Our quest has just begun and already I feel so old! I thank fate endlessly for my men. They keep me fighting as much as the memories do. I will find my father and Safe Haven, and along the way, I will earn the right to live there.”
All Angela White Books

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Wolves in the corn
Rats at our boots
Dodging the stalks
Leaping the roots

The air alive with fire
The ground ruthlessly yanking down
The earth shook in anticipation
Yet we heard not a single sound

Not even our own breathing echoed
As we fought to stay on the quest
Seven fighters determined to succeed
To outlive all the rest

The house in the corn
The dimension to another gate
Horrors slinking across
With bloodlust to sate

Throw the knives!
Fire the gun!
Wait, it’s a trap!
Run, damn it! Run!
“You’re not going in there?”

Alexa’s men glared at Paul for the disrespect he was showing at questioning her, but they also understood his reluctance. The field of corn in front of them was menacing in its endlessness. The chilling wind and roiling gray sky under green haze was simply overkill.

Paul took a step back from the glares. “That’s The Killing Fields! No one comes out the other side.”

Alexa’s men turned to their leader and found her disappearing into the corn. Her choice had been made.

“She is crazy!” Paul protested.

That earned him another scowl from the men who had already agreed that it would be better for everyone if the awkward scientist gave up and returned to the government base. Out here, Paul was only a burden to be handled later.

“Can’t we talk about it?”
Alexa didn’t pause and neither did her fighters, but they did steal quick glimpses back as they followed her. They weren’t able to ignore Paul like she could, but they had no doubts about their own choice, their own levels of commitment. This would be a hard trip for anyone who didn’t have confidence.

Paul was quickly out of sight, divided from Alexa’s protection by rows of tall, black corn with orange tassels swaying eerily in the breeze. When the wind picked up, the stalks moaned like a dying man.

“Wait!” Paul cried. “Wait for me!”

The heavy clink and clank of panicked running shattered the silence.

“Don’t leave me!”

Alexa stopped. Her shoulders were a straight line of annoyance.

The fighters glowered at Paul. They didn’t want to go against Alexa, but they didn’t understand why he was here.

Paul drew up at the hostile vibes. “What?”

“Get in your place!” Edward growled, pointing.

Paul did it with jerky movements that banged more pieces of loose gear against each other.

Alexa’s lips tightened as she began to walk again.

Edward fell in step with her, sensing a distraction might be good timing on his part. “I’ve heard stories of this place.”
“I’d hear them later,” Alexa replied curtly, aware of his tactics. Her army didn’t want Paul here. They would try to get rid of him, while also trying not to piss her off. That was a tight rope to walk.

“Wrong spot. Stay an arm’s length to the left,” Daniel lowly instructed one of his students, David. “Remember rule 2b for close quarters.”

It was the same training that all of them were undergoing, but Paul wasn’t catching on. He would be fine one day, but have to be told again the next morning.

Alexa listened vaguely to the conversations and lessons that were going on behind her, content that the senior men were helping the new ones in the ways she needed. Her annoyance wasn’t as bad as her body language implied. *My father’s code and mine are only different because I’m on foot with six men. If I had a camp, a full army, I would have to do things his way. I don’t need that many for this quest. I’ve been blessed with six strong, loyal, beautiful men—exactly what I required.*

The males making a conscious effort to maintain her basic traveling formation had big muscles and dark hair that made them appear related, but each of them wore it differently. For David, it was loose and almost long. As a blacksmith, he’d kept his hair trimmed for safety, but that requirement wasn’t necessary now. Edward had a tame mass of ebony that curled around his ears to give him the appearance of someone who had earned a high rank or command. Mark and Billy
both preferred the previously gender-restricted braids. Mark had a whole headful of them, where Billy sported only two on each side that were tied together in the back. Daniel had kept the short spikes that connected him to his past, and so had Jacob with his curls. Alexa liked to admire the sexy mix of hairstyles during the nights when she refused to sleep anymore and needed to be reminded that she still had a human side.

Edward stayed close and quiet, hoping she might talk to him. It had been two weeks since she’d told them a story or even held a conversation that wasn’t related to their quest. It was maddening. He and the others had agreed to ask for more information and accept whatever punishment she gave in return for it.

Alexa’s thoughts had drifted to Paul’s very different coloring and she tried not to frown. What was it about blond men that she didn’t care for? Paul was attractive and wasn’t built badly despite being hunched over, but she felt no desire for him at all and that was unusual. Descendants were especially aware of each other, in ways that most people couldn’t match, but with Paul, there was an actual repellant. She hadn’t narrowed down the cause yet. She assumed it was his weakness, but wasn’t sure. There were plenty of faults to pick through.

Edward winced at a loud crunch as Paul waded through brambles that the rest of them had just avoided. “He’ll learn. We all are.”

Alexa didn’t confirm or deny that.
Edward hadn’t expected her to. She preferred silence to lies.

They’d traveled steadily for ten days and though it would be a couple more weeks before the tracing drugs would be completely out of Alexa’s system, she’d made a full recovery. Only a small scar remained on her neck and in her heart. They’d stopped in a few empty South Dakota border towns to resupply themselves before dropping into Nebraska. They’d found old and new battlefields almost as soon as they had hit this state. Alexa had collected several pouches of bone dust.

