



# NIGHT MUST FALL

ANGELA WHITE

Book Three

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**Night Must Fall**  
by  
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Thank you to all my Beta Readers. I don't know what I would do without you.

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# Prologue

## 1

“**Y**ou guys should pack up. It’s almost time for you to go.”

Comfortable conversations came to a screeching halt at Brian’s words. Everyone looked at him.

Brian straightened from his slouch against the bunkhouse door. “You’re all pretending you don’t know, and I can’t take that. She’s half an hour from finishing a full shift on guard duty. That means she’ll want to get back on the road now that she’s healed.”

Edward set his three aces down, but slid a socked foot on them to keep Mark from peeking. It had been three calm days of recovery. They’d enjoyed it, but the need to get moving wasn’t just hitting their leader. The men had been ignoring it in order to deal with it. “Why you breaking our good vibes with your mouth, kid?”

“Yeah. Spit it out or stop farting up the oxygen.”

Jacob laughed at Mark’s joke. “Gotta remember that one.”

Brian flushed, coming closer to the circle of men who had insisted on these positions despite the bunkbeds and living room furniture lining the rear

walls. “She hasn’t talked to me yet!” Brian dropped into a tattered chair by them. “I thought she’d stay longer.”

Edward swiveled around and leaned back on his hands. His fingers kept his cards in place. All of them cheated. “Why can’t you be with your mom?”

Brian’s lips drew up in a sneer. “That’s private!”

“Not for us.” David shoved into the boy’s mind. *Tell them or you get nothing.*

Brian perked up. “That’s awesome! I was worried about her going nuts from being alone with normals.”

Daniel’s frown was identical to the others in the group. “Explain.”

“Descendants need to be with their own kind, at least occasionally. Paul might have been why she wasn’t showing signs of it yet.”

Mark shook his head. “We suspected that weeks ago. She has amazing control over herself.”

“Yeah.” Brian’s glance went to his feet. “She’s leaving me here.”

“We know that, too. If she was taking you along, we would have gotten orders by now.” Billy was sympathetic to the kid. He almost liked him. Resourceful teenagers were rare. “How did you two get split up?”

“We’ve never been together. I was born in the lab. She didn’t know about me until I was ten.”

Horror flooded the warm, dim room.

“They take babies and never let their parents know?” Jacob fought the urge to scream. “Why?!”

“Because we bond completely and then they can’t corrupt the child.” Alexa stood in the doorway.

Only Edward had heard her come up the rickety steps and open the well-oiled door.

She refused to look at Brian. “Be ready by lunch tomorrow. Stay inside after the next bathroom break—all of you.” Alexa leapt over the rail and slid into the shadows.

“I still don’t understand why he can’t come.” David scanned the group. “He’s like her. I know you feel it, too.”

“She won’t risk his life like she does ours.” Billy shrugged at the stunned realization coming over his teammates. “The quest would fall.”

It was an explanation they could understand, even if it was hard to accept. They’d mostly ignored the boy, on Alexa’s orders, but it hadn’t stopped them from making observations. Brian was like seeing Alexa at a young age. It was fascinating.

Brian had already known why. Bitterness twisted his face. “She’d love me, so I can’t go.” He slammed a fist into the chair. “It’s not fair. I just found her!”

All the men held sympathy for the teenager, but they didn’t offer comfort or platitudes. The quest mattered more than a family being ripped apart.

“You think she’ll be okay out there alone?”

Edward snorted at Jacob in the lantern light. “Yes.”

Jacob flushed as the others chuckled.

“I raise you...cooking duty. That’s worth your supply evaluation.”

“Not even close.” Edward snickered. “Just fold.”

Mark frowned. “You’re bluffing. Okay... What do you want?”

“That last piece of fudge you’re hoarding.”

“Deal.” Mark dug it out of his cloak and turned over his cards. “Three tens. You lose!”

Edward flipped his cards without turning. He was still watching Brian.

“Trip aces? Are you kidding me?!”

“Why doesn’t she want us outside?” Jacob couldn’t let it go yet.

“She’ll feed.” Brian shoved the door with his foot, shutting it. “And make sure you guys want to continue the quest now that she’s...changed.”

“We won’t leave her.”

“We’re with her until the end, kid.”

Brian sighed miserably. “I’m glad of it. You’ll keep her alive.”

“You don’t sound glad.” Daniel handed the smoke on as he gave Brian an intent glare. “Are you a danger now that she confirmed you can’t go?”

Brian shook his head. “Never.”

“Don’t lie, boy!” Mark lunged to his feet as Brian cringed. “We feel your secret. Spit it out so we can make a final decision on your life!”

Brian cowered under Mark’s rage, but he didn’t consider lying. “She’s corrupt now! She has to be put down!”

All the men had wondered about that since she'd been bitten.

"Is that all?" Mark hefted Brian up by his jacket, ignoring the pitiful swings of defense. "We've got things covered." He shoved the shocked boy toward the circle, scattering the cards. "Sit down there and tell us some stories."

Brian crumbled on the floor, sobbing.

Edward frowned at Mark. "Little rough, weren't you?"

Mark put a hand up. "He's stewing over putting a stake in her heart, but I'm too rough?"

Edward sighed. "We've all considered the end of the quest. Stop it now."

Mark grinned. "Okay." He dropped down next to Brian and patted the boy's arm. "You need to toughen up. Work on that, will ya?"

Brian gave a jerky nod as he swiped at his eyes.

His rasping breaths made the men feel pity, but not the disgust that Paul's weak moments had encouraged.

"We're working on something for that problem." Jacob's face was stern. "You're out of it now. Put it from your mind."

Brian's gratitude washed over the group with a calming effect that brought smiles and groans.

"Yeah." Daniel inhaled. "That's her kid, all right."

Edward took the smoke and drew. "Before we get to the nostalgia, I want to know the lay of the land we're heading into."



“And who’s around.” Billy folded the socks he’d finished mending and placed them into one of the slots that lined all their cloaks. He didn’t play cards very often. He always won and feared angering his teammates. “What’s the weather like here?”

No one had mentioned it, but all the men were hoping corn fields were behind them. They hated that plant now.

Brian took the last question first, still trying to recover. “Dry and windy now. For the last year, there’s been no snow...”

Outside a window, Alexa listened to her men guide Brian into the right frame of mind for the trip. She was certain the child would follow. Her crew was trying to help him survive. They would also glean any details about her that he would share, but there wasn’t much he could give. They barely knew each other.

Alexa shut off her emotions as she scanned the darkness. There were flares of light in the west, all moving north. South was as dark as ever. The east... A bright green glow caught her eye and held it. “The path to the portal!”

Alexa memorized the location, then studied the moonlit shadows around it. She could see the outline of an RV starting from the top of the hill. “We’re not the only ones hunting that portal.”

Alexa refused to allow a grimace at the pain from her aching ribs and changing body. She

stalked into the darkness behind the house, not leaving prints in the dust. Tomorrow, she would be well fed and maybe heartbroken. Her men might decide to spare their lives and take off. If they stayed with her now, they were almost certainly doomed to share her fate. Smart men would leave. She was making sure they had the opportunity.

Alexa expanded her restless midnight prowling to the edge of the property. The lake was low, though she could hear frogs, but it stank. Brian had to be boiling the water or he would have gotten ill from it. The bunkhouse had survived a fire according to the char lines on the rear and the ashy foundation of a larger building half a mile away. She assumed fencing and sheds were here somewhere, too, but years of growth had covered their locations. The fire that had come through here had been massive. It was surprising that the bunkhouse had been spared.

Her son was in as good a place as any, but Brian was going to abandon it for an ugly ride on her heels. She'd done the same with her father. She wondered if Adrian had done it intentionally, like she had. Brian was a target now. She had to find a place to stash him and this wasn't it. Hunters would be here within a week, trying to pick up her trail. Their adventures in Lincoln would not go overlooked. Brian would be a perfect way to get her to surrender.

The sandy blonde boy was wiry and determined, much like her. His father was unknown, but Alexa

assumed he had also been a descendant because Brian's gifts, though still mostly locked, were strong. He would have made an interesting addition on a quest like this—a complete contrast to the taller, stocky, older men that surrounded her. She had no doubt that he would have been an asset, unlike Paul, but nothing would change her mind. She had to be able to risk the lives of all her men. Brian didn't fit that requirement. On his own, he had a chance. With her, only his death was certain.

## 2

The morning came and went without Alexa's appearance. As the afternoon sun peaked above a dusty horizon, her men lined up in front of Brian's den.

Brian was nowhere to be seen. The kit he had been wearing when they met was gone, leading them to believe he was out scavenging. The men assumed he had done it to make things easier. This way, the mother and son didn't have to say goodbye.

Afternoon shadows began to creep in, making the men exchange uneasy glances. Maybe Alexa had done the same as Brian and cut out without saying goodbye. No one voiced the thought, but it was there.

Seven kits of supplies were lined up on the porch by their boots. Brian had put them together

overnight. The lonely pack was a reminder that they were without a leader.

Dusty wind blew over the faint grass struggling to survive. Another shower of grit splashed across their worn boots. They were in Missouri, near the Nebraska border. Between a relentless new Jetstream and bad crop choices, this area was undergoing dustbowl conditions. Instead of the deep-rooted corn that Nebraska hosted, Missouri had tried to grow a lot of soybean. The plants were too shallow to stay in soil sockets against a constant harsh wind, causing the plants and earth to be scoured and scattered. Farmers replanting the next season's crop would have solved that, like before, but those men and women were gone. Farmers were extinct in America.

On top of that, herds had moved north years ago and ate it barren as they traveled. Animal skeletons were visible in all directions, though most were graying remnants now. Edward suspected even the faint crabgrass that lined Brian's den would vanish after just a couple days of walking. They were in another wasteland.

Time passed slowly as they waited for their leader to arrive. Concerns flashed over her safety and illness but returned to the original thought of her giving them a chance to back out of the quest now that the situation had changed so drastically.

Jacob hoped she knew they would track her down. They were just as committed to it as she was.

Alexa stepped from the side of the bunkhouse without crunching the gravel. It still drew instant attention.

The men approved of her adaptations to the uniform. The only skin showing was her face, though the hood of her cloak was now tied snugly to her head. They were encouraged. She might be able to continue walking in that garb.

Mark delivered Alexa's kit as the others took a marching formation around her. None of them spoke, but each of them allowed her to feel their relief and happiness that the quest wasn't over. For most of them, the lives they'd led before couldn't compare to these moments with her.

Alexa sighed in misery and triumph. "It's the same for me. We may go to our deaths, but we'll go together."

Each man there echoed her as she led them toward the start of their next adventure.

Brian stepped from the shadows near them, making a last desperate attempt to be allowed along. "Grandpa told me to give you a message. I saw him after the war."

Alexa spun around, grabbed Brian's arm. "Tell me!"

Brian didn't struggle. "He said he's sorry he couldn't wait."

"He left you here?"

Brian shrugged out of her loose grip. "He tried to get me to go with them. Conner was there..."

Pain sank into Alexa. "But you stayed...for me."

“I stayed because he’s corrupt. It would have bled onto me.” The boy looked away. “And then you wouldn’t have given me anything but a bullet.”

“And what is it you think I can give you now?”

“Time, lessons...a family.”

Alexa grunted. “I want that, too. You have to know it won’t happen until I finish this quest. The survival of humanity may very well depend on it.”

“I know. I’m just delivering a message.”

Alexa studied her son, hating the chore. “You can’t come with us. There’s no way we’ll succeed with you along.”

“I know.”

“You can go to ground and wait. You’re strong enough to do that. I see it.”

Brian studied his mother, searching for the love he needed. “You’ll come back for me?”

Her heart broke. “Always.”

Brian walked away. That was all he’d needed to hear. He vanished into the shadows next to the bunkhouse.

Alexa cursed the world governments for the thousandth time as she resumed her walk. He would never stop following her now. Their bond was new, but it was already strong—like the one she had with Adrian. “Let’s go. We’re not stopping again for more than a nap until we reach the state line. This part of the quest will increase our stamina.”

Her men followed her into the darkness, smiling or chuckling. There was no other place they’d rather be.

Chapter One

# Multiple Targets

Point Pleasant, TN  
October

1

“**T**his will do.”

All six men studied the small log cabin. It was nice here, without a feel of corruption. It instantly reminded them of their old lives.

The cabin was nestled behind a small town that appeared to be empty but wasn't. Edward was sure survivors existed there. The open view meant they'd witnessed Alexa's arrival. However, the feeling wasn't hostile. It was almost as if they were glad to see new faces.

The other men were not as encouraged. They had hoped to remain alone for a while longer. The week-long trip across Missouri had been rough in places. When Alexa had said they weren't stopping for more than a nap, she hadn't exaggerated.

Mark dropped his gear near the front porch swing that appeared as though it might hold his weight without collapsing. “How long are we staying?”

“Overnight or for a week.” Alexa shrugged. “We'll see how it goes.”

The men liked the idea of spending a week resting, of Alexa resting, but they heard the warning. Alert mode kicked in. The crew spread out to clear the perimeter.

The property around the cabin was thick with dying trees and piles of debris. It looked like one of the rundown places in a neighborhood where even drug dealers wouldn't live. In this situation, it was perfect and beckoned to the men like a guiding light. They hadn't seen a safe structure since leaving Brian's den. Missouri had been a dust ridden quake zone.

Alexa waited in the shade of the porch, skin stinging. Walking in the light hurt, but not worse than her heart each time she'd spied their shadow. All of her plans now accounted for Brian.

Alexa's heart swelled. Adrian must have done the same thing for her or she would have been killed during one of his adventures. The realization was a comfort, something she needed. Becoming this new creature was an adjustment that Alexa wasn't sure she was capable of making. A number of things would have to change, as of today. There would be no more walking in the sun, even in covering clothing, unless she wanted to burst into flames. A week of it had weakened her. They would travel at night and sleep during the light.

"All clear!"

The call echoed from multiple directions.

The males rejoined her on the long porch.



“We’ll get settled, then make some preparations.” Alexa motioned Edward to pry open the door.

The cool, dark interior of the cabin called to Alexa, but she forced herself to wait until it had been cleared. Maintaining routines would be much harder now.

“Clear!” Edward was brushed aside as a blur spun into the coolness and vanished down the steps to the cellar.

Edward exchanged looks with the other men, but none of them commented on it. They got busy preparing their shelter, mindful of her words about overnight or a week, depending on what happened. They assumed it meant they weren’t safe here.

Billy took up a guard post outside.

Edward went to work securing the doors.

Mark chose the windows.

The others went through the home, but the two bedrooms and a large kitchen with a dining area greeted them with dusty floors devoid of prints. Unlike the town behind them, this shelter was empty. Daniel didn’t think anyone had been here since the war.

The basement door hung a jar, casting dark shadows over the stone table in front of a fireplace with a large hearth. It was obvious that electric hadn’t gone through this place even before the world had ended. Daniel assumed they would find an outhouse somewhere on the property, probably covered by thorny weeds. The crabgrass had indeed

vanished as they travel, replaced with vine-like weeds that were taking over every area. This property was no different.

As they worked, conversation drifted down to Alexa.

“Will a week help her?”

“Maybe if we can feed her.”

“I’ve heard they can go a long time between meals.”

“Not at first.”

“Any idea what we’ll be fighting here?”

“Hard to say. Zombies and soldiers? Ghosts? Take your pick.”

“How about feathers?”

The chuckles sent a nice vibe through the air. Alexa closed her lids against the faint light from the window and cellar door she’d left open. She couldn’t stand to be completely cut off from her men. Their voices soothed some of the terror.

“We could always go back for the Rabbit; chop off a part at a time.”

“I think his parts are already being used.”

Snickers and laughter echoed out to Billy, who had climbed the tallest tree on the property. He was perched in the top branches like a parrot. There was movement in every direction and he was keeping a watch on all of it. To the west, Brian had camped in a small cave and erected a barrier over the entrance. The cloth blended perfectly, as did the small pile of debris. If not for coming out in time to see the boy

shoot a squirrel with a dart gun and disappear inside, Billy wouldn't have been able to spot his den.

The other directions held walking dead and lost soldiers. None of those were coming toward the cabin, but Billy wanted to know if that changed. They'd had too many narrow escapes. Pushing their luck wasn't a good idea.

Jacob hated Alexa being forced to stay below, alone. He took his kit and joined her in the mostly empty concrete basement. He did a security sweep, then settled on the edge of an old table.

Alexa had settled in a corner and was busy taking things from her cloak.

"What made you rescue Mark from that prison? How did you pick him?"

Alexa glanced up. "He hasn't told you?"

"No."

Alexa frowned absently. "Mark is a killer. He wasn't an assassin or even what Adrian would have called an Eagle. He was an average American they pushed too far." Alexa glanced at Jacob. "You'll have to get the full from him, but it came down to the same thing with all my men. You picked yourselves. I just answered the mental calls."

"Without knowing if we were worth the trouble?"

She smiled slightly. "Never doubting you were worth it. Fate has provided my needs many times over."

Pride swept the Preacher. He would be sure to replay the words to the rest of the crew. Men needed to hear that they were valued.

Jacob waited for her to speak, not wanting to bother her if she was searching for quiet time. He scanned the basement again, noticing a shadow behind a stack of mildewed boxes.

“Explore if you want. Noise doesn’t bother me.” Alexa could feel his restlessness and need to keep her company fighting each other.

Jacob grinned. He shifted the mess of boxes and found a narrow door. He yanked it open, sending a draft and dust through the dim room.

Jacob vanished into the crevice with a grin, his gun, and a flashlight. “Cool!”

Alexa smiled tolerantly at his enthusiasm for exploring an unknown area. She was hoping for an escape route in the new room, but she’d settle for a darker area. Even the light from the single window down here was burning her skin. Being bitten by the vampire baby had hurt their quest, but she wasn’t going to stop for something as unimportant as pain. Only death would turn her away.

Alexa drifted off with soothing noises from her crew ringing in her sensitive ears.

## 2

Dusk fell slowly despite the fighters wishing it would hurry so their leader could come up. They’d reinforced the entrances and exits, and divided the

supplies they'd found. Then there was little to do except force their brains to accept that they were on downtime.

"What did you guys do before?" David hated the restlessness whispering that there were still zombies to kill if he was bored.

"Yeah, you must have had free time before now on this quest." Jacob was now sitting in the wide windowsill, also longing to kill something. He'd fought that desire all his life. Being with Alexa during a fight was freedom from that prison.

Edward and Daniel shared a glance that held a story everyone immediately wanted to hear, but the two men had an unspoken vow about those times. The first months alone with her had been magical.

"We handled things she's already taught you—personal care and preparations." Daniel got busy sharpening his knife.

"Then we read." Edward was cleaning his gun. "She likes men who know things, so we concentrated on that."

Jacob fought the itch. "Does it work?"

"If you give it time." Edward set the brush down and racked the slide. "Someone needs to relieve Billy, or at least do a check in if he refuses to come in yet. He'll take it the hardest."

"Why?" Daniel's own thirst for deadly adventures should have placed him at the top of that list as far as he was concerned.

"Billy has a rough past."

“All of us do.” David had to support Daniel on this one.

“Not like his.” Edward frowned. “And it’s his story to tell, so don’t ask me.”

Silence came for a long moment, where each man considered either what he knew about Billy or what he didn’t.

What could be worse than Mark’s beginnings? He’d been a convicted murderer. David wasn’t sure he wanted to know and he was the first to pull out of it. “Well, there’s a shelf upstairs with some dusty paperbacks. I’ll bring them down.”

He headed up as the others broke from their ugly contemplations.

“I have socks with holes again.”

“I’ll do the check in.”

“Bet she’d like a hot shower.”

They fell into caring for their needs and hers as the evening came in peacefully—one of the few they’d had since becoming a full group. Now that Paul was behind them, the magic had returned, but the restlessness hadn’t vanished. Each of them remained on edge while waiting for the call to stay or the call of battle.

### 3

Alexa emerged from the cellar as darkness settled over the land.

Each of her men glanced up from their activity to extend a warm welcome...and froze at the open hunger in her expression.

Alexa struggled to obey her moral code. She'd never been this hungry.

"Company!" Billy's excited call betrayed his happiness at having something to do.

The other men responded as though Alexa wasn't eyeing them like they were food. Eager students ran to the door.

It snapped Alexa from her trance. These were her men. They trusted her, even in this form. She joined them outside with that thought in mind, humbled further when they admitted her to the line as if nothing had changed.

The half dozen walking dead weren't a large threat, but Billy hadn't been sure about handling all of them alone. He kept watch on the other areas as the fighters below used their knives.

Edward also kept a watch, letting the newer men release their frustrations. He stood by Alexa and enjoyed the show with her. Jacob's fast thrusts and Daniel's neat swipes were good entertainment after hours inside waiting for darkness to fall.

They dragged the corpses away from their shelter, then headed back toward the house, except Alexa.

She stared into the darkness, able to see farther than she'd ever been able to. There were beating hearts in the darkness—two soldiers who had made a camp to wait for sunrise. They were around a small

fire, eating something they had caught. Alexa didn't know where they had come from, but their presence was fortuitous for her. She needed a meal and they needed to die. It was a win-win.

She moved toward them silently.

Edward glanced back in time to see Alexa vanishing into the shadows. He didn't alert the others. She needed a meal. She would find one.

Edward closed the door.

The group settled into their chosen activities, all of them calmer now that they'd had a bit of action and their boss was out roaming. Nothing would get by her, leaving Billy little reason to stay on watch. He reluctantly joined his teammates in the cabin.

Billy took a place near the small fire they'd started, wondering if the chimney smoke might draw more walking dead. He was almost sure the zombies could smell, as well as hear. They shouldn't be able to, but then, they also shouldn't have been able to run, eat or bleed. In fact, they shouldn't even exist.

Billy felt the old, rational part of his brain trying to open the cage door; he refused to allow it. The gates that he'd been warned about were wide open now. Zombies were the reality. The life he'd led before had prepared him physically for duty with Alexa, but Billy still longed for those he'd known years ago. He'd remembered enough of his life now to understand what he had lost, but even Alexa's magic had been unable to help him fully remember what had happened.



“Someone tell the rookies a story.” Edward began taking inventory of his gear. They shared everything equally, so it made it easy to keep track of their supplies. If he had a week of rations, so did everyone else in the group. Paul had screwed that up by munching between meals and then begging for scraps while Alexa tried to eat. They’d shut it down when she gave him her dinner, taking his food and water so he couldn’t graze. Now that the Rabbit was gone, some of this trek would get easier.

The rookies, Jacob and David, settled back to listen.

The other three men exchanged hesitant glances.

“If I have to pick it, all the little details will come out.” Edward repeated Alexa’s words to him when she wanted him to tell a tale.

The men frowned, shifting uncomfortably. All the stories contained failures. They’d been new to Alexa’s way of doing things. Accidents had happened.

“I traveled with Safe Haven.”

Four heads turned to Billy in shock.

Edward had already guessed that and kept sorting his gear. He found it soothing.

Billy leaned against the wall and began rolling a smoke. “I was injured in the quake of ’13. Right after that, I took a mission to find someone and bring her to her father.”

Now there was complete silence in the cabin. A distant scream outside confirmed Alexa’s location.

“I was told that job would take years and it has. I needed it to.”

“You’re from Safe Haven?” Jacob was stunned. “And you didn’t tell anyone?”

“I told the only person I need to.” Billy didn’t get defensive. “She told me to decide on my own about revealing it.”

“Why now?” Edward was curious about that.

“Because she’s sick.” Billy glanced around as if for confirmation. “She needs us to be bonded and we can’t be if there are secrets this big between us. I feel bad for keeping it so long. I’m sorry.”

Billy’s humbleness drew a groan from the corner. “I wish you hadn’t said that.”

They all looked to Mark, who shook his head.

“Now I have to mention something too. I, uh...well, I killed a woman. It’s what I was in Slam for.”

The door opened. Alexa came in, pale and unruffled in the firelight. She closed it and removed her cloak.

When the silence stretched out, she gestured curtly. “As you were.”

Heads went back to Mark—even Billy, who had thought he held the largest of their private torments, their secrets.

David cleared his throat. “Say that again?”

Mark sighed. “I murdered a woman.”

He ignored the mutters and scowls. It was only the second time he had ever spoken the words and

the liberation was still a new, exciting emotion to be controlled.

“Why?” Jacob was shocked. Mark was the one he admired the most in this group.

It was what each of them, except for Alexa, wanted to know. The silence hung while he searched for the words.

“I couldn’t stand the thought of it all restarting. At that time, I didn’t think there was any way it could be better, and I was so angry! Then the war came, and the President was replaced by succession and yet, it wasn’t going to be different. The next puppet was going to stand on the backs of those who came before and keep ruining everything. ...and I had the thought that if there wasn’t a President anymore, then maybe that could change.” Mark peered at Alexa, who was removing things from the cloak she’d hung up. “I smothered her while she slept.”

“You’re talking about Marsha Binton!” David frowned. “She was next in line for the Presidency when Carter died.”

“Yes. She wanted to make male slavery legal. She said we were a danger to everyone.”

Jacob stiffened. “She wasn’t wrong.”

“No.” Mark was glad when Alexa came over and sat down close to him. “But I’m a man. I couldn’t let that happen. She had to die.”

Alexa joined them, placed her hand on his shoulder. “Murder is wrong. You murdered her. That was very bad.”

Mark's head dropped. "Yes."

Alexa squeezed in comfort. "We're all killers here, of one kind or another. You spent years locked up in payment for that crime. Do you feel like you've been punished enough?"

"No."

Alexa sighed tolerantly. "Then you shall suffer more. No one can forgive you until you forgive yourself."

"How can I? I murdered her!"

"Yes. Would you do it again?"

Mark shook his head. "She was only a pawn. I would have gone higher and found those in charge of pulling her strings. I would have murdered them."

"That would have been an act of the bravest kind." Alexa patted his hand. "Take off the head, my pets. Without a head, the threat is no longer a threat." Alexa glanced around. "Does it bother you to know this about him?"

All of their heads shook. Each of them had their own weaknesses, their own failures to atone for. Edward especially understood.

"Good. Murder, like all other things, has a place in the world. If he had removed the head, he would be a hero. Because he cut off a tooth, he was a criminal. The line between the two can be that thin, but there *is* always a line. We will attempt to stay above it, but when we have to, we will abide by our own guidelines. Nothing will keep us from this mission. You were each delivered to me for that

purpose.” Alexa settled back, no longer cold. “Would you hear how Mark was taken from the slam?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, please.”

“Sweet!”

The men got comfortable, but Alexa motioned toward the senior males who’d been with her then. “I believe Edward told you to tell a story. Make it this one.”

Everyone looked to Mark to start the tale.

Mark didn’t mind, but he only knew part of the story. Edward and Daniel would have to fill in the rest. “I’d been in that slam for years, enduring their interrogations and trying to stay alive. If not for my peculiar mind, I wouldn’t have lasted a month.” Mark flipped a fresh log into their fire. “I was starving to death when Alexa came for me.”

“Did you feel me calling to you?”

“Yes, but I thought I’d gone crazy finally and welcomed it. There was only one thing I wanted at that point.”

“And now?”

“I still want more blood. I long to taste vengeance.”

“There’s all you can kill in this new world.”

“Like the day you took me from the ground.” Mark grinned savagely.

“Yes. Would you tell them of it? They’ve been curious.”

“No.”

“Because of your guilt?”

“Because I never wanted it to end!”

Alexa was tolerant. “Do not be shamed by what you’ve become. Without it, you would never be able to do my work.”

“I’m a killer. That’s why you came for me. But I’m also dangerous because I don’t care if I die.”

“Yes, you are. Now face those fears and tell us everything that still weighs on your soul, Convict.”

Mark opened his mouth. Time seemed to slow as he spoke.

## Chapter Two

# Slam

Utah

Eden Prison

### 1

“**T**here’s a woman standing at the gate.”

The second guard in the tiny room might have thought his partner was joking if not for the befuddled tone. “A woman? A live woman?”

Joel snorted. “Aye, alive. Handsome too, in an odd way.”

Nigel leaned over Joel’s shoulder to view the small monitor showing the topside gate and main entrance of the prison.

After dark, the jail wasn’t opened for any reason, including fire. The current warden had let soldiers and inmates burn last year rather than open the door at night. The men guarding this hell agreed with that decision. Daytime was risky enough. Night in Afterworld was lethal.

“Wow. Is she alone?” Nigel leaned closer for a better view.

“As far as I can tell.” Joel didn’t look away from the screen despite Nigel’s hot, stinking breath on his cheek. “Been standing there a while. I thought I was dreaming.”

The dreary guard room around them was an ugly green and held dusty machines on three sides. These devices were only used occasionally, but the two guards never changed. They had six hours off at night for eating, showering and sleeping. Both men were offensive, but not cruel enough to handle the population of this slam. Because of their computer skills, they had been assigned here.

“And you didn’t ring the alarm?”

“It’s one woman, alone.” Joel snorted. “Why would I trigger the alarm for that?”

“Fair enough.” Nigel slid back into the other chair. “Let’s see what she wants, shall we?”

Joel nodded hesitantly. He’d been staring at her a lot longer than he’d let on. Something about her eyes was unsettling. “Hey, maybe we shouldn’t—”

“This is the guard station.” Nigel spoke to the woman over the speaker. “State your business or be on your way.”

The woman didn’t respond. She also didn’t blink or betray a single flicker of emotion.

Nigel frowned, keying the button again. “Did you hear me?”

The black clad blonde didn’t move. “Shhh...”

“What the hell?” Nigel was now starting to get Joel’s bad feeling.

“Let her go.” Joel swiveled around as Nigel started to ring the alarm. “She’s trouble.”

Nigel knew it, but that didn’t counter his duty, his boredom, or his annoyance. When he got the



woman in here, he would make her answer. “Guards to the main gate!”

Joel involuntarily placed a hand on his holster as the loud alarm rang through the prison. They were buried under the ground, but that didn’t mean they were safe. Any time the top entrance was opened, people got twitchy.

“At ease, Private.” Annoyed with his companion, Nigel watched two sentries hurry out to the woman.

She seemed familiar to Nigel. He squinted harder at the screen as one guard took her arm and the other man scanned to verify that she was alone. “Wish we could hear them.” She and the sentries were conversing too lowly for the topside mike to pick up.

“Maybe she wants shelter.” Joel was glad the woman didn’t seem to be a threat. She was walking toward the gate with the guards, willingly.

“Something moved, behind the tree!” Joel pointed, heart thumping. “Tell them to watch out!”

Nigel was too late to the radio. The gate opened just as a group of walking dead staggered toward their men.

The walking dead in this area didn’t have clothes remaining, other than tiny scraps that were cemented to their bones. Without eyes, it was impossible for them to see the hits coming, though they had excellent hearing. Having any senses left defied reality, but there was no denying the proof as

two of the rage walkers heard the gate creak open and staggered toward them with hungry snarls.

Alexa spun around while pulling a long knife from her belt. She sliced through the slow undead with ease, beheading all of them while the two sentries observed in surprise.

Alexa wiped the knife on a stump with heavy moss and sheathed the blade. The blood on her face, she left. She often used mental intimidations.

The prison wasn't visible from topside. Except for one small shed, the gate and door were the only clue that a form of civilization was nearby. Though Alexa wasn't sure she would call it that in comparison to much. Life in a slam was no picnic.

Three more undead lumbered toward the gate, bony fingers reaching for food.

Alexa drew her gun and put them down, one after the other with solid shots that blew apart their brittle skulls. Rage Walker's disease was ravaging the country. Those infected died from it and still couldn't find peace.

Alexa walked to the gate, motioning the scared guards in ahead of her. A large herd of walking dead wasn't far away. She wanted to be inside the bunker before more shooting happened. Once it did, the zombies would gather here, making her two stashed men safer. Edward and Daniel hadn't cared for being left behind, but she wanted to be a man up when she left, not two down. Her new men were good, but she wasn't confident enough yet to risk

their lives during this collection. If they got involved, it would be their choice, not her orders.

Alexa reappeared in front of the camera, this time flanked by two shaky soldiers splattered in crimson.

The guards in the control room stared at the camera, not sure what to do.

Alexa slowly pulled a pouch from her pocket. She shook it, producing a jingle. "Pure gold coins." Alexa handed it to the nearest soldier and turned back to the camera. "I wish to buy one of your prisoners, then I'll be on my way."

The soldiers around her perked up.

Nigel was relieved. He hit the button to open the entrance. Those two guards weren't much in the grand scheme of things, but as low as their population was, they needed every set of hands they could get. This shift's sentries were the best, sadly. Nigel didn't want to lose any of them.

Joel watched the now bloody woman on the camera, not as convinced as his companion. He quickly secured the gate, but the ball of acid in his stomach continued to burn. "This was a bad idea."

Nigel shrugged. "Too late now."

They watched Alexa enter the processing center of the last working jail in the United States. Right after the war, this prison had housed the most dangerous people the apocalypse had ever seen. Whoever wanted one of their prisoners had to be hard enough to handle them. The government didn't mind selling inmates if they were going to be a

prisoner somewhere else. In fact, their bosses encouraged it. One less mouth to feed was important. They didn't have regular company here, but the occasional stray who came through was always a hunter, so Alexa's request was normal. Joel wasn't sure why his stomach was so upset.

Nigel snorted, but didn't order the man to quit stressing. Over the years since the war, Joel had developed an instinct for moments like this. Nigel didn't see what threat a lone woman would be, but he intended to keep an eye on her just the same. He hadn't stayed alive so long by ignoring possible danger.

## 2

In the Processing Center, Alexa stood calmly between her escorts. This entry room was a rectangle with faded Wanted posters lining one side. At the far end, an elevator was guarded by two tall soldiers who looked thrilled to have something to do.

Without moving, she scanned the room and cubicles, seeing only two of the grungy booths were staffed—both by bruised men who also appeared excited to have company. The jail obviously didn't get many visitors now. She'd been counting on that.

"Give the clerk a name so he can look it up." One of her escorts pointed at the first cubicle. The two soldiers were recovering now that they were back inside.

Alexa stepped that way, but she didn't take the rickety seat across the desk from the red nosed man. He looked as though he had just finished a lengthy shift with Mr. Daniels. Alexa gave him a polite nod. "I want the one who killed the President."

No one spoke or moved.

Alexa's brow lifted. "Is he dead?" She'd held that fear since deciding to come here.

The clerk shook his head, slowly reaching for a button on the desk. "I have to check with my superiors for that one."

The clerk typed in a few sentences, keeping his gaze on the strange blonde woman. Females hunters were rare, but the one in front of him seemed more comfortable wearing blood than her soldier escort did. That duo was waiting to discover if she needed to be convinced to leave and clearly dreading it if she did. The clerk had a sense that they would all be happier once she was gone. He typed faster.

The computer beeped.

The clerk read the answer aloud. "Send her down." He nodded toward the elevator. "Second floor." He waved at the guys behind her. "Don't let her out of your sight."

Reluctant soldiers followed Alexa onto the elevator that was barely wide enough for all of them to stand side-by-side. Coated in greasy handprints, the elevator floor held a layer of grit and garbage. Alexa noted the camera in the corner was broken. *Mistake. Now you may never know who to blame for the coming mess.*

As the door shut, Alexa saw the clerk move away from the cubicle. He didn't want to be here when she returned. *Wise. I'll probably be moving fast and you're not wearing my uniform.*

### 3

The elevator creaked and groaned as it delivered them into the earth. Alexa stood pat to account for the coming stop. Her companions braced with a hand against the wall to keep from falling as the transport jerked to a sudden halt. She hadn't been in an elevator in years, but the rough stop had been a foregone conclusion. The laziness of always using arms to brace was dangerous. Legs needed to be strong to run. Hands needed to be free to shoot.

The door slid open to reveal a wide white room with a single desk in the far corner. It smelled like fresh paint as she stepped off the elevator. Nice furniture decorated the room, but not the lavish kind she expected the main boss to have—which meant this wasn't him.

Second-in-command, Lee glanced up in surprise. When he'd been told a hunter was here, he had expected a man.

Alexa pushed out her chest and swung her hips as she stepped over to the desk, trying to judge what type of person she was dealing with, what deal she needed to make.

Lee's thin lips tightened. "Art is my obsession, so unless you have ancient murals tattooed across your ass, I need to see the color of your gold."

Alexa snickered. She dug in her pocket for the pouch, then tossed it onto the desk in front of him. She scanned the area as he began to count. This first room off the elevator was a reception area or was supposed to be, but the oddly placed paintings appeared to be from a mental hospital. The stick figures in cells, and showers, being drugged and beaten, were more like the rants of an insane child than the bearded Lieutenant sitting in front of her in a blue robe with deep pockets. Those pockets were filled with paintbrushes and small notepads, though she also saw an outline that was likely a small handgun. The only security was the two guards who had stepped out of the elevator, but stayed next to it. They obviously weren't uncomfortable down here.

"Who did you come for?" Lee finished counting as he waited for her answer.

"Mark."

Lee shrugged. "I think we have two dozen inmates by that name. You'll have to narrow it."

"He killed the President."

Lee froze, then iced over. He shoved the gold across the narrow desk. "*That* convict is not for sale."

Alexa gave him a pointed look. "Everything is for sale in Afterworld."

"Not that one!" Lee smacked the desk. "He has a lifetime sentence—here."

Alexa scooped the coins back into the pouch and stored it in her cloak. "I'm sorry to hear it."

Lee was sorry to lose the coins. Gold was a precious commodity even now. "Can I offer you someone else?"

Alexa moved toward the elevator, hand sliding to her knife hilt. "I need Mark for my team."

"Well, you can't have him!" Lee waved at the soldiers, eager to return to painting. "Get her out of here."

Alexa waited until the elevator began to roll open. She spun around, throwing the knife they hadn't seen her pull.

It stuck in Lee's chest.

Alexa dropped to her knees as she pulled her gun, then rolled onto her back. She fired two fast shots in close quarters. Blood sprayed.

Both bodies fell. Not having security down here was another mistake.

Alarms blared across the compound.

The camera in the corner followed her every move.

Alexa stood and reloaded, scanning. The artwork on this wall was now splattered in red. "That's an improvement."

Alexa sent the elevator up empty, then went to collect the keys from Lee's body. The exits behind his desk had to go somewhere.



Edward and Daniel paused in their activities. Heads turned toward the prison, listening for more. Alarms after Alexa leaving them could only mean one thing. She had invaded the prison, alone.

Set into the side of a cliff, there was one way in or out. The vehicle entrance had flooded years ago. The river had reclaimed a mile in both directions, creating a haven for bugs and a hard to navigate barrier. Alexa had brought them across on a skiff, in the dark.

Daniel studied Edward. They were both wearing the fighting gear Alexa had insisted on weeks ago. Most of it had already seen use, but the guns had been the most chosen tool during their adventures so far. The only new gear on them at this point were the boots she'd insisted on last week. Both men had been glad of it. Their original footwear had really worn down after a month of walking.

"I don't feel right staying here if she's in danger."

"Yeah." Edward swept their surroundings to make sure no one was sneaking up on them from the barren landscape that held only remnants of society. Because of the flooding and the soldiers, this area had emptied out. It hadn't recovered.

Edward stood to kick dirt over the small fire. "Let's go." He liked Daniel's attitude. Alexa obviously didn't think she needed their help, but they were going to give it anyway. They were along

to support her in all her choices, but they also needed the excitement.

They hurried toward the large prison... Edward skidded to a halt, but he was too late to avoid the patrol of soldiers coming around the row of trees.

The two groups stopped, staring at each other in surprise, then anger.

Edward and Daniel knew what had to happen. They drew the guns Alexa had gifted to them upon joining her quest.

Most of the soldiers reacted too late to avoid the well-placed slugs that began to fly. Men screamed and fell, while others tried to recover in time to save their lives. Many of the shots missed because they were hand reloads. Alexa refused to use those.

Daniel double tapped a soldier, then knelt in front of Edward to reload like Alexa had been teaching him to do during a gunfight.

Edward slowed his fire to give Daniel time for it like he had been taught.

The soldiers continued to blast useless shots into the air and ground around the two men. They hadn't been expecting a gun fight.

Edward assumed walking dead were in the area or would be drawn to the noise. He took a fast look to verify there wasn't a new threat.

Daniel stood, aiming.

Edward knelt to reload.

In the distance, the prison alarms continued to wail.

“Sir!” Nigel waved at the camera as the Warden joined them in the security room. “We have a patrol under attack. I can see the fighting!”

“So?” Samuel didn’t appear anything like the two men in the room. He was beefy, with clean clothes and dark hair that glistened from a fresh washing. As commander of the base, he didn’t have to do without. It didn’t bother him that his men were suffering. They were soldiers. They would do what they were told.

“Move!” Warden Malin shoved Nigel out of his seat. He settled in the warm, wobbly chair to observe. A small line of trees blocked his view, but the sounds of gunfire and blurry shadows on the ground confirmed the information. Samuel took a few seconds to consider his options, then began pushing buttons. “The dead are getting too close again anyway. Two birds.”

Joel frowned as he realized their commander was releasing the remaining hounds. “Do we have permission for that, sir?”

“No, but those genetically enhanced dogs have killed a dozen soldiers in three years. Plus, they eat too damn much. We’re low on food. At some point, those mutts are going to get loose in this compound and munch their way through.”

Joel winced at his secret fear being spoken. He didn’t say anything else as the commander opened the hound pen.

One of the monitors flashed to the kennel in the topside shed. Two large dogs of St. Bernard and Malamute lineage bounded from their pens. Clumps of dirt and dust flew from their paws as they ran straight toward the noisy fighting. The two hounds were hip high, though taller than a man when they stood on their thick rear legs.

Their sharp hearing made the animals more dangerous. Just like the undead, any noise could send them into a snarling, snapping fury that ended with bullets or Tasers. They had run out of batteries for the Tasers months ago and were forced to use sturdy clubs to keep the big dogs in line now. It rarely succeeded without a serious injury.

Joel shuddered. Samuel was right. Having them outside the jail would accomplish several goals. Along with saving food, it would save lives in here and clear the area around the jail. It also meant they couldn't send out patrols again until the dogs moved on like the other pairs had. They were so low on manpower now that none of their patrols went out on time or at full strength anyway. Joel assumed that was why the current squad was losing. The screams were fading, drown out by snarls.

"Two survivors, sir!" Nigel pointed at the screen.

Two bloody soldiers were fleeing toward the gate, waving and screaming to be let in.

The Warden almost didn't. Samuel could feel a threat...but they needed all hands to scour the prison for the hunter running loose among the

inmates. Samuel considered her low priority, but it was a still problem. He hit the button that opened the gate. “Put them on search duties. No medical care until she’s captured.”

Samuel left, not closing the gate. The guards would take care of that. It was their job.

Joel slammed his hand on the button to shut the entry. A wave of walking dead was staggering toward the gate at a surprisingly fast clip. A few more seconds would have let them in. “Is he crazy?”

Nigel shrugged. “He must be. He’s boss of this hell.”

## Chapter Three

# Do it Fast

### 1

**“W**hat’s the problem?” The red-faced clerk in the Processing Center stared at the bloody Private, trying to place him with soldiers on patrol for this shift. “Was it walking dead or more like the weird woman who just came through?”

Edward lifted his gun.

So did Daniel. Sneaking in as survivors had been brilliant.

The soldiers weren’t expecting an attack. The group in the far corner reacted late, rushing toward them as they tried to pull their weapons.

“Breach! We have a breach!”

The small squad of sentries to the right of the entrance stared in surprise as they were shot. Only one of them managed to get his gun out of the holster.

Daniel shot him before he could pull the trigger.

Edward cleared the front of the room, being sure to miss the clerk crouching under his booth to avoid the bullets.

Edward jumped over the divider and put his gun in the man’s face while Daniel eliminated the rest of the injured, screaming guards. “Where is she?!”

The shaking clerk fingered the elevator. “Two floors down!”

“Where are the command quarters and security rooms?”

“We have a security room on each floor. Command lives below. They don’t come up here.”

“Which one would your commander be in right now, watching your life flash before his eyes?” Edward hated being away from Alexa. It made his tone ugly.

The clerk shuddered. “Two floors down, to the right.”

Edward withdrew the warm weapon and marched to the exit. He didn’t trust elevators. “Send that down without us. Do it now.”

The clerk obeyed, stunned at the invasion by just two men.

The narrow elevator groaned and clacked toward the lower floors.

Edward locked the door to the stairs as he followed Daniel. It might buy them an extra minute.

Alone in the dim stairwell, Edward had time to admire how nimble the Biker was despite the injuries he’d suffered from his cliff dive. Alexa’s power was amazing.

Daniel stopped at the first floor, wishing the alarm would stop. It shrieked from every speaker on the grungy green walls.

Edward waved him down another floor. “She’ll go there at some point. We’ll meet her.”

Daniel went eagerly, ready to kill or die for his new family. He jerked the next door open, letting Edward hurry in.

Edward circled the room and returned to provide cover for his teammate. This lobby outside the security room was barren of everything, including furniture and propaganda. Dusty outlines sat where those items had once been.

Daniel assumed they had been burnt for warmth. The prison was cold.

Edward kicked in the flimsy security door.

It flew open, striking someone. A body thudded to the dirty floor.

Daniel rushed in with his gun, scanning each corner before he spun around to cover his partner's entrance.

Edward came in, firing at the man in the far corner. Daniel hadn't seen him in the deep shadows.

Daniel ducked to clear Edward's line of sight. He saw boots and fired, hitting knees.

Both men kept firing until the threats were eliminated. Gunfire echoed down all the halls, carrying.

## 2

"Those are mine." Alexa laughed, delighted with the sand of the crew she'd chosen. "Put your weapons down. I'll let you live." Alexa grinned in warning at the squad of soldiers in front of the main



command room. “They will kill all of you when they get here. No compromises will be offered.”

“I’m James Hawthorn, Captain.” The squad leader stepped forward. “Surrender or die!”

Jimmy sported a crewcut, a squad leader’s uniform, and recently polished insignia. His cruel leer complemented dirty fingernails and bloody boots. The half dozen sentries with Jimmy were the same. This was a torture squad. Alexa was glad they didn’t believe her. Justice was flying toward them with a Glock and a Barretta.

“Put it down!”

Alexa slowly lowered her gun, finger easing off the trigger. These men had hesitated to kill her because she was female, and they hadn’t had one in a long time. She read that in their hungry gazes, but if she pushed any harder, they would shoot. She’d planned to let them try and enjoy the slaughter, but the sound of familiar guns one level above them had forced a change in plans. “I’ll count to five. Then you’ll all die.” She placed her gun on the ground by her dusty boots and rose. “One.”

Gunfire echoed, louder and closer.

“Two.”

Jimmy advanced, kicking her gun away. He motioned to the two doors. “Guard those entrances. Kill anything that isn’t wearing our cover.” He grabbed Alexa’s arm, jerking her against his hip. “Where’s your gold source?”

“Three.”

The door to the right burst open. Edward, wearing their uniform, shot Jimmy with his Glock before the soldiers could decide if he was one of them.

The other door flew open from a vicious kick. Daniel rushed in, firing his Barretta.

The squad went down in a quick, chaotic heap in front of the exit.

“Faster than I estimated. My bad.” Alexa wiped some of Jimmy’s blood from her face as she collected her gun. It stank. She strode to the security door.

Her fighters fell in on her heels without being told, both proud of how well it had worked out. This was their first time using some of the lessons she’d been training them on.

Alexa banged. “Give me what I came for.”

The speaker crackled. “What do you want?!”

“The man called Mark.”

“The President killer?”

“Yes.” She banged again, trying to make the older sounding man jump. “Do it fast or I’ll blow this door. One...two...”

“Wait! He has to be woken and brought up! Wait!”

Alexa put one hand on her hip and checked her watch on the other. “How long?”

There was a pause, then the speaker echoed, “Ten minutes for full waking...five for transport.”

“Do you need power to accomplish that?”

“Uh...no...”

Alexa moved toward another hallway. “Don’t be late.”

Edward flipped a finger to the camera as he went by.

Daniel stuck a wad of cap lined C-4 to the door, grinning. He followed his companions. He hoped Alexa liked the addition.

In the security room, Samuel ignored the pleas of Joel and Nigel, concentrating on troops instead. The prisoner would be brought here, but so would all of the remaining soldiers. The bounty hunters were going to get more than they’d bargained for.

“Please, sir! Let her have it! That’s cap crimped C-4! The fuse is built in. All it needs is a spark!”

The Warden shoved the man back toward his chair. “I’ve never lost a prisoner. I’m not going to now! Set a trap in every stairwell. If she escapes, I’ll shoot you both!”

### 3

Alexa moved deeper into the prison via the stairs. The soldiers were obviously crammed onto the elevators even when it would have been shorter to walk. Alexa assumed it was laziness, plus reluctance to part with old conveniences.

The stairs going to the lower levels were dusty, but clean compared to the rest of the prison. Edward was encouraged. He hoped it meant they wouldn’t run into as many soldiers down here. He also

assumed it meant they would be hit full force as they tried to leave.

Edward stayed close to Alexa, reloading on the move. He had already run through half the ammunition she'd given him with the weapon. He was now glad she only allowed dry fire practices during lessons.

Some of the prison rooms they passed made them scowl or grimace. The various torture devices and cattle-like set up for hygiene and medical care were cruel. Sympathy came for all the inmates, no matter their crimes.

Daniel brought up the rear, listening for anyone trying to trap them in the stairwell. Alexa had a map, liberated before they'd joined her. She occasionally stopped to shine her light on it and verify their location. Daniel was thrilled to be here. He wasn't thrilled about Alexa's demand, however. He and Edward hadn't known why they were at the prison. He suspected Alexa had left them outside because they wouldn't have agreed to come in with her if they'd known they were helping a prisoner escape. And it wasn't just any prisoner. This one had murdered a postwar President.

Alexa took a left turn at the wide corridor and entered the first small room. She motioned them to shut the door.

The file room was crammed with metal file cabinets and cardboard boxes. It took Alexa a minute to determine that the cardboard containers were for nonlethal prisoners who were available for

trade or sale. The file cabinet with the broken lock was for prisoners who were supposed to die down here in this cold, damp hell.

Alexa held her light in her mouth to view the folders, digging through them with lightning speed.

Edward and Daniel observed the exit, hearing footsteps. A short-staffed squad of troops ran by the room without noticing them. The men appeared unhappy to have been sent on this duty. They weren't doing a good job clearing the floor.

Alexa pulled out a folder. She memorized the details and moved back to the dingy hall.

Shouts came from the opposite intersection. The squad had heard the door open.

"There they are!"

"Get her!"

"I'm staying right here! That's a Mitchel! They never miss."

Alexa took off running, cursing her impatience. She could have waited another minute and they would have been gone.

Her crew stayed close, shielding her from gunfire that didn't come.

The speakers on each camera blared. "You have five minutes to surrender or shoot-to-kill orders will be relayed!"

Alexa stopped. She turned around and marched back toward the nervous troops who had been allowing them to leave rather than duel it out with her and her men. The bunker soldiers were armed, but they were cowards with faulty weapons. Alexa

had known that when she broke in here. She was also aware there had to be someone with a spine, otherwise these guys would have taken over the facility years ago. That voice on the radio was probably the only one they needed to watch out for.

Alexa waved at the nervous soldiers. “Kill them.”

Edward used the last of his ammunition as she went by the soldiers.

Caught off guard, only a few of the men fired back. Like badly done reloads are apt to cause, two of the guns misfired and exploded.

A bullet spun by Edward’s arm.

He retaliated, catching the soldier in the throat. He shoved the smothering man aside as he went by, slamming him into a soldier about to shoot Alexa. The man fell like a brick.

Edward jumped over him to follow his boss into the next stairwell.

Daniel fired in the man’s head as he went by, not wanting to worry about vengeful survivors.

The hallway door slammed and locked behind them, echoing in a final noise.

Alexa took them straight up the stairs, no longer worried about losing her new crew. In a short ten minutes, they had robbed the staff of courage. Only that steely voice over the speaker was still a concern.

Because of Alexa’s veiled threat to cut the power, the soldiers had been diverted. Edward realized Alexa had never intended to do that. She

had cleverly drawn more resistance out of her path, but she wasn't going to repeat that ploy now. Her fury was almost visible as she padded to the camera on the security room. In a slow, deliberate motion, she held up her hand. "A spark, please."

Edward handed her a lighter, not sure if she was bluffing. It didn't feel like it.

The speaker crackled. "Wait!"

Alexa lit the fuse and saluted the camera with her finger.

Edward grabbed her, and shielded her with his body as the explosion shattered the door. Shrapnel blew over all of them.

Lights switched as a new alarm came on, bathing them in a disturbing red glow. Shouts and coughs came from inside the room, revealing survivors.

Daniel tried to recover from the blast. He staggered into the room, ears ringing. Balance off, he leaned against the frame, trying to focus on the threats.

Samuel escaped through the emergency exit as the two sentries tried to pick themselves up off the floor. The room was filled with smoke and blood from debris that had gouged the arms and faces of both soldiers. Half the computer screens were either dark or flickering.

"Don't kill us!"

"We surrender!"

Daniel shot both cringing men.

Edward helped Alexa to her feet and escorted her into the smoky room. He took off his bloody Army jacket as they studied the hatch that needed an approval code to open. “Do you want us to track him through other means? I’m sure someone can be persuaded to help.”

“No.” Alexa went to the one undamaged desk and leaned down to hit buttons on the panel. “Watch the hall.”

Protected by her fighters, Alexa used the functioning control panel to locate her target. Instead of wasting time reading the new information that popped up on the ashy screen, she hit the release button for all inmates. That would keep the soldiers busy. “Who wants Point and the tracking experience?”

Edward held out a hand for the map.

Daniel collected a magazine and two guns from the fallen men.

Alexa motioned Daniel to be Edward’s guard. She would be the Drag person this time. She would take over when her ears stopped ringing. Edward had already recovered. Daniel was well on his way, but Alexa wasn’t able to shake it off as quick as she usually did. Most of her energy had gone to healing Daniel’s wounds. She hadn’t recharged yet, but she was tempted by the steely voice that had proved itself as cowardly as the men he commanded. Taking his life force to replenish her own would be deserved.

Daniel gave Edward a gun and the magazine.



