be with their own kind. It’s all in her letter.”

Brandon had already recognized the familiar feel of the sleeping kids. He put the envelope in his pocket. “What about you?” The woman’s cool attitude bothered Brandon. It felt like she had no compassion.

Ginger peered up at the dark sky and shrugged. “I’d like to stay until dawn. Then I’ll be on my way and I’ll forget this place exists.”

Brandon sensed the capacity for great cruelty in the woman. He dug into her mind and saw her latest transgressions in the form of selling her brothers and their sons to the bunker.

Ginger felt the magic use. *Shit!* She slammed the car back into drive.

Brandon fired a sleep spell and watched the Pinto come to a stop against a nearby building. It didn’t hit hard, but men still hurried over to check on the kids.

Natoli looked at Brandon. “Dead or alive?”

Brandon sighed. “She’s a slaver. If we take her to your village, someone will just slit her throat. Better to get it over now.”

Natoli reached into the driver’s window and ran his blade across Ginger’s throat while the other Indians got the sleeping kids from the backseat and transferred them to their vehicles.

Brandon swept the town a last time, then slid into the front of the semi they were using to transport their belongings out of here. Brandon hated to leave the only place where he’d ever felt safe, but the birth of his sons had forced the choice. If William got to them, the world as they all knew it would end forever. Even being alive during the apocalypse was better than being dead. All descendants were in danger from William.

Brandon didn’t care as much about the normals as he knew he should, but he didn’t want them to be slaves and he had no desire to rule their world. *I just want to raise my family, live, and be left alone from those who would force their way of life on me. I don’t think that’s asking too much.*

Snow fell lightly over the town, the wall, and the truck as wind blew through and continued to freeze the small section of river that ran through the rear corner of the sanctuary.

Brandon and his group shivered even though they were dressed in thick coats. The Indians wore their normal gear of very little fur over the most graphic parts. Brandon didn’t know how they could stand the harsh weather in that getup, but he didn’t mock them. He admired their stamina.

Brandon squeezed into the rig with Natoli and two of his warriors. Natoli hadn’t hesitated when he’d reached out to ask for sanctuary. Natoli had taken over the tribe when the former chief died. As far as Brandon could tell, the short, older man was doing an excellent job. His age wasn’t a hindrance yet, though Brandon was certain it would be before long. Right now, Natoli was still able to run, jump, and climb alongside his warriors.

Natoli steered the truck toward a small alley near the wall so they could reach the next house full of packed gear that needed to be loaded. They’d taken all the residents and their two bags of personal items a few days ago. Those trucks were parked around Natoli’s camp and were being used for various forms of training. Now that it was close to the time for Safe Haven’s return, all the tribes were spending time training and preparing.

Natoli’s wrinkled hands tightened on the steering wheel. A rare grin split his old lips.

Brandon chuckled. The man had insisted on taking a shift driving. To do that, he’d been taught to handle the semi on the way here for their larger gear and supplies. Brandon had enjoyed every minute of talking to the wise leader.

Natoli avoided the muddy ground and the tree stumps, strong legs and arms flexing in the light of the setting sun. “You will return here after all is done. I have seen this.”

Brandon liked hearing that, but he also didn’t. “And my family?”

Natoli began to hum a comforting Indian lullaby.

Brandon’s good mood shattered. The only way he would be split from his family was if they were dead. Even a divorce wouldn’t send him far away... “Unless they run from me.”

“Duty and honor are hard to abide when a man is forced to pick between them and what he holds most dear.” Natoli’s deep voice ran over Brandon’s skin like a cold breeze.

Brandon felt another chill as he was reminded of teaching that lesson to Alexa when she was much younger. “What are you talking about?”

Natoli gave him a sharp glance. “Your Mayor wants to be normal.”

Brandon hadn’t known. “But I should have. When I met her, she was denying who she really is.”

“Being one of the Ghost’s tribe has endangered everyone she cares for, including your sons.”

Brandon saw how it would go if he wasn’t careful. If he refused to live like a normal, his wife would take the kids and run to keep them from being hunted. And he would let her go for the same reason. *But I’ll never renounce who I am. Not even for them.*

“There is much darkness in your heart. I would ask you to look deep inside and decide if those shadows matter as much as they once did. A man’s sons are all he has when he is dying.”

Brandon didn’t correct that view by reminding Natoli there could be daughters. He didn’t like the way the Indians lived, but he respected their right to have it how they wanted. As long as those women were there willingly, it was none of his business.

“It is the way things have been since the beginning of time. Who are we to change the first design?”

Brandon was unable to ignore that train of thought. “What if the first design was flawed?”

“Many of us recognize that possibility. But we are not the Great Spirit. We have no right to change his design.”

Brandon scowled. “We can’t stay with you for long. Even spring may be too much influence on my people.”

Natoli resumed humming.

Brandon didn’t encourage the man to explain his silence. He no longer wanted to know. *I’ll handle it as it comes. It might be a decade later, but I still have hope for the future. There’s a third choice. I just have to find it.*

Natoli didn’t want to make the man more upset than he already was, so he didn’t tell him he’d only seen Brandon return. He’d been alone and covered in sadness. *We don’t always get what we need the most. Life was designed to be hard, and it is.*

**3**

**Gainesville History Museum**

“Dinner is served.” Mark grinned as he held the door open for Jeanie and her group. “I’ve always wanted to say that and mean it.”

Jeanie chuckled, unable to resist his charm as they entered the warm dining hall. Mark was big, strong, and now wearing a black dress shirt and black slacks without his cloak. The gun belts around his lean waist ruined part of the image, but it was still an obvious difference that drew her. *He’d make a beautiful Secret Service agent standing outside my office to protect me from my enemies.* “Where do you want us?”

Mark pointed at the far side of the long table. He noted Jeanie had only brought her magic users and the angry couple who were always fighting. Even now they were tossing sharp barbs at each other over not having fancy clothes to wear like the rest of Jeanie’s group. None of the gate hunters did, but only Jerry and Rachel cared.

William’s black suit complemented Selma’s gold gown and Jeanie’s green scarf. They looked like they were on the way to the opera or theater. The two grungy gate hunters behind them looked like homeless waifs who’d followed them in while begging for spare change. The difference was startling.

Marcella and her three guards were already on the opposite side of the table. They all glowered at Jeanie.

Marcella’s black clothes and long black sweater showed respect for the situation. She hated the bright colors in Jeanie’s group. Marcella swept the normals and hid her disgust. The fighting couple was obviously still in love. It made her feel dirty. Loving a man wasn’t allowed now.

William held the chair for Jeanie, glad he’d told her to dress for the occasion. Marcella and her UN goons were still wearing the same clothes they’d arrived in.

Marcella watched William and wished for her reinforcements to hurry up. She’d called them hours ago, but hadn’t gotten a response.

Edward also watched William, disliking him even more than he already had. The tall man with the gold and red hair was starting to show gray. The dark tuxedo made it obvious that William wasn’t in his prime anymore, but Edward knew not to discount him because of that. The rest of William’s body was slim and hard.

Selma’s feet barely touched the floor when she sat, but none of them wrote her off because of it or because of her unscarred dark skin. The strength in her expression and stocky arms told them she was dangerous.

Mark tried to break some of the tension and avoid the argument he could feel coming as Jeanie and Marcella stared at each other. “This was the actual dining hall of the employees who worked in the museum. It’s all hooked to generators and there were tanks of gas stored. It was an amazing find.”

The dining hall was roughly half the size of the state rooms they’d been given, but it held simple furnishing, other than an impossibly long table and a delicately designed white rug under it. Stool-like chairs held them and silver carts lined the walls holding dishes, linens, and various bottles of alcohol. The white walls had no paintings and the tall black floor lamps stood dark and useless in the corners. The room was depressing compared to their flats and even to the rotunda where Alexa had made her den.

Mark didn’t tell them they’d chosen this chamber because it was plain and a bit dreary. It wouldn’t encourage anger or distractions, though he was sure there would be plenty of both anyway.

Jeanie didn’t care, but she knew she needed to be polite to Alexa’s crew. “Having power explains how you’re able to cook in there.”

Mark shook his head. “We didn’t activate any of the power sources. We’re cooking over an open fire. We used aluminum foil enclosures to bake the rolls and cakes.”

Everyone who’d ever tried to bake over a campfire was impressed.

William scanned for the rest of Alexa’s team as Jeanie slid her emerald green silk dress aside. Candles on the table flickered in the breeze as she sat down.

“The boss will be along shortly. She’s supervising the food.” Mark stayed by the door as a guard and to observe. Alexa had told him to watch for lies. Mark wasn’t sure how he would recognize those, but he was willing to try.

In the far corner, Jacob waited until they were seated before coming forward with a bottle of wine to fill their glasses half way. The fun was already gone for him. Filling glasses for the enemy didn’t make sense to him unless the wine was laced with poison and it wasn’t. He’d asked and been disappointed by the answer.

“Thank you. The rest of my entourage is in our flat, resting.” Jeanie sipped the potent wine without fear. The rest of her group had debated whether they should eat or drink anything while here, but Jeanie trusted Alexa to keep her word.

William huffed at her. “I told you she didn’t give her word about the food or drinks, or our safety while we’re here. She only agreed to hear the claims and make a call.”

“I still don’t understand why she gets to make the call at all.” Kiya had already had a full glass of the wine and was feeling fearless. “It’s not like she was a leader before or even a member of the media. She has no power to make a call.”

Marcella shook her head at Jacob as he came over to refill Kiya’s glass. “She’s had enough.”

Jacob refilled it anyway just to disobey the slaver.

Marcella’s lips thinned, but she didn’t protest.

Kiya slurped down half the refilled glass and let out a loud belch. “That’s yummy!”

Reading Kiya’s thoughts was easy. Finding out she and all her people hated Mitchels thanks to UN brainwashing made Jacob’s stomach roll.

Marcella didn’t like how it felt to be here with substandard support while surrounded by enemies. The sense of doom that had hit her in bunker 11 was quickly catching up.

William smiled at her over the table.

Marcella stiffened in anger. “You don’t scare me.”

William believed her. “Everything changes, my dear. Just give it time.”

The side door to the cooking area opened. Alexa entered the room, ending that possible fight and drawing all eyes to her.

Alexa’s dressy black clothes, braids with red ribbons, and sweet smell kept the attention on her as Edward and Daniel brought out baskets of fresh bread. Each man took a warm roll for themselves and began munching as they put the baskets on the table.

Alexa frowned. “Your guests eat first. Don’t be rude.”

The two men flushed, but they didn’t stop eating the rare bread.

Alexa sighed resignedly. “Well trained, but not finished with that training.”

Marcella snickered.

Jeanie ignored it as she also reached for the warm rolls. She hadn’t had fresh bread in years.

Most of them hadn’t. Everyone took a roll and began eating. Smiles and stomach growls went around the table.

“It’s good.” Selma tossed a second roll to Rachel. “Let’s make that lifeforce taste better.”

Rachel stuffed a bite into her mouth to keep from screaming at the magic user.

William chuckled.

Jerry glanced between the women, not sure what to say.

David came through the same door with a large pot and a ladle. He began filling the soup bowls on the table in front of each person. His black dress shirt was rolled up to the elbows and added a new level of class to the gathering. All of Alexa’s men were dressed up, clean, and flashing comforting smiles at most of the guests. They ignored Marcella as much as they could get away with. It was hard to be polite to the woman who’d been responsible for so much male misery, but Alexa had insisted this dinner was necessary.

Kiya dove into the soup, slurping and dripping.

David put an extra ladle into her bowl, then sat the pot on the warmer.

“The soup is chicken noodle with dumplings and rehydrated peas.” Alexa sat and picked up her spoon. “The next course is dessert. We’ll talk a little then. For now, let’s eat.”

Kiya dropped the spoon and hefted the bowl to her big mouth, slurping.

The other guests watched Alexa take a bite and smile before trying their own.

Marcella’s lids narrowed. “It’s odd to watch a known vampire eat.”

“Isn’t it odder to have aligned yourself with the very group who helped destroy our country?” William scanned Kiya. “And they’ve been charmed.” He looked to Alexa. “Her support isn’t here willingly. Does that matter?”

“Of course.” Alexa waited, letting this next topic sort itself out.

“Look deeper.” Lorey hated it that the other side also had magic. “Kiya and her troops were on Marcella’s side long before we made contact. I just strengthened those bonds.”

“And when it backfires?”

Lorey shrugged at him. “We have plans in place.”

William’s tone grew pointed. “So you’re going to betray your protectors. Interesting.”

Silence fell as Yani and his family entered and came to the empty seats at the table.

The mood shifted into surprise and revulsion as the vampires began sniffing the air to scent the food.

Jacob made sure they were served wine the same as everyone else had been, aware of the fresh tension now growing as William stared at Alexa.

Alexa controlled a grimace as her stomach rumbled.

So did William.

They both recognized the reaction this time and hid it from their thoughts by tossing out a distraction.

“Should we assume the creatures are at this meeting officially?”

“Yani and his family are here to speak officially.”

Tension crackled as they each recognized their own tactics.

Selma chuckled dryly and reached for her wine glass.

The sound didn’t draw men the way Reina’s laugh had. David had been listening for it. He was still trying to figure out why he liked rougher voices more than cultured ones.

Jacob lifted a brow at the Blacksmith.

David flushed as he removed the half empty pot of soup from the warmer so he could serve Yani’s family. “Nothing.”

Jacob snickered and resumed scanning the glasses and the diners.

“Gate hunters are gathering outside.” Lorey had been monitoring the survivors from Yani’s attack. “The ones we left behind have also caught up. I’m picking up a lot of signatures.”

“How many?”

Lorey answered Alexa without looking at Marcella for permission. “At least fifty, maybe more. There are some undead mixed in. It’s hard to get a clear count.”

Jeanie smirked.

Marcella glared.

“We’ll handle it if we need to.” Alexa waved. “Eat while it’s hot. Cold soup is just grease.”

Most of the diners dug in to the hearty soup and stared at each other while trying to figure out how to influence Alexa to give them what they wanted.

Lorey scanned Alexa’s men and let herself daydream about throwing one of them down on the floor and riding him until they were both sticky and spent. She didn’t care which one. They were all wild and scarred.

Daniel saw her glazed eyes and felt a small twitch for the leather clad fighter. His mood lifted at the sign he’d been hoping for. He was suddenly glad he’d volunteered for the duty Alexa needed handled later. He went into the cooking area to help Billy.

Kiya slammed her bowl down and swept the men. “Good food. Now I need a service.”

David grimaced as she centered on him. “I’m not for sale.”

Kiya chuckled crudely. “I don’t want to buy, Darlin’. I just want to play with you for a little while.”

David’s face hardened. “I’d rather be eaten alive.”

Kiya ogled his crotch and grinned. “Okay.”

David groaned, shaking his head. He went into the kitchen to avoid her leers and the laughter from most of their guests.

Marcella was embarrassed. She looked at Lorey, but her descendant was staring at the food with glazed eyes. Marcella recognized the thinking moment and left the woman alone. She watched Yani instead, surprised again that vampires were eating. The five blood drinkers were sipping wine, chewing and swallowing, wiping their mouths, and in general acting like humans. Marcella was fascinated by the idea of them being her protection instead of Kiya.

“Do you think our vehicles are okay?” Jeanie had forgotten about it until now.

“I sent Billy out to move them into the parking garage across from where we met you.” Alexa didn’t tell them Billy had bypassed their locks and alarms with his keys. The Driver had been gathering locksmith sets as they traveled. It now covered hundreds of vehicles.

“Your team is handy.”

William’s mocking tone rubbed Alexa the wrong way, but she didn’t rise to the bait.

Edward did. “Jealous much?”

Marcella snickered at his twisted copy of her words from earlier.

William opened his mouth to toss an insult.

Alexa waved at them to stop.

Denied an outlet for his anger, William struck out at her. “Why are you hiding normals in the hotel?”

Alexa chuckled. “They’re hiding from you and from my security.”

“They were told to stay away from here. Why are you protecting them?”

“Duty.”

William’s anger increased another notch. “We’re better than them! The duty isn’t fair!”

“No argument with that one.” Alexa didn’t clarify which of his statements she agreed with. “The alternative is a quest for power that crushes everyone in the end.”

“It’s destiny for the strong to crush the weak. Our very existence is based on it.”

The other diners stared between them and tried to keep up with the quick, tense conversation.

Alexa’s men waited for the call to kill William. They recognized her tone.

Alexa would have been comforted if William had pretended not to understand. It forced her to be honest, too. “The path won’t be easy. Some will give all to stop it.”

William lifted his wine glass in a toast. “Their sacrifices will be honorable; their duty will be done.”

Alexa snorted at his mocking sarcasm. “You’re very bitter. Maybe this will make you sweeter. Bring it in.”

“Dessert is served.” David and Daniel returned from the kitchen, each carrying a tray of the small dessert plates that Billy had gotten ready.

“Have you all had lava cake?”

Frowns and a few nods met Alexa’s question.

Alexa took the first plate and moved her soup bowl aside. “We found this stash of chocolate right here in the museum.”

Daniel put a plate in front of Marcella’s descendant. He caught her sweet scent and fought not to react.

Lorey stiffened at the curl of lust now winding down her spine.

Daniel moved on, enjoying his reaction. It felt good to want a woman again other than Alexa.

Alexa took a bite and groaned in pleasure.

Most of the women did the same, replacing the soup bowls with the cake as some of the thick tension broke.

Marcella ignored the treat. “Something feels wrong about all this.”

Libby made a face. “What?”

“I’m not sure.” Marcella scanned Alexa’s cleaned up, charming gunfighters. “Them, maybe.”

Alexa chuckled. “So they can hunt and kill on command, but they can’t have manners and work a dinner party?”

Marcella flushed faintly. A wide V popped out on her chin. “It feels wrong. Why are you doing this?”

Alexa gently sliced open the center of the lava cake and let the gooey center spill out. “It’s good practice for them. Safe Haven won’t appreciate dining with pigs who don’t know how to use a fork or a napkin.”

Libby froze. She scrubbed her sleeve across her mouth and picked up her fork.

“How many people have you killed?” Jeanie was becoming fascinated by Alexa.

“How high can you count?”

William took a bite as his mind spun. *If she’s killed that many, then she planned at least some of those deaths.* He brought up his strongest mental shield in a test. *You’re byzan.*

Alexa didn’t respond or give herself away at all, but William was convinced just the same. *She knows what I’m doing and she still has me here, playing games. Marcella is right–something’s wrong.*

Selma nodded in agreement. She felt it now.

Lorey resumed staring at her soup. She’d been trying to figure that out since she sat down.

Alexa ate her cake and thought about how much she wanted them all to go away.

# Chapter Fourteen

**Give It Time**

**1**

**A**lexa waved at Yani, bringing the conversation back to the vampires. “Whoever becomes Pro Tem will need to discuss a previous arrangement they made with the government. We hope you’ll find files on it if you get into the top secret storage areas. The information you’re looking for won’t be on computer files. It happened a long time ago. However, we do have a copy of the basic contract.” Alexa glanced around the table. “Do either of you have questions for Yani? There’s no reason we can’t discuss the little things while we eat.”

“Little things.” Marcella huffed and stabbed a piece of the tender chicken. She wasn’t hurrying through the meal like everyone else.

Jeanie flashed a fake smile at Yani. “Can you be hired?”

Yani nodded stiffly. Bradley had told him about Jeanie’s offer. “If the price is right.”

Jeanie was encouraged by his response. “Does the job matter?”

Yani looked at Alexa and back to Jeanie. “We have a limited set of rules. As long as it doesn’t cross that, there’s little we would refuse in return for citizenship and recognition.”

Jeanie smiled again. “Excellent. I’ll make an official offer as soon as we get this mess sorted. Now, if you can, tell me why you attacked bunker 11 and what you did with everyone who was there.”

William glanced over along with everyone else.

Yani saw no reason to lie to the woman. “It was revenge for my father’s death in Bridgeport. Those inside were freed.”

Jeanie’s smile faded into coming anger. “The children, too? You sent them out into the wild?”

Marcella leaned forward to hear that answer. She hoped it was yes.

“The rage children were removed and added to your furnace.” Yani’s orbs glowed red as he shifted toward Marcella. “If you restart those experiments, the public will be told!”

Alexa noticed William didn’t detect that lie in Yani’s mind. She assumed Yani was blocking him somehow and made a mental note to ask about it later so she could copy it.

Marcella wasn’t impressed with his display of anger. Red eyes didn’t scare her. “Tell the public. I doubt they’d care once they discover those experiments might relieve them of the rage illness. We’ve been working on a cure for a year. We believe we have it now. How else are we supposed to find out if it works?”

Rachel turned from sniping at her husband. “You’re experimenting on the survivors!”

“As I already stated. How else am I supposed to know if the vaccines work?” Marcella appealed to Alexa’s sense of sisterhood, if she had one. “It’s not like I can wait and do it later. Women are dying now!”

Alexa frowned. “You have no idea what this is doing to our population.”

Marcela waved off her protest. “But we will know the side effects when people start reporting them.”

“What about the ones who die from it? No one is recording those.”

Marcella shrugged. “Does that number really matter as long as we get a cure?”

Jeanie beat the others to an answer. “Yes, it matters! Those are American lives! You’re heartless! You can’t be our President. You should be locked up and then executed for what you’ve done!”

“Go to hell, you little–”

“Ladies!” Alexa slapped her cup down, sloshing wine over the sides. “This is a peaceful dinner. Unless you’re ready for me to break our truce here and now before any of your plans are finished, play nice!”

Alexa smirked in the sullen silence. “I know a better topic.” She waved her fork toward Rachel. “A message came in for you from bunker 11. Did you get it?”

Rachel stiffened, while Jerry flinched and the others in their group turned toward the married gate hunters.

“The woman sounded upset. She said it didn’t work and the targets are missing.” Alexa chewed, waiting for an answer.

Rachel shrugged. “That means nothing to me.”

“Liar.” William dug into her mind. “You betrayed me!”

“To keep Donna from stealing the kids herself, which she obviously did!”

“I will assume those are my relatives that you tried to use as bait.” Alexa cut another piece of the cake. “I’ll handle that myself. Let’s move on.” She pointed the fork at Selma. “Why haven’t you called on Nature and attacked me?”

Selma hadn’t expected Alexa to ask outright. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I will make another assumption.” Alexa’s eyes went to William. “It’s because of him.”

“Yes. He told me not to until he gets what he wants from you.” Selma gaped at Alexa in horrified confusion. “I didn’t mean that!”

“No, you didn’t mean to *say* it.” Alexa held up her empty hand. “This is a calm dinner among bitter enemies. There’s no reason for violence yet. Feast on the food and the wine and the bits of truth I’m digging out for our enjoyment.”

*She’s flipping eggs.* Edward and Jacob had the thought at the same time.

William calmed. “I’ve known you didn’t have the kid I need since we arrived, but I still stayed. Leadership of this country matters to me.”

“For now.”

William shrugged. “If we don’t find the time controller we need, we’ll all want someone in that position we can trust.”

“You keep saying *we* like we’re a part of your beliefs.” Edward tossed extra napkins onto the table, scattering them across the center. “You’re going to kill three kids! We’d never be onboard with that.”

Alexa realized Edward had eaten one of the drugged rolls. “Go do a walk through.”

Edward went toward the nearest exit. He understood what had happened. He was furious with himself for screwing up. The truth powder could only be bought from the trolls and it was powerful, but it didn’t last long. That was the only upside for Edward as he was forced to leave.

Marcella snorted. “You dosed the food and he ate some of it. Guess he isn’t as well trained as you’d like us to believe.”

People froze and stopped chewing, turning to stare at Alexa to see if that was true.

Edward spun around and ran at Marcella with his new speed. He drew his sharpest knife and had it against her throat before Kiya or Lorey had time to react.

Edward leaned in close as people stood, shouted at him, or watched in satisfaction. “If I weren’t well trained, you’d already be dead!”

Marcella didn’t try to get away. “I won’t beg for my life. As a male, that’s the role you’ll now play. Men are slaves at this very moment and there’s nothing you can do to change that fact.”

Edward let his knife nick her skin. A bead of dark blood welled against the blade.

Marcella waited for it to be over. Anger kept her face a hard mask.

Edward spun away and vanished through the farthest dark exit.

Marcella picked up her fork and used it on the cake she hadn’t tried yet. She left the blood alone so Alexa would have to see it and know her man had injured a guest. “Mmm. This *is* good.”

Alexa nodded. “Billy made it. He’s starting the cleanup work now.”

“I wondered where your other man was. I assumed he was searching through our things while we’re occupied.” Marcella forked another bite of the moist cake. It really was good.

“Edward will do that now.”

There was no reason for Alexa to have told them that. Most people stilled as they realized Alexa had also eaten the drugged food.

William immediately turned to her. “Where is the vampire lair?”

Yani and his family glanced up, angry and ready to start the fight.

“In the swamps, but it won’t do you any good to go there. He split them up and sent them away.” Alexa gestured dismissively. “Only the riders know where they’re going. You’re back to square zero.”

“No!” William slammed his hand on the table, rattling silverware and glasses. “I want those kids!”

“You’ll get a few months to hunt them until Safe Haven returns.” Alexa wasn’t impressed with his anger. “You’ll need all of it. I don’t think the riders decided to stay in this country.”

William barely controlled himself. He still needed her to verify Jeanie’s claim. “I’ll make you pay for that.”

“I believe you’ll try.” Fire flashed in Alexa’s eyes. “Until then, keep your mouth shut. Slaves aren’t allowed to talk without permission.”

Everyone snickered or outright laughed at William’s expression, including Alexa’s men, who knew she was just using it to needle the powerful man. All of them waited for William to explode; hands tightened on gun butts even while they laughed.

William rose. “Excuse me.” He jerked on his tie and pulled it loose. He dropped it on the floor and took the opposite exit that Edward had gone through.

Alexa’s laughter followed him through the hallway.

“He will make you pay for that.” Selma flashed images of the frozen ship she’d destroyed.

Alexa took the warning to heart. “Let’s keep talking. It’s your turn. Tell Jerry what you have planned for his wife.”

Selma tried to stay quiet, but she couldn’t. “I’m going to rip her heart out and feed it to Jeanie’s hounds.”

Jerry blanched. He hated his wife, but not that much.

Lorey stared at the attractive normal man, wishing he was a little more scarred. “You don’t belong here among the liars and the killers.”

“I want my kids back.”

Alexa sighed unhappily. “I’ll never let that happen. Try to accept their deaths and honor them by helping to build a better world for other kids who did survive.”

“Slam you!” Rachel slapped Jerry on the arm. “Don’t you dare! Our babies matter more than anyone else’s!”

“I know!” Jerry left without asking for permission.

Rachel quickly followed him, nagging.

Kiya swallowed her last bite of cake as Alexa’s attention landed on her. “If you wanted to clear the room, you could have said so.”

She and Libby followed Rachel and Jerry to the door they’d come through.

Marcella waved at her descendant. “Make sure they don’t get into trouble. Now is a bad time for them to make a playdate.”

Lorey went quickly, suddenly glad to be away from all three strong women. *Why didn’t I try to set myself up for leadership?* She dwelled on that question as she left.

Alexa’s men also left, mostly taking different doors and tunnels. They had jobs to do now. They’d eaten an hour ago while Alexa and Billy were still cooking. Having them eat the warm rolls had been a great act that got everyone to eat the drugged food.

Selma downed the last of her wine and then rose. She held her hand out to Jacob.

Jacob gave her the half full bottle of wine and watched her go. *That one likes to get drunk when she’s upset. We should make sure she stays that way while she’s here.*

Alexa waited until they were alone. Then she got up and went to the door they’d used to serve the food. She held it open.

Alexa had kept Billy away from both females for several reasons. As she watched Marcella stiffen and Jeanie smirk in recognition, she was glad she’d chosen to handle it this way. Billy still looked like what he was–a killer who hated them both.

“Billy was recently abused, thanks to the slavery law and a lack of moral leadership. He almost hates women because of it, though we’ve been working on that.” Alexa leaned against the wall and began digging for the tobacco pouch she’d refilled while scavenging in this city. “I want you to convince him, not me, that your leadership is a good thing. If you can, I’ll send out a call. If you can’t…” Alexa smiled harshly. “Then we’ll handle things a different way. You have two hours. Good luck.”

Billy took Alexa’s seat and glowered at the two women as he began to finish Alexa’s half eaten food.

“This isn’t what we agreed on.” Jeanie acted like she wasn’t nervous. “And I didn’t start the slavery law.”

“You also didn’t end it.” Billy slurped loudly and kept his elbows on the table, rubbing it in that he was a male and allowed to do what he wanted.

Marcella swallowed another bite of the cake. It tasted like ashes in her mouth now. “This is all a farce. She isn’t going to give the position to either of us.”

“But I am.” Alexa lit her smoke and inhaled deeply. She blew out a large ring that floated toward the ceiling. “You need Billy’s agreement that your claims are valid. Then I’ll make a final choice. Simple.”

Marcella snorted.

Billy kept staring at Jeanie.

Jeanie forced herself to answer his silent accusation. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you have freedom. Look at what your kind did to the world. You’re dangerous. You have to be kept under control.”

Marcella nodded. “Exactly! A female ruler would never have destroyed the world. We care more about life.”

Alexa laughed long and hard.

**2**

The sound of Alexa’s mocking mirth echoed through the walls and reached William, who had lingered in the shadows to listen. The sound twisted his guts and rang through his mind in a nauseating blur.

He staggered down the hallway to avoid the feeling.

Edward came from the dusty coat closet nearby and followed. Alexa had told him to handle something a lot more important than searching the flats of their guests. Nothing he could find in there could compete with the treasure he was about to secure.

The dark wood-paneled walls held signs and notes about the exhibits and the museum. Those papers rustled in a haunting wave as they went by.

William waited until he was in a dark tunnel away from the dining hall. Then he rotated and waited with his arms crossed over his chest.

Edward came from the shadows without fear even though he knew William was a lot stronger than he was. *I’m faster with my gun, so it’ll even out.*

William heard more soft steps and turned around, shield now coming up as two more of Alexa’s men came from another tunnel to block his way.