They’d reached the first cornfield two days ago, and it now felt as if the hardy crop had taken over the entire state. As they walked, roads were becoming mere paths between the rows. The wind sent a fresh round of moans through the tall corn, making the fighters peer harder at the jungle of stalks and tassels that now surrounded them. Ten-foot plants rose haughtily in every direction, exuding a wet vegetable smell that hung heavily over the field, while the spongy ground under their boots suggested they might sink at any moment despite a lack of rain. It made them all uneasy and Paul’s loud clumping drew their emotions to an easy target.

“Shut up, damn you!” David growled as Paul coughed and spat.

“Hush now,” Daniel tried to soothe his student, but he understood. If things had happened this way when he had first joined the quest, he wasn’t sure he
would have been able to handle it, despite being in Alexa’s healing glow. It had only been him and Edward for the first month after she’d saved him. Nothing would ever compare to it. Jacob and David were trying very hard to fit in, and they were making great progress, even with Paul along. Without Paul, they were all sure that they would already be a stronger, better-trained group. The scientist was a constant distraction.

“Why bother?” Jacob nearly shouted. “He’s so loud that no one will hear us over that racket!” He and David often felt cheated by Paul being here. It had ruined some of the magic for them.

“I agree,” Mark added angrily, looking at Paul. “You’ll get her killed!”

Paul glowered back, still hunched over despite all the exercise he’d gotten since leaving the bunker. “I will not!”

He’d been thinking about killing his father, not paying attention like they’d been telling him to do for the last ten days. He was trying to decide if he liked being an honest killer or if he wished he’d done it while the man slept. This feeling of freedom, of weighing nothing, might have been even stronger.

Two paces later, Paul tripped. His carelessly packed gear scattered across the ground.

Alexa stopped again, shoulders rigid.

Her fighters knew to brace.

“Are you sure, Paul?” Alexa inquired tonelessly. “A month more with me may get you
killed by my men. The last ten days have already added up.”

Paul rose, flustered. “Please!”

There was silence as they all waited for her choice.

“Pick one of them to take charge of you. Five minute break,” she ordered, surprising the others.

If they had to take charge of him, he would become one of them.

That won’t happen if I have anything do to with it, each of her men swore silently. The thought was unanimous.

Paul glanced at Edward, who he admired (and feared) the most after Alexa.

Edward rolled his eyes in prideful resignation.

“Fine. Start by ditching the computer. That world is gone. Next, lay out everything in your kit and do it fast. I’ll help you sort.”

Alexa stayed where she was, listening.

The others took up positions around their stopped group. It took time to learn new ways. Alexa understood that. These small issues, like Jacob still occasionally fighting with his faulty foot and Edward’s thick-headed pride, would settle themselves out in time, but not if she constantly harped on them. Even Mark and Daniel still made too much noise with their hearty male voices. It sometimes brought trouble, but overall, she was pleased with the progress of her fighters.

Alexa’s thoughts returned to Paul. He wasn’t one of her men and thank the gods for it! He was a
twitchy, ticking bomb that she’d chosen to use to her advantage. It was tricky, dangerous, and not guaranteed to be as useful as she hoped. In fact, the man might even blow too soon and screw it all up. If it went well, Paul would keep his life, under his own free will. If not, he would die or return to the safe captivity of a bunker.

David came to Alexa’s side. “I know what you need, what’s going to happen.”

Alexa didn’t blink. Her men were smart. She’d expected to be called on the future of the quest at some point. “You’ll tell the others?”

“Yes,” David agreed. “But not unless Lincoln doesn’t work.” He hesitated, face darkening, then ran a hand through his hair in an unconscious defense. “And if it doesn’t?”

Alexa wanted to be angry, but the quest came first. “Carry on.”

David didn’t think that was possible for some of them. “And if you die?”

“Carry on!” Alexa ordered, eyes flashing annoyance.

David still didn’t confirm that he would do so and Alexa scowled. “What are you hiding from me?”

David winced. “Protecting myself, not hiding.”

Alexa wasn’t going to settle for that. He’d brought this to her, forced her to have this discussion, and now he would open up as well.

“Tell me who you are!” Alexa’s voice was a deep command that was hard to refuse.
“I’m a blacksmith on a quest,” he stalled. It was still how he felt.

“Tell me who you want to be.”

“An Eagle in Safe Haven’s army.”

Alexa let a sound of longing escape her lips.

“Yes, as do I. Now tell me who you were!”

David flinched at the second demand. “I’d rather not.”

Alexa pointed ahead of them. “Evil resides there. We are the light. Get rid of your shadows or allow them to come between us.”

David had no choice. He would never forsake this quest. “I was an engineer…on the other side. I went AWOL.”

“You could have tried to join Safe Haven afterwards,” Alexa stated, finally placing the feel of her father that hung around this man by her side. It had been bright and clear in the dusty street where she’d first found him, but here, it glowed like the neon signs that used to light Vegas.

“I fought against them, killed. I wasn’t worthy,” David told her gravely. “I’m still not.”