Fresh shouts echoed as they reentered the stairwell.

Using the map, Edward led them to the very bowels of the complex. The most dangerous or valuable prisoners were caged here. None of them were loose yet, though several were twitching. It felt like a lab in a haunted house.

Edward skimmed the names on the cages.

Daniel did the same on the opposite row of cells.

Alexa stayed in the doorway, aware of shouts getting closer. She assumed Samuel was rallying troops toward their position. She was good on ammunition, but she had heard the dry click from Edward's gun as they exited the last hall. Her men were out but for the single mag supply Daniel had secured. That meant she needed to do most of the work until they were resupplied.

Edward moved down the hall with goosebumps breaking out on his skin. Many old movies came to mind, including *Silence of the Lambs*. The cells were eerily similar, except the prisoners were strapped to upright gurneys with various tubes and wires leading in and out of their thin, bruised bodies.

"I found it!" Daniel opened the door, noting the cell hadn't been locked. His stomach dropped as he stepped in. "Uh... Boss!"

Alexa sighed, already sure she knew what the problem was. She opened her mouth...

“I have your man.” The speaker above them crackled with steely humor. “If you want him, come get him. I’m on the top floor.”

Daniel and Edward studied Alexa, aware of the trap. The Warden assumed she would have a hard time resisting both her target and ground level, which would put her closer to escaping with her prey if she was able to take him. Both of them wanted to tell her not to fall for it, but neither man saw a better solution.

Neither did Alexa. She motioned toward the locked cabinets at the end of the hall. “Get another weapon.”

The two men hurried over to the glass case. Daniel shattered it with his boot. Edward began grabbing knives. He didn’t find any ammunition.

Alexa turned toward the darkness of a stairwell. She opened the exit to verify a clear path.

Bullets flew. One of them hit her shoulder, knocking her backward.

Her skull bounced against the wall. Alexa crumbled to the floor.

Daniel and Edward ran toward her, but more bullets came through, striking the wall above Alexa. It prevented her crew from reaching her.

“Grab her now!” The squad leader waved at his bravest man.

A skinny soldier with big arms lunged forward. He grabbed Alexa’s leg and dragged her into the stairwell.

The sound of heavy breathing told Edward several men had been sent to stop them from following. He scanned the cells and found half the prisoners awake at the bars. They were afraid to come out without permission.

“Come on!” Edward began to grab the men and women by their thin arms, shoving them toward the stairs.

Daniel put knives in their hands and pointed. “The enemy is there. We’re your rescuers.”

Most of these inmates could only feel anger now. They limped toward their deaths with vicious shouts and staggers that would have hurt Alexa to witness.

Saving their limited ammunition, Edward and Daniel waited out of sight until the gunfire ended.

Silence descended.

Two wary soldiers came through the door to see if the threats were neutralized. Three more soldiers eased in behind them.

Edward and Daniel stepped forward, arms drawn back.

Daniel’s aim was better. He killed two men with three throws.

Edward used half his knives to hit a soldier trying to get his gun out of the holster.

One of the moaning, bleeding inmates on the ground grabbed a soldier and pulled the screaming man down so he could beat him with filthy fists.

The remaining soldiers fled up the stairs, forgetting, and were attacked by the other freed inmates.

Edward and Daniel hurried into the hallway, hoping to reach Alexa, but three floors and multiple doors mocked them.

They had no idea where to go.

#### 4

“I have your leader. It’s over.”

Edward and Daniel stared at each other as the speaker spewed threats, both trying to form a plan to save them all.

“He has a safe room.”

They glanced down to see the inmate had won the punching battle. He was dragging himself toward the other bodies, presumably for a drink from one of the canteens. His cracked lips implied he was parched.

“It’s on the top floor. There’s also an escape hatch.”

The inmate had gaunt cheeks and haunted eyes. His jerky movements told them he wasn’t awake often. Needle tracks in both arms oozed small droplets of blood.

Edward didn’t doubt the dying man’s words. The government was the enemy. He was trying to make sure his enemy was hurt, though he wouldn’t survive to enjoy it.

Edward went to the inmate. He handed him a knife and one of his food pouches. “Thank you.”

The man nodded. “A drink, a meal, and a death by my own hand. Sounds right for the life I lived.”

Edward and Daniel didn’t stick around to hear the man’s story, though they were curious. They collected magazines from corpses as they headed up the steps. Concern for Alexa overwhelmed everything else. They’d forced her to change her plans by coming in against orders. Disobeying may have cost them her life.

## Chapter Four

# You Are Awake

### 1

**A**lexa woke all at once, tensing against the ropes binding her to a chair. She opened her eyes.

Mark was bound to a chair nearby. He stared at her in grateful awe.

Alexa did a short scan and guessed where they were. These extravagant personal quarters were the exact opposite of the rest of the prison. Beside the expensive furnishings and clean walls, there were boxes and crates of supplies that she was positive the rest of the prison had been doing without for years. The writing on most of the boxes was too faded to read, but the two she deciphered were colognes and candy. Both were used to trade for sex or food, but neither were of any use to her on this quest. Medication was the only thing that bought old world bullets. Both were rare.

Alexa studied her Convict. He wore medical bottoms tied with string to stay on his pale, bony hips. The rest of his bare body was waxy skin, bruises, and bones. He had to be forty pounds underweight.

Mark gave her a weak nod, trying to indicate agreement to whatever she wanted. This brief

moment of wakeful captivity had convinced him any life would be better. He had accepted that death would be his escape from hell, but this waking cycle had brought hope for the first time in nearly half a decade. He was beyond grateful. Anything she wanted or needed that he could accomplish, he would.

Alexa pinned him with an intent look despite their situation. Some things had to be handled immediately. “You’d come with me? Learn, obey my codes?”

Mark gave an eager nod, starved grin lighting his bloodshot blue gaze. “My life isn’t much, but it’s yours.”

“We have movement on this level.” Another voice in the room alerted her to an audience.

Alexa turned for an awkward scan over her shoulder, ignoring her minor injuries. She found a secondary command post being run by two twitchy Privates and supervised by the commander of the base.

The Warden stared at her with steely grey eyes and a smirk. Alexa couldn’t help her reaction. That smirk had to go. “You’re down about thirty men by my count. Will your boss think it’s funny?”

The humor fell from Samuel’s face as if she’d slapped him.

*Pride. I can use that.* “Sorry. Did I touch a sore spot?” She gave a charming smile. “If you surrender now, I’ll be nice. You might get to keep your life.”

Samuel refused to acknowledge the shiver her threat sent up his spine. He had bigger concerns than a hunter who didn't know her place. "The attack on my facility was planned. I doubt you thought of it. Who sent you?"

Alexa laughed at him, bringing a deep frown to his grizzled face.

Samuel's hands clenched in his pockets, but he betrayed no other change in demeanor. "So *you* planned it. Why did you go to so much trouble for one prisoner? After the damage you've done here, you'll never be allowed to traffic at any other base. You'll be killed on sight, so why are you really here?"

Alexa studied Mark. "I need fighters. You do that better than most. You fought a Secret Service detail hand-to-hand after the bullets ran out. The war made you a murderer. Now, you'll atone by being a willing killer in the name of the light....in the name of Safe Haven."

Gasps came from the two soldiers.

Samuel's hands came out of his pockets and clenched into fists as he strode to his prisoners. He kicked the side of Mark's chair.

The chair toppled, smacking Mark's shoulder into the hard floor. He landed face down, with the chair on top of him.

"Never ignore me!" Samuel swung to Alexa. He slapped her.

"You'll die for that!"

Mark's scream startled the Warden.



Alexa kicked with the leg she'd gotten free while he abused Mark. She slammed her boot into his stomach, knocking him backward.

Samuel tripped and fell on top the chair Mark was bound to.

Mark used what was left of his body strength to shove onto his feet. He slammed his weight against the chair, impaling the screaming man against the wall.

"Long live Adrian!" Mark shoved the chair the rest of the way, killing the Warden.

The two soldiers scrambled into the hatch they'd opened during the fight. They vanished, closing the steel door.

Alexa kicked the bottom of her chair with her unbound boot, snapping the brittle wood. She heard Mark doing the same as her chair tilted and fell over.

Alexa landed on her shoulder, bringing fresh blood, but she was able to get her other leg free. Now loose, the rope around her stomach went slack and let her shimmy free of the restraints. The hands that were bound behind her came underneath her legs, then out front. As she stood, Mark was there to slice her bonds with the knife he had just taken from Samuel's boot.

Mark immediately flipped the blade around so that she could take the handle. He didn't want her to think he was a threat.

Alexa took the knife, but she only turned it over and placed the hilt back into his large, calloused hand. "I usually give my new guys a gun first."

Mark smiled at her as he stuck the knife into his waistband. "I like big ones."

Alexa snickered as she turned toward the exit. "Don't we all?"

"Stop right there!"

Mark moved in front of Alexa at the shout from the hallway.

"Stand down." Alexa laughed through the pain in her shoulder. "Those two are mine." She moved through the hallway in front of Mark, wanting her crew to know she wasn't a hostage.

Mark stayed on Alexa's heels, eager to blend with the men on her team. If they were with her, he was positive they deserved to be. He hoped they would be openminded about his background. Alexa had said he would be atoning for the past, so her other men were probably doing the same. He didn't spare a thought to what she might want him to do during their time together. It didn't matter.

"Fifteen second recon of boxes. Catch up." The hall was littered with stashes covered in years of dust. The Warden had been a hoarder.

Daniel and Edward rifled lightly as they moved by the stashes, taking supplies they needed.

Twenty seconds later, Edward and Daniel fell in behind the new man, both noting details.

Mark was large, though he'd been starved. Taller than Daniel, he almost matched Edward in height. He was wider than both of them put together, with long arms they could imagine wrapping around someone's neck to snap it with little effort. His

prison pants flowed awkwardly over spindly legs, but his bare feet were larger than Edward's, who wore a 12 wide. When Mark was back on a steady diet, he would be a huge asset in any fight. The fact that he had a weapon in his belt and Alexa was willing to turn her back to him said she already trusted him.

His polite nod, then attention to duty over their boss also scored points. Nothing else about him spoke good. He was scruffy and tattooed, with old scars that would have killed normal men. His twitching fingers implied chemical abuse and the need for violent behavior. Edward kept going with his mental evaluations, waving Daniel to the Drag position. Distractions were dangerous, but he couldn't help it. If Alexa was wrong, even in his weakened condition, the man in front of them would be hard to stop.

Alexa squeezed into the rear of the elevator and gave a lifted brow. Because of Mark's size and the narrow elevator, all the men would have to turn their backs to someone to fit. She had noticed the positions on the way down with the soldiers and thought it would be a good first bonding moment for her new crew. Since they now numbered four, she could officially use that title to herself without feeling like a fraud. Before, they'd been traveling companions. Now, they were a small team.

Edward stepped into the elevator and placed his back to Alexa.

She shifted them so that he was standing with his hip to the elevator buttons, giving him an honored position. He would control where they went.

Mark placed his back to Edward, then motioned to Daniel. “You’re safe. Your hair isn’t long enough for me.”

Everyone laughed as Daniel flushed and crammed into the elevator with them.

Edward pushed the button to take them up to the ground floor, then looked to Alexa as best he could for orders. He expected resistance.

“First one out can clear the path.” Alexa shifted against Edward, drawing a low groan from him as she withdrew the spare ammo she always carried for all their weapons and passed it out. “Next time, don’t go through it so fast.”

Daniel grinned, reloading with smooth movements.

Mark nodded in approval. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

The elevator slid open.

Daniel hurried out with a gun in one hand and a knife in the other. He was adept with both weapons, with both hands. He was the only member of Alexa’s crew who could boast that skill.

No one moved in the bloody lobby. A small squad of soldiers stood near the cubicles with their hands up. They weren’t willing to risk their lives any further.

“The front gate is unlocked.” The squad leader didn’t move as he spoke to Daniel. “Just go.”

Alexa pushed on Edward.

Edward pushed on Mark.

Mark took a flank position on Daniel, waiting for Alexa to walk by them so he could move into drag. He didn’t know what fighting formation she preferred, but until she told him differently, he planned to use the training that had allowed him to get a lifetime residency in this underground slam.

Alexa moved straight for the exit, not looking at any of the surviving soldiers. She had little doubt she would see them again at some point, but for now, there would be more death and destruction here that she didn’t need to be directly responsible for. Her men had certainly added to the mess. This lobby held cooling bodies and puddles of blood that she hadn’t created.

Alexa stopped near one of the soldiers, eyeing his feet. “13 wide?”

The man gave a shaky nod, frowning.

“Let’s have them. Call it my price for sparing your lives.”

The boots were in her hands in seconds.

Alexa passed them to Mark. “Again, not usually the next item I give new members of my crew.”

Mark snickered, pausing to slide them onto his cold feet. She was already caring for his needs. It was amazing. When she added a large shirt from her cloak pocket, Mark’s happiness soared. He had clothes and a weapon. He felt rich.

Alexa led her crew into the afternoon air, able to feel violence rising. The Warden was dead. Men were about to get immediate promotions, some at knife point. The few who survived would remember she had triggered it all. If their lives got better, they may not give chase. For those who lost promotions, limbs, or friends, the hatred would encourage them to volunteer for any search missions a new boss decided to send. There was also the big bunker to consider. Eventually, someone would be sent from there to gather information from this location. They would watch the tapes, hear Safe Haven, and know her quest was progressing. The months ahead would see more encounters with soldiers as a result of this day's adventure.

Mark stepped out of formation as they exited into the tiny courtyard around the entrance to the slam. He hadn't felt the sun or had fresh air in years. He shut his eyes, lifting tired arms toward the sky. "Thank you."

Alexa kept walking, but she denied Edward when he would have reprimanded the new man. Mark had earned a moment of enjoying freedom. Though, he would pay for it.

Movement came from all directions, lumbering and staggering toward them over the rocky ground. Dead bodies growled.

Alexa had assumed there would be walking dead around the entrance when they came out, but she wasn't prepared for the two hounds. She stopped, staring in confused anger.

The animals stood waist high and were as wide as Mark. Bloodred eyes narrowed onto Alexa with ball-chilling intensity.

“What the hell is that?!” Daniel didn’t like dogs anyway, but these were monsters.

Edward drew on his courage, hoping his talent with animals would work on the genetically modified mutts. He began to murmur an ancient incantation that had served his kind well throughout the centuries.

Next to Edward, Mark slowly drew his knife.

Sensing time running out, Alexa fired her gun in the air twice, using the last two bullets in the magazine to draw attention. The warden hadn’t had time to disarm her, only to bind her before she woke.

Edward froze, spotting two zombies on his left.

Mark scowled in the opposite direction. “And what the hell are those?!”

“Walking dead.” Edward put them back-to-back. “Just like in the movies, man. Don’t get bent.”

Zombies rushed toward them from both directions, drawn by gunshots and the smell of fear.

Mark prepared to throw his knife as they lumbered closer, disgusted and not entirely sure he wasn’t still in a drug induced coma. The hounds were hard enough to believe, but zombies were almost too much to accept.

Edward understood how Mark felt, but there wasn’t time to comfort his new companion as the dogs also turned toward them.

“I’m still in there, right?”

Edward was horrified by the question. “No! The gates have started to break. Something about the fabric between dimensions. Governments helped it along and we got this crazy shit.”

“What?!”

“You are awake. Alexa rescued you. We’re searching for Safe Haven. Now kill something!”

Mark threw his knife at the hound about to reach him. The blade plunged into the dog’s eye.

Blood poured as the dog yelped and stopped to paw at the injury.

The other hound kept coming.

Edward spun them around, firing. He chose to follow Mark’s lead and also hit the eye.

Now disabled, the dogs snapped and lunged at the nearest movement, pawing and whimpering between snarls.

Alexa got her men out of the damage zone as the dog’s limited vision kept them attacking the zombies that had been drawn by her gunshots. As she and her crew disappeared into the cover of trees, she pulled a small box out of her cloak. She handed it to Mark.

Mark opened it to find a gun belt, two loaded magazines, a holster, and a Colt .45. He quickly put it all on, then handed the box back.

Edward slapped the man on the shoulder in welcome as he took the middle position.

Daniel did the same, leaving Mark to take drag.



Mark had no problem with it. He was out of hell. For the moment, that was more than enough to keep him smiling.

## 2

“Can I take five?” Mark expected to be denied, but he had to ask. The creek was a branch off the river that kept the reservoir full, but unlike its stagnant parent, this one was running clear at a steady pace. The faint ripples accented the sound of insects around the few trees lining both sides of the bank. It was perfect for a bath.

Alexa motioned. “Set camp. We’ll move on come daylight.” They’d only made it half an hour from the prison, but she and Mark were weakening.

Edward got the two men busy with the normal chores, glad of the order. Like Mark, he couldn’t stand the smell of himself. He didn’t mind the odor of blood when he was spilling it, but wearing it was where he drew the line. After the Convict finished, he would have a dip, too.

Alexa did a fast round of the area to be sure it was okay to camp for the night. Finding nothing they couldn’t handle if it wandered into their firelight, she joined Mark at the side of the creek. He’d already taken off his gun. “You first.”

Mark laughed as he dove in with his pants on. It was amazing after being in a cage.

Alexa began to disrobe.

Edward led Daniel a short distance away to provide privacy. He remembered his own welcome to Alexa's army and found himself smiling. She knew how to make a man feel wanted.

Daniel didn't know what was going on, but he didn't care unless it was trouble. He was high from winning another battle with Alexa. He'd already spilled more blood since joining her than he ever had after the war.

Alexa kept removing clothes.

Mark tried not to stare at her but failed.

Alexa waded into the water in just her shirt, shivering. It was very cold.

Mark froze as she neared him. He didn't know what the rules were on intimacy, but he was glad the water reached to his waist.

Alexa stopped in front of him. "Love me?"

Mark snorted. "With this body? I'm scared you'll be disappointed."

Alexa slid into his arms, pressing her warm body tight.

Mark claimed her lips without more hesitation. When a woman invaded his space, he took her offer. That would always be his reaction.

She retreated, testing his control.

Mark let her go, body tight. His heart pounded, but his mind was functioning at top speed. He eased deeper into the cold, clear water and began washing with sand from the bottom.

Alexa did the same, gaze burning into his.

Mark realized she wanted them cleaned up first. He stayed hard the entire time he scrubbed.

Alexa finished first. She let her hands roam her body while he leered. It was erotic for both of them.

Mark finished but didn't step toward her. He had to be sure she was willing. He was a killer, not a rapist.

Alexa waded to the shore and knelt on her cloak. She peered over her shoulder to find Mark running through the water with heavy splashes to reach her. She braced for a moment of pain.

Mark stopped himself from hurting her, but not from taking what she was offering. He pushed in gently and was rewarded by a sound he would crave from every woman after this. She moaned.

He immediately began trying to draw the noise from her again.

Delighted, Alexa allowed herself to relax and achieve pleasure with her new man. As they climaxed, she drew hard, pulling energy that lit her up. Mark was already more than she'd hoped for.

### 3

“Should we feel jealous?”

Camped next to the trees lining the creek, the circle held two empty places. The small fire crackled gently as darkness took over the land.

Edward shrugged across the fire. “I might be if she'd promised fidelity. She didn't.”

Soothed, Daniel lowered his voice. “Don’t know how he survived. Years without pussy might have killed me.”

Chuckles came from Edward. It also echoed from Mark and Alexa as they returned.

“Almost did.” Mark nodded at the men.

Alexa settled next to Daniel. She took the mug of coffee, but waved her bowl of stew toward Mark. “Later for me. He gets double portions for the next ten days, every meal.”

Edward gave Mark an approving nod. When she was satisfied, Alexa only wanted a smoke and a hot drink. “Nice work.”

Mark blushed.

Daniel laughed as he handed Mark both bowls of food.

Alexa took a pouch from her cloak and began rolling two smokes.

*Two?* Edward stared at Mark. The starved man had done more than just satisfy her. She was in a great mood.

Mark took a bite and found he was ravenous. The first bowl was gone in less than two minutes.

Edward poured the man a cup of coffee to hopefully jumpstart the digestive process and prevent him from throwing it all right back up.

Mark groaned at his first sip of the hot, bitter brew. “Perfect.”

Alexa silently agreed. The strength of their group would be doubled as soon as Mark recovered his health. Alexa passed both smokes to her men

and shut her eyes. A few seconds later, she was asleep.

Daniel eased her down, covering her with part of his cloak. Alexa was the very definition of highspeed, low drag.

Edward inhaled, then stubbed out one of the cigarettes. He added it to his pouch. Alexa could use that when her supply ran low. She was teaching them to stretch their food and water in new ways, but tobacco was a luxury that he wanted her to have later because she enjoyed it.

Around them, insects avoided the smoke from their small fire, but they buzzed overtop it in frantic swoops. The trees shook in protest of human presence, raining occasional leaf storms on their shoulders. It was peaceful for Afterworld.

“So, what’s next?”

Edward pointed at Alexa’s bowl. “Follow every order she gives, even when you disagree.”

Mark picked up the second bowl despite his cramping stomach.

Pleased, Edward gave him the basics. “We share everything. We never leave a man behind. We’re your brothers now. If you have a problem, talk to us first. Don’t nag her with petty stuff.” Edward waved Daniel to finish it, testing the Biker’s memory on the recent lessons he had received.

Daniel exhaled. “Don’t wait for her to ask for energy, because she won’t. Offer it respectfully and try to stay distant while it’s happening. She isn’t here for you to love or lust over. You’re here to die

for her if needed. Nothing will be allowed to interfere with the quest.”

Mark swallowed, nodding. “Sounds good after the last four years.” He met Edward’s eye. “You’re the XO?”

“Not officially.”

Daniel frowned at Edward. “We don’t need that call to know. Yes, he’s the XO.”

Edward tried not to feel too much pride.

Mark let out a loud belch. “Where do you want me for the night? I’m good on any duty for a few hours, then I’ll have to recharge.” Mark didn’t understand why his health was healing so rapidly, but he wasn’t foolish enough to question it.

Edward pointed at his bedroll. “Sleep first. Duty at dawn.”

Mark frowned. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Daniel gave him a hard tone. “We have enough trouble with zombies. We don’t need you turning into one. You already look the part.”

Mark laughed. He scooped up the last bite and washed it down with the last drink of coffee. “Good night.” He lay down right where he was and shut his eyes.

Edward rolled his.

Daniel snickered. Mark was definitely one of them.

Captain Russell Donner, US Army, moved to the tree line to observe the slaughter outside the prison. Flies buzzed around the bodies at his feet. “She was definitely here.”

Russell counted ten survivors at the gate. They were carrying heavy kits and wearing winter gear. “Headed north, to the big bunker.”

Russell stayed where he was. There was no point in alerting them to his presence. “Their injuries will only slow me down.”

Russell examined the cloudy sky and chose to stay on the hunt that had already taken months. He wasn’t afraid of rain. He retreated from the trees, ready for trouble if it came. “Undead, monsters, hell hounds. We got it all here.” Russell laughed silently at himself. He talked aloud on every run. He only went quiet when angered or springing a trap. “Can’t use most traps on this prey. She can smell it.”

Russell increased his pace. He smoothed red curls back when the wind blew them into his eyes. He ignored the shower of grit that sprayed across his legs. All environments were hostile now. He had long since adapted to the conditions, but he had refused to cut his hair. It was his only connection to the old world.

Screams echoed from the prison yard. He listened without pausing.

“Undead showed up.” The hunter kept walking even though he was close enough to help and more than skilled with his weapons. “Or maybe the

hounds heard their voices and remembered an abuse.”

Russell had no loyalties to his fellow soldiers. He had one target. That was all he cared about. “Mitchels are all a plague upon the earth. My life goal is to kill them all, but if I can only have one, Adrian’s daughter will satisfy me. He owes me that for breaking up our team, ruining my career, and impregnating my wife.”



## Chapter Five

# For Your Lives

### 1

Alexa woke with the dawn. She felt a warm body curled around her and identified him by the smell. Daniel's cloak reeked of the sweet stew he'd cooked last night. It was nice.

Her mood sank as she felt danger coming. The need to survive, for her men to survive, flooded her with adrenaline. "Up! For your lives!" Alexa tried to get untangled. She grabbed Daniel's wrist, sinking in sharp fingernails. "Up!"

"Hey!" Daniel registered the panic as soon as he looked at her. "Get up!" He began shouting and kicking the other guys as he grabbed gear.

Alexa's head tilted. "We need a location. Listen!"

*Crack!* Thunder rolled... Lightning flashed...  
*Crack! Crack!*

The creek sounded angrier than it had upon their arrival. The buzzing of insects was also louder, though Mark wasn't sure what that meant. The sound of liquid was impossible to mistake, but it wasn't coming from the creek. It echoed from the opposite direction—the dam set into the other side of the cliff shared by the prison. Alexa was glad the

prison wouldn't survive. It held abominations that deserved to be flooded and abandoned.

"There!" Edward pointed the hand that didn't hold his gun.

Alexa took off running in the opposite direction. "For your lives, and mine, run!"

The men did, leaving everything.

Alexa led them onto the main road, searching for higher ground.

Above them, the sky opened to send driving rain.

To their right, a small pack of walking dead paused, grey skulls turning in their direction.

To the left, a patrol of soldiers did as well, wearing the same surprise as the zombies. The soldiers looked like they had fled the slam in a hurry.

*Crack!*

The dam gave way. Half a million gallons of murky water rushed over the parched land, taking multiple paths toward them.

Alexa ran for the only high ground in sight, trying to reach the summit before the water swallowed them.

The soldiers chased them, uncaring of the danger rushing their way.

Alexa sped up the winding road, but she wasn't fast enough. The water flooded her feet, then her ankles.

Another wave thundered across the ground and swept Alexa off her feet. Knee high, the current was

impossible to fight. She was dragged back down the hill toward the men. Debris hit her, forcing her under the water.

The soldiers and fighters were swept up in the water. Too chaotic for gunshots, the men resorted to hand combat with each other and the smelly liquid.

Mark held a thin soldier under the water, scanning for Alexa as the man struggled in vain. “Where is she?!”

Edward ducked a punch and lunged forward. He grabbed the attacking soldier by the throat, squeezing. The Adam’s apple crunched under his panicked fingers. “I don’t see her!”

Rain beat on them, blowing in their eyes to further obscure their vision.

Daniel gasped as he wrenched his head above the hip high water. He plunged his knife into the stomach of the soldier trying to drown him.

The man staggered back and was pulled down by rushing water. He went under with his mouth open in agony.

Daniel felt something brush his arm. He instinctively grabbed it. “Alexa!” He pulled her above the water and tried to determine if she was alive.

“Higher ground!” Edward splashed and jumped toward Daniel. “Up the road!”

Sensing trouble, Mark spun around. A chunk of debris flying through the storm hit him in the face. He went under, swallowing a lungful of water.

Edward switched directions. He dove under the waist high water, using his hands to clear a path. Debris rose, filling the churning water with more danger.

Daniel lurched forward as something hit his knees. He kept his hold on Alexa's body, but not the knife. It dropped into the water.

"Behind you!" Edward couldn't reach his gun in time to help. He observed helplessly as the soldier grabbed Daniel and dragged him backward.

Alexa slipped from Daniel's arms as he tried to get loose of the arm around his neck.

Daniel grabbed his other knife and twisted in the big man's grip. He sliced his guts open. Bloody screams echoed, pattering into the water.

Daniel shoved free and staggered around. "I don't see her!"

Edward was under the water, retrieving Mark. He grabbed the man's arm and pushed to the surface. Something hard smacked his arm, but he gained his feet. He put his cheek to Mark's chest and felt him breathing. Any injuries would have to wait. Edward swung the man over his shoulder.

"I can't find her!" Daniel stomped around, arms searching the water where they'd been. "Help me find her!"

Edward joined Daniel, glad the water had stopped rising, but there was darkness in his heart. Alexa was gone. The current had pulled her away.

“Get on that roof!” Edward nudged Daniel toward the house when the drenched Biker only stared at him. “We can see from there!”

Daniel lumbered toward the house. He was on the roof in seconds, scanning intently for any sign of their boss.

Edward had to settle for leaning against the house and letting the porch rail guard him from large debris. He couldn't get Mark onto the roof by himself, but he still scanned as deeply as Daniel was doing above him. *She can't be gone. I refuse to accept that!*

## 2

Alexa coughed out water, lungs and shoulder burning. She gasped in air, pulling away from the soldier slapping her on the back.

“That’s good. Deep breaths. Hack it up.”

Alexa did, already flying through her options. She felt for her gun.

“You lost that to the water.” The soaked soldier grinned at her with missing teeth and rotting gums. “Your life, you owe to me.”

Alexa clutched her knife, coughing between breaths. “What...do you want?”

The soldier grabbed her arm to help as she tried to stand. “You, of course.”

Alexa lunged at him, knife going to his throat.

Gunner didn't blink or flinch. He grinned wider. “You’re one of them Safe Haven worshipers. You

follow their code. You can't kill me. I saved your life."

Alexa coughed up another wad of water and phlegm, aiming for his boots.

Gunner's grin faded a bit. He'd seen the men searching for her. She'd been leading them. Those guys weren't slaves, which meant she could only be from Safe Haven, but if he'd calculated wrong, he would die here.

Alexa put her knife away and retreated.

Gunner remembered how to breathe. He refused to underestimate her because she was a woman. Some of his worst fights since the war had been with females who wanted to enslave him.

Alexa scanned, but found only muddy ground around thick, dying trees.

"They all made it." Gunner assumed she was worried over her crew. "Though that big one didn't look so good last time I saw them. He was over someone's shoulder, dripping blood."

Alexa breathed a sigh of relief. Dripping blood meant he was alive or her other men wouldn't be carrying him. Alexa didn't waste time guessing who the injured man was. She faced her new owner. "How long?"

Gunner laughed. "Not for me. I get to sell you. You'll help get me a great price. What you do after that isn't my concern."

Alexa didn't want to agree, but he was telling the truth. If he hadn't retrieved her, she'd be dead. "Tell them I'm a magic user."

Gunner burst out laughing. “I knew you were worth more than sex!”

“It also means I’ll know if you lie to me.” Alexa gave him a single warning.

Gunner shrugged, pointing. “Head for that road, then keep going. I’ll find wheels on the way. When we get rolling, you can handle that slug in your shoulder.”

Alexa started walking. With the soldier hiding their tracks, she couldn’t leave much of a trail for her men. She would have to hope one of them read the subtle clues. If not, she would be sold to a trafficker as a magic user. The most common fate of someone in that position was food at a Snake party.

### 3

“We need to get to higher ground and make camp. Or die out in the open.”

Daniel ignored Edward. Tracking through the muddy area was hard on all three men. It made a lot of noise and created a mess they didn’t have time to clean up. It left a clear trail to where they went. The thick goop had reached all the way to windows in the next town over.

Mark, face black and purple, and crusted with dried blood, nodded at Edward’s comment, but he continued to search through the knee-deep muck they’d been wading through for hours now. Each time they found a body, blood pressure rose and

hearts pounded in dread. So far, they'd only found soldiers and undead who tried to bite them.

Daniel continued to search the debris, slinging things out of his way. He was the last one to have contact with Alexa, to have her in his arms. The guilt was keeping him moving even when exhaustion insisted that he needed rest.

When Edward and Mark turned toward a hill, Daniel slowly followed.

Edward took them halfway up the hill, then moved to the thick trees to pick a place to camp. His body ached as he walked, but the pain in his heart was worse.

The site he chose was free of mud, but not moisture. Everything was damp now. Even the stiff wind couldn't make a dent. It would take days of sunlight before all this water evaporated.

Mark stayed halfway between the two men, keeping an eye on Daniel, who was taking their situation hardest. Mark expected him to go back to the search at any point.

"It looks flat enough here for us to..." Edward's gaze narrowed in on something shiny in the mud. He hurried over to collect Alexa's gun. "Over here! I found something!"

The others joined him, all picking out the indent of a slender body that had been next to the gun.

Edward pointed. "The blood hasn't dried yet."

They began to search the area.

"There's a boot print!" Daniel pointed. "Military issue!"



Anger began to grow.

Exhausted, the crew spread out through the woods to search for more prints. If Alexa was bleeding, she wasn't dead. That meant there was hope.

#### 4

The fighters continued to track the heavy footprints as the sun sank in the sky. It was dark when Edward finally called a halt. "The tracks changed to tires. He went mobile." They had noticed the boot print lightening a couple hours ago and were all hoping it meant Alexa was walking on her own. That was impossible to tell for sure because they hadn't found a footprint matching her size yet. She was light on her feet, even when she shouldn't be.

The others came over to examine the tire prints.

"They're fresh." Mark sat on a piece of debris he hoped would hold his weight. "It's not dry enough for them to blow away or fade out. We should camp here, start fresh at dawn."

"Agreed." Edward nodded. Alexa had taught him that.

"We need to keep going. She's counting on us to find her." Daniel didn't want to eat or sleep. He wasn't sure he could do either until they were reunited with the boss.

Edward waved a hand. "Go on if you have to. Mark and I will catch up."

Mark began setting a small camp with the items they'd scavenged from the debris. They didn't have bedrolls, but they had looted enough canteens and supply packs to make a meal.

Edward went to the edge of the perimeter to stand watch.

Daniel was torn. In the end, he decided to stay with his group. Alexa would have insisted on them staying together.

"How are we set on ammunition?" Edward wanted to go over the main checklist like Alexa would have.

Daniel grunted, pain slapping at him. *She was in my arms!*

"Fully loaded, with three extras here." Mark looked at Daniel.

Daniel shrugged. "I'm full, with extra. I stopped counting."

Edward didn't reprimand the Biker. He understood the guilt, though he didn't agree. Daniel had been the last man to have Alexa in his arms and he'd let her slip away. His mind was scolding him. Little else would get through. Still, Edward felt he had to try. "I would have had to let go, too. He had you around the neck. Tough situation."

Daniel grunted again, but he couldn't accept the pass. He tossed the pack he'd scavenged at Mark's feet, then scaled a nearby tree to keep scanning. It was his fault that Alexa had been taken. He needed to be the first one she saw during the rescue.

“Is he always like this?” Mark wanted to get to know his team.

“We both are over the boss.” Edward gave him a pointed glance. “You will be, too, after you’ve bonded with her.”

Mark thought of their moment in the creek. His heart still hadn’t settled into a normal rhythm. “It’s bothering me now. I’m just not acting like a sullen girl about it yet.” Mark sighed. “If we don’t find her soon, that will probably change.”

Edward thought Alexa would be pleased by how fast Mark was becoming like them. His own sadness threatened to snap his control. To prevent it, Edward did his job. “We need to eat and sleep for a few hours. I want to be moving with the sun.”

“Sounds good.” Mark dug through Daniel’s pack. “He has good finds here.” He took out a small pot and two beaten metal cups. “One of the soldiers had just hit the PX. Coffee, powdered milk, peanut butter... Or maybe he looted the Warden’s stash.”

Edward listened, but his mind stayed on Alexa. He didn’t know what she might be going through right now. That bothered him.

“You want me to throw soup together or a real meal?”

“Save the real meal for when the boss is back. She’ll need it if she’s been shot.” Edward assumed it had happened during Mark’s rescue. They hadn’t been facing the stairs when the shooting began, so he wasn’t certain.

Mark got to work on a fast soup. *When we get her back, I'll cook a meal she won't forget. Can I make cookies over a fire...?*

Edward was glad for Mark being dependable so far. He was too scattered to concentrate on politeness or bonding. Daniel's guilt was starting to reach him and sink in. *I should have stayed closer to her. After this, we'll never be more than five feet away, no matter what's going on or what she says. This will change everything.*

## 5

Daniel registered the change in sound first. The engine wasn't loud, but in the silence of Afterworld, it stood out.

Daniel tossed the sticks he'd collected for this moment, waking Edward.

Edward looked up to find Daniel waving at him. He shoved Mark's leg as he began collecting his gear.

Mark peered up, but he didn't understand the hand gestures. He did notice the men were near frantic.

Daniel slid down the tree, scattering leaves and smaller limbs. He had to gain splinters from it.

Edward tossed his gear into pockets without sorting it as he'd done during their first evening together.

"A vehicle." Edward kicked dirt over the site. "We were closer than we thought."

Mark hurried, heart thumping. He'd insisted on sleeping on the ground instead of in the tree. He had been surprised when Edward chose to do the same. He assumed the man was trying to make sure they stayed together, but Mark had no intention of leaving. He needed their help and he liked the company. He'd slept on the ground because years on a hard table in the slam were too similar to the hard tree branch he would have had to tie himself to so that he didn't fall while sleeping. At some point, he would tell his traveling companions, but now wasn't the time.

The engine echoed louder.

The men moved faster, trying to erase signs of their presence.

"It's closer now, coming toward us." Daniel stared at Edward with fear on his unshaven face. "It might not be her."

Edward had already considered that.

Mark went for a more optimistic choice. "Maybe it is her, searching for us."

Daniel blinked. Then he turned toward the road. There was a cabin in the distance that he assumed belonged to the driver of the engine nearing their position. Small and decrepit, the cabin appeared to be falling apart, but deep tire tracks in front implied regular use. The broken windows and garbage strewn around the yard were a good cover to those who didn't know they were being set up.

Edward followed, crossing Mark's suggestion off the list. If Alexa escaped, she would wait right

there for them to catch up. Mark didn't know that rule yet and Daniel had forgotten it in his guilty fear.

"Straight down." Edward led the way, hoping Daniel controlled himself until Alexa was out of the line of fire.

Mark brought up the rear, also ready to kill on command.

Daniel stalked between them, seething. He spotted a single person in the SUV and identified the uniform of a soldier. He broke into a run, staying behind the cover of the hillside.

Edward sighed, but took off running, too. *So much for staying calm.*

Mark sucked air into healing lungs and ran faster over the grassy ground.

Gunner stepped out with a large bag, trunk rising. He kicked the door shut. The SUV backfired and clanged as it finally shut off.

Gunner brought the bags from the front seat to the trunk and removed a small dolly. It had been in the trunk when he found the vehicle.

The wind shifted. Gunner felt death sneaking up on him. *Someone followed me from the market!* He spun around while pulling his rusty gun.

"You'll only get one of us." Edward delivered a smile that revealed his anger. He struggled to sound furious and not out of breath from the run. "Cooperate. He might not kill you."

Gunner's shifty eyes went to the biggest man among the trio pointing guns and hostility at him.

“Not me. Him.” Mark bobbed the barrel. “That’s Daniel. He’d like to speak with you about a recent stroke of luck you may have experienced.”

Daniel had a gun in one hand, a knife in the other, and the evilest leer Gunner had ever seen on a person.

Death inched closer without a smile. “I have questions.”

Gunner was 6’ 300lb with big arms, but he was instantly scared of Daniel.

Edward waited for a response, hoping Daniel controlled himself for a few more minutes.

Gunner slowly lowered his gun. “I sold her this morning.” It was clear he’d taken something precious, not just valuable. The amount of supplies he’d received had warned him, but he’d chosen to stay here anyway. Now, he was going to pay for that mistake.

Edward holstered and withdrew a map, glad he kept his important items in the pouch around his neck. He hadn’t lost it in the flood. “Show me where.”

Gunner darted a quick look at Daniel. “And then?”

Edward shrugged. “He has questions. Punishment will depend on your answers.”

“What kind of questions?”

Daniel lunged forward, eyes wild. “Did you hurt her in any way? We saw the blood.”

Gunner flinched. “No! She was already shot when I found her.”

“How did you get her to come? You beat her? Drug her?”

Gunner winced. “I used the code of you Safe Haven zealots against her. She went to the market willingly!”

Daniel was almost disappointed. He wanted a reason to kill her abductor in terrible ways.

Edward held up the map. “A location first, please.” He barely controlled his own need to hurt the man.

Mark scanned their surroundings to be sure they were alone. Finding nothing, he switched his attention to the stack of supplies at the trunk and then the small, dust layered shack.

There wasn’t much around Gunner’s house. In the far distance, Mark could see a sign implying civilization. All other directions were empty except for a gray skyline with dead tree limbs. Gunner had a decent setup here, but it was too undefended. It implied he didn’t spend many hours in service to the army that owned him.

“There.” Gunner braced for violence as the man with the map walked away.

Mark patted Daniel’s shoulder as he followed Edward. “Make it quick.”

Mark heard Gunner draw in a breath to beg. It was cut off by a gurgling noise. Mark noted a lack of struggle. He gave Daniel points for agility and knife skills. Gunner was taller than Daniel, but the Biker had slit his throat from the rear. It was impressive.



## 6

Daniel tossed the supplies into the trunk. He slammed it shut, then got into the driver seat. He moved the SUV behind the small shack and rejoined the men who were guarding the area. If there was an opportunity, they would return for the supplies.

Edward showed him the place on the map. "It intersects two towns, and it's close to a big city. Has to be a regular market."

"How long?"

"Two hours on foot."

"We could take his wheels."

Edward shook his head. "We've got eyes on us already. Plus, anyone who saw him leave with all those supplies will be watching for it."

Daniel did a slow scan in every direction but found nothing. "Where are they?"

Edward shrugged. "Close enough to trigger my animal side, but far enough to avoid your ears. A mile?"

Daniel nodded. "I'll let you know when I catch them."

"Good. We'll use the new guy as bait when we stop for a meal out in the open."

Mark chuckled. "Perfect."

Edward frowned at him. "You might die. This isn't a game."

Mark shook his head, laughter stopping. “Don’t mistake my enjoyment for recklessness. I like being alive.”

“Fair enough.” Edward motioned at Daniel. “Point man.”

Daniel led them north, eager to reach the slave market. He hated those places anyway. Now he had the reason he needed to kill them all.

Mark kept pace with Edward for a minute. “Is he okay?”

Edward blew out a deep sigh. “This would normally come from her, so keep that in mind if I don’t say it right.”

Mark waited, eager for more of Alexa’s rules or wisdom.

“We’re killers. We can be brought to a level of anger or hatred that can only be satisfied with blood. Daniel reached that point when her body slipped out of his hands. He chose to live, to fight. It may have cost her life. Only she can appease that in him. If she’s hurt or God forbid, killed, he’ll never be satisfied. He’ll have to be put down.”

Mark hadn’t been expecting that, though it made sense to him. He dropped to the Drag position and concentrated on finding their watchers before Daniel did. He didn’t want the quest to end so soon.

## Chapter Six

# On Your Call

### 1

**T**wo hours went by with no signs of anyone trailing them, but everyone felt it. Daniel and Mark were still searching for a clue, but Edward had already determined the people were a threat or they would have made contact by now. He was expecting an attack once they found Alexa. He couldn't think of any other reason the people wouldn't have attacked in one of the narrow locations they'd just traversed.

Daniel slowed as the intersection on the map appeared in the dusty distance, letting the others reach him. They each took a side, indicating he was in charge for this encounter.

Daniel would have been proud of the choice, but anger was the only emotion he had room for right now. "Straight to the slave lines, but find a leader."

Edward nodded his approval of the plan. It's what Alexa would have done.

"Are we trading or taking?" Mark's tone said he didn't care which one Daniel chose.

"I'll let you know after I see the boss. If it's a hardass, we'll try to trade and save bullets."

Mark was impressed that Daniel had considered conservation through his rage. Waves of hot anger were flowing thickly from the tanned Biker.

Mark could almost taste the blood in Daniel's thoughts. He found it comforting.

Edward gave a low whistle.

Daniel automatically reached into his cloak for his other hat, glad of Alexa's rule about cloaks being kept on when they slept. Thanks to how wide they were, he'd been able to cover them both. Anguish went through Daniel's heart. *I want her back! Now!*

Edward handed Mark a hat. "Use this one until she outfits you."

Mark put the armored hat on, thinking one of those cloaks would be great. He loved the impression they created.

"They'll know you're new." Daniel increased the pace a bit, making them look like men on a serious quest who didn't need to run from the demons or rush toward them in a frantic mindset. "Follow Edward's lead. He'll follow mine. You'll be okay."

"Any codes or anything I should know for when we find the boss?"

Both men liked it that Mark assumed they would find her alive. Edward shook his head when Daniel didn't answer. "We don't know them well enough yet to teach. Use body language and innuendo, or just shoot when we do."

“That’s the one.” Mark patted the gun on his hip. “I’m not better with a rifle, for future reference.”

“Noted.” Edward moved his cloak behind his holster for easier access as he spotted movement. “Don’t forget about our watchers. Keep the rear clear.”

Mark spun around, walking backward while he did a scan.

The movement was smooth enough to give Edward hope that the man would be an asset in the coming situation. He acted as if he had professional training. *When this is all over, I’ll find out.* Edward fell into silent killer mode as they reached the edge of the road leading to the market. There were only a dozen grizzled slavers in sight, but they were all armed. All races were represented, but just one gender and it wasn’t male. This was a *female* slave market.

Three sets of balls curled up. Spines of steel came out in their place. Male slavery was common now that males were a small percentage of the population. Men still did the most killing, but female encounters were more likely to end in death. Some women were determined to see all males in chains or buried, and these were the worst of that lot.

“Men.”

“Alone!”

The slavers outside the closed market were stocky, musclebound women who were used to

fighting to get what they wanted or needed. The only one who didn't work hard was the protected woman sitting at a low table while leaning against pillows. Next to her, a much taller twin stood with her arms crossed over an ample bosom. Her clothes were a quality lower than the leader. Everyone else wore jeans and tank tops. Mark noticed only the leader had jewelry. All the rest were painted instead, wearing various designs that he assumed denoted their rank in the clan. If not for the differences in skin tone, they could have all been related with that dark hair, those dark eyes, and thin lips stretched with ugly leers.

“Free men!”

“Armed men, ladies.” Zelda waved at her guards to move so she could get a better view. “Those are someone's pets roaming the neighborhood. Be careful.”

Georgia, the taller twin, uncrossed her arms to be able to reach her gun easier.

“Stand down.” Zelda gave the order against the wishes of most of her women, but it was the wisest choice. She recognized walking death when she saw it.

“Look at those arms!”

“Forget the arms. Look at those hips!”

Crude laughter spilled from the slavers.

Zelda scanned the three men, wishing she could change her decision. The guys were healthier than she'd seen in years. Breeders were worth double cash, but they hadn't had a birth in a year. To get a

better trade, she made use of them over the winter and sometimes got a pregnancy to show for it. They at least had entertainment when the snow was four-foot deep and the only things moving were nightmares plowing through drifts. These three would have made the cold season tolerable and increased their fortunes. "Let them pass."

Georgia glanced at her sister in disgust. "It's three payments walking in without an owner. I say we take them hard and fast, then go west. We'll keep them this time."

Zelda snorted. "Go on then. I'll bury you next to our mother."

Georgia blanched. "You're a cruel bitch. You know?"

"I've kept you alive for years, so shut up or go get yourself killed, but don't bite my hand or we'll have trouble."

Georgia stomped away from her sister and the tempting trio of fresh meat. She circled around to provide a flank position in case Zelda changed her mind.

Zelda flashed a gold toothed smile at Daniel. "Lost or looking, sugar?"

Daniel didn't stop until they were a few feet from the leader lounging in the lawn chair. Her sentries came closer, but they didn't interfere. He assumed they wouldn't unless they were given an order. "Looking for something that was stolen."

Zelda scanned him from head to toe, then turned curious eyes to the other two men. When she

finished her evaluation, Zelda sighed. “Who was she?”

Daniel leered. “Alexa Mitchel.”

Zelda paled. Her guards moved back, muttering. “Safe Haven.”

“She really was a magic user.”

Georgia stomped back toward her sister. “I told you we should have kept her! With her, and these men, we wouldn’t need to be slavers anymore! You never listen!”

Zelda ignored her, observing the hatred flashing in Daniel’s eyes. “She’s two miles from here, east. She was bought by a clan of homesteaders. She’ll have a better life than most slaves.”

Daniel leaned forward. “If she’s been hurt, we’ll be back. You should leave this area.”

Zelda nodded at the ugly tone. “We’re going west soon.”

“Name?” Daniel wanted to be sure he could track them.

Zelda didn’t consider lying. She had no way to know if these gunfighters were also magic users. She wasn’t taking the chance. “Pruetts.”

Georgia glanced at her younger cousin, Marcella, who often agreed with her on how the family should be run. The teenager was a gifted assassin. It was almost time to do what they’d been planning since removing her mother.

Daniel turned east and walked away. It was hard. His old world emotion of never hurting a woman was the only barrier between them and



death. He was glad the leader had recognized that danger.

Edward couldn't imagine killing these hard women.

Mark didn't ever want to repeat his behavior.

They were thrilled that Daniel had kept himself under control. Horror hit all three men when a gun cocked. The sound echoed loudly in the uneasy silence.

Daniel kept walking. "I won't leave one of you alive. If I run out of bullets, I'll strangle you with my bare hands."

Zelda jumped up and knocked the gun from Georgia's hand, sending it into the dust. She lunged at her sister, thick arm swinging.

No one interfered.

"You thought I didn't know!" Zelda kept swinging. "She's mine, you traitor! Marcella will follow me forever! We'll always be slavers! Men deserve these chains!" She kept hitting.

Georgia finally recovered enough to fight back. She shoved her sister with her boot so that she could get to her feet. "You're the one who hates men! We don't all want to be slavers!"

The trio kept walking. The Drag men tried to listen to the chaos behind them, but Daniel didn't. He had a rein on his rage, but it was growing. If they didn't find Alexa soon, he would snap.

He increased his speed and drew his gun.

“I’d rather not get involved.” Alexa cleared her scratchy throat. “I’m already on a quest. Maybe I can help you after I finish this job.”

The group of escaped males glared at her as if she was crazy.

“Did she say no?”

“Doesn’t she understand we’re going to burn her alive?”

“What does she think those gas cans are for?”

Alexa settled against the pole she was tied to, delivering tired encouragement. “This is something you can do for yourselves.”

The three dozen men and boys were a mix of races, ages, and nationalities, with their terror in common. It surprised Alexa to see a group of males this size gathered to fight the slavery laws coming from a government bunker in the west. Most males were loners, protected, or already enslaved.

“She can’t be serious.”

“We can’t wait. We’re dying now!”

The house implied someone in the group had been wealthier than the others. Alexa couldn’t tell by the clothes that were a mix of handsewn furs and bolts of cloth, but the house refuted a poor past. Before the war, the furnishings here would have placed them well into the middle class. Maybe even the lowest class of rich. These locals didn’t resemble the environment. They also didn’t act as if they were familiar with some of the items in the home that Alexa knew could be used even without

power. She swept again and found a hand cranked power source. Alexa realized this house had been set up by a prepper. “After you eliminate your enemies, you should stay here. This is a great setup.”

The adults didn’t know how to react to her casual rebuttals and conversational tidbits.

The leader stepped forward, pointing. “You will help us or we will burn you alive!”

Alexa shrugged. “I’m on a quest right now. Perhaps if you can wait until—”

Jerald slapped her. It rang through the wooden house, drawing gasps.

Jerald waited for her reaction, braced to take pain as long as it got her agreement.

Alexa spat blood at him. “Marked.”

Jerald hit her again. He wasn’t scared of her name or her religion. Safe Haven zealots weren’t the threat.

Alexa felt fire growing inside, but she pushed it down. Some of these people were innocent. She didn’t want to hurt them.

Jerald retreated, slinging blood from his hand. “You’ll help us or I’ll cut off a piece at a time and cook it! We’re hungry.”

People protested his claim, but Alexa had little doubt they’d all eaten human flesh to survive. Their hollow sockets said they would consume whatever they found. They were starving. “But you won’t fight the slavers.”

Jerald raised his hand.

Alexa's eyes glowed red.

He stopped, sucking in air. "I knew it!" He dropped at her feet, reduced to begging. "Please! You have to help us!"

Alexa felt old magic enter the room. She didn't want to obey the invocation, but she had to. "There is always a price to deals like these."

"We'll let you go!" Jerald pleaded from her bound feet. "With anything we have that you want."

"*Your* life."

Jerald swallowed, nodded. "If it saves my son going on the market, I give my life gladly."

Alexa nodded, mouth and heart stinging. She understood the desperation that had pushed him into striking her. So far, he was the only male here who would. The others had refused to torture her when she'd said no the first time. "Release me."

"We're bound. You agreed." Jerald stood, waiting for her to acknowledge it.

Alexa spat more blood, striking him in the chest this time. "So be it."

Jerald cut her bonds and scrambled back, trembling with fear. He didn't want to die.

Alexa stretched her sore arms. "The entire family at the slave market?"

"Not the young ones." Jerald glared at some of the men in the crowd, tone scolding. "They chose to spare them."

Alexa felt a bright heat on her cheek for an instant. She smiled. *He remembered to alert me with the mirror! Nice.*

The men in the crowd relaxed. It was a beautiful smile.

Alexa retreated to provide a clear shot. “Do it!”

Edward fired. He hit Jerald in the bloody spittle on his chest.

Men screamed and ran, assuming it was the women from the market.

Alexa stayed still so her crew could have a clear line of fire if any of the others fought back.

None of them did. Many fell to their knees in surrender. The rest grabbed their sons and tried to flee.

Mark and Daniel stopped them at the two exits to the cabin. They didn’t have to shoot. The timid males surrendered at both locations without a fight.

Alexa waited for all of them to be brought back in, ignoring their pleas for mercy.

Alexa felt the unease among her team and handled it first. She identified the worst wave and went to Daniel, hugged him. “Thank you for finding me.”

Daniel clutched her close, heart releasing the ball of fear. “It’s my honor!”

She smiled at Edward, then Mark over Daniel’s shoulder. “Mine as well. Such a loyal crew you already are.”

“Yeah, about that.” Zelda stepped in the house with most of her girls, all aiming guns. “We’d like to buy them from you. Especially him.” She motioned her weapon toward Daniel.

“Not on your life.” Unarmed, Alexa slid behind Daniel. “Do it now or we’ll be parted again.”

Daniel pulled the trigger.

Her crew did the same. Alexa had chosen their punishment. Her men enforced the decision.

Zelda died in the first volley. She hadn’t expected them to open fire without a pause. Her sentries went down in the next wave.

The escaped males rushed for doors and windows, carting screaming sons.

The other women tried to fire, but they also hadn’t been prepared for the men to be so bold as to duel them. Slugs slammed into guts, chests, legs.