David and Jacob stared without revealing their thoughts or their dislike.

“What do you want?” William knew what *he* wanted, but frying her men before she made the choice wasn’t a good idea. Still, madness beat against his temples and started the familiar ache that had caused his last snap.

Edward felt it. He used a polite tone. “We have whiskey and warm ale in the attic.”

William wasn’t sure if it was a trap, but he didn’t care either way. Getting drunk sounded great now that he’d eaten good food. “Anything’s better than the piss she called wine.”

The three gunfighters chuckled as they walked toward the stairwell to the attic, but it sounded cold, hollow.

Edward waited for William to follow David and Jacob, boxing him in again.

William pretended they were his guards and marched confidently into the stairwell and up the dirty steps.

Edward and the others kept their mental shields in place. They didn’t try to dig into William’s thoughts, but it was already clear that this would be dangerous. If they pushed too hard, the byzan male might attack and then they would be forced to kill him.

“You’ll die trying, *pets*.”

William’s mockery stung all of them and provided more proof that he was stronger. He’d gotten into their thoughts, through mental shields, without any of them knowing it.

“Over here.” Edward led him to the corner.

The long attic still held pallets of supplies they hadn’t gotten to yet. Dusty plastic wrap was tossed into the corners like transparent shells on dead crustaceans.

Despite all the movement up here, it still smelled musty. The upside was this was where the rising heat was concentrating. It was noticeably warmer even with the steady draft. Enjoying the warmth, William spotted crates around a big center box that held several stacked coffee cups and a tall bottle of Fire Water. Two six packs of FB ale sat next to the big box. “Nice.” William grabbed the bottle and began opening it.

Edward took an ale, while the other men held out their cups for William to fill.

Put in the position of servant because he’d rushed in, William felt his respect for Alexa go up a bit. He had no doubt that she’d arranged this little private moment.

He filled each cup half way and then tilted the bottle to his mouth.

The fighters stared in surprise as the man drained half of what was left without stopping.

William gasped in tiny threads of air, not caring about the tears rolling from his eyes or the heavy weight on his chest as the fiery liquid scorched a trail to his stomach.

Edward sipped his ale and studied William openly. He wasn’t leading this talk. He was supposed to gather details for the boss. Edward had already collected several and none of them were good.

Jacob sat down on a crate. “How do you feel about male slavery?”

William coughed to clear the burn. Then he took another long swig and put the bottle back on the box. “It’s inconvenient at times.”

The air became cold in the warmed attic.

William picked a crate and dropped down, grunting. He wasn’t into living the easy life, but the hard crate was rough on his tailbone.

“We’ve been told Jeanie plans to expand the slavery law.”

William nodded at Jacob. “She does.”

“Some details would be good.”

“Why should I tell you anything?” William pinned Edward with a hard look. “Why aren’t you leading the charge? Were you demoted or is she punishing you for eating the wrong food?”

“I’m not the right man for this job.” Edward grinned. “I have other uses.”

William laughed at the leer even though he assumed it was a distraction so the others could try getting into his thoughts. “Does she share everything with all of you?”

Jacob nodded, bringing the attention back to himself. “Yes. Are you okay with being treated like a slave?”

“Of course not. I’ll handle that when I strangle Jeanie in her sleep some night.” William froze. Then he got angry. “You miserable bastards! You’re already slaves. That’s why you don’t like me.”

Jacob realized William was feeling left out with so many descendants being here. He was clearly used to being the center of attention. “You’re stronger than all of us put together. It’s a bit intimidating. Perhaps you could be nicer and we’d like you just fine.”

William strengthened his mental shield. “How did you get through?”

“I read what you didn’t say.”

William studied Jacob’s scars and then the impression of the heavy book in his cloak pocket. “You’re the Preacher.”

Jacob frowned slightly. “Former. I gave that up when Alexa came for me.”

“But she still sent you up here to use those skills on me.”

“Of course.” Jacob held up his cup. “To Alexa. May she always be such a cold hearted bitch.”

“Hear, hear!”

The other team members lifted cups or ale and drank deeply.

“You love her.” William rarely thought of other people having emotions except as a way to manipulate them. He was curious this time. “She owns you. You work like dogs. You are her slaves and you’re happy with those roles. But you want to challenge that happiness for men all over this country. It doesn’t make sense.”

All the men glanced at Jacob to state their case.

Jacob chose to show William instead. “Take a look. You’ll understand.”

William loved the images of Alexa and her team training, talking, and exploring this dead world to the fullest. He dug in contentedly as the other men watched and waited for the right moment to finish their duty.

William paused at a shadowy memory where six bodies reached for her and Alexa welcomed them all, in one way or another. “Wow.”

Jacob tried to shove him out now. “That’s private.”

William ignored the man to watch the erotic scene.

Jacob looked at Edward.

Edward flipped the ale in his hand and slammed the bottle against William’s skull.

William fell forward, moaning as his hand came up.

Edward hit him again, shattering the bottle. Bits of ale and glass sprayed across the area.

William’s vision went fuzzy and then full dark as he fell forward. He hit the big box and sent the remaining cups and bottle sliding into the air. Glass shattered. The smell of ale floated up thickly as the cups spun across the dusty floor.

Edward retrieved the cups, being careful to avoid stepping in the spilled alcohol. “Goodnight.”

He and the others went down the steps and headed for their next assignment, leaving William where he’d fallen. He wasn’t dead, but he would feel like it when he woke.

“I hope she knows what she’s doing by leaving him alive.” David looked to the others for support.

Edward’s meaty fist slammed into David’s jaw. The other fist hit the other side, rattling his teeth and sending blood gushing from his nose.

David dropped to his knees in agony as pain rippled through his face and brain. He fought to stay conscious and didn’t quite succeed.

Edward stepped by him and took the lead back from Jacob, finally feeling better. “He’s had that coming for weeks now.”

**3**

“There’s nothing here we need.” Libby slammed the drawer shut and faced Lorey. “And she charmed us!”

Kiya was feeling the same anger, but she didn’t agree with Libby that the museum loot sucked. Her pockets were nearing full as she dug through the cabinets and dressers.

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Kiya had picked a side and she planned to stick with it. “We might be right under the next President of this country. It’s worth it.”

Libby went to the door and peered through the dark hallway. “We can’t achieve our goals by sitting on our asses while Marcella pretends to run this country.”

“You can leave anytime you like.”

Libby hesitated. Kiya’s tone said she was tired of listening to complaints. Libby stomped off down the hall, muttering. She didn’t see the men in the shadows who watched her hungrily as she vanished down the steps to the basement.

“Finally!” Kiya was enjoying the trip. She didn’t care about being charmed because Lorey was right. They’d already taken slaves before it happened. She agreed with Marcella’s vision of the future.

Kiya thought about Alexa’s men. Need slashed through her body, bringing a mask of pain to her face. “Wish they were available for rent.”

Lorey sighed. “Same.”

“One of us is.”

Both females rotated to find Daniel in the doorway.

“What’s the price?” Kiya wasn’t going to be tricked into betraying Marcella.

Daniel ignored her for the lovely descendant now staring at him in open desire.

Kiya’s face darkened. “Bastard!”

Daniel nodded. “There’s a man in the hallway who’ll take you even though you’re a foreign invader.”

Kiya marched to the exit, not sure if she would refuse because of this insult.

Kiya’s smell drifted up his nose.

Daniel recoiled. “Did something die in here?”

Lorey stared at Kiya. “Not yet. Give it time.” Kiya’s fearlessness was an advantage if they needed to fight. Everything else about her was offensive.

Daniel stepped aside to let the UN woman exit. Then he shut the door, blocking the view of Yani grabbing her. He stalked toward Lorey. “You can have fifteen minutes, if you can pay my price.”

Lorey instinctively knew what it was. She gave a jerky nod. “So long as I’m satisfied.”

Daniel flew toward her now, fangs descending. “Me first!”

In the hallway, Yani smothered Kiya’s screams with his hand and enjoyed a meal.

# Chapter Fifteen

**Self-Defeating**

**1**

**“C**oming through.” Mark kept a hand on his gun as the group of gate hunters outside Jeanie’s suite stood up. “I’ll just be a moment. Alexa sent me. Stand down.”

Shadows moved into the dim hall behind Mark and went unnoticed as the gate hunters concentrated on him. They didn’t attack. They weren’t sure if they should. William had been adamant about them following rules and being polite until Alexa made her choice.

Rachel moved in front of the entrance to their suite. “You can’t go in.”

Mark brushed by the gate hunter and approached the lone descendant sitting on the windowsill that led into the exhibit.

“He can’t talk to you! Get him out of here.”

Jerry took Rachel’s arm and pulled her back out of the room. He didn’t like how Alexa had spoken to them; he didn’t want to add to the bad impression they’d already made. “Let’s see what he has to say.”

Mark kicked the door shut and flipped the lock.

Selma stood and lifted her shield. She was fully charged and eager for a fight. William had pointed out bunker refugees he wanted removed and she’d drained them. Her power had grown in the short time she was there.

Mark smiled. “I come from the boss with a message and a gift.” He took off his backpack. “Which one do you want first?”

Selma stayed out of the big man’s reach. “The gift, and to know what it’s for.”

Mark drew an unopened bottle of champagne from his backpack. “She’s happy you haven’t killed the two normals yet. She wants to bargain for their lives.”

Selma didn’t lower her shield. “You drink from it first.”

Mark took his knife out and began working on opening the bottle for her. “My boss will get Rachel to free you and she’ll put in a good word for you with her father.” Mark popped the cork and grinned when it flew across the room, making the woman flinch. “Jumpy.”

Selma nodded. She watched him take a drink of the sudsy foam and then a large swallow from the bottle. “Why do those normals matter?”

“They aren’t evil yet, I think.” Mark put the bottle on the window sill next to her, then retreated. “Are you ready for the message?”

Selma gave a curt nod.

“She said you would have made a great Eagle. When Safe Haven returns, they’ll need fighters to replace those who’ve died or stayed behind. Once she frees you, if you’re strong enough to stick to the right side of the line, you could even be considered for the first ever female crew slot on our team.”

Selma was speechless.

Mark walked toward the exit. “I’m going to talk to Rachel now, but no matter what she says, you will be free by this time tomorrow. All you have to do from there is try to be one of the good guys.”

Selma didn’t watch him leave. Her mind went over his words, hunting for the trap.

When she didn’t find one, she let herself hope. Her biggest regret was not being able to go with Safe Haven when they’d set sail.

Selma let go of her shield and retrieved the bottle of foaming champagne. She settled back on the window sill and drank while she considered Alexa’s offer and what it meant. If she sided with the good guys, she would have to face William and that thought was terrifying.

“We heard everything you said!” Rachel turned on Mark as soon as he came out into the hallway. “I’ll never let her go!”

Mark studied the miserable woman. “Are you one of the good guys?”

Rachel huffed angrily. “Right and wrong don’t matter. Only my babies do!”

Mark sighed. “I’m sorry for your loss, really.” He walked down the hall, nodding to the angry guards.

Rachel’s voice rose. “You said you were going to bargain with me!”

Mark kept walking. “You made it clear you don’t want anything I might offer.”

Rachel hesitated. Then her greed flared hotly. “What are you offering?”

Mark motioned them to follow. “Let’s go someplace quiet and talk about all the orphans we’ve run into on our quest.”

Jerry expected Rachel to explode again.

Rachel wanted to, but being here among these powerful men and women was a clear reminder that life didn’t go like any of them wanted it to. *If the descendants can’t do the reset, then what chance do I have?*

Her shoulders drooped as she nodded.

“But just you two. Leave your guards here so Jeanie and Selma are protected. Marcella’s people definitely don’t like any of you.”

Rachel nodded again. “Wait here. We won’t be long.”

The guards were relieved. Alexa had sent huge portions of soup. They were full and warm, and fairly safe. They didn’t want to fight or play escort.

Jerry trailed his wife, glad that she was being reasonable for once. *If I could stop blaming her for their deaths, maybe we could move on. I don’t know if it’s possible, but I might want to try.*

Mark took them toward the rotunda and tried not to let them see how tired he was. Not having fresh blood was a problem.

He contemplated the deal Daniel was supposed to be making right now and grimaced. *I’d rather be running on fumes than to take my needs from the enemy. We should be killing them, not kissing them.*

Alexa had offered that role to all of her team. Daniel had jumped on it after viewing his target. The rest of them had showered him with their disapproval. Except for Alexa. She’d given him a smile the rest of them would kill for.

It hadn’t taken long to remember Daniel had been grieving for the slaver he’d met when they crossed the Killing Fields. Taking this assignment was a sign that he was healing.

Mark was glad for him, but he still didn’t like it. *Fraternizing with the enemy is dangerous. If he isn’t careful, he’ll be grieving again when Alexa puts a hole through Lorey’s forehead.*

Mark slowed as they reached the dining hall. Shouting echoed to them through the closed doors.

“I won’t do that!”

“It’s not right!”

“I don’t care! The slavery law will never be rescinded!”

Mark motioned. “Let’s give them some space.”

Jerry frowned. “I didn’t think Jeanie could yell. She’s been so…quiet since we’ve known her.”

“Alexa knows how to get to the truth. Hiding your real self is impossible once she starts to dig.”

Jerry believed that; he was tired of the game. “When is she going to kill us?”

Mark shrugged. “Hard to say. Maybe not at all if you give her what she wants.”

“I can’t.” Rachel knew Mark meant her. “I’m not good inside. I can’t act like I am.”

“You’re not bad either. Your grief has made you do things you normally wouldn’t have.” Mark pointed as they entered the rotunda. “We put bedrolls in the corner for you both. You can move them if you want.”

Rachel didn’t protest their bedrolls being close together. She didn’t care. “We’re going back to our group after this.”

Mark shrugged. “Alexa wants to talk to you both later, after everyone else is settled. It’s best if you stay here so you don’t piss her off and make her side against you.” Mark knew that wouldn’t happen, but the normals didn’t.

Rachel grunted. “Make your offer and then leave us alone. We’re tired.”

Mark thought of Claudia and the gift he’d given her. Their son was forming right now. By the time Safe Haven returned, he would probably be a father. “There’s a group of *good* people traveling west. Most of their group is made up of children.” Mark’s eyes flashed. “Including mine. They need defenders.”

Rachel was shocked. “You let your child go off with strangers?”

“Should I have brought them along for my quest so my enemies could kill them?”

Rachel was forced to admit that wouldn’t work. “You could have stayed with them.”

Mark had considered it. In the end, Alexa was more important. “I’m obeying a code most people have forgotten. Walking away isn’t an option.”

“Because you’re a slave.”

“Because I have honor.” Mark studied the sad woman, able to view her for who she was now that her anger had been deflated. “You’re strong. You could help keep them alive until Safe Haven returns and builds a better world for all of us.”

“Not for my kids!”

Mark’s voice dropped into stone. “They’re gone, Rachel. Give that love to children who survived.”

Rachel’s tears ran down her cheeks and dripped over her chest.

Jerry couldn’t take her pain. He put a hand on her shoulder and tried to act like his heart wasn’t ripping out, too.

Rachel tried to think through the anguish. “Why did this happen to us?”

Mark chose to answer the only part he could. Asking why bad things happened to innocent kids was a rabbit hole no one could escape from. There wasn’t an answer that would satisfy a grieving parent. “You captured a magic user and incurred a debt that will see you dead when it finishes. Then you sent gate hunters to attack Marcella. She doesn’t have time kids or blessed blades and you knew that when you made the calls.”

Rachel’s misery faded beneath a rebellious tone. “William wanted it.”

“You’re supporting a man who wants to rule the world.”

“He wants the reset! That’s all I care…cared about.”

“He also wants everyone to be slaves and though I have no proof yet, I suspect he wants to be our God. He’s not good. None of your companions are.”

Jerry shrugged. “Jeanie isn’t like them. She’s normal, like us.”

Mark wasn’t sure, but he didn’t pry up that side of the egg he was responsible for flipping. He worked on a corner that was already loose. “If he resets time, your kids will be slaves, too. And he’ll slaughter you when you challenge him. He has no mercy.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Rachel revealed something she’d overheard William mutter before they left bunker 11. “Even if he can’t find your time kids, he plans to breed with women in our bunker. He thinks he can make them deliver early. The babies only have to live for a few minutes. He’ll have what he needs before the end of spring.”

Mark locked eyes with her. “Not if they’re dead.”

Rachel froze as ugly images went through her mind.

Jerry pretended he hadn’t heard it, but he knew William would be able to get it from his thoughts now. *It’s good that we’ll be in here with Alexa and her men.*

Rachel shivered in the cool draft. “That’s the price, right? If we want a second chance with your orphans, we have to kill.”

Mark didn’t flinch. “Yes. You’ve caused the deaths of hundreds since your quest began. Debts built in blood must be paid the same way.”

He motioned at the bedrolls again. “Get some rest and think about the chance Alexa is giving you. It’s a great honor and a hard duty. Maybe by the end of it, you’ll be able to forgive yourselves for surviving when your kids didn’t.”

Mark left them there, now eager to handle the rest of their guests and settle in for winter. The faster it came and went, the sooner he could be reunited with Claudia.

**2**

“I won’t do that!”

“It’s not right!”

“I don’t care! The slavery law will never be rescinded!” Jeanie shoved away from the table and spun toward the window. She punched the glass again and again, leaving blood smears as her hands weakened under the rough use.

Marcella watched in satisfaction. The rage disease was making women meaner, tougher, more dominant. “Even if I died right now, America will still be the super power because of this. I’ve helped my kind more than any other leader who came before me, and I did it in half a term.”

Alexa saw the truth in that and also the horror. “You’ve never been hurt by men. I can tell that from how you react to my team and to William. You really don’t fear them. Why the hatred?”

Marcella didn’t feel the truth powder working anymore. She decided to be honest anyway. “The scientists who bred my sister too early were weak men. Those are the ones I fear.”

Alexa stored the knowledge that her mother was dead. “I’m sorry.”

Marcella nodded. She was feeling drunk from the wine that had been refilled each time her glass ran empty. “As am I. She was sweet and kind. She was my better half.” Marcella straightened, gloating. “She would have raised you to be a lady, not a fighter. You’re better off that she died birthing you in that lab.”

Alexa stiffened. “You knew all along.”

“Lorey figured it out right after we arrived. I waited to confirm it, like you did.” Marcella smiled genuinely. “I’m proud of how you’ve turned out. The Mitchel Pruett mix is indeed perfect.”

Deep down, Alexa had known her mother was gone. Staring at the image in Marcella’s wallet had given her a familiar ache that she’d understood. She slid Marcella’s wallet across the table to her and moved on to the next logical stage. “Was she a descendant?”

Marcella went quiet.

Alexa lifted her wine glass. “You said scientists. You gave yourself away. Your twin was a descendant. You’re Invisible.”

“Yes.”

“Our kind are not allowed to rule.”

“And I’ve made that clear in the laws I passed. Magic use is forbidden, but I’m not like you.”

“You could be if you unlocked it.”

“I’ll never do that.”

Jeanie stared between them, just catching up. Blood dripped from her hands onto the carpet. “You’re related! This is a biased meeting! You can’t make the call.”

Marcella snorted to cover her hope that Alexa would side with her because they were family. “She’s a patriot first. She’ll make the best call for the country.” Marcella’s hope died. “For the way it was *before*.”

Jeanie’s hope also faded. “She won’t pick either of us because we support slavery.”

Both women regarded Alexa in dismay.

Billy drew their attention back. “You have to convince me and neither of you have. You’ve told me you’re scared of men hurting you or others, but you’ve given no proof it will happen. All I see is survivors being punished for being male.”

“It’s not wrong to enact preventative measures to keep the past from repeating.” Jeanie returned to the table. She wiped her hands with her napkin, leaving gruesome smears on the white cloth. “The lack of civility and peacekeepers in our post-apocalyptic society already provides the perfect environment for crime. Historically, women have been the biggest targets of crime. Therefore, it’s logical to assume my female constituents are being harmed right now. I can’t let things slide all the way back to women being owned property that can’t live their own lives.”

“So you’re inflicting it on the men before they can do it to you.”

Marcella and Jeanie both nodded. Neither woman showed regret or hesitated.

Billy forced himself to stick to Alexa’s plan instead of shooting them both right here and now. “Tell me things you’ve done to help the country that don’t involve blaming men for everything.”

“But they are to blame.” Marcella was enjoying having Jeanie’s words match her thoughts and actions. At another time, they might have worked well together. “Women didn’t create bombs and they certainly didn’t get to pick who those weapons were used on. *Men* destroyed the world.”

Jeanie nodded toward Alexa. “I’ve heard it was her father.”

Marcella had heard that as well, but she’d had her own moment of talking to the real leader of Safe Haven and she doubted that female had had anything to do with it. “If so, perhaps that’s why he lost leadership.”

Billy shrugged. “Does that matter?”

Alexa suffered through the moment without defending her father so Billy could keep digging at the truth.

Jeanie stared at him in angry triumph. “Of course it matters. She’s related to the Mitchels. That would mean her family helped destroy the world.”

“That is something we will need Safe Haven to clarify when they return.” Marcella wasn’t going to take the blame unless she had to. “However, I doubt that rumor is true. Mitchels were used as hired hands and training tools. They didn’t hold any authority.”

Jeanie had noticed the same when she read the files the FBI had stored in the vaults under Camp David. “Still, he needs to weigh that in.” Jeanie tried to use her natural political ability to reach Billy. “My bunker is giving shelter, food, clothes, and protection to survivors as we speak.”

Marcella grunted. “I started those programs. My voice brought those refugees in and still will at this very moment. No one knows who *she* is, and they wouldn’t care even if they did.”

Jeanie acted like Marcella hadn’t blown her out of the water with that one. “We’re sending out reconstruction crews in the spring, and we’ve been in touch with the United Nations to establish an official communication channel.”

Alexa perked up from her spot by the wall. She focused on Marcella. “What else have you done, officially?”

Jeanie glared.

Marcella smirked. “I ordered all bunkers in the west emptied and all experiments ended. The subjects are either being let go or put down if their condition might endanger others. All those who’ve been hunting you are now out in the cold with no support structure.”

Jeanie didn’t say anything this time.

Marcella waved. “See how she shut up? That’s because she was involved in those men being sent after you.”

Billy lifted both brows at Jeanie. “Really?”

Jeanie flushed. “I had fugitives to track and bring in. If I had known you were valuable, I would have come out myself and invited you in.”

Alexa laughed. “I believe that. You have more sand than your rival. She might have started all that stuff, but you had the balls to sit here and imply you did it, right in front of her.”

Billy snickered.

Alexa gestured. “Finish up. I need to walk off that meal.”

Billy turned to Marcella. “What’s in the shots?”

“Yes, let’s hear that answer.” Jeanie was eager to continue those experiments, but only if it benefitted her in some way.

Marcella shrugged. “Only the scientists know. I didn’t invent it.”

“You’re just spreading it.”

“I’m governing in terrible conditions. Hard choices were made, and the public agrees with most of them.” Marcella pressed her luck. “Thousands of women are following that law, as you well know. It’s what they want.”

Billy pushed through his anger. He leaned back so he could see both females. “One of you started conquering bunkers and enacting laws. You offered care and supplies to my countrymen, and you’ve kept the peace in the far west and now in the east, for almost a year. You’ve made contact with the public and with the outside world. You’ve done everything needed to use the right of conquest in this meeting. That is officially recognized.” Billy’s face darkened. “Jeanie, you hid in a luxury bunker and sent soldiers out to kill the few groups who were trying to go for the help we all needed. You’re basically the enemy I’ve been fighting since I started this quest. Tell me why I should even consider your claim.”

Jeanie used a bloody hand to pull a roll of parchment from her dress pocket. She untied it and held it open for him to read.

***Presidential Succession Act of 1947***

“This gives me the Presidency. It trumps any other claim.”

Billy switched back to Marcella. “You owe me.”

Marcella reluctantly nodded. “But I won’t rescind the slavery law. The debt isn’t that big.”

Billy flushed, lips curling. “I’m worth fifty of you.” He glared at Jeanie. “Of either of you.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Alexa felt the right moment arrive. “Go finish your chores.”

Billy rose from his seat now that he’d gotten them to this moment. “Thank you for your time.”

He staggered back into the kitchen area and began cleaning up. His heart was lighter after facing another of his demons, but also because Jeanie was right. The Alexa that Billy served would never install either female. Billy began to whistle as he worked, occasionally hiccupping drunkenly. The wine was potent and he’d used it to control his anger.

Alexa straightened. “He decided neither of you are worthy and I’m not surprised. You’ve all made assumptions about me. You’ve tried to kill me or have made plans to betray me. And yet, *I’ve* not lifted a hand in violence to either of you in return. You’re both still breathing. You can make different choices. That ugly future is not carved in stone.” Alexa went toward the farthest exit. “Let’s walk off the food and keep talking. I want to make sure our den is secure for the night.”

Both females followed her.

Jeanie pocketed two of the remaining rolls as she went by the warmer even though they’d hardened.

Marcella dismissed it as greed.

Alexa took it as a good sign. The rolls had been dosed. *Jeanie is smart enough to know she can use them later. All Marcella wants is control over the men.*

Alexa led them into the dark hall without switching on her neck light or lighting a torch. *My world is dark and dangerous. They’ll both figure that out together. The one who survives our walk might get my call, but neither of them will get my support.*

Alexa thought of the mini-missions she’d given to her men. If those were successful, she might not have to make the choice. Human nature would have its way and the future would be safe again for a little while.

*Or it will pop yolk in my face. Either way, this short peace is almost over. I’m about ready to flip my eggs.*

The women paused as Mark came down the hall with his flashlight on. He ignored Jeanie and Marcella. “This floor is secure, Boss. Heading up to check on the attic now and then I’ll handle the basement.”

Alexa was pleased his chore had gone well. “We’ll cover the basement. Have Yani report to the rotunda for guard duty.”

Jeanie glanced around. “Where is everyone?” She’d expected William and Selma to be waiting in the hallway for her.

“I’m sure they’re all around somewhere. This museum has some fascinating exhibits.” Alexa led the way toward the basement.

Mark went to the attic steps and paused by the dark shape on the ground. He waited for Alexa and the others to get out of sight before he knelt and lifted David’s prone form onto his shoulder. “Come on. You can finish your nap later.”

David groaned, still trying to recover from Edward’s fury. “Sorry!”

Mark nodded. “I would be, too. I don’t know what you did, but I recognize the punishment. Stay away from our second in command until he cools off or you’ll be out for the count next time.”

“Won’t be a next time.” David pulled away from Mark and stood shakily on his own.

Mark chuckled. “As stubborn as you are, I’m sure it will happen again and so is Edward.”

David put a hand on the wall to steady himself. “There won’t be another time because I’m leaving.” David staggered toward the rotunda, blinking away the shadows over his vision.

Mark continued up the steps, shaking his head. *You can try and you can die. No one leaves a quest. The price is too high.*

David knew, but the humiliation was complete. “Come dawn, I’m gone.”

Mark didn’t answer. He had faith Alexa would fix this. *We haven’t come this far to be broken up. She’ll know what to do.*

Mark spotted another body on the ground. He hurried forward and began securing the powerful man’s hands. He didn’t mind being a closer, but he was sorry he’d missed the action. “Come on, old man. There’s an exhibit with your name on it–literally.”

Mark hefted William over his shoulder, not being careful like he had been with David. He took the man down the dark steps and went through a tunnel none of them were using because it dead-ended into a large exhibit. “The boss has plans in place for you, William, but I doubt you’re going to enjoy learning that being a byzan doesn’t make you invincible. It actually makes you a walking target that everyone tries to shoot the minute you come into view.”

He thought about the gate hunter guards who were being removed by Yani’s family while the nature descendant got drunk and missed it all. “It also makes you blind to the obvious. You assumed everyone has an intricate plan. You spent all your time trying to find a way to outsmart them and now you’ll get to find out it was all in your mind. I think they call that self-defeating.”

# Chapter Sixteen

**That Isn’t My Game**

**1**

**D**aniel groaned, shuddering as release swept him away.

Lorey clutched his big shoulders and held onto the moment. *Please take root. Please take root.*

Daniel stayed locked against her as blood slowly returned to his brain. He nuzzled her soft cheek.

Lorey kissed him desperately. She didn’t want the moment to end. *It was perfect. I’ll never find someone else who can make me feel this way.*

Cold air blew through the exhibit, but neither of them noticed it.

Daniel’s grip around her hot body tightened. Then he let go and slid out of her.

Lorey clenched around his gift. *Please. Please, God.*

Daniel tucked back into his clothes and then tucked his clothes back in. He smiled warmly at the disheveled descendant. The lantern light gave her a glow, but it wasn’t needed. She was already the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Lorey tugged her leather pants up and started fastening her vest. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Daniel kissed her cheek, then wiped the beading blood drops from her neck. “I mean that.”

He retreated, pulling the rest of his gear into place. He refused to trigger the next part of Alexa’s plan, however. He was supposed to tell Lorey she could join them if she killed Marcella. *I can’t do it. This one doesn’t deserve to die.*

Lorey let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you for that, too.”

Daniel sat on the edge of the bed they hadn’t used. His legs were grateful for the break. Sex while standing was fun, but difficult. “Ugly things are coming shortly. You should get out of here while you can.”

Lorey didn’t even think of refusing. “I’ll be gone in ten minutes.”

“Good.” Daniel watched her straighten that silky hair until it looked like he hadn’t wrapped his hands in it and made love to her until they both topped that stunning summit. Her thick scent wafted up from his body and snuck into his brain.

Daniel felt the seconds ticking by as he lingered. Midnight was long gone. *I wish I could slow time. If I had power, that’s what I’d want it to be.*

“Don’t you have gifts?”

He grinned. “I’m very skilled with my hands.”

She blushed. “Yes, you are.” Lorey finished dressing and came to stand in front of him. She ran a soft hand against his forehead, muttering; magic settled over him.

Daniel enjoyed the warmth from her protection spell. He waited for her to follow it up with a dangerous charm that could get them both killed. *It’s worth it if she wants me.*

Lorey sucked in air, now trying not to cry. She stared sadly. “I do, and I won’t. The choice has to be yours or the ending will be as ugly as what your boss has planned for all of us.”