Alexa understood that feeling, but it didn’t bother her that David had been with the enemy. So had Edward and Jacob. Mark had been a career criminal. It didn’t matter.

Alexa wasn’t good with comforting her men, but she managed to find a tone that sounded gentle.

“You’ll tell them. They’ll make the choice. Until then, store up credits.”
David had planned to do that, felt he had a start on it, even. He was grateful to hear that there was a chance for him to earn forgiveness.

“Hold still!”

They both looked over to find Paul flinching back from Edward’s big hands as the horseman tightened, fastened, pulled and tugged the scientist’s gear into the correct places.

“And stop drinking the crap you brought from the bunker.” Edward ordered. “We can track you by the smell of your piss!”

Paul stumbled backward.

Edward snatched a handful of jacket to steady the nervous man. “Can’t you at least try? She will leave you behind if you keep slowing us down.”

Paul’s face filled with anger and embarrassment as he jerked loose. “I’ll still be with her when you’re dead!”

“Yeah,” Edward snorted. “Come on. She wants to be moving. Can’t you feel her impatience?”

When Alexa turned toward the path she’d chosen, David took the place on her right to cover for Edward, who would have a miserable few hours of trying to re-teach Paul the basics of their traveling formation. He should have learned it on his own by now just from doing it every day. It wasn’t hard, but it took concentration that the scientist didn’t seem to have. Paul often caused them to stop while he examined some specimen that he’d only read about in the lab or while he exclaimed over the hues of the
sunset. It was as if he hadn’t been outside in his entire life. For all they knew, he hadn’t.

“She’s getting ready to drill us,” Mark commented, making sure his gear was high and tight. The others did the same, muttering.

Edward’s frown grew as he shoved Paul into place. “Your fault, you go ahead of me, so I can beat on your shoulders like a mule.”

Paul started to protest,” What did I…”
Edward shoved the scientist. “Let’s go. Now!”
Ahead of them, Alexa was already running.
The other fighters flew by Edward and Paul.
Angry, the horseman snatched the scientist by his jacket and jerked him deeper into The Killin’ Fields.

2
“Get up!” Edward stopped and went back to the sweaty scientist, aware of his group getting further ahead with every second. The last hour had felt much longer.

“The next time you fall,” Edward growled, hauling Paul’s cringing form to his feet. “I’m leaving you.”

Gasping, cheeks bright red, Paul couldn’t spare air to argue.

“Useless!” Edward spat, sliding his arm around Paul’s waist as the sound of boots faded. He hefted the man over his shoulder roughly and rushed to catch up. He ignored Paul’s cry of discomfort.
Alexa heard the heavy steps, the crashing of two bodies through the corn that reminded her of their adventure on the bridge, and brought her team to a reluctant stop. She waited for Edward to put Paul down, giving them a one-hundred count to catch their breath before she started walking at a quick pace. She kept it that way for the next hour, fighting the instinct that said faster was better. If slowing them down was the worst consequence of bringing Paul along, they would be fine.

3

“Feels like we’re being followed,” David stated. He changed to walk backwards, scanning. There hadn’t been much in the way of noise or sights today. It made the blacksmith alert to slight changes.

Not doubting him, Alexa signaled her men closer, but didn’t stop. After nearly three days, they were deep into the fields and well, trouble had to come sometime, didn’t it? She prepared herself mentally, hands falling into a comforting routine of checking her weapons and gear. She didn’t need to confirm that her men were doing the same, but she did glance at Paul.

Paul tried to copy the others, but didn’t feel like he was being given a fair chance to prove himself. They had no sympathy for the sheltered life that he had led.

“Boss.”
This time, Alexa did stop. David’s tone said they had trouble and he wasn’t sure what to do about it. Alexa turned to see a little girl of about seven, pale as a corpse, standing behind them.

Alexa waved a hand and her men fell in behind, pulling Paul along as they all gaped at the undead child.

Alexa studied the girl for a brief moment, wondering who she had once been. The child wore a long dress made of simple wool that declared her origins after the war had been poor and untraveled. There were still enough old world clothes around to outfit a country, but those who controlled the items were ruthless in their pricing. The only other way to outfit a family was to scavenge for it, but this child’s clothes were handmade, suggesting a life in one place. Bare, scarred feet implied the same. Alexa wondered only at the braces still on the girl’s rotting teeth. This child hadn’t always been isolated or poor. Once upon a time, she’d had a life. It was heartbreaking.

“May we pass?” Alexa asked sadly. She already knew the answer.

The little girl bared gleaming fangs, hissing, “Never!”

Sighing resignedly, Alexa pulled her gun and shot the undead child in the forehead.

Blood poured down the small face, a fatal wound, but the little girl only hissed in anger and darted into the corn.
“Word of our presence will spread now,” Alexa informed them during the stunned quiet that fell over her fighters. “Go quietly. Watch your six.”

She hadn’t wanted to reveal her presence yet, but there was only one way to deal with such a threat—forcefully. As a result, her hand had been forced. There was little doubt that it was intentional.