Zelda’s crew lost their lives in two minutes.

Daniel reloaded, still pushing Alexa back against a wall for more protection. She stayed tight to his frame, warming his chilly spine and watching out for him.

“Duck!”

Daniel dropped at her call.

A bullet plunged into the couch by his hip.

Mark shot the slaver in the chest before she could fire at Daniel again. She fell down the stairs, gun sliding across the bloody floor.

Alexa picked it up, checked for rounds. “Stay alert. It’s not over.”

Her men weren’t happy to hear it. They reloaded, eyes searching, blood pounding, ears ringing.

Alexa looked toward the door.

Edward groaned low in his throat as an older woman entered the house with a group of jeweled females. *Must be the rest of the family who were waiting for the workers at the market to come home. We miscounted that threat.* “Don’t do this.”

Mark felt the deep reluctance in his fellowmen, but he didn’t have it. He lifted his gun toward the woman in front. “You go first, Lady.”

Maria grimaced, insides burning at being so close to fresh males. “Don’t miss.”

“He won’t.” Alexa also had a bloody gun aimed at her. “Neither will I. Leave now. Find another pain relief.”

The changeling shook her head, eyes blazing. “I can’t control it.”

The older woman’s face was adorned in paint. She glared at them through shades of red, black, and green that gave her the appearance of an undead slaver. The rest of the women were without paint this time but wearing jewelry. Edward wasn’t sure that he could fire on them. *Odd world we have now.*

Alexa understood and even felt sympathy. She looked at Mark.

Mark felt her silent query. He nodded. “On your call.”

Maria’s hand tightened on her gun. “Don’t move!”

“Now.” Alexa pulled the trigger.

Mark followed her lead.

Edward shuddered as the dead woman crashed through the banister. She fell onto the pile of bodies below.

Her crew fired at them.

Alexa's crew fired back, all of them this time. Slugs flew into arms, legs, stomachs, and the walls, spraying more crimson through the once expensive cabin.

When the shooting stopped, Alexa and her crew were standing, though not without damage.

Alexa scanned them, then waved at the house. "Load up."

The males began looting the corpses and the environment.

Alexa took the supplies they handed her without examining the packages. She stored them in her cloak, vaguely aware of the added weight. This trip would not only toughen her men, but herself, as well. Like them, she was looking forward to being more than she was now.

Most of the escaped men and boys had fled through windows during the fight. The few who hadn't gone were watching them from dark corners, expecting to be killed.

"We're set." Edward waited for orders as he and the others joined her near the front door.

Alexa handed Daniel a cloth from her cloak. "Take care of that arm."

Daniel dug out his medical pouch and extended it. "Can't reach at that angle."



Alexa snickered, taking the kit. She led him onto the wide porch.

Edward and Mark reloaded, aware of the rest of the escaped males fleeing through the rear exit.

Alexa dug the bullet out of Daniel's bicep and flipped it into the trees next to the porch. She poured in the peroxide, then smeared ointment into the bleeding hole. She was proud of Daniel when he only tightened his grip on the porch rail. She tied the cloth around his arm, then handed him the knife.

Daniel wasn't as quick or good while cutting into Alexa's festering wound. He noticed her hot skin and flushed cheeks but didn't say anything about it. He used the blade to cut out the infection, respect for her growing when she didn't scream. He stuffed the hole with a swab of gauze, then rotated it with his finger to scrape off the rest of the infection that he hadn't been able to get with the knife.

Alexa groaned, but swallowed the scream.

Edward came over and placed his back against hers for support. He kept watching for trouble, able to feel her body tense each time Daniel swabbed out the angry wound.

Mark tried to fight the urge but couldn't. He also came over to place his big body along her hip, trying to lend strength.

Alexa felt tears welling up. She slammed her eyes shut.

Daniel used that moment to pour in the peroxide. As the white liquid bubbled out the dirt,

he heated the tip of his knife to a bright flame with a scavenged lighter. Her wound had to be sealed now. Swabbing had cleared it down to the flesh, but the flow of blood was too heavy to slap a bandage over it. She either needed stitches or cauterization. She had already made it clear which to pick in a situation like this.

Alexa hissed as Daniel sealed the wound with the fiery metal. It only took two quick presses, but it felt longer as her skin continued to burn. Smoke rose from the charred skin.

Daniel dumped his canteen over it, effectively stopping the burning and hardening the top layer of skin with the abrupt temperature change. It would hold if she wanted to keep traveling, though Daniel hoped she didn't. She needed rest, medication.

Alexa swayed, exhaustion and pain overwhelming her.

Edward turned around, feeling her fall.

Mark was already dipping down to catch her.

Daniel dug through his cloak for the bottles of medication she insisted they carry. "Which one? I don't remember what she said for infection."

Edward pointed. "The penicillin." He looked at Mark. "Stand her up."

Edward rubbed her hands as she woke. "It's okay. It's us."

Alexa stifled the need to strike out at all the hands on her without permission. She let Daniel give her the pills, but she took the canteen from him

to drink on her own. She was horrified to see her hand shake.

The water tasted too good. She had to make herself stop so she didn't get sick.

The men all scowled, becoming aware of her condition. She was bruised, sick, and very thirsty. They doubted she'd been fed once since the night before the flood.

Alexa hated their pitying gazes, but she couldn't hide the weakness from days of neglect. She studied them each in turn, from senior to rookie. "The code can be used against us. I will always follow it. You have options, though they're limited. This is why I need you. This is what happens when I'm alone."

Daniel winced.

Alexa didn't let him turn away when he would have. "It's *my* fault. I got too far away from all of you. I'm sorry. It will never happen again. My word on it."

Daniel's guilt was vanquished to a dark corner and covered in salted earth. He took a deep breath, accepting her words. "Thank you."

Alexa patted his healthy shoulder, drawing energy without him knowing. "Lead us out of here. I'll need to rest for a couple days once we stop."

Daniel did as instructed, calm demeanor finally snapping back into place.

Edward gave Alexa a grateful nod, then stepped to the rear position.

Mark waited to see where she wanted him, loving the feel of them all being together. These

short moments were quickly becoming precious to him.

Alexa waved him toward Edward. “Do what he does, listen to what he says.”

Mark hurried to catch up.

Alexa stayed where she was. She’d learned a hard lesson here and it wasn’t over yet. “Company.”

The males all spun, ready to kill again.

Daniel came to Alexa. He put his hip against hers while glowering at the remaining slavers now pulling around the rear of the ranch home. Many of the local men and boys were in the vehicles, silently begging for help.

“Hold your fire.” Alexa picked out the new leader by her gestures. She was giving orders for her fighters to stay back and not make sudden moves.

Georgia exited the jeep and came to Alexa with half a dozen guards that she waved off as she got close. “After the fight, we voted about coming to get you, and to end slavery in our family. My sister’s group won the vote. They’re dead now, so they paid for it.”

“I hold no grudge against you.”

“Thank you.”

Alexa noticed the woman’s smirk as she studied the shot-up house. “You did this on purpose.”

Georgia shrugged. “An opportunity presented itself. I chose to take advantage. I didn’t call you here or know you were coming. There’s no way I could have planned it.”

Alexa grunted at the clever evasion. “As I would have done in your place, perhaps. I need to know why, or I may need to seek vengeance for being used in your opportunity.”

Georgia spun around, wearing hatred Alexa had been expecting. The sisters hadn’t been tight.

“She killed our husbands after the war. I loved mine!”

“And what about the guys begging me with their eyes to kill you all?”

Georgia’s face softened. “We’ll try to love them. Winter will come soon. We need children and they can obviously produce them.”

One of the slaver sentries frowned, making Alexa doubt the antislavery lifestyle would last. Still, if there was a chance this family would change, they deserved the opportunity to try. The cowardly men who would have burnt her at the pole didn’t deserve any more of her skills. She’d given them what they demanded. All young women and kids had been spared. The rest were dead. Alexa waved the woman on. “Go in peace.”

Disappointed she wasn’t getting an opportunity to tell the story or whine about it, Georgia gave Alexa a look of contempt and flounced off.

A few seconds later, she and her girls drove away, leaving a thick cloud of dust.

“Well, that was fun.”

Everyone snickered at Edward’s comment.

“Agreed. Can we do it again, mom? Please? Can we?” Mark couldn’t help adding to the moment.

Alexa snorted amusement. “Sooner than you think. Let’s roll before she comes back for Daniel. His sand got her wet.”

Laughter flowed over the carnage, creating another layer of scar tissue to protect them from the horrors of how drastically the world had changed for everyone.

Chapter Seven

## The Right Thing

1

**T**he smell of rotten water faded as they walked. In its place came a dusty, dry air that brought coughs and extra sips from canteens while they adjusted to the environment. Around them, small, neglected neighborhoods passed without the sense of human life. There also weren't any signs of other life.

The wind increased, making it harder to walk without getting grit in their eyes or mouth. Alexa motioned them to pull up bandanas or shirts, now understanding why the area had emptied out. The weather alone would have been enough, but there were also charred military vehicles, destroyed chunks of road that forced them to climb down and then up, old brass winking in the dim sun, and skeletons. This had been a war zone. All of them were eager to be under cover, but nothing in sight would be safe. The small towns had multiple collapses and most of the remaining bullet ridden buildings appeared as though they could go at any point.

Alexa stayed on her feet longer than her men thought she would. Three hours after her rescue, she finally stopped.

Alexa shuddered at the pain, then shivered from the cold sweats.

Daniel had been waiting for her call.

Alexa forced her brain and mouth to work together, eyes closing. "Soldiers are coming." The enemy was close. Her team would be in sight in minutes. She slid to her knees, stomach roiling. "Step back."

The men glanced away as she vomited.

When Daniel copied her action, Edward took control. He pointed at the nearest hulk of a car. "Get her in there." It was the only shelter that might protect her in a gunfight. He waved at Daniel. "Stay with her."

Daniel got Alexa moving toward the rusted, burnt vehicle. He helped her climb in and lay down out of sight.

Edward went to the sturdiest looking shack and climbed it in slow inches to keep from making enough movement at one time to draw attention. The shack swayed under him, ready to fall as he peered over.

"Shit." The soldiers had come in force this time. Five jeeps rolled in front of two transport vehicles, all led by a hummer equipped with a .50 caliber gun. He did a quick estimate. "Ten minutes..." Movement to the south caught his eye. The slaver convoy was coming this way at a steady clip. *Also*



*ten minutes.* “The soldiers are coming for the slavers...” The type of vehicles implied a quick snatch-and-grab about to take place. Edward doubted the slavers would evade the organized ambush starting to cover both entrances to this town.

Edward slid down the side of the house and ran to the car.

Mark read the panic as he joined them.

“The slavers and soldiers will get here at the same time. I think they’re arresting the women, so they can take their slaves in the Draft trucks. They have a big gun.”

“Should we get Alexa out of here? I can carry her for a while.”

Edward noted Mark’s eager tone but frowned. “So can I, but it seems wrong to leave the slavers. They don’t know it’s coming.”

“They were slavers.” Daniel’s teeth chattered.

“Agreed, but out of those two enemies, who do we want less?”

“The soldiers.”

“The government.”

“Agreed.” Alexa shivered under Daniel’s heavy heat. “Leave us here. Go warn them.”

None of the men liked that order, but they didn’t argue. There wasn’t time for it.

Mark and Edward took off running toward the convoy, praying Alexa and Daniel would be here when they returned.

Alexa began to mutter, pulling her strength together for a spell.

Daniel hugged her. “Take what you need. I give it willingly.”

Alexa drew from him, murmuring. Energy flowed over the car, bringing up a mirage. It appeared empty.

Daniel smothered his groans at the connection, not afraid.

Alexa was terrified. She didn’t know how long she could hold the illusion. If she passed out, they would both be found. If the soldiers had a tracking device, or a hunter, they might be able to detect the magic while it was being used, making it easy to narrow a location. Safety was a myth.

## 2

Mark was out of breath before they reached the convoy. He wheezed alongside Edward as they reached their destination.

Made up of five vehicles, the slaver convoy carried the eight women with their children, plus the new males crammed into the rear of the trucks. They had little chance of avoiding the ambush or outshooting the soldiers. Being on a Draft team meant a promotion and better living quarters. The men who were accepted were loyal to the New World Order and to the remaining United States government. They were good at their job.

The convoy slid to dusty halts as they saw two of Alexa's crew approaching. Many of them drew weapons.

"Hold your fire!" Georgia beeped her horn to get attention. She shook her head, letting everyone know not to attack. She didn't get out of her vehicle, however. Her gun rested on her thigh.

"Soldiers are coming for you in the next town." Edward sucked in air, hoping these women were worth this effort. "Go back the way you came, then get lost."

Georgia saw another opportunity and stewed over it for a brief moment. She could try to hold Alexa's men. It would involve a shootout that would certainly cut her numbers in half, but she was confident in her own skills. She could hit one of them without killing. It would also mean crossing Alexa, but she already owed that woman a debt, no matter what the blonde hadn't said.

Georgia waved for them to be allowed to leave and then holstered her gun on the clever dashboard holder she had installed. "Another time, maybe, when you don't have a magic user protecting you. In the future, those females will not be allowed to breed. Strict population control is the answer."

Pruetts hadn't had enough honor in the past. Her sister, Zelda, hadn't been bad in that area, but Georgia wanted their rules to be stricter. She hated being around people she couldn't trust. The Pruett of the future would have an honor code guiding their every decision to keep them on the path that only a

world war had presented. Women would rule the world at some point. Pruetts would be the reason why. All Georgia's talk of ending slavery had been just that—talk. She'd gotten exactly what she wanted. *My sister is gone. I'm the power now.*

Mark groaned as Edward immediately turned back toward Alexa's location, but he kept pace.

Edward wanted to give Mark a break, but he needed to reach Alexa before the soldiers did. She was in rough shape and Daniel wasn't much better.

Mark slowly fell behind. He waved Edward on when the man spun around in frustration.

Edward returned for him. "Never leave a man."

Mark's respect increased, as did his concern. They would never reach Alexa in time. Mark couldn't stand it. He dug deep and found a burst of reserve speed.

Edward put a hand under Mark's arm to keep the man at that pace.

Gunshots rang out.

Edward lifted Mark over his shoulder and used the speed tricks Alexa had been teaching him.

Engines swelled behind them...and kept going. The front of the convoy didn't stop, though many of the drivers waved at them.

Edward moved over, then stopped as the rear vehicle slowed to pick them up.

Edward piled into the middle with the kids as Mark got in the rear with a smiling male local. He was eating for probably the first time in days.

Edward glanced at the driver in the mirror as she floored it. “How did you trick them into agreeing to attack the soldiers?”

Marcella frowned lightly. “I didn’t. I told Georgia we need to kill the soldiers or they’ll wipe us out next time.”

“The soldiers really are coming for you. There’s a trap.”

“I believe you, but it doesn’t matter. The soldiers will slaughter these women, then Draft our males. We’re going to our deaths.”

“Why would you go if you know the outcome?!”

Marcella ignored his aggressive tone. “Because it’s the right thing to do. Didn’t your boss teach you that yet?”

### 3

Alexa felt the presence of someone who could track magic. Her heart sank. She’d made it to sunset, where they might be able to escape into the shadows. She only needed another five minutes, but she didn’t have that long to spare. “We’re about to have a lot of company.” She felt them zeroing in on her location.

“We’ll do the best we can.” Daniel let the cool shield drop into place as Alexa let go of the illusion over them.

Soldiers gaped in shock as Alexa appeared in the vehicle.

Before they could raise an alarm or a weapon, Daniel shot them.

More soldiers turned toward the sound, then rotated again at a new noise.

The engine of a large vehicle came closer.

“Go!” Daniel shoved Alexa from the car during the clear moment. The distracted soldiers knew Alexa was here, but the tank rolling down the center of the road had confused them. Daniel quickly determined the tank wasn’t part of the ambush, but he didn’t have time to determine an outcome. He struggled to get Alexa on her feet and moving to another shelter before the next wave of chaos hit.

“It’s slowing!” One of the soldiers pointed.

“The turret’s lifting!”

“Run!”

The soldiers in the street scattered as the tank fired.

Daniel covered Alexa as a loud whistle drowned out the shouts.

A hard thud came... A transport truck exploded into a thousand pieces that plunged through the smoky air.

“There she is!” A soldier took off after Alexa.

Daniel fired, hitting the man in the stomach.

“It’s turning! It’s turning!”

Now without a leader, the four dozen soldiers didn’t know what to do or who to obey. They were all the same rank. Some of them chased Alexa. The rest huddled around the body of their Sergeant while others fired in vain at the tank.

The driver of the remaining transport truck jumped out and ran.

The sound of the tank effected all other noises as it rolled down the dusty street. Screams were muffled, gunshots barely registered, shouts were muted. Bullets fired, but their targets were no longer looking for it. Soldiers fell to Georgia's slavers, who arrived in time to take advantage of the moment. They were the only ones not surprised by the tank. They had been expecting soldiers and a tank was standard equipment.

Daniel shoved Alexa's slowing body toward a shack, wishing he had the strength to pick her up.

The tank fired again.

Soldiers tried to dive out of the way.

The shell barreled down the middle of the street and slammed into the other transport vehicle. The street was sprayed with shrapnel that killed some and wounded many.

Daniel grunted at the pain, also hit. He fell against Alexa, knocking them both into the brush behind the shack. They were out of sight as the convoy rolled up beside the tank.

The passengers fired rifles, further encouraging the soldiers to give up this battle.

The remaining army men fled toward their jeeps.

The slavers cheered and kept firing in the dusky light.

The tank followed the jeeps out of town, making sure they didn't try regrouping for another attack.

Edward and Mark ran from the rear vehicle, meeting at the bullet ridden car where they had left their teammates.

“It’s empty!” Edward began searching the ground for clues.

Mark scanned the destruction and then convoy, hoping the trouble was over now.

“That heel.” Edward followed the tracks. “It’s Daniel. He has a limp when he’s tired.”

“Old gunshot wound?” Mark stayed with Edward, ignoring the females now observing their every move.

“Long fall.” Edward used his light to trace the debris on the street to the yard of a small shack.

“Over here!” Edward hefted Daniel off Alexa. “He’s breathing. Get her.”

Mark took Alexa’s lighter weight, exhausted. “Where to?”

Alexa drew energy, needing to handle one last issue. “Put me down.”

Mark helped her stand, then backed up, sure she didn’t want the enemy to know how weak she really was.

“Can we offer you a ride from the area?” Georgia made sure she sounded polite, not eager.

Alexa studied the woman much the way she had at the house after her rescue. She slowly shook her head. “Your new code hasn’t sunk in. You’ll find a way to double cross me. You can’t be trusted.”

Georgia controlled her anger because Alexa’s words were the truth. She’d been hoping to rack up



a travel debt and claim one of the men as payment or to find Alexa too weak to defend them all.

Alexa slid her hand onto her gun belt and tapped out the tune to Nay Nay Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye.

Georgia recognized it and looked away before she could say anything that would trigger an uglier moment. There wasn't a full credit here, even though they had showed up in time to shoot a few of the soldiers. Alexa had warned them, but the tank had done most of the work. Without that metal protector, Georgia and her women would never have been enough against the soldiers. She still owed Alexa half a debt.

Georgia waved her convoy to get moving. "Let's roll. We need to clear the state. No way this goes unpunished."

She was obeyed instantly.

"What about the tank?" Mark needed to be sure it was okay to relax now.

Edward shrugged. "If he's one of us, we'll see him again. And he is, so we will."

"How do you know?"

"Same feeling as when we got you out of that slam. Same as when we found Daniel and when she found me. Some things feel perfect because they are."

Russell understood Alexa's decision not to take a ride with the slavers better than she would have wanted him to. She was protecting her men. He couldn't threaten them, but she was fair game. He would be able to get her to surrender to save their lives. All he had to do was find a way to entrap her. As for the tank driver, Russell believed it to be an AWOL soldier. He mentally marked the man for death. "Cowards and deserters deserve whatever they get."

Russell clicked his radio in the code that only trackers were allowed to use. The response was immediate.

"Make your report."

Russell sneered at the condescending tone, but he didn't let it color his response. "Eden Prison was attacked. A high-risk prisoner was taken without payment. The entire prison is flooded. Pineview Reservoir finally let go. Survivors are doubtful. I also saw your missing tank. It was in Logan, Utah three minutes ago, with Alexa Mitchel, number two on our list. She's too defended for me to approach yet. I'm following, but the soldiers that were sent to this town to Draft the slave stock have failed."

Russell waited for a reply, prepared to repeat himself if necessary. Communications were not what they used to be.

"Orders are to stay on target. Her capture is vital to preventing the return of Safe Haven."

Russell snarled at the radio as he turned it off, unhappy the man had used a name. “That’s another one I need to kill.”

Russell studied the small slaver convoy. Alexa was protected, but he doubted that would hold against a large group of angry men. These soldiers hadn’t been angry. “They were scared to be out of the big bunker. I need the men they wouldn’t let out... Or maybe some undead to surround her.” Russell observed his target. Swaying steps in the fading sunlight told him she was weak. “I kept her moving. No time to heal. Good.”

Russell kept his hiding place in the tall weeds, aware of abandoned, surviving soldiers still fleeing the town.

Panicked steps crunched too close...

Russell kicked, hard.

“Ug!” The bloody soldier slammed into the hard ground.

Russell plunged his knife in the man’s throat. “Sorry, kid. Can’t have you screaming.”

Russell scanned for more trouble as he waited for the soldier to stop gurgling. The convoy was almost out of sight and the eerie feeling of a deserted battlefield was falling into place. The damage was impressive. He hadn’t expected Alexa to have a protector driving a tank. Clearly, the soldiers hadn’t either. Without that, her quest might have ended right here.

Instead of rage or disappointment, Russell was excited to be so close to the final showdown.

The tank engine faded, leaving silence.

Russell retrieved his blade, wiped it clean on the body. He kept it in hand as he rolled over and shut his eyes. Now was a good time and place for a nap. The tank would be easy to follow, and he wanted to be well rested for their meeting.

## 5

“Spread out. We need a location.” Alexa kept watch while the men examined debris and used moonlight to figure out where they were. They’d been walking for five hours since leaving the convoy. She couldn’t take much more despite the energy she’d drawn.

“The store says Krem something. I believe this is Kemmerer.”

Alexa found it on the map, agreeing with Edward’s assumption. She felt something here, though she wasn’t sure if it was a threat or a Safe Haven site. She hoped for the latter but prepared for the former. She checked her weapons. The pain in her shoulder had been banished to a dull ache by energy and painkillers, thankfully. When Daniel had insisted, she hadn’t refused, but it wouldn’t hold her much longer.

Her men did the same, becoming tense at her actions.

Alexa moved to the center of the dusty street, hands on her gun butt. She could barely see to travel as the moon slid behind clouds.

Edward and Daniel exchanged surprised glances when she led them to a small YMCA only a few blocks away. Her injury had taken its toll.

Alexa waved two fingers and flipped on her light as she stepped inside the dusty building.

Her crew also activated their lights, walking in rows of two behind her.

Alexa chose the bottom floor, zeroing in on the smell of the water. The pool put off waves of faint bleach instead of rot. If it was relatively clean, they could fill canteens, then bathe. She motioned them to secure the rest of the basement floor while she examined the pool.

It had a dirty bottom of sediment, but no mold or algae on top, thanks to chemical traces in the water. It would be like a pond but cleaner. Alexa began to fill her canteen.

Edward returned first. He took a guard post by one of the many entrances to the room as the dark quiet seduced him, bringing a yawn.

Alexa echoed it.

They shared a quick smile as the others returned. Encouraging the silent communication in the dark, Alexa waved to an empty corner.

Mark and Daniel put the bedrolls there, trying to be quiet as they worked. This was another lesson for them.

Alexa joined Edward on sentry duty. Edward didn't need to be taught to function in the dark. He already knew how. He'd been surviving underground for years.

The basement of the YMCA looked like any other poolside entertainment area, complete with mildewed lounge chairs and a bone-dry shower setup. It also had small booths for people to change their clothes. TV screens, couches, and end tables covered with dusty, faded magazines lined the opposite wall. The only thing out of place was the people bedding down here for the night.

Edward yawned again. It had been a long adventure to add Mark to their crew. He liked the tough man and he was glad to have more help, but he wanted sleep right now.

Alexa waved him on. "We're right behind you."

Edward went without protest, proving his exhaustion. He gave Daniel a sharp look to remind him of his duties as senior man on point.

Wide awake again, Daniel grinned at him.

Edward sighed as he dropped onto the common bed they'd made. *Ah, to be young again.*

Alexa caught his thought and swallowed a smile. This lifestyle was hard anyway, but lack of sleep made it harder. She'd never had so many aches and pains. Not getting good sleep for days at a time prevented a body from healing.

Alexa stretched. Her spine popped loudly in the silence, like a gunshot.

Daniel and Mark spun around, drawing.

Edward rose off the bed in a dangerous movement, boiling.

Alexa's raspy chuckle filled the room.

Edward groaned, dropping back to the uncomfortable bed.

Daniel snickered, holstering.

Mark flushed, embarrassed.

Daniel shook his head when Mark would have apologized. He put his fingers to his lips to remind Mark they weren't supposed to talk.

Mark nodded, but he gave the boss an apologetic glance.

Alexa's approving nod took Mark a bit to figure out. When he did, the embarrassment faded. He was able to fight on a second's notice, like her other guys. Mark suddenly wondered if she'd had a husband before the war, if she missed her family. Before he could ask, Mark joined Edward for sleep. He wasn't supposed to talk right now, but a part of him also didn't want to know the answer.

Alexa waved.

Daniel joined them at her motion, sensing she wanted a few minutes of alone time. Like the other two men, he dropped out hard, comforted by the fact that their leader was on duty. No one would get by Alexa. They could sleep now.

Alexa waited until all three men were out before letting her tears fall. It had been a rough life and she was nearly at her weakest. Worse, she did miss her family, even the evil souls hellbent on finishing the destruction of the world. It would be hard to do her duty when the time came. Moments like these would allow the pain to dull so she could pull the trigger when the time came.





Chapter Eight

# We'll Go From There

## 1

A low rumble pulled everyone from deep sleep. After half an hour of silence, with no feeling of a new threat coming, Alexa had joined her men in sleep. Now, as the sun began to rise through the windows of the basement, everyone leapt to their feet, fumbling for weapons.

Alexa hurried to the nearest window to take stock of the situation. The rumbling noise came from a huge engine. She assumed that because it rattled the entire building.

Her crew spread out, covering the other windows.

“I see something.” Edward swiped the dirty glass. “I think it’s the tank that helped us.” He’d almost forgotten about it in his exhaustion.

Alexa moved to his window to observe.

Outside, voices echoed.

Daniel began packing their small camp. “There are people here. Why didn’t we notice them when we came in?”

“We were tired. They were probably asleep.” Mark came over to help Daniel gather their gear.

“I think they’re coming this way.” Edward checked his loaded gun out of habit.

The rumble grew louder as the tank circled in front of the YMCA. It came to a dusty stop between the front and the people coming toward the building.

Alexa went to the first floor, but stopped by the door, eager to listen to the exchange.

“We don’t want trouble with the soldiers.”

“We have permission from the government to be here.”

“What do you want with this building?!”

Alexa’s head went up at the sound of that last firm voice. *My Driver*.

“We know who that is in there!”

“So?” The man’s voice didn’t change.

“We want to talk to her.”

“And you thought surrounding the building was the way to go?”

“We didn’t want her to run away before we could talk to her. You didn’t have to chase us out of the alley. We’re not a threat.”

“People who say they’re not a threat are usually the opposite.”

“You can’t get all of us with that tank. We’re going in to talk to her.”

“The gun in my hand has twelve shots. There are eleven of you. I like the odds.”

Alexa grinned at the silence in response. She turned the handle of the door and opened it, but she

didn't step out to present a clear target. "State your business."

The tank driver lifted his weapon when the group of people would have rushed toward Alexa. "You can talk from right there."

During the small standoff, Alexa scanned the driver of the tank. She had already determined the people talking to him were not more than she could handle, even while wounded. She was groggy, but the six hours of rest had done wonders.

The driver didn't look at her, though she saw his shoulders straighten at her perusal. Tall and sandy, he had a dirty ponytail, a five-day beard, and a beautiful pair of 1911s—one of which was in his hand. The feel of Safe Haven, of her father, floated through the afternoon air.

Edward felt it, too. He also concentrated on the man, gleaning details from his appearance and body language.

Daniel observed the townspeople. He doubted any of the group was over the age of twenty-five. Several of them were carrying kids, implying the sterile disease that had hit most of the western population had skipped them. Their leery gazes and thin bodies wouldn't have been out of the ordinary except they knew of Alexa. It was possible this group had been allowed to stay here for this moment.

Daniel and Mark edged closer to their leader to have a clear shot if trouble broke out.

“She’s not gonna wait much longer.” The driver of the tank delivered a derisive sneer. “Not that she’s going to give you what you want anyway. Why don’t you go back to your bowling alley and finish dying?”

Alexa didn’t correct the man, though his words were harsh. She assumed he had a good reason for feeling that way. If he had been patrolling the area, he would have noticed more about these people than she’d had time to observe yet.

“All we need is an escort.” The oldest female of the group, with drooling toddler on her back, took a step forward.

The driver’s gun moved with her, keeping aim.

She stopped, paling. “We can’t make the trip by ourselves, but she’s honor bound to help people like us!”

Daniel and Mark were now convinced this was a trap. Like the slavers, the bowling alley people were a mix of races, with more women than men.

The leader, a ponytailed brunette with a slender waist and a twitchy eye, kept pace. The other locals took turns staring at Alexa’s protectors in curious fear. These people were not fighters.

“She’s already on a quest.”

Edward frowned as he realized the tank driver knew a lot more about Alexa than he should.

Alexa stepped onto the front walk of the YMCA, hands on her guns. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

The tank driver still didn't look at her, though Edward could feel that he wanted to.

"Safe Haven took our parents while we were out on a scavenging run." Amber waved toward the tank. "When we got back, soldiers were here looking for them. We had to stay."

One of the two men in the group stepped forward to take Amber's side, not liking the way the tank driver had his gun pointed at her and the baby. "We've managed to survive, but all the food is gone now. We need to leave."

"And where is it you wish me to take you?" Alexa didn't call them on the lies she'd heard, still gathering details.

"There's an old bunker west of here." Amber resisted the man's attempt to take the child from her. She lightly bounced the restless toddler to soothe him. "There's another one to the south. We don't care which one you take us to, so long as *you* take us."

Edward moved to the guard position as Alexa stepped to the front of the tank. She stood with her back to the driver, telling her crew she didn't consider him a threat.

All they could see of the driver was a lot of hair and a black jacket with a fading eagle. The tip of a beautiful Colt showing on his lean hip was a fascinating contrast to the fedora on his head.

Edward suspected the tank driver would be joining them, but he didn't turn his back to the man like Alexa had. He gave the driver an appraising

look. He found bags under a bloodshot gaze and dried blood on the front of the man's army shirt. It wasn't comforting.

The driver gave him a casual nod in return, then directed his attention back to the situation unfolding in front of them.

"As you've been told, I'm already on a quest."

Amber shook her head, baby now playing with her hair. "That's not the way this works. You have to take us. You're one of them."

Alexa studied the girl. "If you didn't meet Safe Haven when they came through, how do you know?"

Amber let out a derisive noise. "Safe Haven left flyers all over the country. They also left supplies for us. We learned more from the soldiers, then from the people who came through behind them, trying to find safety."

Alexa waved at their empty holsters. "Do you not have weapons, or did you know it was a bad idea to wear them during this conversation?"

Amber grimaced. "Both. We have three guns that work, but no ammo for them. We can't even hunt anymore."

Mark and Daniel flanked Edward, also giving the tank driver a quick look. Neither of them recognized the feel, but Edward had. The tank driver was a hardass, like them.

Alexa scanned the rest of the group. The presence of children was designed to make her more sympathetic to their cause. Unfortunately, it was

working, but the temptation of information on Safe Haven was what made her stop and put out a scarred hand. “I agree to have a conversation. We’ll go from there.”

Amber immediately shook, flashing a weak smile. “Thank you. I’m not sure if we have enough food to feed all your guys, but we do have a fuel supply that might work for the tank.”

Alexa waved two fingers in the air. “Give it to my new guard dog.”

And with that, the driver of the tank became part of her crew.

Edward took a spot on the side of the tank in response to her coded order, but he wasn’t about to let her walk alone in that group. They were lying about something. When she waved Daniel to join him on the tank, Edward pointed Mark to her rear.

Alexa allowed it. Like Edward, she knew the locals were shady. Still, she wanted the information they had and she was willing to kill to get it. If they were simply stranded like they claimed, then her quest would have to wait. The girl was absolutely right about her being honor bound to help innocent people and all of the children here were that.

As they walked through Kemmerer, Alexa noticed the stores had been looted. She assumed these people had cleaned everything out but hadn’t had respect for the town itself. Instead of opening doors, they had smashed windows and rammed cars through walls. The mini mall across from the bowling alley was only ashes.

“If you had fuel, why didn’t you follow your parents?” Alexa walked on Amber’s right as Mark stayed between her and Amber’s guard—a tall, thin redhead with no teeth and bruised arms.

“Wrong kind of fuel for the vehicles we have, plus everything gets filled with dust and refuses to stay running. We don’t know how to fix that.” Amber shifted the baby higher. “I didn’t want to take the chance on us getting stranded somewhere.”

“When the slaver convoy came through the first time, we talked about joining them.” The redhead gave Alexa a glance that begged her to see the truth. “Since they were traveling through the western areas, it didn’t make sense for us to go with them.”

“You stayed in the bowling alley?”

“Safe Haven shored it up before they left. It seemed like a good place to be.” Amber glanced at her sideways. “Was that a bad decision?”

Alexa shrugged. “I won’t know until I’ve seen it.”

Amber led her toward the parking lot that held old vehicles and bones. “I invite you. Please consider yourself a welcome guest.”

Alexa stored another nugget. These people had too much information about the descendant lifestyle to have learned it from a flyer.

Amber sensed she’d crossed a line and fell silent.

Her redheaded friend didn’t. He began to babble about how hard it had been for them to survive. Alexa tuned him out in favor of listening for the



rumble of the tank. Billy had waited for her to be far enough ahead that the huge machine wouldn't drown out her conversation. It showed a type of foresight that impressed her.

Now riding on the tank, Edward waited impatiently for it to stop so he could go inside. Alexa had as much as said the driver would be joining them. Edward wanted to know why he'd been following them, but he wanted to be with Alexa even more as she entered enemy territory. Grilling the driver would have to wait.

Daniel had the same thoughts, along with a faint desire to drive the tank. He'd never been in one. It looked like a fun ride.

Dust blew over all of them as the wind picked up. The calling of a sickly bird drew attention from the locals. Hands went to empty holsters and eyes went to the sky. The birds here were a threat. Alexa's men stored that information, too.

"It's fortified with metal." The first sight of the bowling alley pleased Mark. "Nice."

Amber preened under his approval, not immune to the draw of healthy men. "Thank you. We've tried to add to their improvements whenever we could."

Alexa stopped at the lounge entrance to wait for the rest of her crew.

"He can park the tank around back or in front, it doesn't matter. Other than the slavers, we don't get visitors here." The redheaded man cast shifty eyes toward Amber.

Amber nodded, echoing his lie. “We don’t even get soldiers anymore.”

Alexa didn’t presume to tell the tank driver what to do yet. She had accepted that he would join her crew, but they hadn’t officially exchanged words. Until he accepted her rules and leadership, he was his own boss.

Edward approved when the new man drove the tank into the alley next to the small bowling center. It wasn’t completely out of sight, but squeezing into the alley made it appear as if it was just another relic of the past. Edward hopped off and joined Alexa in the lobby.

People moved away, intimidated by Edward’s glowers.

Daniel watched for the tank driver, sensing their boss would want him to escort the man in. Even though she didn’t consider him a threat, it was still a good idea to treat him as such.

Tiring of the looks, the tank driver stopped outside the doors. He locked eyes with Alexa.

Alexa felt that Safe Haven pull again. “You’d go where I do, obey my rules?”

The tank driver knelt at her feet, relief hitting her in waves. “For as long as you’ll have me.” He was thrilled to finally be with her, for the voice in his ears to be real instead of just in his mind.

Alexa’s lips curved in a partial smile of recognition. “I accept your life with honor. Rise and take your place among my men.”

The driver immediately turned to Edward. He held out a hand. "I'm Billy."

Edward reluctantly shook with the ponytailed man, smothering the jealousy that always arrived whenever Alexa added someone else to her crew. "Edward. Stay in the rear and follow the rest of us."

Billy immediately took the rear position.

Happily switching plans to a five-person crew, Alexa surveyed the bowling alley, then the few people occupying chairs at the end of the lanes. Everyone gawked at them.

The people in the bowling alley were the same as those who'd greeted them. All young and dressed like their ages, they stood or stared from where they were, as if they knew not to approach Alexa. Daniel didn't like it.

Alexa noted the row of dusty fishing poles hung on one wall. Below them was a variety of dull weapons that included bows, snares, and knives. A line of tables next to the station had obviously been used for preparation. She assumed hunting and fishing had become their mainstay of life, as it had for everyone who hadn't died in the war or during the long months afterward. She also believed those food sources had run out. Finding game was harder now. The dust from Yellowstone had covered the grass and killed off animals that depended upon it. It was natural that the humans, who relied on those animals, would also suffer. As for fishing, crazy life forms came out of the water now. Most of them were not safe to eat. The earth was slowly purging

itself of the poisons from the war, but it would be a long time before the land was back to normal.

The locals waited impatiently for her to finish, while her men enjoyed the peaceful silence and windless conditions. There was still a draft going through, but it was nowhere near as bad as being outside.

Alexa noted insulated walls slowly crumbling from the weather and lack of maintenance. Despite the youth of the group, she didn't see recent repairs. The smells were also a bit unexpected. With a food prep station, there should have been rank odors, but all she could smell was baby powder and butter. She assumed that was from the use of dandelions for coffee. The thought was confirmed when Amber began to pour cups from a large pot near the prep station. Dandelion roots were in the filter.

Alexa took the hot cup and went to a large, empty table in the center of the lounge. She could see the lanes from here. Homemade candles were on the tables and the alleys were covered in thick layers of grit.

Alexa's crew took spots a few feet from her but behind the locals. It made everyone except Alexa nervous. She settled at the table and pulled out her pouch of tobacco to twist a smoke.

Amber and her protector joined Alexa at the table.

Alexa scanned the rest of the locals, understanding this couple determined the fate for everyone else. "I'd like to see the flyer."

Amber dug in her pocket to pull out a crumpled sheet of paper with faded words.

Alexa read it with a pounding heart that yearned to have been here when it was left.

### *Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties*

*1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, verbal) is forbidden. Punishable by banishment.*

*2.) Fighting, property damage, violence for any reason except self-defense, is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment.*

*3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment. Jury vote required.*

*4.) Killing for any reason, other than self-defense, is a capital offense! Punishable by death. Jury vote. Guardian can overrule.*

*5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will almost always overrule any decision but death.*

*6.) Rape is a death sentence. There is no reason or excuse. It can only be overruled by a unanimous camp vote that includes the victim.*

*7.) Treason/ Mutiny. When more than half the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.*

“We tried hard to follow those rules.” Amber unstrapped the child from the sling and placed the toddler on her knee where Alexa would have to view him. “It’s been hard at times, but we’re proud

to say we're Safe Haven members. Or at least we should be."

Alexa didn't confirm or deny that following the rules made them part of the coveted clan. Instead, she pushed the paper back toward the woman and studied the baby. Unlike the redheaded man or the brunette woman, the child was blonde. "Adopted?"

Amber paled at Alexa's quick discovery. "We found kids. Some of them are ours."

Alexa didn't understand why they would be ashamed unless they had kidnapped the children. "Where are their parents?"

The man lifted the child from Amber's lap and walked toward the play yard. "Some of them are in the convoy. Some of them were killed by soldiers."

Alexa put two and two together. "You bought kids, from the slavers, and took them from soldiers."

Amber gave a curt nod. "With so few pregnancies here, we did what we had to do to keep a future alive. When these kids grow up, they'll help us survive."

Alexa didn't like children being used as commodities or sold like a product. Her disapproval ran through the bowling alley in a thick wave that drew her men closer.

"How did you pay for these children?" Alexa waved a hand toward the weapons. "You didn't use knives and weak coffee."

Amber hung her head. "We paid whatever they asked, no matter how hard or ugly."

Instead of the sympathy she had hoped Alexa might feel, the blonde woman gave a look of contempt.

“Bad deeds end in bad rewards.”

Amber’s hand came up in denial. “These kids are better off with us. We won’t ever sell them or hurt them the way their parents did.”

Alexa believed that, but it didn’t make it right. She sighed.

The raspy sound of weariness told her senior men she’d just made a decision. The locals also interpreted the sound, coming to the defense of their leader.

“We never hurt the kids! We love them.”

“The kids get fed first, even the boys. They’re happy with us.”

“You can check them for signs of abuse if you want to.”

Alexa drank her coffee, but she didn’t scan the children or ask to examine them. Instead, she studied the bowling alley again, sensing she would find more truth in the walls. Everything about this place, these people, was a lie. They were going to regret it when she figured out their game.

“Do I know you?”

Amber’s question to Billy brought everything to a halt. Heads turned toward the ponytailed man.

Billy nodded curtly. “I worked for the slavers.”

Amber’s face lit up in recognition. “You’re the slave with amnesia who drove the boss around. You were the best wheelman they ever had, according to

gossip.” Amber flashed him an inviting smile. “And a great service provider.”

Billy grunted. That part of the rumor wasn’t true, but he didn’t want to explain it here.

“Why did you leave them? Sold off?”

Billy didn’t look at Alexa. “I was called for other things.”

Edward, who had felt Alexa’s pull before she reached his town, relaxed a bit about the new man.

The others felt sympathy for his condition, but also envy. Not remembering the past certainly had advantages.

Billy ignored them all in favor of enjoying the sight of the woman he’d been tracking for years. The sound of her voice was the coolest drink to a parched throat. During his years of self-exile, he’d spent too many nights wondering if he’d gone mad. To know for sure Alexa existed in the flesh was a balm to his tortured soul. *My second chance is here!*

Alexa swiveled around, locking eyes with him. *I feel the same. Thank you for your loyalty.*

Billy fought her draw and barely managed not to fall to his knees. “It’s my honor.”

Alexa smiled at the old words.

This time, all of her guys dropped.

So did the bowling alley people. Her approval was great, but her pleasure was impossible to resist.

Alexa sighed, shutting it off. Her usual stoic mask fell into place as her crew rose. “I’d like a tour. My team will set up security.”



“You’re helping us?” Amber’s eager voice cut through the daze and brought everyone else back to their feet.

Alexa moved toward the hallway she assumed led to a main living quarter. “I’ve agreed to stay a night to discuss your situation—nothing else.”

Amber stood, frowning, but she knew better than to argue. “Okay.” She followed the hard woman, pondering the magic in the air. She could almost taste it. *I want that!*

Alexa snorted. “It will never happen, my clever host. Now show me your home, but control your thoughts or I’ll be gone in two minutes and you can find another sucker.”

Amber hurried after her, lips clamped shut.

Edward motioned the other men to come with him, frowning. He hated Alexa being alone with people they didn’t know, but she could handle these pitiful survivors without help.

The rest of the bowling alley people stayed out of the way, watching with worried eyes and low mutters.

Chapter Nine

## Ready To Go

1

**B**illy walked behind Edward as they cleared the hallway that led to the bathrooms. He stopped as the past slapped him.

*“Adrian! Headlights!”*

*Jeremy and Seth ran toward him.*

*People moved out of the way; everyone stopped bowling. Strikes and cups fell unnoticed.*

*Adrian found Neil and Kyle in the twitchy crowd. When he motioned, the men rushed toward the front doors. Both their teams fell in behind them without being called. This was their job.*

*Adrian pulled the plug on the music. The silence was almost a relief. “If you’ve passed the gun class, form a line inside the door. Do not draw your weapon. Everyone else, stay behind them.” Aware of Seth on his heels, Adrian pulled on his jacket, then opened the holsters of both guns. Just in case. He was hoping for survivors, but the odds were high that they’d drawn a threat.*

*“Where?” Adrian strode into the storm with Doug and Neil flanking, but he didn’t need them to point out what could only be the headlights of a big*

*truck moving through the heavy snow. Adrian signaled to Doug, storing the fact that Kenn was still nowhere to be found. "Tell the doctor he has patients. Put up tents in the lea of the alley. Get some heaters in them. Have the cook start a fresh batch of meals."*

*Doug was still scribbling the information as he and Neil left, dividing the list.*

*The semi pulled into the lot, weaving around deep drifts that were as hard as concrete blocks. The inside light of the rig was on. Adrian counted four middle-aged males crammed in, their hands in view. "Lesson three, Eagles. Move."*

*Nothing happened for a second, then Kyle reacted, drawing his Glock. "Weapons out. Don't shoot unless I do."*

*The other eight men immediately dropped back to form a neat, wide V, aiming their guns at the windshield.*

*The driver reacted fearfully. Gears squealed in protest as he stopped the semi a good forty feet away, sliding a little in the thick slush.*

*Adrian said nothing, waiting.*

*Kyle motioned his team forward. "Secure and disarm. Go!"*

*They went in a hurry, like professionals from before the war. The truck was surrounded before Adrian finished grinding out his smoke.*

*"You okay?"*

Billy shook off the past, nodded. Being on Kyle's team had been great, but also painful. "Still putting pieces together."

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Feel like it. I've been here before."

That intrigued Edward, but they had a job to do. He made a note to tell Alexa as he led the new man through setting up a security perimeter. When Billy did it without slipups or questions, it added to the mystery of how he knew so much about Alexa's methods. Edward began to suspect they'd been trained by the same person.

## 2

"We're up and running." Edward joined Alexa and Amber in the rear room of the bowling alley a short time later. "Rookies in front, senior roaming."

Alexa pointed at an empty corner. "We'll bunk there."

Edward didn't like that order.

Alexa felt the same way, but they still hadn't had an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep. It was wearing on her. She assumed her crew felt the same but didn't want to admit to a weakness. She couldn't avoid it. They were going to notice her feverish skin soon and insist on medication. She was going to let them.

"We stay up pretty late and sleep in." Amber didn't know how it would work if Alexa wanted to sleep at night.

“Noise doesn’t keep us from sleeping. Silence does.” Alexa turned away before the girl could ask her next question about where they were headed. She could feel it coming, but she didn’t have the patience to deal with it. The amount of lies she’d already been told had worn through the little bit of politeness she’d retained from the nap.

Edward stayed on her heels, curious as to what Alexa would do now. When they were alone, this would have been personal time, but with so many strangers here, he expected her to mingle for different versions of their host’s story.

Alexa went to the hallway and took the steps to the basement, following the feel of Safe Haven. It had been hitting her in strong waves. She was going to satisfy that curiosity now.

Edward watched her slow to scan the paint chipped walls. He joined her as he realized she was searching for a sign or message. She’d done the same in the places they’d been before.

“I want you to help me train both new men.” Alexa didn’t respond to his prideful smile. “Billy can drive anything. Mark can fight anything. Make use of them wisely.”

“I will.” Edward noticed an area with fresh paint at the same time as Alexa. They moved in front of it, both frowning.

“Ideas?”

Edward shook his head. “Paint thinner might remove whatever is under it, too.”

“Persuasion, then?”

“Yeah.” He deliberated. “But not our host. She has her story too memorized. You’d have to threaten the kids.”

“I won’t do that.”

“I won’t either.” Edward picked at a corner of the paint. It chipped off with the under layer. He stopped to keep from ruining more of it.

Alexa sighed, staring at the wall. “Safe Haven came here. They’re not lying about that part.”

“What about her redheaded boyfriend or whatever he is?”

Alexa grunted. She’d already considered that. “Not by force. Kindness might be the trick there.”

“Shall I go warm him up?”

Alexa snickered. “By all means. You know I like my guys ready to go.”

Edward laughed hard as he went upstairs.

Alexa stared at the wall, haunted by a message she couldn’t read.

### 3

“Hey.” Mark leaned in as Daniel walked by on rounds. “The boss needs another dose of—”

Daniel opened his palm to reveal three pills.

Mark chuckled, returning to his constant scans of the bowling alley and the front entrance. Billy stood outside those doors, watching the town.

Daniel lifted a brow at Edward, who was now standing by the basement stairs.

Edward motioned a job trade, sending Daniel down to the boss.

Daniel loved the way they worked together. He and Edward could communicate without speaking in most situations. He hoped the new men tried hard to fit in the same way.

Alexa held out the smoke as Daniel joined her in the dank basement. "Trade me."

Daniel dumped the pills into her hand, then took the smoke. He enjoyed the strong tobacco, wondering what she'd been stewing on down here.

"Now your dose."

Daniel fished out a second set of medication. He gave the smoke back to get a drink from his canteen. He couldn't dry swallow them the way she could.

"This time tomorrow, I predict we'll just be waking from a long, restful sleep. I expect to pick up where *we* left off."

Daniel grinned. "I'd be honored to hold you while we sleep."

Alexa used the sparks between them to dull the pain in her shoulder. "Don't be afraid to get *very* close."

Daniel's amusement faded as hormones permeated the air. "What the boss wants, she gets."

"Excuse me." The redheaded man cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt."

Daniel moved on at Alexa's motion.

"What can I do for you, Red?"

The local flushed under her sexy tone. "Not for me." He opened his mouth to beg.

Alexa held up a hand. "I doubt we have time for that. My man is going to insist on talking with you as a cover. He'll work out a plan. Once you agree, we are honor bound to see it through." She paused. "And to avenge it if needed."

Relief flooded his face. "I'll pay anything you ask."

"Good. It's easier that way." Alexa didn't know what she wanted from him yet. It would depend on Edward. A masterful strategic planner, he often employed tactics that used a person's weakness against them. That skill in a man was sexy.

Alexa took the rear stairs up from the basement, sharp gaze picking out improvements she wasn't sure the people here were capable of. They had power, though none of the lights or appliances were running right now. They just didn't use the lanes. The spliced, heavy-duty cords nailed to the ceiling spoke of someone with electrical experience. She assumed Safe Haven had done it during their brief stay. She also attributed the covered windows to them. All Amber's talk of doing improvements had been lies. The people surviving here were interested in material possessions, not hard work.

She'd seen it in their superfluous clothes, but it had become clearer after Amber's awkward tour of the living quarters. The girl had left her to wander on her own after a few questions about the huge bed and luxurious carpets that were secured by heavy recliners and entertainment centers. She expected



those televisions and stereos to be used when it got dark.

The only credit she could give them was keeping it off during the day, but she suspected Amber had designed that so workers would work then and not to conserve power when the sun provided more than enough light. The fact that these people were still alive spoke volumes. They had to have a deal with someone or a protector she hadn't met yet. Alexa was betting on the first. She'd been all through the building now, including the narrow attic space. There was no one else here.

Subdued voices echoed as she reached the dorm. Alexa lingered in the doorway to observe unnoticed for a few seconds.

“...tell them.”

“I bet she knows already.”

“We have company.” Amber glared at her companions.

The three females flushed or dropped their eyes upon spotting Alexa.

Amber flashed a bright smile. “We’re talking about turning power on early in honor of your arrival.”

“No need to do anything different than you have been.” Alexa dreaded them being a lit beacon in the apocalyptic darkness. It made this building a target and she was pretty sure Amber knew that. Which meant the same as them being alive—they had a deal or a protector. Alexa chose to get that answer now. “Is this everyone?”

Amber nodded, turning to scan the four dozen souls lounging behind her. “We didn’t send out a work crew today.” Her voice dropped. “There used to be a lot more of us.”

“Before you went to the bunker that wouldn’t let you in?”

Amber’s jaw dropped. “You can’t know that!”

Steps echoed from the hall.

Alexa’s lip curled. “Your lack of respect for my intelligence is getting tiresome.”

Amber flushed, raising a hand. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand how you know so much about us. All your guesses are right.”

“Why did they let you go?” Alexa motioned toward the children in a large play yard. “They have the feel of rape babies.”

“What does that mean?” Amber’s hand came to her hip in instant defense.

“You’d die for them, but only the women. The men here don’t like your children. I assume so because you keep them away from the kids.”

Amber refused to answer.

Billy appeared in the hallway ahead of Alexa. He stayed in the shadows, out of sight of the locals.

“The men don’t seem to be in on whatever plan you have going against me. I feel their hesitation, their fear.” Alexa heard Daniel come up behind her. “Why don’t the guys like your kids?”

Amber frowned at Daniel, who had a knife in his hand and ugliness on his face. “They come at one frown? That’s some training.”

“It’s loyalty and love.” Alexa stepped closer to the girl. “Something you don’t have here, so it surprises you instead of bringing fear. Another clue. Should I stop piecing together your puzzle and go?”

“Please don’t!” Amber’s shoulder’s slumped. “We sold ourselves to the bunker to keep them from taking our men, but not all the kids are from those months. Some really were bought from the slavers.”

“But none recently. Your youngest child is over a year.”

The girl’s eyes darted to her companions for help.

No one came to her rescue.

“Confess your evil. Sleep better for one night.”

“I don’t...can’t...”

“What happened a year ago?”

“The soldiers came for us!” Amber dropped to a plush recliner near the door. “They came for their kids, but our men wouldn’t fight! We were forced to make a hard deal to keep them.”

“You promised to sell out survivors and watch for me?”

Amber glared, eyes burning with hatred. “For all descendants. You’re what they want, who they hunt. Your kind are the reason the war came. It’s your fault we’re all forced to live this way, to sell ourselves to those bastards!” The girl began to cry. “It never ends.”

Alexa sighed, feeling pain she couldn’t reveal. Not all of Amber’s story was a lie this time. “How often do they come by to enjoy the spoils?”

“Once a month. They deliver supplies and birth control.”

Alexa frowned. “No more kids or just from certain females?”

“No more. They only want descendant children now.” Amber pushed to her feet and went to the play yard where a dozen toddlers were enjoying soft toys. “They’re going to kill our babies. We’re not good enough for them.”