Daniel knew she’d viewed it in his mind, but he wasn’t worried. Alexa was changing those plans regularly while William was here, to keep him from knowing which future she’d chosen. “I’ll be with Safe Haven when they land.”

Lorey felt hope for the first time at those words. She contemplated the three bunkers she’d lived in or been to since the war. *I’m not safe in any of them.* Those in charge would use her up and hold her loved ones hostage against her power. Another option popped into mind. “I’ll probably be with Yani’s tribe.”

Daniel chuckled. “That’s brilliant.”

Lorey sighed. “It’s the only place I’ll be safe from Marcella and William.”

“True. Everyone hesitated when they saw the vampires.” Daniel frowned a bit. “But they didn’t fear us, even though we’re like them.”

“Your human half shines out in a glorious light that blinds us to the other side.” Lorey shifted away, embarrassed.

Daniel stood behind her for their last hug. He rested his cheek against her neck. His soul was truly happy for the first time since a young girl had stolen his heart while they rode his dirt bike. “Be safe.”

Lorey leaned against him, heart starting to ache. “And you.”

Noises echoed, reminding them both they weren’t alone here. It sounded like new arrivals were coming around the rear, and they already knew the undead were bunching up on the front porch. It was calm for the moment, but that wasn’t going to last.

Daniel let go of her and strolled toward the exit. “If I die in the big battle, don’t name him after me. Use a name with better luck.”

Lorey stared at the door as Daniel shut it and left her life. She let herself hope again–*Please. Please!*–and then she started gathering her gear.

Lorey hurried, listening for her companions to return. She didn’t want to kill anyone to get out of here. She already knew Daniel wouldn’t accept her if she slipped any farther into the dark side. “It’s time to find the light and stay there until he comes back. After that, he’ll help me make good choices and neither of us will ever be lonely again.”

Daniel caught that as he headed toward the dining room. He didn’t answer her or beg fate for a future like she was doing. He thought about the way they’d connected as their bodies came together, how their minds had sealed in blue lights and staggering satisfaction. He’d never felt anything like it, not even with Alexa. *Thank you.* All he felt right now was gratitude. *I found my soulmate in a dusty Georgia museum after the apocalypse. Life is strange and wonderful.*

**2**

David stomped into the chilly air of the rotunda and stopped, glaring at the plaid wearing couple sitting on their bedrolls near the burnt-out fire.

Rachel and Jerry stiffened at the instant hostility, not sure what they’d done wrong.

They smelled like slightly burnt bread to David. *I love slightly burnt bread.* His mouth watered heavily. *I wonder if they smell that good to the ghoul in the corner?* “What are you doing in here?!”

They both flinched at his growl.

“Alexa told us to wait here.”

“Figures.” David wiped drying blood from his cheek and nose; he was too angry to feel the pain yet. He swept his long, heaviest cloak shut and grabbed his bedroll; he began rolling it up. He was supposed to be on duty right now. If he’d been on time, he would have known that already. Hunger and bitterness made his stomach burn painfully. “Don’t steal anything.”

Rachel fastened her top button as the draft increased, lowering the temperature. “We aren’t thieves.”

David slung his roll into his pack, snorting. “You’re trying to steal the future of everyone in this country.”

Jerry understood the gunfighter was upset. He drew Rachel back to their conversation. “I say we try to do what she wants. It’s the price we have to pay for the choices we’ve made.”

Rachel hadn’t spotted the trap, but she knew Alexa had placed one. “I don’t think I can help her. It still hurts!”

Jerry winced. “I can’t make that go away for either of us, but time here is convincing me that we aren’t like the others.”

“We aren’t. We’re normal!”

Jerry rubbed his beard in frustration. “I don’t mean that way. We used to care about freedom for everyone, and the right to live how we want. We were raising our kids to obey the laws and be peaceful people. We used to be the good guys...” Jerry sighed deeply. “And I want that back.”

Rachel slapped the dirty floor. “We can’t have peace as long as you blame me!”

“Same to you!”

David listened to the couple as he packed, drawn in despite his anger and embarrassment. He felt bad for them. It increased his anger. They reminded him of the family he’d left behind without a single word.

“We screwed up by aligning ourselves with those people. We have to do what’s right.”

“By whose standards?” Rachel gestured wildly. “Alexa Mitchel is a killer. She has no right to tell us we’re bad!”

“Maybe so, but that’s the way it worked out. We’ve spent years being miserable, Rachel.” Jerry shed a chunk of his grief-fueled rage. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“So am I.” Rachel fought sobs. “It was so hard!”

Jerry opened his arms and held his wife for the first time since he’d escaped a bunker and made it home to find out their three children had died of the flu.

David shuddered as his resentment faded. The misery and relief was smothering. It replaced his anger with regret. *Alexa’s been trying to fix this for everyone and all I do is second guess her and incur the wrath of my team for it. They’re right. I have to change, not her.*

David dropped his kit next to the others and went to stand by the dying fire. He hadn’t realized he was this angry until now. *But I am. I lost everything, including my second chance with that family. I left them for this quest, for Alexa, and all I’m going to get for it in the end is death. I won’t survive to enjoy a better world.*

David was sure of that, and he’d been fine with it when she found him because he’d had no hope. Now, he wanted to live more than he wanted anything else. *I’m ready to bury my bitterness and hatred for her father. I’ve been projecting that onto her and she doesn’t deserve it.*

Steps echoed. An engine revved somewhere outside. Voices and odd thuds came next.

David spun around and went down a dark tunnel to check it out.

Rachel and Jerry didn’t notice. They were still hugging and crying. Misery was always easier to carry when the burden was shared.

Yani watched the gunfighter leave, then switched his attention back to the crying couple who were apologizing for their actions against each other. He enjoyed observing humans, and he knew this good moment had been arranged. Alexa had seen how unhappy the couple was and found a way to make them deal with it. They would repair their relationship after this and maybe even accept Alexa’s offer to go west and help care for the orphans.

Yani suddenly realized it was a lesson for him as well. She was telling him she could be generous and forgive some mistakes.

The vampire was relieved. He’d been terrified that Alexa had called him here to kill him. It was good to know that wasn’t true. *But we do owe a debt.*

Being forgiven didn’t erase the error. By the time Adrian returned, Yani planned to have eradicated enough abominations to shift the tide of the coming war. After ensuring their win, Safe Haven would have to recognize vampires as an essential part of nature. *Someone has to take out the trash and my people don’t mind the job. In fact, I believe it’s what we were created for.*

**3**

Daniel saw David coming down the dim hallway that connected the rotunda to the dining room and kitchen. Duty kicked in and shoved Lorey out of his thoughts. “I hear it, too. We stick to our posts.”

Daniel had recognized the noises coming from other tunnels, but Alexa had told them all to hold their ground on the jobs she gave them for this fight. “I have a message for you from the boss.”

David stopped, scowling. “Alexa knows everything that happened between me and Edward?”

Daniel eyed his bruises. “Like you would have been able to hide it.”

David flushed.

The faint odor of fresh bread lingered in the halls, but it was being pushed out by the cold draft coming through every hall now. It reinforced the chore Daniel had been given. “Ready?”

David tensed, expecting the worst. “I’m sorry.”

Daniel hit the second button on his watch.

*“I forgive you. Now get that ass to work!”*

David laughed.

So did Daniel.

The noise carried to Billy, who was finishing cleanup in the kitchen. It made him feel better to know his team was nearby and in a good mood.

Other, more unpleasant noises had already hit his ears, but he wasn’t leaving his post until it was time.

The dim kitchen was filled with dishes he wished he could take along. The bread pans and muffin tins appealed the most after using pots and skillets for so long.

His new waterproof watch glinted in the lanternlight as he used his apron to wipe out the remaining water in the skillet. He had sobered while working, but the feeling of peace hadn’t left with the buzz. *I don’t think I need to kill Marcella now to finish healing.*

Billy neatly spun around to put the cleaned skillet back in his kit.

Libby leered hungrily from the doorway. Her huge arms and wild pink hair shuddered in anticipation.

*But I might have to kill her.*

Libby’s dilated pupils narrowed in on his body. Drool fell down her wide chin.

Billy’s fear rose fast enough to choke him. He staggered backward, free hand going to his gun.

Libby held up a syringe and entered the room.

The door shut behind her.

**4**

Icy wind rushed through halls all over the museum. Harsh wind blew the front doors open repeatedly. They banged against the walls in thick thuds.

Standing at the intersection to those hallways, Daniel and David knew the building was no longer secure.

Daniel checked his watch. “It won’t be much longer. Get back to your post.”

“See you on the flip side.” David returned to the rotunda.

He waved at the shadow in the shadows. “When it starts, protect your wards, not me.”

Yani chuckled, stepping forward. “I thought I fooled you.”

David snorted. “You’re the reason I felt okay leaving my post to check on the noise.”

Yani had also felt the cool drafts and understood the action had finally caught up to them. He ignored Rachel’s flinch and Jerry’s scowl as he went to stand in front of them. They hadn’t known he was there.

Metal thuds rang through the tunnels, making the normals twitch.

“Don’t draw that gun or I will consider you a direct threat!” David didn’t want to be shot by a nervous man trying to defend his wife.

Jerry forced his hand away from his holster. “We need to go.”

“Not until it’s time.” David took Yani’s place in the shadows and waited. Now that he’d cleared his mind, the old sense of fun and excitement was back in full force. He waited with a grin on his lips and death in his hand.

**5**

Daniel hurried toward the dining hall. He was supposed to stay with Billy while the action happened. That time had arrived. He could hear intruders coming from several directions and not all of them were alive.

*Bang! Thud! Thud!*

“It was clean!”

A familiar shout of rage ran through the museum and gave him a chill. Daniel ran into the dining room.

Silence fell.

Daniel went to the kitchen door. “Coming in!”

He pushed it open.

*Thud!*

Blood squirted next to his ear. Daniel flinched, hand going to his gun.

Billy slammed the skillet down again. Blood squirted over his cheek and the kitchen wall. He did it again and kept going until his arm hurt too much to keep lifting the skillet.

Billy’s cheek was swelling from where he’d taken a direct hit, but Daniel didn’t see any other injuries. *She must have triggered his rage with a punch when he refused an order.* Daniel was happy with how it had worked out for her. He could tell the fight had been short and ugly. Billy’s gun was on the floor, telling him the man had been caught off guard. Light from the rolling lantern they’d knocked over glinted off the appliances and the blood on them. The big shelves in here were welded in place, but everything on them was shuffled or knocked over. Blood was on the walls all the way across the room. Dishes and garbage littered the floor.

Daniel saw the broken, bloody syringe next. He beamed. “Great job.”

Billy switched the skillet to his other arm and resumed swinging. “I! Just! Cleaned! This!”

Concern replaced pride. Daniel eased out of the kitchen and stood guard.

**6**

“It’s beautiful down here.” Jeanie marveled over the glow-in-the-dark floor and walls that were providing more than enough light to see by as they walked down the ramp from the first floor. She ignored her stinging hands. The pain from her outburst was starting to sink in now.

Alexa nodded. “Wait until we reach the end. It’ll be so bright you’ll think it’s daytime.”

Marcella didn’t care about the museum or anything in it, including the faint, ugly noises of survival echoing down to them. Her crew was on their own. “Why are we taking a tour?”

Alexa belched and then grimaced at the odor. “Excuse me.”

Jeanie rolled her eyes. “We’re doing this so she can have a last minute to decide which of us is smart enough for the job.”

Marcella chortled. “You’re a fool if you believe she hasn’t already made the choice.”

Alexa kept walking. Her hands slid to her gun belts and rested there.

Marcella had figured out this wasn’t going to be a normal walk. Alexa’s behavior proved it. “Only one of us are coming back up this ramp. Don’t you recognize the sounds of death coming our way? Her man didn’t secure the doors. He *opened* them.”

Jeanie regarded Alexa.

Alexa lifted a brow. “Problem?”

Jeanie’s hardcore attitude showed up right when she needed it. “Not really. Are we going to fight barehanded or are you just going to shoot at us?”

Alexa snickered. “I don’t waste bullets.”

Jeanie glanced down at her fancy clothes. “Any chance I could change first? This isn’t the right gear for a fight.”

“We don’t always get to pick our outfit for that moment.” Alexa gestured at Marcella. “But it is unfairly matched. Leave your shoes here.”

Marcella arrogantly denied that. “It’s not my fault she dressed up for a dinner with enemies. Why should I be penalized?”

“Good point.” Alexa walked faster.

Jeanie stripped and ripped, transforming her gown into a ready-made dress with splits up the side that would allow fighting and running. She slid her flats off and left them without another thought.

It made Marcella feel like a coward. She also kicked off her shoes, muttering about coming here being her worst idea.

Alexa grinned coldly as they reached the bottom of the ramp. “And you’re about to pay for that mistake, but you won’t be alone. There’s a lot of company coming to cheer you on.”

Jeanie wanted to ask questions.

Marcella opened her mouth to do that.

“Good luck, ladies.” Alexa slid into a storage room and blended in with the dark shadows.

“Wait!” Jeanie spun around, searching for her. “What are the rules?”

Marcella snorted in contempt. “We have to survive, of course. Honestly, you think you’re the smart one?”

A horde of undead came down the hallway and began staggering across the invisible bridge toward the ramp.

“Yes, I do.” Jeanie lunged at Marcella and shoved the woman as hard as she could. Then she took off running, laughing like a loon.

Jeanie picked the far right tunnel, hoping the undead would go straight. She leapt over debris and furniture, heart pounding as a huge grin plastered itself to her face. *Now I know I’m really alive.*

Marcella stayed where she fell and studied the ceiling of the exhibit. She spotted rope stairs and rolled onto her feet. Marcella took off running… She jumped as she hit the edge of the ramp.

Marcella caught the dusty hangers with both hands. She pulled herself up as the undead reached the ramp and streamed down it without seeing her. The horde bunched at the next tunnel and then gushed through it, trampling the few who’d been in the front.

Marcella waited to hear Jeanie’s scream. She settled onto the center of the sturdy landing, silently gloating. *You might be more courageous, but you aren’t smarter.*

Still in the shadows of the storage room neither woman had noticed, Alexa agreed. *But that doesn’t mean you’re safe, slaver.*

Alexa padded to the far corner of the storage room and unlatched the window. In the darkness, the people outside couldn’t see her. She stuck her face through the opening. “I found a way in! Over here! She’s on the steps in the air!”

The crowd of gate hunters flew toward the window.

Alexa jumped onto a crate and jumped again. She perched on top of the window ledge.

Marcella’s furious shout echoed loudly. “You cheated!”

Alexa stayed still as people began shoving through the window below her. *I never said I would play fair. That isn’t my game.*

**7**

Selma stilled with the bottle against her lips. She listened to the new sounds outside the flat as a chill ran over her skin.

Muffled screams and thuds echoed faintly, giving her goosebumps. *It’s happening and I’m drunk as fuck. Great.*

Selma sat the bottle down and began ripping off her fancy clothes.

A wave of gunfire echoed up the hall next, making her heart race. She moved faster.

“Help! No… Help!”

Selma recognized the voice of one of their gate hunter guards. She grabbed her backpack and climbed into the huge closet. She kept working on getting dressed and finding her gun. She also cursed herself. She was new to fighting with magic and she’d never tried it while drunk.

The darkness pressed in on her tingling senses, making her sway. A thick belch tried to blast out of her.

Selma swallowed it to mute the noise and grimaced at the pain. Heartburn immediately flared up, bringing more agony.

Selma heard heavy steps in the hall. She jerked on her shirt, leaving it and her pants unbuttoned. She reached for her boots and fell backward into the wall of the closet.

Instinct said she’d been heard. Selma yanked on her boots and drew energy to fire mentally while digging for her gun.

The entrance to the flat slammed open.

Selma froze, half dressed, with an uncocked gun in her sweaty grip.

The closet door began to open.

“Don’t shoot.”

Selma stared at Bradley’s nightmarish profile in the light from the lantern on the mantle. Yani’s son wasn’t a comfort. “What do you want?”

Bradley motioned in normal speed. “Come along now. Marcella is in grave danger.”

Selma stood by easing up the closet wall so she didn’t have to lower the gun. “Why are you telling me?”

“No idea.” Bradley lunged forward and buried his fangs in her throat while she pulled the trigger repeatedly.

Selma screamed around his teeth.

No one answered.

Selma used the energy she’d gathered to blast the vampire off her. He slammed into the bedpost and dropped onto the carpet. He didn’t get up.

Selma fled into the farthest room of the flat and went to the window. She reloaded her gun and sat it on the small table so she could tie her boots and button her jeans and shirt.

She reached for the window latch… Selma replayed Bradley’s words.

*Marcella is in grave danger.*

Selma reluctantly picked up the gun and headed back to the main entrance of the flat. She kicked Bradley as she stepped over his body. One hand stayed free to use tools and the other held her gun. She drew more energy for the next fight as she stepped out into the hall.

Selma gasped.

Bodies of their guards were sprawled over the floor like a gruesome Halloween decoration. Blood had puddled around them, blocking a clear path.

Selma didn’t know if Bradley was responsible. She could hear the ugly shuffle of undead now, as well as screams of the mob that had obviously gotten inside. She staggered down the hallway, belching out heartburn and leaving bloody footprints.

She called mentally for her group.

There still wasn’t an answer. Selma couldn’t tell if that was because they were all dead or because she was drunk. Controlling her gifts wasn’t easy and alcohol tolerances had to be built up. *I let my guard down. I believed we were safe here with the Mitchel.*

Selma’s anger roared to life. “Consider it a lesson learned.”

“Who is that?”

Selma turned as Kiya staggered from a side hall. The big UN woman was covered in red drips that mirrored the ones on Selma’s shirt and chest. “It wasn’t just us.”

“No.” Kiya held onto the wall and swallowed. Her throat was parched. “Need a drink.”

Selma grimaced. She slid her pack to the floor and used her feet to kick it toward the woman. They were on opposite sides, but in this moment, they could also be partners in survival. “Alexa can’t be trusted.”

Kiya drank from the canteen until she could feel her throat again. As soon as she stopped drinking, the pain restarted. “Where is everyone?” She drank again.

Selma took the moment to tie up her hair. “No idea. I’m not getting answers. Do you know what happened?”

Kiya shook her head and almost blacked out. She held onto the wall and fought to stay conscious.

Selma realized the big woman wasn’t going to be able to help. She went by her, grabbing the pack. “Keep that canteen. I’ll find more.”

Kiya wanted to follow, but the vampires had drained her to the point of death. If she didn’t find a place to sleep and heal, she wouldn’t see dawn arrive.

A loud, close scream echoed. Heavy footsteps followed.

Kiya scanned the open flat. She limped that way, cursing her choice to come here, to help Marcella, to let the woman into their bunker at all.

Kiya heard voices behind her. They were angry and unfamiliar. She dropped to her knees, then rolled under the bed. It was the best she could do.

She spotted Bradley’s body and tensed. She followed it up to his face. He appeared to be dead.

Kiya inched toward the wall and the thickest shadows as her mind started to go blank. She collapsed, shivering, as she blacked out.

Bradley’s lids opened. Those bright red orbs glowed hungrily as he crawled under the bed. *Selma hurt me, but blood will take care of that. The only sure way to kill us is to take off the head. Everything else regenerates.*

# Chapter Seventeen

**Less Traveled**

**1**

**M**ark tensed at the light steps approaching his location even though he recognized them.

“Coming in!”

Jacob and Edward entered the basement exhibit and came over to join Mark by the main desk. The lantern on it was almost out of fuel, as were most of the light-givers they’d put in a few chosen rooms right before dinner. Alexa hadn’t wasted any lamp oil.

Jacob checked his watch. “He’s not awake yet.”

“Didn’t budge the whole time I had him over my shoulder.” Mark scanned William’s cage again, smelling gas on his teammates. “Salts don’t work on some people.” He’d tried and failed to wake the descendant.

William was still regal in captivity. Edward hated him for that. They had the man chained to a wooden post at his ankles and his wrists, but Edward already knew it wasn’t enough to keep him in there.

Jacob checked his watch. “I don’t think you should have hit him the second time.”

Edward shrugged. “Too late now.”

Mark sniggered, wiping away a thin sheen of sweat from his neck. It was almost warm here below the ground.

Jacob read the golden plaque for this exhibit. “William the Conqueror displayed such cruelty even after winning battles that his foes were disheartened and eventually allowed him to complete the conquest of England that began after the previous ruler defaulted on a promise to make William the next king.”

“Sounds like we put him in the right place.” Mark hadn’t read the tag or examined the long exhibit of torture devices and cages. He’d kept his attention on his prisoner.

The three men watched William as they listened to the chaos happening all over the museum. Screams and bangs were coming from every direction. There had also been gunshots, but not from their crew. Letting in the undead and the gate hunters together was a risky choice. All of them were listening for familiar Colts to tell them where Alexa was.

Mark patted his pocket, where he’d put the keys to William’s cells. “I think we should kill him right now.”

“So do I.” Jacob wasn’t questioning Alexa, only the way things were going. “It’s all been too smooth.”

Edward agreed with them. He’d agreed with David. “We follow her plan. She has a reason for sparing him.”

“Do you know what it is?”

Edward nodded at Mark’s question. “I think so. I’m just not sure it will work.”

The two men gawked in surprise at his admission.

William chose that moment to wake up. He tried to lift a hand to his aching skull. The chains rattled.

His eyes flew open. Hatred came into them as he took in the three gunfighters and his situation.

He inspected the double cage they’d put him in next. His tiny cell was inside a much bigger cell that would require two big blasts to get through once he freed himself from the post.

Edward didn’t beat around the bush. “We captured you. There’s a debt to be paid for your freedom.”

William felt old magic sink into his skin and seal those words. He growled in frustration. Power ran through the chains on his arms.

The metal clanked to the stone floor and echoed loudly.

Edward tensed. “You can’t kill us with the debt unpaid.”

William scanned the tattooed Convict. “He wasn’t there. I can kill him.”

Mark flipped him the finger. “You can try.”

“You can’t take revenge for your capture.” Jacob did gloat. “That’s my price.”

William glared at the scarred Preacher. “I don’t want you guys anyway. Only one of you has any real sand.”

Edward grunted as William’s evil attention switched to him.

William sneered at the cocky Horseman. “This isn’t over between us. When the bonds break, I’ll come visiting.”

“Understood.” Edward bowed sarcastically. “You can’t hunt time kids anymore. That’s *my* price.”

“No! No! No!”

The gunfighters listened for the chaos to reach them. Thuds and thumps rolled through the museum. Somewhere outside, a bullhorn was being used, but they were too far away to tell what was being said.

William blasted the chains from his legs and then tossed his arms out. The small cell exploded away from him, spraying metal debris in every direction.

“David will tell you his price when he sees you. Agree and we’ll let you go.” Jacob felt foolish saying it.

William lifted his hands.

Edward and the others shifted, bringing up their armored cloaks as metal shot across the room and embedded in fake brick walls, props, and the door.

William stared in hatred, gasping. He’d used a chunk of his energy to get free, but he had plenty left.

Edward waited for him to attack.

William wanted to, but he couldn’t. Until he gave them what they’d asked for, or bargained better terms, his magic wouldn’t work against them. “I’ll be talking to your boss. She set this up. She *isn’t* off limits.”

“She’ll be happy to discuss things with you. All you have to do is find her.” Mark took off running through the door.

Edward and Jacob followed.

Their fast exit startled William. He’d forgotten Alexa and her crew were vampires.

His ears twitched; his head rotated like an animal. His rage boiled hotter as he realized he had to get through a mob. “She let them all in. It’s a gauntlet!”

Edward’s mocking mirth floated down the hall and sank into William’s madness like a flame. It lit the match and set his brain on fire.

**2**

“We should get them out of here.” Yani scanned all the tunnels leading from the rotunda. “We have no cover.”

“We’re on a schedule. We have a couple minutes left.” David did motion toward the normals. “Collect your bedrolls. We’ll be moving fast.”

Yani spun around as shadows darted into the room.

Reina came straight to him, ignoring David and the nervous normals. “We can’t find Bradley.”

Yani tensed. “He didn’t come back from his meal?”

Reina wasn’t wearing her youth charm. Her aged skin shoved lines of wrinkles across her forehead. “He was supposed to meet us in the hallway outside her room, but the room is empty and he isn’t there. Neither is the magic user, Selma.”

David noticed none of the vampires eyed the normals like a meal. He assumed the full bloods couldn’t smell the goodness on the couple that sizzled like meat to David.

Yani looked at David. “Where is my son?”

“I don’t know anything about it. Last I heard, he should have been with your family for a meal while Alexa went on her walk.”

“You’re lying!” Reina flew toward the gunfighter. “Where is he?!”

Old magic swirled through the air. David was helpless against her demand. His mind flew into the time stream and began searching for Bradley’s signature.

Yani took Reina’s arm and pulled her away, aware of his deal with Alexa. If he left to go search for his son and something happened to these two normals, the deal would be broken.

Reina hissed at Yani.

Yani hissed back, torn between duty and honor.

David’s glazed eyes barely saw them as he searched. “Selma got away from him. He’s hunting her.” David slowly came back to them. He yawned widely. “Kiya’s body is under the bed.”

Yani motioned. “My family will stay with them. I must go.”

“Agreed.” David’s new watch vibrated against his wrist. He hit the button and read the message.

*“A less traveled path is often clear. Go now.”*

David hit the button to switch it off, relieved. “Alexa wants us to go now. You get your son. We’ll take the normals to safer ground.”

Yani vanished in a blur that even Reina couldn’t track.

David motioned at Rachel and Jerry. “The boss cleared you. Don’t screw it up.”

“We won’t.” Jerry helped Rachel stand as Yani’s family surrounded them.

“Grab our kits. If you lose them, the deal’s off.”

Jerry tossed their bedrolls to Rachel so he could gather the seven kits lined up along the wall next to them.

David waved.

Yani’s family picked up the loaded-down, cringing normals and lifted them onto their backs.

David listened, hearing noises from most of the tunnels now. He went to the one Alexa had prechosen. He didn’t hope it was clear or wonder if she was wrong. He led them into the darkness with a confident heart. His team leader had picked the route; it was survivable.

**3**

“Where are they?!”

“Come here!”

“You will give us those kids!”

Marcella hid in the metal vent as the gate hunters tried to find a way up to her. She’d kicked the hanging steps loose, but one end was still dangling and swinging through the air. It wouldn’t be long before the angry hunters tried to climb it and then all of them would be up here.

Marcella smelled gas, but there wasn’t time to determine if it was another threat. She inched backward through the dark vent and hoped it came out away from this exhibit. The gun was heavy in her pocket, but she didn’t draw it yet. She only had seven bullets.

Marcella pushed backward. She was easily fifty feet from where she’d crawled in, but it was too dark to see where she was going.

Marcella flailed as her hand went through open space. She jerked forward, banging her head and scraping her arm on the sharp steel. The one advantage Alexa had given her was the removal of her shoes. Marcella had been able to jump and run with less noise. The one consolation was that Jeanie was likely in this same situation.

Marcella felt the edge of an opening right at her hip now. She turned carefully and felt along the sides, searching for the end of the hole. She found it one square away and quickly slid over it. She used her feet to kick off and get her legs across.

Pain ripped into her senses as the steel shredded her knee. She dragged herself along, fury beating in her veins. *The Mitchel will pay for this. In my future, that name will not exist in any bloodline!*

Marcella went faster as fresh sounds echoed to her. It sounded like the gate hunters had found the rope. She shoved forward and hit the wall of the vent.

She blinked, trying to clear her brain from the blow. “Dead end.”

Glowing red orbs appeared in the darkness behind her. “Yes, it is.”

Marcella twisted around, hurting her hip to get turned.

The thick odor of her fear filled the vent. She slid in her own blood and caught herself against the metal wall.

“Come here.”

Marcella blanched. She lunged forward; a patch of her hair ripped out and stuck to the vent.

The eyes hurried toward her.

Marcella found the empty space with her hand again and covered her head. She shoved herself through. She didn’t make a sound as she fell into the unknown darkness of another exhibit.

Bradley stared down in surprise and anger, but he didn’t follow yet. Alexa had told him to scare this slaver into flight toward an exit. He was just giving Marcella a taste of what she’d put others through.

Bradley rubbed his chest where Selma’s bullets had left holes that were almost healed but still aching. He watched Marcella hit the canopy below and tear through. She landed on the plush bed. He tensed to drop through on top of her.

“Hey!”

Bradley spun around.

Selma swung the butt of her gun.

Bradley fell through the opening, barely missing Marcella as she lunged off the bed.

Marcella’s vision adjusted. She saw the outline of an exit and ran over the shag carpet.

Bradley didn’t move.

Selma whistled. “Hey!”

Marcella stopped at the 60s exhibit exit, glancing back.

“Up here.” Selma switched on her light. She quickly shut it off to keep from drawing someone to them.

Marcella stayed there as Selma clumsily jumped down, landing on Bradley’s body. When the vampire didn’t respond, Marcella found her voice. “Is he dead?”

“Doubt it. Not staying to find out.” Selma hurried over to the door and listened to determine if the gate hunters were in this hall yet. She was still a little drunk, but it was wearing off.

Marcella strode back to the bed. She pulled the gun she’d forgotten when Bradley appeared and fear took over her mind.

“Don’t bother. I shot him at least five times a little while ago. I don’t think they can die. We have to go.”

Marcella reluctantly lowered the gun and followed Selma through the exit.

A loud roar echoed up the dark tunnel.

Selma steered them away from it. “William snapped. If you see him, make sure he doesn’t see you.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Selma reached a hand back and rubbed Marcella’s wrist.

Marcella’s lip curled, but she didn’t pull away from Selma’s loving touch.

**4**

Yani waited until the two women were gone. He was glad he hadn’t killed Marcella when she lifted the gun. Alexa had made it clear that both women were supposed to survive the gauntlet she’d arranged.

Yani jumped to the bed and slapped the faking vampire as hard as he wanted to. “Twice you almost died!”

Bradley rolled over, covering his face from Yani’s beating.