Her fighters recovered quickly, but David had to bump Paul on the elbow to get him moving again. They fell back into their normal march-like formation, none of them surprised when Alexa sped up. The encounter had been unsettling and all of them scanned the abnormal corn jungle for the child.

“What was she?” Paul asked, trying not to trip over the thick roots and sharp rocks in the path.

“A guardian,” Alexa answered. “They protect the places where reality has ripped open.”

“That’s a lie!” Paul protested. He began to roll out the same lines he’d heard Corbin use so often. “There are no gates! The government does not control or encourage the destruction of reality. There are no monsters in the…”

“Shut up!” Edward stopped and spun around. He grabbed Paul by the jacket. “Don’t ever do that again!”

“What?!” Paul squeaked, bracing to take the blows.

“Call her a liar,” Jacob said. “Or any of us. You’re the only liar here.”
“And you just saw a monster, you idiot!” Mark snapped. “Wake up!”

Mark shoved Paul.
Edward sidestepped to let him hit the ground.
“We’ll be tolerant, but we will not let you restart that old shit, not in this group,” Mark insisted.
“Black is black and white is white. There is no damn gray.”

The men hurried to catch up with Alexa.
Paul came along more slowly, now bringing up the rear. He refused to believe the child had been shot. Alexa missed…

Alexa spun around as she caught the thought, rushing toward the scientist before he could flee. She punched him in the mouth, hard enough to send him back to the dirt. “I didn’t miss! Tell me what happened! Now!”

Paul opened his mouth to spew his false beliefs…

Alexa lunged down and slapped him. “What really happened?”

“You shot her!” Paul cried. Then the dam broke. “And she wasn’t dead! She hissed! She would have killed you if she could! They lied to me!”

Paul began to sob at her feet.

Alexa recoiled in disgust. “Don’t make me do that again or I’ll leave you behind. I have no time to waste fixing your broken parts. Do that yourself.”

It was something she’d said to each of her men at one time or another, and they realized she was giving him a break by not demanding he confess his
sins to one of them. It was also a sign that he wasn’t going to be one of her fighters.

Paul pulled himself together, cautiously standing up. He wasn’t sure if one of them would hit him again.

“How do you kill a guardian?” Billy asked, wanting the information more than to fill the awkward silence. He couldn’t help Alexa fight these battles if he didn’t know how to handle their enemies.

“You can only disable those like her for a while. You have to kill their creators,” Alexa answered, resuming the walk.

“Disable?”

“Creators? Like vampires?”

Alexa used their interest to allay their fears of not being able to kill the dangers around them. Sometimes blood spilling wasn’t possible or even needed. They were learning that.

“Vampires die easily enough when you know their weaknesses. It’s a myth that they’re hard to kill. Guardians are different. They are an extension. You have to disable the ability to send. To do that, you would normally use the same disbelief that Paul clings to.”

“Normally?”

“This creator is a fair bit tougher than most. The average conjurer can send a shadow of themselves to spy, but little else. They’re weak. Those who’ve perfected their craft are Masters. The shadows they
send are capable of everything that a person is and more.”

“How do we…”

“You don’t,” Alexa stated firmly. “I do. You’ll handle the creatures the Master sends to stop me. Those can be killed with exactly what I’ve already given you.”

It was then that her men realized they were here for more than just tracking down the next Safe Haven clue. Alexa had a livelier target in mind and she’d just handed out their assignments.

Satisfied that they were now in the right frame of mind, Alexa quickened their pace again. “Let’s move.”

4

“There’s something back this way,” Edward stated a few hours later.

His words were passed to Alexa, who brought the group to a halt again. Edward had been sniffing for such a place, hoping to be free of Paul’s weight for even a few minutes. The scientist would never be able to keep up.

Alexa joined him to survey whatever it was he’d found. Edward had a nose for stashes, and Alexa saw no reason not to follow the possibility. “You lead, we’ve got Paul.”

That was something she hadn’t allowed or even hinted at before, and Edward tried to be perfect as he took over Point position. The sense of food being hidden was clear, and he found himself falling into
the tracking zone. Alexa often used words to trigger their mood changes and actions, but it wasn’t needed with him. He’d watched her closely every time. After months, it was almost natural.

“Be careful,” Edward called over his shoulder. “Some sort of wall.”

The corn and weeds had mostly taken over the concrete wall that bordered the property, but the large ranch house appeared in decent shape. Only a few of the bricks were crumbling and, of course, the glass in the windows was gone, but otherwise, the house seemed intact. Even the front door was undamaged.

Edward stopped, considering, listening, feeling. “There.”

He led them toward a wide building that ran alongside the home. It was covered in thick vines that didn’t belong here. The front of the building, a storeroom, was cleverly hidden by a large tree, two small bushes, and a trellis with climbing ivy that had spread itself around since the war. The vivid green vines covered the roof and sides, leaving only outlines of doors and filthy plastic windows.

“Keep leading,” Alexa stated from the bodyguard’s place.

David and Daniel kept Paul close, while Jacob and Billy watched the dark shadows of the house that was now between them and the corn.

Edward used a light hand on the knob and pushed the narrow door open, wondering if this storehouse had another entrance. It was hard to
imagine people carrying boxes through that tight opening.