“How long until the next...visit?”

“They’re a day late already. When we heard the tank, we thought you were them.” Amber picked up the toddler she’d been carrying when they met. “Now that a descendant has come, we don’t have any value. Your arrival may have killed the rest of us.”

Alexa left the dorm.

Daniel stayed on her heels.

Billy lingered in the shadows of the opposite hall, listening to the locals for new information. He heard only tears and angry declarations to fight when the soldiers came.

Alexa slowed to let Daniel reach her. “Do you believe them?”

Daniel shrugged. “This story sounds better, but there’s still something shady.”

“Agreed. Edward is talking with one of the men. Why don’t you work on the others?”

“You got it.” He turned left at the fork in the hallway.

Alexa kept going straight until she reached the main lounge.

Mark met her and fell in step. "Perimeter is secure."

"We're going to have heavy company at some point. I'd like something special as a greeting. Can you tell the new man to handle that for me?"

"Sure. Bet he'd be happy to arrange a party."

"Make it big, with wide arms. I suspect the guest list will be extreme."

#### 4

Billy climbed into the cold tank and shut the hatch. His cool demeanor fell aside as he sat in the darkness. Tears rolled over his stubble layered cheeks to drip into his dusty lap. *I'm not crazy.*

Outside the tank, the wind howled in anticipation of nightfall. Grit blew over the street, covering evidence of human presence. If not for the glow of lights, the town would have appeared deserted.

Music blared, ending the eerie silence.

Billy wiped his eyes and began digging through the kit near his seat. The noise from the bowling alley would cover his movements. Alexa wanted a big bang when the soldiers came. He planned to give her that and more. Anything she wanted, she would have, no matter the cost.

It took Billy two hours to set the surprise party. Filthy all over now, he returned to the tank to collect his belongings. He didn't know if Alexa would want to do anything with it, so he'd made his own choice. He had spent months with the tank and had a lot of adventures. It didn't seem right to destroy it.

Billy settled in the cold seat and flipped on the light he had put up shortly after liberating the tank from an old army depot with lazy security. A faded pink, handmade card stuck under the edge of a map drew his eye.

Without reading it, he slipped it into his jacket pocket. He refused to think about why as he collected the rest of his belongings, then spent a few minutes encouraging people not to fire the tank. He couldn't bring himself to destroy it even if he had time, which he didn't. He could feel Alexa getting restless. She wanted him inside with the others.

The dusty man jogged toward the bowling alley, eager to be with Alexa.

A shadow broke away and came toward him.

"Can I talk to you for a minute about your boss?"

Billy paused. He gave Amber a warning look. "Be careful." He could feel her about to spring a trap.

Amber pushed ahead with her plan. "She doesn't like us. I need you to have more honor than she does."

Billy put his hands on his gun butts in response.

Amber flinched but refused to back down. “You know it as well as I do. She’s already decided to kill us. Including the kids.”

Billy didn’t believe that part, but he waited for the rest.

“I insist on sanctuary.”

Billy snorted. “I’m not able to grant sanctuary. Only she can.”

“That’s not true. She wouldn’t have chosen you if you didn’t have honor.”

Billy studied the girl, trying to find the trap.

“What if I trade you for the truth about the paint spot on the wall downstairs?”

Billy didn’t mean to look toward Edward. It just happened.

Amber snorted in derision. “Red doesn’t know. He’s acting like it to get attention from your friends.”

Billy wanted to deny her claim, but Edward’s face was resigned, telling him the conversation wasn’t going the way they wanted it to. Billy looked back at Amber. “I can’t give you what you’re asking for. I won’t go against her, not for you or anyone else.”

Amber pointed at the babies in the playpen. “You’re sworn to protect the innocent. You’re not allowed to shirk this duty. I’ve offered a reasonable payment. Obey the code.”

Billy felt those words in his heart. She was right. If Alexa ordered him to kill the babies, he would refuse. “What’s under the paint?”

Amber's face melted into ugly hatred. "It said not to trust the kids of the people who used to live in this town. We're dangerous." Amber left him there, not wanting Alexa to know they'd spoken.

Billy stared after the girl in dismay. *Alexa's going to order me to kill all of you and I'll do it without hesitating. I'll never be worthy to be in Safe Haven again.*

## 5

"Where's the new guy?"

Daniel glanced toward the main lobby. He could see the wall to the alley, but not the tank "Still making himself useful." Daniel turned toward Mark as his words registered. "He's got you by a few days but he's the new guy?"

Mark grinned, nodding. "Yep."

Daniel chuckled. "We'll see how the boss calls that."

Mark, who hadn't turned from his position, took a step backward to make their conversation more private. "How can they sleep through this? I haven't heard this much noise in..."

"Four years?" Daniel put his back to the man and forced a turn so that he could view Alexa and Edward in the corner bedroll. She'd insisted right after he finished talking to Red.

"Yeah."



“I don’t think she is asleep.” Daniel turned them again, taking a teaching moment. “Look everywhere else before you look at them.”

Mark scanned the front lounge seats, where a dozen people were getting drunk while playing cards.

Next to them were another dozen, all men, sitting on window ledges with beers and tense faces.

On the other side of the alley, the women and kids were sequestered in the corner with armed sentries made up of the toughest fighters, Mark assumed. He doubted they’d stand a chance if the men attacked. Lower numbers didn’t matter in a fight like this. Neither did guns. If the men rushed them, a few would die, but the women would lose. Mark didn’t know the dynamic yet, but animosity was in the air despite the attempt to make this look like a party.

Mark glanced at the bedrolls now, trying to find what had triggered Daniel’s instinct that Alexa wasn’t sleeping.

Daniel had been keeping track of Mark’s head movements. “She has her gun in her hand.”

Mark narrowed in on the outline of Alexa’s empty holster, then looked away, not wanting to draw attention to her. “You’re sharp. I like that in a crewmate.”

Daniel snickered. “So does she.”

“Then why a new guy already?”

Daniel realized Mark was jealous. “You wanted to be the new guy, so you’d get the time with her?”

Mark grunted.

Daniel's amusement faded. "We belong to her, not the other way around. Never forget it."

"I'm sorry."

Daniel sighed. "We all felt the same. You'll adjust with time. The new guy will too when she adds the next man."

Mark wasn't sure what to say. He put it aside. He had a job to do now, something to live for. Ruminations could wait.

## Chapter Ten

# Initiated

### 1

**T**he music and movies grew louder as it got later. By 4 a.m., noise was blaring into the darkness in window rattling beats. No one could hear trouble coming, but the males in the windows kept scanning the town around them. Mark was pleased by that, but also uneasy. *Something's about to—*

“Company!”

“Headlights are coming!”

“It’s them!”

Mark observed Alexa’s reaction from the corner of his eye, admiring the smooth roll to her feet.

A tank rumbled to life under the chaos.

The music shut off as men leapt to the floor and rushed toward the main entrance.

Edward kicked the blankets to the corner and took Alexa’s right.

Alexa observed the locals to determine the biggest threat—them or the coming soldiers.

“Tell them no!”

“We’re not doing it this time!”

The women lifted guns toward the men.

Instead of a fight, all the men nodded or called agreement.

“That’s okay.”

“You don’t have to do it.”

“We’ll go with them this time.”

Alexa saw guilt and fear cross the face of every female. She spotted the clever trap. The women were using the slavery law to keep the men here.

*Boom!*

The tank fired, jarring windows and people from being so near to the alley wall.

Alexa laughed.

The rest of her crew observed as the tank rolled toward the line of jeeps. Ahead, the transport truck flamed.

“What is he doing?!” Amber ran to Alexa. “They’ll send more men! We’ll get slaughtered after you’ve gone! Make him stop!”

Alexa shoved by the woman without responding to her panic. She waved at the redhead staring at them in fear. “Pick your side. Do it now.”

Red lifted a shaking hand to point at Edward. “His plan.”

Alexa nodded, moving toward the play yard. Edward had filled her in as they rested. “You’ll owe a debt for this.”

Red joined her, ignoring the angry, fearful women who didn’t try to stop them. “Anything you want.”

“Your life for allowing it.”

Red winced, but he didn’t flinch from the price. “It’s what I deserve.”

“Yes, but that will work to your advantage in this moment. Pick one.”

Red reached for Amber’s toddler.

Amber screamed, rushing toward them.

Edward put out a boot and tripped her.

Amber went flying onto the carpet, thudding into a table.

Red gently settled the toddler on his hip. He turned toward the main entrance as the rest of the women grabbed their children or went to help Amber. None of them tried to stop him as he took the child outside.

Alexa stayed near the doors, surrounded by her trio of hardasses.

“What’s going on?”

“Should we run?”

“They’re going to kill us!”

The locals were panicking, no longer separated by their hatred, but bonded through their terror.

Gunfire exploded outside.

“What is he doing with Amber’s baby?!”

Alexa had been waiting for that question. “Trading him for your lives. You won’t fight for your freedom, so now you’ll pay a tribute each time they come.”

“You can’t do that!”

“You promised to help us!”

“Get out of my way!” Amber shoved by Alexa’s crew without fear. “Move!” She ran out the exit. “Give me my baby!”

Alexa grabbed the woman by her jacket and spun her back into the lobby. “You were fine trading your body and my life! Now you’ll risk something that matters to you!”

Locals cowered from Alexa’s anger, then from the sound of the tank firing again.

A jeep exploded into rusty metal shrapnel.

“Keep them inside.” Alexa stepped out, leaving her crew to deal with locals.

Billy used the glass in the buildings on either side and spotted Alexa coming up behind the tank. The big redhead with a baby walked near her.

Billy waited instead of firing again, letting Alexa take over the negotiations.

The soldiers were cowering from the unexpected tank. Three of the ranking men yelled orders, but no one listened to them.

Alexa halted next to the tank so that she could be seen and heard but not block Billy’s line of fire. She glanced at the tiny viewing window, gave him a nod.

Billy activated the speaker system. “Who’s in charge? Come forward to talk or I’ll fire again. You have five seconds.”

Silence fell as the soldiers observed in shock. Shadows moved into the darkness, abandoning the fight. Others came forward.

“That’s her!”

“We have warrants for her!”

“Mitchel! Alexa Mitchel!”

Soldiers ran forward, forgetting about the tank.  
Billy fired.

Another jeep blew up, scattering the soldiers.

“That’s my baby!” Amber’s wails echoed through the crackling flames.

Red kept walking toward the soldiers.

The soldiers regrouped as they realized Alexa did want to talk. They ignored the man with the child coming toward them.

Alexa holstered, appearing to be an easy target.

Soldiers eased toward her this time. They waved the man with the baby toward the remaining jeeps to get him out of the way.

Alexa stepped to the front of the tank, allowing the soldiers to relax as she blocked the turret.

Billy opened the hatch and stood there with his hands up to complete the harmless image.

A dozen soldiers met Alexa a few feet from the tank, leering at her and the bright bowling alley. It was clear what they expected to happen now.

One of the soldiers glared at Alexa. “Drop your weapons, come forward!”

Alexa lifted her hands. “You have one minute to agree to my terms and then I’ll kill you all.”

The soldiers laughed at her.

Billy felt the air shift to a deadly place and stored the information. They’d just made a mistake. She didn’t tolerate being laughed at.

“Forty-five seconds.”

The man in charge frowned at her. “Okay, I’ll play. What are your terms?”

“Let me take these people north to the old government bunker. Forget they exist.”

The man laughed again. “Why would we?”

Alexa delivered her own trap in the form of a lie that they wouldn’t see through. She was a master bluffer. “Because the baby behind you is spreading chicken pox through the air. In thirty seconds, you’ll be exposed.”

“Who cares about chicken pox?”

The soldiers laughed at her again.

“Yeah, we’re vaccinated.”

“Before the war.” Alexa subtly moved her fingers to give directions to the crew watching worriedly from inside the doors. “It wore off years ago. Twenty seconds.”

“We’ve heard that rumor, too. It’s scuttlebutt.”

“What about the rage sickness?” Alexa smirked at their paling faces and jerky stops in the firelight. “As I’m sure you know, when crossed with chicken pox, it makes the vaccine ineffective.”

“You’re lying!” The man in charge waved toward the bowling alley. “They aren’t carrying the rage sickness. We tested them years ago...”

Alexa’s smile grew colder. “Exactly. It’s been years. You forgot to keep testing them. Five seconds.”

“What do you want?!”

“Safe passage. For all of us. I’ll take them to the bunker. Your bosses can decide later what to do or you can just forget about them.”

“No deal! I don’t believe you!”



“Have it your way.” Alexa lowered her hands.

The locals burst from the bowling alley with shouts and guns lifted. She’d ordered her men to arm them.

Alexa stepped to the opposite side of the tank as the twilight shootout began.

Billy leaned down to grab her, pulling her up and into the tank. He slammed the hatch behind them.

The locals, wound up by the guilt, killed and died in the dusty street. There were no more words of deals or surrender. Blood flowed over the ground.

“Where’s my baby?!” Amber stabbed the gut of the man in charge, eyes glowing with the rage disease. “Where is he?!” Amber stabbed again, then spun toward the next uniformed man.

Soldiers fled, shocked by evidence of the rage sickness. They were terrified of it.

“How did she know they were ill?” Mark waited with Daniel and Edward in the lobby, fighting the need to go to Alexa. She was safer in the tank than they were in here.

Edward shushed him. “Wait for the finale.”

“What finale?”

“The one she had the new guy working on. Now be quiet.”

Mark studied the scene. The soldiers were fleeing. The locals were chasing. The battle was done.

In the tank, Billy pointed at a control panel taped to the hull. "The safety is off. At your leisure."

Alexa swept the bloody scene through Billy's view slot as she pushed the button. She wanted to see it, see him, in action.

Buildings on both sides of the street exploded, sending fiery debris through the battlefield like a gunshot blast but much larger. The line of military vehicles vanished under the onslaught. So did the people.

Alexa leaned against the tank hull as Billy moved it forward. She watched his hands control the metal monster in admiration. With limited vision through the slot and the smoke, he kept them centered on the street. The tank wasn't veering to the right or the left.

Billy cleared his throat. "Can I ask why?"

Alexa moved toward the hatch. "Later. For now, go get Red. He and the child are hiding in a dumpster behind what's left of the laundry mat."

Billy steered that way using his mental map of the town that he'd spent hours wiring. He'd enjoyed the work, but he hadn't figured on her using it to wipe out the locals, too. Few had survived. He didn't like it, but this was low on his own list of crimes since the war. If she had a good reason, that would help him put it out of his mind. If she didn't, nothing would change except that he would have more respect for her ruthlessness. His desire to serve her would never waver.

Billy drove over fiery debris as Alexa opened the hatch and climbed out. He heard the hatch slam shut and once again let his tears flow. Each moment with her was magical because it proved he hadn't forsaken his duties in vain.

*"I'll always love you, even if you never return."*

Billy winced at the haunting ghost in his mind. The little girl from the cave was never far from his thoughts. The emotional responses her parting words had delivered would also never fade.

Billy let himself cry harder this time. If Alexa took him to Safe Haven, that girl would be there. She would say those words again. When that happened, Billy feared he might snap in half. Alexa wasn't going to let him serve two mistresses. He wanted time with her more than even his memory restored, but that little girl was special to him in ways he refused to examine. They had a bond no one could tear asunder. That was dangerous.

*I hope this quest takes a very long time and stays dangerous. Then I may never have to make the choice.*

## 2

"Wow." Mark observed through the smoke coated main entrance as the five locals behind him continued to scream and cry.

"Why did she do that?" Daniel knew the order had come from Alexa.

“Now isn’t the time.” Edward turned from the gruesome scene that he’d more than helped to arrange. “She wants them ready to leave in fifteen minutes. We’re helping.”

Mark and Daniel shared a glance of unease.

“With the kids? Us?”

Edward couldn’t laugh, though Daniel’s timid tone deserved it. “Start with finding them full covering clothes. Red will lead us through the rest of it. He’s had bugout kits ready for two weeks, or so he told me.”

Daniel and Mark had witnessed Edward talking with Amber’s redheaded man and guessed some of what they were discussing, but Edward had been called to bed without giving them an opportunity to ask for details.

“I thought the men here hated the kids.”

Mark snorted at Daniel’s comment, taking his turn to teach. “They hated the women who controlled their lives, told lies, and threatened to turn them over to the soldiers whenever the men complained about doing all the work. They used the kids against them.”

“What about those looks we saw?”

“They were planning to take the kids to the bunker, so they wouldn’t be initiated into the female disease.”

“Initiated?” Daniel was confused, but this muttered conversation with Mark also allowed him to delay handling the startled kids in the play yard.

“The rage sickness gives the women enough strength to keep power. They’ve been infecting the kids intentionally, to make sure males can’t resume leadership. The guys have put up with it for years because they refused to take the kids from their mothers. That changed when we arrived.”

“Very good.” Edward also delayed facing the sticky toddlers. Like the others, he dreaded the coming child care, but not as much as Daniel. “Tell him why.”

Mark liked how that felt. “We reminded them female leadership doesn’t have to be loathed or feared if the men have the balls to do what’s right.” He paused. “Is that what we’ve done here? Is this right?”

Edward slowly nodded. “I think so, yes. She spared the innocent and got rid of everyone infected.”

“Except the kids.” Mark was glad none of the kids had been hurt. Even Red and Amber’s toddler had gotten out of range before the explosion.

“Yes. We’ll take them to a safer place where they’ll have a chance to survive without being slaves.”

“No.” Alexa stood behind them.

All three men spun, drawing. They hadn’t heard anyone come in.

Alexa couldn’t smile either, though their panicked positions certainly deserved it. “We’re the target of the soldiers. These few people can’t defend

against that. They'll go north on their own. We'll go east, as per our quest."

Alexa met the relieved, horrified eyes of the locals, aware of the tank now rumbling back toward the alley. "You have infected kids. They'll spread the rage disease to others. It will restart, without a moment like this to slow it. You knew that already, but you let the children live. I respect it and also loathe it. You understand what a rough choice this was for me?"

Red came to her, bouncing the baby on his hip like his mother had done. "Of course. It's why we've stayed and what's haunted us since they started shooting them up with Amber's blood, but there's never been another choice for us. We'll do the best we can to control them."

"And when you can't?"

Red kissed the boy's head. "Then they'll kill us and die on their own like nature intends."

Alexa nodded. "Go in peace. Lock that bunker when you get there and enjoy the months you'll have with them."

"We will." Red held out his hand. "Thank you for your strength and your wisdom."

Alexa pulled him into her embrace. She whispered, then retreated and turned for the exit. "Come along now. They'll take it from here."

Edward noted Red's relieved expression as he followed. It mirrored Daniel's and Mark's at not having to help get the kids ready to go. He took the guard position behind her, trying to piece together

what she'd told Red, but he didn't ask. Now wasn't the time.

David moved up to Edward and leaned in. "She told him Safe Haven might be able to save the kids if they can keep them alive that long."

Edward smiled, nodding to David in appreciation. It wasn't a surprise that Alex had given the men that hope, but it was a constant source of pride that their crew leader was a good soul. Not everyone could say that and mean it.

### 3

"I've almost got you..." Russell watched Alexa and her group, noting the destruction in their wake. He hadn't been sure how to conquer her, but an idea had occurred to him. He could follow until they camped for the night. They hadn't slept in days. When they dropped out, he would grab her.

Russell stayed two blocks back, observing the flaming damage. The street wasn't passable without stepping on glass, wood, concrete, or body parts. He didn't know which man on her team was the explosives expert, but he was talented. Russell hadn't seen this much damage in such a little time for planning since before the war. Even then, it would have been unheard of to take out an entire city block in only a couple hours.

Russell noted Alexa leaving the tank and felt relief. He hadn't been sure how he would get to her if she decided to travel in it. He needed to catch her

off guard. The tank would have made enough noise to cover his approach, but it would also have provided her an impenetrable place to hide until her supplies ran out. He didn't think she was traveling lightly after all these encounters.

*Maybe I'll take it.* Russell grinned at the thought of rolling around crunching over undead with the tank. He doubted he would be able to use it in a final plan because it made too much noise, but that didn't mean he couldn't spend an hour playing with it before getting back to the hunt. Even a good dog needed to be allowed to dig in the dirt here and there to keep himself happy.

Russell listened to the cries of the few survivors. All of them were injured, in ugly ways. While being hit with flying glass wasn't normally a death sentence, when it came from four different buildings and directions, those odds changed. Once again, Russell didn't think many of these people would make it to wherever they were going. Alexa and her crew were beyond lethal. He wasn't ready to challenge them until they were asleep, even though he had an idea. Most Mitchels had a sense for that sort of thing because they had been hunted for so long. It was instinct to them. The only way to win against a Mitchell was to hit them from the front.

Footsteps and voices came toward his location. They moved on just as fast, allowing him to relax. He had no doubt about winning against the tiny group of locals, but it was better that he didn't have to face them right now. So far, he'd managed to get



through all of the slaughter fields without Alexa knowing a hunter was on her heels. If something suddenly happened to the people she had liberated, she might sense that, too.

He wasn't willing to take the chance now, but... *I'm so close!* In fact, he'd never been so near to her. At this distance, he could see the sweat running off her profile as she turned to scan the crew walking in a rough V behind her. It didn't surprise him that she was attractive despite her scars or that he was pulled toward abandoning the hunt to win her heart instead. Descendants had varying gifts, but the one all alphas shared was the draw that brought people to them. Russell wasn't worried over it. *I have my hatred to see me through.*

## Chapter Eleven

# Circle Of Love

### 1

**“W**e’ll make camp here.”

The men stuttered in their steps, exchanging quick glances that asked if they had heard her correctly. She’d led them to a gentleman’s club.

Alexa snickered at their responses.

Edward moved to her right. “We have a tail.”

Alexa shrugged. “Don’t we always?”

Edward chuckled. “Seems that way. I wondered if you wanted me to go handle it.”

“No.” They’d come three hours from the bowling alley. She was nearing her limit again. “Get them in there.”

Edward directed the others into position to clear the club that appeared sturdy. The concrete walls and metal roof had withstood the test of time so far.

Alexa motioned Billy to stay with her as the others cleared the club.

Billy didn’t slack in his duty as he stood next to her, smelling her.

Alexa studied Billy without looking at him. She didn’t hear him breathing despite the long walk. None of his gear flapped in the wind. As he shifted slightly to change directions, he barely made a

sound. She couldn't smell him. All of those were good. That level of awareness, shared by Daniel and Edward, would make his training easier. She hadn't noticed any of those issues in Mark either, though the Convict was a little rougher around the edges because he'd been in an underground slam. He hadn't adjusted to the apocalypse yet.

Billy moved backward until they were touching. He felt her slight intake of air, but he didn't notice any other reaction. His own body started to react immediately.

Billy shut it down fast, not wanting her to be intimidated or worried about having him along for this quest. He wasn't here for sex.

Alexa used a simple movement to shift them around, wanting a view of the opposite direction. This time, his hard body against hers drew heat. Unlike him, Alexa didn't fight what she wanted. She leaned against his warm back, grinning.

Billy sucked in air and tried not to get distracted. He understood how the alpha draw worked, but he had also been without a woman since before leaving Safe Haven. He had learned several methods of control over the years, but most of it involved staying away from the opposite sex. He didn't feel like he was being forced into chastity by his past, but he didn't want to copulate with a stranger. Alexa could be an exception to that rule if she desired, but Billy had no intention of bringing it up or making a move toward her. If she wanted that, it would have to come from her.

“There are things we need to discuss.”

Billy nodded his agreement. “At your leisure.”

“We’ll do it now, while we’re alone.”

He used the same movement that Alexa had shifted them with, able to tell he had impressed her by catching onto it with one demonstration. “You feel Safe Haven on me because I was there. I left, against their wishes.”

“Meaning you escaped. Were you a prisoner?”

“I was one of Adrian’s Eagles.”

“That explains why you have more skills than the others.”

Billy shrugged against her. “I taught the lower teams, but your way of doing things is different. It won’t take me long to get caught up, though.”

“At some point, I’ll ask for details on your life in that camp, but not now.” Alexa scanned the horizon, calculating the time until the storm reached them. “In less than an hour, it’s going to be pouring rain and we’re all going to be asleep. We try to wake every hour or two for a fast scan in situations like this. Follow Edward’s lead until I give you further instructions.”

“You got it. Anything else you need?”

“To know why you want to go back if you escaped at the cost of your honor.”

Her quick deduction both scared and impressed Billy. “I have someone there waiting for me. She told me I would see her again.”

“A descendant.”

“Yes.”

“You have first watch. Pick a high point.” Alexa moved toward the porch, where Edward and Daniel were now standing. She assumed Mark had been placed on guard duty in the rear.

Edward fell in as she explored their den. He wondered what she had been discussing with the new man. He had a lot of questions for Billy.

Daniel took a position in the center of the main room, where he would be able to hear both sentries. It was the new routine Alexa had discussed with them a week ago. She’d known they were going to get Mark. She’d been giving them the information they needed to train the new man, and to adjust to having four people in the crew instead of three. Now that there were five, more routines would be added.

He hoped there would be a little more space between Billy and the next new person, however. To be able to train them effectively and still keep up with his own knowledge bases, he needed more time. He was learning from Edward. Everyone was learning from Alexa. Daniel knew that would ease with the more time they spent together, but at some moments he struggled to remember what needed to come next under her leadership. He looked forward to having some time to shore everything up.

Edward went through the club, closing windows and blinds, then covering those areas to avoid shadows from their fire.

Because of the coming storm, Alexa felt better about having them indoors. It wasn’t usually safe because most people who prayed on others knew

weaker people preferred to shelter under old world comforts. Hardened survivors camped out in the environment and were considered a threat, but she worried over the health of her men if they slept in the rain. She and Daniel needed time to recover. Edward would be fine, but Mark would probably get pneumonia. Maybe Billy, too. The tall man was also thin. It wasn't as bad as with Mark, who had pronounced cheekbones, but it was enough to make her adjust plans to suit their needs. She had to have healthy fighters for this trip.

Daniel returned without revealing what he'd seen in any of the rooms he'd just cleared. He noticed Edward doing the same. Some of the equipment in those rooms was burnt into his brain. Some would be used for entertainment purposes on a later replay while alone. Others, he would spend the next weeks trying to erase from his memory. He'd had no idea the human body could be squeezed into so many positions.

## 2

It took Alexa and Edward half an hour to secure the site. While they worked, the new men stood guard and Daniel set camp in the center of the building. By the time they finished, Daniel had dinner going and spots cleared for bedrolls around the fire. "The circle of love."

Alexa snickered. Her hormones were flowing well enough that at some point on this journey, the

dirtier version of their circle might happen. Old world rules about companionship no longer applied, at least not to her. It was one of the few true freedoms of a person anyway. There was no greater bond than to give your body to someone in a loving way and have it accepted in the same manner. It created ties that could only be broken under limited circumstances. She enjoyed the benefit of the pleasure, of course, but bonds were more important to her.

Alexa tossed out her bedroll, put her gear on it, then went outside for a moment of privacy.

Edward did the same, keeping her in sight.

As he finished, Edward realized the storm was minutes away. Small sprinkles were hitting his skin now. He scanned their shelter again, looking for anything that might be a problem. He also studied the area to see if they had left any telling tracks. When he was satisfied, Edward moved to the front door to wait for Alexa.

Alexa did a quick scan and found Billy perched on top of the club. She waved at him to come in.

Edward stepped aside so she could enter, waiting for the new man as Daniel continued to stink up their den with wonderful smells. He was the best cook in the group so far, though they didn't know what Billy could do yet. Mark's fare was only passing.

Billy joined Edward, but he didn't go in yet. He could sense the senior man wanting to talk to him. He didn't mind. If he had been in Edward's shoes,

he would have had insisted on this conversation, too. Alexa was too special to trust just anyone with her safety.

“Is there anything she could tell you to do that you would refuse?”

Billy sighed. “I want to say no, but there are some ages that would bother me. The sex doesn’t matter.” Billy deliberated what he had been thinking about and swallowed a chuckle.

“Would you, for any reason, betray her?”

“Never. The same for the rest of you. We’re in this together all the way or until death.”

Edward dug in his pocket and pulled out a small notebook. “Make your mark.”

Billy signed his name, wondering if that meant he now had Edward’s approval.

“She’s the boss no matter what. If you have a moment where you want to question her, talk to me first. That’s the way she wants it. Feel free to verify it with her or the other men. We are brothers. We share everything, but she doesn’t belong to us. We belong to her.”

“I don’t see how it could work any other way.” Billy was eager to be with people like himself again.

“Come in now. It’s downtime.” Edward led the way to their campsite, motioning for Billy to help Daniel serve the meal. Edward went to collect Mark.

Alexa began taking things from the pockets of her cloak.

Outside, heavier rain started to fall.



Daniel automatically scooped a double portion into Billy's bowl. He didn't need Alexa to tell him the man needed to be bulked up, too.

Billy waited for everyone else, stomach growling. Most of the rations he'd been surviving on for the last four years had been freshly hunted or caught. Alexa still had stores from the old world. Oddly, he was looking forward to the freeze dried stew Daniel had put together.

Edward joined Mark at the rear watch post for a minute of silence while he scanned their surroundings.

Mark peered at the sign, imagining the seductive pose of the woman being lit up in bright neon. His face turned red.

Edward saw it and grinned. "Makes you think bad thoughts, doesn't it?"

Mark nodded, but he turned away to keep from saying anything else. Friendly conversations while on duty were discouraged, but this was also awkward for him. In his former life, he'd never shared a woman. He was still adjusting to how it worked. He didn't mind the setup, he just hadn't adapted to it yet. He looked forward to the time when he would be like Edward and be able to joke about it without being uncomfortable. He hoped that would come as he got to know his crew. It had very little to do with sex and everything to do with personal compatibility among teammates.

"Let's go eat."

Edward and Mark placed their bedrolls on either side of Alexa. They began getting comfortable.

Daniel sat across from her as he settled into place with his bowl. For a few minutes, snaps and cracks of weary bodies and moans of enjoyment at the food were the loudest sounds.

Outside, the rain and wind picked up. With the increased noise, the sense of being watched faded.

The leather couches and faded signs that surrounded them brought blushes, snickers, and quick glances to memorize things for later. This had obviously been a popular area for people to get to know each other. Plush chairs in provocative shapes and pillows with lewd silhouettes littered the area in front of a huge bar. Other than the layer of dust over everything, it was a blast from the past.

Alexa turned on the radio she had taken from the body of a soldier after the bowling alley fight. It took her a minute to tune in the only station airing now. Even this government channel wasn't always on.

"... zones in the west are unlivable. Radiation continues to spread at a rate of ten feet per month. Exposure results in contamination, illness, and death. Mutation reports have not been collected." The droning voice on the radio paused, clearing his throat. "Two installations were infiltrated, with heavy casualties. Anyone with information leading to the capture of the subversives will be rewarded

with rations and weapons. Suspects are armed, dangerous, and heading northwest.”

Alexa belched. “That we are.”

Edward snickered, observing her for signs of the evening to come.

Daniel was doing the same. They’d been with her long enough to judge some of her reactions. She was often horny after a battle.

“The underground prison in Utah is no longer accepting prisoners. Unless you have official business or information on the recent escape, avoid that area.”

Mark chuckled as he dug into his bowl. Daniel was a good cook, and he had great company. His mood was high.

“There has been no communication with the southern bunker in 204 days. We have limited communication with the Hawaii Center. There has been no communication with the eastern bunker in 308 days. East Coast communication attempts will cease in one week.”

“That’s good, right?” Edward lifted a brow at Alexa. “Less soldiers to get in our way.”

She shrugged. “We can hope.”

“Rewards for all fugitives have been raised by 5%. All employee rations have been cut by 10%. Population levels are under one million and dropping...”

Rain beat on the roof in the pause.

Alexa stilled, listening to the environment instead of the radio.

“A tank was stolen from a western transportation hub, resulting in the deaths of half a dozen men. Rewards are offered for sightings.”

The fighters looked at Billy, who was shoveling in the stew as fast as he could.

Billy paused, mouth full. “Vhat?”

Daniel chuckled, shaking his head. It was amazing how the crew Alexa chose for this quest was fitting together so well. They were alike, in many ways.

Edward noticed Alexa’s tense shoulders. He began scanning for trouble through the radio and storm.

“This broadcast is now over. Please remember Martial Law is still in effect. Military justice no longer applies. Problems are to be settled on site, by the ranking soldier.”

Static blared.

Alexa flipped the radio off and stored it. She returned to her meal.

Edward noticed she didn’t relax and kept scanning.

Daniel picked up on it next. He also began searching for trouble.

Mark glanced over his mostly empty bowl, frowning as his ragged black neck hair stood on end. “So soon?”

Billy nodded, scooping up the last bite. “About one minute.”

Alexa was pleased with her crew, but annoyed that their first quiet moment together was going to be interrupted.

“Activate the barrier.” Alexa drew her gun as she stood. “Do not fire until my call.”

Edward hit buttons on his wrist controller.

Outside, hydrogen gas hissed from a security perimeter around the club.

Undead ran into the barrier and burst into flames. Their screams should have alerted the other walking dead to a threat, but the mindless eating machines kept coming. The smell of burning bodies was thick in the air.

“Undead barbeque.” Daniel watched it through the window by his head, gun in hand. He’d drawn because Alexa had.

An engine rumbled in loud rhythms of warning. Insane snarls echoed behind it.

*Slap!* Bony hands appeared on the window.

Daniel lifted his gun, then stopped himself. “They’re the Hoochie women!”

“Makes sense they’d be here.” Edward tried not to stare at the employees of the Hoochie Hotel. Beyond being grotesque, it seemed disrespectful because they had died in bad ways. Almost all of them had bite marks that gave him the cause of death. Rage Walker’s disease was out of control. Edward often wondered if that was the reason for the war itself. Had the government been trying to eradicate the disease or the proof they’d created it? Edward knew he was likely to never have an

answer, but it bothered him every time they encountered the walking dead. It was a bad joke, except the virus really had animated the corpses. After the war, then Yellowstone blowing, corpses outnumbered the living.

“I was late with the barrier call.” Alexa grunted. “I was slacking. I apologize.”

The men mumbled platitudes, uncomfortable with her confession, with her humility.

The engine rumbled louder as Alexa moved to a window for a better view.

“It’s the tank.” Daniel frowned at Billy. “You didn’t disable it?”

“I left a surprise. I activated it right before we left.”

“And when can we expect that surprise?”

Billy shrugged. “It’s not on a timer. It depends on user error.”

Thunder boomed. Behind it, came a cool voice on a loudspeaker.

“Surrender and I’ll pick you up. Leave the hardasses.”

Alexa snorted, stepping away from the window. Undead were all over the grounds, but most of them were on the outside of the waste high gas barrier.

“I will fire!” The hunter was gleeful, not bluffing.

“Do you recognize him?” Daniel had to ask to break the torturous wait for the death dealing to begin.

“No. Does it matter?”

More undead reached the windows, slobbering and growling.

“No.” Daniel felt the cool shield fall into place as Alexa strode toward the exit.

“Backs to the wall as you come out. Senior men fire first, the rest twenty seconds later for reload cover. This is rinse and repeat.” She opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

Undead staggered toward the noise.

The tank rolled closer, leaving deep, muddy tracks.

Alexa, Daniel, and Edward opened fire.

Mark and Billy began to count.

The tank stopped. The barrel lifted...

*Boom!*

Smoke belched from inside the metal monster.

A man began to scream.

Alexa slid back into the club, waving Daniel and Edward along as Mark and Billy began to shoot.

The hunter in the smoking tank continued to scream.

The undead paused, torn by the new noise.

Mark and Billy emptied their magazines, then slipped inside.

Edward shut the door as everyone reloaded.

“Security check of the building. No noise unless needed.”

The men went quickly at her order.

Alexa watched the window. The undead were headed for the tank. The man would have to get by

them to reach her, if he survived. Billy's surprise had been perfect. He'd rigged the turret to backfire.

The rain came harder, muffling screams, but the undead weren't dissuaded. They knew that noise meant blood.

Alexa returned to the circle of bedrolls and settled down with her gun in her lap. When the others joined her, completing the circle, she waved at their bowls. "Keep eating."

"We're not shooting anymore?"

Edward grinned at Mark's disappointed tone. "The Young and the Restless."

Alexa snickered. "But All My Children."

The others caught on fast.

"You are our Guiding Light."

"In all these Dark Shadows."

"Yeah, we're a Dynasty of Desperate Housewives."

Everyone laughed at Billy's combo.

"Well, these are The Days of Our Lives." Alexa grinned, encouraging the good moment.

"In Knots Landing."

"Is there a General Hospital?"

"We may need one As The World Turns."

Alexa brought the good moment to an end with her next words. "We'll slip out the back in a few minutes. Eat and get packed."

Billy and Daniel were relieved. They hadn't been sure about sleeping here with so many undead roaming the grounds.

Mark was still disappointed.



Edward didn't care either way. He was on a priceless adventure, where every second was precious. Whatever Alexa wanted was fine.

Alexa dug in her cloak and came up with two identical vacuum sealed packages. "Uniforms." She tossed them to Mark and Billy. "Wear my colors in good health."

Mark and Billy opened the packages and donned the black cloaks that matched their crew. The solemn moment was accented by the screams, rain, and growls.

"Welcome to my army."

Billy secured the clothing, loving the soft thickness. "Where does your army go next?"

"We're picking up another man. It will take a month or so to reach him."

All of them were relieved that it would be a bit before another new man joined.

"What can we expect during that month?" Edward cared about her getting to rest before their next adventure.

Alexa shrugged. "Our number one enemy, of course. That hunter probably called in our location. The quest is going to get a lot harder now."

Outside, the screams began to fade. The rain came down harder, muffling it, but Alexa wasn't pleased despite the good outcome. That hunter had been able to track magic. The next one might be able to use it. "Let's roll. We have miles to cover and shit to shoot."

Chapter Twelve

# A New Lesson

Tennessee  
Now

1

“**W**ow. That’s a hell of a story.” When no one spoke, Jacob assumed they were pausing for a security check. He stood. “I’ll do the outside.”

David also rose. “I’ve got the upstairs.”

Edward and Daniel knew the story was over. They stayed where they were, waiting to see what Alexa wanted them to do next.

Billy remained in the past, thinking about what had happened shortly after they left the club. Alexa had claimed him, made him an official part of her crew. It had been half an hour that he would never forget. After all these months, it still hadn’t dulled for him.

Mark went outside, eager to stretch his long legs and be alone for a minute. The tale of where he’d been only months ago was a reminder of his mortality. He could feel death watching him, waiting for the right moment to attack. He was scared, but he didn’t want his crewmates to know.

“We already do.”

Mark flinched at Alexa's voice behind him. He hadn't heard her follow.

Alexa came to his side but only scanned the nearby town. It was a few blocks wide and long, but the buildings were stacked on top of each other with barely a yard to share. The brick made for a good shelter, but lit homes were dangerous. Lights at night drew attention, which meant the locals weren't worried about anyone who might come to investigate.

Mark was ashamed of his fear. He didn't know what to say.

Alexa didn't either. She would do everything she could, but in the end, only fate made the final choice on life or death. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"When it happens, burn me. I hate the ground now."

Mark's blunt last request hurt Alexa. She walked away before she broke.

Mark went back inside, wishing he'd kept it to himself.

## 2

Alexa's return was silent except for the creaking of the stairs as she descended. Her crew assumed she'd climbed in through a window. They were grateful she felt well enough to do that. When she went to the kitchen table, Edward hurried to clear the years of dust from it.

Alexa slowly settled onto a bench. The table filled as Alexa allowed her thoughts to roam. She'd been gifted and cursed before. Neither of those issues had changed, though both had increased in severity. She would work with what she'd been given.

"Join me." Alexa controlled her voice to sound normal. Her body was still changing on the inside. She took a paper from her pocket and placed it on the table. "Do you recognize that?"

The tense silence told Alexa they all did. "They know I'm coming. We're going to have company at some point."

That phrase drew frowns and resigned sighs.

"Any chance they're friendly?" Jacob stared at the upside down cross. The Fanatics of Afterworld weren't like the technology-using wannabes of the past. They blamed men for the war, and they were willing to die to keep male authority from being reestablished, no matter how small the role. They had been considered hardcore feminists before the war. Now, they were a rare meeting that always ended in bloodshed. The Fanatics were incredibly bitter that the public hadn't listened to their warnings about men before it was too late. That hatred made them quick to kill and reluctant to negotiate even for trades.

When Alexa didn't answer, Mark cleared his throat. It was obvious they weren't going to be friendly. "What do they want with you?"

“Help to eliminate a common threat, for starters. Afterward? To keep me for the next fight they pick. The Fanatics have become almost as bad as the government they oppose.”

David scowled. “You mean they force people like you to fight?”

*People like us, my pet.* Alexa nodded. “Fight, breed, kill. Whatever slot they need filled that a descendant can cover.”

“Why don’t you...”

“Just kill them all?”

David nodded.

“Because they grab a loved one or a friend to force us to obey. When you challenge them, you’d best have a good plan and a great crew.”

All six men glanced toward doors and windows, put on edge by her serious tone. She respected the fighting skills of the Fanatics. That meant they were a real threat.

“There are also gate hunters in this zone. They sometimes wear the symbols and clothes of the Fanatics, but you can tell them apart by the gender roles. They don’t really care about male slavery. They want the portals between realities closed.”

“The soldiers are a common enemy of all the groups, right?” Mark wanted to be sure he knew who all the players were.

“Yes, but not the troops or inept officers. This time, they’re hunting the brains.”

Edward thought he knew, but he asked anyway to be sure. “Who else are they fighting?”

“The new government in the Midwest. They used to be part of the Bureau of Land Management. Now, they’re tax collectors who steal property and lives in the name of a power that no longer has the right to exist. They’ve expanded eastward.” Alexa sighed. “I’d hoped to get through here without fighting them. We still might, depending on the run once it starts.”

The men assumed she meant that literally and tried not to complain.

“The BLM took weapons from social security offices and environmental protection agencies across these midwestern states, and they also let men have equal roles in their plans. They’re well-armed and they get enough practice to know how to use those weapons.”

“They don’t have you.”

Instead of nodding at Daniel, Alexa shrugged. “They might have others like me. I’m not the strongest of my kind.”

“We’ll protect you from all of them.” Jacob sent her a comforting smile.

Alexa scowled. “I only need your bullets. If we’re challenged, we’ll eliminate both sides of this battle. I prefer no survivors.”

All the men liked hearing that. Killing was part of why they’d come on this quest. Tensions eased.

“We’re low on a few items.” Edward poured a cup of the strong coffee and set it by her hand.

“Yes, but that very old saying of necessity breeding invention holds true. We shall pull

something from nothing. The opportunity for a new lesson has risen.”

The two men who’d been with her the longest brightened.

“I will assign you each a need to cover over the next weeks. You will find a way to provide it in the safest, yet fastest way possible.” Alexa glanced at Jacob first. “We’ll need more food and water. Make a list of ways for each, then sort through them for two that fit our protein requirements.” She turned to Billy. “We may need a mode of transportation. Fifty miles a day capability, with low noise and a trunk space for me to ride during the day.”

Alexa began to roll a smoke as it sank in for the men that their days of walking in the gritty sunlight were over. “We need weapons for long range, and ammunition to put in them. Edward, you handle that.”

“Yes.” He already had several ideas.

“Mark, I’d like you to work on a surprise defense we can each carry.”

“I’ll cover it.”

“David, I’d like you to cover medical items. All our kits are low.”

David nodded. Injuries were common on a quest.

“Daniel is going to find us a way to communicate even if we get split up.”

David nudged the cup of hot coffee toward her.

Alexa picked it up. “I will help all of you in your duty, while figuring out how to keep the listening boy from being killed.” She looked at Edward.

Edward didn’t want to get rid of the teen, but he immediately rose and flashed a nasty gesture at the window anyway.

Brian’s head vanished.

She gestured with her free hand. “Want him along or not, he will be, so make sure you factor that in all plans you make. We will keep Brian alive until I can find a place to stash him. He isn’t like us, though he believes he is.”

“Is he corrupt?” Jacob had already been worrying over that.

The other men laughed at him.

Jacob frowned. “What?”

Alexa nodded at Daniel, sensing he would be the kindest.

Daniel stopped snickering. “Brian is pure. He’s probably one of the few good humans left in our country. We’re the corruption, Jacob. We have to protect him from us.”

Jacob’s frown grew as he realized they were right.

“When do you think our company will arrive?” Mark needed to know so he could determine how much time he had to plan surprises that were small enough to be hidden in their pockets.

Alexa yawned, then shrugged. “I wish I knew. Until I finish adjusting, we’ll play things by ear.”



“In that case, I’d like to suggest we spend the next half hour switching to the basement.” Edward was keeping track of time. “We won’t be parted from you for sleeping that way.”

“Agreed.” Alexa forced herself to drink the bitter brew she usually enjoyed.

The mood stayed calm as the men got to work on the tasks she’d assigned.

Edward motioned Billy to watch over Alexa.

She didn’t protest. They had rough days ahead and Billy knew how to handle moments like that. He’d been very well trained.

Billy sighed. *Is she damned now?* If so, the quest would be in vain.

Alexa’s light laughter was a surprise.

“It’s sweet of you to think I wasn’t already.” She gave him a comforting glance, firelight shining in her eyes. “I’m not going there to stay. I’m going to bring him back. I’m the messenger. It’s time for Safe Haven to come home.” She laughed again at his surprise. “You’re hired help escorting a woman with an important message. We’re the new Pony Express, without the ponies.”

### 3

“Put the light out.” Alexa went to the center of the cleared space in the basement.

The men did it without questions, but not doubt. They didn’t know what lesson she could give when they couldn’t see her.

“We’re going to be walking at night. We need to be able to see to fight, but we won’t be able to.”

Edward smothered the single flame, dimming them into darkness. He stayed where he was, letting his senses adjust as Alexa started the lesson.

“When night falls, you have to hear the threats coming, smell the changes that precede those threats, touch the vibrations, taste the fear and the anger.” Alexa dug in her pocket. “Tell me what the object is.”

Alexa began throwing rocks at them.

“Damn!”

“Ow!”

“Hey!”

Men ducked the hard stings, protecting their faces.

Alexa dug for another handful. “What is it? First answer passes.”

“Rocks!” Edward rubbed at a welt on his cheek. “They came from the Killing Fields.”

Impressed, Alexa paused. “What makes you say that? Rocks are rocks.”

“They smell like rot. So did the corn.”

“Move to the stairs.”

Edward went without tripping over anything. He’d spent a lot of years traveling underground to avoid soldiers. It had allowed him to find stashes that other war survivors hadn’t.

Alexa dropped the stones back into her pocket and took out a different pouch. “Same rules apply.” She began throwing.

Men cringed from the dust that covered them in ashes of the dead.

“Bone dust!” Billy hated the feel of it.

The others coughed or spit. Her aim was perfect, even in the dark.

“Move to the stairs.” Alexa dug in the next pouch. She didn’t give warning this time.

More grit flew across the men.

“Dirt.” Jacob coughed, wiping at his face.

“From where?” Alexa threw more.

Jacob forced himself to taste it. There was too much grit in his nose to smell it. “Potting soil. The hardware store we passed after Lincoln.”

Alexa stopped throwing. “Take the stairs.”

The remaining men braced, listening to her fingers scrape a new item from one of her pockets.

Small, narrow missiles slammed into their raised hands.

“Sticks!” David yelled. “In my eye. Sticks in my eye!”

Chuckles echoed in the darkness.

Alexa struggled to talk through her laughter. “Stairs.”

David staggered toward Edward. “Can you pull it out? Leave the eyeball.”

Alexa’s aim was off as she threw and laughed at the same time.

Liquid splashed.

Mark groaned. “Wine. Strawberry, I think.” He spat. “Dusty, twiggy strawberry wine.”

“Where did it come from?”

Mark struggled to think through the discomfort of being put on the spot. “Uh... One of the soldiers had it. We smelled strawberries while we camped. Before the wolves came.”

“Take the stairs.” Alexa dug in her pockets.

Tiny cracks filled the room, popping in random sparks of light.

“I love Snap-n-Pops!” Daniel danced around the cracks at his feet. “Did you take an extra box? Can I have it?”

Alexa tossed him the box, chuckling. “Take the stairs.”

The order was followed in confusion. All six men had passed. They listened for her next order, realizing the lesson wasn’t over.

Alexa sat, making little noise. “With your ears now, my pets. Earn a seat in my circle.”

The guys sobered, including David, who had removed the debris from his eye.

Alexa tossed something. “What is it?” She tossed a bit more.

“Nuts?”

“Beans.” Edward cleared his throat. “Coffee will be gritty tomorrow, boys.”

Men chuckled.

“Join me, Horseman.”

Edward came to her right without slipping on the dirty floor. He sank down next to her with thoughts of the name. She only called him that when she wanted him to do something the others didn’t know how to accomplish. Reminded that he was her

first for a reason, Edward chose a pocket and tossed something. “What is it?”

The men waited for the sound to be repeated.

Edward tossed again.

“Cloth...gloves?”

“Join us, Daniel.”

Daniel wasn’t as graceful as Edward in the dark, but he didn’t stumble as he went to Edward’s location. He’d listened for it so that he could find his place.

Daniel sat and waited for the lesson to continue.

Edward nudged him. “Your turn.”

Daniel grinned in the darkness. “Yeah, Uh... What is it?” He tossed something.

Silence.

Daniel realized he’d changed the order by only throwing once. He started to do it again.

Edward put a hand on his wrist to stop him.

Daniel realized it was a secondary lesson on adapting. He’d been the one to trigger it. He hoped Alexa didn’t mind. He hadn’t meant to change her teaching structure.

“Your knife.” Jacob was sure he was wrong.

“No.”

“Spare blades.” David sensed Alexa guiding them to the true lesson now.

“Join us.”

David wanted to stagger around the room again to bring more humor but didn’t. He sat next to Daniel and dug in his pocket for something to throw. “What is it?”

Billy struggled not to laugh. “Jacob’s rocks. We call them biscuits.”

“Join us.”

Billy patted Jacob on the shoulder, then took his place in the circle. He threw something. “What is it?”

Jacob didn’t hesitate. “Your lighter.”

“Join us.”

Jacob tripped over the step and fell into Alexa’s lap.

“Ugh!”

Not sure what had happened, all the other men except Edward drew their guns. Jacob’s boots had landed in his lap, blocking access to his weapon. He shoved the embarrassed man off them.

The others scrambled for light.

“Stand down!” Edward blew out a huff. “It’s just my evening lap dance.”

Alexa straightened as Jacob crawled to his seat. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I did that. I’m sorry.”

“Your foot is a weakness.” Alexa wasn’t angry. “At some point, those we fight will use it against you. Be ready for it.”

“I will.”

“Finish my lesson.” Alexa was growing restless. Jacob tossed something. “What is it?”

Mark scowled. “That better not be the last pack of smokes.”

“It’s wrapped. Don’t whine.”

Alexa and the others chuckled as Mark joined them.

Edward assumed the seriousness had been ruined by Jacob and waited for it to be over. He could sense Alexa wanting to be doing something else.

“Our time here is short.” Alexa brought alertness back to her crew. “I’ve sensed Safe Haven. As soon as I’m ready, we’ll go hunting.”

The men were almost relieved to hear it. They’d only been here half a day, but they were already getting bored. That wasn’t good. They were used to staying on the road.

“Next, Jacob will tell us how he came to be scarred.”

“I will?” Jacob cleared his throat. “Of course, I will.” He took a fast drink from his canteen. “I was attacked during a service. One of the locals thought I was a problem and tried to end me.”

Jacob’s tone begged them to let it go.

“Out of the blue?” Billy frowned through the darkness.

“His wife tried first.”

Men whistled and made crude comments, but not Edward. He knew Alexa wanted Jacob’s story told now and he was, as always, determined to give her what she’d asked for. “Did you only do it once or whenever she came to you?”

Jacob’s hands clenched into fists. “I never touched her. She followed me around like a puppy. Her son told the father.” Jacob’s fury came through in thick waves. “She screamed the loudest when

they stormed the church, telling them I'd hurt her. She wielded the knife that marred me."

The men were silent, trying to imagine the scene.

"They were in the middle of hanging me when the son drew a gun. I dropped to the ground during the shooting." Jacob swallowed his self-loathing to finish his awful tale. "He killed them all. Then he killed himself."

Alexa passed Jacob a smoke. "You didn't bury them."

He shook his head. "No. I left it for the town to find." He shivered, haunted. "They thought I did it. They cleaned it and ostracized me, but no one came with torches or lies again. I rebuilt the church and restarted services." Jacob lit the smoke and passed it.

"How long had you been giving words over empty pews?"

"Years."

"And now?"

"I'm yours until you remove me, or until I make a mistake and someone else does it for you."

Silent approval filled the warming room.

David broke it. "I got the idea that it's more than the fanatics needing you as a descendant. Is there a personal reason they want your family?"

Alexa shrugged. "It's entirely possible that my family may have offended them along the way."



“During the time your father worked for the government or during the time the government used you against other descendants?”

Heads rotated toward David for the disrespectful tone behind the reasonable question.

Alexa scowled at the magician. “Face your own nightmares before making other people face theirs!”

David dropped his head.

The other men in the room made mental notes to scold him when they were alone.

Aggravated, Alexa flipped on her light, then gestured toward the stairs. “Security check.”

The other men frowned at David for the punishment but stood to do as they were told. No one liked it when Alexa was upset.

David regretted questioning her so rudely, but only that. Everyone had a right to know her father wasn’t the hero she believed him to be. It hadn’t occurred to him that she had planned to tell everyone in her own way, in her own time. It should have, though. Alexa didn’t like secrets. It made sense that she would have been searching for a way to explain the complicated relationship between Adrian and Safe Haven.

If not for his own time in that camp, it would have been easy for David to overlook the signs that Adrian had been responsible, at least partially, for Safe Haven leaving America. David wouldn’t hold Alexa responsible for it unless she intended to continue his traditions. He hadn’t spoken about it with Billy yet, but he would. At some point in the

future, Alexa may follow in her father's unethical footsteps. They needed to do everything they could to prevent that from happening. It would be heartbreaking if she took the same path.