“Never again! You’ll stay at home where you belong!”

Bradley was tired of his father’s abusive corrections. He shoved Yani off the bed and lunged to his feet. “I did it for you!”

Yani rose. “What?”

“I didn’t want you to be killed. I took your place.”

Yani’s anger returned. “What price did she demand for getting what she already wanted?”

“She said my honor paid for it.”

Yani calmed, but he was bitter. “What are you supposed to do now?”

“Flush the slaver out of here.”

“We’ll do it together.” Yani refused to trust Alexa or cross her.

Bradley frowned at his father. “You’re a weak leader because of your emotions. You’re acting human and our people have started to notice.”

Yani wasn’t surprised. He allowed himself another of those weak moments. “If you were in my place?”

Bradley started to smile. “I’d be just as emotional. I love my tribe. The humans among us have rubbed off.”

Yani sighed. “Maybe this is how we were meant to be.”

“True. If we didn’t understand them, we could never eliminate them. But I’ll be glad when we leave here. Acting like we care about these hybrids and their pets is exhausting.”

“I agree, but they’re the only ones who can give us permission to exist. If not for that, we’d slaughter them all like the abominations they are.”

The vampires glided into the hallway and began tracking their target.

**5**

Daniel tapped lightly. “We need to roll soon.”

“Be right there.”

Daniel was relieved that Billy sounded like himself again. He stayed in front of the kitchen entrance and listened to the chaos come closer. He could tell the gate hunters were in the museum, but the undead were the ones he was worried about. He could hear them coming through another tunnel.

The door opened. Billy joined him with a fast scan.

Daniel shied away from the bloody man.

Billy shouldered his kit. “Sometimes you just need a great outlet.”

Daniel thought about Lorey and grinned.

Billy headed for their escape route.

“Hang on.” Daniel checked his watch. “We’re a few seconds early.”

Billy lingered by the narrow exit that used to be for the serving crew to transport dirty dishes and trays into the wash area. That small room had a tiny window he and Daniel were able to squeeze through. They’d tested it this morning while Jacob and Edward played with gas canisters and mocked their efforts.

Daniel’s watch lit up. *“Take the scenic route.”*

Billy was glad Alexa hadn’t changed their path, but it didn’t matter. He felt like he could cope with anything now.

The dish room was pitch black and cleared of obstacles to the window for this moment. Daniel tripped over the rug and banged into a pot rack.

Pans and pots fell to the tiled floor, crashing and drawing attention.

“In there!”

“Don’t let them get away!”

“Damn it!” Daniel quickly rose and held his hands cupped together for Billy to reach the window.

Billy heaved himself into the sill and flipped the latch. He shoved the window open and slid out, feet first. He left his arms hanging down for Daniel to grab. As he slid through the window, he pulled Daniel up.

The door flew open. Gate hunters crammed in, fighting with each other to reach them.

Billy yanked Daniel the rest of the way through.

“Get down!”

Billy dropped automatically at the harsh shout, pulling Daniel along. He regarded the line of big women now lifting guns. Their black and silver uniforms reminded Billy of the UN troops, but these women were wilder, weathered, and well-armed.

The big female in front glared at him with real menace. “Stay down or die. Our guns are rusty.” Ivy, Marcella’s Lieutenant from the west, didn’t give them time to answer.

Billy and Daniel cowered against the museum wall as the defenders opened fire and killed every gate hunter who came through the window after them.

Bodies dropped, knocking others out of the window.

The other gate hunters took off out of the dish room.

The defenders stopped firing and reloaded.

Ivy studied Billy’s gory cover in approval. *That one’s a fighter. I like it when they fight.*

Billy helped Daniel up, nose lifting into the air. “I’m not scared of you.”

Daniel chuckled. “Nice.”

“We should get away from the building.” Billy stepped toward the defenders, making them all frown as he proved his words.

Daniel followed, not giving the women a choice. “We aren’t going far. There’s work waiting.”

They moved to the center of the big women and then eased behind them.

The defenders relaxed. They assumed the males were taking shelter behind the real fighters.

Ivy was happy with it. They’d saved the males because they had been without company since leaving the west. *They’re kinda cute.* *It’s a shame that my girls will rip them apart later.*

**6**

Rapid gunfire drew attention from all areas of the museum. The pause allowed the undead to get closer to their targets.

Jeanie recovered, kicking at the zombie reaching for her leg. She got his neck and heard something break. She hoped it wasn’t her toe as pain shot up her leg.

Jeanie pulled herself onto the swinging seat and began climbing one of the ropes that held it. She didn’t know where she was or where she was going. The exhibit was flashing in the light from a spinning globe that kept changing hues of brightness above her. She concentrated on the climb, aiming for the window right above the display of 70s nightlife.

The undead crowded toward her, grunting and groaning as they shoved each other and the hammock. It swung violently against their efforts.

Jeanie kept going. Her feeling of being protected hadn’t left, but it had faded a bit. All she could rely on was herself and the will to live.

Jeanie heard a female scream and climbed faster. The gate hunters were reaching this part of the basement, too. They were following the undead to their targets. She’d heard several violent fights while running, but she hadn’t stopped to determine who was involved or to help anyone. This was the wrong time for compassion or heroics.

Jeanie hefted herself onto the window ledge with hands that were bleeding again; she finally looked back.

The undead weren’t having any luck with the awkward climb.

“Beautiful.” Jeanie shoved on the window, not sure how to open it. She left red streaks on the glass.

The entrance to the exhibit flew open. A dozen gate hunters rushed in.

The undead rotated toward them, grotesque hands reaching out.

Jeanie steeled herself. She slammed her elbow into the glass and gritted her teeth. Pain hit her arm as she did it again, but the rage disease covered most of her misery. She slammed against the glass again.

It broke, shattering out a corner and spraying glass onto the undead and gate hunters fighting below.

“Someone’s up there!”

“Shoot her!”

These gate hunters weren’t taking prisoners. They opened fire, trying to hit her before she got through the window.

Jeanie shoved her body through the sharp space, leaving skin and blood behind. She fell to the snowy ground and lay there, stunned.

Rough hands jerked her up and shoved her against the nearby bushes.

Jeanie tripped and slid in the snow, hitting the ground hard. She stayed there as her rescuers began shooting the gate hunters who’d followed her.

The defenders had been listening to the radio calls. They knew the gate hunters were the biggest threat.

Ivy recognized Jeanie. She directed her defenders, but she didn’t let Jeanie crawl away. She stepped on Jeanie’s bleeding arm and forced the woman to stay right there.

**7**

“Run!” The two gate hunters fled from William, but it wasn’t fast enough. Ice crawled up their legs and froze them alive.

William kept walking, blasting out rage spells and ice charms at anything that moved. He searched mentally for Alexa, fury out of control.

All the plans he’d made were for tomorrow. He never thought Alexa would violate the hospitality rule, and he’d expected her to spend more time with both women before making a choice. This said she’d made her pick and it wasn’t Jeanie.

In the far corner of the main entrance, David and his group were waiting for the exit to be clear. They could hear William coming, but the mass of fleeing gate hunters and undead were just as dangerous. It was impossible to get anywhere fast with them crowding body-to-body toward the doors and windows.

Screams bounced off the walls and rang through the top floor of the museum.

William fired another spray of ice to silence the shrieks of the gate hunters he’d hit but hadn’t killed. He stormed forward, drawing more energy. *Where are you?!*

William’s passage caused panic. The other gate hunters fled out the exit, trampling each other.

David realized they were about to be caught between the herd and the wolf. He swept for another exit…and found the less traveled path.

David pointed at the top of the huge bookshelves lining the wall next to them.

Reina clutched Rachel tighter while the normal shut her eyes and hoped she survived.

David leapt, leading them.

The vampires took to the top of the shelves in nauseating blurs for Rachel and Jerry. They clung to their rides as the blood drinkers leapt from shelf to shelf, staying above the fighting, shouting, bleeding, dying crowd. They circled the room and ended up ten feet from the exit that was crammed full of terrified gate hunters struggling against each other and the undead.

Reina smashed the tall window next to her and jumped out.

The others followed, not waiting for David’s permission.

David went last, scanning the hallway. William was coming through.

David instinctively lifted his gun.

William instinctively lifted his shield.

David tipped his gun at the furious man and then followed his group out the window.

William took off running, madness in control. He dropped his shield to fire.

Hatred blasted through the exit, knocking people to their knees and clearing space to get through.

A dark blur flew by him. Blood welled on the back of his neck.

William brought his shield up and spun around, searching.

Alexa drew him left while more blurs streaked by him on the right. She slowed as she went through another doorway, flipping the finger.

William followed, clearing the main entrance for the others to escape.

**8**

“We’re here for Marcella Pruett. Let her go and we’ll leave. You have ten minutes!”

In the museum, the remaining gate hunters cheered. They assumed the voice on the bullhorn belonged to their people.

“Come on.” Marcella stepped in front of Selma, not caring that the descendant was swaying on her feet from blood loss. The holes in Selma’s neck made it obvious what had happened.

“Wait.” Selma used another chunk of energy to lift her strongest shield over them both. “Something’s coming.”

Marcella kept moving. “You can handle it when we get to it.”

Selma snorted, but the anger gave her a fresh boost of energy.

Both women moved faster as a man’s roar found their hallway. William was killing everyone he ran into and none of them knew the layout here. Selma was walking them in circles to avoid running into him.

The screams faded.

Selma retook the lead. She led them toward the exit this time, hoping they would be able to get through. The massive mob of looters and hunters had passed them at one point, but they’d been fleeing and hadn’t noticed two women hiding in the long velvet curtains that lined this hallway.

Selma tensed. “Damn.” She grabbed Marcella’s arm and sucked in more energy to strengthen the shield. It flickered warningly before solidifying like she wanted. The gift from Alexa had definitely been a trap. “Keep moving! Quick!”

Marcella tolerated the drain. She could feel death breathing down her neck and it was hot.

**9**

“Someone’s coming out the front!”

Ivy motioned at her understudy, Nichole. “Take my place.”

The mohawked woman ran over and put her heavy boot on Jeanie’s other arm as Ivy went to the front of the museum.

Jeanie shivered in the cold slush, but she didn’t argue. Fate had saved her again.

Ivy lifted her hand, ready to give the order to resume clearing.

Vampires blew through the exit and sped by the line of armed women before any of them could react. They went to the thin trees nearby and waited.

Ivy recovered, blinking. “Move in!”

The two dozen defenders entered the museum and opened fire almost immediately as gate hunters and undead converged on them.

Ivy wasn’t scared, but she was cautious. She let the others go first while she worked on a plan to handle the creatures who’d blown by them. “Clear and hold! Light us up!”

The defenders lit torches and gave them all a view from hell as zombies hurried their way, shot, bleeding, but still alert enough to be drawn to the light and noise.

“Remove them all!”

The gate hunters in the group of bodies spun around and ran back the other way.

“I smell gas.” Ivy made a quick adjustment. “Retreat! Get out of here!”

“Too late.” Alexa flew by the woman with her longest blade in hand.

Ivy’s head went rolling into the center of the undead; they lunged for it.

Alexa flew through the exit.

The other defenders ran out behind her, but they went around the building to seek protection with their squad.

Jeanie looked up at the stunned, muscled woman standing on her arm. “I’m the President. I command you to–”

Nichole walked away from her to meet the panicking defenders who’d come back. “What happened? Where is Ivy?”

“They cut off her head!”

“Who?”

The defenders pointed at the trees and retreated behind the rest of their teammates. They all missed more people emerging through the front of the museum.

Marcella and Selma hurried down the steps, both glancing over their shoulders.

Nichole stared at the four dark forms under the trees.

They all bared fangs and hissed at her.

“That’s my boss.” Billy frowned as the smell of gas floated over them. “I don’t think she likes you.”

Nichole snorted. “I can kill you before she kills me.” She jerked Billy by his arm.

Alexa saw it. Her eyes lit up bright red.

Nichole lowered her arm instead of delivering the blow she’d intended.

Daniel was relieved.

Billy was disappointed.

In the tension, only Jeanie saw the angry man come through the exit and stalk toward them. She considered giving a warning, and then fled barefoot into the darkness instead.

William fired hatred at the nearest women, bringing them to their knees in front of him.

Alexa’s stomach rolled over in the now familiar feel of two byzan repelling each other. She fought the urge to kill him just so the nausea and discomfort would go away.

William embraced that annoyance and used it to fuel his attack on the defenders who tried to challenge him.

Half the defenders dropped, screaming as his spell scrambled their brains with hatred.

William marched toward Alexa.

Alexa was ready. She fired a blast of flames.

William ducked it and kept coming.

Alexa smiled. “Perfect.”

Her fireball met the gas that had been building through the museum. It flamed up and rushed inside.

A thick ball of fire blasted back out, hitting William. He was knocked down the rest of the steps as the backdraft went over him and hit the entire front line of screaming defenders.

The museum gave a loud creak as the gas expanded…then it exploded, blowing walls and people into the sky.

# Chapter Eighteen

**Bright As Daytime**

**1**

**T**he night lit up with flames and fire. Glass sprayed from unbroken windows. Heat rushed over the survivors, sparking against clothes, skin, and hair. Shrieks ripped through the night as those closest to the museum burned alive.

William hit the ground hard. He groaned as flames went over his back and flew out into the parking lot. He tried to bring up his shield. Another wave of fire melted it and rushed over his prone body. He screamed in agony.

With all his gifts, he’d never battled fire. He rolled over into the snowbank; steam hissed up into the frigid air.

Selma kept pushing Marcella toward the alley next to the flaming museum, hoping no one noticed them. Small bits of smoking wood and melted plastic flew and popped around the women. Selma was too weak to bring her shield back up. The first blast of heat and debris had dissolved it like cotton candy.

“She tried to kill me.” Marcella swayed on her bare feet from the blast. Her ears trickled blood, as well as her nose. She paused and twisted to the side, vomiting harshly.

Screams pierced the cold darkness all around the front of the burning museum. Flames shot into the sky. Sparks blew on the wind and died against the cold buildings around it. Dying defenders ran into those buildings and each other, screaming as they tried to find help. New fires sparked. The acrid odor of burning flesh swelled. It rose on the snowy wind and broke over the city, drawing attention from wildlife in the area.

Selma resumed pulling Marcella toward the alley. *Things are about to get ugly.*

**2**

Jeanie stopped and stared at the destruction in shock. The burning people horrified her, but in a vague way. It mostly reminded her that she was protected. In all the chaos of this meeting, the only real injury she’d gotten had come from her own loss of temper. She didn’t care about the gear she’d left behind in her kit or the beautiful, destroyed dress that wasn’t keeping her legs, arms, or chest warm. They were replaceable with a fast trip into the supply rooms of her bunker. *I have to get back there. I’m outside now and the meeting is over. Hospitality no longer covers me.*

She swept the heavily smoking inferno that had been the museum and then people around it, shivering as her bare feet started to freeze. She was too far away to feel the heat of the fire, but the light from the blast showed all of her enemies. Jeanie narrowed in on Alexa and her crew lined up neatly under the trees. “She tried to kill all of us.”

Jeanie headed for the parking garage where their vehicles were stored. She wanted the warm clothes from the emergency kit in her jeep, and the loaded gun she’d put under her seat on the way here. Not bringing a potion to the dinner party had been a mistake. *I won’t ever do that again. I’ll be armed everywhere I go now, even if it’s just a trip to the bathroom.*

Jeanie marched angrily through the slush, mind flying over her options. Things hadn’t gone her way at all.

David saw her and glanced at Alexa to see if the boss wanted him to stop Jeanie from leaving. He and Trenton had stopped their group when the museum exploded. They were surrounding the two vampires who were still carrying Rachel and Jerry, but all of them were mesmerized by the fire.

Yani and his son joined them from the shadows of a nearby alley, also staring at the fire. *Did she try to kill all of us?*

Alexa gestured. *Send them on and join your team.*

David turned to Yani. “Take them to our den and wait for her call.”

Yani and his family hurried the two normals toward Alexa’s hotel. All of them hissed at Jeanie as they finally spotted her.

Jeanie took off running in the opposite direction.

Rachel shoved off Reina’s back, forcing the group to stop again.

Jerry joined her on the ground. They gaped at the destruction, stunned.

Yani and his family nudged them toward the hotel while casting worried looks at the sky. Dawn wasn’t far away, but more than that, they were eager to be gone before Alexa triggered something that targeted them this time.

**3**

William shoved to his feet and limped away from the heat of the fire. His once neat hair was singed around the rear and burnt off on one side. Part of his ear was blackened and crispy. It smoked continuously as he marched toward Alexa. His shirt smoldered in the back and gave off tiny sparks that died in the slush.

“Watch out!”

Rachel’s reaction was lost in the screams and cracks of burning wood collapsing under the onslaught of the fire.

Alexa knew what the woman was warning them about. There was only one thing that would bring hopeful horror to a gate hunter’s face and that was magic. She drew her Colts in a blur and opened fire.

Her men did the same.

William stopped and brought up a shield. Bullets hit it and flew into the crowd, redirected. Screams rolled over the scene; blood dripped to the ground as Alexa and her team reloaded to try again.

Marcella forced Selma to stop. She sucked in fresh air and tried not to puke again. “Help him kill her.”

Selma stared in disgusted surprise. “You can’t be serious.”

“If you want me to forgive you, kill her.”

Selma swept Alexa’s firing crew, and shook her head. “I don’t think I can.”

“Then call for help!”

Selma scanned for survivors among their western guards. Only three dozen of those big woman were alive and all of them were burnt or injured in some way.

“I want her dead!” Marcella narrowed in on Alexa and found an opening in their line. *She’s distracted!* Marcella lifted her gun.

Alexa’s men slid in front of her and brought their cloaks up together in a six-layer barrier that stopped all of Marcella’s bullets.

“Very nice!” Alexa chuckled as she reloaded, but the sound was full of fear that her men registered.

Edward spammed the firing mechanism, unloaded his entire magazine at William to keep him from advancing or firing a spell.

Marcella knew she’d missed her one shot. “Kill her!”

The men stepped aside to let Marcella see Alexa laughing.

Marcella snatched Selma by her throat, letting the rage have control. “I owned you long before anyone else! You owe me everything! Kill her!”

Rachel’s weak hold over Selma snapped in the face of the truth. Magic swirled around the women.

Selma bowed her head. “My gifts are yours to use, Alpha.”

Marcella had always known what Selma would be once she accepted her gifts. “I already told you. Call for more help!”

Selma immediately shut her eyes and made the call Alexa had been expecting and dreading. *Mother Nature! Help me!*

The wind around them picked up, bringing an icy chill to combat the heat from the fire. Thick smoke from the blaze rolled in crazy directions, making the survivors cough.

Jacob knelt to reload, heart pounding. They were forcing William to stay still and keep a shield up by taking turns, but it wasn’t going to work much longer. “Last mag, Boss!”

A group of defenders broke away from helping their injured women. They ran off into the alley behind the museum, hoping to reach their vehicles.

More flames blasted out of the burning museum.

Those defenders split off into the city, abandoning the burning vehicles.

More of Marcella’s surviving defenders abandoned their injured and fled into the night. They didn’t want any part of what would happen next.

“Do something!” Marcella couldn’t wait for Nature to arrive. She sensed the battle depended on what happened in the next two minutes.

Selma lifted her hands to cast her quake spell, drawing power.

Marcella kept ahold of Selma’s arm, feeding her energy.

“Take her out!”

Mark switched targets at Alexa’s call. He fired his rifle.

Selma got a shield up at the last second. The bullet stuck in it and then dropped to the snow. Her mouth fell open as she saw who’d fired the shot. *I thought he was one of the good guys!*

Mark prepared to fire again. *I’m earning that status with every moment like this.*

Alexa held up a hand. “You missed it. Get your team ready to handle the fallout.”

The team saw William stagger forward with his shield up and realized he was about to fire back. So far, he’d only defended.

“The quest goes on, even if we do not, my pets. Never forget my lessons.” Alexa stepped around her team and strode forward to meet William.

Edward was too worried to be pissed at Mark for missing his target. He hadn’t forgotten how anxious Alexa had been about this moment.

Alexa lifted her shield as William lowered his and tossed hatred in an icy ball. It stuck to her barrier and started freezing it.

Mark swung back to him and fired again.

William screamed as the bullet plunged into his stomach, but he kept coming.

Alexa pulled flames to her hands and warmed the shield. The ice melted off in rivulets that gushed to the snow and began to freeze at her boots.

William threw ice again, moving forward as the rest of the crew fired at him. Half the slugs veered off course as William used his hatred as a barrier. The others plunged through it and hit their mark, but it still wasn’t enough to kill him.

Alexa pulled more flames. Her shield cracked and fell.

The flames put out William’s ice.

Once again, it was a draw.

Fury ran through William at a new level. He opened another mental door and shoved a lump of energy into it. Fire immediately belched out of his chest. It melted the bullets reaching him and exploded the others that followed.

Alexa met his flames with her own fire, but it wasn’t a match. Heat rushed over her body and sparked in her hair.

Edward used his cloak to smother it as Alexa brought up another shield and smothered the rest of the fire running over her arm. All of them were out of ammunition now.

William fired again.

Alexa and Edward held her shield together, sharing strength.

Edward felt the difference between them and realized there was no way to win this one. William’s power, even while he was injured, dwarfed Alexa’s magic.

William’s next hit cracked the shield and singed them both as the fire died out in the snow.

“Now, David!”

David pointed at William, who was a few feet away and getting ready to fire again. “Kill Selma, right this minute. That’s my price.”

William was trapped. He tried to keep walking, to fire another spell, but nothing responded. He was bound to his captors. He fired ice as he rotated toward Selma.

Selma screamed as it began climbing her legs. She was too rattled and hungover to form a defense. She was no match for William. *Help! Mother!*

“Mitchel traitor!” Marcella’s fury popped. Her mind snapped open and filled with power.

William zeroed in on Marcella. Hatred flashed across his face. “This is your fault. You should have gone away!”

Still standing on the street above the museum, Rachel remembered Mark’s words about killing for their ticket to ride. Then Marcella’s revelation repeated in her mind.

*“Selma was in charge of my scientific level. She organized things, picked the kids, and rotated them through the programs.”*

Rachel pulled the gun from her holster.

Jerry was thrilled. Rachel was the best shot between them. “Do it.” He stayed close to guard her from the vampires who were now turning toward them in disapproval for interfering.

Rachel opened fire.

Alexa’s men dropped to the ground, covering themselves and each other from the wild slugs.

William jerked as a bullet went into his shoulder. He stumbled forward as another one hit his back.

The next bullet missed his neck by an inch and hit Selma in the head.

“No!” Marcella caught the woman as she fell. Blood dripped over them both as she lowered Selma to the ground. “No!” She tried to use her new gifts to heal, but it was too late. Selma slipped away in a fleeting instant.

Rachel blanched. “I killed her. We just lost the kids.”

William fell silent as grayness took over his vision. He concentrated on freezing his injuries so he didn’t bleed to death. He also waited to feel the final projectile enter his brain and end his life.

Nature screeched in rage. The wind gusted toward Rachel, drawing deadly debris from the town. It slammed into windows, walls, and walkways, breaking apart into more pieces. Frozen rocks and ice swirled after those who fled.

Rachel ran as fast as she could go.

A large branch impaled her through the spine and threw her into the street where she bounced and rolled like a piece of debris in a hurricane.

“Rachel!” Jerry ran to his wife, already sure she was dead.

Rachel gasped out blood and her last breath as Jerry reached her.

Nature switched her fury to William, tossing shrapnel and ice in every blast of wind.

Marcella left Selma’s body and ran toward the parking garage for her truck. She already knew she couldn’t fight Nature. Descendant gifts couldn’t match that.

Yani and his family also took off. Their blurry shadows were quickly out of sight.

William crawled toward Alexa as she and her men flattened against the ground and waited for the rain of debris to end.

Nature zeroed in on him. A tree trunk slammed down by his leg.

Alexa and her men rolled away as trees and rocks slammed into arms, legs, cars, and the ground.

William brought up his shield again, but it was weak. He caught a fence post in it and it popped, leaving him unprotected. The post fell heavily next to him, spraying wooden shrapnel along his body.

Alexa’s team cleared the damage path and rose, guns in hand, but there was no one to fight. Nature was using her normal tools. She hadn’t come herself in a form they could fight.

William mistimed a roll. The wind brought a metal rail from the alley and hit him with a howl of triumph.

William’s scream echoed over the scene, telling Nature she had a direct hit.

Satisfied, Nature withdrew and left the foolish fighters to their fates.

**4**

Alexa motioned to her crew. “Finish this.”

The six men swept for survivors first.

Billy’s eyes narrowed. “Marcella’s alive.”

“Jerry made it through.” Mark watched the man try to bring his wife back, but that wasn’t going to happen.

Jacob scanned behind them. “Jeanie was here. I saw her run off.”

Edward scanned the front. “A few of the western fighters are still trying to save some of their people. I doubt they’ll be able to unless they have a healer.”

Daniel shook his head. “Lorey said Marcella kept all the magic users with her so they couldn’t conspire behind her back.”

Alexa examined Daniel to determine if Lorey had charmed him.

Daniel smiled happily. “All my own choice, Boss.”

Edward swept the burning museum. “I didn’t see Lorey. Maybe she didn’t make it out.”

“She left before the chaos.” Daniel didn’t hide the warmth in his voice. “She switched sides.”

“Excellent.” Alexa was thrilled with how most of it had gone, but she was dreading what came next. *I don’t want to do this.*

She sighed. *But duty matters.* Alexa circled her finger.

David appeared on her right, while the rest of her team marched into the firelight to secure their captives and loot magazines for their guns.

Marcella’s few troops were overwhelmed within seconds. They knew how to fight, but no one had ever thrown fire at them or exploded a building in their faces. They sank to their knees when ordered to, shocked and sad from their losses.

Nichole was the only one to resist. “What about our wounded?”

Edward inspected the severely burned, whimpering, and unconscious women. Then he looked at Alexa.

“Give them a fast death.”

Alexa’s men did it quickly from where they stood.

The defenders they’d rounded up cried out, but they didn’t fight. The men were too sharp, too good with their shots. The women didn’t want to die.

William groaned, then screamed as he woke and tried to roll over. The long fence railing had pierced his leg and pinned him to the ground. Blood was seeping out around the pole and puddling against his knee.

Alexa approached William carefully. Even horribly hurt and burnt in places, his power was still a mountain to her molehill.

David expected Alexa to capture the man and demand a price like three of their team had done.

William used a huge portion of his remaining energy to send the rail flying from his leg. It hit the wall of a building across the street and stuck in the door. Light from the burning museum showed blood squirting from his leg in thick streams.

William flopped over onto his back and used the last of his natural energy to freeze his leg.

Alexa smiled in appreciation as his blood thickened and the wound froze. “Ingenious.”

William glared at her, shivering and jerking. His teeth chattered as he spoke. “This won’t k-k-kill me.”

“I know.”

William waited for her to pull her gun and finish him off.

“Why do you want the reset, William? I didn’t view that in your thoughts or memories at all.”

“You’re b-byzan.”

“Of course. Letting you wonder about it gave me the advantage, but mostly, I used your companions against you. They were the loose edges. You were stuck to the pan like an egg without oil. Now tell me why you want time turned back!”

William’s lids shut; his face paled. “I want my mommy back.”

William’s hoarse whisper sounded like that of a broken child.

Alexa’s heart shattered again for all of them. “Damn it!” She spun away from him and went to join her men.

Not sure if he would wake again, William passed out.

Gunfire echoed from the nearby parking garage. The noises were distinctive.

Alexa gave a low whistle.

Her team got the captives onto their feet and herded them toward her.

She glanced at William’s body as she went by, but she didn’t draw her gun like instinct was telling her to do. She had compassion for him.

Edward didn’t. He drew his gun and fired off three fast shots.

William’s body jumped with each one. Fresh blood flowed into the snowbank.

Edward reloaded and holstered while everyone stared at him.

Alexa had stopped at the first pull of the trigger. She saw three holes open up–leg, waist, and back–and looked at Edward. “What happened there?”

“I missed. On purpose.”

“So he’ll suffer more as he dies.”

Edward nodded curtly. “I hope.”

Alexa led them toward the garage. “You put duty over your honor.”

“Yes. He was too dangerous to spare.”

“Was that your choice to make?”

“Yes.”

Alexa snorted at his bravery. “Not apologizing and begging forgiveness is a new tactic. See me later for your punishment.”

“I will.” Edward wasn’t sorry. William had murdered hundreds of people over the four years that America had been suffering. He deserved it.

“But why do you get to determine that?”

Edward decided he was already in trouble. There was no reason to hold back. “The same right that you have. I’m not a slave.”

Alexa laughed lightly. “Excellent.” She rested her hands on her guns.

Wolves and wild dogs darted in the distant shadows, drawn by the smell of burnt flesh.

Alexa swept Nichole from braids to boots. “Tell me where you hid your vehicles and we’ll bring them along in a few minutes.”

Nichole stepped closer to Alexa, covered in tiny wooden wounds and burnt patches. “They were behind the museum. We pushed them for the last mile.”

“We’ll cover your ride home. Stay together and behave and you’ll be back with your master shortly.” Alexa patted her guns in warning. Then she headed for the parking garage. “Why didn’t you go to the UN bunker like Marcella ordered you to do?”

Nichole hurried to catch up so the men didn’t touch her again. “We were an hour away when Marcella’s coded call came in.”

Alexa wasn’t surprised. All the groups had carried radios and she hadn’t demanded they give them up. Alexa assumed Marcella would go back to the UN bunker to lick her wounds. *Then she’ll attack Jeanie and start a new war, like I warned them about during our meeting.*

Jerry watched them all go. Tears of sorrow and betrayal ran from his eyes.

Alexa felt his stare, but she didn’t look back.

Mark did scan the single normal male standing by his wife’s grisly body. Then he spun on his heel and resumed his walk. “Do you think he’ll make the right choice?”

The rest of the men glanced at Mark in confusion.

Alexa shook her head. “No. Grief doesn’t allow logic to penetrate. Only after he’s made that deal with a devil will he grasp what he’s thrown away.”