Edward went inside, Alexa right behind him to check the dark corners with her penlight.

The horseman whistled lowly in surprise. The cool room was lined with shelves, filled with a stash that other survivors might have killed each other to possess. The concrete walls and floor were covered, plexiglass windows and ceiling in good shape. The food was probably edible.

Alexa slapped Edward on the arm. “Nice.”

Edward glowed at the praise.

Alexa called the others inside and shut the door.

It was crowded once they were all in, but not in a bad way. It made it more obvious that Alexa’s strengths weren’t always clear upon a first meeting. She was petite compared to the stature of her men, but when the fighting began, she became a powerhouse of wrath and vicious intelligence. She’d learned that skill over a lifetime of fighting for the right to exist. Edward was sure that Alexa would use it to her advantage on this quest. She liked the element of surprise as much as he did.

“What? Hit me,” Alexa ordered.

“Bottled water.”

“Jars of canned corn.”

“Toilet paper rolls!”

“Some kind of juice. Can’t read the first word.”

“Five cases of canned items, no labels.”

The list took a while and Alexa gleaned a lot more than ration counts from the find. If this stock
had been here long enough for the labels to have eroded or worn away, it meant there hadn’t been people here. No one in their right mind would leave a stash like this untouched, but there wasn’t a single print in the thick dust.

“I found something,” Jacob said. He’d been searching for manuals or other reading material. “Emergency relocation supplies for Preparedness Capabilities Evacuation Plan Hotspot 42. Lot Four of Seven. Re: Item SAM23145 for coordinates. Radio upon confirmation. Proceed to pullout location Alpha.”

Jacob paused, and Alexa motioned for him to continue. They all wanted to hear it.

“Take the path cleared by Recon and set the charges according to the map. To ensure proper timing, the explosives are prewired and timed. Follow arming instruction with precision.”

Jacob handed the paper to David to read, unable to take anymore. He’d already scanned the next lines and almost couldn’t believe it.

“When the city is at the height of fire, release the valve on the chamber. Wear masks with respirators or death will occur within seconds. Once chemical is released, evacuate area of all personnel and rendezvous at final coordinates within 21 days.”

Speculation and horror ran through the group.

“This is a joke, right?” Paul questioned. He was the only one who still didn’t think the government would do something so awful. “Or a mistake?”
Alexa waved at Edward to handle him and went to help Jacob dig through the other crates. They were doing it carefully now that they knew there were explosives and deadly chemicals here. The other men stayed back.

“Sit down over here and pay attention.” Edward led Paul by the arm to the empty corner of the storeroom. “And be quiet.”

Paul wanted to ask questions, to argue with the orders, but Edward’s scowl discouraged it.

Feeling he’d been hit enough, Paul closed his sore mouth. He hated being with these men. They weren’t like him and Alexa.

“It’s here,” Jacob whispered. “Both of them, right here together.” The preacher was pale under his scars. “If this blows, the chemicals will be scattered on the wind.”

“Can anyone remove it?” Alexa asked.

No one said anything.

Alexa gestured Jacob back. “Leave it alone.”

“We can damage the door,” Billy suggested. “Make it hard to get in here.”

Alexa stared at the medical crate and the cloth satchel thoughtfully. She didn’t want to give away their location to anyone, but it would bother her too much to leave these things out here for anyone to find. They would have to handle whatever came from here.

“We’ll take the explosives and burn the rest. Clear out everything that we can use.”
Satisfied the dangerous weapons wouldn’t fall into stupid hands, Alexa’s men quickly had a large pile of new supplies outside the door.

Paul stayed in the corner where Edward had placed him, absorbing the lesson he wasn’t getting. Nearby, Jacob and David were being instructed on prepping a few of the goods they’d found. Paul was memorizing the instructions. Once he’d seen it done, only lack of strength or tools could stop him from repeating the actions. It was another of those gifts that Corbin had exploited.

Alexa looked over as she caught the thought. “Have you learned to pack it?”

“I’ve watched a lot,” he answered slowly.

Alexa took pity on him. “Come over here and help with the explosives.”

Paul moved too quickly, once again tripping over his own feet.

Mark was there to grab the man before he fell directly into the gun rack. He directed the cringing scientist toward the more dangerous items. “Slow down! Control yourself.”

Alexa held a pouch out. “Hold this.”

Paul not actually touching anything dangerous sent relief through the room and the group continued their chores as if it were a normal day. For them, gathering supplies, traveling, learning and occasionally fighting was now their way of life. Each of them enjoyed the quiet and the solitude. Only a bit of their daily time was spent bonding and talking. Alexa was guiding them back to nature, to
peace, and they longed for it. Paul was a disruption of everything they’d come for.

Alexa kept Paul’s hands busy while they were inside, then put him to work once they moved outside. Mark and Daniel were on guard duty, while the rest of them sorted and packed. Paul was told to close the pouches tightly and nothing else. A simple chore, Billy went behind and secured each carelessly sealed pouch. Couldn’t the scientist get anything right?

Alexa met Billy’s eye for a moment of shared sympathy for the Rabbit. No matter who his group was, he wouldn’t survive. They would do all they could to keep him alive, but in the end, it would never be enough.