Alexa understood the reasoning, but she resented being held responsible when she had done nothing to warrant such mistrust. Family curses were hard to break. "It's time to sleep."

Edward felt her restlessness. It matched his own. "Trouble is coming sooner than you thought, right?"

Alexa nodded. "Yes. Our good vibes have been pinpointed."

Hoping he wasn't overstepping, Edward sent out a wave of need.

Alexa stiffened. She usually chose the physical moments that happened, but she also enjoyed a bold partner. "It would take the edge off..." She ducked into the small room Jacob had discovered earlier.

Edward followed, body already responding.

Billy nudged the others, directing them to the stairs. Like Edward, he'd felt Alexa's need to be on the road. He approved of pleasure as a distraction. Edward would serve her well and fortify his place as her right hand. The others had tried to create a bond with her when she chose to gift them with her body, but it hadn't worked. She allowed them to do as they pleased during those moments, but she only responded to him so eagerly. They were all a bit jealous of him for being her first. They assumed that was why he had more liberties.

Alexa murmured something.

Edward came out a few seconds later, catching Mark's eye as he went up the steps.

Mark didn't react except to change direction. Not even a smile came to his lips, but everyone felt his joy at being chosen to help satisfy her needs. Neither male considered her illness or the possible dangers.

Billy did, remembering another woman who'd had a disease that made her crave blood, but he didn't speak his concerns. He trusted Alexa to control herself. Blood was necessary for her now, but he had no doubt that she would starve herself if it meant reaching her father.

"What happens if she gets pregnant?" David couldn't help but voice his secret dream and fear. "It ends, right? The quest."

Billy shook his head, holding the basement door for the others. "That won't stop her. Delay us maybe, but we'd just have a baby to care for."

All of them tried to imagine what that would be like but couldn't.

The men followed Billy, listening to raspy moans that said Mark and Edward were already working. It wouldn't take them long to please her.

*It never does.* Billy smiled. She was hard to please in every other way, so it balanced out.

Billy joined his team for the security check. They would rejoin her downstairs when she called. Until then, she was in four good hands.

Chapter Thirteen

# Big Things

1

Alexa wasn't sure where she was when she woke. Dizziness assailed her, making her limbs hard to lift.

Pain came from a bright glare.

Alexa instinctively rolled over, bringing her arm up for cover. *Why is it so bright?*

Alexa's movement triggered a reaction that rippled through her team.

At her side, Edward sat up.

Near her feet, David's glassy eyes flew open.

Jacob drew his gun. He didn't wake.

On watch upstairs, Mark rotated toward the cellar. He had memorized the soft, whispering creak of Jacob's holster.

Daniel, on duty outside the window, saw Mark turn toward the cellar and came inside.

Billy, perched in the tree in the side yard, began sweeping the area for trouble, but he doubted something had gotten through their watch. Daniel had been crouched beneath the window ledge and blended in perfectly. Billy had viewed enough movement to be sure the man had stayed awake.

Mark waited, listening to determine the proper course of action.

Daniel went downstairs.

“Problem up there?” Edward didn’t hear anything to suggest that.

“No.”

Edward did the same as Mark and David—he searched for clues as to why they’d all shifted. Their sleep was normally the quick, hard drop of exhaustion. It was unusual to wake near the end of a cycle.

“Bright...”

Alexa’s mutter caused Edward to scan their den. The mirror shoved in the corner tossed a glint over his face. He frowned. She couldn’t take even a hint of light during these recovery times. *We’ll have to clear our dens differently now.*

Edward flashed a signal at Daniel, sending the man back to his post. Someone would chastise him later for leaving it without being called.

Edward dislodged himself from Alexa’s side, removing his cloak to cover her completely.

Alexa shuddered in relief. *So bright! So hot.*

Edward tried to be quiet as he covered the few things in the room that would transfer light from anywhere. When he thought he had it taken care of, Edward went upstairs.

Daniel was hunkered under the window outside again.

Edward took a cup of coffee from Mark, noting the Convict was wide awake. "You can go down now."

"In a minute, maybe." Mark was still listening. He trusted his team, but he also trusted his instincts. He preferred to have both of those confirm things were okay.

"She's restless. Did we miss something?" Edward hated the thought.

Mark shrugged reluctantly. "I want to say no...."

"Same."

"But neither of us are sure and she's restless." Mark grunted. "We'll talk to her?"

Edward nodded. "Or she'll talk to us. If we've noticed something hinky, she already spotted it and started making plans."

"How clever you both are."

Both men spun, startled by Alexa's gruff voice at the top of the stairs.

Pale, Alexa dragged her shaky body to the nearest chair. She sat, wincing at the dull light from the smoldering embers of the last coffee fire.

Edward went to put it out, but Alexa waved him off. "I'll adjust."

Neither man was sure that was true.

Mark pressed a cup of coffee into her hands, noting the chilly skin. "Would you like to eat?"

Alexa nodded, stomach twisting. Now that the thirst had been satisfied, hunger was ready to be slaked.

Her men hurried to satisfy her other needs as she considered the new diet. She now needed both solid and liquid. Maybe over time she would be able to survive on either. It was an interesting, awful thought.

The stew, made by Mark, was decent. Alexa finished two full bowls and a cup of the canned milk they'd saved for her. As she finished, Edward handed her a smoldering cigarette.

Alexa enjoyed the fullness on both sides. The two lost soldiers had served her well. She exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. "Our presence has drawn attention I didn't count on."

"Government rats or undead?" Edward flashed a motion to Daniel when he glanced through the window for a check in.

Outside, Daniel repeated the motion to alert Billy to a possible problem coming. They would double their scans. Adrenaline would help get them through the weariness.

"Both, I expect. We may still go unnoticed if we're quiet." She tossed the smoke to Mark. "Or we could draw them here and try to wipe them out."

Edward and Mark exchanged grins that hid only a bit of worry. Enjoying her sexually, then seeing her eat two thick bowls of stew had helped restore some of the good mood.

"We either have to go quiet or be set to fight."

"Too many for us to sneak through?"

Alexa nodded. "Noise and light are two things Mother Nature hates unless she's the cause of them.

Most of her army has gathered. Those still on the way have begun to slaughter survivors again. We've had a brief peace, but I think our victories have sped up those plans. Humans are once again at war, only this time, there are so few of us that we may not survive."

"Safe Haven will stop it." Edward hoped to soothe all of them.

Alexa grunted, but didn't add her faith. She wasn't certain the people in America had that kind of time. It would be many months yet before they were even in radio range of Safe Haven.

"We could just go south right now." Mark tried to sound casual. "Find a nice boat."

"I want that more than you can imagine." Alexa sounded like the leader they'd come to love, breaking the tension. "But we have a lot of work to do here."

"We could train on the boat."

"Not against these threats." Alexa once again fought the temptation to flee straight to her father. Her dreams had mapped out most of this trek so far and that wasn't going to change unless she had no other choice. Every day here saw them getting stronger, gaining more information, gathering the things Adrian would need. She hadn't told her men yet of the items they would have to take along. She hoped they would find the rest during the trip to the coast, where she would contact others like herself. She had to let her relatives know when she left to find Adrian. If she fell on the way, someone else



would have to take her place. The quest had many layers, with the barest chance of victory. Once they found the camp, they still had to convince Safe Haven to come home. That wouldn't be easy. It might not even be possible after so long. Without interference, Alexa expected that place to have become a utopia—one that she would never belong to now, no matter who her parents were.

“What if we don't use bullets?” Jacob had woken shortly after Alexa left their body pile. He'd taken a seat at the top of the stairs to listen while he became alert.

Alexa rotated toward the Preacher. “What do you mean?”

Jacob leaned against the wall so that he could view both directions. “We've seen how effective fire is.”

“Yes.”

“And we know how they panic. The undead walk straight into it. The soldiers drive miles out of their way to avoid it unless they're the ones setting it.”

“Arson and ashes.” Mark tried not to think of his past.

“We could have a controlled roast. The first wave will be easy, compared to what we're used to. The undead will burn. The soldiers will wait for orders to come investigate. That will take a while. We can have surprises waiting for them.”

“Surprises?”

“Under the smoke, we could lay a trap that would disable their vehicles. After that, we’d have to find a way to finish the job. I haven’t gotten that part yet.”

Mark snorted. “We have all the shrapnel we could ask for with the dead trees and rocks.”

“Shrapnel!” Jacob slapped himself. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re not the bombing kind. You’d rather pray it to death.”

A sharp glare from Alexa silenced the coming teasing and possible wrestling match. She often let them go, but not now. She needed a plan in place or she wouldn’t be able to sleep. It had already woken her once. “If we go right now, we might slip through. If we make any noise, our quest will likely end. The numbers coming to investigate the destruction of the House in the Corn is more than we can manage alone.”

“Is there assistance nearby we could call on?” Mark thought of all the spirits they’d left in Lincoln.

“No. We’ve gone beyond their protection.”

The fighters didn’t like the idea of running, but if the enemy had massive numbers, they weren’t prepared to handle that.

David tensed on the steps below Jacob. “We may have to scrap all our plans. I’m picking up tremors. Anyone else?”

Alexa stilled, searching. Had she overlooked a problem? It was possible. Over the last weeks, she certainly hadn’t felt like herself.

“I thought I was dreaming about thunder.” Jacob could feel the calmness in the air now. It wasn’t storming.

As they sat quietly, listening to the ground beneath them, the sensation came again. The deep thudding immediately reminded the men of a movie series with dinosaurs.

Edward stood. “I think we should go dark.”

Alexa was already motioning him to call in their outside men and douse the lights. Whatever was pounding around out there didn’t need a target.

Alexa went to the narrow stairs of the cabin. It led to the attic space that had a single window she wanted to use. As she ascended, the front door opened.

Billy and Daniel hurried inside.

“Close us up!” Billy rushed to their fire. He draped his cloak over the embers to muffle the dim light further, breathing heavily. He’d run from his post.

“What is it?” Daniel locked the door but remained near it to view through the blinds.

Billy waved at him. “Shh!”

Upstairs, Alexa and Edward watched from the window, noticing the complete lack of movement in the darkness. Nighttime in Afterworld was full of creatures that preferred the dark, but not now. That could only mean one thing. Something very dangerous was in the area and it wasn’t their crew.

Downstairs, the fighters spread themselves out among windows and doors, straining to see or hear

anything. Billy wasn't spooked easily and he'd never left his post without being called.

"What about the kid?" Mark stayed by the steps to wait for Alexa.

"No time! Stay still!"

Witnessing Billy so upset sent a tremor of another kind through their group. Panic was contagious.

Mark grunted in sharp annoyance, reminding himself who they were. "Stop it."

It helped all of them calm down. They had Alexa. They were gunfighters, and survivors of an apocalypse. They were far from defenseless.

"What is it?" Daniel had been on the ground. He hadn't gotten a good view.

Billy, now ashamed of himself but still terrified, pointed toward the door. "A big thing!"

*Thud. Thud... Thud!*

Alexa hurrying down the stairs wasn't a comfort. "Into the cellar, my pets." Alexa kept going, not sparing time for their gear.

The others followed, also leaving their stuff. When Alexa ran, so did they.

Alexa motioned toward the rear room.

They squeezed into the tight fit without asking what was coming. They no longer wanted to know.

*Thud. Thud...*

Something big stopped outside the small house. The fighters inside felt the cabin shrink before the form.

It sniffed again...then moved on, letting everyone breathe.

Alexa didn't let them emerge yet. Creatures that size didn't need long to get where they were going.

As they waited for Alexa to call clear, all of the fighters were helpless not to imagine what was out there.

Daniel had glimpsed a huge shadow and couldn't stop thinking of those dangerous dinosaurs.

Mark assumed a tooth-filled a monster.

Jacob thought it was a giant lizard.

David and Billy knew it for the real form—a dog.

Alexa used the time to dig through her mental files for mentions of such a creature. When she did find a dusty sheet, it held limited information. *I need to fill that out for future reference.*

Adrian would require details. When they reached Safe Haven, all seven of them would hold valuable information about their homeland. Adrian would need their observations and stories as much as their skills with a gun. *Without us, he'll come home blind.*

Alexa gestured to Edward at the other end of the sandwich.

Edward eased upstairs to reestablish a watch for however long they remained. He didn't expect Alexa to keep them here now. Ready or not, they were about to go roaming in Afterworld while it was dark.

## 2

Brian stared through the crack in his cover, trying not to breathe as the huge dog sniffed at the cabin. It appeared to be a St. Bernard, but ten times larger. Instead of a normal collar around its thick, furry neck, this dog wore a strap of gold that flashed through the darkness like a beam from a lighthouse. Brian wondered if the glare had disturbed his mother.

The dog thudded forward suddenly, drawn by other smells, Brian assumed. He stayed still, waiting. In this narrow cave, any noise would echo. He imagined being in here while the beast tried to paw him out and swallowed a shudder.

As soon as he felt it was safe to, Brian began repacking his gear. His mother wouldn't remain here now, he was certain of that and glad. Big things were scary.

Inside the cabin, Alexa's men were reacting the same way. They didn't wait to be told.

Alexa was pleased. Each of her fighters had survived in Afterworld for years before she'd come for them. They knew when it was time to go.

Alexa stepped outside for a moment of relief before they hit the road.

Edward followed, giving her as much space as she had once told him. "*Privacy ends when hearing does.*" If he couldn't hear her, he was too far away.

Mark and Daniel kept the others working by helping them when they slowed. Alexa was preparing to leave and she was strong enough to run if she wanted to. They might be on the verge of a sprint through the twisted darkness. The rookies needed to remember the training they'd received so far.

"What about her son?" Jacob made sure his voice didn't carry far.

Mark glanced toward the boy's den, then shrugged. "Whatever she decides. He isn't our quest."

Jacob didn't care for the heartless answer. He understood the total loyalty to Alexa, but it had only been a short time for him. Some of the adjustments were taking his mind longer to accomplish than his heart. That bloody organ already belonged to her—lock, stock, and barrel.

Jacob flashed Alexa a soothing grin as she came inside, drawing a tolerant snort.

"Ready for the next adventure so soon?"

Jacob patted his gun in answer.

Alexa chuckled, sending light through all of them. If there was time to laugh, there was time to escape.

Alexa motioned them toward the fireplace. "In two minutes, Brian will come. Here's how that has to be handled."

Edward snatched the door open before the boy could knock, scowling.

Brian flushed, hand dropping. He'd only meant to tap, but he could have waited. He should have known they were aware of him.

"You're coming with us or going away for real. I won't watch you kill her with your death."

"I'm not allowed to be—"

Edward grabbed the kid and shoved him toward the others. "In the center to start with. Mind your stolen lessons."

Brian refused to argue further. Breaking their rules or not, he wanted to be with them.

The men surrounded Alexa's rash, skilled son with a feeling of rightness. Brian would be useful, they were certain of it.

So was Alexa. Brian wouldn't be happy with any other life. He was already ruined for settling down to a peaceful future. He would take his place among the rest of their family as fighters in a war they hadn't asked for but were duty bound to see to the end.

Alexa watched her crew move over to give her son the rookie slot. She noted Jacob and David eyeing him in relief. His friendship with those two could be easily sealed if he did well on this run.

Edward directed the boy's attention to a stack of gear, still wearing that scowl. Brian would think Edward didn't like him, but it had been his idea to give the boy this chance. Alexa had agreed, though she hadn't promised more than to consider the early



gift. She'd given it to the twins at the bunker. There was little reason not to do the same with Brian if he was ready. This run would provide that answer, for good or bad. The downside was if he didn't pass the test. He would be sent back to live among the shadows until he learned what he'd missed.

The life of a descendant child had been the same over the centuries. It broke as many as it made, but when successful, children like Brian grew up good enough to provide the hope that balanced the world's darkest hours. Descendants were powerful when fully developed, but children had to make the choice between good and evil and they made it alone. That was the epitome of free will.

Wise parents had discovered that gifted children who were raised this way were unshakable in their loyalty to the light. Governments had tried for eons to discover that trick, but they controlled their subject from minute one, never letting them make their own choices. When a descendant was only exposed to control, they only learned to control others.

Brian took the kit and went to the bathroom to change into the outfit he'd dreamed about for years. He didn't ask what was going on. He recognized the evaluating stares of each man and from his mother. He was being tested. If he passed, he would be rewarded by his gifts being unlocked early. That was all the information he required.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Old Friends

### 1

**S**ensing the right moment had come, Alexa hurried her crew out into the cool darkness. The lack of nature's noises convinced her they were right to leave. All of them needed sleep, food and to not be hounded for a while, but that wasn't possible here.

Alexa took point, leaving her senior men to look out for the rookies. She set a fast pace through the thick foliage, trying to be quiet. It was hard. The weeds and bushes reached for her, as if they were trying to slow her down.

Edward and Daniel kept track of the new men, letting the rest of the crew remain alert to outside problems. The heavy crunch of footsteps echoed in the silence.

Ahead of them, a howl split the air.

Unsure if the dog had sensed their presence or simply smelled something else, Alexa advanced into a run.

The rookies kept up at first, but after an hour, they became more spread out than Edward was comfortable with. He gradually slowed, knowing Alexa would come to check on them as soon as she realized he wasn't on her heels.

Edward made the motion for them to stop.

Brian was glad of the break, but not because he was out of breath. He had loose gear making noise. He wanted a minute to secure it before someone scolded him.

The seven males stayed in the thick darkness near a large tree with branches that hung over them like a carnival top. It made everyone nervous to be without their leader.

“Something’s coming behind us.” David could feel it, though it wasn’t making noise yet.

Edward signaled them into the tree, like Alexa had done with Daniel when he’d first joined them. He waved Brian up last, wanting the boy close in case he had to grab him and run.

Edward stayed on the ground at the base, ready to leap into the tree.

*Thud. Thud.*

The men exchanged worried glances that none of them saw in the darkness but still felt. The dog was covering ground faster because of its size.

Edward climbed into the tree, hoping the top branches were high enough, hoping the tree he’d chosen would hold against the dog, hoping Alexa knew what to do for this.

The night went silent again, leaving only the sounds of their breathing and the odd rustling of moldy leaves in the tree.

Edward strained to view through the wave of utter darkness that swamped them as the moon slid behind the clouds.

The dog began to howl. Long and sharp, the sound sent shivers over men and women alike.

“Come down now.” Alexa spoke softly from the base of the tree. “It scented something else.”

The snaps and cracks of her crew coming from the tree echoed loudly, but Alexa hoped they had a few minutes to get under better cover. That last howl had been a predator with something cornered. Glad it wasn’t them, Alexa held out the end of her rope to Edward. “Get us secured.”

Edward approved them being connected, though it made trekking more difficult. He quickly fastened himself to the next man in line, then waited for them to do the same.

As soon as they were all linked, Edward gave two short tugs on the rope connecting him to Alexa.

She immediately took off running through the darkness.

Edward was ready to be jerked off his feet, as were Billy and Daniel, but the others were caught off guard. It caused a nasty recoil that Edward and the other top men prepared for by anchoring their rope and pulling hard. It kept them moving but dragged the others until they recovered.

At the tail end, Mark groaned, trying to regain his feet with Brian’s boot in his balls. It was the only noise they made.

Alexa ran them hard and fast, but not nearly as hard or fast as she could have. The sense of something coming other than the dog was strong. She followed the pull, tracking the light in her mind

that was screaming of Safe Haven. *I'm right on top of it.* She slowed.

“Over here!”

Alexa veered that way.

Her crew hurried to surround Alexa at the unknown voice. If the person was a threat, they were in for a nasty surprise.

A faint flicker in the darkness revealed a short, older woman standing in front of a hillside cave.

Alexa didn't feel the minor stings from the thick thorn bushes that lined the entrance, but she did frown over the noise as they all came through.

“It can't be helped.” The woman turned away before Alexa or her men could ask any questions. “Get in here far enough and he can't dig us out.”

Alexa recognized the huge gouge marks around the entrance, and was sure her crew would as well. The woman's torch was bright to them after an hour in the pitch black, illuminating their surroundings.

The woman limped ahead of them, muttering about smells of power. Their guide was hunched over and carried a dim lantern that cast odd shadows as she limped through the tunnel. Her clothes and moccasins were nice, as was her coat and scarf, though it was all filthy. She clearly knew where to scavenge or trade for old world supplies.

Alexa untied her rope, letting them know it was okay to do the same.

Edward disconnected and stored his rope, observing details. Hard packed from steady travel, it was obvious that little sunlight reached this cave.

Green plants sprouted from the walls, but only a few. The pale bugs were large, numerous. Edward hated how loudly they crunched under his boots.

The other fighters ignored that in favor of dreading the awful feeling of going into a tomb without knowing where the exit was.

*Thud. Thud.*

Dirt fell over them in light sprinkles as the dog pounded toward the cave.

“In here.” The woman took them through a sloping tunnel to the right that had newly removed cobwebs hanging wildly around the entryway.

Alexa swallowed her unease to follow. If trouble waited ahead, it was probably better than what they’d left behind. To verify that, she studied their guide, gleaning more details.

The woman appeared to be old, but the spring in her movements warned them to beware of that impression. She wasn’t a typical grandmother in the shoe. This woman lived underground or at least in a place filthy enough to be, judging from her mud caked boots and dirt on every inch of exposed skin. Alexa was willing to bet the rest of her body was the same. The woman stank.

Their guide took them through several more tunnels before finally stopping in a large chamber that had been rounded. Several more tunnels led from it.

Alexa faced their guide while her men surrounded them, then faced the dark tunnels.

“Is she real?” Jacob was thinking of the Killing Fields.

David nodded. “Yeah. Smell her?”

Jacob did, wincing. “Okay. Got it now.”

Alexa stared at the woman, recognizing contempt in her sly brown eyes. “Thank you for the help.”

“You owe me for it.” The woman removed her scarf to reveal grey and brown hair in long braids and skin as wrinkled as Alexa’s was weathered.

“The price?”

“A talk.”

Alexa nodded. “Lead the way, old woman.”

“I’m your age!” The woman spat on the floor by her boots. “Sally.”

Alexa smiled coldly. “Yet you cling to age like a child with a bottle. How odd.” She didn’t say they were at least ten years apart. Alexa was in her upper twenties. This woman had a decade on her, though it seemed like much more.

Sally flushed, rotating toward the farthest tunnel. “Come on.”

Alexa smirked a bit as she gestured two of her crew after the woman, then followed. The rest brought up the rear, placing her in their center of protection.

They only traveled for a few minutes when the woman stopped again. A door with no key hole or handle sat in the earth ahead of them.

Sally dug her fingers into the dirt around the frame and pulled the door open.

The fighters realized it was a trick to make intruders think the way was blocked.

“It also keeps out the cold.”

Edward scowled. *Another mind reader. Great.*

Sally cackled, using her torch to light two others located in the corners of the small room.

Last in, Mark shut the door, then leaned against it to study their newest environment. Being underground would always remind him of being in prison. This wasn’t different. The small, earthen chamber was eerily like his old cell, even down to the dried blood on the floor.

Sally squatted near a dirty blanket and dropped heavily, grunting. She instantly sent thoughts of a wild animal into every mind.

Sally flushed again but didn’t respond to their automatic revulsion or curiosity. “I have a message for the daughter of Adrian Mitchel.”

Those words had an instant effect. The guys relaxed, taking positions that suggested they were going to get comfortable.

Alexa sat right where she was, unwilling to be closer to the dirty woman than she had to be.

Brian stayed by Mark. He’d often used caves or went underground, but he didn’t like it either.

Alexa took a pouch from her pocket and tossed it by the woman’s leg. “Speak your message and go in peace.”

Sally relaxed. “That’s the code.” She squinted at the men, cackling again. “Yar, you might make it, with those.”



Alexa nodded, not letting the woman get into her thoughts again. "That's my hope."

"Your father said night must fall."

Alexa waited for more, not sure if the phrase meant anything to her. Something tickled her brain, but nothing else came.

Sally leaned over to pick up the bag. "He also told me to remind you that your enemies are everywhere." She slammed the trigger under the dirt by her knee.

Alexa tensed as the ground shifted. *Too late!*

Edward lunged forward as Alexa fell through the gaping hole in the floor. He followed her, diving through without a sound or thought.

Mark stayed on the door as the others rushed to the hole or to secure Sally, who cringed into the corner like a wounded rat.

Billy threw one of the fallen torches into the hole, dismayed when it continued with no end in sight. He spun around and yanked Sally to her feet. "Where is she!" Billy shook her. "Answer me!"

Sally refused to.

Enraged, Billy dragged her toward the hole. "You next!" He tossed the woman in before anyone thought to stop him.

She screamed all the way down.

Billy dove in after her, praying for a soft landing as he scraped a side, then banged into the earth. It was all he could do not to shout.

Mark and Brian were the last two in. Mark picked up the other torch and held it over the hole. "Go on, boy."

Brian swallowed his terror and shut his eyes as he stepped off the edge, but it flew out of his mouth in a shriek that only stopped when it became grunts of pain from hitting earth and stone.

Mark dropped the torch in and followed it, hoping to see whatever he hit.

It didn't work. He slammed into the side of the pit and barely felt the rest of the fall as he struggled to stay conscious.

## 2

Alexa kicked to the side, pulling men to get them out of the way of the others she could hear coming down through the waves. She fought to get clear, dizzy.

Heavy splashes hit the water behind her. She lunged upward, letting go of the struggling men to turn back and do it again. If one of them hit the other, they could be seriously injured from the impact.

The men were as dazed as Alexa, but the shock of the cold water helped, as did the fight for air when they went under. Feeling bodies around them helped the men right themselves.

A light flared in the darkness.

"Count off!" Another heavy splash sent waves of water over the treading group. Alexa pulled the

man to her right and was sent under as the next man hit, followed by a thin plink she distractedly labeled as the other torch.

*One more.* She counted dragging her son's lighter weight to the left, then shoved him upward. She took ahold of his leg as he went, letting his panicked paddling pull her exhausted body to the surface.

"Six!"

"Seven!" Brian coughed out liquid, arms paddling in furious circles. He hated the water.

Edward and David held Alexa's gasping frame above the waves as the others helped Mark and Brian while they recovered. The light in the distance seemed to be on land of some sort.

"Take us there." Alexa was unable to help much as the men towed her in; Her lighter weight was being shoved backward by the waves. She was grateful all her crew could swim.

Tired boots scraped a rough stone bottom as the crew emerged from the water. Alexa scanned and found Sally floating close to where they had been, glowering miserably.

"Should I go get her?" Billy, furious, wanted to go get the woman so he could make her pay.

Alexa watched Sally struggle to swim, to stay afloat in the light waves. She was being pushed away from the shore. She didn't appear strong enough to make it on her own. "Yes. By two."

Alexa chose Edward to go with him, but only so the woman would be alive when she was brought ashore. Billy's rage was thick.. "I have questions."

Alexa signaled David and Jacob to take a guard post near the single torch glowing from a rock stand in the center of the land that was less than three hundred feet wide. She couldn't tell how far it went in length yet. "Do your best. Shoot anything that moves, but only shoot once."

It was a reminder to conserve their ammo. No one was even sure if their doused guns would fire now. Sometimes guns would and sometimes they wouldn't. It was always a wildcard, but the pair did as they were told, taking the wet weapons in hand. Anger filled the cavern as they began to understand the situation Sally had tricked them into.

Alexa tried to rush her recovery so that she could go back in the water to help, but the two fighters weren't having trouble. Sally hung between them, arms around their necks while they swam.

"Relieve them." Alexa waved at Brian and Mark. Long cloaks with all their deep, occupied pockets were a detriment in water. The two men struggling to get Sally on her feet were even more tired than she was.

Jacob and David kept rotating, grateful to not see or hear anyone waiting for them. It appeared as though it had been a trap to separate them from Alexa or stick them all down here, but that torch implied something else. It felt like they'd been captured instead of left for dead.

*We can't get out.* The two men realized it at the same time and began scanning for a place to climb.

Alexa wearily trudged away from the water, leading her group to the highest spot she could see. Using her light, she checked the cave walls for signs of flooding. Alexa scanned the ground next, then pointed. "Make camp there."

The men didn't need to be told to make a hot camp. Anytime they got soaked, they needed to get dry, but temperature also mattered. Most of them were already starting to shiver.

Without dry clothes to put on, the fighters were forced to warm up around the fire. Irritated grunts and nasty glowers were directed at their guide.

Sally followed the group, stumbling, but she knew better than to speak yet. The mood was ugly. She shivered nearby, trying to get warm.

Alexa motioned to David. "We'll use your log first. It will hold us four hours."

David carefully unsealed the baggie from a pocket in his drenched cloak, handing the dry log to Alexa so she could make their center fire.

"Our combined lights will give us another twelve to twenty hours, depending on what works and what doesn't. Those lights and our six remaining logs are how long we'll have to figure a way out of here. Then we're stuck wandering around blind in this darkness until we starve. There's nothing here we can burn or eat."

The fighters all tossed new glowers or curses at Sally, who was now shivering so hard her teeth chattered.

Brian did the same, though his glowers weren't as potent as the older men. He didn't have the bond with Alexa that they did. He didn't hate Sally as much yet, though that would grow the longer they were stuck here.

Alexa lit the log, packing it with her tinder. If not for the baggies she insisted on her crew using for the most important items, they would be down to just their working flashlights. "Before we start working on that, we need more information." Alexa nodded toward Sally. "Get her warmed and fed. She probably sold me out for food. You can see how thin she is."

Billy stomped to the woman and yanked her up by the arm, angrier that they had to share their supplies. *I should have just killed her.*

Sally read the thought and cringed from him.

Billy dragged her to the fire and began pulling off her top layers. He spread them out next to his cloak, daring her to protest when he searched her pockets.

Sally slid closer to the fire, hands coming out to find the warmth. Bony claws rubbed each other in misery.

"Why does she act like she's eighty?" Jacob was still standing watch nearby.

Alexa waved him toward the fire. "Perhaps you can find out."

Jacob took a seat by the woman, eager to hear what she knew. He wasn't convinced they were trapped. "Who are you? Why did you do this?"

Mark took Billy's spot on the other side of Alexa, automatically adjusting to be close enough to help her if something else happened. He also flashed an admiring look to Edward, who had gone into the hole after her without a second thought.

Edward nodded back, a little impressed himself. He hadn't known he was going to do it. He swept the large stones and small rocks around them, listening to the sound of the water gently lapping against the stone shore. He'd heard of underground rivers all his life, but he'd never seen one. Despite his underground preferences for dens, he hadn't ever been this deep.

Wanting to be useful and to listen, Brian went to the fire. He began assembling a meal from his kit. He had a large enough pot—a collapsible item that had been his favorite for a long time—but no water.

Alexa passed him a canteen as Jacob questioned Sally.

"Who, what, when, where, why and then how. Let's hear it."

Alexa hid a curl of her lips. This was no time for amusement.

Sally shuddered. "I can't... I don't know most of that!"

"Start talking or we won't waste food on you. You'll die before we do."

The other men approved. They were all doubtful about Jacob being given this chore, but his words said he was as upset as everyone else.

Sally glanced at Alexa, who didn't waste her time repeating the threat. It wasn't idle. She'd taught them captives were to be useful or eliminated so as not to drain or distract them.

"A man came to me and offered a month of food, upfront, for a chore I would have to do later. He showed up last night and told me to lead you here. He knew I had a message for you."

"Where are we? How do we get out?" Jacob couldn't see anything resembling an exit.

"A mile underground. Ride the waves or climb the walls. There is no other way."

"So, you were supposed to get us down here and then what? Just leave us?"

"Yes."

Alexa chuckled coldly. "He didn't tell you we probably wouldn't be taking the trip alone. Ironical."

Sally dropped her head. "We got hungry."

"Who is we?"

"Me and my animals." She stared brokenly. "They'll starve without me."

No one held sympathy for her or the pets they assumed were dogs and cats.

Jacob insisted. "There has to be a way out."

Sally wiped her sleeve across her nose. "I want out of here, too. I would tell you if I knew."

Satisfied she wasn't lying, Jacob lifted a brow at Alexa. *Anything else? Did I forget something?*



Alexa shook her head. “Nothing else she can provide. Feed her a last meal. Then she’s cut off from our supplies. She can stay by the fire until she dries and then get her out of our circle, out of our light.”

Sally began to cry.

It was pitiful, hard to watch. It replaced some of the anger with waves of guilt that the men tried to fight. She deserved the sentence. The wrong part was that they might share this grave with her.

Alexa motioned her last man off watch. “We’ll eat and sleep for six hours. Think the entire time, my pets. Our lives depend on it.”

Freed to do what they wanted, all of the men took places near the fire to scan their new prison while they waited for the food to be finished.

Mark sat next to Alexa. He slung an arm around her shoulders to share his warmth. When she rested against his shoulder, the need to save her filled his heart. The quest couldn’t end like this. He wouldn’t allow it.

An hour later, everyone except Mark and Brian were sleeping. One of them stared at Alexa, full and warm, and feeling safe despite the situation. The other male held Alexa while stewing on a way to get her out of the ground and back into the light where she belonged.

Chapter Fifteen

# No Regrets

1

**A**lexa woke at dawn. She felt it in her mind. When she opened her eyes, there was no proof of it except for the single soft beep of Edward's watch.

"You're early." He was automatically in a better mood now that she was awake.

Alexa snickered. "I try."

The men chuckled, glad she hadn't snapped awake in danger mode or disturbed this pitch-black silence with screams from her nightmares. The fire had gone out an hour ago.

Alexa sat up, feeling them in a circle around her. It was their guard position in dangerous situations. Hip-to-hip allowed them to be comforted, but also to know where everyone was. Any odd noise or movement could be pinpointed and would alert everyone.

Sure they were eager for a light, Alexa made them wait while she adjusted. Often, the hardest part of staying in control of yourself came when you no longer had to. That's when trouble liked to start.

"Sally's gone." Edward hoped it didn't spoil Alexa's mood, but he was glad they didn't have to care for the traitorous woman now.

Alexa continued her stretch, not surprised. In Afterworld, Sally's fate would have been food for the trapped people if it were any other gang of angry fighters. Alexa wasn't positive her own group wouldn't fall that far if she didn't get them out of here. When a person got hungry, they searched for edible food. When a person was starving, they ate whatever they found. Sally had definitely been in danger with them.

Alexa took the leftover bowl of stew, glad Mark had finally laid down. His warm body in front of hers was starting to wake, though. She placed a hand on his arm. "Rest."

Mark snuggled against her heat gratefully and immediately dropped back out.

"Is he okay?" Brian was next to the tattooed man.

"He's working on freedom. Being underground is hard on Mark. His mind is searching for an exit, as should all of ours be. Light the fire."

With that, she put them to work. Men began repacking gear as they scanned their surroundings again. There was a way out. They just had to find it.

Alexa consumed the stew quickly, debating on when they would leave. Mark needed more sleep, but the rest of them were ready to roll. *Half an hour.* She stood up, spine popping.

Alexa took the rolled smoke Edward handed to her, waving off his canteen. She'd gotten water from the stew. Let the men have the canteens for

now. They could boil the fresh water here, but they needed to find food first.

Alexa shut her eyes to the thin, gloomy light and concentrated, stretching her hearing as far as it would go. She only heard water, but it didn't give a clue to an exit. They would have to follow this stone shore and search for tunnels. That lit torch nagged at her. If someone had been here to set it up, there was a way out or the person was still down here.

David came to her side. He was also searching, though not with his normal senses.

"Have you finally accepted what you are?"

"No." David grunted. "But I hate the dark, so I'll use whatever skills I have and face the consequences afterward."

Alexa clapped him on the shoulder, then let her hand linger on the thick muscles in his arm. "My magician."

David raised a brow. "I thought you were the magic in our group."

"I'm the alpha. You are the magician. Mark is the killer. Jacob is our faith. We all have roles under those we've chosen to present to the world."

David sighed. He'd been around enough descendants to know what was happening to him. Since Alexa arrived, his gifts had started appearing.

"Use them now, Magician. Which way do we go?"

David felt the low hum of an engine fill the space between them and realized it was coming from him. A small light flickered in the dark

distance, then went dead. David pointed at where it had been.

Alexa grinned, eased a bit as she led him back toward the others. “Scour for Sally’s tracks. Brian, stay by Mark.”

Thrilled to be addressed directly for the first time, Brian kept his emotions to himself. Now wasn’t the time for love. They had to survive. Brian stood near the sleeping Convict, admiring his knuckle tattoos in the light of the fire.

Jacob spoke softly, aware of how rock and water both magnified sounds. “I found one of the torches.”

Billy did the same. “Her scarf is over here.”

“She thinks to lead us away from her.” Alexa wasn’t fooled. “Find the real trail.”

While the men searched, Alexa considered how she wanted to handle this newest adventure. She’d viewed the light through David’s sight and judged it to be a few hours travel. In the dark. Underground. Surrounded by water and stone.

Alexa sighed, already starting to feel the time without fresh blood. Her advantage here was the new vision that cut through the blackness like small lasers. It wasn’t full sight, but it would allow her to lead them without a light, which would conserve their supplies.

Alexa joined Mark and Brian at the fire ring, scanning them both.

Brian waited as still as he could, fighting the need to flinch, to move, to break the thickening

silence. It was harder than he'd imagined it would be.

Alexa gave the boy a last searching glance, then sank down by Mark's snoring form. "If you prove yourself on this run, I will consider gifting you early."

Brian smiled, but didn't speak. The sound of her voice was a double timbre in his mind, searching his soul for darkness.

"You have a lot of anger."

Brian nodded. It was true.

"You may need it to get through this. Stay close to him." She looked at Mark. "He'll keep you alive while we get out of here."

Brian would have protested if it was the other way around. He stared at her for a long time in the fading light, enjoying being with her even in this situation. Her strength was a light in his mental darkness.

Alexa shuddered at his thoughts. She didn't want him here. His death might crush her.

"We found a scrap of her pants by the water." Jacob joined them at the fire. "The two torches are almost dry."

"Good. We leave in fifteen minutes. We'll use the first torch as we go."

All the males were relieved to know light was coming, but even more so that they would be using it while they walked. Scouring these boulders with just their flashlights had been a challenge. None of them had been looking forward to trying to find an

exit in the thick blackness. A single basement lesson hadn't prepared them for this.

Brian stayed by Mark. He didn't like the dark, though he'd been alone in it before. This was different than crawling into a cave. If not for his mother and her crew, he would be terrified.

Mark rolled over and sat up, unable to sleep now that Alexa was awake.

"Are we going the same way she chose?" David frowned. "It's opposite what I saw."

Alexa soothed and scolded at the same time. "We're following you, David, not the stranger who led us down here to die."

David fell silent, feeling the weight now that she'd made the official choice. If he was wrong, they might all die.

"We're not alone. We know that. As we travel, this darkness will try to convince each of you that we're going the wrong way, that death is upon you, that every shadow holds a monster." Alexa began to assemble another rolled smoke, hoping to calm their frayed nerves. "Some of those may even be true at times. You must remember your training. This is the next level; your skills will be used here." Alexa felt for Mark's arm and let the smoke slide down it for him to catch or lose. "Your other senses will rise. Your hearing will adjust. Any flash of light will hurt you, so look away from fires when they're lit. Consider yourselves deadly moles. While mostly blind, you are no less lethal than you were while walking on top of the ground."

Moods lifted more at her short speech.

Mark stored the smoke for later, when they would enjoy it more.

Alexa stood. “Let’s hit the bathroom. I’m eager to be out of this tomb.”

No one went far, but the sound of the lapping water was loud enough to give a semblance of privacy. They certainly didn’t have to worry over seeing each other’s private moment. Away from the fire ring, there was only dark nothingness on top of sharp, unfriendly stones.

“Put out that fire and collect the log.” While they did it, she retrieved one of the torches.

“Shield your eyes.” Alexa lit it with the tip of her finger. She was forced to carry it upside down so that it would stay burning.

“Here.” Billy handed her one of his bandanas. “It’s got holes anyway.”

Alexa tied it to the torch. Light flared bright enough to make them all wince.

Point proven, Alexa walked forward. The bandana wouldn’t last long. “Let’s go.”

The group walked in a narrow version of their normal V. The area between the water and the cavern wall didn’t change in width as they walked. Boulders littered the uneven ground. The water seemed endless. None of them could spot a wall or the other side of the loud liquid.

*Loud?* Alexa paused, bringing the group to a halt. “It’s louder.”



The men noticed it together. The sound of rushing water echoed through the cave.

“It’s rising!” Mark shoved Brian back the way they’d come.

“Back to our site!” Alexa couldn’t avoid the wave that broke over her boots.

Jacob took the worst of it. “Wet again! This place sucks!” He spun around to follow the others who were already doing as told. “Damn it! Watch out!”

Jacob’s gun firing alerted the others to a problem, but they’d gotten spread out and the light was too faint to detect his target. They knew he was trying and failing because he was still firing. After Edward, the Preacher usually handled business with the least amount of lead.

Jacob leapt forward, knife in hand. He didn’t have time to reload a gun as the croc snapped at him, advancing. He plunged his blade at the animal’s huge head, but it hit a scale and pinged off, flying from his grip.

Jacob wrapped his arms around the reptile’s neck and hung on as it snapped and spun, trying to dislodge him.

Edward flung himself onto Jacob, knocking them both free as Alexa planted her blade in the back of the animal’s big head. She thrust it in as deep as she could, glad of Mark’s thick arms now keeping its jaws from her legs.

She felt the animal give up the fight, but there was no time to be glad as Jacob grabbed her and ran

for their campsite. *Must be more of them.* She was a bit shaken at the abrupt change of position in the darkness. Their torch was currently burning out near the rising waterline. Alexa squinted to find what had made Jacob panic.

Four more of the hungry crocs waddled from the murky water.

“Shit! Shit!”

Edward shouted over the fearful curses from Brian. “Get against the wall!” It would keep them from being attacked from behind, but this fight was still going to be ugly.

*Kaboom!*

Everyone paused in shock as the land near the four crocs exploded in a thick shower of stone and flesh.

*Meat*, they realized in tandem.

Alexa recovered enough to stand. She turned to Brian, who was holding another grenade.

Brian smiled. “I brought a few of my toys along. I hope you don’t mind. I’ve got eight more of them.”

Alexa chuckled. “Not at all, boy. Come take the front guard slot. Once we gather the meat, our quest continues.”

Calming now that the threats had been eliminated, Jacob pushed away thoughts of demons and Hell in favor of listening to the water as he worked. He found it almost soothing. He missed swimming. In his old life, he’d gone to the public pool twice a week during the summers.

David resisted the urge to send out his new gift again, waiting for it to be called upon. Alexa would tell him when to use it, or the situation would. There was no need to drain himself yet, though the desire to be out of here was thick in his heart. David hated the darkness, too. He always had.

Mark sliced off a hunk of meat and coughed, already starting to feel the dampness in his lungs. Drying around a fire hadn't been good for him. He'd gotten stronger since Alexa took him from the slam, but his health might always be fragile. Years of being drugged, starved, and beaten had caused that.

Edward listened to their breathing, trying to tune out the water in favor of keeping track of his companions. The coughs and throat clearing were bothering him. He didn't feel bad yet, but some of the crew was already starting to suffer effects of their captivity after only six hours.

Alexa also listened to her men, worried. If they didn't get out of here in the next 24-hours, the damage might be irreversible. This was the perfect setup for pneumonia and infections.

Daniel rubbed at a bruise on his arm, back aching. The fall down the pit had banged him into the earthen walls and hurt him in several places. He was sure a bit of rest would put him to rights, but it was hard to think about sleep while they were trapped. He wanted out of here, now.

All of them had minor injuries but nothing bad enough to warrant alerting their leader. They rubbed and felt those places when she wasn't looking.

Alexa knew they were in pain. So was she. The long fall hadn't been good for any of them. She dug in her cloak and came up with a bottle of painkillers. "One each. Pass it back."

Men gave small smiles, grateful for her leadership. Alexa always looked out for them.

Edward noticed she didn't take one. He wondered if her illness would prevent it from taking effect, but he didn't ask. When things settled down, he had new questions.

"That's enough. Store the meat on the go." Alexa couldn't wait any longer to get moving. Her bad feeling was getting worse the longer they delayed. Her father's message hit home now. It had been a warning that she hadn't recognized in time to avoid this awful captivity. She berated herself as she led them into the darkness.

## 2

"Who's there?"

Sally's scared demand drew condescending snorts from some of the fighters. She'd left a decoy trail, but they'd followed their man and still caught up to her. She wasn't in their league when it came to survival.

Alexa walked by Sally without speaking to her. She wasn't sure if she should help the woman or just kill her. She didn't know if there were more crocs to kill for food and they didn't have a fuel source for light. They couldn't afford to help the traitor.

“Wait! What about me?”

Brian glowered over his shoulder. “I won’t use my grenades to save you. Shut up.”

Alexa approved. Brian had learned his survival methods on his own; he was as ruthless as she was. Surviving alone made a person that way.

“It was a month of food.” Sally tried for sympathy. “You would have done the same.”

Billy shoved by her. “No, we wouldn’t. Get lost.”

Sally blanched. “Wait for me!”

The noise she made following them was as bad as when they’d had the Rabbit along in Nebraska. Alexa tried to ignore it. She sensed they might still need Sally for something.

Billy, tiring of the stress but lacking a kill order, grabbed the woman and slung her onto his back. Sally’s bony claws cut into his shoulder as she tried to get free.

“Be still!” Billy winced as her nails went deeper. “If Alexa sees blood on me, you’ll die right here.”

The group went on full alert at that threat. It wasn’t idle. They could all sense Alexa fighting herself over a removal order. Edward and Mark had expected it to come by now.

Sally reluctantly let Billy carry her, withdrawing her nails. She wrapped her legs around his lean waist, refusing to admit that she needed the break. She’d been traveling for hours but hadn’t gotten very far.

Billy grunted, shifting her higher as he hurried to get back in line. The smell of the woman wasn't as bad since she'd taken the same dunk they had, but it wasn't nice. She obviously didn't care about personal hygiene.

The woman whimpered. "Food comes first. We have to eat."

His response was fast and cold. "Maybe you should have eaten your animals like the rest of us have had to do over the years. *People* come first."

Sally's lips clamped together.

Billy felt her anger. "Good. Enjoy that and shut up or I'll dump you in the water again."

Sally shut up.

Ahead of them, the torch sputtered out.

### 3

"There's a tunnel over here. I feel a draft." David didn't venture inside. He waited for orders.

Alexa felt trouble coming, but they needed to find an exit. She joined Daniel, hand on her gun.

All of the men hoped she would use a light. It had been hours in the dark now and it was wearing on their nerves.

Alexa knew. She used her neck light, bringing relief to her team.

Edward did a fast scan of all the men and Brian, hoping they were holding up. He found tension and anger, but no signs of rebellion or insanity yet. *Good. Sally's crazy ass is enough.*

Alexa swept the tunnel, seeing narrow walls with writing and drawings but nothing else. She kept going by the words, sure her men would read them. They were desperate for a distraction.

Billy also skipped the messages and warnings, keeping his attention on the woman clutching his shoulders. Sally's tension was clear and worrisome. Billy shifted Sally higher onto his back, proud of himself for not needing a break yet. He'd always been strong. It came in handy here and allowed him to carry both of them over the hard ground. If not for her smells and the darkness, he might have been taking a casual stroll.

The others paused to read, including Brian.

Alexa slowed to keep them from getting separated, sighing. They didn't have enough will power yet. She would have to work on that.

She looked around as she reached the top of the slope. It appeared to be old living quarters, complete with a rocked off cooking station and mattresses that had long since mildewed to the ground. The smell reminded her of dead bodies... Alexa spotted a skeleton and drew her gun.

The sound of her clearing leather brought the men to her immediately, also lifting their weapons.

Alexa studied the sprawled bones, estimating it had been a year or more. In this dampness, bodies lasted longer, but this one didn't even have scraps of clothing left. The skull grinned at them in warning.

Daniel swept the wide room, spotting another tunnel in the rear. He hoped it would lead them upward. He stepped that way to find out.

Alexa let him, motioning David to go with him.

Everyone waited in silence for the men to report back.

Daniel hurried, aware of the tension. Using his neck light, he found a room at the end of the tunnel and nothing more. “Dead end.” He winced as his voice echoed.

He took a minute to scan the contents and conditions, disappointed.

David shined his light on the walls, reading... “Is that blood or paint?”

Daniel shuddered as he read the note on the wall. “Blood, I think.”

The word blood drew Alexa and the crew to them. The team studied the note with fresh horror.

*A Rage Walker found us here. We don't know how it got down the ladder. We assume it fell and swam, which is terrifying. We killed it, but not before one of our kids was bitten. The vote went badly. We can't kill one of our own, no matter how dangerous they are. We know it will spread. We're doomed.*

Sally whispered, scared. “People tried to hide down here when the monsters came.”

“You can't escape death, I guess.” Mark also kept his voice low, but his fear echoed to all of them.



“Let’s go.” Alexa took them back through the tunnel, stomach boiling. She needed to eat.

*Scratch...*

Alexa motioned them to get along the wall. She flipped off her light as she did the same. “Remember your lessons and keep your back to the wall so you don’t hit any of us.”

The sound of guns cocking echoed in the dark stillness.

*Growl...*

Alexa’s finger tightened, mind counting down the time to fire.

Red orbs glowing with madness appeared.

*We must have missed a tunnel.* Daniel pulled the trigger first.

Gunfire echoed off the walls, but it couldn’t drown out the snarls and growls of the dead. They hurried toward the noise, hungry.

*I know how you feel.* Alexa concentrated on the sides as she fired, protecting the ends of their line.

Shots pinged off walls and the rocks, sending chips and dust into the air.

Alexa felt a hand on her boot and lowered her aim. “Mind the floor!”

The attack seemed to last for hours. The undead kept coming and the team kept firing. The only pauses were for reloading.

When silence finally fell, their ears were ringing and their eyes hurt from all the flashes in the dark.

“No light or we’ll give away where we are.” Alexa reloaded and handed a mag to the man next

to her. "Pass it down. Brian's out." It was luck that she had ammo for his little PT111.

Her raspy whispers were followed without words, but all of them wanted light now and a check for injuries.

"I smell blood. Who's hit?"

Jacob grunted. "Small trim from a ricochet. No problem."

*Scratch...*

"Here we go." Alexa fired, aware of her men doing the same. The undead had bright red eyes that allowed them to pinpoint a target without giving away their position. It was a powerful advantage.

Silence fell again.

"Is that all of them, you think?" Billy hated how Sally was molded to his back and shuddering against him. He was surprised she'd kept quiet.

"Doubtful." Alexa passed the ends of her rope. "Attach and we'll move out before more of them follow the new smells in the air."

Gunpowder and oil were thick in the tunnel.

*Scratch...*

"Shit." Mark fired at the eyes by his boots, hitting two of the three.

Edward got the last one with his last bullet. "I'm out."

"Here." Mark handed him a spare mag.

"Time to go." Alexa tugged the rope and stumbled over the corpses to reach the open area where they'd entered. "No more talking."

The team hurried behind her, trying not to fall over the body piles they'd created.

The sound of slurping and crunching echoed to them.

Alexa increased their pace. *When a person is starving, even a zombie, they eat whatever they find. That includes each other.*

#### 4

Two hours later, the water had returned to lower levels. Alexa rotated to David. "Take over the lead."

David did it with pride. He took them to where he'd estimated the light flash had come from. He wasn't sure what it had been, but he was hoping for another hole—one they might have a chance to climb from—with sunlight beating down. Realistically, he knew it wasn't. Alexa had woken at dawn, but he'd seen the flash before that. It couldn't have been sunlight. It had to have been something else, something manmade. If it was natural, he'd brought them here for nothing.

David wasn't comfortable with his new role. He'd witnessed the problems of being a descendant. He'd lived among them, and seen how easy they were broken. Until a few weeks ago, when he'd killed the bat, he'd never considered that he might be special.

"There!" Brian pointed at a bright flare of light to their left.

“That’s in the water.” Mark scanned for more crocs even though the water had receded. They couldn’t be sure the reptiles didn’t come out all the time.

“It looks like a steel cable.” Edward frowned. “A ladder. That’s how our torch setter got out.”

“But why light it at all?” Billy directed his question toward Sally, who shrugged against his hot back.

“We’ll have to swim.” Alexa swept for a place to make camp, but the land had finally begun to narrow over the last hour, implying it would run out. She assumed there were also water lines on the walls because of the way the ground had softened. “Let’s do it now. If not now, we’ll have to go back to the other site until low tide again.”

Sally shuddered as Billy let her slid down his back to the ground. “More crocs will come.”

“Might be here now.” Alexa didn’t think so, but it would keep Sally in line.

Alexa anchored a chunk of bloody meat a few hundred feet from where they were going to cross, hoping the scent would pull anything that might be here. She made them wait fifteen minutes to be sure, during which time they shored up their personal items, stored their cloaks, and tried to keep their courage. In the water, reptiles were the lethal predators.

Alexa motioned Billy and Edward toward Sally. “Bring her last. If there’s a problem, drop her.”

Alexa waded into the chilly water before any of them could protest.

Mark and Daniel hurried to reach her, to be close if she needed help.

The rest of the group followed in one minute pauses that she had already taught them for a situation like this. It gave the man ahead of them time to get out of the way so the next could come through. For jumps, the count was shorter, but not as low as what they'd suffered to get down here. They'd been lucky Alexa had thought to pull them aside.

Alexa dove forward as the water reached her thighs, sliding through easily. Her aching feet stopped protesting, as did her muscles, but her mind went into overdrive as she tried to hear everything going on around her. If trouble came, she wanted to know so she could help, but the waves were too loud to make out words. She assumed screams would break through and swam faster, eager to be on the ladder where she might be able to see a little.

Daniel provided her a brace as she lunged from the water to grab the first rung of the ladder. Made from rope and steel steps encased in mesh, it felt sturdy as she swung from it, one handed, while fighting to get a second grip.

Daniel and Mark floated under her, ready to dive aside if she fell.

Alexa pulled herself up. "Let's go!"

Brian treaded the waves, waiting for one of the men to direct him up the ladder.

The others did the same around him, protecting the boy.

As she got higher, Alexa scanned again for trouble, but it was impossible to view through the darkness. She listened for another second, then resumed climbing. She would trust her crew to help each other. She worried over what waited above instead.