Mark spat. “And it’ll be too late. William will take his lifeforce and heal.”

Edward spun around to verify William was still on the ground. “He’s dead, or will be soon. My bullet holes aren’t frozen.”

“And we may all pay for your mercy!” Mark glared at Edward, something that rarely happened. “We agreed to kill him, not to wound him and let him bleed out.”

Edward flushed; his lips thinned. “I’m sorry.”

Mark grunted. “So am I. I won’t miss next time. You’ll drill me with rifles until I can match you.”

“It would be my honor.”

Alexa was proud of her team for being able to correct each other, but even more, for being able to accept those corrections. It was hard to be told you were wrong, for anyone. Accepting it and moving past it was a lost art that needed to return.

“We’ve told a lot of people about Claudia’s group now. That’s worrying me.”

Alexa didn’t mind giving Mark comfort. “Most of those we’ve told are dead or very busy just trying to hold onto what they have. The rest will add strength to her group and protect her children.”

Mark wanted to be relieved. Instead, he was instantly jealous. “Children?”

Alexa kept a light tone. “Don’t ask for pain before it comes. No future is set in stone.”

Mark was comforted. Alexa had saved his life and he was sure that she was planning something to save Billy. He saw no reason why she wouldn’t help him again in the future.

David listened to Mark relay his doubt with respect and honesty, to Alexa’s face, and gained another layer of understanding. *I handled it wrong.*

“Why didn’t you kill him?” Jacob was the true rookie this time. “And the slavers I assume you’re about to set free.”

“I can’t. I invited them here.”

“So?”

Edward switched his gun to his other hand so he would be ready with a bare edge of surprise if it was needed. “The hospitality rules are set in stone. We can’t kill someone under our protection, even if they try to end us. You saw how William couldn’t attack or refuse David’s demand?”

Jacob understood now, but he didn’t interrupt. He hadn’t known in the beginning and it would be rude not to let Edward finish. “Yes.”

“It’s like that, but it might not happen instantly. Karma always rolls around and if you earn too much, it flattens you.”

Jacob’s eyes widened. “Like Rachel. And William!”

“Yes. Both of them were willing to sacrifice innocent lives to get what they wanted. They lied, cheated, stole, kidnapped, and killed to achieve that goal.” Edward looked back once more to make sure William’s body was where he’d fallen.

It was.

“Were you bound by hospitality? Is that why you didn’t kill him?” Mark wanted to forgive Edward. If that was the case, there was nothing to forgive.

Edward refused to take the easy way out. “No. I forgot about it and almost cursed us. I pulled it at the last minute because I realized how disrespectful it was to the boss.”

The team liked his answer, including Alexa. “Your explanation is noted. If you ever do it again, you will lose your place as my right hand. Daniel will assume that role and you will drop to the rank of rookie.” Her eyes glowed red as she regarded him over her shoulder. “Are we clear?”

“Yes, Boss. I’m sorry.” Edward suffered the embarrassment, but deep in his heart, he was grateful for the correction. If Alexa started letting them get out of control, she would lose their respect and that would crush them all. “And sorry about the rolls. I’m not sure how it happened.”

“Same. We’ll work on our communication while we winter here.” Alexa felt no need to punish him for that minor mistake.

“We didn’t win, even though we came out on top.” Daniel hated the way that felt.

So did Alexa. “No. This is our first tie.”

Jacob had caught up. “Because you chose that result.”

She nodded. “I had two options. It was either a loss or a tie, so I picked the one we could all learn to live with.”

**5**

Jerry shivered in the cold wind. He stared at William’s body, heart pounding. *I have to make a hard choice now.*

Jerry didn’t know how he would go on without his family. “I thought I hated her, but I don’t. I love her.” Blood dripped down Rachel’s body and turned more of the snow red. “Now she’s gone…like our kids.”

Jerry let out a long breath as his mind flipped into blind fear of being alone. “I can bring them all back.”

Jerry stumbled toward William. He wiped away his tears, smearing Rachel’s blood over his face. He didn’t notice. Only one thing mattered to him now and it wasn’t his appearance.

William was too cold to feel the pain. He knew he was in mortal danger. He didn’t understand why Alexa hadn’t killed him, but he was grateful. *I will survive and come back to reward you for this moment.*

“She’s gone. Open your eyes.”

William forced his lids open. Insanity locked gazes with Jerry.

Jerry nodded as he knelt. “Crazy is what I need.”

William tried to find energy to fight as he realized the man intended to take him prisoner.

“I’ll help you find the kids.”

William groaned as more life blood poured out of him. “I’m forbidden.”

“I’m not. As your captor, I can use your gifts for my goals.” Jerry reached out and clasped William’s cold hand. “Take some energy to heal up and I’ll get you out of here before anyone comes back.”

William drew what he needed, but no more. There was still hope for the reset and revenge. That was all he needed.

**6**

“I want my truck!”

“It’s not yours anymore. I claimed it under the law of conquest.”

“Give me my damn truck!”

“No.”

Jeanie’s laughter echoed to Alexa’s team and made them snicker at Marcella’s frustration.

Alexa opened the door to the parking garage and entered. She nodded at Yani and his family. The vampires were standing near the now screaming women, like they’d been told to.

Jeanie saw her and cringed down in the cold seat of the truck. Only her damaged hands on the wheel were visible.

Marcella ran to the other side of the armored vehicle, glaring at Alexa through the windows. “Traitor!”

“Oh, shut up.” Alexa was tired of playing nice. “Don’t call me by the name you own!”

Both women were dirty and dismayed. They’d failed to retain their dignity during this run, but they’d kept their lives so far. That was likely about to change.

The parking garage was dark and had two wide exits leading to the next floor and the floor below. The glowing rails along the walls gave them enough light to view by even without the bright dome light in the truck.

Edward and Mark lined their captives along the wall where they would be killed if Marcella opened fire at Alexa. Their shadows were clear. There was no way she could mistake them.

Marcella searched for an escape route, but Yani had her blocked in. She swept him and Bradley with a furious fear that told Alexa she would never make a deal with the vampires.

Alexa studied the garage, spotting shell casings and fresh blood. She waved at her crew. “Tell me what happened here.”

Edward examined the scene and glanced at his team to see if one of the others wanted credit for this one.

David felt he needed it. “Jeanie emptied her magazine, missing everyone but the walls, and then took cover in her truck.”

Alexa nodded. “Very good. And what caused her panic?”

“Yani showed up.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “Is that what happened?”

Yani was always impressed with her training. “Yes. She also took the jeep keys from that ignition as we arrived.”

Alexa studied the two women who were sure she was about to order their deaths. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. She motioned. “Give her the keys to your jeep.”

Jeanie reluctantly opened the door a crack. “I want the keys to this truck. We’ll trade.”

Marcella no longer cared which vehicle she got as long as it let her get out of here. She fished the truck keys from her pocket and tossed them over the hood to Alexa.

Now that Marcella had unlocked her gifts, Alexa was able to get into her thoughts and rip through them like a whirlwind. Marcella was too inexperienced to even try to keep her out. Alexa dug deep.

Marcella moaned in fury as the gunfighter found the bunker codes. “There won’t be any Mitchels left alive in the world! I’ll slaughter them all, big and small!”

Alexa held up a hand when Edward would have chosen duty over honor once again. “Let it go. Karma will catch her and when it does, we won’t be caught in her blast.”

Alexa made the key trade with Jeanie, aware of the woman gloating. Alexa almost changed her mind.

Edward stepped forward and shut Jeanie’s door. “Roll the window down and listen. You’re being given a gift you don’t deserve.”

Jeanie did what he said. She also started the engine and shifted into drive so she could run them over to escape if she had to.

Alexa slid the jeep keys over the truck hood to Marcella, who barely caught them. “I’ve made my decision.”

“I know you aren’t giving it to me.” Marcella headed for the jeep. She lifted her chin and tried to salvage some of her respect. “But by the rules you follow so dutifully, she can’t have it, either.” Marcella threw an ugly look at Jeanie. “She hasn’t popped yet, but she’s one of us. She’s forbidden to rule the normals and nothing you can do will change that.”

# Chapter Nineteen

**Conquest Or Succession**

**1**

**“T**hat only applies to Mitchels and Pruetts, not all descendants.” Alexa braced for the correction she knew was coming.

Marcella opened the jeep door. “I don’t view it that way. *All* descendants are dangerous to your human herd.”

“So are the blood drinkers.” Jeanie was happy to cause trouble for them since they’d killed her guards and scared her. “Magic can’t penetrate a vampire mind. You’ll never know if they’re lying.”

Alexa stiffened. Pieces flew into place. William hadn’t grabbed one of the vampires and tortured them for information, despite knowing the kids had been in their cave. *Why didn’t he try to get the information?*

Marcella was also eager to turn Alexa against Yani. “William already knew it wouldn’t work, even for a byzan. I’m surprised you missed it.”

So was Alexa and her team, but it was obvious now that it had been pointed out. Alexa moved on to the next logical question. *What is Yani hiding from me?*

“Something that would void your deal, no doubt.” Marcella was enjoying the view into Alexa’s thought process, but she knew not to keep doing it or she would risk Alexa’s wrath.

Alexa remembered Zaro’s concerns that some of his tribe had killed hybrids in the past. He also said his granddaughters weren’t safe in his tribe, even though he was the leader. She put that last piece in with an unpleasant grunt. “You’ve put on a good act.”

Jeanie flinched.

So did Yani.

Marcella tried to scan them. “Nothing. It’s like a blank wall.”

Alexa tapped her finger against her gun butt. “And you can tell the wall isn’t blank by the guilt and fear on their faces.”

Yani hadn’t expected to be caught. He opened his mouth, but no pleas came out.

Alexa blew out a sound of disgust. “Just once, I’d like to be wrong about someone.”

Yani found his voice. “I have to protect my people.”

Alexa knew who he was talking about. “If you follow through, you’ll break our cold bonds.”

“I never wanted them! Zaro insisted.”

“Did your hybrid test with us work?”

Yani snarled at her. “You know it didn’t or I wouldn’t need anyone to recognize our right to live unpolluted!”

“Where are Zaro’s grandchildren?”

Yani snorted. “Caring for the rage kids in our cave. The girls won’t be harmed. We didn’t even kill the evil women who came with Marcella. We obeyed you and only drained them.”

Bradley smirked. “All but one. Kiya tasted too good. I had to finish her off.”

Alexa was disgusted, but not with them. Their actions made sense for people trying to preserve a pure bloodline. She was furious with herself for not seeing it sooner. “If not for your prejudice, I could have helped you in many ways.”

Yani’s true self emerged. Rage crossed his features, but it didn’t come from the blood he’d taken during this run. “We do not need the help of hybrid trash! Abomination!”

Alexa’s men stepped forward.

Alexa held up a hand.

The men stopped, but each of them were eager to pay Yani back for the insult.

Alexa scanned Yani’s family.

Reina wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Bradley gazed back with an insolent smirk that she wanted to slap off his smug face. She settled for triggering another stage of her plan. “Our time as student and teacher has ended. Thank you for the moments we’ve spent together.”

Yani inclined his chin a bare inch. “You have taught me many lessons. Thank you.”

Alexa felt the glee he was hiding. She drew her gun and had it against his forehead before he could run or fight.

Yani was stunned by her speed. Because she was like him, he wasn’t sure about running anyway. *She might not miss.*

Alexa slowly holstered, voice hardening. “Let me give you one last lesson to carry home?”

Yani forced a nod and tried to keep the hatred from his expression.

“If you don’t want people to know you as a liar, don’t give yourself away in front of even one of them.”

Yani pinpointed the moment where he’d lied about killing the rage kids, in front of Alexa. His eyes narrowed. That meant she’d accounted for it. “What did you do?”

“My duty.”

Jeanie leaned her head through the window. “My offer stands.” Jeanie needed the protection and she was furious with Alexa. Partnering with the vampires was the perfect move now that Alexa had turned on them.

Yani frowned at her.

Jeanie stared back calmly, once again displaying her lack of fear in dangerous moments. “You do still want official recognition, I assume.”

Yani’s voice was full of denial. “You can’t pay my price.”

Jeanie smiled through her dirty, scratched, bruised lips. “Try me.”

“Rescind the slavery law.”

Alexa and everyone else regarded him in surprise. The vampire had asked for the one thing they hadn’t believed he cared about.

Yani put a hand on Bradley’s arm. “They’ll take the male vampires, too.”

Jeanie’s charm evaporated. “Not a chance in hell!”

Marcella chuckled. “I wish we were on the same team.”

Jeanie rolled her eyes. “You’re a criminal element. I’d never align with you.”

Alexa had to ask. “Would *you* pay his price?”

Marcella wasn’t as rude as Jeanie had been. “No. I believe in it with everything I am. You know what that does to us.”

Alexa fought the familial pull. “Jeanie will announce terms for your surrender and exile later. Take your survivors and go.”

“What about us?”

Alexa’s nostrils flared at Yani. “Don’t break our deal. I bargained for the lives of *all* vampires, not just the full bloods.”

Yani controlled his anger. “I hope we never see you again.”

“Same.”

Billy brought in the captives and led them toward Marcella. He popped a key from his belt and stuck it in the engine of the jeep right behind her. The blood had dried to his face and arms, making him appear to be a bigger threat than anyone else in the garage.

The defenders quickly surrounded Marcella or piled into the second jeep, but none of them felt safe with so many men glaring at them.

Marcella scanned the defeated women, lips thinning. “I assume you killed Lorey?”

Alexa nodded. “I took a magic user from each side.”

Marcella glared. “When did you make the choice?”

“As soon as you agreed to the meeting. Conquerors don’t negotiate. They conquer. I became sure of my choice when you showed up and then agreed to let me pick.”

Marcella’s glare faded into frustration. “Then why go through all this?!”

“So you’ll think twice about doing it again.”

Marcella snorted, scanning the sneering woman in her truck. “I won’t be able to. She’ll have me hunted.”

Alexa shrugged coldly. “You should have thought about that before you tried to conquer this country.”

“I did conquer it!”

Jeanie smirked. “You should kill her so I don’t have to.”

Alexa hated the smug woman just as much. “Maybe I’ll still kill both of you.”

The men rooted for it; the women held their breath and waited to see if they were getting out of here alive.

Alexa’s inner voice spoke up eagerly. *We could do it. We want that job!*

Edward and the others felt it. He nodded slowly. “You have the support of your team, Boss. That’s all you need.”

Terror filled the garage.

Alexa shut her eyes for a brief second. “That’s why we can’t be in charge. All descendants are instinctively power hungry. If I start on that path, I’ll lose everything and I won’t care.” She blinked to clear the haze, letting go of her Colts. “I’m not my father and you should thank the stars for it.”

Alexa stepped aside. “Yani will escort you to the city limits. I suggest you get that bunker packed and get gone within a day. Any more than that might be viewed as an act of war.”

Marcella started the jeep and drove away without answering.

Yani and his family ran alongside the jeeps and even rode on the rails.

“Thank you.”

Alexa shrugged at Jeanie. “Don’t thank me. She’ll reach her den right before you make it back to bunker 11. She’ll probably be on the way to reclaim that strategic location an hour later.”

Alexa took out a notebook and wrote something. She tore off the paper and handed it to Jeanie through the truck window. “This bunker code needs to be changed as soon as you get back. Marcella knows I pulled it from her mind. Watch your six or you won’t survive.”

Jeanie stared. “What do you want in exchange for this?”

“I have a package to be transported.”

Jeanie blanched. “No more kids. I hate kids.”

Alexa chuckled coldly. “That does not surprise me. Pull over to the hotel and pick up the package. Then get home and try to lead this country with honor until the rightful rulers arrive.”

Jeanie immediately left, hurrying out of the garage, but she went to the hotel like Alexa ordered. She’d gotten what she came for. Caring for some of Alexa’s lost souls was a small price to pay for it.

Jeanie’s mood improved as she flipped the heat to the floor vents and put it on high to warm her frozen feet. Alexa had eliminated the horde of undead that would have eventually migrated to her bunker. She’d also hurt Marcella, removed the gate hunter fanatics, and she had turned against the vampires; they had no allies now. Jeanie started to whistle as she drove over the debris littered street and stopped in front of the hotel.

Jeanie hit the horn twice and avoided looking at the gruesome sights on the ground around her.

Mark watched Marcella’s tail lights flash in the opposite direction. He was shocked at Yani’s true feelings. “Will he be dangerous to the few travelers he might run into over the winter?”

“I don’t think so. He’ll stick to our deal.” Alexa took a long drink from her canteen. She’d used a lot of energy in the short fight.

Jacob frowned at Edward. “William said he might strangle Jeanie in her sleep some night. You didn’t tell her.”

Edward shrugged coldly. “Fate might handle that one for us if he survives and she lets him into the bunker.”

Jacob snorted. “He’s too strong. She wouldn’t have a choice.”

“Like I said–fate might handle that one for us.”

Alexa and her team all waved from the garage entrance as Marlin observed them through the painted windows. It was clear they wanted Marlin and his wives to leave. They waited patiently between scans of the town and the museum fire that was starting to die out. The other small fires had already been extinguished by the weather.

“The body’s gone.” Edward was now sorry he hadn’t put a bullet in William’s brain.

“Let it go. We’ll see him again and that fight won’t be a draw. One of us will die.” Alexa pulled her hood up against the stiff, resentful wind. “Let’s go handle a last goodbye and then we’ll be alone.”

All of the men wanted that. They hurried across the street to tell Marlin what was happening.

**2**

Marlin put their bags into the rear of the truck as his wives rushed inside the rear cab. They’d viewed enough of the fight through the windows to know they weren’t safe here. “What did you say her name was?”

Alexa gave him a pointed glance. “She’s the woman from the radio. You’re going to her bunker. Names don’t matter as much as safety, you know?”

Marlin caught her hint. “Sure.”

So did Jeanie. *Alexa just told me how to win over the public. I need to put my face to Marcella’s voice. That’s where she made the mistake. No one knows who she is on sight.*

Marlin climbed into the truck, suddenly a little scared. “I’m going to be a slave.”

Alexa shook her head. “You’re going to go west with your family. Your time in the bunker will be short. The west will have groups of *good* people you can join.”

Jeanie flushed at the insult, but she was almost out of here. She gave Alexa what she wanted. “Nothing will happen to them while they’re under my protection.”

Alexa didn’t roll her eyes like she wanted to. “Safe Haven will not allow slavery or human experimentation. You should change those laws and methods now, while you have the chance.”

Jeanie’s eyes glittered. “Let me worry about Safe Haven.”

“As you wish.”

“Boss.” Billy couldn’t help it. “Please, don’t do this.”

Alexa stiffened in pain. “I’m sorry.”

Billy could feel it. “I know.”

Alexa regarded Jeanie. Her rage was the same color as the dried blood on Jeanie’s hands and dress.

Jeanie felt the dangerous gunfighter changing her mind. She had no choice but to give a little more. It was time to bend or break. “I’ll give the males a stay on the law, but just until spring.”

Alexa nodded curtly. “The last day of spring is June 20th.”

Jeanie frowned, but agreed. “Not a second longer.”

“Deal.” Alexa waved, eager for the woman to be gone.

Jeanie got out of sight as fast as the snowy roads would allow.

Alexa faced her team. “Thirty seconds.”

The men let her have it, unwilling to swallow their disgust and anger.

“How can you give her support?”

“She’s wants to expand the slavery laws!”

“She can’t be trusted!”

Alexa wasn’t happy about it either. “She has the claim according to our constitution.”

Billy tried not to shout. “Then we need to change it, or maybe even write a new document!”

The other males added their agreement.

Alexa studied their surroundings, deciding how to handle what had to come next. “Until Safe Haven returns, Jeanie is legally the Pro Tem President and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Mark thought of how Edward had gone rogue. “I could kill her.”

Alexa shrugged. “*You* could, but then I couldn’t support you.”

“Because of the constitution.”

“Yes. It’s not perfect, but it’s the only thing separating us from the horrible killers of the past who wiped out entire civilizations.”

Jacob finished a scan of the museum and the body-littered porch and parking lot. It looked like a violent video game level had just ended. “So if we didn’t have the constitution, we’d have to accept the law of conquest?”

“Exactly. Slavery is wrong, but it’s better than genocide.”

Daniel frowned. “Do you think Jeanie would go that far?”

“I believe she already has.” Alexa pulled Jeanie’s phone from her cloak. “Her pictures of the bunker prove she’ll do anything for power. Those men and women died within the same season. There were 4th of July decorations in every image.”

Jacob’s anger grew heavier. “So she’s a murderer, too!”

“Likely. But for now, she’ll have to uphold most of the constitutional laws or risk the public taking her out during one of her townhall trips.”

Mark watched Alexa transfer the phone to a deep inner pocket where she kept items of value. “Why would she bother with townhalls?”

“Because there will be an election. She’ll set it for late spring so Safe Haven doesn’t have much time to counteract the things she’ll have in place by then. She wants to rule the country and that includes my father’s camp. She’s doing all of this for that reason.”

Edward agreed. “It’s personal for her.”

Alexa fastened her cloak against the wind. “I think so, too. Someone in that camp is in for a nasty surprise when they get home.”

Mark swept the truck that was almost out of sight. “We’ve made things worse by doing this.”

Alexa sighed. “In some ways, yes, but it’s also better. America’s citizens will have peace for a few months and in that time, they’ll start to heal.”

Billy grunted. “The females, maybe.”

Alexa nodded. “The men don’t deserve this, but life is full of unfairness that people don’t deserve. If they don’t like their lives, they will change them no matter who is in charge, or they’ll suffer through whatever comes because change is too hard for them. So it has been and so it shall always be.”

Mark gestured. “But why? We could change that course with a single shot.” Half of their team could still hit Jeanie’s truck from here.

Alexa didn’t remind him it was an armored vehicle. She used the moment to explain her choice and to distract them so Jeanie could vanish safely. “Who replaces her? The next Hitler? The next Stalin or Mao?”

Jacob had more hope. “Maybe the next Gandhi.”

“Perhaps, but I can’t be sure. I’m protecting the majority at the cost of the minority. It’s what we’ve always done.”

Mark scowled deeply. “We’ve never done that.”

She waved off his indignation, acting like it didn’t bother her when it did more than anything she’d done so far on this quest. “Nonsense. Vaccines are one example. Thousands had bad reactions or died, but millions were protected.”

Edward’s anger flared. “That’s not right.”

Mark didn’t get distracted. “It’s a single example.”

Alexa gave him another one. “The Draft took men against their will and forty thousand died, but how many lives were saved because of those conflicts?”

Edward’s fury increased. “Doesn’t matter. The Draft stole those men and murdered them. Even the ones who made it back were scarred for life. A lot of them committed suicide.”

Alexa felt it was important to make them think about these things, no matter which side they were on. Knowledge was powerful, even if they didn’t like it. She pointed out one more example. “After the attack on Pearl Harbor, more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were put into internment camps to protect the rest of the country from possible espionage.”

Edward now understood she was trying to rile them up. He used an even tone he didn’t feel. “They were given a lot of cash later, and a Presidential apology, but money doesn’t make up for what they went through, or for the lives that were lost in those camps.”

“I agree.” Mark had been drawn into the emotional side of it. “None of those situations should ever be allowed. It’s not okay to sacrifice innocent people for a greater good.”

Alexa shrugged. “A new or revised constitution may revoke that type of power from a government, but it’s a job for someone else to hash out.”

David said the one thing that might get her to change her mind even though he had no real faith it would work. “Your father will be pissed that you’ve supported a slaver.”

Alexa didn’t react to that blow. “Perhaps, but my country will have some peace until then.”

Daniel tried to get them past the ugly topic. They were way over the thirty seconds she’d allotted for whining. “What will happen to Yani and his family?”

Alexa listened to determine if they were alone now. Then she spilled her latest horrific action. “They drank from Marcella’s people. Marcella is using those troops as lab rats. I believe she’s increasing the rage instead of trying to cure it.”

Jacob was horrified. “Yani’s family will be infected with the illness!”

“Yes. Their people will end up putting them down, along with all the rage kids he held in hopes of having an army to use if everyone refuses to recognize the vampires. Zaro’s granddaughters will be safe from their angry uncle and cousin now.”

“You told him to drink from them.” Billy put a filthy hand on her shoulder. “Are you sorry?”

Alexa’s voice was regretful. “No, but I am sorry for not being sorry.”

Billy squeezed her shoulder in comfort. “You protected the normals. You also picked duty over honor.”

“Lorey was going to stay with them.” Daniel scanned the southwest worriedly.

Alexa shook her head. “She’ll think better of it. Jeanie’s radio address will make it clear that things changed after she left.”

David and Jacob exchanged a glance.

Jacob wondered if they should try to help Reina, though he didn’t want to.

David just hated it that he couldn’t figure out why the trickster Vampiress attracted him so much. *Maybe she charmed me.*

Alexa chuckled. “You like *aged* meat.”

The last of the tension broke and faded away with their laughter.

“Who’s hungry?”

All six vampires hissed at her; fangs descended and dripped saliva.

Alexa felt the same way. “Clear the area for survivors. Southwest sweep first so we can trap them against the lake. I want to see if it’s frozen yet.”

Jacob grimaced. “Won’t we get the rage illness if we feed from them?”

Alexa spilled another secret. “Who says we don’t already have it?”

No one answered. There was nothing they could say to make themselves or her feel better.

The men secured their gear and prepared mentally for a hunt. Any of Marcella’s defenders who ran off, or any gate hunters who’d survived and stayed, wouldn’t live long.

Alexa concentrated and managed to bring up a clumsy grid in her mind. She zoomed in and found several moving dots. She wasn’t sure if they were human or other, but it didn’t matter. Even animal blood would satisfy their needs at this point. It had been a mistake to handle all this before feeding, but it had also been good training. They’d gotten a lesson on control. “You’ve all done well.”

The thirsty vampires immediately turned back into her smiling, cocky team.

Alexa walked toward the biggest concentration of dots on her grid. “Find a way for us to have a group photo. I want it for my album.”

Jacob stiffened suddenly. “We’re not alone.”

“No. It feels regretful and furious.” Alexa sighed. “That is another duty my father and his teams will have to handle. Jerry has gone through too much for me to kill him or arrange it.”

“How do you kill a byzan?” Edward needed to know to prevent it from happening to Alexa.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure, honestly. I believe a bullet in the temple would have hurt William, but I’m not sure it would have killed him. There are automatic defenses at this level. I don’t have to think about them or activate them. They just pop up.”

“I say we use a combo when the time comes.” Mark thought it would be poetic if they all got in a bullet or blade.

“He showed weaknesses while he was here. Tell me what they were while I flush our dinner.”

Every man there frowned.

Alexa was pleased with that response. She wouldn’t let them forget they were taking human lives. By bullets or blood, it deserved respect.

David battened down his gear. “He was scared of Yani, but not us.”

Billy tried to clear another layer of dried blood from his hands. “The slavery talk did bother him even though he didn’t want anyone to know.”

Jacob checked his gun in case he needed it. “He felt isolated. He was lonely.”

Daniel was still staring southwest, but he was ready with an answer. “He has no control over his rage. When he snaps, he stops thinking.”

Alexa ran down the street in a blur.

The men ran after her as she rounded a corner and hurried forward with her eyes glowing.

The two defender survivors took off running.

Alexa let them go, turning to flush a different corner of the street so the prey would end up together. “The last three?”

Mark contemplated how William had reacted in the exhibit. “He’s inexperienced. This might have been the first battle where anyone was strong enough to fight back.”

Alexa shook her head. “It wasn’t strength. It was smarts.”

“Fair enough.”

“He might be weak against fire.” Edward replayed William being blown down the stairs. “It might have just been the force of the blast, though.”

David went again. “He didn’t have any loyalty. He didn’t try to help anyone from his group.”

“Add it all together and give me predictions of his behavior, starting from Edward’s act of defiance.”

Edward flushed again.

Billy hurried to answer and take the heat off his teammate. “He won’t come on his own. He has limits, and he’s found out he’s no fighter. He’ll have to train up or find someone to fight for him. I doubt he’ll train up.”

Mark gestured. “I agree. He’ll increase his defenses, though. It won’t be as easy to get to him next time.”

Jacob tried to make a prediction, but he wasn’t good at these lessons. “I’d play dead and get lost as soon as I could. When Jerry approached me, or I approached him, I would drain him to heal myself and go hide somewhere to heal.”

“No drained body left behind. Next?” Alexa ran down the next alley.

A single defender took off toward the only open street.

Edward knew she wanted him to keep things going because she wasn’t letting them flush at all. They were just following her. “Who else?”

“He’ll find a way to defend against vampires specifically. He fears them. He won’t travel until the sun rises and even then, he’ll want to be protected...” Daniel scanned the dark city. “He’s still here somewhere!”

Mark pointed. “Bingo. That’s why she’s flushing. It isn’t for our dinner.”

“Ah, but it is, my pets.” Alexa circled back now that she’d gathered enough prey to feed them a good group meal. “These are Marcella’s closest supporters. They adore her and slavery. If anyone deserves to be consumed, it’s them.”

Guilt didn’t enter the picture for the men as they surrounded the survivors and took a much needed meal.

Alexa kept her mind blank and drank her fill. If she thought about it, she wouldn’t be able to do this. She liked killing with her guns and her mind, but draining prey was a shameful act that left her unsatisfied in almost every way.

**3**

Jerry pulled evenly, strong arms flexing as he dragged the upside down car hood behind him. He’d tied it with rope he’d taken from the museum. Loaded with the loot he’d found and the gear he’d quickly scavenged from the dead, he was now headed south east. William was in the center of the pile and looked like the other injured males trudging through the woods. None of them were talking or making eye contact. They traveled together by unspoken agreement, going to the only place left where they had a chance to be safe.

Jerry pulled harder to get over a small snow bank. He breathed evenly, mind at peace. He would help William heal, and together they would find what they needed for the reset. None of this night would matter then.

A tall, thin male fell in alongside Jerry.

He nodded at the man, but didn’t get a response. Jerry didn’t think he’d ever seen the man before, but it didn’t matter. It was a male; he was welcome.

Jerry saw two more men edging closer to him. He didn’t sense animosity or bad intentions. It felt like they were being drawn to him.