“And there’s no way to change that?” Billy asked.

Alexa shook her head and though she went right back to searching the corn without another word on the subject, Billy knew her mood had taken a hit. She was dwelling on it. Always good with a quick retort, Billy caught her gaze again. “Imagine the havoc he created in a lab.”


Before Billy could do more than chuckle, Paul’s loud voice came from the pile of bags and pouches. “I thrived in the labs! The women used to ask for me.”

Silence. Then laughter.
Paul reddened, but wasn’t wise enough to stop there.

“It’s true. Many of them paid their allotments to have me.”

Now the laughter was uneasy, fading into disapproval.

“You charged prisoners to rape them?” Mark’s tone was icy.

Paul quickly said, “I wouldn’t do that. The women are breeders. It’s all they do. They’re treated well.”

Alexa signaled for the packed pouches to be loaded up. “They’re not treated well, Paul. They’re prisoners.”

The scientist understood their meaning, but wasn’t sure they understood his. “They have to have it once they get pregnant. You know? If not, they get out of control. And we can’t sedate them—it interferes with the gifts.”

All of them were staring as if he was insane now and Paul shrugged, heading for his kit. “Fine. Whatever.”

“You mean they crave…physical contact when they’re carrying?” David asked, unable to help himself. Unlike the preacher, the blacksmith had been the opposite of an abstainer. He’d indulged in the locals, the towns around, and any travelers who’d come through. The last two weeks without had been the hardest part of this quest for him so far.

“It’s better than that,” Paul confided, grinning. “They have to have it or the offspring won’t develop
gifts. But it has to be with another descendant. Cases are almost nonexistent where a child develops gifts from only one parent with powers.”

Alexa rolled her eyes and went to stand watch. Descendant gifts depended on fate and fate alone.

She motioned the two males who were supposed to be doing that duty to go and help load instead. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner she would have her fighters back. Unless the bullets were flying, nothing else distracted a man like talk of sex. They would spend hours comparing notes if left to their own devices.

“What type of scientist were you?” Jacob asked curiously. He wasn’t interested in the female knowledge as much as the others—he’d been with Alexa and thought no other woman would ever be enough for him—but there was still the sense of being lied to. How could this…nerd, be a lover boy?

“I supervised several labs,” Paul said arrogantly. “The reproductive wing was my side job. I covered Corbin’s research division.”

“Research about descendants?” Billy wanted to know.

“Yes, and their offspring.”

“So you assigned partners, took notes. That sort of thing?” David guessed.

“At first, but for the last year, I’ve been one of the subjects as well,” Paul told them bitterly. “My father wanted fresh DNA for his experiments and I had just started showing signs of my lineage.”
It was such an incredible story that all of the men had already dismissed it. There was no way the government had been using Paul for breeding purposes. It was too much to believe.

“You mean you took part in these…tests?” Daniel asked, relieved that Alexa wasn’t angry at the conversation, only impatient. “And they were willing?”

“And asked for you?”

“Repeatedly,” Paul boasted, then realized he was being taunted, and stood up. He grabbed his now refilled kit and swung it over his shoulder. Not ready for the new weight, the kit pulled him over and he went sprawling.

The men burst into fresh laughter, even Alexa unable to contain a low chuckle.

Paul went scarlet. He scrambled to his feet, opening his mouth to shout.

Alexa cut him off with a sharp whistle.

“That’s our cue,” Daniel stated dryly. “Let’s go, stud.”

Paul’s lips drew in further, but he did as he was told. They didn’t have to believe him. He had the memories, the skill. If given enough time, he would have Alexa begging for his touch as well.

“Aren’t we going in the house?” Edward asked as they prepared to leave.

Mentally snickering at Paul’s thoughts, Alexa asked, “Is it something we need?”

Edward wasn’t sure and didn’t lie. “I don’t know. It has a…”
Alexa concentrated and caught the vibe he was centered on so intently. “Safe Haven.”

Edward was glad to have that feeling confirmed. It was faint enough to be doubted.

Alexa led them into the main yard of the house, counting windows and floors to judge the size and possible threats inside. From the wild appearance, they could assume it was empty, but she would never let them treat possible danger that way. To do so now might get them killed later by carelessness.

The house was large. Seven windows with bars over them lined the front of the ranch home and that same wall-covering ivy had grown overtop everything, including water-stained birdbaths and garden gnomes. The landscaping implied the people who had called this home had preferred flying pets. All of them flashed back to the vulture on the stairway. Edward and Jacob did a quick scan of their rear and then above them for an ambush.

“Two to the door, two up high,” Alexa ordered, getting set to fight. She had noticed that the undamaged front door actually had small, deep gouges in it, as if something had tried to get in. That was contrary to the deserted feel. The coolness of battle fell over her mind.

Alexa’s serious attitude told her men what was expected. They hurried into the house like a team of professionals efficiently clearing each room.

The inside was basic and bare. The walls were stripped, leaving only dust squares, and even the lampshades were gone. Empty of everything that
could be burnt for warmth, the lack of furnishings said the residents had tried very hard to survive here. Alexa was sure they would discover fire cans and ash dumps if they searched hard enough. These people had used everything they had to keep warm.