Chapter Sixteen

# Rule Number One

1

**I**t took Alexa a long time to reach the top of the ladder. As the next wave of exhaustion hit, making her legs shake, she stopped. “Count off.”

Six tired, ragged male voices came from below her.

“Seven.” Brian was proud of himself. He’d come up last despite her orders, telling Edward he would watch for crocs while he and Billy took Sally up. Edward had meant to switch them out, but having to help Sally make the climb was grueling. He hadn’t wanted to spend energy trying to swap their positions.

“Break.” Alexa breathed in deep. “Wrap the rope around your hand. Keep your movements easy or we’ll make it swing.” Alexa felt a canteen brush her leg and accepted Daniel’s offering. She took a healthy drink, heart settling. Climbing a ladder didn’t seem hard, but this one wanted to twist with their weight. It was a long and slow climb.

After a minute, only Sally’s rough breathing echoed.

Alexa waited, sensing the woman was milking it. As she hung there in the darkness, Alexa caught

a smell she identified with a frown and a stomach rumble. *Cooking meat.*

Alexa strained to hear, but she didn't pick up anything. "Let's go!" Her hard voice alerted them to her observation of a possible problem.

Wanting them off this ladder so they could fight, Alexa moved faster than she had been, causing stronger ripples to go through the ladder.

The men below felt her urgency but didn't know what had caused it. That sent adrenaline through tired bodies and allowed them to finish the climb without the grumbling that could have come.

Sally still muttered, but Billy smacked her hip to keep her moving each time she slowed. He had no sympathy for the woman. This was all her fault.

Alexa hefted herself through what felt like a hole in the floor, much like the one she'd fallen through, except this felt like stone. Alexa gained the floor and knelt to help her crew through.

Daniel came quickly, flashing his light in a short blast to verify they were safer than they had been. Upon spotting dark tunnels, he stood watch while Mark and Alexa helped everyone else. The ladder climb had put them in a large chamber with more messages scrawled on the rock walls.

Each of the fighters scanned for red eyes this time, expecting another wave of undead.

When Jacob came through, he joined Daniel on watch, as did Mark and Brian. No one wanted to be caught off guard again.



Alexa counted off two minutes for recovery, then led them into the nearest tunnel. She followed her nose.

Daniel stayed by her, shining his light, but they barely needed it. The ground was smooth and clear, implying it was well traveled or had been cleared recently.

“Another door!” Billy groaned as he caught up to the group that had stopped after only going a few hundred yards. He turned to Sally. “What’s behind this one?”

Sally cringed. “I’ve never been here before. I don’t know!”

Billy snorted in disbelief as he drew his gun.

The rest of them realized they were back on training time and did the same, sharing ammunition.

Alexa stood back as her crew found the dirt edge and opened the thin wooden door that had probably come from a small cabin.

Light greeted them, as did a group of ten smiling faces with dark hair and thin, hard bodies.

“I told you she’d beat it!” One of those faces beamed. “And she brought the traitor.”

“It’s really her. It’s Alexa!”

A small campfire crackled, revealing a living space with beds and chairs shoved along one wall. All of these items appeared in good condition, unlike the moldy furniture below.

Alexa sighed wearily, moving to the front of her men. “You could have just asked who we were.”

She stepped among the heavily dressed men and women as if they hadn't tried to kill her. "Whatever you want will wait until we've been fed." She scooped up two of the sticks roasting in the fire and tossed them to her men. While the new people were distracted, Alexa let her anger loose.

She shrieked. Her teeth became fangs and her eyes flipped into solid red orbs that stalked the people now trying to get out of the room.

Edward leaned against the door as Alexa took her revenge on the group who had thought this was the proper way to hire her.

Mark pulled Brian out of the way, pointing. "Watch how she fights the cowards. Remember it for the future."

Brian almost couldn't. She was moving too fast to keep track of.

"She never lets them get to her back." Mark slid over again, pulling the boy along as people scrambled in their direction. "That's rule number one."

The rest of her men munched on the hot meal and enjoyed the show. Alexa didn't bite anyone, but she hit, slapped, kicked, and yanked out handfuls of hair.

Not wanting Sally to miss out, Billy gave her a sharp shove. It knocked her into Alexa's crouched back.

Alexa slammed the woman into the cave wall, almost knocking her out.

When she finished with the punishment, Alexa stood in the center of the small room, scanning the bruised, bleeding group of ten. She started to speak and then spat at them instead.

Alexa went to the corner, where the fire had remained untouched. She sank down, breathing heavily. “Billy. Your turn.”

Billy went eagerly, but he punched lightly and avoided Sally completely until she tried to stop him from shoving her out of his way. Then he slapped her.

Sally hit the ground at his feet.

Billy kicked her in the shoulder. “Stay away from me!”

Sally cowered, calming Billy’s rage. He slung blood from his knuckles in disgust. “I’m good.”

Alexa gestured. “Next?”

No one else wanted a turn.

Alexa waved a hand. “One of you get over here and explain this. Do it now or I’ll kill you all.”

“I’m Lillian.” One of the women, nursing a split lip and Alexa’s handprint on her cheek, came forward a single step. She didn’t move her wild black hair from her eyes, afraid to trigger another attack.

Lillian’s group smelled like meat and betrayal, but that didn’t stop the men from scanning them to be sure the people weren’t ghosts, like in Lincoln. That had been a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget. The frightened locals wore religious garb, but the

haunted expressions and ruthless behavior implied they had left that light a long time ago.

The men in the group, thin and pale, stayed back, letting Lillian, who was almost fat, talk. That told Alexa male slavery was alive and well here. She had expected it among the young, but these people were older. Everything had changed.

“We need your help.”

“Funny way of showing it.” Mark glared at the woman so she wouldn’t get close to his boss.

Lillian dropped down across from Alexa, keeping her distance from the men. “We had to be sure it was you.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “If we survived, good. If not?”

Lillian flushed, but lifted her chin. “Then it was another group of posers gone.”

“You’re setting traps for innocent people based on who you need them to be, but *they’re* the posers?” Alexa snorted in derision. “What requires killers to handle, that *you* couldn’t?”

“We need an escort.”

“To where?”

“The gate. We’re going to shut it.”

Alexa laughed at them. “You’ll end up dead in front of it. You’ll never get through the road.”

Lillian frowned in annoyance. “We will get through. Then we’ll shut it.”

Alexa studied the woman. “Who are you?”

“Just someone Safe Haven didn’t think was good enough. I found them in the mountains. They weren’t letting people in anymore.”

“Safe Haven always took in people!”

Lillian shook her head at Alexa’s anger. “No. When the mountain curses started, they shut their doors to all of us. We were on our own.”

“You were turned away for being corrupt.”

Lillian flushed at Alexa’s accurate guess. “I was desperate. There’s a difference.”

“Safe Haven couldn’t tell the difference.” Alexa snorted. “What makes you think I’ll have sympathy for you?”

Lillian fired right back despite the beating she’d received. “Because I’m not asking for shelter this time! I just need your knife.”

Alexa sighed heavily. “You’ll never make it. Only a descendant can shut the gate.”

Lillian’s rage blazed. “I want the knife. Keep your magic!”

Alexa shrugged, hand going to her belt. “Payment?”

Lillian slowly put a hand in her pocket and came out with a large bag. “Dust from my son. He died after Safe Haven refused us entry.”

Alexa took the bag, but she recognized the lie and dug into the woman’s mind. “You sold him to the slavers, but blame Safe Haven for that choice. Hypocrite. Killer.”

Lillian jumped up, arms going to her hips. “I had to survive!”

“At your child’s expense. That’s why he didn’t let you in. Adrian knew you for what you were.” Alexa tossed the bag back at the woman. “*That* is cursed and you’re not pure enough to challenge the gate master. No deal.”

“Then we’ll take what we need!” Lillian’s hand slipped into her pocket again.

Billy quickly grabbed her wrist and twisted it up behind her back. “No, you don’t!”

Alexa waited until her crew had the group of weak people secured, then stood. She swept them with more compassion than her crew felt the group deserved. “The gate is in my path. I have plans in place. Go back to your pathetic lives.”

These people obviously weren’t going to do that. Alexa shrugged. “It’s your funerals.”

“Yours, too.” Lillian pointed. “You’re all trapped here. I’m the only one who knows the way out.”

Mark started to grab her, but Lillian twisted free of Billy’s light grip and pulled her knife. She held it to her own stomach, madness running across her face in dangerous ripples.

Alexa faced the woman tiredly. “Why are you so sure you can do it? The gate master isn’t easily defeated.”

Lillian’s anger faded a bit to reveal a well of infinite sadness. “I want my old life back.”

“Gate hunters.” Alexa realized these people believed the gates being shut would reverse time and reset the world to a period before the war. It was

a common myth in Afterworld. Those who believed in it were obsessive.

Alexa shrugged. "Fine. Lead us out. I'll give you the blade in exchange."

Lillian stared in suspicion. "Your word?"

"Of course." Alexa walked to the center of her men. "Let's go."

Surprised at the quick turn, Lillian slowly lowered her own knife. "Prove you have it."

Alexa flashed a golden blade from one of her deepest pockets, then shoved it out of sight. She glared at the woman, no longer worried over fighting them. This group would perish long before hers did.

Lillian took them toward a far tunnel, exchanging glances with the other beaten, bleeding men and women. "Ready?"

There were nods of relief and fear that said the threat wasn't over.

Alexa sighed. "Tell me."

"The tunnels out of here aren't always empty." Lillian didn't look at Alexa as their newest trek began. "Crocs, mutants, people."

"How did you get here without facing them?" Edward eyed the only one of them who appeared healthy enough to have gone down the ladder, set the torch, and then come back up, all in a few hours. The man had large muscles and an angry expression.

“We traded for passage and fought the rest.”  
The big man tried to force politeness into his voice.  
“I’m Drew.”

Edward shrugged. “I don’t care about names of walking dead.”

Drew glanced at Lillian.

Lillian shook her head and took them into the darkness.

Alexa followed more carefully than she’d done with Sally, aware of the woman casting nasty looks at both groups. Sally clearly wasn’t a member of the new people.

“Where did you get her?” Mark gestured toward Sally.

“She was part of their group in some way.”  
Lillian didn’t turn around. “We saw her being escorted by two Eagles from Safe Haven, so we followed. When they left her near our town, we kept watch on her.”

“How did you know she had a message for me?”

“She’s been telling anyone who’ll listen for years. When we heard about Lincoln being freed, we knew she wasn’t lying.”

“Why didn’t you find another blade and try sooner?” Jacob was curious about the knife they needed.

“Because it has to be gold and it has to be blessed. They have no faith left to use on such a moment.”

Lillian blanched at Alexa’s words. “Do you? Is it already blessed?”



Alexa shook her head, but didn't tell them which question she was answering. She also didn't look at Jacob.

Jacob understood his previous career hadn't been forgotten. Alexa would need him to bless the knife before they challenged the gate guard, but Jacob wasn't sure he could do it. Blessing an object needed faith to work. His was low.

Lillian seemed to catch the thought because her shoulders drooped and the fire left her voice. "Then we're doomed."

"That was true of you and yours many years ago." Alexa gestured at the dark tunnel. "Move faster. We're ready to be done with your trial of value."

Lillian wanted to argue, but learning the blade Alexa carried wasn't blessed had hit her hard. She rotated toward the darkness. Her mind raced over possible options, but the knife had been their only real hope. *Doomed. Safe Haven passed us over and we're not going to get another chance.*

Aware of how dangerous gate hunters could get, Alexa walked with a hand on her gun, ready to kill them all.

Her crew did the same. Finding out this had only been a verification of who they were was infuriating. It wouldn't take much for them to start shooting.

The tunnel stayed empty as they journeyed toward the surface. The noises of their feet and breath echoed loudly for Alexa and her fighters. As

they traveled, her group subtly put distance between them and the locals. If the gate hunters drew trouble, Alexa's men wanted to be clear to fight without hitting their cruel hosts. The men would just as soon shoot them all, then dump their bodies down that hole for the crocs, but Alexa had made a deal. They were honor bound to uphold it.

## 2

The tunnels led to areas best left unexplored. Alexa's twice an hour light bounced off messages, telling them people had also tried to live here. They assumed Sally called these tunnels home, too, but none of them bothered to confirm it. They would find out soon enough.

Bones crunched beneath their feet as they entered the main living area.

"Keep an eye out."

Her crew chuckled. They couldn't see anything in the darkness.

Lillian's group stayed well ahead. Now that they'd gotten her to agree to give up the knife, they were in a hurry.

Sally struggled to keep up. Billy stayed behind her, still smacking her shoulder when she slowed. He was positive Alexa wanted another word with her before they parted ways.

Dragging steps echoed through the tunnel.

"Look out!"

Alexa held a hand to the wall, preventing her fighters from helping Lillian's group as undead rushed toward them from a side tunnel.

Gunfire lit the darkness, showing a small herd.

The noise concerned her crew, but they approved of Alexa letting the people fend for themselves.

Last in line, Mark put his back to Billy, trying to listen for problems through the gunfire, screams, and snarls.

Silence fell for a few seconds.

Billy tapped Mark on the shoulder. "We're moving."

Mark fell in, assuming Lillian's group had won. "Figures." Mark had been hoping they would get to mop up after a zombie ate the woman's face.

Alexa snickered at his disappointed tone.

Lillian came to them with her light on, dripping scarlet. "We lost two good women! Why didn't you help?!"

"You didn't ask."

Lillian's mouth dropped open.

Alexa shrugged. "We're hired hands, remember? We don't do anything without a deal in place and you've already made yours." Alexa signaled toward the bloody tunnel. "Speaking of which..."

Lillian stomped back to her group and shoved by them to take the lead, muttering.

"I love my job."

Alexa chuckled at Billy's comment.

Lillian heard it. Her stiff shoulders disappeared as she flipped off the light.

Snickers followed her into the darkness.

### 3

It took them almost two hours to reach the end of the tunnel. By the time they emerged into the cool night air, the fog had rolled in to obscure the land.

Alexa and her crew stayed in the entrance of the cave, noting the huge scratch marks on either side of the hole. The big dog came here, too.

Lillian turned to Alexa in apprehension. She held out her hand.

Alexa slowly placed the golden blade into the woman's hand, locking eyes with her. "Ask my man to bless it. At least stand a chance."

"One of your fighters is a Preacher?" Lillian stared incredulously. "How can he be a killer and religious at the same time?"

Jacob glared at the woman. "Because of people like you."

Lillian extended the blade toward him, voice once again arrogant. "Do your duty to the future and you may not be branded when male slavery officially becomes a law."

Offended, Jacob raked her with open contempt. "Bless it yourself."

Alexa gestured toward the road. "He gave you an answer. Get lost."

Lillian understood that she had missed an important opportunity, but it was too late. She and her group slowly went to the road, casting nasty looks over shoulders.

As they disappeared into the fog, Sally went to join them.

Alexa grabbed her by the arm, pushed her back toward Billy. “Keep an eye on that.”

Billy clamped a hand around Sally’s thin wrist. “Too tight! Ow!”

Billy ignored the woman’s faked pain. “We’re going to have that talk. Where do you live?”

Sally grudgingly pointed them toward her den. While she was glad she had made it out of the cave alive, her survival still wasn’t a given. She didn’t want these people to know where she lived because she would have to move. It would no longer be safe.

She’d relocated several times over the years since Safe Haven had dumped her, but she’d never gone far. Despite not believing anyone would come through for the message, Sally hadn’t been brave enough to ignore the warning Adrian had given her.

*If you don’t deliver my message, I’ll come back for you.*

That had been enough to keep Sally here for years. Now that she had delivered part of the message, Sally had the urge to hide again in a new place. Most of the animal herds had already gone north. She’d often considered joining them. Now, nothing stood in her way. Humans were nearly nonexistent in the northern country. That was where

she wanted to be. Sally studied Alexa slyly. First, she needed to get rid of this descendant.

Sally shrugged off Billy's hold this time and led them into the trees instead of taking the concrete path that branched off to the left. Alexa's men saw the damp footprints from where Lillian's group had continued on the pavement.

Sally ventured into the darkest part of the trees.

The team followed, comforted a bit. They also preferred to take the road less traveled.

## Chapter Seventeen

# Let Us Pass

### 1

**T**he fog rolled over their boots in thick clouds as they walked, carrying shades of gray and undertones of rot. It also smelled burnt, a common odor now.

Alexa and her crew took deep breaths of it, happy to be out of the ground. The last two days had been rough.

Mark's joy beat on them in waves. He was ecstatic.

Brian stayed close to Mark even though they were out now. He hadn't been given orders to do otherwise.

The ground under their feet gradually changed from dirt and roots, to just dirt, and then to stones. The small pebbles layered the earth all the way to the edge of the forest, then beyond it. As they came to the end of the tall, moldy trees, Alexa's group spread out in that dangerous V formation to confront whatever civilization they found.

Sally ignored them to hurry forward. She knelt near a large boulder in the clearing, cooing happily. "Come to mama."

An ugly black crow with shiny feathers and glowing red orbs hopped from the boulder onto her arm. The ends of its beak were a pale gray, indicating old age, but it was spry. If they made any sudden movements, it would fly away.

Sally cocked her head toward the bird, as if she were listening.

Alexa tried to do the same, but got nothing. That implied the woman was imagining a conversation or that only her warped mind could hear it. Deciding the latter to be more realistic, Alexa drew her gun and pointed it at the bird.

An instant later the crow vanished into the fog.

Sally glared at her. "Nature will find out anyway! You can't hide this from the Master."

"Nature isn't the Master!" Brian spat at the woman, surprising the men around him.

Alexa took Sally's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Let's go."

Sally led them around the clearing to the side of the woods that were in the deepest shadows. As they walked through the fog, a building slowly took shape.

The very old church had grey stone walls and an arched doorway below an old-fashioned cross. Long and narrow, the roof slanted in a sharp angle over half a dozen stained glass windows covered in years of dirt.

Sally pointed them to the rear of the church, moving comfortably through the dimness.



She obviously knew the layout of the area, allowing the tense men to relax a little more. Her den wasn't as likely to be a trap. That part of their meeting, at least, was over.

Alexa chuckled. "If only, my pets."

All seven males reacted the same, dropping hands to their guns while searching for trouble.

Sally took them to the rear, where a furry shape on the porch immediately stood and began to growl.

"Easy, boy." Sally put a hand on the wolf's shoulder.

The animal quieted, but stared at the new people with mistrustful eyes.

Alexa held her hand out to the wolf so that it could sniff her.

She recoiled in shock as the animal tried to bite. She'd never had that happen to her before.

"These animals are not your kind!" Sally huffed up the steps. "Leave them alone."

Alexa let rage bleed through, leaning down to face the wolf. "Go away or I'll kill you right now."

It shied from her, slinking off the porch.

Alexa glared at Sally. "Keep them under control or I will end them. I have no mercy for animals like you."

Muttering, Sally led them into the church.

Edward entered last. He latched the steel door, recognizing work that had been done since the war. He doubted Sally had done this. He assumed whoever had brought her here had helped her secure the place before leaving. She had probably made a

deal with somebody in the town or even Lillian to be allowed to stay, but in exchange for what? Edward had no idea. From what he could tell, Sally was only a burden to be carried.

Sally struck a flint in the fireplace in the rear of the church, bringing meager light to the small living quarters for a priest.

Jacob entered the room reluctantly. He hadn't been in a church since Alexa took him out of River City and he wasn't comfortable being inside one now. The fact that he would have to draw on his faith made the situation even more awkward. *How can I get on my knees at an altar now that I've committed such sacrilege?*

Alexa felt Jacob dwelling on what was to come, but she didn't comfort him. He didn't need it. He needed to accept the fact that he was a killer and a Preacher. The two were not mutually exclusive.

Outside the church, a low thud came, reminding them of the danger that had driven them underground in the first place.

Billy studied Sally, dismayed. "Let me guess. You're friend?"

"It likes my company!"

Angry that they hadn't been told and tired of being put in these situations, the fighters drew weapons. They went to the doors and windows in hopes of finding a weakness in the animal about to enter the clearing.

"That won't work." Sally smirked. "Even *you* can't kill it."

Alexa raked the woman with scorn. "I don't kill unless it's needed."

Sally snorted. "Like I believe that."

"You're the liar here." Billy stepped closer to Sally in case she tried something crazy.

Alexa went out onto the porch, waving her crew along. "Time for something new, my pets."

She stopped at the edge of the courtyard, too tired to try evasion again. "Leave the traitor. Come learn something, all of you."

The males joined her, all casting warning glares at Sally that were clear in the dim moonlight.

"Hold very still." Alexa tossed a handful of dust high into the air, murmuring words the men couldn't make out. It settled over all of them in smothering thickness.

"Breathe deeply."

The dust entered orifices as if being sucked in by vents, burning and melting into their bloodstreams. It hurt, but there were no complaints.

The glittery dust lit up all at once, becoming very hot... Then it faded and they could see in the dark.

"Fake sight lasts four hours, but sometimes gives a nasty headache. Is anyone not feeling it?"

Fake sight was a common item of merchants, but Alexa's crew hadn't experimented with it because only supernatural creatures were capable of brewing it. They'd all avoided magic until Alexa came for them.

Alexa had wanted to use it while they were below, but she only had enough for two doses and it wouldn't have been enough to get them out. She'd saved it as a last resort and was now glad that she had. Sight dust was made from bones that had been buried more than a hundred years. It was hard to come by without a lot of work, which drew attention from scavengers eager to steal another person's hard-won fruits. "On your guard. Center flank spread. Move out."

Edward led them toward the curve in the road. The fake sight was amazing. He could see the dew on the plants and dust lingering in the air.

*Thud. Thud.*

Edward stopped, turning to Alexa. It came from behind them.

*Thud. Thud.*

A bit closer already.

Well trained, the men waited for her call, but shared glances of concern. Their battles were becoming harder, stranger.

*Thud. Thud.*

Much closer now. The ground vibrated beneath their boots. The rocks shook and bones crumbled, falling from the trees where they'd been trapped by nature.

The men forgot to breathe as they saw what was coming for them.

Alexa gathered energy. She was proud of her crew when they surrounded her instead of running

as the huge tan dog came within a stick throw of where they stood.

It was every mutt that had ever chased them on their bikes, that had ever nipped at their ankles. It was every rabid lunger on a chain, every junkyard dog, and their aunt's mean poodle, all in one. Fearless and seven feet tall, saliva dripped from its massive mouth. Red orbs glared balefully as it scented the air again.

The trees and rocks offered no protection from such a creature, explaining why Alexa hadn't told them to run or climb. Her crew was eager for the call to shoot.

The dog's fur began to rise. *Humans!*

"Sleep..." Alexa tried a spell. "We've come on a quest. Let us pass."

The big dog snorted instead of howling.

"Sleep..." It held for a brief second.

*Thud! Thud!* The dog charged, ears laid back in a vicious snarl.

Alexa flung out her hand. "No!" A bolt of blue light exploded near the dog's face.

It flinched to the right, slowing as it zeroed in on her.

*Thud. Thud.* The ground shook as it charged again.

"No!" Alexa's hand cracked out a larger blast that hit the slobbering animal under its eye.

"Ow!" Howling in pain, the dog slid to a stop. Huge paws came up to swipe at the wound. "You'll pay for that, witch!"

Gasps echoed from the men who had barely kept their formation behind Alexa. The dog talking was too much for them, but their guns were a comfort as fear approached survival levels.

Brian wasn't as surprised. He'd witnessed many strange things while out here alone, but he was terrified of being eaten.

Drawn by their revulsion, the dog stopped again, turning to sniff. "What herd do you bring through this yard?" *Sniff*... The dog's muzzle flared angrily. "You travel with humans!"

The dog let out an awful wail of fury as it charged again, this time going for the men who began firing but did no damage.

"I said no!" The blinding blast knocked men off their feet as it hit the dog in the shoulder.

The animal swayed heavily, turning, body shaking.

Alexa leapt in front of it, motioning her fighters back. "It pains me to treat you so, but you must listen. Now sit!"

The dog paused. Its body shook from the blast of her magic.

When it sank to its haunches, red eyes dazed, the men again felt indescribable joy at belonging to Alexa.

Alexa walked a little closer, voice now soothing. "I would take away your pain and talk. Do you agree?"

The dog didn't want to, but blood was pooling on the ground from her first real hit. "You are my enemy!"

Alexa shook her head. "Nature has given you an unjust hatred. It is not your way to be so. I would free you."

The dog's confused red orbs swung between her and the men. "They are my enemy. Look at what they have done to the Master's world!"

"Yes. I, too, grieve for all we lost, but man alone is not to blame. You know that to be true. Did you not help humans before the war? Were you not the guardian of every small child whose greatest wish was to have a puppy?"

The dog bobbed his massive head, sniffing. "I was blinded by their innocence. Those children grew up to destroy the world. They are the enemy!"

Alexa sighed. "Perhaps they were, but that is not for any of us to decide. Who is Nature to judge? *She* is not the ruler of all things."

Alexa waved at the listening males. "These are mine. They are being trained to respect the forces, to protect the land, the people. I would give humans another chance. Think of those children. If given the correct guidance, might not the world still exist? They alone, are not responsible."

The dog considered. "Perhaps..."

Alexa raised a slow hand. "Heal!"

The dog's wounds began to close, though the blood didn't vanish.

Edward saw Alexa sway on her feet as she shot power into the animal.

Now healed, the dog studied the sweaty woman. Her show of mercy gained his reluctant agreement. “What do you offer for passage through the Master’s yard?”

Alexa smiled. The beauty of it stunned the males who witnessed it. They dropped at her feet, unable to speak.

Brian was no different. He soaked up the emotions, trembling at her boots.

“You’re freedom.” She waved her hand again, snapping out another sharp bolt of light. “Wear Nature’s chain no more!”

The golden collar dropped to the ground, changing to a circlet of tangled weeds as it fell.

The big dog groaned at the freedom.

Alexa slipped over its big paws and shocked her crew again when she wrapped her arms around its neck. “You’re a good boy!”

Alexa scratched the groaning animal behind the ear she could reach, enjoying the soft fur under her rugged fingers.

The dog rumbled greedily against her. “That’s nice!”

Alexa chuckled, using both hands now.

The dog nudged her playfully, almost knocking her over.

Alexa’s laughter traveled the area, bringing pleasure. A second later, they were free to continue their quest.



The dog rose. It peered over its healed shoulder, ears perking up. “The Master calls me! I can go home!”

The dog would have run, but Alexa fired another weak shot of blue energy over the big animal.

The dog snarled, whipping around. “The Master calls me by name!”

“Tell him everything you’ve witnessed during your exile. Make sure he knows of Nature’s dealings.”

“And if he does?” The dog’s tone lowered in warning. “If he agrees?”

Alexa heard the warning, but she refused to lie. “Then he is wrong.”

The dog lunged forward, stopping inches from her face as her men scrambled to rise, to find their useless guns. “He made you! How dare you!”

“It shows a mistake. Am I not a continuous pain in the ass to all I come in contact with?”

Alexa’s voice never changed despite the levels of danger they’d gone through since the dog scented them. Her crew knew it well. It meant she wouldn’t budge on her decision.

The dog’s ears twitched as it picked up another piercing whistle. “He bids me to leave you to your fools’ quest. He laughs at you.”

Alexa was relieved. “I accept it gratefully. Go home now. Be loyal to the Master.” She snorted. “Stop chasing his cats so you aren’t banished again.”

*Thud! Thud!*

The dog ran off, vanishing into the fog rolling toward them.

Alexa signaled her crew. “We’ll go now. We can’t trust Sally while we sleep.”

She started to lead them back to the path and collapsed at Edward’s boots.

“Maybe not...” Alexa was too tired to even lift her head. She went into the blackness struggling vainly to tell them to keep going now while they could.

“She needs to recharge.” Brian wanted to help, but he was low on energy and didn’t have access to his real power yet.

Edward carried Alexa back inside the church. He didn’t feel safe out there in the open. They could protect her against Sally. He waved the crazy woman to her rear room, where she muttered continuously.

The fighters settled Alexa in the rear storage room of the rectory, cramped but okay for the situation. It would be a comfort to be able to reach over and feel members of their group.

Billy kept an eye on the doorway, where he could view Sally’s shadow. He had no doubt the crazy woman could call other problems to them. He wished they had eliminated her. They wanted to talk to the woman, or at least they had before the big dog had shown up, but Billy didn’t know what else the crazy lady could tell them that they couldn’t figure out for themselves now. He wanted this threat gone.

“She’ll be upset if we do that.”

Billy gave David a sharp glance. “I didn’t like it before and I don’t like it now. Stay out of my mind.”

David dropped his head and didn’t say anything else. He didn’t want to risk his new place with Alexa, but he also couldn’t fight the need to use the new gifts that had presented themselves. It was exciting and a little scary. He wished he had someone he could talk to about it. Billy obviously wasn’t going to be that person.

In the other room, Sally threw herself onto her pallet, moping. The only reinforcements she could think to call on were too far away to be any help. Come dawn, Alexa would be back on the quest and the opportunity would be lost. *I’ll only get one more chance to kill her. I have to make it count.*

## 2

“Who wants to step out and have a smoke? My treat.” Edward wasn’t surprised when Billy refused. The ponytailed man kept staring at Sally’s closed door.

Fresh air slapped Edward as he stepped outside, bring relief and the nauseating odor now lingering on his clothes. Sally’s den stank.

Edward took them to the corner of the church, wanting to be able to view the window to the room where Alexa was sleeping. Confident she would be

safe while they were outside, Edward dug through his pockets for his tobacco pouch.

The other men felt better as they realized the boss was covered from two sides. They could take a personal moment.

Brian followed them out, but he lingered at the corner where he could see Sally's window.

The near perfect security perimeter gave them all a dangerous sense of safety. They soaked it up like sponges.

"Does anyone have anything they need to talk about or want an opinion on?"

No one spoke right away. There was too much to narrow it down yet. They needed time to process everything that had happened. No one wanted to talk about their underground trial or the huge dog yet.

Edward lit the smoke and inhaled. He passed it to Daniel with a quick flip.

Daniel juggled it, grinning.

"I'd like to know where you went after escaping the hunter in the tank."

Jacob nodded at David's comment. "Same here."

"I'd like to know how a blacksmith soldier from Safe Haven ended up exiled in the west."

David flushed at Daniel's counter.

Mark glanced at Jacob. "Or how a government man turned Preacher ended up in the same town."

Edward exhaled. "I want Alexa's full story."

“Think she’d tell us?” Mark inhaled, then passed to Jacob.

Edward shook his head. “Doubtful.”

Mark frowned. “Why not?”

“She has secrets she can’t trust us with yet.”

“How do you know that?”

Edward sighed. “I feel it.”

Daniel studied Brian. The boy was listening, but also scanning the darkness.

Edward grunted. “Don’t get attached to the kid. She said no. He won’t be with us much longer.”

Brian’s expression iced over. He walked out of hearing distance.

“That was a bit harsh.” Daniel knew Edward had done it so that they could have privacy.

“Yes.” Edward took the cigarette back. Smoke streamed out as he spoke. “It’s also the truth. If you want to do the kid a favor, ignore him now so he doesn’t become dependent on us in any way.”

“I agree. Magic users are solitary. It’s better that he adjusts to that now.” David passed on the smoke, going to the front door. “You know where I’ll be.”

The guys watched him go, aware that David had left before anyone could dig into his knowledge on descendants.

“Do you want me to push that a little?”

Edward shook his head to Daniel’s offer. “He’s fighting personal demons. We’ll help him when the time comes.”

“What if he loses?”

“Then we’ll be a man down.”

No one else spoke, all haunted by that thought.

## Chapter Eighteen

# My Honor

### 1

**I**nside the church, Billy looked over as the front door opened. He nodded to David, then returned his attention to Sally's room.

David chose a spot to the right, in Billy's line of sight so the Driver wouldn't have to glance away and break his concentration.

*She's muttering. It might be a spell.*

David grunted. Billy was using silent communication because he needed to, not because he was okay with it. "Ears like a dog?"

Billy nodded again, remaining silent. So close to the door, Sally would hear him if he spoke. *She might have a shield up.*

David stepped toward the door. "Let's find out."

Billy kicked it open.

Sally's eyes snapped open, body rigid.

Billy scowled. *False Alarm?*

David snorted. "She was trying to reach Alexa through dreams."

Billy hauled the cringing woman from her bed and shoved her into a chair in the corner of the main room. "Then she can stay awake tonight." He

motioned toward the bedroom. “Get in there, for security.”

David didn’t argue. He eased into the dark storage room with Alexa and shut the door.

“Join me.”

David jumped, then chuckled. He should have known she’d woken when Billy kicked in Sally’s door.

“My dreams are cruel.” Alexa shifted over in the bedroll.

David joined her, feeling her shoulders shake as he held her. “Keep me with you.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’ll hold back your nightmares.”

“Deal.” Alexa yanked them under. Both bodies went slack.

A tense calm filled the church.

## 2

“Why do you hate your own kind?” Billy hadn’t looked away from Sally despite the other men rushing in to see why the door had been breached. “Tell the truth.”

Sally stroked the arm of the filthy chair, but she didn’t speak.

Billy took a menacing step forward.

Sally cringed. “You scare me!”

“I mean to. Answer the question.”

Edward waved the others back outside. “He has it covered.”



Brian followed them out, eager to listen if they would let him, but also wanting to be in the fresher air. The smells in the church were stomach-turning.

Billy kept glaring as the door shut.

Sally scowled. "My father hated me because I'm an Invisible. I was useless to him. Satisfied?"

Billy shrugged. "Partially. Spill the rest of it."

When she didn't answer, he searched for compassion. Politeness was the best he could muster. "Unburden your soul to a stranger. It costs you nothing."

Sally kept stroking the chair. "He hurt me. A lot. He made me hate...everyone."

"Lots of people were abused and still grew up to be normal."

"Not descendants." Sally shuddered. "Shut up now."

Billy snorted, but didn't push. He really didn't care. He had been trying to distract her from petting the chair as if it were alive. The motion was creepy, like the woman doing it. "We'll be gone soon. Don't endanger your life here in this stinking mess."

Sally glowered at him.

Billy sighed, hoping someone else was on duty when she tried again. He would enjoy killing her. That would be wrong. "Tell me about the people around here."

Sally assumed Billy needed the conversation to help keep himself awake, but she couldn't take the hostile silence. She answered without rancor in her voice for the first time since they'd met. "They were

town members. After the war, they began studying things that go bump in the night. Now, they're trying to shut the portal. Many have died trying, but it's not easy to find recruits in the survivors of attacks from the creatures."

"How long have they been trying?"

Sally smirked. "More than three years."

"It's not just the knife, is it?" Billy felt adrenaline shoot through his body as she flinched. "Tell me. Do it now."

"They don't know where the portal is." The rancor was back in her tone now.

"How do we find it?" Billy had grown tired of threatening the woman, but he shifted his hands to his guns once again to make sure she didn't lie. They needed this information.

"You have to be a magic user or have one! Lillian's group doesn't. None of the recruits are willing to face what lies in wait."

Billy pinned her with a hard look. "You're a descendant. Why didn't they take you?"

"Because I don't have power!"

Billy didn't believe it. The fact that she could Dream Walk implied she did have limited gifts. "You read thoughts."

Sally grimaced. "I didn't ask for that."

"How is it possible?"

"Invisibles sometimes have gifts that have to be unlocked. The powers always start with reading thoughts."

"So you will have power at some point?"

“I said no! I don’t want it.”

Billy didn’t understand, but he doubted Sally would refuse magic when it came to her. Most people feared it, but also longed for it. Magic in Afterworld was a huge advantage in staying alive when everyone else was dying.

Silence fell again, bringing more tension.

Billy saw Brian outside the window on the front porch. He wondered if the boy was cold, but he didn’t motion him back inside to warm up. Brian was observing the other men and learning from them, which was good, but he was also like Alexa. If trouble came, the kid would probably be the first to hear it. David would be next. Billy usually tolerated magic, but these last few days had been rough on him. It would be better for everyone if they gave him more time to adjust.

The door opened again as Edward and the rest of her crew entered.

Edward did a fast scan. He lifted a brow at Billy.

“I’m done with her.”

“I’m not.” Daniel settled on the floor as far from the woman as he could get. “How long to reach the gate?”

Billy gave Sally a glare when she didn’t respond.

“Next city over.” The woman leaned back and shut her lids. “I have to sleep now. Leave me alone. I’ll do the same for your boss.”

Edward and the others joined Daniel to form their circle.

“It’s footcare night.” Edward began to remove his boots. Last week they’d handled oral issues. Alexa was a stickler for personal care. She said it would interrupt the quest if they had an ingrown toenail or rotting teeth. Edward agreed. Toothaches sucked.

Sally’s eyes flew open. “In here?!”

Edward snorted. “A few toenails on the floor will make this place perfect. You’ve got everything else.”

Sally snapped her mouth shut and glared at all of them in turn.

Billy laughed, but he wasn’t amused. The woman about to lead them to the gate was dangerous; spending time with death wasn’t funny.

In the storage room, Alexa pulled her magician further into the darkness where they searched for signs of Safe Haven. Alexa hadn’t had contact with Adrian in years. She had no way to know if that camp had even survived. Now, David knew her secret. He would tell the others and the last of their walls would be gone. They could trust each other completely after this.

### 3

Brian lingered on the front porch, occasionally glancing in the window the way he’d been doing all his life. He also tossed scraps of gator meat into the weeds lining the church, feeding the hungry

creature there. He liked animals, but Sally had an obsession. Brian had already made a note to himself to never let it go that far. He understood people came first.

Brian peered in the window again and caught Mark's motion for him to come in now. Brian tossed the rest of the meat into the weeds, then entered the cabin.

"How are your feet?"

Brian frowned. "My feet?"

Edward pointed at Brian's boots. "Take 'em off."

Brian joined the men in the ring of empty footwear, liking how it felt to have someone care about him. It was strange and nice. He tried not to get used to it. Edward was right. He wouldn't be with them much longer.

## 4

Billy stayed up all night. He didn't trust Sally. None of them did, but Billy was angrier about the betrayals.

Morning found him and their very tense host sitting in the kitchen. The fighter had made breakfast, much to Sally's displeasure. She was still shooting him nasty looks when Alexa and the rest of the team joined them at the small table. They'd body piled around their leader in the wee hours, including Brian.

Brian's happiness sent warmth through the room. That was the first time he'd slept against his mother's body. He would never forget the feeling.

*Neither will I.* Alexa entered the kitchen, not looking at her son. She glared at their host as Sally started to speak.

Sally paused, understanding Alexa didn't want to hear her yet.

In the dim sunlight coming through the window near the stove, they could all see Sally's true condition. Thin, with dark bags under puffy eyes, it was obvious she wouldn't survive much longer. If not for the way she had already treated them, the group might have considered helping her before continuing their quest. As it was, none of them felt much sympathy for her.

Alexa sat at the table, nodding her thanks to Billy for the steaming cup of coffee he pressed into her hands.

The other men took places around the room, some at the table, some leaning against the walls to observe their newest environment. Even her kitchen was filthy, though it was garbage and old animal droppings instead of dirty dishes.

Sally studied them with extreme prejudice. "When are you leaving?"

Alexa lifted a brow. "When are you going to tell me the rest of the message?"

Sally blanched.

"What are you lying about now?!" Billy came over to tower in front of the woman.

Sally cringed away from him. “It’s nothing. It’s nothing.”

Alexa jerked an impatient hand. “Get the truth. I don’t care how you do it.”

Billy grabbed Sally by the wrist and dragged her into the other room so that Alexa could enjoy her breakfast undisturbed while he got the information they needed.

“He doesn’t like her.”

Alexa didn’t respond to David’s mild complaint. He thought Billy might get out of control, but Alexa wasn’t worried over it. Billy would obey their code, even when he didn’t want to.

“We need to talk about the blade!” Jacob blurted suddenly. “I can’t do it.”

“You can. You will.”

Jacob didn’t argue. He would try. Of course, he would try, but his faith had been wrecked. Being inside a church wasn’t helping.

In the other room, the sound of Sally’s tears echoed, making David frown deeper.

“Go watch if you’re worried. You’ll see you have nothing to worry about.”

Not wanting to doubt her, David still went into the other room. Despite the betrayals, he had sympathy because of her condition. Surviving in Afterworld was an impossible feat, but this woman had, alone. It was almost amazing.

Alexa understood his sympathy, but she didn’t have any. Sally had proven her true character. Now

it was a matter of getting what they needed from the woman before she forced them to kill her.

David stayed in the doorway to observe Billy. He would have gone further, but there was no need. Billy had one of Sally's pets. The fluffy orange cat was hissing and digging its claws into his thick arm, but he wasn't paying any attention. He only had eyes for Sally, who thought he was about to kill the animal.

"You tell her everything she wants to know."

"Don't hurt it. Please don't hurt it!"

"Your word. We don't want any more trouble with you."

Sally held up her hand. "I promise! Give me my cat!"

Billy set the screeching, scratching monster into the woman's thin arms, glad to be rid of it.

He turned toward the kitchen and spotted David watching him. He understood he had been suspected of cruelty. Billy frowned. "Is that really called for?"

David hung his head. "Sometimes, yes."

Fury filled the room. "I'm not going to put up with that, especially not from a new man. You're on probation now. You lied by omission to get onto this crew and now you're acting like you're more important than you are. Remember your place. It's behind the rest of us." Billy shoved by the man to rejoin Alexa in the kitchen. "It's done."

Alexa motioned toward Edward. "Get her a cup of tea. Then we'll have a story."



Sally didn't resist as Edward brought her back to the table. He sat her down and even helped her arrange the cat on her lap. She hadn't let go of it yet.

The animal glared at the fighters. It obviously shared its owner's aversion to having descendants around, but most of them were sure it was also because they were people. Sally didn't act like a person, so the animals didn't view her that way. Everyone else was the enemy.

"Begin." Alexa sipped her coffee.

"I knew the people from Safe Haven."

"That much is already obvious."

"I cared for one of their animals that escaped. They sent Eagles to get it back. I had no choice but to go with them. I wasn't good enough to be taken into their shelter, so they put me in a warehouse outside the mountain."

"You came here, all the way from the mountains in Georgia?"

Sally nodded at Daniel's question. "After I escaped their custody, I came here."

"You were escorted here by two Eagles. One more lie and Billy will take the cat."

Sally's grip tightened on the unhappy feline at Edward's threat. "They brought me here and told me to stay until a group of people came through that were like them. No one else reminded me of them until now." She glared at Alexa. "You're an abomination."

Edward placed a stiff hand on Sally's shoulder, causing her to tense. "You'll scream for a long time before you die."

Sally trembled. "I'm sorry."

They all knew that for a lie.

Billy took a step closer. "Who brought you here? Where are they now?"

"Two Eagles who didn't want to be in Safe Haven anymore were ordered to bring me here. Adrian came to talk to me before we left the mountain. He told me you would come, to give you a message."

"Now deliver the entire message this time."

"He said night must fall. He also said you have to kill me...or I'll kill you."

Understanding now why she hadn't wanted to tell them the rest of the message, Alexa pinned the woman with a harsh glare. "You're going to take us to the gate. I know you know where it is, otherwise my father wouldn't have left you here. You're my guide."

Sally wanted to protest, but Edward squeezed her shoulder again. She hadn't realized all of Alexa's men were as brutal as the ponytailed man who had threatened her cat, but she got it now.

"We leave in an hour."

Sally shrugged out from under Edward's grip. The abrupt movement allowed the cat to get free. The fluffy feline took off for another part of the church, glaring at all of them.

Alexa looked at Jacob. "Get ready."

Jacob stood up, unwilling to argue, but he wasn't going to be able to do what she needed him to. This might be the end of the quest for him.

Alexa let him go. Jacob was suffering in a variety of ways right now. All new men suffered mental problems. Concerns about being strong enough to make the trip were usually the most prevalent, but this time Jacob would be asked to rely on something that had already been broken before she'd found him in River city.

Confident he would work through it the way her other men had their issues, Alexa took her coffee cup to the front of the church. She stared through the stained glass window near the rotting wooden pews. She was curious if there were other people living around here, beyond Lillian's group. She also wondered if Lillian's group had continued toward the gate or if they had stopped for the night. If they had stopped, it was likely they would meet again on the road.

"What was it like to be around them?"

Daniel's question to Sally as he followed her from the room drew the attention of the other fighters. Most of the men gravitated that way, eager to listen.

Edward joined Alexa at the front window of the church, while Brian shadowed them and tried to listen. "She's the only guide we can find? We can't trust her."

Alexa shrugged. "If you can find another, I'm willing."

Edward didn't have an answer for that, as she had known he wouldn't. If there was another choice, she would have already taken it. Edward sighed deeply. "I'll keep her alive until we get there. After that switch it off to someone else. I can't stand her smell."

Alexa placed a hand on his wrist. "There are plans in place."

Edward was comforted. Alexa's plans were detailed and usually accounted for most of the things that could go wrong. He sensed Sally was a wildcard, however, and didn't let the comfort take over. He wanted to be alert for more of her tricks. He wasn't going to let the woman die, but he also wasn't going to let her kill his boss. If Alexa fell, they all fell.

Now that morning had come, the state of Sally's den smacked them in harsh waves. It didn't look or smell like it had been cleaned in a long time, if ever. There were bones and clothes strewn across the dirt packed floor that had once been shining wood to match the golden beams in the corner.

They all tried to ignore the stink, but failed. As soon as Alexa was ready to go, so were they. Anything was better than this filth. After seeing how she lived, they understood why Sally was alone. She was a twitching, scratching threat—much like the unfriendly cats lining her window sills and the tops of her couches. Deep scratch marks in all of her furniture and curtains, as well as books,

cabinets, appliances, and personal effects, said she had no control over her visitors.

Daniel frowned. “What happened to your Eagle escorts?”

“When Safe Haven left on the boat, they went, too.”

“So, they brought you here and told you to wait, but all you could do was plan traps to ambush us to further your own gain?”

Everyone expected Sally to defend her behavior with excuses of the world being hard now.

She flashed a cruel smile at Billy. “Her kind doesn’t belong here. You’ve been tainted by it. You’ll all burn.”

Jacob winced, but Billy leaned forward. “Shut your mouth.”

Sally cringed away from them, hating their presence in her den. “You descendants are evil. You say you’re doing good, but all you do is hurt people.”

“We’re not descendants...” Billy studied David. “Well, most of us aren’t.”

Sally laughed at him. “There are more than you think.”

Billy glanced at the front window, able to see Brian and Alexa.

Sally shook her head, now donning her thickest sweater. “You have a lot to learn, killer. I hope you don’t live that long.”

Instead of anger, Billy smirked. “I’ll live longer than you. Right now, that’s enough for me.”

Sally went to the door without taunting him again, but Billy's mind stayed on her words. *Who else is like Alexa?*

He never considered himself.

Chapter Nineteen

# Wish Me Luck

1

**A**lexa led them into the morning light.

Sally recoiled from the sun.

So did Alexa, though she only covered her head with her cloak hood.

Sally fell to the ground, whimpering.

The fighters held up hands until they adjusted, hoping Alexa could travel this way for a few hours.

“I can’t do this!”

“You will.”

“I’m too weak for a quest!”

No one was surprised by Sally’s reaction. The deals she preferred had to be made in the darkness. When a person only had that left in their hearts, what else did they have to give to society but what they were made of? The apocalypse brought out the worst in mankind—both male and female. Neither was more trustworthy than the other.

“We have company.” Daniel had chosen to stand guard while they got Sally ready to travel. All of them were expecting a slow haul, much like they had experienced with the Rabbit. They hadn’t had enough of a break from that situation yet to be patient, however. Daniel hoped the woman would at

least try to cooperate. Paul hadn't and the trip had been worse than it needed to be.

The rest of the fighters glanced over to find a small line of ants coming from the woods.

"Is it the same group from the corn fields?" Jacob was curious. "Are they following us?"

Alexa shook her head. "These are smaller. Probably more descendants of those who were friends with Safe Haven when they came through this area, I would imagine."

The men weren't surprised when Alexa knelt in front of the small insects.

Sally shoved by Billy and ran to the ants, boots stomping. "Die!"

Billy and Edward grabbed the woman, frowning in confusion.

Alexa wasn't confused about it. She used her boot to put the only injured ant out of its misery. Of the four that had shown up, only one was alive. It trundled off into the woods before it could be killed, too.

Alexa stood, glowering at Sally. "My father was right. I am going to have to kill you." Alexa jerked a hand at Mark. "Secure her hands. She's your charge."

Mark tied Sally's hands together, not being gentle. He didn't understand why she was on Nature's side. Her quick execution of something as harmless as a mutated ant horrified him. If it had attacked, then he could have accepted that reaction, but the only reason to kill something innocent in this



world was if you were corrupt. Sally had become the exact thing she hated.

Alexa got them moving before her temper could take over. The ants had been trying to give her a message, but she would never know what it was. She suspected they had been trying to tell her of a Safe Haven site nearby. Now, she would have to rely on her instincts to find it. She was used to that, but it angered her that fate had sent emissaries and Sally had killed them.

Alexa concentrated on their surroundings. She searched the apocalyptic landscape around them, coming up with several small blimps on her mental radar that may or may not be anything. She looked at David.

The Blacksmith shook his head. “Not yet. Sorry.”

She knew he would keep looking, as she would. Safe Haven always left traces. It was also possible that the feeling was coming from their unwilling guide simply because Sally had spent time around people from that camp.

Sally led them down the middle of the road, hoping they would draw attention that would delay the trip.

Edward scowled. *She's nuts.* She thought animals were better than people. She hated the sunlight. She hated descendants even though she was one. Those clues told him she was hoping they would be attacked by leading them in the open. It also told him that she had no idea who Alexa really

was. Despite knowing Adrian was her father, Sally thought that would be enough to deter Alexa from the quest.

Shadows scurried alongside the road as they traveled, drawing attention. The rats and ground hogs were huge.

“Can we eat those?” Billy looked at Sally for her reaction.

“Go away!” Sally waved at the animals following them, trying to save their lives.

“We always need meat.” Alexa glanced at Jacob. “Give the kid a fast lesson on moving targets. We’ll watch for problems from the noise.”

Honored to be chosen, Jacob dropped back next to Brian and held out one of his guns. “Do what I do.”

Brian took it with eagerness revealed in a huge smile. His own gun was good, but it wasn’t like Jacob’s.

Alexa didn’t watch them, but she did listen, braced for the loud noise.

When the gun fired, Sally shrieked.

“No! Don’t kill them! They’re mine!”

Jacob ignored her to show Brian how to reload the .357. “Always fill it back up, even if you only use one shot. One bullet can mean the difference between life and death.”

Sally would have confronted them, but Mark slid in behind her and started smacking her shoulder.

Sally cringed away from him, speeding up to avoid his taps.

Jacob pointed at another shadow. “Get that fat one. It’s probably carrying babies. We have enough ground hogs. Can’t take a step without hitting a hole.”

Brian aimed, fired.

Sally moaned, but kept her opinion to herself this time. Mark’s glare was burning holes in her back.

Brian handed the gun back. He ran off to collect the meat without being told.

Jacob smiled. “He’s good already. No worries there.”

Alexa didn’t answer, but she felt pride. Gun skills were a must in Afterworld. It was also another bit of proof that Brian was indeed her son. Shooting came as natural as breathing to their family.

Brian got in his place, but he worked as they walked, carefully gutting his kills to let them drain. He hung them from his belt, not worried about leaving a trail. It would stop soon and the animal following them could eat the guts. As long as they were moving, it was okay to do it this way. When they stopped, he would skin the bodies and cut the meat for smoking over their next fire.

“We’re close.” Sally hated to give them any information, but their view would clear shortly. She didn’t want Billy to hurt her for withholding details. “It’s in the city.”

As they rounded the next turn, stepping over cracked pavement and downed telephone poles, the trees around the road cleared to give them an unobstructed view of a formerly civilized location.

The fighters stared in dismay at the city on the other side of the river. The sound of the rushing water also concerned them, but it came second to the view.

Huge craters lined the main road into the city. They didn't appear nuclear in origin, but a big battle had taken place here that had involved the military. Broken shells of transport vehicles and jeeps littered the edges of the craters, as well as the entrance of the city. It was easy to tell the soldiers or residents had tried to barricade the city. It hadn't gone well.

Across the half mile between them and the city, the murky water of the Mississippi river glinted at them dangerously. There was no obvious way to cross, and no signs that anybody had tried recently.

Alexa scanned the shoreline, then the road leading to the water. She assumed the bridge had fallen under the brown liquid.

On one side, the decayed remains of a huge tree set precariously on the edge of the road. Among its leafless black branches, huge vultures with oddly shaped necks and strangely pointed wings watched their approach. A small boneyard littered the ground under the tree.

On the other side of the road were more telephone poles that had been chopped down, and several more burnt hulks of military vehicles. There

was also an RV that looked like it had been abandoned here after the fight because it didn't have the same damage. It also had tires, implying somebody had replaced them. The rain they got now quickly ate through everything, but these tires still had tread.

Daniel scanned the vehicle. "Do you think they tried to cross?"

Alexa went to the middle of the road, not answering. She had several guesses as to where the driver had gone, but no way to verify any of them. She was positive this was the RV she'd spotted on the portal road over a week ago. The absence of the driver was another mystery to be added to the huge list they had already gathered during their months together. It would be too long to count by the time this quest ended. People in crisis did things that were impossible to predict or explain.

Alexa followed the road all the way to the end where the brick edges revealed the murky river coming nearly to its banks. The layer of mud over the last ten feet of the road implied this river occasionally flooded that high, which made all of them glance at the sky to determine if rain might be expected soon. It wasn't a comfort to discover thick clouds gathering in the distance. The consolation was they didn't hear thunder or view any lightning, and the cool wind was a gentle breeze over their skin.

Alexa peered into the water, able to see more vehicles and even parts of buildings. Entire sections

of the city were now beneath the water that was moving northward at a slow but steady pace. The war had turned the river backward. It had only happened once before throughout history that Alexa knew of, but this time, it hadn't reversed itself. The river now flowed north instead of south.

She scanned the shoreline, hoping to find a mode of transportation to cross.