*Are you doing this?*

William didn’t answer.

Jerry glanced back. William was unconscious.

*It must be me.*

Jerry didn’t know why it was happening, but he felt better as more men came from the woods and walked around him. It felt like some of Alexa’s magic had rubbed off.

Jerry hoped that was true. He needed all the luck he could get.

Icy wind blew through the trees, dropping thick clumps of ice and snow from the branches overhead.

The other men didn’t react. They kept walking.

Jerry narrowed in.

The man next to him stared back with empty sockets and open gouges in his frozen flesh.

Jerry flinched. *Undead!*

His panic rippled through the small herd. A dozen undead paused, shifting toward him.

Jerry dropped his chin and resumed pulling without thinking.

The undead forgot about his human reaction and resumed their rough staggers.

Jerry pulled faster and tried to think of a way to lose them before he got to his destination. If he appeared out of the woods in a herd of zombies, he would get shot along with them.

More undead shuffled toward him from the west. They plowed through snowbanks and kept moving like the cold didn’t have an effect.

Jerry saw stationary forms ahead and realized that wasn’t true. The undead were stopping and freezing in place. The more active ones had just joined the walk. They weren’t as cold yet.

Jerry straightened in determination. *All I have to do is stay awake and not freeze to death. I’ll lose them on the way.*

Jerry wasn’t sure if he could make the four hour walk to Soldier Town without stopping or triggering an attack, but there wasn’t another choice. Alexa was clearing the city behind them. Facing the undead would be a more merciful way to die now that he’d sided with her enemy.

**4**

Marcella pulled over as she cleared the city limits and the vampires vanished. She kept her stinging bare foot on the brake and shut her eyes. The horror of her trial washed over her and brought fresh rage.

The defenders in the jeep waited for orders. They were eager to hear how Marcella was going to make the Mitchel woman pay. Her reputation for revenge was legendary in the west.

Marcella ran through the situation from Alexa’s point of view. She saw the trap right away. “We’ll go to bunker 11 and Jeanie will be ready. We’ll all die there.”

Marcella considered William and Yani, but neither man was the top threat in her opinion, at least not anymore. Alexa had risen to the top of that list with her brutal games. “I want her dead so much! I’d pay absolutely anything.”

Snow and harsh wind pushed against the jeeps. The rocking motion sank into Marcella’s mind, flashing her to dangling from the rope steps while gate hunters shot at her or tried to jump up and pull her down. “She gave me a taste of what it feels like to be hunted. She hopes I’ll stay close to get revenge. When she stirs the shit pot next time, she’ll tip it my way.”

Marcella eased on the gas and chose the road that would take her to the UN bunker. “We’re not staying. Get them packing as soon as we arrive. I want us gone within an hour.”

The defender in the front passenger seat nodded. “Where to?”

“Back to the west, maybe. We need to build more strength before we deal with these enemies again.”

It was the first time they’d known Marcella to admit defeat. They all stared.

Marcella knew why she was getting the looks. She drove faster, shoulders straightening. “It’s not a loss. It isn’t a win, either. We’ll call it a draw.”

Her defenders accepted that. It felt better than telling everyone they’d suffered a humiliating defeat.

*But we did and I’ll never forget how this feels.* Marcella drove faster and let her rage write mental checks that her army couldn’t cash yet.

# Chapter Twenty

**Dangerous Deals**

**1**

**“I** think this is far enough.” Jeanie reached for the radio with a cracked, scratched, bruised, swollen, gouged, blood-spotted hand. The vehicle slowed as she let off the gas and coasted over the snowy street toward her bunker. “This is Jeanie, your official President Pro Tem! Isn’t that wonderful? Alexa Mitchel will verify my claim in a few minutes. First, I have some updates for you. Stand by, please.” Jeanie took a deep breath. She needed to get this wording right.

She studied the trio in the rear of the crew cab truck. Her gaze lingered on Marlin as she keyed the mike. “Effective immediately, all UN troops are to leave American soil. You have ten days to clear out or I will consider it an act of war and drive you into the ocean. Your request for citizenship has been denied. Don’t go west–go home.”

Jeanie’s victory lifted her voice into smug, triumphant tones. “Marcella Pruett is at UN bunker 14 right now. She’s going west from there, if she’s wise. Her crimes against our country cannot continue. She admitted to running inhumane experiments on defenseless citizens and she is being charged with war crimes for it. There is a warrant out for her arrest. She *must* be brought in alive. The reward is two males who can cook and breed. I’ll pick them myself.”

Marlin cringed, shocked that Alexa had sent them with this hard, uncaring woman.

Marlin’s wives felt bad for Marcella. That reward was good enough to bring the older, more experienced bounty hunters out of hiding. Marcella had used gear and supplies as payment. Jeanie was smart enough to know what their population really wanted.

Jeanie drew in another breath as the entrance to her bunker appeared through the blowing snowy wind. “Due to bad weather, I understand you can’t get here yet, so you now have until May 31st to register your males or surrender them. The moratorium is effective as of noon today.”

Jeanie didn’t care if the delay angered Alexa. She wanted those few more hours to get all the males in her bunker registered and maybe even sold. “I am offering another bounty on the blood drinkers and the gate hunters. These gangs are consuming children! Bring them in, dead, and I’ll outfit you with a full kit of gear and a free meal. Bring in five bodies at a time and I’ll throw in a free rental of a room or a male.”

“Did Alexa agree to all of this?”

Jeanie glared at Marlin’s wives in the mirror. “I can still claim him and kill you both. Keep him quiet.”

Mandy slapped her hand over Marlin’s mouth. “We will.”

Jeanie gave them all dirty looks. “When this truck stops, load up with the gear you need and get gone. If you’re still here at 11:55, I’ll follow through and Alexa be damned.”

Mindy and Mandy both nodded.

Marlin dropped his head and got ready to act like a slave so they could get away from Jeanie without a fight. It wouldn’t go over well if they killed the new President.

Jeanie keyed the mike again as she came to a stop in front of the bunker. The front door opened; a crowd of cheering females rushed out to meet her. “While there is a coming moratorium on the slavery law until the weather clears, anyone caught aiding the soldiers or rebels will be considered enemies of the state. You will be charged with treason and shot down like the animals you are. Don’t help the enemy. Be part of the solution. Come join bunker 11 and we’ll build a better tomorrow, together.”

Marlin felt like he was going to be sick.

Jeanie lowered the window as Donna squeezed through the celebrating people to reach her. She dug in her pocket. “Eat this.”

Donna took the hard roll. Her nostrils flared. “What’s in it?”

Jeanie didn’t need to lie. “Truth powder. I took it from our fun dinner party.”

Donna didn’t want to eat it, but all Jeanie had to do was accuse her of treason and she would be shot by any one of the celebrating women around them. Donna bit into it and began to chew. The hard roll tasted like sweet dust in her mouth.

Jeanie swept the yard nearby and found a line of fresh graves covered in snow. Her lips thinned. Bodies were supposed to be burned for fuel.

Jeanie handed the other roll to one of the new guards she’d hired before she left. “Make sure that gets to the lab. Then find someone who knows how to work the equipment. I want to know how to make it.”

Trudy was thrilled to be singled out after only a week as a guard. She hurried through the crowd as Jeanie got out of the truck and was lifted into the air by her celebrating minions.

Half of the crowd had rushed out without donning heavy coats or even shoes. The front of the bunker was a quarter mile of constant movement and noise as those people tried to stay warm or hurried back inside to get more clothes on.

Jeanie didn’t feel the cold or the falling snow. She was full of the fire from victory and rage.

Behind her, Marlin and his wives climbed out and hurried into the bunker to gear up and then get lost during the partying.

The radio in the truck blared with Alexa’s voice. “Jeanie Hornsteader of bunker 11 is the President Pro Tem. That means she’ll run things until we have an election.” Alexa paused, sighing into the radio. She went on in regret. “I’m sorry. It was the best I could do, for now. We’ll hold a vote next year. If you believe you can do her job, make sure your name gets on the ballot and maybe I’ll give my support to your run.”

Misery and madness cheered and cried in response to her words.

Jeanie shoved out of the celebrating arms and slid to the snowy ground. “Son of a bitch.” With a few words, Alexa had stated she didn’t really support the new President. “And there’s nothing I can do about it. Like my announcements. We’ve cancelled each other out.” Jeanie slammed her cold hand against the warm hood of the truck. Blood squirted from her finger.

Donna took her scarf off and wrapped it around Jeanie’s hand while she chewed the tough bite. She felt the air change and talked around the food in her mouth. “Somfing’s coming.”

Jeanie swept the dawn shadows, heart pounding. *Did Yani follow me?*

The snowy woods across from the bunker were bare sticks rising into the dusk light.

Donna felt uneasy even though she didn’t sense anyone around them. “Come on. Let’s get you inside.”

Jeanie shrugged off the hands trying to pull her into the bunker. “Wait.”

Donna took off her coat and wrapped it around Jeanie’s icy shoulders. Donna was wearing thermals beneath her jeans and shirt. Jeanie’s dress was a thin, ripped, stained garment that would be burned as soon as she took it off. Donna didn’t know what had happened to the woman yet, but her clothes and battered hands said it hadn’t been good.

The truck’s radio crackled again with Alexa’s voice. “Calling all available Mitchels. Port City in eleven weeks to the day and hour.” Her powerful insistence lit up tired hearts around the globe. “Dad? You need to come home now. It’s time.”

Time slowed in reaction to her call. The radio stayed silent; people held their breaths, waiting to see if she was answered.

Donna swallowed the last bite and waited for Jeanie to ask if she was loyal. She knew it was coming. She was glad only Jeanie had returned so she could say yes, providing no kids were hurt. For a few months, Donna would be Chief of Staff to the most powerful woman in the world. *Then Safe Haven will come home and take it away from us.*

The radio lit up again.

“Jersey bound by four. May be a day or two late. Birth abides by no woman’s plans.”

“Canadian hunting. Party of five. Save us a canvas.”

“Ohio by nine. We’ll be early.”

The radio continued to transmit answers to her call for family to meet her in Port City in eleven weeks.

“Ciemus at fifteen by ten, if you need us.”

Alexa’s warm voice answered the last male. “No need, Uncle. Now get off the air so the fighters can get through.”

In the pause, more answers came in; more people woke to the mood and switched on their radios. The feel of something happening beyond the constant fighting was clear to those who were listening for those subtle changes.

Others were upset to discover they were close to a Mitchel den. They began making plans to go west. No one wanted to be in the damage path when all those fighters came together. There was no guarantee they would win whatever fight they were gathering for, but it was an absolute that people would die.

Jeanie examined the shadows around the bunker again and found glowing red orbs scattered among the trees. Rage snapped her control. “I’m not scared of you anymore!”

She marched forward, throwing things from Donna’s coat pockets without caring what they were. “You’re not allowed to touch me! I’m protected by the Mitchel! Slam you!”

Yani and his family withdrew with hatred in their hearts. She was right. She’d put out a bounty that would undoubtedly get some of them killed and they couldn’t do anything about it, either.

The vampires had stopped here on their way home in hopes of making a deal anyway, but it wasn’t going to happen. The new President didn’t want anything to do with them now. Alexa had done her job well.

Yani recognized that trap now. Alexa had made sure no one was willing to band together and stand against Safe Haven.

The angry vampires took off toward their loaded truck in fast blurs that were now able to withstand the glints of the rising sun. Alexa had taught them many things.

Donna took Jeanie’s arm and led her toward the bunker. “You do know you’ve declared a new bounty on Alexa, right? She’s also a blood drinker.”

Jeanie snorted. “No one will bother her. The reward isn’t big enough to die for.”

Donna didn’t ask for details. She got Jeanie inside the bunker where she was safer. Then she began shutting the entrance so they could all celebrate or sleep in safety.

Jeanie understood Donna’s relief. Her own mental exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her, but she pushed it back to do her duty. “Get someone on the radio. I want the entire country to know they have a new President and new bounties to hunt.”

“I will. I’ll also send the hounds out here to patrol as soon as we’re shut down for the night.” Donna had put them in her chambers with the males, providing extra protection for the kids. She didn’t bring that up yet. Jeanie wasn’t in the mood to hear it.

Jeanie felt the lock rattling on her gifts.

She refused to answer it. The only real advantage she had was her Invisible mind. *Safe Haven can’t read me. I’ll be able to handle them now. Thank you, Alexa. I also learned a lot from our time together. I’ll make sure you’re well treated when all Mitchels are rounded up and imprisoned.*

Jeanie thought about Marcella. They could have been partners in another time and place. Their methods and goals were incredibly similar. “And that means she can’t be trusted. If someone brings her in, I’ll cut her throat instead of torturing her like I’d planned. The same goes for Yani and William. The best thing they can all do is hide from me.” Jeanie glared. “Hey!”

Donna stopped. “Yes, Madam President?”

“Can I trust you with my life?”

Donna didn’t feel any different as she nodded. “Of course. You were never my problem.”

“And the time kids?”

“I sent them to their family, in Ciemus.”

Jeanie asked the last question that mattered to her. “What happens if William comes here?”

“We’ll play nice and find a way to kill him.”

Jeanie relaxed. A charming smile appeared. “I’m the President of the United States.”

Donna smiled back. “And I serve at your pleasure.”

**2**

**Ciemus**

Lorey studied the imposing patchwork wall from the front seat of the truck that she’d found behind the museum. Marcella’s defenders hadn’t noticed her leaving. Then the museum had exploded, destroying the other vehicles they’d parked on a road next to that building. No one knew where she was now, not even Daniel.

Lorey didn’t view any signs of life inside the wall, but she’d heard Alexa’s radio exchange with someone who claimed to be here. “I hope this is the right choice. I don’t think I have another option.”

Lorey winced at her upset stomach. She hadn’t eaten since the dinner party. She got out of the truck anyway and approached the wall, heart thumping in her chest. “Hello?”

A small red dot appeared on the wall.

Lorey smiled into the camera. “Alexa let me go. Can I stay with you until Safe Haven returns?”

The camera blinked off.

Lorey still didn’t feel anyone in there. She explored the wall, searching for a way inside.

The dawn light allowed her to find a gap and figure out how it opened, but she couldn’t reach the controls from out here. Desperation swamped her. “I can’t go to the vampires! They hate Alexa now. They’ll kill me.” Tears welled when there was no response.

Lorey trudged back to her truck and climbed in out of the cold wind. She let herself cry. She’d already considered going back to Daniel, but he was just going to send her away again. She couldn’t go on his quest. If she joined either woman at their bunker, she would be executed for treason. After hearing Jeanie’s address on the CB, she’d changed her mind about living with Yani. His lair wasn’t safe. Ciemus was her last option, but it appeared that was a dead end, too.

Lorey looked west, wiping away tears. She thought of Mark’s words to the normals. She’d overheard them as she slipped by that hallway.

*“There’s a group of good citizens traveling west. Most of their group is children. Including mine. They need defenders.”*

“I can help them, too. I just have to avoid any group Marcella might join.” Lorey hadn’t stuck around for the finale after the explosion, but she was positive Marcella had survived or Jeanie wouldn’t have put a bounty out on her.

*Tap-tap!*

Lorey flinched away from the window and drew energy for a fight.

A tall man wearing animal skins over a lean body tapped on the dirty glass again.

Lorey lowered the window a hair.

“I’m Annule.” The warrior scanned her tears and then her mind.

“Lorey.” Lorey didn’t resist.

The man was satisfied with what he found. He pointed.

Lorey saw a line of vehicles in the dawn shadows. “How did I miss those?”

“Magic.”

Lorey snorted as she scrubbed away more tears. “Guess I should have known, huh?”

“Yes.” The Indian went around to the passenger side and waited.

Lorey understood the man was going to ride with her. She unlocked the door reluctantly. He would ask questions, too. If he didn’t like her answers, he probably had orders to kill her. Lorey suddenly wished she’d driven away.

The Indian sensed her fear, but he didn’t offer comfort. That wasn’t his job. He closed the door and waved at the convoy. “Let’s go.”

Lorey cleared the snow from the windshield as she fell into the rear of the line and hoped she’d made the right choice.

The line of idling trucks and cars all held suspicious warriors who stared at her. Lorey lifted her chin. *I’m one of the good guys now. I have nothing to be ashamed of.*

She narrowed in on a single pale profile in the front semi. The man felt familiar. She picked up the magic use an instant later. *He’s a descendant, too.*

Brandon resumed his scan of their surroundings for threats. Bounty hunters had come by Ciemus regularly since Safe Haven left. They’d always won those fights because they’d been behind the wall. Now, they were an open target for anyone who wanted to try to capture rogue members who refused to submit to the new order.

Brandon wasn’t worried over this new arrival, though. Lorey wasn’t a bounty hunter bent on making all men into slaves. She was just another desperate survivor trying to stay alive until Safe Haven fixed the world.

Brandon sighed. “As are we all.” He shifted into drive and got them moving. He didn’t glance at the empty town as they left with the last load of supplies. *I’ll be back and my family will be with me. I don’t have to decide between honor and duty. I have magic.*

**3**

**Soldier Town**

“Something moved out there.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“I’m telling you someone’s out there.”

The two soldiers guarding the gate to their town peered through the blowing snow. The thick shadows around the trees made it hard to see even though the sun was finally rising.

“There!” The man pointed.

“I saw it.” The other soldier squinted. “Looks like a man, pulling something.”

The solders waited, not feeling a threat since it was a lone male.

Jerry knew the soldiers had spotted him, but he didn’t have the strength to stop and greet them properly. If he stopped now, he would freeze in place like so many of the undead had done all around him.

The town was dark and snowy and gave the appearance of being empty. Jerry applauded their efforts to go unnoticed even though everyone knew where they were. He doubted these men would be safe for long, but there wasn’t any other place he could go. He hoped the bad weather would protect them for a while. The sturdy gate around the town was encouraging, but it wouldn’t stand against what he’d witnessed tonight. If Alexa came here, or others like her, the soldiers would be wiped out. William might stop that from happening if he could be convinced the soldiers were on his side and worth defending.

“What is he pulling?”

“I think it’s a car hood. Someone’s on it.”

“More injured men. Great.” The soldier reluctantly stepped to the gate and began unlocking it. Injured men were a drain on their meager supplies, but if they lived, it was another warm body for chores and guard duty.

Jerry almost sobbed in relief as the gate began to swing open. He pulled faster with the last of his strength, breath heaving out in cold clouds. He kept going until he was through the gate.

He stopped for the first time since leaving Gainesville.

“Are you okay?”

Jerry nodded.

“What’s your name? Where did you come from?”

“Let him catch his breath.” The younger soldier secured the gate and then went to tell their commander they had two new arrivals.

The older soldier stayed ready to shoot in case this was a trick.

Jerry slid to his knees in the snow, heart pounding and lungs burning. “Thank you.”

The soldier studied William. “Your man doesn’t look good.”

Jerry knew. “Not sure…if he’s alive.”

“That happens a lot now.” The soldier resumed his post on the gate. “Anyone following you?”

“No.” Jerry sucked in icy air. “Saw a lot of undead in the woods.”

“They’re freezing. We’re good until spring.”

Jerry thought about Alexa’s words and Jeanie’s threats, but he worried the most about Marcella. He didn’t tell the soldiers any of it, however. *For a few months, we’ll be alone here with other men who want freedom. When spring comes, we can join those fights. Until then, this is the perfect place for me to hide and figure out where the vampires took the time kids. When I do, nothing will stop me from resetting this mess. I’ll kill anyone who gets in my way, even the Mitchel.*

William chuckled weakly from under the piles of gear. “There’s a good man.”

Jerry drew up in angry determination. “Good and bad don’t matter anymore. I have a quest to complete now and nothing will stand in my way. Not even the fanatics can compete with me once I get rolling.”

Jerry stiffened as heavy steps crunched toward them through the snow.

“I’m the boss here.” Gerald scanned him and found only another betrayed male hunting for sanctuary. His eyes settled on William. A frown showed through his beard. “He’s a magic user.”

Soldiers around them drew their weapons and hurried forward.

“Wait!” Gerald ran through it in a quick moment. They’d listened to the radio calls in hope and horror. He heaved out an unhappy grunt. “Keep him alive. We need help and he’s one of us even if he doesn’t think so. Bring him into the basement where it’s warm. Our medic can examine him, but don’t expect much. We’re out of most supplies and the medic is a rookie.”

William peered up through the gear and snow. “Thank you.”

Gerald huffed and rotated back toward his warm room. “Just don’t kill us in your games. We’re on your side.”

William agreed. The soldiers would make decent guards while he healed, and then excellent escorts while Jerry searched for the time kids. He stifled a shout as Jerry began pulling the hood once more. His body hurt everywhere. He was missing an ear and burnt in several places. He’d been hit with a bottle, slammed into the ground, shot multiple times, and he was frozen in places. “But I’m not dead.”

Jerry frowned. “We’ll keep you out of sight until you recover.”

William forced out a snort. “Everyone knows where this town of men is located. Prepare to be attacked repeatedly as each group comes here to satisfy their needs.”

Jerry didn’t doubt him. “Maybe the boss man here will think about moving his men.”

William didn’t answer. He’d passed out again.

Jerry looked ahead at Gerald.

Gerald recognized the moment. These two were strong enough for leadership if he didn’t want it anymore.

Gerald slowly shook his head. “I’m not done here yet.”

Jerry was glad. He didn’t want to be in charge. “Then act like it. Get these men ready to move as soon as the weather breaks or you’ll lose half of them and command.”

“I’ve thought about it. I don’t know where to take them.” Gerald didn’t say it would be hard to get the men to leave. That might not matter if he could find a good place to hide.

“I suggest as far south as you can get.”

Gerald opened the door to the basement where their medic insisted on living. “Why south, and don’t you mean *we*?”

“South is where Safe Haven will land. You should be there to beg for protection.” Jerry slid the frozen ropes from his shoulders and sucked in air.

“And what will you and the magic user be doing?”

“Hunting.” Jerry knelt down to lift William.

Gerald’s mouth watered. He was always hungry now. “You have a deal.”

**4**

**Bunker 81, Mississippi**

“Deal me in.”

“Let’s see your ante.”

The soldier pulled a candy bar from his pocket. The wrinkled wrapper gave off a chocolate scent that made mouths water.

This was one of three bunkers in the country still under government control. All of them expected an attack as soon as the weather broke. Playing games and placing bets was the only thing keeping them from going mad while they waited.

“He’s good.” Dion glanced around the barracks. “Anyone else want in on this?”

“I do.”

Dion glared at the man in the corner cell. “You’re not one of us.”

Paul snorted. “Wouldn’t want to be. Deal me in.”

Dion took the toothpick from his mouth. “Let’s see your ante.”

Paul pointed at the radio. “There’s a lot going on. You’re missing it. Now deal me in.”

Dion got a cold chill. “Activate it.” They didn’t waste power on the radio unless it was time for the evening announcement.

The barracks were neat and clean, and more importantly, they were warm and still held food. The water was gone, but the snow and a nearby creek were covering that basic need. The men were bored, but grateful to be hidden down here while Nature and the undead ran rampant. Unless an announcement came through, they had no way to know if the government had officially fallen. When the news stopped, it was over.

Voices flowed through the radio, but it was scrambled. “…updates…stand by…”

Dion looked over at Paul. “Deal him in.”

Paul smiled happily as the dealer wrote his name on a slip of paper. “I say Alexa wins.”

Dion scowled. “We only have two names in the pool.”

Paul shrugged. “You’re betting on who gets Alexa’s vote of confidence, right?”

Dion nodded. “So you think she’ll keep it for herself?”

Some of the three dozen men brightened at that thought. Others scowled as they considered how much they hated her or how much she hated them.

“The Rabbit says Alexa is the President Pro Tem. And I might agree, but there’s no changing votes.” He examined Paul’s cell, still disapproving of the scientist being here at all. He and his girlfriend were in side-by-side cells in the corner of the barracks. “What did you do, Paul?”

The use of his name allowed Paul to give the truth. “Corbin was my father. I killed him. I have to be punished.”

Dion put the toothpick back into the corner of his mouth. “Should have been given a medal.”

Other soldiers called out insults and agreements.

Paul smiled brighter. Then it faded. “I think they’re getting ready to relocate us again. That’s why you’re supposed to dart me at bedtime.”

Dion stiffened at the proof of mind reading. “You’re giving yourself away. Stop it.”

Paul shrugged. “Does it matter if I die here or somewhere else?”

Dion sighed. “No, I guess not. Hush now. I want to listen.”

As if on cue, the radio voice became clear.

*“Due to bad weather, I understand you can’t get here yet, so you now have until May 31st to register your males or surrender them. The slavery moratorium is effective as of noon today.”*

A huge cheer went through the bunker. There wasn’t enough of them to fight anymore. Any pause in that law was cause for celebration.

“Quiet!” Paul shouted for the first time since he’d been recaptured. “Something else is coming through!”

Everyone turned toward the radio, but the smiles stayed on their lips.

*“Jeanie Hornsteader of bunker 11 is the President Pro Tem. That means she’ll run things until we have a vote.” Alexa paused, sighing into the radio. She went on in regret. “I’m sorry. It was the best I could do, for now. We’ll hold an election next year. If you believe you can do her job, make sure your name gets on the ballot and maybe I’ll give my support to your run.”*

“Jeanie won! Pay up!”

Soldiers hurried over to the man holding the winnings and slips.

Dion was surprised it hadn’t been a clean win. He eyed Paul, who didn’t seem upset that he’d lost. *Maybe we should keep him around. We can tell command he tried to escape and was killed.*

Paul was thrilled. “I accept your bonds willingly until Safe Haven returns. Then you have to set me free or it will rebound and curse you.”

Dion ignored the shocked stares from the few men who’d heard them through the cheers and chatting. “Give me an hour and I’ll have it planned out. You’ll have to bleed a little so they have a blood sample.”

Paul shrugged. “I’m not scared anymore. I just want to be wanted and not scorned.” He glanced at his sleeping girlfriend. “The deal includes her.”

“Of course.” Dion had already been making sure she wasn’t abused, but the men in this bunker had honor and morals. They all got along and worked together to keep each other alive. They were almost a family. “We know how it works.”

Paul went to his cot by the bars and laid down. He put his hand through and rested it on Tabitha’s warm shoulder. She was sleeping a lot now that she felt safer. *That went well. And I didn’t even have to use my magic!*

Paul tried to rest, but his excited mind didn’t want to. His gifts had popped in a few days ago. All it had taken was one sentence from the love of his life.

*“You’re going to be a daddy.”*

Now he had more spells and charms than he knew what to do with. *And I’m surrounded by an unlimited energy source with weapons, training, and integrity. I think Alexa would finally be proud of me.*

# Chapter Twenty-One

**Last Known Locations**

**Missouri**

**1**

**“A**lexa would be proud of you.”

Carolyn wiped her mouth. “For throwing up? I’m honored.”

Jason helped her to her feet, huge arms bulging as he kept them from sliding in the frozen snow. “For continuing this quest even though you’re sick.”

Carolyn pulled away and got a drink from her canteen. “How close are we?”

Jason scanned the dark woods around them. “We should be there by now. I think they’re hiding.”

“Makes sense.” Carolyn followed him toward the faint path he’d been tracking for the last hour. The sun was rising in the east, but it wasn’t providing much light yet. “Does that mean they have a descendant, too?”

“I think so. I picked up some thoughts earlier, but there’s just empty silence now.”

Carolyn believed him. She ignored her burning guts and matched his pace as it increased. When he got into the zone he sometimes forgot he wasn’t alone anymore.

Jason grabbed onto a thread of a thought and rotated toward it. His patience ran out. “We’re not hunters, damn it! Alexa sent us. Stop blocking me!”

A branch snapped to his right. He turned.

Three men came from the shadows on his left. A gun went to his head.

“State your business.”

Jason was ashamed he’d fallen for such an easy trick. “Holster that thing before you get hurt.”

Carolyn didn’t resist as a man wearing all white took hold of her arm. He wasn’t pointing a gun and he wasn’t rough.

The man got a better look at her and flinched. He wiped his hand down his pants and retreated. “She’s sick!”

Jason could feel the situation reaching a dangerous level, but he hadn’t expected to be greeted this way. “Alexa said we’re supposed to join you and help out.”

Marshal kept his gun on them. “Prove that.”

Jason sent an image of Alexa and her team.

Marshal growled and pushed the gun against Jason. “He’s a magic user!”

“Alexa sent us!” Carolyn didn’t move away from the man who’d taken her arm and then let go, but her voice rose with each declaration. “We fought with her. I saved her life. She sent us to help you and the kids!”

Marshal scanned her. “We can’t help you. She doesn’t heal.”

Carolyn’s hand went to her stomach as it roiled from the adrenaline. “I didn’t come here to ask for help. I came to give it.”

She turned her head and bent over.

Everyone looked away or winced as she got sick again.

“It’s cancer.” Jason didn’t want them to do anything rash. “You can’t catch it and we already know Claudia can’t heal it.”

“He knows her name.” The man who’d taken Carolyn’s arm relaxed. “It’s okay.”

“Shut up!” Marshal was becoming convinced, too, but it was his job to deter anyone who might be bad for their group and he sensed drama all over this couple. “If you came from Alexa Mitchel, you have something physical as proof.”

Jason shook his head. “Just scars.”

“Wait.” Carolyn sucked in air between heaves. “Carving!”

Jason cursed himself for forgetting. “That’s right! I’m reaching into my pocket.”

Marshal lowered his gun. “I’ll do it. Which one?”

“Inside cloak, three rows up.” Jason studied the man and found his mind closed, but the sense of magic was clear. Jason connected the dots. “She shared her gift with you!”

Marshal didn’t like it that strangers had such personal knowledge. He was also instantly jealous of Jason even though it was clear he was partnered with the ill woman who was leaning on a wooden branch that had been carved into a cane.

Marshal knelt and admired the dozens of pockets sewn onto the inside of the sturdy cloak. He recognized the technique immediately. He had admired Alexa’s cloak for the same reason.

“It’s in an envelope.”

Marshal retrieved the small package. It hurt his heart a little to see it was addressed. There were only names and the country, but it was enough to make him sad for the world that was gone. “Stand down.”