“Things got bad that first winter,” Alexa murmured, remembering. “The winter took a heavy toll.”

She moved them on before depressing thoughts and memories could become a distraction.

They went through half a dozen dusty, neglected bedrooms before they moved down the cold hall. It ended in a main room with a huge bed of gray lumps, giving them the feel of being in a low-budget horror film. Except, this was real.

As they neared the warped bed, they confirmed that it was a pile of bones, though the skeletons were much bigger than what they were used to.

Alexa paused as flashes of the past burst into horrifying detail in front of her. She could hear the screams, could see the bleeding wild man that she assumed was the ranch protector. She could smell the blood as they tried to tend the huge man’s wounds while defending their home.

Alexa came back with a small jerk and looked around, mind automatically comparing it to what she had just witnessed.

Plastic and sheets of metal were over the windows in this room, and over the vents, with caulking and brittle tape over baseboards and cracks in walls. Appliances had been pulled around half the
bed to form a barrier and baskets of long-molded corn sat at the foot of it.

“Did they try to burn the corn for heat?” Jacob asked, confused.

Alexa didn’t answer. Neither of her theories was pleasant, but if she had to pick one, she would say it was intentional. They’d chosen to die of corn poisoning instead of starvation, freezing, or being eaten by predators.

Alexa gestured to the next set of plastic curtains. Edward and Mark rushed through with guns out.

“Clear here,” Mark called, wrinkling his nose at the strong odor of rotten corn.

Alexa quickly scanned the kitchen. It wasn’t very large, but it felt that way by how empty it was. No table and chairs, no cabinets on the walls. Only dusty squares proclaimed that life had once existed in this place. The floor did sport a rug—a shabby, circle carpet only a few feet in size. It had faded to glare dingily. Even the walls were hostile, carrying gouges and holes that had been filled with what smelled like toothpaste.

“They tried so hard,” Alexa murmured. “We’ll honor that by not burning it down.”

She narrowed in on the floor, the sole surviving rug. “See what’s down there.”

The shabby rug made a loud ripping noise when they tore it up. The carpet, like many other items, had molded to the surface it had spent so long covering.
“A tunnel,” Edward said, dangling down by his big arms and Mark’s strong grip.
Alexa allowed herself a moment to enjoy her men. They were beautiful to watch in action.
“Describe it,” Alexa ordered.
“Used to be a sewer or maybe a storm drain. There’s an old rope-n-ladder set, but the rope’s pretty frayed. Can’t see much beyond a pile of bones and a stack of crates that I wouldn’t put a feather on.”
“Water? Wildlife?” Alexa led, body flashing need that bled through her tones.
“No, to both. Doesn’t even look damp for being a tunnel. You want me to drop down and scout it?”
“No,” Alexa answered, feeling the temperature in the room rise. “I have other duties for you.”
Both males felt her warm regard and moved her way without waiting for the invitation. What she wanted was clear and they were willing. It was something each man had already decided he could tolerate or better.
Alexa tugged the plastic back over the doorway.
Daniel grinned as he realized what was going on. Her moments of need usually came at night when they were camped, but it wouldn’t be the first time that she’d stolen a moment during the day. He signaled to Jacob and the males left the house.
Outside, David and Billy took the news the same way—amused and the tiniest bit jealous.
There was silence as the guards and the guest tried to hear what was going on inside that kitchen. Even the corn was suddenly quieter.

Billy caught Daniel’s attention. “Up high?”

Daniel was glad for the excuse to stop thinking about it. He was so hard that he could barely walk. “Good idea. One roof, one tree?”

The two men settled in, leaving the three rookies to suffer through the torture of listening and not reacting. It wasn’t as if they could sneak off to take care of it. The top men out here had already experienced that hell. Making camp had been greatly anticipated, with early goodnights given so hands could be filled.

David and Jacob were tormented, especially the blacksmith who hadn’t been used yet. Jacob hadn’t been touched again since his joining ceremony, but at least he had the memory. It was rough on him and the woman-loving blacksmith. For Paul, it was demoralizing. Alexa was showing him that she didn’t want the future he could provide, that these wild men were what pleased her. The Rabbit’s jealousy was loud.

Back inside the kitchen, things were nearing their peak. Alexa’s groans and gasps were a perfect torment to the hurting, sweating males. She opened her legs wide as a climax burst through her.

Edward went first, gentle and respectful, remembering to back away at the final moment.
Mark took his place with a cry of devotion that echoed to those outside. The convict took advantage of the moment and stroked his rough hands down her long braids, skin tingling. He tangled his hands in them and lowered his mouth to hers eagerly.

Alexa twitched in satisfaction as Mark pounded, fighting the urge to hold him close when he too backed away. It was a woman’s duty to accept that offering and nourish it, but she would have no children with these men. The quest came first.

The trio recovered without speaking, fixing clothing while sharing stares of contentment. They weren’t bound by the old rules. There was no one to hide from, so there was no shame to ruin the moment. They emerged happy, ready to continue on their quest.

Alexa took the lead after a rare smile at the waiting males.