Sally, who had come up next to her with Billy's approval, pointed at small shapes in the water. "I'm not going in there. The crocs make their nests in the debris. Anyone who tries to cross gets eaten."

Alexa and the others realized this river was likely part of the one underground where they had fought the crocs. It made all of them even more reluctant to get into the water.

Alexa stared across the river, trying to determine if the waiting city held life. She didn't see any movement, but she was too far away to determine that for sure. Most of the buildings were severely damaged. Many of the city's tallest landmarks were gone. Those remaining had large chunks missing. Others were only frames from fires, leaving the rare building intact.

At the entrance to the city a roadblock had become a traffic jam and turned into a complete blockade of the street that had once connected to the road they were standing on. Alexa assumed other entrances to the city would be the same. Much like in Lincoln, these people had barricaded themselves in and tried to survive. The lack of lights or smoke

from fires told her it hadn't been successful, but that was the case for most of the cities she had come to since the war. Even those with good intentions had been swamped by evil. The corruption of humans had been allowed to flourish for thousands of years. When the apocalypse came, the occasional kindness hadn't been enough to stand against it.

One of the vultures in the tree spread its large wings and took off. It caught the draft and glided across the road, very near to where the humans stood. It dipped below the broken bridge and glided out over the water.

"Vultures are carrion feeders. They eat the dead." Alexa wanted them alert. "Someone has to be alive in order to die. Watch your six."

The other vultures in the tree also took flight, following their leader. The sound of flapping wings drew the attention of the crocs sunning themselves on the concrete debris below the bridge.

Alexa gestured toward the side of the crater, sharp gaze spotting darkness that shouldn't be there. "Is that the entrance?"

Sally had been hoping they wouldn't find it on their own. "Yes, but you can't get to it. The crocs guard it...and mutants!"

Alexa walked by the woman to get back to the main road.

Her men followed, wondering how they were going to get across the water to reach the small tunnel they could now see coming from the side of the crater. They also wondered how long they

would have once they were in there before the tunnel flooded. If the water reached to this road, it would cover that hole and they had no way of knowing if that was a regular occurrence or just when it stormed. Either way, the clouds coming their way would ensure the water rose.

Alexa led them to the RV and pried open the door while her crew stood watch. She scanned the interior for threats, then climbed inside. She began rifling in the rear of the vehicle, making her men nervous. All of them stayed alert and kept an eye on Sally.

Brian took the moment to skin the two large groundhogs and store the parts in his jacket. If they were getting near crocs again, he didn't want to be easy bait. He swiped his boots in the weeds to remove the blood splatters.

The crew liked it that he was aware of the danger and was taking steps to minimize it. They also admired his knife skills as he handled dinner. It was another thing they didn't have to teach him.

Alexa stepped out of the RV, holding a tattered notebook. She handed it to Edward, pointing at a page. "Read that while I unload."

The men snickered at Alexa's term for taking a dump. It let them know she would be a few minutes and warned them to stay downwind.

She disappeared into the bushes.

Edward began to read. *"I came here to try to shut the gate. The monsters destroyed our town and killed everyone there. I'm the only survivor. It was*



*as if they knew we were coming for them. I have the blade our priest blessed, but now I have to get into the tunnel. The rains are coming, but I'm hoping to make it in before the water rises. The crocs are slower at night when the temperatures are colder, so I'm going to wait for the sun to set and then swim across. Wish me luck."*

Edward rotated the book so everyone could view the small hand drawn map on the bottom of the page. It was a diagram, they assumed, of the complicated tunnel network on the other side of the bank. There were notes and question marks all over it.

While the men were distracted, Sally slid toward the trees. She didn't want to take them in. She wanted the gates left open and the people gone.

Edward gazed around, sensing something about to go wrong. "Grab her!"

Sally took off running.

Billy tackled her. After a short struggle, he brought her back.

This time, Mark tied the woman to his belt so if she tried to run again she would have to take him along.

Sally glowered at the men, rubbing her sore arms. "You'll be sorry for this."

Mark snorted. "Lady, we were sorry about ten minutes after we met you."

Alexa didn't scold them as she came from the bushes. She had been listening as it happened and approved the reactions of her men, though she

wished everyone had stayed alert enough to prevent the attempt in the first place. They were in training. She was as patient as she could be. She also felt a bit responsible since she hadn't mentioned Sally's coming attempt at escape even though she'd been aware the woman was planning it. She didn't like setting her crew up to fail, but sometimes it was important for the hands-on experience.

Alexa led them off the road, following her instinct to the edge of the crater. She wound them through the brambles and brushes, almost able to feel herself on the same path as the owner of the RV. As she eased down the embankment, she picked out places where it looked like someone had camped, waiting for nightfall or for the water to recede.

The city on the other side of the muddy water appeared completely abandoned. From here, it was possible to observe missing glass, walls that had crumbled, and streets filled with garbage. It wasn't an encouraging sight, but Alexa took it as a good omen. Maybe they would get through unnoticed.

Alexa scanned the water, aware of the crocs watching her from the debris. Small bubbles scattered across the river told her more of the reptiles were waiting for anyone foolish enough to step in. Alexa gestured toward Sally. "You go first."

Sally cringed away in panic, almost jerking Mark off his feet. "There's another way! There's another way!"

"That was easy." Alexa took them back up the embankment at a brisk pace, then rotated to Sally,

not caring that the woman was out of breath. “Now.”

Sally sucked in air and pointed toward a path that led in the opposite direction. “It winds down.”

Alexa didn’t doubt her. Sally was too scared to lie. She motioned Edward to go first, then took the rear herself in case anyone from the city had seen them or had a trap set.

They found the tunnel almost immediately, covered by dying branches. Damp prints said someone had entered recently.

“Lillian’s group?”

Alexa shrugged at Edward’s question as she shoved the branches aside to enter the tunnel. “We’ll soon find out.”

The tunnel was damp and dark, but not muddy. It meant the water might not come up this far.

“Give us some light.”

Daniel and Billy quickly fired up torches at her call, passing them to the persons in the front and rear. The flames illuminated earthen walls and a tightly packed floor.

It appeared to be natural, though Alexa had her doubts. The sewers in the city had obviously been used in a mass migration. There were living items, as well as bones. She was just happy there were no fresh bodies, lending more credence to her theory of the city being empty.

The walls around them were covered in graffiti and pleas for assistance, along with notes to loved ones and warnings to the government. Antiauthority

slogans were the most common. Everyone hated the government now. If the survivors ever got together, the remaining soldiers would be in trouble, but Alexa doubted that would happen. People were too used to being hidden prey in their holes.

Alexa glanced at Mark. "Let me know when she gets tense. That means we're close to trouble."

Mark understood Sally would let them be drawn into a trap even if it would endanger herself because she hated them that much. When she got tense it would be out of fear for her own life. "You got it."

Defeated at every turn, Sally marched angrily, muttering about descendants being the root of all evil.

Billy quickly tired of it. He stepped up next to Sally. "You don't need your tongue to point the way."

Positive he wasn't bluffing, Sally clamped her lips together.

Alexa sighed, hating her next order but it was necessary. "Put out the lights."

It went dark a few seconds later.

Mark stifled a shudder. *Here we go again.*

## Chapter Twenty

# Cursed Ground

### 1

**T**he sewer was pitch black. Odd noises echoed from it.

Alexa led the way, now eager for this part of the quest to be over. As much as she wanted to remain topside, this was their journey. No part of her country would miss their footsteps and that included sewers and mountains. From here, they would go where fate led—north, south, east or over all seven oceans. They wouldn't reach the end of this quest for a long time.

Sally muttered again, but not loud enough to be understood.

Edward took the rear, waving Brian in front of him. Edward liked the kid. He just didn't know how Brian was supposed to survive. At some point, all hell would break loose again, splitting their attention. The boy was a distraction they couldn't afford. Alexa meant to leave him somewhere safe, but Edward didn't know where that would be. Every place they'd traveled through had the same problems—lack of food and water, lack of authority to keep the peace, lack of honor, and an abundance of illnesses. Even cannibalism was common,

despite all the wild pigs. The human race had fallen back into the dark ages. Without strong leaders, they would remain there until the last soul was extinguished.

The light had faded fast. Less than three minutes into the tunnel, it went dim. A minute after that, it went dark. Pitch black followed seconds later, bringing a sense of excitement that all of them, including Sally, felt. They were fighters, killers, and they would soon be doing what they loved.

Noises echoed from behind them.

The group slowed, aware of a trap closing in.

Alexa stopped, hand going to her gun. "Aim low; watch your crossfire."

Grunting echoed, then a hissing sound that drew balls into stomachs and guns to hands.

"On my call, light a flare." Alexa listened hard, trying to time it right. The animals on their trail were hungry for flesh, but so were the undead skulking about. The gators could be discouraged with enough light, noise, or deaths, but not the zombies. They were drawn to all three.

"Now."

Jacob struck the flare.

Sally screamed at two fat gators a few feet away.

The men opened fire.

Brian watched his mom. Trouble was coming from another direction. He wanted to help her.

"Here they come!" Sally took off running into the darkness.

“Stay!” Alexa didn’t want her crew to follow the woman.

More gunfire echoed, loud in the tunnel.

Brian stayed by his mother, hating the flare. He didn’t mind the bloody blur. He hated not being able to see her expression for the glare.

Alexa put a hand on his arm, aware of the constant gunfire from her men. They were handling the reptiles. She could hear their shots hitting what they aimed at; she could feel the animal’s dying.

“They’re leaving!” Jacob reloaded in the pause and turned to his boss.

“Another threat replaces them.” Alexa fired.

A small band of zombies scratched their way through the damp tunnel, shoving and staggering. Alexa’s shots were true, knocking the front corpses into the middle.

Her men added their aim and took out the middle wave as they tried to get around the bodies of their fallen companions.

The rear of the clan scrambled over, rushing forward.

Brian saw his mother reloading and stepped in front of her, firing.

Edward flanked the boy, impressed. It’s what he would have done

Brian didn’t miss a single time, but he ran out of ammunition before all the zombies were put down.

Edward moved in front of him to finish the job. Silence fell.

A familiar scream echoed, followed by a dull thud.

Alexa sighed, holstering her empty weapon. "Let's go."

"Are we rescuing her?" Billy didn't want to. It wasn't because he didn't have many bullets left. Sally needed to die for her betrayals.

"If it's convenient to us." Alexa understood how he felt, but they were servants of the light, not the darkness. Sally wasn't evil by nature. She was mentally ill. To Alexa, that was a huge difference. It had kept her from putting a bullet in the woman's brain yesterday. She had enough taint on her soul.

David snorted, taking the guard position as the others spread out in front and back.

Alexa gave a lifted brow.

David shook his head. He wasn't about to call her on the lie to herself. They all had demons they were fighting; she just had more than most.

Alexa let it go. He was right. Sympathy had stopped her from killing Sally. She felt bad for the woman who'd obviously had a rough life.

"Help me! I fell!"

"Are there zombies?" Jacob ignored the glares from the other men.

"No! I just fell! I think my leg is broken."

Alexa and her crew advanced into the darkness. The flare began to fizzle and spit as it went out.

Alexa felt the ground sloping and lit her flashlight.

Walking dead lunged for her.



Sally cackled from somewhere under them.

Alexa couldn't fire. Her hands were busy keeping the snapping zombie from biting. She shoved it away, surprised by the strength in its flimsy bones.

Daniel placed his barrel against the zombie's head, watching the line of fire, and pulled the trigger.

Another corpse lumbered toward the noise.

Furious, Alexa lunged to her feet and grabbed it. She spun around and shoved the snarling zombie into the hole.

*Thud! ...growl!*

Sally screamed. And kept screaming.

Alexa stepped around the hole to resume their walk.

Billy laughed, following. "I really do love this job."

## 2

"We'll camp here for a few hours." Alexa stopped and sank down to catch her breath. They'd been walking for six hours since leaving Sally. She was exhausted. So were her men. Sleep hadn't come easily to any of them in the filthy church, but Billy hadn't rested at all. His stamina was amazing.

Alexa slumped over, unable to take any more. The illness was winning.

“She needs to eat.” Brian helped Edward get her laying down and placed his pack beneath her head for a pillow. “New vampires can’t go without food.”

“You sound like you know a lot about it.” Jacob didn’t, but he needed to.

“I’ve had a few run-ins.” Brian took the canteen of water Edward handed him and drank. He stifled a belch, then handed it back. “You can make deals if you have something they need.”

“What did you trade?”

“Animals. Some of them don’t like to kill people.”

“What kind of animals?” Edward handed the boy a food bar. “Rats? Gators?”

“Deer and cow. They say herbivores taste best.”

Mark frowned. “Damn. No deer down here and no cows anywhere for years.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Edward eased down next to Alexa and cradled her body. “Get a wire set, then go to sleep.”

No one argued.

When the sound of slurping came, no one commented. It was a small price to pay to keep Alexa with them.

An hour later, everyone was sleeping except for Brian and Billy. Billy had checked on Edward a little while ago, unable to help himself. The man was resting peacefully, body draped over Alexa’s in unconscious protection. Also asleep, Alexa’s skin felt much colder than he was used to. Billy had

come to join Brian on guard duty since neither of them were able to sleep here. The boy hadn't said so, but Billy felt it. He didn't like waking in the dark, either.

"Will he become like her?"

Brian shrugged, then remembered it was too dark to see. "I don't know how that part of it works. I thought it would be rude to ask, so I didn't."

Billy stared in the boy's direction. "How have you survived so long on your own?"

Brian let out a sigh. "You don't want to hear my story any more than you want to tell me yours."

"True, but your mom taught me to face my issues, not hide from them. If you want my story, I'll give it to you in exchange."

Brian grunted. "You go first."

"Mine has to wait until the others are awake. I owe them the truth and I don't want to tell it twice."

"Excuses." Brian put his arms over his chest and leaned against the dirty tunnel wall.

Billy frowned. "It's like a small version of Alexa. You creep me out a little."

"Right back at you."

"Me? Why?"

"Because you'll die for her."

"So would you." That was obvious from the boy's actions during the fighting.

"I'm her family. I'm supposed to be that way. What's your reason?"

Billy forced himself to answer. "She's my redemption for the past. If I die in her service, I'll be forgiven."

"Ah." Brian considered that for a moment, then frowned. "What if you live?"

Billy scowled. "I don't like this game."

"Answer the question or I'll think you're a coward."

Billy grunted. "Your opinion of me means shit, kid."

"What about mine?" Alexa's voice was groggy.

Billy's bravado went out in a deep sigh. "It'll be up to the person I betrayed when I escaped Safe Haven. I pulled a gun on a good friend and took off to follow the voices in my head. He may shoot me for it. They needed me to stay and help."

Alexa snuggled under Edward's arm, aware that all of her crew was awake again. "Go to sleep. Forgiveness can wait."

The others did as she ordered, relieved that Billy's confession hadn't been as bad as they were expecting. He hadn't killed his way out of the refugee camp. That was enough.

Billy waited for Brian's next words.

Brian shut his eyes and tried to go to sleep.

"No way, kid. We made a deal."

Brian snickered. "I had to try."

"Definitely like your mom. Give it up. How did you survive so long?"

"I stayed with the enemy for a while, as a soldier."

“Before that?”

Brian’s fingers dug in the grimy tunnel floor, scattering bugs. “I stayed in sewers, like this one. I ate rats, fought zombies. I slept with women for food and I killed men for the same. I did whatever I had to do.”

Billy’s respect grew. “That, I understand.”

“Same for you?”

“I shot my way through the problems I could handle and slipped around the ones I couldn’t. I stayed with families until they got too ill to survive, then left them to follow the voices in my mind. My sins are bigger than yours.”

Brian grunted. “I’m young. Give me time.”

Billy grinned at the response. He couldn’t help liking the kid.

Brian felt the same about his mom’s protectors. He’d told himself they were killers who were taking advantage of her, but the last weeks had convinced him that he was wrong. She was taking advantage of them.

“Yes.” Alexa let out a sigh. “Now shut up or I’ll get us back on the road right now.”

Both males fell silent.

Alexa went to sleep, satisfied they were bonding. If trouble forced them to choose, her crew might now protect her son instead of her. That was how she wanted it. Brian meant everything to her. That’s why he couldn’t go much farther. If he stayed, she would give up the quest. She’d missed his entire life and she only wanted one thing more

than to make up for that. If they had too much time together, her need to be his mother would replace the desire to reach Safe Haven. Then they would all fall. That couldn't be allowed to happen.

### 3

Daniel woke to the sound of Alexa sliding by him on the tunnel floor. For one instant, he felt fear. Then reality kicked it. His hand went to his gun.

Alexa shook her head, going by him.

Daniel waited tensely, noting they were the only ones awake.

Alexa tried to be quieter, disappointed that she'd woken one of them. Her heart hadn't settled yet from waking in the darkness. She'd barely kept from screaming.

David opened an eye as she went past him, heart stopping at the abrupt wake up in pitch black surroundings. Night had fallen.

Alexa sighed, dropping the pretense. She lunged toward Brian, feeling time stop for them all.

Brian gasped as a hand went over his open mouth, smothering his screams. *Dark! Too dark!*

Alexa clutched him to her chest, trying to calm him without using magic that would leave a signature.

Edward placed a hand on Brian's stiff shoulder. "Easy."

Both Mitchels calmed.

Edward let go and slid away from them before he let too many of his emotions show. Alexa was deep in his heart. Her son was burrowing in with every encounter. They were his family now and that was dangerous on a quest like this.

Alexa helped Brian stand, heart breaking at the shivers wracking his body. She gave his shoulder a brisk rub, then stepped back. “Two minutes. Make it fast.”

Her guys went a short distance away to relieve themselves.

Brian followed their lead, too traumatized to be self-conscious over the sounds.

Alexa would have done the same, but she was horrified to discover she no longer had bodily functions. No farting, no belching, no upset guts at awful smells. It was all gone.

Alexa pushed her misery aside for a deep scan of the tunnel in both directions. She didn’t see or hear anything, and the only scent now was urine. It was strong, telling her the men needed more water.

“Drink a full day’s ration as we walk. Let’s move.”

Edward slid into the spot behind her, aware of Brian on his heels.

The others got in line, all of them with a canteen in hand. Each male noticed she didn’t eat or drink. They hoped Edward’s gift would hold her through the next challenge.

So did Alexa. She also hoped he didn’t take such a horrible risk to his life again. Waking while

drinking had allowed her to stop before she drained him, but it had been hard. If she hadn't woken, he would be dead; the quest would be over. It still might end abruptly. She had no way to know if Edward was now infected.

Distracted by her worries, Alexa motioned Edward to take Point position. He was calmer in the darkness than the rest of them.

Edward took the lead with pride, but also concern. Alexa didn't like being anywhere but in the lead in any situation.

Alexa felt his concern as she slid into the center of the formation, but she couldn't offer comfort. Edward would lead them back into the light. *And I'll cower from it.*

#### 4

A pinprick of light came to Edward. It had been hours since Alexa gave him Point and he'd stayed tense the entire time. Walking through a dark sewer was rough. They'd passed open tunnels and doorways that had tempted him to go astray, to get them so lost that even Alexa couldn't get them back out. It relieved him to see that tiny light. He would never admit how much.

His relief swarmed the group, bringing smiles and lax attitudes from all but one. Alexa stiffened her spine and prepared to burn while they found a place to shelter until nightfall.

Brian placed a hand on her arm in comfort.



Alexa allowed it, mind spinning into the future. *Where can I stash him? There has to be a safer place.*

Brian let go of her, frowning.

Alexa began digging in her pockets.

Her men heard the noises and saw the movements as their vision adjusted. She was taking out secondary weapons. They did the same.

Alexa halted them at the exit of the tunnel as she scanned their surroundings. There were no signs people had been here recently. She didn't detect tracks in the dirt from humans or animals. Glad they were at the top of a small incline, Alexa motioned her crew to set camp. "We'll stay here until the storm passes." She could hear the rain coming, though the ground around the exit wasn't wet yet.

Everyone was happy with that call and glad to be out of the ground again with only one close shave this time. They were also secretly thrilled that Sally was gone, though it felt wrong to speak it.

Alexa sat near Jacob as he built their fire. She didn't remind him of the coming duty, but her presence sent him to bad places.

He opened his mouth to tell her again that he wasn't sure he could do this for her.

"Do you have faith in me?"

Jacob nodded. "Of course."

"Then believe me when I tell you that you can do this. Put it from your mind until the time comes."

Jacob smiled, always soothed by her. "Thank you for picking me."

Alexa leaned against his shoulder. "It's my honor."

"Can we talk about the gate for a minute?" Edward settled next to her. "I'm not clear on it yet."

Alexa waved, body aching. "As you would."

"What are the gates? Or portals?"

"The gates hold the fabric of reality between dimensions. There are five. Two have opened and allowed monsters to roam our world. Disbelief is now harder to come by."

"How do we close them?"

"We have to defeat the guards who use their magic to keep the portals open."

"Can that be done?"

"It already has been—twice—from the other side."

Edward realized that's how those two gates had fallen. "I thought the war did all this."

"It was an effect. The large hadron collider was running when the world fell. It caused a reaction I can't explain because I'm not a physicist. The gates became visible because of it, allowing attempts to breach what hadn't been there before."

"You mean the fabric of time and space."

"Dimensions. There are more than we understood, but we played God anyway. Now, those gates are being hunted."

"Are we going to shut them all?"

"Unlikely." Alexa drew a map from her pocket. She pointed to a place less than a day's fast walk from where they were now.

“Why does it require a blessed blade?” Jacob hoped for a loophole.

“Because it gives control back to the Creator. He cannot come to cursed ground without first washing it in blood.”

“Why didn’t Safe Haven handle the gates?”

“That is something you’ll have to ask them when we reach the camp.”

“Will we?” Jacob was full of doubts about everything right now.

“Yes. I’ve seen it in my scans.”

“So, we kill the guards and shut the portals. Then we follow the trail to Safe Haven and convince them to return. What then?” David was enjoying the moment.

So was Billy. Alexa was like Adrian, before corruption had ruined his leadership.

Alexa’s head snapped toward him. “We’re awake now.”

Billy cleared his throat. “I didn’t tell you at first because I hadn’t remembered.”

“And after?”

His head dropped. “I don’t think you’ll believe me.”

“Try it anyway and we’ll go from there.”

Billy drew in a breath, hoping his next words didn’t get him removed from Alexa’s crew. “Adrian isn’t leading them anymore. He was banished.”

Alexa chuckled, surprising them all.

Billy frowned. “Why is that funny?”

“It’s not, really.” Alexa patted his wrist. “I’ve known for a while. His methods crossed a line long before the war.”

The news shocked Edward. “Then why are we trying to get him, get that camp, to come back?”

“He’s the first alpha. Only he can bring people together. His methods won’t matter in the end.”

Edward snorted. “People don’t forget that sort of betrayal.”

“No. They learn from it.” She glanced at the disappointed men, then Billy. “Have you forgiven my father?”

He shook his head. “I want to. I can’t.”

Alexa smiled softly. “Neither can I. Imagine the pain I’ve suffered as his kin.”

They all stared in surprise.

Alexa’s smile fell. “None of it has stopped me from doing my duty. Destiny put you on this quest. Only death will remove you from it.”

Billy felt his soul lighten. All his secrets were gone now.

Alexa sighed, wishing she could say the same. She blocked her thoughts from their magician and took the hot drink from Jacob. “Get fed, then rest. We won’t have another chance to do so before we reach the gate.” She didn’t look at her son. Their time together was almost over and it hurt.

Alexa tensed, inhaled, and caught a burnt odor. “Government.”

Edward sniffed. The diesel vehicles put off a very distinctive odor when idling. That meant the

troops hadn't been here long enough to get bored and make camp yet. They would be fully loaded with slugs. The advantages were government reloads and not having to emerge from this tunnel yet.

"Put the fire out." Alexa leaned her head back as Jacob handled that. "I work best in the dark now anyway."

Her men grinned, understanding they would come out when the sun set. By then, the soldiers would be bored and sleepy.

No longer in total darkness, the men took seats and got comfortable. They worked on silent chores, minds planning all sorts of fun for the unknowing men waiting ahead.

Billy settled down to sleep, finally exhausted.

Alexa tensed at the footsteps. She hadn't considered the troops would venture into this tunnel. She felt her anger rise and let it. "Stay here."

Her gruff whisper froze her crew in place. They watched her stand and stalk toward the coming squad with lethal grace.

Brian turned away from the slaughter that ensued. He didn't want to remember his mom with blood on her lips. He much preferred her with a gun in her hand and an icy scowl on her face. The woman ripping out throats and grunting in pleasure from it wasn't his mother. She was a necessary evil that would have to be put down.

Chapter Twenty-One

# Mind Your Lessons

1

**T**he city was worse up close than from a distance. Years of garbage and debris were plastered to the streets and alleys. Parts of buildings were crumbled on cars; businesses were burnt frames coated in thick weeds. Parks and trees that had once cleared the air of the city had taken over, covering block after block. Huge vultures were the only movement, but it told the fighters there had to be bodies here or the big birds would have chosen somewhere else to hunt.

Alexa walked the main street, hands on her guns and hearing stretched out to listen. She heard nothing.

Behind them, vultures began to circle the air over the tunnel they'd exited, eager to feast. The mess Alexa had left behind had been hard to view as they'd exited, but despite the gore, she wasn't wearing any of it.

"We'll camp at the top of this road."

Her men didn't like the thought of being so out in the open.

“It sends a message. We’re the ones to be scared of.” Alexa walked them up an incline. “It will also provide a clear view of what we’re looking for.”

The tunnel had brought them out on the other side of the city, explaining why it had taken so long to traverse. They were actually backtracking a bit as Alexa took them to the nearest alley.

“Set us up, tight quarters.” She waved at David and Billy. “On duty. Stay together.”

The two men went to the open end of the alley that led into the city and took places across from each other on the wall. It put them five feet apart and allowed a quiet conversation as the rest of the crew, Alexa included, got their camp set.

“I’m sorry.” David didn’t like being on the outs with his team. “For all of it.”

Billy shrugged.

David understood an apology wasn’t enough, but he didn’t know how else to make it right. He ran through Billy’s words again. “I don’t think I’m more important than anyone here. And she knew about my past with Safe Haven. She sensed it.”

Billy knew. “That’s why she took you, but we went to River City to collect Jacob.”

“Yes. I’m the odd man out. I hate that.”

“Then you need to try harder than the rest of us.” Billy wanted to have sympathy, but he was still angry. “You’re a descendant.”

“So are you.” David gave a low snort to Billy’s head shake. “I know what I know. We’re *both* like her.”

“No. I’m not.”

Alexa glanced over, pinning Billy in place.

Billy’s scowl grew. “I’m not.”

Alexa laughed at him.

That drew attention from Edward, who loved the sound of her amusement, even when it was laced with scorn. He nodded at Billy, then went back to his chores.

Billy stared in shock and denial. “I can’t be.”

“We all are.” David had been scanning his teammates since deciding to use his gifts without hating himself. “Invisibles.”

“Like Sally?”

David shrugged. “She was corrupt and a little crazy. We’re not.”

Billy lifted a brow. “A little?”

David chuckled. “Okay. She was over the top crazy, but we signed up willingly.”

Billy contemplated that, head shaking. “I can’t be.”

“You said you pulled a gun on a friend to get away from Safe Haven...to follow the voices in your mind.”

“That was Alexa calling.”

“It was one descendant picking up the misery of another.”

“That can’t be right.”

“None of this is right. We’re all from that bloodline, even if we don’t want to be.” David gave the man a small smile. “Think of how badass we’ll be in the future.”



Billy scanned the empty hillside behind the alley, sighing. "I don't want this."

"I don't either. It's not like we have a choice."

"Don't we?"

David shrugged. "If she needs it, she'll unlock it, or we will ourselves because we deny her nothing."

"So by the end of the quest...?"

"We'll all be using these odd gifts. Safe Haven will wonder how they missed it with you."

"Incoming!" Edward drew his gun.

"Don't shoot it!" Brian ran down the alley.

At the end of it was a large wolf. They assumed it was one of Sally's pets.

Brian stopped a few feet from the growling animal and turned his back to it. "He's mine."

Brian lifted his chin at Alexa's dubious stare. "I haven't finished connecting yet. He *will* be mine."

Alexa sighed. "Bond with it if you can. You'll need company."

Brian's face fell.

Mark was surprised despite all the warnings. He'd started to think Brian would take his place when he died. He'd been trying not to resent the kid for it.

Brian knelt to dig in his bag. "This one isn't like Sally's other companions. It's different."

Brian tossed his leftover gator meat. He hated the greasy taste and the memory of being tricked.

The wolf immediately snatched the food and ran, but he only went a dozen leaps before stopping

to gulp it down. The animal sniffed the ground, then peered at Brian with golden eyes.

Miserable, Brian held out a hand. He normally wouldn't have tried this yet, but pain made him reach out for more rejection.

The wolf padded toward him with fur rising on its thick neck.

Edward inched closer to have a clear shot if the boy had bitten off more than he could chew.

So did Alexa.

Brian sent out a fresh wave of pain, testing a gift he hadn't realized he had. Being young usually meant gifts had to be unlocked, but this one felt natural.

The wolf whined, slowing. It paused a few feet away, head tilting.

"Safe Haven."

The wolf relaxed at Billy's call. It sat, regarding all of them in turn.

The men studied Billy in surprise.

"How did you know that would work?"

"Safe Haven had a wolf." Billy rotated back to the open part of the alley for a scan. "From what I remember, it came and went. Might be a pup."

Billy's curt tone kept David from asking more questions. It was obviously a sore spot. Still, he wanted to know what had happened after Billy ran from Safe Haven, and exactly why he had run. David had remembered that scene recently but hadn't brought it up out of respect.

Brian stood and walked backward toward their small camp.

The wolf followed, staying a few feet away.

Brian settled on a rusting slab of flattened debris he thought had been a washing machine. It made a good seat. He held out a hand and kept working with the wolf.

Edward kept his hand on his gun and his attention on the boy's new companion. Edward was good with animals, but the wolf wasn't responding to him at all.

The wolf sat, watching Brian.

Brian glanced at his mom.

Alexa grunted. "Some things feel perfect because they are."

Memories swirled over the men who'd been with her for that adventure.

Jacob and David observed with light jealousy but knowing most of that story now helped them to understand.

"The sun will set in half an hour." Alexa went to Jacob. "What will soldiers do when they find the road?" She assumed more troops were close, but even if they weren't, someone would come to investigate the absence of the squad she'd killed in the tunnel.

Jacob hated the reminder that he'd worked for the government, but he didn't give her attitude over it. "Investigate, carefully."

Edward nodded when she looked to him for confirmation. "Agreed. They'll probably try to

follow us, even if they don't recognize you or the boy. The bunker babies probably want monsters under their control."

"We'll be ready for an ambush." Alexa took out her bedroll and placed it near the small center fire as Daniel fueled it with debris. "Rest if you can."

Those not on duty did, while watching the boy make friends with the wolf. Entertainment in Afterworld was often bloody, but the nice change of pace was soured by the method. Brian's pain pulled at all of them.

From their view at the top of the alley, the men could see the hillside around the city in two directions. One of those appeared flooded. The other appeared well-traveled despite the empty skyscrapers towering over them.

Alexa studied the place she had marked in her mental map, making sure their position would allow a clear line of sight come darkness. She was looking forward to the cool shadows. Her skin seemed to be on fire even though it was dusk.

Alexa motioned Billy and David toward the fire, then took their place, hoping the alley shadows would ease her misery a bit. She settled on a clump of hard debris. For her, the tunnel had been easy compared to being out in the—

*Click!*

Everyone froze at the sound of a gun being cocked. Alexa felt cold steel against her neck and sighed. "I really am slacking."

A cold voice laughed behind her.

Her crew turned their heads to get a view of the man they'd never seen but all hated.

"Stand up."

Alexa rose to her feet in the quick, graceful motion that her crew always admired.

Russell took a quick step backward, shoving his gun against her spine. "Easy!"

Alexa snickered. "Nervous? You should be. You're about to meet the Maker."

Russell struck her in the back of the head with the barrel of the gun.

She barely budged, but her men cringed at the hollow ping, then glowered at Russell.

"We're gonna kill you for that." Billy locked eyes with the half-eaten man covered in burn scars. It was obvious that the hunter had been bitten. He'd cut out the bites and cauterized them. It had probably taken months to heal, but now he'd come for vengeance. Billy assumed the man had been catching up every time they'd been delayed.

His red curls were matted with dirt and debris so badly that they were stuck to the side of his head. It didn't appear that he concerned himself with hygiene anymore. The smell of him was as if the rage disease had taken hold.

Surviving that was unheard of. Everyone noted it with mental sighs of relief. If they could cut it out, and not die from the loss of blood or infection, they could beat it.

Russell put a scarred hand on Alexa's shoulder and tugged her backward. "You hardasses stay

where you are or I'll kill her in front of you. Let her go with some dignity."

Alexa felt the grip on her shoulder slacken as Russell glanced around to verify his steps. She looked at Mark, giving a silent order.

Edward frowned, wondering why she hadn't chosen him for the honor.

Alexa pushed backward, acting as though she had tripped over the debris laden ground.

"Stop!" Russell jammed the gun into her spine again.

Alexa ducked in a flash, grabbing something from her toolbelt. Before he could fire, she tossed it into his face.

Russell recoiled from the peroxide spray, but his laughter rang out. "I'm not infected. I went through hell to make sure it didn't spread. You lose."

"I did exactly what I meant to."

Russell looked up in time to see Mark fire. The bullet plunged into his chest.

Another one smacked him in the forehead, knocking him backward.

Alexa grunted as one of the slugs trimmed her. A tuft of blonde hair floated away on the wind.

Alexa stood, ignoring their immediate concern for her injury. She smiled at Mark. "Great work."

"Has he been following us all this time?" Brian holstered, sorry he'd trimmed her. "I never saw him."

"Hunters are skilled or else they wouldn't stay alive long enough to bring in their prey." Alexa

waved off his coming apology. She was impressed by his shot but didn't tell him so. Despite the trim not being bad, she didn't want him to forget about it. This moment would improve his gun skills because he would remember that he'd hurt her.

"Security check." Edward was stinging a bit from not being chosen to save her life.

The men spread out, checking both ends of the alley as the sun began to sink below the horizon.

"There's a light...under the ground."

Daniel's call drew them to the edge of the hillside.

The deep green glow was vivid in the sunset.

"It leads underground." Mark let out a deep rumble. "Getting sick of being in the dark."

Mark rarely complained. *We need a real break.* Alexa changed her future plans. *When this one's done, we'll take time to recharge.*

The sun sank, showing a group of shadows near the beginning of the green glow.

"There goes our knife."

Alexa shrugged at Jacob's mutter. "We'll collect what we need as we go, like we always do."

Jacob held out a medical pouch, but Alexa waved him off. "I heal quickly. Save it."

Jacob frowned but didn't argue.

"We'll go now."

"I thought we needed Sally to be able to..." Jacob paused as it clicked. "You never needed her to bring us here."

“No. I didn’t want to leave her as a snake who might follow or a rat who would tell where we’d gone.”

“You brought her along...so she would die.”

Alexa nodded but didn’t try to excuse her choice. She’d made it. Now, she would live with it.

The men knew they should be worried over that level of ruthlessness, but they weren’t. Sally had been evil.

“Get ready to roll.” From where she stood, Alexa spotted four sewer entrances. They were roughly half a mile apart and appeared identical. Following her instincts, Alexa took the map from the RV out of her cloak and studied it.

The tunnel to the farthest right had a red X and ‘gators!’ scrawled next to it. The tunnel on the far left had the same. The two tunnels in the middle both had circles, but one of them had a checkmark. That’s the one Alexa chose.

“This is where we’re going in. There are more soldiers around here, too. I feel them.” She handed the map to Edward. “We’re going to try to slip in unnoticed because that’s been working so well for us on this trip.”

Men snickered.

She waited until they had all gotten a view of the map, then motioned them into formation. “Tell me the first lesson I taught you after giving you a gun.”

All the men answered together. “Plans are made to be broken. It depends upon the situation.”



“And the backup?”

Their voices raised in unison as excitement flared. “There isn’t one.”

Her voice cracked out like a whip. “And why is that?!”

“Because then, we fight!”

Alexa was satisfied. Her style was odd, but peace wasn’t the desired outcome. “We’re using fake sight again. Gather close for a dusting.”

Camp repacked, the males came to her side in the dusky shadows.

“Three...two...one.” Alexa tossed her last two handfuls of dust high into the air. It settled over them with a thickness that was just as smothering as the first time.

Alexa gave them a moment to adjust. “The road is guarded. A traveler must meet the demand or defeat the guard. Our first test is to free the Yaoguai. It’s a demon that manifests as an old woman; she is a malevolent spirit in disguise. We may also face a hydra along this quest. They often keep company with these hags.”

Alexa removed a small, very worn blue book and flipped to the middle. “Yaoguai are the spirits of people who were neither innocent enough to gain Heaven nor evil enough to be sent to Hell. They’re trapped between worlds and assigned posts, such as gates. They are tormented for not being good enough during life. Serpents are sent to guard their graves. If their tormentor is slain, they are free to attempt moving on to the afterlife.”

“Attempt?”

“Another time, Jacob.” She kept reading. “The Hydra is a huge serpent that comes out at night. It can stay on earth until the sun rises. If the rays touch it, it becomes dust. It cannot be defeated in many other ways.”

Jacob’s lips thinned. “How do we keep it occupied for so long?”

“I cannot answer that yet. I need to see it to know how to handle it.”

“How do you know so much if you were locked up after the war?” Daniel blurted the question against his will. “Where did you get that book?”

The other men listened eagerly for her reply. All of them wanted to know that.

“Now is not the time for such questions. Perhaps when we have completed our task, then such curiosities might be satisfied.”

The guys were forced to accept that as Alexa began their next adventure.

“On your guard. Center flank spread.”

Danger filled the air as they began to walk toward the glowing path.

The hill behind the city was a thick mass of trees on both sides of the road, but the tramped paths through it told them other people had made this trek recently. Unlike in the city, there was little garbage here and almost no signs of the old world. If not for the cracked, weedy pavement beneath their boots, it could have been a stroll through the countryside. Nothing moved or made noise around them, not

even bugs or bats. The wind was also still, preventing them from catching smells. The peace made everyone nervous.

Brian trailed the group, trying to stay out of the way, trying to find the courage to leave like his mother wanted.

Behind him, the wolf padded along, nose to the ground as if to memorize their scents.

Shadows lengthened into full darkness, making the fake sight priceless.

They walked that way for an hour.

“I see a...Pinto!” David snorted. “Never did like those tiny cars.”

The group slowed to store details. It was the first vehicle they’d found on the road.

They kept moving, boots leaving no traces on the gritty ground. This road had hardened and was no longer receptive to prints. Nature had taken away yet another other sense to keep them from tracking the beasts. The animals were gathering, preparing for a massive revolt intended to finish off the surviving refugees.

Alexa pondered that thought as they advanced, seeing signs of old battles now half a decade gone. For their sins against each other, mankind deserved to parish. Nature had been brought in to play... A cold feeling of danger fell over Alexa.

She stopped, turning to face the threat with her gun drawn.

Her men did the same.

A woman stood on the road behind them.

Tall and crying, she wore black rags of mourning. Bright blood rolled from an open gash in her forehead and her ashy skin was blotted with crusted sores.

“We would pay the toll.”

The hag extended a bony hand at Alexa. “You alone may pass.” The banshee glared malevolently at the alarmed men, nose flaring in hunger. “I will eat them.”

Alexa showed no fear at the threat. “I would buy their passage.”

“Ha! You are corrupted by your love for them.”

“Perhaps.”

The harpy hesitated, pockmarked face flashing cold greed. “What do you offer?”

“The death of your enemy.”

The hag’s expression tightened. “Man is my enemy.”

Alexa shook her head. “Nature has blinded you with a hatred that is justified, but not your own. Let us pass. In return, we shall destroy the beast ruining your grave. You will be free.”

Thunder cracked overhead. Lightning flashed angrily in the distance.

“You have until the sun’s full rise to deliver on this promise or I will kill you all!” The hag screeched loudly, backing into the scraggly trees. Her evil noises echoed in the suddenly gusting wind as she vanished.

Alexa nodded at Edward to take over the lead.

He didn't need to ask which direction. He could already tell where they were supposed to go. The Hag's grave was the car they had passed. Bright white light shined from it.

The car was a rusted hulk with old bullet holes and weeds higher than the doors growing inside it. They couldn't tell what color it had been for the layers of dirt. It looked like any other remnant of society that had been abandoned when the fuel ran out. The men had been expecting an actual grave. They hadn't thought about it being a car.

They walked back up the hill silently, on the lookout for anything else also moving toward it.

Bright light illuminated the car. The ghosts of the haunted swirled above them in the sky, visible only because of the fake sight dust.

A familiar woman sat behind the wheel. While they watched, the hag cackled for her partner to open fire. Ghostly bodies fell, denied passage for a lack of water, and then it ended.

Silence fell as the vision vanished.

Alexa walked toward the car. "Pick a spot to watch."

The men settled in various places to be sure each angle was covered.

Alexa concentrated. The things that happened here were beyond forgiveness. They couldn't free the hag. Alexa sighed as she realized she was going to be forced to break her promise. The hag deserved to die and that wouldn't be easy to accomplish

because she was already dead. “Two top throwers with me. Bring the tree shards.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Tough Love

### 1

**T**he weeds near them rustled.

Alexa faced the serpent coming from the shadows. The size of a boa constrictor, its tail rattled. She assumed it would bite and poison, as well as squeeze.

The snake slithered toward the grave of the hag.

Alexa's men didn't move when she remained still, but it was hard. All of them were poised to open fire.

"Stop, in the name of Safe Haven."

The snake hissed, rising to be as tall as a man. Hungry fangs dripped saliva. "Who are you?"

"Travelers who wish to pass to the portal."

The snake glared at her, but Alexa could sense its weariness.

"In return, I offer you a favor."

"Favorssss are not the currency here, Firewalker."

The snake surprised her by knowing what she was.

"Neither you nor your human pets may passss without the payment."

"Name your price so we can haggle."

“No haggelsss either, my bold adventurer.” The snake rotated toward her crew. “Ssstow the guns. You can’t kill a ghost.”

All of the men might have argued that in another situation.

Alexa’s hand slid toward her waist. “I have something you do want.”

The snake lowered to resume its slither toward the grave. “Passage has been denied. The portal will not appear for you.”

Alexa tossed a pouch of dust toward the snake. “Bones of a descendant.”

The snake spun around and latched onto the pouch with its fangs, tasting it.

Alexa’s men frowned at the trade.

The snake rose into the air. “They sense the rules you break. What happens when they discover your origins are not pure?”

Alexa sneered. “It’s a mistake to think they don’t already know and watch for it.”

The intelligent reptile eased back into Alexa’s path, scanning her. “Why do you stalk the portal?”

“To close it.”

The snake laughed.

To Mark, it sounded like a creepy clown.

For Edward, it echoed like a serial killer from an old movie.

Jacob knew it for what it was. He stepped forward. “I see your chain.”

Everyone froze, including Alexa.



Jacob used his blade to slice through the golden lariat.

In the distance, a scream of rage echoed through the darkness.

The reptile fled into the shadows of the grave without desecrating it.

The hag appeared inside the car. She pointed at Alexa. "Say it now! Free me!"

Alexa braced, gathering energy. "I won't release you until you show remorse."

The hag screeched, flying toward her.

"Now!"

Mark and Daniel threw the tree shards, both impaling the hag in several places.

It didn't stop her.

Alexa slid between the hag and her men, still gathering energy.

The hag switched directions, rushing for Alexa. Huge arms grabbed her and began to squeeze.

Edward ran forward.

"Fire!" Alexa burst into flames.

"No!" The hag screeched as the fire did what the tree shards couldn't.

Alexa held tight as the hag burned, ears ringing from the shrieks.

The demon spirit vanished in a blinding flash of red glares and screams.

Alexa let go of the fire, panting.

The night fell silent around them, then grew darker until they couldn't even see each other.

The road lit up in blinding green edges that whispered of nasty nights and bloody days along the cobblestones lining it.

Alexa stepped forward. "Move out."

The crew walked down the road, all sensing they'd just had a very fast test of their ability to accept oddness and adapt. They were proud of themselves.

So was Alexa. She hadn't stopped Jacob from following his instincts and they'd gotten by the first test. They would all learn together.

Behind them, Brian stepped onto the path to follow.

The snake came out of the shadows, sliding back toward the pouch of dust.

Both of them stilled, regarding each other.

Alexa slowed, sensing the exchange about to happen. "We freed you. Do not betray me."

Brian realized the danger at the same time as Alexa's men. He stared at the snake in revulsion.

The snake was hungry. Set free of the grave chore, the reptile shivered as it stared at the boy. "I demand passage."

"My mother freed you."

The snake lowered. "Payment wasn't given willingly. I...smell you!" Before Brian could react, the snake lunged forward and began to wrap around his legs. "...Mitchel. Safe Haven! Descendants!"

Thunder cracked, rattling the ground.

Alexa sighed. "So much for going unnoticed."

Around them, the night lit up with the sound of something running.

“That’s coming toward us.” Edward motioned the others to get ready. They drew their guns and prepared to do what they’d been recruited for.

Brian refused to move as the snake continued to wrap around his legs. It wasn’t squeezing yet, but he could sense it getting ready to. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be! Mitchels are a scourge upon the earth!”

Brian’s tone hardened. “I meant to my mother for screwing this up for her. She had you in line.”

Offended, the snake spun faster around his legs. “No one has me under control!”

“Then why were you chained to a grave? Liar.”

The sky flashed in warning as the snake began to squeeze. “Humans are the betrayers.”

Brian didn’t struggle even though it hurt. “Liars are the same in every dimension. You’re a liar and a cheat. That’s why you were cursed, wasn’t it? Because you can’t be trusted.” Brian glanced toward the starless sky. “Payment was given. I demand vengeance for this betrayal.”

Time slowed as magic swirled through the night. Lightning forked, slamming into the snake. It blasted Brian and the reptile into the shadowy trees lining the road.

Alexa gestured her crew to wait as silence fell. It impressed her that Brian had known how to handle the serpent, but she hadn’t wished for this

outcome. By calling for help, he'd put himself on the radar.

Brian stood slowly, sore but unharmed. He glanced down to find a tiny garden snake writhing in agony at his boots. Its voice was high pitched, like a balloon with air rupturing through small holes. "I demand your li—"

Alexa's knife plunged through the snake's head, silencing the curse before it could be finished.

Edward joined them, not sure when she had moved. One minute, she'd been at his side. The next, she was three feet from the snake and minus her best knife.

Brian knelt to retrieve the blade, shocked at the tiny snake. He could fit it into his pocket. Brian held the blade out, face wrinkled in confusion.

Alexa took it without touching him, without hugging him or verifying that he was uninjured. She slid the knife into her cloak and turned away.

Brian almost cried. He needed answers...and maybe a hug.

Alexa's shoulders stiffened as she walked. *I won't respond to that need. I refuse to endanger him further.*

Edward saw both reactions and vowed to unite the family. He didn't understand all the obstacles, but that wasn't necessary for removing them.

"You can't." Alexa stepped by him to take the lead position. "It's the way it has to be."

"Why couldn't we see the snake's real size?" Mark didn't usually mind snakes, but he could

loathe the creature they'd just left behind. It had been evil.

"Monsters are illusions pulled from our minds by spirits who have crossed through the portal from other dimensions. Grave guards are spirits who couldn't pay for passage through that gate and agreed to a term of bondage. A snake was simply the form it chose."

"So these spirits pick thoughts of monsters from our minds and become them. Creepy."

"It's worse than just an entertaining shiver. If they kill enough, they become real. The blood ties them to this dimension. Our belief as we die gives them solidity—like in the Killing Fields."

"Like the vampires." David's voice was subdued.

"Yes." Alexa felt Brian's stare and grunted. "He's too far away for us to reach him."

Edward spun around to flash a hand code that the other men couldn't read. It was the one she'd taught him during their month alone together. When she hadn't taught it to Daniel or the others, he'd been full of pride. Now, he was just relieved. It was a way to help her son, but not involve the other men on her crew.

Alexa increased her pace, feeling time slipping. "Mind your ammunition."

Relief came as the men understood they would be using their guns for the next challenge. It was why they were here.

Eyes appeared in front of them, floating higher than a normal animal. Red glares padded their way with low growls and snarls.

Everyone began shooting.

Large wolves lunged from the front and sides of the path, falling into each other as they were hit.

More gunfire rang out behind them.

Alexa spun around, leaving her crew to finish the half dozen hounds still charging them.

Edward fired into a wolf's head, then rotated to guard Alexa. He had no doubt Jacob would cover the remaining animals.

*Bang-bang!*

Daniel and David also turned around, disappointed, but aware that they wouldn't have a chance with Jacob on Point for the three wolves still coming.

Billy didn't shoot, but he also didn't turn. He was the second to last man on this angle, protection for the shooter. Billy admired Jacob's skill.

Jacob didn't care about any of it. His fears over having to bless the blade needed an outlet, but these three animals weren't going to be enough. Still, it was something. Jacob rattled off three fast shots that should have brought silence to the road.

Gunfire continued in a steady pattern that reminded the men of their training sessions. Watching her was amazing, so it was a surprise for the men to find Alexa's guns in those worn holsters.

Alexa watched in pride, but she also listened for trouble sneaking up on them. Her men were getting

a verification here and it would be easy to overlook new danger.

Brian fired again, then scanned for the next wolf pup. The size of large dogs, the pups had come for him while their parents went for his mom.

Brian snapped off another shot, swept, fired again, and reloaded in a blur that drew smiles to the faces of the adults. Brian's motions mirrored theirs, just a bit slower from his smaller hands and large gear.

Like Jacob had been, Brian was lost in the fight. He didn't notice his audience. All he saw was a row of red orbs and hungry teeth that needed to be stopped before they hurt anyone else. Those pups needed a lot of meat.

Brian fired in a smooth sweep, hitting sides and chests instead of aiming for heads. Chest wounds were just as deadly.

Alexa rotated back toward the road but didn't resume the walk. She refused to allow any of them to observe more of her emotions for Brian. Many things had been stolen from her over a lifetime of fighting the government for her inherited skills, but having her child taken was the worst of it.

Alexa locked herself behind the cool façade she was known for and waited with fingers tapping her holsters.

Edward walked toward Brian, not worried the boy would hit him by accident or on purpose.

Billy grinned. "He's definitely hers."

Edward slowed as Brian finished the last two pups with a single shot. He got them through the chests at close range, backing up as he fired, like any of them would have done. Edward was sorry he now had to run the boy off. “You’re going to get her killed!”

Brian reloaded, breath coming in sharp gasps. He shoved the hot gun into his holster and knelt to retrieve the items he’d dropped. The wolves had come out as he thought things were over. He’d been fishing in his kit for a snack.

Edward glanced at his boss, torn. He wanted to disobey.

Her stiff shoulders sent anger through Edward.  
*This is cruel!*

Alexa nodded at the mental shout. *For all of us.* She turned and delivered a curt glance to her son. “This is as far as you go on this quest.”

Brian’s pain hit new levels as he faced her decision. “I’d like to know why. I’ve been perfect so far.”

“You have, but another quest waits for you.” Alexa reluctantly held up her arm. “The cure.”

Everyone stared at her scarred wrist. The bitemarks had blackened, decaying. The ugly color was spreading up her wrist.

“If you stay, we’ll have days, weeks. Maybe months if we’re careful, if fate is kind. When we reach Safe Haven, I’ll be turned away. If you find a cure, we can be together for years...maybe. I’ve made the only choice a mother can.”



Brian nodded as she lowered her arm. The cloak sleeve hid it now, but the image was burnt into his brain.

“Because of my situation, we’re going to shut this portal, take a break, then go to Safe Haven’s last known location—the Georgia mountains.” Alexa let her love show, just for an instant. “Your gifts are now yours to use as you see fit. Take your place among my father’s army.” She jerked her hand, ripping away the mental lock.

Brian groaned as doors opened in his mind, revealing power he’d only dreamed of. Blue light flashed into the sky and disappeared.

The other men observed in fascination. Edward remembered the twins she’d unlocked in the beginning of the quest, right after picking him up. Those girls had been strong, but Edward thought Brian was stronger than both of them put together. He could almost feel a power that matched Alexa’s.

“Complete your quest. Join me when I return.”

Brian locked down on his fear, grateful she’d unlocked his gifts. It would help him to help her. “I love you...mom.”

“And I, you. Nothing will ever change that.”

Brian left the path and didn’t look back.

The Wolf followed him, nose to the ground.

Alexa turned away to keep from crying.

Edward placed a hand on her shoulder in comfort.

Alexa smothered the response that came. She didn’t have time for a relationship, and she certainly

wasn't going to start one with someone like Edward. As soon as he had her to himself, he would change. It always happened, and she refused to go through that, but even if he was perfect for her, it didn't matter. The quest came first, above all else.

Edward felt the wall of coldness come down. He frowned, unsure what he had done to displease her.

"I see movement ahead." David used the fake sight with his gift. "Soldiers. At the tunnel entrance you chose." Daniel studied them. "Looks like they traveled hard to get here. Light on supplies...and no heavy artillery."

Alexa wasn't surprised. "We'll still try to slip in. If they chase us into the darkness, we have the advantage." Alexa glanced at Daniel. "A little boom?"

Daniel grinned, fishing in his cloak pocket. "You got it, Boss."

Alexa walked closer to David, scanning him, then she led them into the weeds alongside the path so they wouldn't be as visible.

The soldiers were camped around a fire and appeared unhappy to be in Afterworld at night. They huddled shoulder to shoulder, guns in their laps. All the men were thin and bruised, with worn clothing and boots wrapped in duct tape. The government wasn't taking proper care of their men.

Alexa and her crew moved into the darker shadows, stopping less than fifty feet from the soldiers' camp.

Alexa waited, timing it, then made the call.

“Go!” She ran for the sewer opening.

The squad of soldiers turned at footsteps crunching on the road, but they hadn’t been ready to fight.

“Incoming!”

“Watch out!”

“That’s her! Get that woman!”