A cool breeze went through the trees. Shadows solidified into twenty men, women, and kids huddled together around a beautiful teenage girl. All of the group was wearing white. They blended in well with the snowy surroundings.

Marshal took the package to Claudia, but he examined it as he walked, checking for a trap. It felt like a chunk of wood in a shape he knew but couldn’t place.

Everyone’s breath streamed out in front of them as they waited. Winter was settling in heavily now.

Claudia stared at Jason as she felt his mind reach out to verify what she was.

Jason let out a sigh of relief. “It’s her. We’re in the right place.” He went to Carolyn and rubbed her shoulders while she got her breath back. “We’ll get you some food and sleep and you’ll feel better.”

Carolyn nodded. She’d been doing fine until they got close and Jason had gone into hunting mode.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s who you are, what you do.” She switched her attention to the strangers. The group seemed healthy, but just barely. Like most people in America now, starvation was only a week away for them. Carolyn silently vowed to fix that. She covered her mouth with her hand as she yawned. *After I rest, Jason and I will go hunting.*

Jason also noticed the people were thin. Winter was a bad time to be without body fat because fresh food was harder to come by and you went through energy faster.

Carolyn gave Claudia a tired smile. “As soon as I recover, you can put me to work.”

Claudia nodded. “I will. Can you cook?”

Carolyn straightened. “Yes. I love to cook.”

“Awesome.” Claudia let Marshal guide her toward their den. They’d all been out here earlier to collect snow. They were melting it and boiling it to get everyone refilled. They were going to keep doing it for as long as the snow lasted. Their small shed was empty and waiting for the buckets and barrels.

The way the kids and adults rotated around Claudia as she walked was eerie to Jason. A constantly shifting circle of protection was a common battle strategy of descendants. Very few of their kind could fire through a shield, and it took a lot of energy to hold one against attacks. This setup allowed them to fire while their guards defended. If the descendant in the center was good at timing, they were able to fire almost continuously while the guards held small personal shields that bounced or absorbed the incoming attacks. That energy was then fed back to the descendant in the center.

“Welcome to our home.”

“Wow.” The long ranch house in front of them blended in perfectly. It had been painted dark green and covered in dead sticks and foliage, while the paint was wet. The result was a camouflaged house that blended in during any season. “That’s incredible.”

Claudia sighed. “We hope it will cover us until…”

Jason nodded. “A late spring battle is the rumor going around the east.”

“Considering what we heard today, that sounds right.”

The wide house was a neat rectangle with boarded windows, a well-hidden cellar that Jason assumed was an escape route, and a dark second floor with bars over the windows. He thought he saw the ripple of a curtain up there, but he couldn’t be sure. The yard was littered with dead leaves and debris that gave it the appearance of any other abandoned property from a distance. Up close, it was clearly someone’s carefully constructed den.

Marshal pointed. “Avoid the windows. They’re boobytrapped with snake pits.”

“Why snakes? They’re dormant right now.”

Marshal held the front entrance open for them. “And yet they still bite you if you fall in.”

Jason couldn’t argue.

Dark paneling around the entrance halls kept light from the other rooms out of here and prevented it from glaring like a candle. The front door, once shut, blocked their passage into the main house where a dozen lanterns and a center fire in the stone fireplace gave the entire first floor a cheery glow.

Carolyn was thrilled.

So was Jason. Black curtains were taped to the walls to prevent movement, block the light and shadows, and to keep out the cold. The house was warm. Jason took his gloves off and stored them. Then he helped Carolyn do the same.

Orphans of nearly every demographic regarded them in fear from places on the carpeted floors and blanket-covered couches lining the walls.

Jason wondered if that’s where they slept. Then he wondered what the upstairs was used for, if anything. He was betting it was sealed off to keep the heat from rising.

The sound of chatter and chores came to them, but the noises were muted. Jason swept the home again and spotted an active CB system. Lights all over it flashed and fluctuated. The radio setup filled a long oak desk and part of a steel shelf next to it. *Someone here knows how to play with electronics.* “That’s a waste of power.”

“We don’t usually leave it on while we work. Today is special.” Claudia beamed at the males in her group.

“Special how?” As far as Jason knew, the holidays were over.

Marshal hung up his coat. “He doesn’t know.”

“We’ve been traveling. We didn’t make a camp at all for the last three days.” Jason winced as he realized how hard that must have been on Carolyn.

Claudia waved at Marshal. “Tell him. Let him join in the celebration.”

Marshal smiled this time, transforming into a happy soul. “Alexa got the new President to delay the slavery deadline. We gained almost six months.”

Jason stared at the scars on Marshal’s neck without really seeing them, stunned. “I’m not an escaped slave.”

“No. We’re all still free men, but that’s not all. Alexa made the call to her father.”

Jason stared at Marshal. “Was there an answer?”

Marshal shook his head. “Not yet. That’s why we’re leaving it on.”

“How long ago?”

“An hour.”

Jason agreed it was too soon to expect a response. Afterworld’s communication lines were human and they moved slower in this weather. Unless Safe Haven had a powerful radio and it had been on the same channel, they might not know for days. Word of mouth was a constant communication method throughout history, but it wasn’t fast.

Carolyn was happy for the men, but she felt bad. She spotted a chair and went toward it, lids drooping. She had to sleep now.

Claudia motioned to a long couch next to the radio desk. “Crash there where we can keep an eye on you.”

Carolyn forced her body to move. She was asleep almost the instant she stretched out on the couch.

Jason dug out a blanket from his kit and covered her up. Then he rejoined Marshal and the other men, enjoying the moment.

Claudia carefully tore open the package while everyone was distracted. She tried not to cry as she pulled out a carving that almost exactly matched the one she already had. The difference was the tiny center wings. On this one, they were red.

“That’s for the girl.” She stored it in her pocket and tossed the trash into the fire. She smiled or nodded at the kids and adults as she went by them, always eager to share her love.

She paused to rub the ears of the big black dog that had joined them a few days ago.

The dog licked her hand and then resumed listening to everyone in the house. It wanted to be with Edward, but this was tolerable until the gunfighters returned.

As Claudia left the kitchen, one of the happily coloring kids peered at the girl next to him. “Will you glow like her when you grow up?”

The girl stared after Claudia wistfully. “I hope so.”

The boy resumed drawing. “Cool. We can get married then.”

The girl stuck her nose in the air. “If you can’t love me when I’m dull, you can’t have me when I’m bright.”

**2**

**Bunker 34, Michigan**

“Bright! Too bright!”

Brian shut off the sunlamp and hurried over to Daphne. “Are you okay?”

“Sure.” Daphne rubbed her arms. “I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

“Me too. I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

“How else will you know if it works?”

“Still…” Brian helped her over to the chair. Her large stomach drew his attention repeatedly. She didn’t know how long vampires were pregnant. Brian only had the human and descendant sides to use for comparison. The succubus side was also unknown. Brian was guessing they were both a faster gestation, though. Her stomach was big even for a seven month delivery.

“I’m fine.” Daphne wasn’t used to being cared for. Brian was wonderful. She loved him. She was also deeply scarred from her time as a trafficking victim. The confusing mix often left her unsure how to react.

“We need to access the medical wing.”

Daphne groaned. She was tired of the common conversation. She dropped the hood on the desk.

The bunker below this floor was a mystery. Brian hadn’t been able to bypass the computer and get down there. This level held a long barracks, a bathroom, an office, and a hallway to the top door. He knew the entrance had to be here somewhere, but he hadn’t found it yet.

Daphne tugged on the thick robe she was wearing over her stretchy pants and loose shirt. Brian had convinced her this gear was better for running and fighting, but Daphne missed her bright silks.

Brian waved at his desk. “Top drawer.”

Daphne retrieved the small box, brightening. “Another gift?”

Brian smiled. “I want you to be happy.”

Daphne took out the bright red scarf with a huge glittery red bow. She slid it on and struck a pose.

Brian kissed her hotly, heart thumping. *I love you.*

*I want you.*

Brian knew the two weren’t the same, but he didn’t push or even try to explain it to her. She was learning how emotions worked. In time she would grasp the difference on her own.

Brian kissed her brow and went to the desk to record the results of his experiment.

They’d made their living quarters in the office to conserve heat, but also to have less items to grab if someone else was able to hack the scanner like he had. The room held a chair, a desk, and the two cots he’d dragged in and set up next to each other to create a bed for two. The tall stack of mattresses made it tolerable, though it was so cold he was wearing all the clothes he owned to stay warm. Daphne didn’t feel the cold the same way he did, but Brian was worried it would have an effect on the baby that was half human. “The fifth hood was also a failure.”

“Why are you testing on cloth and not me?”

Brian snorted. “That question answers itself.”

Daphne chuckled. “Are all Mitchels good or is it just you?”

Brian capped the pen. “A select few are good, but only a couple are actually monsters.” Brian grinned as he realized what he’d said.

“What did I miss?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about my mom.” He shook out the thin see-through hood. “When we find something that makes a bond, we can duplicate it and then look for other vampires to test it on. If Safe Haven has come home by then, my mom will probably volunteer for it.”

“Create a bond?”

He nodded. “I mean chemically. If it creates a barrier on the cloak that blocks the sun, I believe I can trace forms of the reaction to find something that might work in the human bloodstream.”

Daphne bared her fangs. “Why would anyone want to give up being like this?”

“I didn’t ask.” But he knew. He’d known as soon as he realized Alexa was a vampire. *Safe Haven won’t accept her like that. She’s too dangerous to the humans.*

“Am I unclean, like the books and movies say?”

Brian was still pissed that Daphne had been watching those old horror films. He’d given her a few books in hopes of contradicting those theories, but most of the literature was negative, too. “No. You’re a new lifeform. You have every right to exist.”

Daphne rubbed her stomach. “And him?”

Brian grinned. “*She* also.”

They laughed together at their common gender joke, but both of them felt the difference in the air.

“You’re failing. Is that why your mood is swinging?”

Brian nodded. “Disappointing my mom sucks. But I’m not giving up. I need to come at it from a new angle.”

Daphne yawned and patted the chair arm. “Come let me bounce on you and then I’ll go sleep. You can work.”

Brian hung the hood next to the other four failures. Then he went to please his fiancé. He hadn’t officially asked her yet, but he planned to. He’d already picked out a ring made of solid gold.

“Can we stay here forever?” Daphne liked this empty bunker section. It reminded her of the tomb she’d been banished from as a child. “It’s quiet and dark.”

“Maybe for a while.” Brian had gotten the power on, but they only used it for his tests and sweeps of the security system. During the day, they had mirrors rigged to rooftop vents for light. During the night, they used glowsticks. He’d adjusted well to being in the dark most of the time. “It’s like a cave.”

Daphne wrapped her arms around his neck. “Maybe we’ll have our own cave someday.”

Brian ran his hands over her soft hair. “How about a house with a long smelly basement?”

“Deal!”

Brian nuzzled her. “So we’ll get married, keep having kids, and be happy together forever.”

Daphne tensed. “That is forbidden to vampires and to the succubus lines.”

“So?”

“So we’ll be hunted. Our children will never be safe.”

“We’ll get you officially recognized and then it will be legal.”

Daphne shivered as his lips brushed over her neck. “Then we just have one more hurdle.”

“What?”

“Your mother’s approval.” Daphne drew back to meet his surprised eyes. “I’m not crossing her. If your mom won’t approve me, we’re through.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“But I do. I’ll take the baby and leave this land. As long as I go, she won’t follow me.”

“Why do you think my mom won’t approve of you?” Brian decided to start there.

“She’ll know I charmed you. She’ll remove it and you’ll start hating me.”

Brian laughed.

Daphne scowled at him. “What’s funny?”

“I was worried she’d be pissed because I charmed you!”

Daphne shook her head. “That’s not possible.”

Brian stilled, attention caught. “Why not?”

“I don’t know for sure. It’s just how we’re made. Not even Nature can control a vampire.”

Brian instantly understood how powerful that information could be to their future. “I wonder if it’s because man created the monsters, not Nature.”

Daphne grimaced.

Brian’s heart melted. “I’m sorry, Love. You’re not a monster.” He blasted her with his alpha power. “You’re my heart.”

Daphne blushed prettily, mood lifting.

Brian kissed her cheek… He froze, sensing danger. He examined the bunker around them and found it as empty as it had been when they’d broken in. “Must be above us.”

Brian went to the door. “Lock this behind me.” He shut it and waited for the click.

Brian went to the computer and switched it on. He’d been doing a weekly scan for alerts and messages going between other bunkers, but he’d also made sure the cameras were working. He tapped his gun butt impatiently. “Who’s up there and do I have to kill you?”

He studied the images as they popped onto the fuzzy screen. The darkness over the bunker was complete. It was hours before dawn here.

A male shadow broke away from the trees and came toward the camera.

Brian was instantly concerned. No one could see the camera or the code box. He’d made sure of that. “He might know this bunker’s here, like I did.”

The man on the screen glanced directly at the camera like he knew he was being watched.

Brian didn’t feel the shield of a descendant and he didn’t see signs that the man was a creature in disguise or a gate hunter. “Loose slave?”

The man held up a sheet of paper.

Brian read the single sentence in shock.

*Your mom sent me.*

Green waited patiently even though it was very cold and he was exhausted. He’d followed the tracker couple for a day and then came north, pursuing the feel of Alexa’s magic. He turned the page over and held it up.

*I was stationed here.*

Brian stared at those words, mind spinning.

Daphne opened the office door. “What is it?”

“A visitor.”

Daphne scanned the screen and blanched. “That’s a soldier!”

Brian clicked the button on the screen.

The single narrow door rumbled lowly as it prepared to open.

“Why are you letting him in?!”

Brian eyed her stomach as he drew his gun and walked toward the hallway. “We need access to the medical wing.” He filled in the rest silently. *And I don’t want to deliver our baby alone.* “Lock that door and rest.”

Brian waited at the entrance with his gun in plain sight.

Green walked in calmly, smiling. “Do your scan. I’m a little tired for a lot of talking. I need a nap.”

Brian did it right there, digging in for every memory of his mom. He concentrated on Green’s last contact with her–a hug. “Nice.”

Green began unsnapping his heavy winter coat. “It’s funny. I never would have believed that word and Alexa Mitchel could be put together, but she changed me.”

Brian didn’t like it that Green hadn’t always been on the right side. “You hunted her.”

The soldier sighed. “I regret it, son. That’s all I can say.”

Brian understood in a quick flash. “She sent you to finish atoning. If you screw up, I’ll have to put you down.”

“Yes, but you won’t have to. I’ll leave first.”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

Brian stuck out his other hand. “I’ll use a truth charm. You won’t be able to lie.”

Green didn’t hesitate. He clasped Brian’s smaller hand.

Brian spent a few seconds acting like he was doing something. He’d often bluffed people about his gifts. Normals didn’t know anything about magic so it was easy. He let go.

Green put his coat on the hook by the lockers. He ran his hand over a dusty nametag, smiling sadly. “I was happy here before the war.”

“What was this place used for?”

“No idea. I just ran security on this ground floor. I never went below and they didn’t come up. I did see a map, once. It looked like it was a small city with all the basics of a society.”

“Great. It could be a Resident Evil kinda thing.”

Green snorted out laughter. “I hope not. I’m on my last mag.”

Brian bared his fangs, proving he’d been changed. “If you turn traitor, Daphne and I will get a fresh meal.”

“I won’t.” Green was almost comforted by knowing he was locked in here with two vampires. *If I die by their teeth, then Alexa decided my fate and that’s tolerable.*

Brian recognized the man’s obsession with his mom. It matched his own. He holstered and shut the door, but he wouldn’t relax until he was sure the man could be trusted. It looked okay so far. His memories of Alexa felt genuine. “Name?”

“Just Green now.”

“Why?”

“It’s a soothing color.”

“What?”

“You ever meet an angry tree? A jealous tree? A tree supporting slavery?”

Brian chuckled. “No, I guess not.”

“Well, we all will during the final battle.” Green fell silent. His mind was still trying to accept it.

“I’ll want to talk about that later.”

“Sure.” Green scanned the shadow of a pregnant female through the office door. “Looks like we need to get down to the medical wing. Let my fingers warm up and I’ll show you how to hack that computer.”

**3**

**Georgia Swamps**

Bradley hacked through the ties around the pallet of boxes. “Why are we doing this?”

“It was part of our deal.”

The huge vampire cave towered over the line of trucks and the people chained to the outer walls. The vampires made imposing shadows as they worked and patrolled. None of them liked being topside, but it had nothing to do with the rough weather. The sun was rising and it hurt. Moans and hisses echoed continuously as they labored.

The area in front of the cave was flat and barren and held deep tire tracks through the snow. Across the road, the thick, swampy forest they often used for trapping animals waved in the breeze, dropping branches and snow piles that would make it harder for anyone to reach them. The street itself was under that natural cover now and impassible by most vehicles. It was a perfect lair. They’d been safe here for fifty years, but that wouldn’t last now that there was a bounty out on them.

The vampire tribe wasn’t happy about it or anything else that was happening. Yani knew and it worried him, but there was little he could do about it. They’d wanted him to capture the Mitchel and trade her to her family when Safe Haven returned, but Yani had chosen a different route. *We have to be recognized first. Then we can wreak havoc on those who stand in our way.*

Yani saw the hybrid girls he hated more than any others. The two sweet children were feeding the captives and throwing dark glares at him. He’d used their compassion against them. The girls were free to go, but they wouldn’t leave the others behind. They’d hoped he wouldn’t return from meeting with Alexa.

Yani grinned. Their displeasure made him happy.

Yani lifted a stack of boxes. The relics were a failsafe in case Alexa kept her word and spoke for them. Despite what he told his son, Yani had little faith it would go that way. *When we take over, we’ll burn these things as a sign of our control. It will crush the humans to watch their history be destroyed, even if half of it was bad. Those moments in time marked the age of man. Soon, a new era will begin.*

Bradley wasn’t as sharp as his father. “But she didn’t give us anything. Things are worse now!”

Yani grunted. “We gained knowledge.”

“Yes, they plan to kill us. The new leader put a bounty out!”

Yani tried to be patient. “We learned Alexa doesn’t like either of them. Those bounties won’t stand after the election.”

“That’s not worth all the information we gave away.”

“We also learned she doesn’t know we’re immune to Nature’s trickery, or that she and her men are also. We found out she’s sending people west, out of the fighting zones.” Yani’s voice lowered into triumph. “We know she can be defeated.”

Bradley paused. “What?”

Yani was becoming disgusted with his son. “How did you miss so much? William would have killed her if not for their capture trick. His next blast would have melted her. When Nature arrived, Alexa got out of the line of fire as fast as she could. The Mitchel has a lot of weaknesses.”

“It won’t go well if she decides to hunt us for the bounty.” Bradley waved at the cave. “She knows where we are!”

Yani handed the boxes to another tribe member to carry. “We have her support.”

“She won’t support us! She knows we don’t want the hybrids.”

“Alexa Mitchel is one of us now. She has to support our right to exist or those damn men she loves will have to be eliminated, too.”

Bradley’s scowl deepened until his brows pushed together like two caterpillars mating. “She’s family. Safe Haven will spare her and her team.”

“Perhaps. Either way, we learned important things for this trip and we intimidated all of them. Even the Mitchel hesitated to attack for my coming betrayal.”

Bradley studied their hostages. The cave wall was lined with those they’d captured, rescued, and even some of their own tribe who didn’t want to cross Alexa. “Are you sure we can’t just kill the hybrids now?”

“Haven’t you been listening?! There’s a chance she’ll side with us. She won’t if we break our deal!” Yani blur ran to the cave entrance to direct the assembly line of vampires carrying boxes inside.

Bradley stayed at the rear of the truck and stewed. *I wish spring was here and Safe Haven was back in America. After they refuse to acknowledge us, I’ll kill their council and take their leader captive. Then no one will be able to deny we exist.*

Reina joined Bradley at the rear of the truck. “Count me in.”

Bradley frowned at her. “For what?”

“Whatever you’re planning that Yani won’t like.”

Bradley snorted. “He’ll like it fine after it’s done.”

Reina shrugged. “How can I help?”

Bradley considered it and then voiced what Yani would beat him for speaking aloud. “The hybrids don’t look well. I think they’re ill. It could endanger all of us to let them live.”

Reina scanned the captives in disgust. “Yani wants them for our army against the humans.”

Bradley lowered his voice. “What good is an army if we’re all infected and falling ill?”

Reina’s grin was huge and evil. “Our people won’t like hearing that. They might even demand we get rid of them right now, for the good of everyone else.”

Bradley smiled coldly. “That’s exactly what I had in mind. You should start spreading that around. We can be rid of the abominations by this time tomorrow.”

A short shadow approached the truck in time to hear them. The girl reacted like Zaro would have. She pulled her longest knife and rushed toward the traitors in silent fury.

A second small blur ran next to her, feeling the moment of death arrive.

“No!” Yani saw it happen, but he was too far away to stop it.

The girls stabbed Bradley and Reina repeatedly, following their bodies to the ground. Dark, stinking blood gushed over the frozen earth and sent up steam. Caught off guard, Bradley and Reina had no defense to the girls’ fury.

Heather hacked through Reina’s neck and lifted her head in triumph.

Vera kept stabbing Bradley in the neck as his blood squirted over her hands and face.

Yani flew toward them, orbs glowing red. “Kill them!”

Heather grabbed her sister’s arm and ran.

The snow began to change to fat flakes saturated by water but not cold enough to freeze solid. The sleet covered the bodies and soaked up the blood.

Yani dropped down by his son, crying red tears. “Why?!”

The sisters kept going into the night. They would be hunted for this. They needed the head start.

Yani held Bradley as his blood poured out.

Bradley struggled to find the strength for words.

Yani leaned close to hear his last request.

“Kill them now. Abominations! Kill them all…” Bradley shuddered as he died. He’d lost too much blood too fast to be healed.

All the vampires in their tribe hissed in mourning, but their orbs glowed bright red. Despite all the legends, vampires were easy to kill.

Yani stood up. Grief made his voice rough. “Hybrids did this. We are at war.”

The vampires rushed toward their chained captives and guests and began draining them. Then they ripped out their throats.

Yani no longer cared if it crossed Alexa. Losing his son and his mother was too much. “Kill them all!”

“This way!”

“Stay together!”

Zaro’s granddaughters ran as fast as they could go, flying by the empty houses and farms lining this post-apocalyptic street.

Heather grabbed Vera’s hand so they didn’t get split up, but she didn’t slow. She didn’t hear anyone chasing them yet, but she was certain they would be hunted. Yani would never stop now until they were dead.

“Where are you going?”

Heather tried to run faster, skin starting to sting as the sun rose. “The only place they don’t want to go.”

**4**

**UN Bunker 14**

“Let’s go.” Marcella stepped over the body and slid her slippery knife into the sheath on her belt.

Vanessa brought up her shield to keep out the rocks and other things the line of furious people were now throwing at them.

Marcella wiped gore from her hands onto the side of the truck she’d retrieved from the storage area in the bunker. They’d only taken one of them to Gainesville.

Vanessa glared at the line of would-be bounty hunters who’d lost heart after watching Marcella freeze and then slice open and cut out the guts of a man twice her size. There were gate hunters, a few fanatics, and several real bounty hunters in that line, but none of them had the sand to attack. They didn’t realize their power was in sheer numbers. They could have overwhelmed Marcella as she fled, but the single ugly death was holding them hostage.

Marcella licked blood from her fingers, eyes glowing dark crimson. She made sure the unhappy people could see her. It would lend proof to Jeanie’s accusations about blood drinkers, but it would also keep them back so she could escape.

Vanessa kept her shield over Marcella as the western defenders who’d survived drove their jeeps and other vehicles away from the bunker.

The UN troops in those trucks and jeeps rode in sullen silence. The descendant in each vehicle had a machine gun and extra ammunition. They glared with red eyes and dared any of the Draftees to resist.

Marcella read the bullet-ridden interstate sign as they left the property. Clouds above it rolled quickly to the east, warning of more snow coming their way. A new plan formed in her mind. “Turn north.”

Nichole looked over at her. “What?”

“Everyone knows we’re going west. So go north.” Marcella wiped bloody hands down her clothes. “Unless you want to be hounded like this every step of the way.”

Nichole saw her point. She turned at the next street and rolled the convoy north. “There’s nothing up there, we’ve heard. Bunker sensors were still reporting dangerous levels of radiation.”

Marcella pulled items from the glovebox and let them fall to the floor in her search for towels or napkins to finish cleaning her hands. “We’re going to verify that. New York City would be perfect for a network enclave. It connects to a series of underground tunnels that will keep us out of the weather and out of view. We can grow over the winter and still have a dog in this fight.”

“You lost. We’re fleeing.”

“All great leaders have delays.” Marcella glared at the driver. “Afterward, they usually behead disbelievers.”

Nichole drove faster. “New York, huh? I’ve always hated that name.”

“So have I. Perhaps we’ll give it a new title that better conveys my message.” Marcella settled back, uncaring about the line of hunters now approaching in vehicles. They hoped the steel bodies of the cars and trucks would provide protection. “Set the girls loose.”

Vanessa lowered her shield and sent the order to the descendants in the other vehicles.

Screams began to echo almost immediately as spells and fire flew through the air.

Marcella smiled. “I’ll never get tired of that sound.”

The bunker behind them was open and pouring smoke. The battle had been ugly for the UN troops. Marcella was happy the shelter had been destroyed. None of the people hoping she died here would be able to use it for more than a roof and not even for that until the fires stopped burning. Thick smoke was rolling over the crowd, bringing coughs and tears.

Marcella’s only complaint was that Vanessa hadn’t conquered the bunker of UN loyalists while she was gone. Vanessa had waited for the outcome.

Vanessa hadn’t been sure Marcella would return and she’d seen no reason to follow orders.

Marcella glared at the woman, hand going to the gun on her hip. She’d loaded up on gear while her descendants and defenders conquered the UN bunker.

Vanessa continued to direct the other magic users. She wasn’t scared. “You’re like the rest of us now and we’ve all had more practice than you. Be nice or we’ll have a duel right here.”

“Deal!” Marcella sent a thick wave of hatred and lifted her gun at the same time.

The hatred swarmed Vanessa, stopping her from lifting a shield around herself.

Marcella fired her gun.

Vanessa fell over on the seat as the bullet ended her life.

Marcella had watched how William fought and replayed it repeatedly during the ride back here, studying. Being the same type of descendant as him was incredibly helpful.

Marcella scanned the other descendants mentally. *Anyone else think I’m not in charge?*

The magic users ignored her challenge and kept attacking anyone who tried to follow them. They didn’t want control; they just wanted to survive.

Marcella’s sharp mind returned to Alexa. “She almost killed us all in that garage. She scared me, and anything that does that to me gets wiped out. As of this minute, every member of that family is in grave danger. So is everyone around them.”

Marcella felt stronger than she ever had despite the weary, aching body. Alexa had put her through a vicious game to weaken her, but it had backfired. “Perhaps all of us should go through a trial. Then we won’t kneel before our enemies.”

The defenders in the truck with her flushed at the reminder of their surrender to Alexa’s men.

Marcella didn’t punish them further. It was her failure more than theirs. She hadn’t been ready to face her target, but she’d rushed in anyway. “I needed bigger numbers and a better plan.”

Marcella remembered Kiya’s words about doing roundups for men and new members. *Maybe I’ll get lucky and catch a few Mitchels during that cattle drive.*

Marcella considered calling out to the family who’d left. She also thought about the hundreds of defenders still in her western bunker. If she called them all, they could be together within the month.

Marcella decided to wait until she had a den ready for them. If they thought she was weak, she would have to kill them to keep control. “And I don’t want to play her game anymore. The next time we meet, it will be on my terms, Alexa Mitchel, and you won’t like the outcome.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

**Close**

**1**

**“D**o you guys hear that?”

All six teammates nodded in response to Billy’s question. The odd noise was faint and sounded like someone ringing a bell.

Everyone paused for a thorough scan.

Animals were moving through the snowy town and enjoying easy meals from the bodies. A few birds were doing the same, but otherwise, nothing moved. Even the wind had died down, leaving a brightening day that the gunfighters wanted no part of. The smell of burning wood, plastic, and flesh had combined over the hours and now hung above the city in a thin cloud of smog. It was warmer, but not by enough to matter as the sun continued to burn them.

Billy narrowed it down. “It’s coming from the southwest.”

“We cleared the city and flushed everyone out or to the lake.” Edward yawned. *I ate too much. I feel sloshy.* “It can’t be coming from a person or a group.”

“It’s not mechanical, either.” Daniel swept the rear for his check in, then turned back around.

“I don’t think it’s metal of any kind.” David had done a lot of work with that resource.

Mark concentrated on putting his feet in the right places to minimize tracks and noise. “It’s the wind. Something’s happening and we’re feeling the vibrations from it before it reaches us.”

Mark frowned as he stepped wrong and crunched loudly. “It’s how the boss always knows something’s coming our way.”

That wasn’t correct in this case, but Alexa still delivered a blast of warmth that swarmed Mark and warmed his cold feet.

“That feels wonderful.”

“Your mind is wonderful.” Alexa led them toward their den. “We didn’t do as much damage as usual. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

The men grinned. Other than the one area, it seemed like nothing had happened here last night.

Alexa lowered her hood.

The sun blinded her. She stumbled out of formation. “Damn it!”

She covered up and held onto Billy’s arm as Edward took over the lead. She was trying to build tolerance to something intolerable. *It might be the hardest challenge I’ve ever faced.*

The ringing grew louder.

Alexa stopped them, but she let Edward keep the lead while her vision cleared.

Edward held up a hand in that familiar sign of warning.

Daniel and Mark fell into protection detail around the group, one moving to the front, one to the rear. The other two senior fighters placed Alexa and the rookies between themselves, creating a barrier from each direction.

Ahead of them, something moved.

When the other fighters remained motionless, so did the rookies. They now loved where they’d been placed. If someone got through the other four, the two River City men would be Alexa’s last defense and they were eager to kill for her, as always.

The movement wasn’t slow or plodding this time. It flew toward them like lightning, ringing and jingling.