Feeling her pleasure was a balm to the small jealousy that remained in her men. Mark and Edward had pleased her. That was good. Too often, they all felt like she was disappointed in them. It was a relief to have a few moments free of that heavy weight.

Mark felt a bit differently about the moment. He’d felt Alexa’s pause, that brief instant where she’d almost pulled him deeper instead of wasting his seed. It had made his heart thump and his mind race. What would a child with Alexa be like? He’d never had that happy family life that some of the
other cons had talked about incessantly. He’d never missed it either, until now. A life with Alexa was wonderful. It was why he was here. He’d never been more alive, more useful, more deadly, but to have the dream that had been stolen from him was an impossibility that he tried not to dwell on during moments like this. That was his old life. Now, there was only the quest and these magical moments. It would be enough.

Alexa was aware of Mark’s slight discontent, but didn’t do anything about it except to send him to set fire to the storeroom. Facing this world, these new ways of living, was hard for all of them. The convict would do his duty and then some, and be happy with it all in the end. Alexa planned to handle the futures of all of her fighters when this quest was finished. It was what they deserved if they survived—a life of love with a deserving female chosen from Safe Haven’s loyal herd. What more could a man ask for?

5

“Those bones were big,” Paul commented a bit later, finally finished with sulking. He’d chosen to view the kitchen moment as proof that Alexa needed to be serviced by one of her own kind. She hadn’t needed a nap or even a rest after being with both men. They weren’t enough to satisfy a woman like her.

“They were giants,” Alexa answered, motioning for Edward to drop back and cover their rear.
“Would you hear the story?” She was clearly in a good mood.

“Yes,” Daniel answered quickly.

Alexa began to roll a smoke, slowing a bit to keep from spilling. “Giants prefer the cold. They stay in the mountains as much as they can. With their rocky skin and hulking forms, they blend rather well despite being so large.”

“You’re talking like they exist,” Paul observed.

Alexa adjusted their path to the north by a bit. “When I was little, I stayed in the mountains for a year and learned how to survive there. Giants were great training tools.”

Not sure if they quite believed it, no one spoke.

Alexa added, “Honestly, my pets. Giants are the Bigfoots of old world legends. They’re no mystery, simply a race that prefers to be left alone. They don’t even usually stay with a mate for more than a few years. It’s rare to have an entire family down here. Very curious.”

Now there were plenty of questions.

“So they were real?”

“Why didn’t we take any of the dust from them?” Billy asked respectfully.

“There’s no demand,” Alexa explained, motioning for them to eat while they walked. “People are still like Paul. They don’t believe giants exist.”

“Does the dust have power?” Billy wanted to know.
“Oh, yes, very much so, but not the good kind. Much like trolls, giants are a cursed species. Their ashes can be used for all sorts of dark spells that such as us will never have contact with.”

It was a relief to hear.

“What could have killed a giant? Besides us, I mean,” Jacob asked arrogantly.

“Didn’t you smell the corn?” Mark remarked. He’d brewed enough homemade alcohol in his day to know that answer. “The fumes can be deadly.”

“Giants die as easily as any other creature,” she informed them gravely. “They are large and rough, but they’re also primitive and slow–another thing that makes this family unique.”

“Do you have a theory?” Billy asked. He did and wanted to compare.

“They were too different,” Alexa answered promptly. “They were probably forced out by their own kind for being advanced.”

Billy nodded. My thought, exactly.

Distracted by his disbelief, Paul started to argue and forgot to be careful. An old watering trough sticking up from a pile of moldy stalks caught his boot as he tried to step over it instead of going around. He fell forward onto the pile of rotting wood, sending noise through the peace.

Alexa sighed, still warm and tingling. She ignored it instead of handing out a punishment that would have been wasted on Paul. The fire from the storage room would attract a lot of attention
anyway. Paul’s clumsiness wouldn’t get them killed right now. Time would only tell about later.

“No guns,” Alexa reminded her men.

The enemy knew they were here from her shot at the corpse child, and the fire would narrow the location, but the enemy wouldn’t know exactly where her group was by the time they tracked those signs.

The fighters double-checked to be sure they weren’t adding any noise, and Edward reluctantly dropped back to where Paul was to help him do the same. Despite his good mood, he still loathed being saddled with the scientist and part of the reason why, was having to do this. He’d checked, repacked and tightened everything Paul had, but half of it was loose again from the man getting into things and not putting them away correctly. He’d done it by the book for Alexa, though he hadn’t sealed the pouches correctly, which meant he could have taken care of his own gear the same way, but didn’t care enough to.

Paul did as he was shown without speaking, not even to say thanks. He was still stinging in places from his falls and from the blows that he’d taken. He was ready for Alexa to call it a night so that he could cry himself to sleep.

Angered by the thought, Alexa glared at him over her shoulder, then switched into a full run.

Not sure what had flipped her into anger, only sure who had caused it, the others shoved by Paul to catch up, pushing him to the ground repeatedly.
Paul realized he hadn’t been shielding his thoughts and groaned, “Why can’t I get it right?!”

“That’s what we’d all like to know.” Edward jerked the scientist into position and started slapping him on the back to make him run.

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