Gunfire filled the air as Edward and the others tried to kill them while running. Half the shots landed, forcing the soldiers to take cover behind their truck.

Alexa got her crew into the sewer and immediately rotated to fire at those brave enough to follow.

Soldiers still tried to slip inside.

“Get in there! She’s worth double rations for a year!”

Daniel slapped his last brick of capped C-4 onto a grimy wall.

Alexa and the others ran into the darkness as Daniel struck the lighter.

Soldiers rushed in during the pause.

Daniel dropped to the filthy ground and crawled into the darkness.

Alexa turned. She fired once, aiming high.

The enemy paused, expecting more bullets.

Daniel got up and ran.

The soldiers heard him and gave chase.

The C-4 exploded, blowing soldiers over the walls that began to crumble. The entrance vanished

under a pile of dusty rubble, throwing them all into pitch black conditions.

Alexa opened her mouth to get them moving... A familiar, hated sound echoed through the tunnel. Something scurried over Alexa's boot, chittering in fear. She didn't wait for another warning. "Hand on shoulder while attaching the rope! Move!"

Alexa walked quickly while taking a flare from the deep pockets of her cloak. "Call when secured." Alexa struck the flare as she increased speed.

Water roared behind them.

"On the run!"

The men struggled to get ropes attached to each person's belt but not lose the shoulder hold. It slowed them down. Water rushed through the tunnel.

"Secured!"

"For your lives, run!"

Daniel shoved forward to reach Mark and Edward. All three men ran alongside but behind Alexa, waving the others to do the same. It tangled the ropes but kept them close enough to shoot a clear path as she ran straight for a group of walking dead. The gunfire was drowned out by the water on their heels.

"Jump on my call. Middle holds!" Alexa dropped speed a little as she threw the flare. "One. Two. Three... Jump!"

Alexa's boot pushed off the last inch of ground.

Daniel wrapped her up as he jumped, bringing her along.

Mark and Edward clasped arms around the couple to give them all momentum as they flew through the open air. They landed hard, groaning and scrambling for a sturdy hold.

The rear trio was jerked off their feet. They dropped into a narrow abyss.

Edward and Mark used their free arms to hold onto the jagged concrete floor, bracing.

Daniel held tight to Alexa, protecting her weaker form.

The ropes went taut, yanking the three Drag men to a sharp stop. They hit the side of the broken ground, grunting and groaning.

“Ah!” The top men absorbed their stop, hurting, but not letting go of the concrete.

“Pull at the same time. Get us on our feet first or the edges will cut the ropes.” Alexa stayed still, letting her men use those strong bodies while she listened for trouble. It was dark again, but the flare she’d thrown as she jumped wasn’t showing problems close to them now. The water was falling into the long, narrow crack, sparing their lives.

Daniel stayed dug-in to the concrete as Mark and Edward fought to their feet.

The men hanging moved up a bit as the top men stood. They both leaned out over the crevasse and started pulling.

The Drag men climbed the exposed wall, trying not to snag the rope.

Alexa heard five sets of boots make it onto the rock around her. “Excellent.”

Daniel stood, helping her do the same.

Alexa flashed a smile they could see because of the flare. "You make yourselves proud."

Her men beamed, all trying to catch their breath.

"That should be in a hall of fame somewhere."

Jacob brushed dirt and bits of stone from his arms. "Never would have thought it possible."

"Necessity is the mother of invention."

Alexa's favorite quote brought calm to the adrenaline-filled males. They waited for her to continue their adventure.

Alexa secretly breathed a sigh of relief that they'd all survived. She hadn't been expecting a hole in the ground, though she probably should have. The apocalypse hadn't just ruined topside.

Alexa straightened her clothes and gear, like her crew was doing, then led them forward. The flare was starting to sputter already. It had been splashed by the water rushing into the gap. There were no other sounds, telling them the soldiers hadn't been as lucky. That should have been a blessing, but it raised concern instead. The way behind them was blocked. If the way ahead was also, they were trapped in the stinking darkness again.

Anger flared as they walked, searching for an outlet.

Chapter Twenty-Three

# Night Must Fall

1

**A**s they trudged through the darkness, Mark's fears grew louder in his mind. Before the war, he had been a respected member of society, though he'd frequented the edges. After the war, he had become a killer. During his wakeful periods, he had been tortured. Walking through these dark earthen walls resembled the marches to the shower that inmates had received once a month.

Edward dropped back and placed a hand on Mark's shoulder, able to feel his unrest.

Mark appreciated the gesture, but he didn't reply. There was nothing he could say other than he was fighting his demons and Edward already knew that.

Alexa walked by the flare, eyeing the new room they were entering. It was wide but narrowing into a corridor she disliked for the confined space. It appeared like a badly decorated hallway in a haunted house of the past. As they walked, small windows appeared on each side of the tunnel walls, but they let in no light.

"Cells."

Alexa's mutter gave her crew a shiver. These cells had been here for a long time according to the layers of webs and crud over them, but they felt out of place.

"These are the final guards before the portal." Alexa increased speed. "Jacob, be ready."

"We don't have the knife." Jacob clung to his fear of failure.

"Coming up on the right. Don't stop."

Near the end of the corridor, a stack of bodies were bleeding onto the floor. The flare burning out behind them gave enough details to bring goosebumps. Gouged eyes and shredded chests glared at them in warning.

"Very fresh." David moved closer to Alexa. "I hear thoughts. Eager...impatient...hungry."

Alexa put a hand on David's arm. "You're my magician. You've always known why I chose you."

"Yes." David began to gather power. "I didn't want it this way."

"None of us did." Alexa let go of him. "Be proud of who you are. Shield on my call. Guns up!"

Jacob ducked low as they reached the bodies. His fingers fumbled for the edge of the golden blade sticking from Lillian's bloody belt... He got a hold of it and kept moving without tripping his team.

The cells began to creak open.

"Run!" Alexa took her own advice, but it was hard for them to stay tight in the narrow tunnel. She pushed hard to get ahead so that the ropes wouldn't tangle. "There's a light." She pushed harder, almost



dragging the Drag men. Their feet were barely touching the debris layered floor.

Something big crashed after them, pounding on the walls of the tunnel.

Concrete flew. Roars echoed. The monsters lumbered out behind the largest demon guarding the portal. He was the leader. Big, and angry at being disturbed, he swung along the nasty walls, creating gouges.

The tunnel narrowed. *Too much!* Alexa tried to stop without tripping everyone. *Trap!*

Alexa rotated to face the biggest threat. She leapt over the ropes before they could trip her.

The team slid around, crisscrossing, but managed to stay on their feet.

Everyone opened fire.

Bullets slammed into the walls. They went right through the monsters.

“Now, Jacob!”

Jacob drew the golden blade but hesitated. “Which one?!”

“The big one!” Edward was still firing useless bullets at the dozen monsters nearing them.

Jacob didn’t move.

“Put your bitterness aside or we all die here!” Mark didn’t have time to be polite.

“It’s none of them.” Jacob turned his back on the coming monsters. “It’s him.”

Alexa turned to find a man standing at the opposite end of the room. He appeared perfectly normal in every way.

Jacob kissed the blade. "I believe. You know I do." He threw it.

Alexa shoved Jacob out of the way as a monster swiped for him.

Mark took the blow instead. He grunted, falling.

Edward caught him.

The blade plunged into the stranger's chest, drawing a shocked gasp.

The monsters froze. Then they melted into piles of rats that scurried beneath the debris with hostile squeaks.

Alexa took a bottle from her pocket and forced it between Mark's lips. "Shield up!"

David concentrated and brought up a thin barrier around them.

Edward watched the mystery man fall to his knees. "How did you know?"

Jacob also observed the dying man. "The test wasn't about my faith in God. It was about having faith in myself."

"Still, how did you know they had a master?"

"Because we do." Jacob smiled at Alexa, though she wasn't looking at him. "We're *her* monsters. It made sense that they'd have a controller, too."

Edward grunted. "Never thought of it that way." He slapped Jacob on the arm. "Let's get these ropes off."

Alexa worked on Mark. The timeless potion she'd bought from Jendon was slowing the blood loss, but it wasn't healing him. The potion hadn't

been made for him. She'd miscalculated who fate would try to take from her first.

"A trade!" The dying stranger gaped at them, bleeding in heavy streams.

Alexa shook her head. "No. Die."

"So will he." The man shut his lids. "The wounds are lethal." His last breath was an ugly cackle. "No descendant ever cured my work!"

Jacob, now free of the rope, went to the man. He yanked the blade free with a splurch. "What about a magician and a descendant?"

David grinned. "Yeah!" He let go of the shield and dropped down to help Alexa send healing energy into Mark's rasping body.

Nothing happened.

Tension seeped back into the team. Rats peered at them with beady red orbs.

"Why isn't it working?" Daniel wanted to help, but he didn't know how.

"Faith." Alexa studied Jacob.

Jacob paused, shaking his head. "I'm not like you two...and I did my part."

Alexa kept staring at him, waiting.

Jacob balked, stepping back. "No. I can't."

"You will, or we'll end it all here." Billy pushed Jacob toward the bleeding man. "Say you're sorry."

"But I'm not! He'll know!"

"Honesty...always matters." Mark forced it out through the pain and chills. "Why do you hate?"

"Because the world sucks! Look at it! Look at what we're forced to do now!" Jacob strode over to

Mark, furious. “You’re dying because of it. How can you have faith in the Creator?”

“He loves me.” Mark’s eyes shut. “Or I’d still be in Slam.”

Jacob growled, spinning. “And you?”

Edward shrugged. “He loves me or I would have died in the government bunker. So would you.”

Jacob’s fury swarmed them, but it didn’t stop the others from answering his disbelieving glares.

“Leadership would have killed me when I left Safe Haven.”

“I would have died from illness when I left the mountain.”

“My suicide attempt would have worked.”

Jacob stared at them. “You can’t believe that!” But he could tell they did. “You have no anger for being put in those situations?”

“We put ourselves here through our choices.” Alexa placed a hand on Jacob’s ankle. “You made the decisions that put you in awful places. Not the Creator, not the government—you.”

Jacob’s expression dissolved into deep sorrow. “They made me kill people.”

“You stayed because you liked to kill.” Edward could tell where this needed to go now. He could also tell that Alexa and David were getting tired. This needed to be over soon. “Admit it. Receive peace.”

“I won’t! I didn’t!” Jacob’s shouts echoed off the walls, scattering rats. “I wouldn’t! ...I didn’t want to enjoy it! I should have been put down.”

“Yes.” Alexa removed her hand from his leg. “He loves you, too. You’ve been given another chance to do things right.”

“I don’t...” Jacob tried not to cry. “Why? I don’t deserve it. I hurt people.”

“So does the Creator. Maybe it’s a bond.” Edward pushed on Jacob’s shoulder, getting the man to kneel by Mark. “More likely, it’s because you’re needed.”

“For more killing.”

“Yes,” the team answered in unison.

Jacob hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

Alexa led him to the finish. “For what?”

“For being willing.” Jacob let the tears fall. “For liking it.”

Alexa smiled, tiredly. “Welcome to my army.”

Jacob shuddered. He placed his hand on Mark’s chest. “It’s my honor.”

Bright light shot from all the fighters touching Mark. His body arched as healing orbs flew over his frame.

“The wizard guy is melting...or something.”

Alexa didn’t take her attention from Mark.

Everyone else glanced over to see what Edward was talking about.

The wizard’s bloody body lay in the same place, but green steam rose from his head. The eerie fog was lifting off the ground and floating toward the wall. As it began to go upward, almost slithering, the tension brought Alexa to her feet.

“The body’s almost gone.” The magic fascinated David. He helped Mark to his feet but kept an arm around the shaky man as he pointed. “It’s turning into the green fog.”

“It’s the portal.” Alexa spun around.

Her men gaped at the blur of her fast draw.

Behind them, the wizard stood in motionless approval. “You may pass.”

Alexa studied the unharmed man wearing a robe that covered him from head to toe. Only his sparkling green eyes and dark cheeks were visible under the black cloth.

“We came to close the portal.”

The wizard laughed.

Her men were offended and confused.

Alexa holstered, sighing. “Only Adrian...”

“And his companions.” The wizard pointed a grizzled hand at the portal now shimmering along the wall like a stepmother’s evil mirror. “You may pass.”

Jacob could view their reflections, but not the wizard’s gnarled profile. It was disturbing.

“Where will it take us?” Billy was leery of magic he didn’t understand.

“Wherever we wish?” Mark barked a hard laugh, high on the mixed energy speeding through his body. The humor drained from his face. “‘Cause we don’t believe in that shit.”

“It leads to the next stage of your quest.” The Wizard’s gave a creepy smile. “And yours, Horseman.”

Edward winced at the warning but didn't reply.

The wizard slowly lifted both hands to include the entire group.

"Where does it go?!" Mark couldn't help his frustration.

"Where do you want it to take you?"

The team looked to Alexa. That was her answer to give.

Alexa sighed. She wanted to go straight to Safe Haven, but that wasn't how a quest like this worked. "A place where we can shelter safely for a day or a month." She paused. "A Safe Haven site perhaps?"

The wizard nodded. "And now, your prize." A ball of golden light flew from his hands.

David couldn't bring up his new shield in time. The gold ball slammed into Alexa's chest.

Alexa groaned, arching. "Thank you!"

Her crew waited for an explanation, understanding it wasn't a bad reward.

"He's gone!"

"So are the rats." David was disappointed. His first attempt to use his power had been a disaster.

Alexa groaned again. "Let's go." She walked toward the portal, stepped through without fear.

All six men ran after her, frowning or grinning.

Alexa stopped as the sun hit her skin. It didn't burn at all. "A prize, indeed."

Edward stopped next to her. "Are you cured?"

"Only of my sun aversion." She could still feel the wrongness of her body and the thirst for blood burning in her throat.

Her men peered back through the portal as shouts echoed and footsteps crunched. Some of the soldiers had survived Daniel's boom.

"They'll see us!" Alexa got them into the woods next to the shimmering portal, but she couldn't run. She had no energy left.

Soldiers filled the sewer room... Thuds and snarls came... Screams echoed next.

"They don't have the blade." Jacob patted his pocket.

The wizard appeared near the portal. "You may NOT pass!"

The gateway began to shut.

Alexa forced her feet back to the main road. "As long as we can or sunset."

Edward scowled at her weak tone, but he didn't argue. It was noon at best. Sunset was a lot of miles away. *She won't make it this time. I'll be ready to carry her.*

David took Edward's right. *Me, too.*

Edward felt the answer in his mind and glanced over his shoulder. Mark was back in his place as Drag man and appeared happy to be there. "You did well."

David shook his head, releasing his misery. "She did that, not me."

"She was too drained to have done it alone. Fighting that big dog took it out of her." Edward waited for a sharp remark from Alexa.

Nothing came.



Edward waved. “Case in point. She’s in survival mode right now. You gave her the energy.”

“And Jacob.”

“Yes. He’s many things now, our surprising Preacher.”

David chuckled respectfully, glad of Edward’s words. “That he is.”

“Quit the jabber.”

Both men swallowed laughs at Alexa’s weak bark.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Alexa also hid her amusement. She kept walking, silent, and her crew followed, but she struggled to keep moving. It had been long since she’d been this weary.

As the afternoon shadows once again lengthened, Alexa finally stumbled to an awkward stop. Her lids closed as she sank to her knees. “Edward has point.”

Control safely passed, she slumped to the hard ground.

Edward pushed the others aside to scoop up her limp, cool body. “She said sunset. We go on.”

Moving as he said it, Edward didn’t worry about being followed and he wasn’t relieved when they fell into a rotating guard around him. His only concern was for the unconscious woman in his arms. *I’m in love with her. The portal wizard sensed it.* Edward walked faster. *This won’t go well for any of us.*

“I see buildings.”

All of them did. They paused at the entrance to the first sign of civilization they’d found since coming through the portal.

The quaint town had white picket fences and red sheds behind each home. Framed by dusk, it was too pretty for them to feel comfortable as they stared.

“Next town over.” Alexa burrowed deeper into Edward’s arms. She only needed five minutes to recharge, but she’d refused to take energy from her men right now. They were tired, too. She was letting it refill naturally, which took a lot longer. “Animals own this one.”

The males kept walking, eager for a break from their adventure now. This had been a long one and they hadn’t been successful.

As they passed the wealthy homes, eyes glared at them from windows and weeds, but they weren’t attacked.

Half a mile further, the group paused again.

“Here will do.” Alexa assumed the small brick village was where the employees that serviced the previous property had lived. Walking through that high-class area had made all of them uneasy about how long it had been since they’d had a bath or even donned clean clothes.

“Is this place for real?” Twelve neat homes sat in a semicircle around a truck that had been here

since the war or near to it, judging from the weeds. The peaceful village stunned Daniel. It made him wish for his old life.

“Where are we?” Edward wanted the basics covered.

“I came through here on my way west.” David scanned the area again, concentrating on the landscape. “Looked the same. Back there anyway.” He scanned the village. “That feels like...”

“Safety.” Alexa slowly pushed out of Edward’s arms and steadied herself on shaking legs. She walked toward the center of the town. “This is a Safe Haven site. Spread out. Find the message.”

Daniel stayed by Alexa, mind on their adventure. He was running through their moments and admiring the men with him. It felt like they’d been together for a decade instead of just six months.

“Over here.” Edward scraped the weeds aside to reveal a carved note in the chimney.

*“Arkansas next. We’re going home.”*

“What does that mean?” Jacob scanned the empty cabins while he waited for an answer. He ignored the chill coming into the air.

“Little Rock.” Alexa almost smiled. “My family lived there.”

It was nice to think that Alexa had once had a home to go to.

“I hear water.” Mark used his sharp ears. “Bubbling... A spring?”

Alexa groaned. “A bath together later, if the setup is right.”

Each man there shifted or adjusted at the resulting images.

Alexa snickered. “We’ll clear the town. I’ll pick a house. We’ll start stocking it for winter.” Alexa moved toward the nearest home with Daniel on her heels.

“Winter?”

Jacob nodded at David. “We’ve earned a break.”

None of them were sure if they would survive so much downtime but for the moment, it sounded good.

“Ant hills.”

Alexa nodded at Daniel’s observation. “When we see a lot of them, we’re close to a Safe Haven site.”

“Were they friends?”

She nodded. “The ants followed them to the ocean, I’m sure.”

Edward went to find the spring to determine if it would accommodate at least Alexa and a guard. She’d been able to rest in his arms, to recharge a bit. He wanted to give her a soothing soak before they slept.

Billy went to the nearest tree to have a good vantage point for a security perimeter. He already knew the homes were empty by the feel. It was the most peaceful place he’d been since the war—

because there were no humans here. He also didn't see any animals.

The others cleared the village with Alexa, mentally storing notes on everything in the homes. There were enough supplies to outfit them for a month of traveling or two months of staying. Each of them hoped it was for the outfitting, mostly because two months was too long to be stationary.

"Movement to the south." Billy kept his voice calm so that they would know it wasn't a threat.

Large ants came from the weedy dunes behind the village. They stopped there, waiting in a line.

Alexa greeted them warmly. "You're welcome here so long as you obey the code."

The ants trundled into their perimeter and began forming letters.

*I love you. Be safe.*

It was the message Sally had interrupted.

Alexa swallowed the tears. "I miss you, father." She lifted her chin. "And your disregard for the rules."

She signaled. "Clear and set camp. Anyone but Jacob will cook." She waved at the Preacher. "With me."

Jacob hurried to take Daniel's place, grinning. "Yes, ma'am."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# Close

### 1

“**S**he wants us all in the water.” Jacob stepped by the men sitting on the small porch and stairs that were lit by a lantern. He dropped his kit in the pile with the others, then went back toward the spring where Alexa had bathed and was now relaxing. She’d been there for an hour, letting the water soothe her tired muscles.

The other men followed, waving Billy down from his perch. The ants were surrounding the small town now, providing a line of sentries that would alert them to problems. None of the men expected any, but they were a bit worried over it being so peaceful. Alexa needed to hunt. They had quickly realized their needs would be met here, but hers wouldn’t.

Alexa waved them over as the group rounded the farthest house. “The water’s warm. Come soothe those sore bodies.” She turned up the wick on the lantern near her head, giving them brighter light to see by.

The springs were multiple holes in the ground, some no bigger than a foot while others stretched a quarter mile. All of them were bubbling gently and

smelled exactly the way water should. It was another relief.

Alexa admired her crew as they eagerly dropped clothes. Their gazes on her bare skin weren't shy, but she didn't feel threatened. These were her fighters and she wanted to share the good moments with them. The water rippling over her full chest felt amazing.

Edward strode into the small spring, grinning as the warmth covered his knees, then his waist. "Damn."

Jacob chuckled. "That's what I said." He knelt on the bank by Alexa and held out a rolled smoke.

"Another, if you would."

Jacob sat next to her to roll a second smoke.

The good mood improved to contentment.

David and Daniel chose to dive into the center of the spring after seeing Edward go up to his neck there as he walked over to take a place next to Alexa. They surfaced together, throwing warm sprays over Edward's back.

"Nice!" Edward sank to his knees and found a sandy shelf. He assumed Alexa was sitting on it and allowed his weary body to do the same. It felt like a huge hot tub. He leaned against the bank and shut his eyes. Then he smiled.

All of them stared at him. Wearing happiness, Edward was a handsome man who glowed with vibrant health and a powerful draw.

Alexa surrendered to it, sliding toward him in the water.

Edward curled an arm around her bare waist, moaning at the sensation. She settled onto his lap, rested her head against his chest.

“Now it’s perfect.” He held her close and let the warm water begin washing away his aches.

Alexa let herself drowse, listening to the water and the sound of her crew enjoying it.

Jacob left the second smoke in reach of Alexa’s hand and returned to the spring. He washed at the far end, laughing with the others as Billy and Daniel had a breath holding contest. None of it was loud, but the sounds echoed in the hearts of all the fighters. Moments like this had been in short supply.

Alexa nuzzled Edward’s neck. “My injuries have healed, even the ribs.”

Edward didn’t open his eyes yet. “Mmm. I guess you’d like to test them?”

She snickered. “You are my favorite horse to ride.”

Edward laughed at the crude innuendo, body starting to rise to the occasion. “Prove it?”

Alexa kissed his cheek, drawing a shudder. “I’m in the mood for pearls. You’ll need the help of your team.”

Edward moaned as she slid wet skin over him. “Can I get five volunteers over here for service?”

Silence fell for two seconds, then five hardening men walked toward them.

Edward made a quick motion, telling them what she wanted while fighting not to drive into the baking heat now riding him. *Necklace!*



Mark pointed at Daniel as he stepped toward the bucking couple. "You owe me a chore."

Daniel laughed, switching to Alexa's right. He'd bet that Alexa would never have all of them at the same time because it was too difficult to organize without making everyone uncomfortable. "I'll pay it gladly."

Alexa rose long enough to turn around. She dropped back onto Edward, emitting a guttural moan that he echoed.

Tattooed breasts begged for hands. Her men obliged. Fingers also went between her legs, ripping moans from her throat and shudders from Edward.

"Two minutes!" Alexa gasped as rough fingers pressed perfectly. "Or less. With me if you can!"

Edward bucked at the command, lifting her out of the water.

Two of her crew rubbed against her legs, holding her up.

Edward was grateful for the moment to regain control. He didn't want this to end yet. He sucked in air, flesh throbbing.

"Twenty seconds. In order of arrival." Alexa spread her legs in their hands.

Daniel hissed in need. He stepped forward and took what she was offering.

Each of the men did, stopping when the others lifted her from their hard flesh at the twenty count. When all five standers had gone, Alexa lowered herself back onto Edward's hard flesh and lifted her chin.

Cum sprayed her neck and chest.

Edward placed a hand over her clit as he bucked in her, drawing groans from her mouth and his. They came together, joining their team.

“That may be the most graphic display I’ve ever witnessed.”

The male voice brought immediate reactions. Alexa was shoved behind Edward as all six men spun around, balls hanging low. Their hands went for guns that weren’t there, then raised in defense of their leader.

Brandon laughed. “Okay. Now that’s the most graphic display I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Wait. I know that voice.”

“You should.”

Naked, Alexa stepped to the front of her angry men, scanning the intruder. “Uncle Brandon.” She studied the blurry shadow staring at all of them in turn. “He’s not really here.”

Brandon smiled at her. “Still smart as a whip. Good.” His amusement faded. “You’ll need it.”

The men understood it was a vision. All of them kept their stances, not sure how to fight it but willing to try.

“You’ve interrupted a good moment for us.” Alexa went back to her sandy seat and began rinsing off. “This better be good.”

“Or what?” Brandon smirked. “You’ll shoot me?”

Alexa reached for the smoke Jacob had rolled. She used her finger to light it. "You're not the only one who can appear at inopportune times."

Brandon sighed. "I didn't know you were in the middle of an orgy. Be nice."

"That's not what I'm known for." She inhaled and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "Why are you here?"

Brandon's demeanor switched to tense alertness. "I felt a descendant and was sent to check it out."

Alexa frowned. "Where are you?"

"A little town called Ciemus. We've been attacked a lot since your father left. We keep close tabs on the areas around us."

"Attacked by soldiers or things that go bump in the night?" Jacob didn't care that they were naked. Information was important.

"Both." Brandon swept the men again, grin returning. "She knows how to pick 'em. So does her father."

"Why aren't you with him?" Alexa passed the smoke to Edward and signaled for her crew to stand down. "As you were."

Brandon watched her fighters obey, all leaving the water to dress, to have their guns at hand. "I am sorry. There's nothing to fear from a ghost, you know."

Every man there snorted or rolled their eyes.

Alexa chuckled dryly. "I don't think we can agree with that statement anymore."

Brandon frowned. "It's getting worse out there."

"Yes. I assume you don't travel in Afterworld."

"No. I've been here since Safe Haven left." He paused, coming back to her last query. "I was invited to go. I felt better off here."

Alexa sighed. "Family legacy?"

"Yeah. A little too much of it sometimes."

"Tell me about it." Alexa relaxed as Edward settled on the bank next to her. The Horseman really did make her feel safer. "So, what's the message?"

"How do you know there is one?"

"Deductive reasoning. You're on the lookout for descendants, but you came openly. You're searching for allies, not enemies."

"Yes... You can't come here. These people have turned against magic users over the last two years. Their guardian left. Without William, the town reverted to suspecting all descendants of being evil."

"Yet you're allowed to stay." Alexa gave a disappointed sneer. "Blending in again, Uncle?"

Brandon nodded. "The mayor here trusts me. It's the others we have to watch out for now."

"What's the message?"

"Magic users are being hunted."

"We're always being hunted."

"Not like this. William is powerful."

Alexa sat up. "Byzantine."

"Exactly." Brandon began to fade from view, energy failing. "Be careful. He's not sane."

“Last known location?”

“The southern coast. I’d hoped he was going after Angela, but I feel him still prowling that area.”

“What does he want with magic users?” Alexa didn’t know who Angela was, but she liked the respect in Brandon’s voice when he spoke of the woman.

“To make a forbidden call. He’s searching for a strong descendant who will agree.”

“Wonderful.” Alexa sighed. “Thank you for the warning.”

“It’s my honor.” Brandon swept her crew again, approving of their health and strength. “Stay safe, Alexa. Good luck on your quest.”

The vision vanished.

Alexa shut her eyes, aware of the good mood being gone. “Shake it off. We’re alone again.”

Edward stayed next to Alexa as the others thought about getting back in the warm water. He no longer felt safe.

Alexa sighed. “Are we ever?”

He snorted. “No, I guess not.” He gestured at their team. “Downtime. Enjoy it while you can.”

Daniel, David, and Jacob dropped their hastily donned pants and returned to the water.

Billy settled on the bank opposite Alexa and Edward, so he could observe in that direction. He caught the smoke Alexa tossed. She was beautiful to him, though not in the romantic way. He had yet to see her panic, except over them. She was the perfect leader.

“Stop it.” Alexa chuckled, voice raspy. “Perfection is a myth, though you guys are as close to it as I’ve ever found. Be happy with yourselves, not me. You did the work.”

Billy nodded, but didn’t change his opinion. He’d remembered more about his past while reliving the story of how he’d come to be on this quest. He would tell her later about Angela, who was also a great leader. He thought Alexa might enjoy knowing another female was doing right by everyone. Not all of them wanted men in chains. Some of them wanted the old world put back to rights.

Billy assumed the two females would meet when they reached Safe Haven. He shut down on that thought and moved on to what had happened in the sewer. While he replayed it, the stiff breeze blew over his warmed skin, bringing contentment.

All the men felt it. Another job had been finished. They’d survived and they were still together. Perfection might be a myth, but this was real.

## 2

Evening came with a cold chill that put the fighters in front of a small fireplace. They stayed close, enjoying the warmth and the feeling of being together. They didn’t discuss the quest or their failures yet. There would be time for that later.

Alexa sat in the center of her men, fed and warming. They'd remained in the spring until the cool wind had forced them out. The house she'd chosen had one bedroom, dusty wooden furniture, and appliances built into the walls to conserve space. After everything they had been through, it was nice. "Let's have a drink." She glanced at Jacob. "Use some of it on that trim. I don't like how red it's becoming."

Jacob nodded. He'd cleaned it out, but the injury wasn't cooperating.

Edward dug in his kit and handed Jacob his tube of Bacitracin ointment. "Use that, too."

Jacob was warmed by their signs of caring. He doctored himself with a smile, even when the whiskey began to burn his wound.

"Anyone else have an injury that needs tending?"

Alexa wasn't surprised when all of the men nodded or held out a hand for the tube. They'd done a lot of fighting with little time to care for themselves. "Get medicated. Then get a little drunk and relax. Our downtime has begun."

"Do we get another story?" David still wanted the rest of the tale about Billy's beginnings with the group.

"Tomorrow night, perhaps." Alexa wasn't in the mood to relive the past. She wanted to look toward the future. When the bottle came around to her, she took a healthy swig, content. They hadn't shut the

portal, but Mark was still alive, and she'd sent Brian on his first quest.

She wondered briefly where he was now, then blocked those disturbing thoughts. The boy had done fine on his own. He would survive better without her and the dangers that came to her like magnets. She didn't think she'd gone more than a day or two without killing someone or something since escaping the Hawaii lab.

Billy, on the far right end, leaned against a dusty chair and drank from the bottle. He belched and drank again before passing it. Getting a little drunk sounded very good to him right now.

David agreed. The conversation they'd had about being descendants was weighing on him. So was Billy's statement about him being on probation.

"Let it go." Billy handed David the bottle. "I have."

David nodded as the other men looked at them in surprise.

"Did you read his mind?" Edward waved off the bottle.

Billy nodded. "Guess he was right about me being like him."

"Like us." Alexa also passed on the bottle. "We're all connected. Don't be unhappy when the gifts present themselves. They'll allow us to reach our goal."

Half the men were satisfied with that. The other three frowned or shook their heads.



“I know you don’t want it. Distrust of magic users was bred into you before the war and set in stone afterward. I get that, but don’t be scared to embrace it now. You can’t change who you are.” She sighed loudly. “Neither can I.”

“We don’t want you to change.” Jacob took another drink and passed the half empty bottle to David. “It’s just odd to know we’ll be like you at some point.”

Edward cleared his throat. “Some of us sooner than others.” He tugged aside his shirt to show the teeth marks Alexa had put there. They were darkening to match hers.

Alexa sighed. “I’m sorry for that.”

Edward shrugged. “Maybe I will be, too. Not sure yet.” He dropped his head. “But I’m thirsty and that bottle isn’t cutting it.”

“We’ll hunt together, after you’ve finished changing.” Alexa leaned against his shoulder. “This damn quest will change all of us before it’s over.”

“You’ll help me adjust?” Edward had been worrying over that.

“Of course. You were my first. I’d never remove you for something that wasn’t your fault.”

Edward kissed the top of her head and began digging in his pockets for his light pouch. “Smoke?”

Alexa shook her head. “Go ahead. I’ll snooze for a bit right here where I feel safe and wanted.”

Hearts melted, as she’d known they would. She’d needed to erase the tension from Edward’s admission and she had. Her men were relaxing now,

assuming she would cover it. Alexa could only hope she would live up to their expectations. Becoming something new when you were already different was hard, but she was positive Edward would be able to resist the temptations.

Alexa went to sleep.

Edward held her and wished they had a chance at a different life.

### 3

Dawn alerted Alexa to the arrival of a new day. Her eyes snapped open, proving her aversion to sunlight had indeed been healed. The thirst still burned, but now, she could hunt in the daylight.

She inhaled deeply and caught the faint chill of fall ending. Winter would come soon.

Alexa stood, waking the two men near her. Mark peered up in groggy concern.

On the other side, Edward sighed. "I thought you said this was a sleep in day."

Alexa chuckled. "Rest, my pets. I need to feel the sun on my skin. I've missed it."

Mark settled back down. He'd only been in the bedroll for a couple hours. He and Edward had stayed up later than the others, chatting.

Alexa shut the bedroom door, nodding to the other men who were sprawled out across the small cabin like giant decorations. She approved of the crackling fire and stack of firewood that had been brought in.

Billy gestured toward the small counter. "Breakfast and coffee."

Alexa poured the sludge they called coffee, but she grimaced mentally at the hard biscuits and cans of fruit. Blood was all she craved these days.

"Yeah, we thought that would be an issue." David pointed toward the springs. "Lots of animals are out there now, checking my scent line. Quick hunting."

Alexa took her coffee along, not responding to the half questioning tone. Yes, animal blood would work. It had to. She wasn't leaving this small town unless there was no other choice.

The sky here was a beautiful blue, but puffy white clouds in the distance heralded the end of fall for those observant enough to notice. They could go to the next city or town, but why? It was perfect here for the needs of her men. If the animals stayed, then for herself, as well.

She would have human blood if they had intruders. She would make it clear to her crew to shoot to wound while they were here. She would also keep training them. A few months would feel like a lifetime if she didn't keep them busy.

The door opened. Edward joined her, also carrying a mug of sludge.

Alexa leaned against his shoulder. "Others will join us after winter. I sense them searching for me."

"Friends or foes?"

"Both."

“Figures.” Edward sipped, trying to wake up.  
“Anything you want me to do?”

“Just prepare my crew for that eventuality. They won’t want to share after the time we’ll have here.”

“I’ll handle it.” Edward knew they all needed the break. Even past delays had been forced from injuries. This would be a welcome change of pace.  
*...until I get bored.*

“We’ll increase training while we’re here.”

*That will help. Still, if I get restless, it could cause trouble.*

“I also want the areas around us scouted. It wouldn’t be good to get rusty.”

Edward relaxed. That would be enough. Men like himself needed something to look forward to, a danger to face. It was both odd and exhilarating in a world where most survivors hid to wait for their end to find them.

“I feel the same.”

“Something else is bothering you.”

She nodded. “I expect the BLM to arrive at the same time as our friendly company. We’ll need those lists covered.”

“We wondered about that after we left the cabin.”

Alexa sighed. “It was only delayed. I thought the BLM would be the issue there, not gate hunters.”

“We’ll go over it tonight and start scavenging the areas around us at your call. We’ve all made our lists and checked them twice.”

Alexa snickered, loving his sharp mind. “Add lights to it, will you?”

“Definitely.” Edward made a mental note. No one wanted to be in the dark again without that; all of them were down to just a single neck light now.

Alexa straightened, handing him her cup. “I’ll be in shortly.”

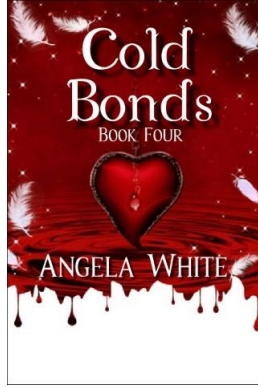
Edward took her cup and the hint, returning to the warm interior of the small house.

Alexa walked around the corner toward the springs to hunt. The thirst was maddening. Every second around her males was a temptation. The next months could be the hardest she’d ever gone through. Their blood called to her in loud shrieks and she doubted animal sustenance would be enough to damper it. Edward wasn’t the only one who would have to roam the wastelands to be satisfied. They all would, and God help anyone they ran into. This team was lethal. Even a byzantine would find them a hard fight.

“Let him come. We’ll be ready.” Alexa settled into hunting mode, confident her crew would handle anything that might come during her absence. She’d trained them well.

**The End**

**What would you like to do now?**



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## Deleted Scene

“I can try, if you give me permission.”

Caught at a vulnerable moment, Alexa sighed in pain. “As you would, my friend. It’s never been done. Good luck to you in your *solitary* challenge.”

Edward understood that meant he wasn’t allowed to tell the others. “That makes it a lot harder.”

“You can’t make an impossible chore harder. It already weighs as much as you can carry.”

Edward hurried to catch up, ignoring the confusion of the other men and the mental dilemma going on in Brian’s mind.

“May I ask and learn?”

“Not now. Our checkpoint will come up fast. Get them ready.”

Satisfied that he would be able to ask later, Edward made a sharp motion he believed Brian would understand.

Brian nodded slowly at the order and trudged back into the shadows where he’d spent most of his life.

Edward waited for the men to pass him, then flashed another message he hoped would help the boy recover. Unlike Paul, Brian knew the rules and how to care for himself. He was just too inexperienced to survive on his own yet. If he were

allowed time to grow, he might become one of them.

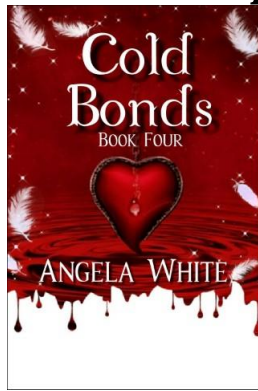
Brian couldn't stop the tears from flowing over his cheeks at Edward's message.

*Don't give up. She needs you, boy.*

Brian didn't know if it was true, but it didn't matter. Edward had shoved determination back down his throat and it tasted good.



## Book 4 Sample



### Cold Bonds

“**T**hank you for gifting me.”

Alexa frowned at Edward as he laid on the frozen ground by her boots. “Concentrate!”

Edward notched the arrow. “I mean it. I’m grateful.”

Alexa huffed. “Show it by hitting your target.”

The deer herd was small but healthy, all grazing without concern despite the two people in sight. The trees were covered in an inch of snow, but the sun had melted the top branches, providing a slushy surface that made a lot of noise. She’d brought him here to hunt, hoping it would give him a challenge. His stalling was unexpected.

Edward paused again, glancing up. “I feel trouble coming.”

Alexa didn't scold him again. She felt it, too. They were alone here, but at the same time, they weren't. "We've been training hard; we're in shape. We'll handle what comes." She glared at him. "Are you nervous using a new weapon?"

Edward chuckled. "Yes. The wood in my hand is frightening."

She snorted curtly at his humor, but she enjoyed it. Edward wasn't like Billy, who took every opportunity to crack a joke. "What's up with you?"

He hesitated. "Can I be honest?"

"Of course." He had her full attention now.

Edward sighed. When the wizard had warned him about the future, he'd sensed the vampire change. He'd been telling Edward a different life was coming. Now that it was here, Edward couldn't find it in himself to regret it. "The thought of danger coming our way pleases me."

Alexa relaxed. "That's because we're not meant to spend the winter playing house." She grinned at him. "Though it has been fun."

Edward was relieved to know his feelings weren't singular. He didn't want any of them to be hurt, but he longed for the need to use his skills.

Alexa pointed at the grazing targets. "Now, or the others will starve next week." She lunged forward to scare the small herd of deer, forcing him to react

The herd scattered, hopping over each other and the rocky ground as icy slush flew from their hooves.

Edward stood, bow lifting... His arrow hit, taking down a large buck.

He immediately jogged to it before nature could make a claim.

Alexa joined him as the herd regrouped a hundred yards away. "Nice shot."

Edward enjoyed her praise. "Never used a bow before the war. I like it."

"So do I. I've always found it soothing."

Alexa's scarred skin glinted in the sunset. Neither of them were wearing cloaks. They didn't feel the cold as much now. He watched her arm muscles stretch under firm skin, flashed to kissing that spot less than an hour ago. She had asked for a service right here in the woods. He'd eagerly obliged, but even during, he'd been distracted.

Edward inhaled deeply, catching her smell. He marveled at his new senses, the luster to his black hair, the sparkle that was brighter in his blue eyes. He looked younger, but even better, he felt it.

Edward put the bow into the sheath on his back, then knelt by the buck. He broke off the arrow in its chest, glad the animal had died quickly. His first kill last week hadn't. He'd had to end its misery with his knife. That hadn't been enjoyable.

Edward listened to the deer herd chuff and stomp their anger. The new senses were amazing, but he also had a new voice in his mind that came from Alexa releasing their gifts. Then she'd forbidden them to use it unless the situation required

it. She'd also started to teach them the rules, the first of which, they all hated: never without permission.

"You'll take the food back to Jacob?"

Edward nodded. "Go hunt. I'm good."

Alexa glided away from him, alert for trouble. She didn't want to hunt helpless deer. She craved a human source.

Edward pulled the warm carcass across the snowy ground to their cart, marveling at his strength. In the three weeks they'd been here, all of them had bulked up. Even Alexa had put on a little weight, though it was barely noticeable. If not for satisfying her needs, he might not have. The others worried it might be pregnancy, but Alexa had informed them vampires don't reproduce.

They hadn't asked how she knew. They'd accepted that answer because it was what they wanted to hear. But they were all watching her in case the information was wrong. A few of their crew suspected Alexa was keeping the peace until the chaos had to happen.

Edward didn't. He trusted her in every way. He just couldn't stop thinking about being connected to her for life. His desire to be her mate was growing. Their trips out hunting together had increased those urges.

Edward saw Alexa had stopped a few feet away. She was staring into the west, like she did often. Her hand slid to her gun...

Edward ran to her, drawing his own.

She peered into the light snow. “We have a supplier coming.”

Edward holstered. “Do we need anything he has?”

Alexa shrugged. “Let’s go find out.”

Edward stayed on her heels as she strode into the snowy street to meet the lone man trekking through the storm with a mule. Edward found it suspicious.

Alexa assumed it was fate. She began preparing for news that would put them back on the road. She wasn’t ready yet, but she would follow where the quest led. That was the job.

The man coming toward them was buried in a long coat; he wore boots that came to his thighs. He led a mule on a rope, loaded with bags covered in snow. The deep white fluff on his hat said he’d been traveling through the storm.

The trader spotted Alexa and Edward. He waved a gloved hand.

Alexa returned the gesture. She kept her other hand on her gun. The trader was their first visitor, but there had been engines in the distance. The team had all been glad when none of them stopped.

“Hello!” The man stopped ten feet away, studying them. After a minute, he grinned, showing straight, white teeth. “Happy evening to you.”

“The same, friend.” Alexa enjoyed the old speech. She’d learned it from her father, but rarely got to use it.

Tall, wearing a bright yellow scarf, the trader was a cross between a gunfighter and a pilot from the old world. His trench coat was wide with bulging pockets and the odd fit of his clothes suggested he was fat and slow, but Alexa didn't fall for it. The dangerous strength said to be careful. She liked that.

The trader stomped snow from his boots. "Nice night we're having here."

Edward chuckled. "Yep. Might even get some weather later."

The man's laughter brayed into the storm. "That we might." The trader tugged on the rope to stop the mule that was still plodding forward. "I have a few items you may be interested in."

Alexa rotated toward their cabin. "Come share a hot drink, then we'll trade."

"I'd be honored." The trader tugged on the mule rope again and followed.

Edward stayed next to the stranger, taking in details like he was supposed to.

The trader glanced over. "Are you the boss?"

Edward shook his head.

The trader grunted. "Didn't think so. Might be a problem for you tomorrow."

Edward braced for the bad news he'd felt coming. "Why is that?"

"A group of resistance fighters are marching in this direction. They're okay with magic, and most creatures, but they don't tolerate female leadership."

“Thank you for the information.” Edward chose the simplest solution. “When they come through, I’ll be the boss.”

The trader chuckled. “Knew you were smart.” He extended a hand. “I’m Ulysses G. Smith.”

“Edward.” He shook, wondering if the comment about magic and creatures meant the trader had noticed they were different. Edward hoped not. It would be a shame to feed the trader to Alexa for a midnight snack.

Alexa paused on the porch. The cabin and surrounding area fit the post-apocalyptic landscape, but the steady stream of smoke from the snowy chimney told strangers someone was here. It was dangerous, but she’d refused to run a cold camp for the entire winter. She opened the door, hand still on her gun. “We have company.”

The team rose, joining her. Billy and Jacob took her right, while David and Daniel took her left. All four were in socks, jeans, and tank tops, showing strength and signs of previous battles in scar lined skin. It was impressive.

Edward waved the trader inside. “I’ll stable your mule if you like. We have a small pen.”

Ulysses nodded. “She needs to drink, but don’t feed her. She has a blockage. Needs to push it through.”

Edward led the big, docile animal around the side of the cabin.

“This is Ulysses. He’s a trader.” Alexa let the stranger enter first. “He needs a meal and a hot drink.”

Daniel had the food shift tonight. He went to get the items while observing their guest.

Hammocks swayed gently in the corners, casting shadows over neatly packed bedrolls and kits waiting to be grabbed on a moment’s notice. The bedroom held three more similar setups. The rest of the cabin was stocked with wood, dried food, water jugs, and junk that Edward was reclaiming for ammunition. It wasn’t the cozy home of refugees. Daniel wondered if the trader would notice.

Billy and the others holstered at Alexa’s signal, resuming their places around the cabin.

Alexa shut the door, returning them to a muffled silence broken only by the occasional thump of a tree branch giving from the weight of ice and snow.

Ulysses sank down by the fire with a grunt and a fart. “Oh. My pardon.”

“Beans do that to you.” She pointed at the bowl Daniel was filling. “We have deer stew.”

“Sounds good.” The trader dropped a small pouch by her hand. “For your hospitality.”

Alexa stored it without peering into the bag. “It’s our honor. Stay in peace; leave the same come dawn.”

Ulysses relaxed. “This is nice. I’ve never met a magic vampire.”



Alexa shook her head as her team tensed. “Ulysses makes his living on catching details, my pets. Like us.”

“Aye. It serves me well to know who my clients are.” Ulysses took the bowl. “My thanks.”

Daniel nodded, but he didn’t feel right using their speech in return. Alexa hadn’t taught it to the team yet, but they were picking it up. “Do you have many clients around here?”

Ulysses talked while he chewed. “Just a town almost two weeks back. Some kid was raising hell there. Scuttlebutt said he was a Mitchel.”

Alexa chuckled.

The trader swallowed. “Those Mitchels certainly know how to get under people’s skin.”

“Yes.” Alexa shrugged. “The family reputation is a bit...harsh.”

The trader shoveled in more food. “Young for so much success against vampires.” He slurped in a gulp of the hearty broth. “And alone. Kid might be a badass if he lives long enough.”

“He was with vampires?” Billy was happy the boy was already working on his quest.

“Yeah, he claimed the daughter of a prominent tribe and killed her controller.” Ulysses belched. “She was being slaved out to passing travelers. I heard the kid sexed her up. She won’t even look at anyone else now.”

Laughter floated through the warm room.

Ulysses joined them, snorting.

Edward's arrival ended the amusement. "Your mule is going to die."

The trader grunted. "I'll find a new one. Always have."

"Fate provides..." Alexa sipped the hot coffee Daniel handed to her.

"And man takes advantage." Ulysses shoved in another mouthful, chewing and talking. "I was telling your guy about fighters coming this direction. They're going to the bunker."

That got everyone's attention. Silence fell except for the trader chewing.

Alexa sighed. "Resistance?"

Ulysses bobbed his head. "Yep."

"Are there soldiers left in the other bunkers?"

The trader shrugged at her. "Not around here. They got the call to come east for support. The call came from a female. They know it's a trap. They're going to wipe them out, I hope."

Alexa added her agreement. "Slavery is wrong, no matter the gender."

Ulysses scanned her men. "She's a good one."

The team snickered. They already knew.

Alexa took the bowl Daniel brought to her. "Is the resistance organizing? Here or anywhere else?"

"No contact from the west in a while now. Around here, the resistance is men and the enemy is women." Ulysses gave her a pointed look. "Towns have been split; families ripped apart. Don't get mixed up in that."

“Not unless fate shoves them into our path.” Alexa didn’t say more, not wanting to make a promise she wouldn’t keep. She motioned Jacob to bring over her cloak.

“What will you do when they come here?” Ulysses waited for her answer, spoon pausing.

Alexa rolled her eyes. “I’ll be playing the role of slave for a day or two.”

Ulysses snickered. “Guess that’s a role you don’t play often.”

All her crew snorted.

Alexa took the cloak from Jacob and began removing pouches. “What can we offer for a full account of your travels through this wasteland?”

Ulysses gestured. “A warm place to sleep and none of those slugs you’re all loaded with.”

She frowned. “You remind me of my father.”

Ulysses grunted. “I may have trained with a Mitchel at some of the same places, long before the war.”

Alexa was drawn. “Would you speak of those days?”

The trader shook his head. “What’s done is done.”

“Fair enough.” Alexa pushed two pouches toward him. “These are for your silence after you leave.”

Ulysses frowned. “The men coming through will tell tales.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps, but they may not see what you have.”

Ulysses snickered. “Clever Mitchels. No wonder you’ve all survived so long.”

Alexa chuckled. “Yes, we have a winning way with people when we’re not making bitter enemies of them.”

The trader scooped up the pouches and stored them. “Your secrets are safe with me. Now, what would you like to know?”

Alexa leaned in. “Everything you want to tell me.”

Ulysses stared. “I would answer *any* question, were you not already bound to a quest...”

Alexa’s eagerness dimmed. “We will not be drawn from our goal to serve any other cause, no matter how worthy.”

The trader grunted, shifting for a good spot on the floor. “Then I’ll tell you about the area you’ve chosen. It’s not peaceful here. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

## 2

Evening came with heavy wind, smothering the small town in icy waves. Nothing moved outside the cabin except nature.

Alexa was sorry that wouldn’t last. The trader had told them about the soldiers and their weapons, but he’d been unable to give more. All he kept saying was the Colonel would do anything to accomplish his goal. The leader of the resistance had clearly made an impression on the trader and

she doubted he was easily impressed. Alexa hoped the good vibes held steady with their next guests. This one had been full of needed items and information, with a great attitude and respect for the situation. She'd enjoyed his company. It was a nice change.

Edward handed Alexa a cup of tea, aware of the sleeping, sweaty men in the warm cabin. They smelled like the best feast he'd ever attended. It wasn't just because of the sweet blood pumping through those arms and legs. These lives were special. He could smell it on them.

So could Alexa. She stared at Edward in sympathy and firm denial.

Edward went to the fire to pour a cup of coffee for himself. Everyone else was sleeping, though the trader was doing it sitting against the wall. His light snores were steady, almost soothing.

Alexa yawned, then emptied her cup. It had been such a good evening that she was loath to end it.

Edward wasn't sure what to offer her next. He listened for clues to anything else she wanted.

She stood, moving toward the door. "Are you coming?"

Edward was on her heels in seconds, mood improving.

Alexa pulled up her hood as she slipped out, scanning for the prey she'd sensed.

Edward shut the door without acknowledging Daniel. The Biker had woken the instant Alexa had risen. He would take over the watch now.

Wind pushed against them; snow floated over their cloaks, but neither of them felt the cold like the others would have. Alexa wished things hadn't changed, but saving the vampire baby had been necessary—not for their safety, but for her sanity. No matter the type, it was just a baby. She held a deep compassion in her heart for those tiny creatures. *I'll never have my own.*

Alexa's sadness wafted over Edward. He started to give her comfort but stopped himself. *She doesn't want that. It's not my duty.*

Alexa was proud of Edward for learning to control himself no matter the situation.

The pair vanished into the snow, following her mental map.

Daniel sat on the stool by the counter to keep an eye on the door and their guest. The trader had been knowledgeable about the area, but they'd all stayed cool with him because he hadn't told Alexa stories about her dad. She rarely asked for anything. They hated her being denied.

Daniel enjoyed the last of the strong coffee and the quiet of the cabin, but he couldn't help feeling restless. *We've been here too long, I think.* He decided to mention it to Alexa after all their company had come and gone.

Daniel got comfortable on the stool and listened hard, trying to hear the snow fall.

He was still there when Edward and Alexa returned, both flushed from a successful hunt.

### 3

“You could stay longer.” Edward held the door for the trader an hour after dawn. The cold wind blew flakes inside. “She likes you.”

Ulysses hefted himself over the threshold, loaded down. “How can you tell?”

Edward chuckled. “She gave you more supplies than you can carry. Then she made Billy and David go out this morning to find you a new mount.”

Ulysses started down the snowy stairs, pulling on his hat. “We’ll meet again. She made sure I’ll cover this route.”

“That she did.” Edward understood Alexa’s friendly behavior with the trader. Ulysses was a way for them to resupply some things through the winter, and longer if they came back here. If they didn’t, someone else would get that benefit.

“Let’s prepare for our company.”

Edward shut the door at Alexa’s order. A large group of armed fighters were coming. “Do we pack? Hide until they’re gone?”

“We gather their information like a fine harvest.” Alexa unbuckled her gun belts. She held them out to Edward. “Hold these until I need them.”

Edward took her weapons with reverence and unease. “This isn’t right.”

Alexa didn't like how it felt to be without her Colts either. "All it requires is acting like what each of you are. My role will be harder. I've not been a submissive female in my entire life."

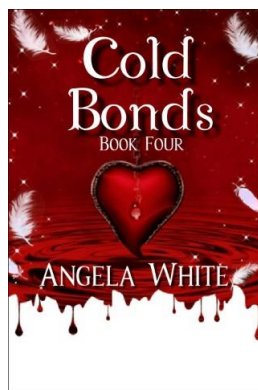
Edward chuckled. "You're not that, even without the guns. Your scars warn people, if they're wise enough to listen."

Alexa needed the reassurance. "And if they don't?"

"We'll kill them for you." Edward's tone hardened as the others nodded. "You're as safe without the guns as you are with them."

Alexa smiled at her team in full joy, bringing every man there to his knees.

Outside, Ulysses was also slammed by the wave. He dropped heavily into the snow. He wiped away tears as it faded, chuckling. "Yeah, I definitely came to the right place."



[Cold Bonds](#)  
Book Four



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