Edward recognized it. He pointed a calloused finger down and spun it in a fast circle that sent the senior men into action. They formed a crisscross line on both sides of Alexa, with the rest lined neatly behind. The rows were perfectly straight as the rookies stayed where they’d been put. His switch cleared half of the snowy road.

Seven sets of hard eyes watched the horse-drawn cart fly closer.

*“Potions, charms, spirits…”*

The memory flashed for the other men now, but they didn’t relax; they hadn’t been told to yet.

Jacob made the next connection. “Shouldn’t they be in the swamps, protecting Yani’s tribe?”

Edward shrugged. “He told us he was banished.”

“I know.” Jacob fought a yawn. “I mean the other trolls.”

Daniel caught on. “Good point. Why haven’t we run into others?”

Edward still didn’t get it. His mind was growing foggy from lack of sleep. “He said they were carrying out their mission from Nature.”

“That’s my point.” Jacob gestured. “We should have seen them trying to kill humans, including us.”

No one had an answer except Alexa, but she didn’t offer her opinion on Nature gathering her army in the north.

The red and black, star-carved wagon sent up a cloud of snowy dust as it came to a rough halt in front of them. The solid gray horse huffed out steamy breaths.

Jendon studied them avidly. His vivid yellow eyes rapidly changed to bright blue to dark brown and then back to yellow, but it wasn’t excitement causing his lack of stability this time. It was annoyance. Dressed in the same black robe and boots, the tufts of long, bright yellow fur coming from his ears stood straight up and glowed brightly.

The gunfighters were once again impressed by the troll that was three times their size. Those blood red brows lifted higher as he regarded Alexa.

Alexa opened her hand and revealed the streaming green tails that bound them.

Now that the gunfighters understood she’d called Jendon, they gave him nods in greeting.

The massive horse nuzzled the nearest fighter. It clearly remembered the loving care Alexa’s men had given.

Daniel stroked the horse and smiled. It was nice that not all the animals feared them because they’d changed. This horse belonged to a troll and was able to recognize their magical connections.

Mark tried to see into the rear of Jendon’s cart, but there was a closed wooden door with matching star symbols carved around the edges. *And it doesn’t have a handle or keyhole*. *It must open with a charm.*

David thought of the short time he’d sat with Alexa and Jendon.

*David sat on her right, keeping his attention on their surroundings as much as on the creature across the dim flames.*

*Jendon studied the man, shifty eyes seeing what he had no doubt the woman already knew. “You’d use this one? You know what it will cause?”*

*“Stop.” Alexa cut Jendon off before he could confirm his suspicions. “Those are not your answers to give, nor your questions to ask.”*

*Jendon flinched from her reproach. “As you say.”*

David resisted the urge to rub his leg where he’d cut a piece of his flesh for the potion. He’d asked Edward later and found out it was supposed to slow death. *She believed I was the one who was going to die, not Mark. And she didn’t care that it would have revealed my descendant status. She just wanted to save me.*

The harness gave a last jingle as the cart came to a complete stop. “Lady. I always come. Why must you jerk so hard?”

“Because it’s always an emergency.” Alexa shuddered as sunlight fell over her.

Jendon stared, ear hair curling in shock. “Master.”

Alexa sighed. “But that’s not why I called you… Though now that you’re here, is there a potion or protection I can purchase or make?”

Jendon slowly shook his head, sweeping her men. His ear hair went straight up. “All of you!”

Alexa wasn’t disappointed because she’d had no hope to be dashed. “I would have you repeat your last mission for me. And then our bond can be severed. I have gotten my dust’s worth.”

Jendon looked around for his new passengers, but he didn’t seem happy.

*Maybe he doesn’t want to be freed, Boss.* Edward understood. It would kill him not to have this bond with Alexa anymore.

Alexa relented. “Or it may stay, as the bonds of friendship.”

The troll grinned, flashing long yellow fang-like teeth. “Yes.”

Alexa pointed southwest. “There’s a cellar in Bridgeport. You’ll find two like us who need safe passage and secure residence until spring. They are the rightful heirs of their tribe. Heather and Vera do not know you’re coming, but they will be grateful just the same.” Alexa believed the girls went there because it was where Zaro died. Vampires avoided graves of their kind, despite preferring crypts. One was a necessity to protect them from the sun. The other was a reminder that they weren’t immortal.

“Outcasts, like me.”

Alexa nodded. “Things changed quickly for them. You’re not the only one who refused to obey an order.”

Jendon regarded the green chains in her hand. “You overpaid. These rescue runs do not add up.”

Alexa realized Edward was right. “I disagree.”

She pulled another pouch from her pocket. “Timeless, for each of us.”

Jendon felt the power of the dust as he caught the bag. “You cannot die now but by special means or outright butchery. It is a waste of your dust.”

“We are half human. We’ll take the potions along and hope we never have to test that.”

Jendon inclined his head. “As you wish. I will deliver them the next time we meet.”

Alexa began digging through her cloak. “Hair and flesh. Label your own bottle.” She handed out the small vials as she pulled them from her pockets.

Each man there took a permanent marker from their waterproof bags and added their names to the lids.

Jendon observed greedily as each man cut a small piece of their flesh and added it to the bottles. It took a while because they had to stay covered. The sun was brightening, heating, burning.

Blood dripped into the snow as they dug out bandages.

Alexa stood watch until they were finished. Then she provided her own samples, not wincing as she took a layer of skin from her upper arm. It was nothing compared to the pain of the sun even through her clothes.

“You must seek cover now.” Jendon took the bottles and dropped them into his magic pouch. “My cart will open for you now upon that command.”

“My thanks, but no.”

“As you wish.” Jendon prepared to leave. “I will search for a defense.”

Alexa smiled. “I give my gratitude, layman.”

Jendon snapped the reins and took off, headed for Bridgeport. There was no song or jingle to mark his passage this time. The glare of sun on the snow swallowed him.

Alexa marched toward their den, unable to take any more.

The men quickly followed her.

The cold darkness of the stairwell brought relief and a stronger tug of sleep that they all ignored. There was still work waiting.

**2**

“We’re home.”

Almost everyone smiled at Alexa’s words.

Edward frowned at the small fruit flies buzzing around the dirty apartment in chaotic, dying circles. “We’re not going to bed with it like this.”

They all scanned the mess, but didn’t complain. They hung up dirty cloaks that would receive a wash after their owners did. They also emptied some of their pockets. They were using the corner wall shelves for current projects.

Billy put the Hummer model on his shelf, along with the box of supplies so he could finish it when he was off duty.

Mark did the same with the new rifle. He was going to practice every day like he’d told them he would.

Jacob put a pair of the nunchucks on his shelf.

David sat his book from the library on his ledge. He was eager to dig in and find out how to make their radio more powerful. They would need it while they were on the ocean.

Edward sat his small tools kit on the shelf. He wanted to go over all their guns during this break.

Daniel left his shelf empty. He hadn’t decided on his next project. *I think I just want to daydream of what my life could be like after the final battle.*

Alexa examined their shelves and then each of her men. She found them happier than they’d been before she called the meeting and that was enough for her. She put the new photo album on her shelf. *I’m going to fill it with our love. My team means everything to me. I want to capture as many of these moments as possible.*

Edward snapped a copy of her expression in a quick push and then put his phone away. Next week they would bring a printer in and get it working. Then Alexa could play with the photos on all their phones. That’s all she wanted. Edward was determined to make sure she got it. *We may not live through the final battle, so we’ll live now.*

“Get those chores rolling while Billy cleans and Mark checks the radio.” It had been two hours since her call and she was exhausted. Alexa gave Edward a quick look. “Handle drama now, too. Don’t bring it into sleep with us.”

Edward cast a quick glance at David’s bruises and then shook his head. “I wasn’t wrong.” He went to the squid tank. “Apologize.”

“I do.” David gave the concession without hesitating. “I was wrong to handle it that way. I’m sorry.”

Edward wanted to let it go, but he had the job of keeping the men in line. Second in Command didn’t just get perks. “Why the change?”

David came over to hold the trash bag while Edward rolled up his sleeves. “I realized I’m pissed at Adrian and taking it out on the boss. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.” Edward scooped and dropped the mess into the bag. “It was mostly because you expected us to support you over her. That won’t ever happen. It’ll just cause problems.”

“That’s the last thing I want. I’m honored to be here, to have been chosen at all.”

“Same.” Edward swept the others, then went back in for another scoop of the rotting meat. “Billy looks better.”

David snorted, amused. “I think he looks like William Wallace after the first fight.”

Edward laughed. “As long as he won.”

Billy soaked his washrag over the sink that was still perfect to drain messes. There just wasn’t any water coming through the pipes. “You know I can hear you, right?”

David assumed a Scottish drawl and a thoughtful expression. “Can ye now?”

Edward caught on and copied the accent. “Well, that’s something we shall have to remedy, isn’t it?”

The men burst out laughing.

Alexa didn’t join them even though their amusement was great. “A movie, I assume?”

David nodded. “Mel Gibson as William Wallace. It’s called Braveheart.”

“One of the best movies ever made.” Edward cleaned his hands as David tied the bag and tossed it into the garbage chute. “A forbidden romance. No wait, *two* forbidden romances. A king who wants to rule the world and the peasants who are tired of being abused. Lots of action. It’s also the bloodiest film I’ve ever watched. You may not like it because of all the…” Edward remembered who he was talking to.

The room filled with laughter from all of them this time.

Alexa tuned them out as the men began talking about parts of the film. There were still a few loose ends she needed to tie off. Most of them were in her mind now that Edward and David had settled their flare up. One glance at the bruises had told her where they came from. Other than Billy, who’d been victorious in his fight against Libby, all of her team should have been unmarked. It had been easy to match the knuckle marks to Edward’s big fist.

Alexa wasn’t upset. She was being patient with David because of his hatred toward her father. She believed in being fair and compassionate when it was called for. When it wasn’t, Edward was her muscle. His blows might as well have come from her and David knew it. He would apologize personally to her over the next few days and she would accept him fully back onto the team. Then they would go on. When they stopped being able to fix things and keep moving, then their team might be in real danger of splitting up. Until then, minor moments like this weren’t the end of the world.

*That will come if Jeanie gets to keep the Presidency. There’s nothing to stop her from being evil in every way. The slavery law will be her testing tool. She can say it was Marcella’s plan, and it was, and avoid the blame if people vote it out. If they vote it in, she can take credit for it and then expand it until she has every citizen under complete control.* Recovery would spin on her dime and those who fell out of favor would be given ugly punishments to demonstrate her power and reach.

*What have I done?*

“You followed the constitution.” Edward didn’t want her to feel bad. “It was a hard duty.”

“That, it was.” Alexa thought of Marcella and how she’d kneecapped the western conqueror even though Marcella might have been a better choice. She didn’t want time reset, so those kids wouldn’t have been hunted as much. She was also more stable. Jeanie had multiple personalities and all of them were showing cracks. *But I couldn’t pick Marcella. She’s experimenting on survivors without caring what she’s giving them. She’ll kill us all and never know what went wrong.* “I had to pick between extinction or the reset. I chose to wound all parties involved and then I made the call that might doom humanity anyway.” She sighed. “I feel dirty.”

Edward and Billy spoke at the same time, “Need a bath, Boss?”

Alexa chuckled. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

“We’ll get it set up.” Billy hurried to finish cleaning off Libby’s dried blood. His aching arms could use the soak.

Edward went to start heating the water. The huge tub in the bathroom was a perfect fit for three cold bodies.

Outside, the snow had returned. The undead were frozen; nothing was moving except thick flakes that were coming down hard and fast. Winter was here to stay. Alexa’s thoughts turned to spring. She needed to reach Safe Haven before Easter.

*And I will, no matter how many plans I have to change. As soon as winter breaks, we’re back on the road.*

“I wish they’d left a couple of the apples.” Daniel was in the mood for something sweet that wasn’t a candy bar. They had bags of those, taken from the pallets in the museum.

Jacob pulled three softening apples from his cloak and tossed one to the Biker. He gave the others to Alexa, who would share them out in a treat or a reward before they rotted.

“Is it enough for a pie?”

Jacob nodded at her. “But have someone else do it. I’m great with most things that get baked, but pies aren’t one of them.”

Alexa stored the fruit. “Noted. We’ll go by the tree tomorrow and pull anything still edible. We’ll also go ice fishing.” Their quick look at it after hunting said the lake was frozen enough to try. “Then we’ll take that tour of the USS ALABAMA battleship that Jacob wanted to tour.”

The men began to relax and let go of the tension that had arrived with Yani and his family. Smiles came easier. Thoughts were kinder.

“I’ve been thinking about the story they told us, about how they were created.” Daniel yawned. “I’m not sure it was an accident that there are so many of us. If the government didn’t want more vampires, why would they ever let them loose in our world with the ability to reproduce?”

The men remembered Daniel’s previous opinions on vampires being normal for this new world. They waited for the Biker to finish his thought as they worked.

“We’re stronger because we have to be. Hunting at night, especially in winter, is harder. Nature gave us what we needed. It’s the same with going dim. Many species have camouflage capabilities. Now we do, too, even though we don’t know how to use that yet.” Daniel rubbed his bearded chin. “I don’t know why the government wanted us. I’m still working on it.”

“I may have that answer. They knew people would resist their tyranny. They wanted better soldiers who could ferret out prey when they’re asleep or hiding in the ground. There isn’t any place a vampire can’t go, so long as we use the darkness.”

Alexa’s answer made sense and brought a fresh wave of anger at how the government had manipulated all of them and caused everything bad.

“Why can’t we read Yani’s mind, but we can still read each other?”

Everyone rotated toward Jacob, staring. Edward came back from the bathroom. He also stared.

Jacob tensed. “What?”

Edward and Alexa exchanged a glance.

Billy caught it. “Was anyone able to read Yani or his family?”

David picked up the last apple core and dropped it into their bait bucket. “Not me.” David still didn’t mention his newest gift. He was positive Alexa knew about it and that was enough for now. Exploring the time stream was a terrible temptation. He wanted to get control of himself before he told his team. They would want him to start using it to see what they were walking into.

Mark pushed his boots off. “No.”

Alexa felt like slapping herself. “It was right there the whole time.”

“I don’t understand.” Jacob didn’t like being last in anything, but he was totally confused.

“Descendants can’t read vampire minds.” Alexa was sure of it now. She’d tried several times during this run and came up blank.

Jacob frowned. “So?”

Alexa’s good mood increased. “So Nature can’t read vampire minds, either. She can’t control them.”

Jacob thought about it, but didn’t find any proof. “How do you know?”

“Why else would Nature recruit the trolls and not the vampires?” Alexa and Edward stole another glance.

Billy made an ugly gesture. “Just spill it.”

Edward didn’t want anyone to think he and Alexa were hiding anything. *But we are.* He wasn’t sure what to say.

Billy was too tired to be polite. “Too late to keep it a secret now.”

Edward waited for Alexa to make the choice.

Alexa didn’t hesitate to trust her team. “It might not just be full bloods. Nature might not be able to control hybrids, either. She didn’t try to take over my gifts tonight even though I’m fire based. She should have tried.”

Edward gave an opinion on that. “We have to test it and find out before we leave. Safe Haven needs that information. We might be their secret weapon.”

“That’s why the government really wanted more of us!” Daniel snapped the final piece in place. “They wanted to control Nature. She’s the ultimate weapon. They needed a soldier to fight her for control.”

A chill went through the room.

“She’s just been defending herself?” Jacob was horrified. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

Alexa sighed deeply. “I wish I could.”

“Well, that sucks.” Mark shrugged. “But it’s too late to change now. We have to survive and she’s the biggest threat.”

Billy stared at the happy Convict. “You said *we* like you mean the vampires.”

Mark nodded. “I do. The normals aren’t a threat to us now, and neither are most descendants. Only William gave us pause and that’s not a certain outcome yet. Other vampires are dangerous, but they’re submissive to us until Safe Haven makes the call. And if it goes against them, they’ll blame Safe Haven, not us. For our team, Nature is the biggest threat. We were made by man. She isn’t going to let that stand. During the final battle, we might be among the top targets on her list.”

Alexa felt that truth and gave her man the promise he didn’t want to ask her for. “I’ll make sure there’s a place for us after we win. The survivors have earned the right to live in peace.”

The teammates who had more to live for were delighted.

Those who had little hope heard the wording and hid their concerns. She hadn’t said creatures, just survivors.

A faint buzzing came to all of them. Carried on the cold wind, it was thick, dense.

Alexa felt the radio call coming. She swung toward it in pleasure that shot out of her and slammed into her devoted team.

It dropped all six men, even Edward. He hit his knees, stunned by her waves of happiness.

“Are you there?”

Adrian’s voice through the radio was clear, hard, and obvious. There was no denying who was calling.

Mark keyed the mike when Alexa gestured. “She’s speechless. Give her a minute.”

“I don’t have time for your emotions!”

Adrian’s sharp voice snapped Alexa back into the hard leader they all loved. She grabbed the mike and hissed into it. The sound echoed through their den. To any ears, it was clear that she wasn’t entirely human.

“I see.” There was a thoughtful pause and then Adrian smiled through the radio. “It doesn’t change anything. Finish your quest in honor.”

Tears rolled down Alexa’s cheeks. “By the Resurrection.”

“So noted and welcomed. Safe travels, Alexa.”

The radio went silent.

Mark quickly lowered the volume as people across the country began to alert each other that Safe Haven had survived. All the rumors were true. “They know it’s more than a legend now. They’ll start hunting that light again.”

Alexa was filled with renewed determination. “But we’ll get there first. As soon as the spring eagle flies, so do we.”

**The End**

**What would you like to do now?**

**[A picture containing text, night sky

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## Deleted Scenes

Alexa laughed and shoved in the last bite from her treat. Jacob refused to be rough and Billy only seemed to like it rough. They would meet in the middle to make her happy, but it would help all three of them. Jacob would learn rough didn’t always mean pain. Billy would remember he didn’t need to be abused to enjoy sex, and she would get the pride of knowing she was helping both men get over those emotional hurdles.

*And what about your issues?* Daniel had been worrying over that from time to time. *What do you get out of it?*

*Their love.*

*Sex isn’t love.*

*Not in normal relationships, but in ours it is.* She smiled at the Biker. *Or am I imagining it that you try to show me how much you care when we’re groaning and riding the waves together?*

Daniel chuckled. *Fair point.*

Alexa wasn’t going to change their setup. If she gave them the strings of a relationship, then they would have the drama of it to handle at every turn and she wasn’t capable of that. *I’d rather jump in the lake with no clothes on and den there for the winter.*

All six men burst out laughing at the image.

**Deleted Scene #2**

“We’re done for now.” Alexa wiped blood from her mouth and turned toward their den. “Let’s go find out how bad it is.” She was certain the trio had trashed their setup, but she didn’t hate them for it. When people were desperate, they didn’t worry about being careful or clean.

The men followed her up the stairs, unhappy with Jeanie getting the position, but they all understood why Alexa had done it. They just didn’t agree.

Their den wasn’t as bad as they’d expected.

Half of the fish were gone and stinking apple cores littered the floor. An awful odor coming from the far tank said the squid meat hadn’t been touched and had gone bad, but the rest of their setup hadn’t been bothered.

A large pouch sat on the center chair.

Alexa stored the dust, putting it in her special pocket for use in potent potions. Marlin had said they would pay in dust from family. That made it powerful.

Alexa stared out the window at the neighborhood she hadn’t needed to explore. She studied the airport behind it, building on her next plan.

“How long do you think we have before William comes back?”

Alexa sank down in her chair as Edward made the fire and Mark did a walk through to be sure everything was secured. “Spring.”

“How long will he be bound to our capture bonds?”

“Not as long as we need. He’s already free of two of them. One chain isn’t as strong as three.” She shut her lids and let herself relax. “We’ll be gone long before then, my pets. As soon as winter breaks, we’re back on the road.”

She gestured. “Get a radio on and coffee rolling. Jeanie won’t wait long to enforce her claim.”

Billy was grateful Alexa had gotten Jeanie to give the men in this country a few more months of freedom at all. If luck was with them, Safe Haven would return before then. Slavery might not end up the new law of the land. The Supreme Court was still out on that one.

## US Line of Succession

President

Vice President

Speaker of the House

President of the Senate

Secretary of State

Secretary of the Treasury

Secretary of Defense

Attorney General

Secretary of the Interior

Secretary of Agriculture

Secretary of Commerce

Secretary of Labor

Secretary of Health and Human Services

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

Secretary of Transportation

Secretary of Energy

Secretary of Education

Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Secretary of Homeland Security

## Book 7 Sample

[A picture containing text, night sky

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[**Port City**](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/at-7-port-city.html)

**1**

**“D**own!” Jacob held his breath as the water sucked him under. His heavy cloak dragged him into the cold depths.

Sharp, firm pulls on the ropes around his waist popped him to the surface. He gasped in air and held it while the wave crested over his face. Then he was able to breathe again for a minute.

“Down!”

Jacob pulled sharp and firm on the rope to his right, popping Billy to the surface. He drew in deep breaths, cramming oxygen into his lungs as the lake swelled again and sent another wave toward them.

“Check in!” Alexa held her breath and struggled to hear their answers as the water pulled her under.

Edward jerked her back to the surface, pissed that she’d chosen to be man on the end again for this training session. It was the most dangerous place to be. “Good!”

“Good!”

“Tired!”

“Good!”

Alexa drew in air. “Brace, then break!”

The wave crested and hit them full on.

Alexa felt panic coming from her men. She opened her eyes under the water and brought up her shield around the entire team.

The lake water lowered enough for all of them to suck in air as they sank. The shield protected them a little. It didn’t keep them afloat.

Alexa shivered. “Three more minutes.”

The men forced their weary bodies, and the fear, to obey.

Alexa let go of the shield and kicked hard, pulling them up. Each man in line followed, kicking hard to break the surface of the choppy lake.

Bright sun smacked them repeatedly, but there was no time to freeze as the adrenaline overrode the glare and forced them to react or die.

David observed from the shoreline, big arm ready to reel them in with the large pulley he’d set up weeks ago. He saw Alexa go under again and got ready to bring them ashore. His time last week as her anchorman flashed in his mind. He’d hated every second of it. He had no doubt Edward felt the same.

Edward popped her to the surface, holding his breath. He didn’t have time to call as the icy water sucked him down.

Alexa and Daniel felt the drag and pulled without the call.

Edward broke the surface and shouted over the water. “Time!”

Alexa allowed it. They were all miserable.

David began pulling them in. They went under repeatedly as the rope wound and finally tightened.

The five men pulled each other and Alexa along. Trying to swim against the waves would have been impossible without David’s pulley system.

Edward plowed forward, helping. His body protested the cruel treatment.

Mark lifted Alexa’s body above the waves and held her there as they were pulled to the shore. His boots sank into the silt on the bottom. He forced his legs to move, to get them out of the water before he put her on her feet.

Alexa coughed out lake water and sucked in air. She coughed again and brought up more of the cold water that was making her insides shake and jerk. She didn’t believe she’d ever been so cold.

David grabbed the robes they’d hung next to their fire, holding them ready as each person stripped, shaking and twitching. Their red skin made David frown, but he didn’t protest the lesson like Edward had the first time he was left on the shore to watch his team sink or tread water.

Alexa refused the robe and helped Jacob strip instead. The rookie had gone quiet and that wasn’t good.

Edward helped her, but he also popped buttons on her clothes while holding Jacob still as she rubbed him to warm him up. By the time she got the Preacher undressed, half of her clothes were off as well.

The other men, now swaddled in warm robes, came over to help them.

David put their wet things onto the hooks they’d attached to a long pole. They would carry it to their den in a bit and let it all dry. Their pockets were empty of valuables, but full of rocks to mimic the weight.

Alexa wrapped up in the now cool robe that still felt amazing to her chaffed skin. She went to the fire and stood as close as the robe would tolerate.

Edward got Jacob next to the fire, then dropped his robe.

David handed him fresh gear.

As soon as Edward was dressed, he and David handed out clothes to Mark and Daniel.

Jacob and Alexa went last; their teeth chattered like a woodpecker bent on bringing down a tree.

David passed out hot mugs of coffee next, wishing he’d chosen to make the hot chocolate packs they’d gathered from the museum pallets. They had a few left. The sugar in them would have been better in this situation than a diuretic like coffee.

Five minutes after touching the shoreline, the entire team was dry except for their hair and warming nicely. Alexa had created the lesson and made them practice the recovery for a week before they’d stepped foot into the lake.

Edward waited for Alexa to speak, for any of them to talk, but the lake made the only noise as the waves increased in strength. Edward was glad to be out of the water. These lessons had started a month ago, but it never got any easier.

“Check in.”

The men all turned toward Alexa, not liking her tone.

“Good,” came from each of them, even Jacob, who was blue around the lips but warming.

Alexa sighed. “Same, though we may wish for the opposite shortly.”

Edward lifted a brow. “Something’s coming?”

Alexa nodded. “I hear it on the wind. Our peace is about over.”

It was hard for the team to act sad, though they’d enjoyed the calm. Nine weeks of no action had sucked. All of them were eager for the rush that only came when they had a brush with death or gave one to their enemies.

Alexa lifted her face to the sky. She was able to ignore the burning sun this time. *Progress!*

Her team noticed it and shared smiles. Their misery had paid off. They all took a risk and lowered their hoods.

The sun hurt them, but not as badly, not as sharply. They brought up their hoods to block the cold wind this time as much as to block the sun.

Alexa finished straightening her spare clothes. She knelt to tie her boots, like the others were now doing.

A feather dropped into the sand in front of her.

She slowly picked it up as time slowed enough for her to actually feel it. Her hand distorted in her sight as she held the feather.

“Eagle.” Edward was great at tracking animals by what they left behind. He’d been good at it before, but he’d spent the winter reading all the books in the library on the subject. He was a walking wildlife guide now.

Alexa felt fate glance their way.

*Do I want to keep doing this?*

It was the first time Alexa had asked herself that question.

*We could skip the watery hell waiting for us. Safe Haven will come back on their own. Yani was right about that.*

The team rotated toward her in slow motion, drawn by her contemplations and the sudden mood change. Then they noticed the time distortion. Only one of them understood what was happening.

Edward was stunned. He gawked at her. “Not just kids!”

Alexa got it an instant later. She flinched, letting go of the time stream.

Time resumed, snapping back in with a loud pop. The ground shook. A window exploded in the small shed further down the beach.

Alexa let go of the feather, mind now blazing a path toward her next plan, the next challenge. “I can slow time.”

“Stop. Don’t.” Jacob put his warming hand around her wrist. “You’ll draw them straight to Safe Haven.”

Alexa knew he was right. She shut that mental door and tried to find a way to seal it off. “You know we’re bound by ancient rules. If captured, I’d have no choice.”

Billy scowled. “We won’t let that happen.”

“Your word you won’t let them take me alive.”

Edward spoke up. “They’d have to kill us all to reach you, Boss. You’ll be on your own.”

Fire blazed across her face.

The men grinned at her and each other. They knew how to help her control the swinging moods that came from being one of the most powerful people on the planet. Her byzan status had challenged them at first, but they’d learned how to manage it.

Alexa relaxed. “Stay here tonight or go back? Vote.”

Alexa waved at Edward to handle it.

“Stay.”

“Stay.”

“Go.”

Alexa swept the horizon behind the city. Somewhere out there, her son had made her a grandmother. Claudia was heavy with Mark’s child. Lorey was enjoying morning sickness. It looked dead in every direction, but life was doing what it had always done. *I can’t stop now. All those lives need hope. Every time they hear one of us, it provides that. And I’m forbidden the job I want most.*

Alexa put it from her mind. “There’s time yet. Enjoy the sunset and the company.”

A dark shadow with thin descending symmetrical wing tips flew over the team and landed on the ground in front of Alexa. It opened its yellow beak and cawed loudly.

The team stopped, frozen as the eagle studied them.

Alexa almost refused. The months here with her team had been good for her in every way. They hadn’t heard from any of their friends or their enemies, though Jeanie’s weekly radio address had been disheartening.

*I promise to continue our journey. Does it have to be this very day?*

The Eagle cawed again. It stared into her eyes. *Of course not. You can do whatever you want. You’re a Mitchel.*

The bird flew off into the eastern sun.

Alexa sighed. *And that’s why I’m bound to finish what I’ve started, even if we don’t survive the end. The family legacy is at stake. I will repair our image or die trying.*

The men waited for her words, certain of what she would say now. She hadn’t worked them daily during their downtime just to renounce the quest that had brought them all together.

Alexa’s heart settled back into that familiar, tiresome rhythm. She sat on the sand and squeezed water from her long blonde braids. “We leave at midday on the morrow.”

That was as long as she could wait. If she stayed longer, she wouldn’t go at all. This team meant as much to her as her honor, as her father, and she’d almost picked them. Instead of shame, it brought awareness. *I have to find a way to save them all.*

Edward felt her unhappiness, but he also knew the hard, resourceful woman who’d led them here was waiting impatiently to be needed again. “We go where you go.”

“We’ve come a long way, and dealt with challenges that would make superheroes weep.” Her face hardened into the stony, hawk-like profile they’d come to respect above all others. “I pray it was enough to get us through the last leg of our quest. The hardest part is yet to come.”

Jacob snorted at her. “What could be harder than having the Rabbit along?”

The other men laughed.

Alexa didn’t. “We have to tell the sheltered people of Safe Haven the world has changed in their absence and that, my pets, will be no easy task. I promise you, they won’t want to hear it and we won’t make friends for saying it.”

Mark shrugged. “Then it’s a good thing we aren’t going there to make friends.”

“Aye, but those bonds make the world a better place, do they not?”

The men saw her point. Their bonds with this team meant everything.

“Do not close yourself off to relationships once we arrive. We need them to accept us before we tell them they don’t have a choice. If we do it backward, they may try to kill us and every hybrid they encounter. The last thing we want is to go to war against Safe Haven.”

Edward met her eye. “But we will, right?”

Alexa sighed miserably. “If it’s called for, yes. We all have the right to life, and even during the crappy moments, it’s still worth fighting for.”

[A picture containing text, night sky

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Book Seven

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