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# **Boxset Copyright**

Alexa’s Travels Boxset

Books 1-3

by

Angela White

**Title:** Alexa’s Travels Boxset

Books 1-3

**Edition:** 2021

**Length:** 1205 Pages

**Author:** Angela White

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# **Boxset Table of Contents**

[Book One](#_Book_One)

[Book Two](#_Book_Two)

[Book Three](#_Book_Three)

# **Book One**

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# Copyright Book 1

**Bone Dust and Beginnings**

by

Angela White

**Title:** Bone Dust and Beginnings

**Edition:** 2021

**Length:** 343 Pages

**Author:** Angela White

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Thank you to Elizabeth, Drew, Crystal, Kristi, Jim, and Jackie! Your dedication to my work is awesome.

# **Table of Contents Book 1**

[The First of Six](#_Chapter_One)

[Exploits](#_Chapter_Two)

[Descendants](#_Chapter_Three)

[One Last Ride](#_Chapter_Four)

[River City](#_Chapter_Five)

[The Mystery](#_Chapter_Six)

[Myths and Legends](#_Chapter_Seven)

[The Utah Facility](#_Chapter_Eight)

[Bridges and Betrayals](#_Chapter_Nine)

[Hoppers and Helpers](#_Chapter_Ten)

[Hunting Ground](#_Chapter_Eleven)

[My Mercy](#_Chapter_Twelve)

[Close](#_Chapter_Thirteen)

**The Quest**

They came from the west,

Seven fighters to the end.

One fierce blonde warrior,

Leading six hardass men.

Through magic and death,

Demons and fire,

Clever ambushes,

And nature’s ire.

Stand in their way,

Nothing will.

Bone dust or bullets,

To pay the bill.

Through now decayed cities,

Filled with nightmares,

Following a path,

Forgotten over the years.

Looking for a place of change,

Of safety and light,

Striving for honor,

And American might.

Wrapped in the horror,

Lucky to be alive,

Blessed and cursed,

How many will survive?

# Chapter One

**The First of Six**

Lexington, Utah

**April 2016**

**1**

**A** lone woman limped into the border town on a sunless morning, long years after the nuclear world war that returned humanity to the dark ages. In front of her, the last outpost within a hundred miles beckoned like a flame. Behind her, the shimmering green sky overtop dusty wastelands rolled closer in a devious illusion.

Lexington consisted of two dozen rickety homes and half as many store tents lining the unforgiving road that gouged its way through the brutally arid terrain. It was large by the standards of Afterworld.

Only stunned merchants saw the woman limping steadily toward them. Coming from the west, where even the hardest of men vanished, the merchants expected only walking dead or worse. That was the reason for the chemical barrier around the border town, but the smoke had no effect on the female as she stepped through it. She didn’t scream in pain or burst into flames.

The lanky blonde was filthy, covered in glowing desert dust, and her hardened face said she’d been to Hell during her lifetime–likely, more than once. A Colt .45 slung low on each slender hip supported that impression, as did her torn, tacky pant leg. The horrors that fate had delivered to her in the wastelands clearly hadn’t been easy to survive.

Shaking off the shock to vie for the woman’s business, the merchants moved toward her with greedy eagerness.

Stopping, Alexa’s hands slid to those gritty Colts, and her frosted blue eyes blazed with heat.

The half dozen sly puppets immediately paused in fear and confusion. Guns made the law in Afterworld and she obviously knew how to use hers.

Seconds more of this set stance from the woman found the thieves banished back to their stoops and flaps. She had items for trade, and the anger to punish those who tried to take advantage, but these vultures weren’t worth a lesson. Border towns were as rare as the Caravan stores and twice as soulless. If she fell, these men would not offer help, only an attack. Alexa would never willingly haggle with their like. She spent her dust with those who were worthy, those who deserved the patronage. The rest were no better than animals.

Before the war, Alexa had stayed away from other people, but there was a feeling of something being in Lexington that she needed. Someone crucial to her quest was here and that feeling of importance said they couldn’t be found in any other place.

*Slap! Slap!*

A tattered American symbol flying over one of the smallest stores drew the woman. She turned that way with a smoothness not impeded by her injury, ignoring the hawkers and their instant, impotent outrage. Her boots made no noise on the dirt hardpan as she headed for the fluttering flag.The decoration was the equivalent of suicide for a business owner, proclaiming them to honor the old ways that had destroyed so much. Alexa instantly respected the one who had put it there. Love of country was part of what she’d come for, as was courage.

Before she reached the battered green canvas under the flag, the tent flap opened. A cloaked man of tall stature and wide shoulders stepped into the bracing wind. The sense of being pulled here faded.

*He’s the one.*

This merchant didn’t rush to be useful; he kept his hooded head bowed in respect. When he only waited patiently, Alexa was instantly comforted. He wasn’t a vulture like the others here and he was strong. She could feel it emanating from his form in thick, healthy waves.

She looked toward his store.

The merchant immediately held the flap open for her, moving with a casual grace that she admired.

Alexa stepped inside with a hand still resting on one of her Colts as a warning to those watching with heated glares. Having one old world supporter in town was an annoyance. Two was a threat. It impressed her that they had allowed this seller to stay. In the other places she’d been since the end of the world, flying the red, white, and blue caused an instant battle to be survived. It said a lot about the man now closing out the dust with a light hand on the zipper.

Alexa evaluated the layout of the small store in seconds, marking neat displays of handmade firearms and bins of ammunition. Since the war, life anywhere depended on guns and the men to use them. All of her crew would be gunslingers. This hard loner was the first.

Edward kept a clear distance, able to feel the woman evaluating him, determining his worth. Would he finally be rescued from the self-imposed prison he’d created? *Can my real life begin now?*

He slid the hood back, exposing black waves and a face roughened by the brutal sun. “May I offer you a drink?”

Alexa studied him. The man was clearly no stranger to survival. It was evident in the cold eyes that watched her, expecting trouble, but also in how his hand stayed near the 9mm on his hip. He had the fighter’s steel that she needed, but would he kill forher*?* This would be no short, easy quest.

Edward looked back just as intently. Tall, with uncountable blonde braids falling into thick ponytails that hung to her hips, the wide forehead and that crooked nose fit with those remorseless blue eyes. However, the gentle curve of her jaw and delicate arch of brows hinted at a softer side he thought few were probably lucky enough to know. The merchant suddenly wanted to be counted as one of them.

“I have no thirst…only a hunger.”

Her raspy voice rolled through the canvas like a match across sandpaper, snagging, bringing heat. Edward’s tone deepened. “What would please you, mistress?”

That one word sent a short-lived smile across her weathered lips. “To be a man up when I leave this place.”

Alexa took a step closer, not caring about the occasional scarlet drop still trailing from her leg. “Do you have a mind to fill that need?”

Edward nodded slowly, heart thumping with anxiety that didn’t bleed through his tones. “Aye. Only ghosts hold me here.”

“Bones are to be buried, not brought along for this quest! I need men, *fighters*.”

Edward felt her strength then, and the dark, endless well in his heart began to fill with hope. She sounded like a true leader. “Aye. I am that.”

The woman hardened herself against the silent pleading in his body language. “Where do your loyalties lie?”

His answer came instantly. “With America.”

“As do mine.” Alexa went on before he could make the mistake of questioning her words, of asking for proof. “I offer no pay, no promises. I will not swear to protect your life.”

“I don’t expect it.” Edward’s voice was surprisingly bitter, considering how much he wanted to leave this place behind. Many people now started dangerous trips, but few survived long enough to see them through. “The quest above all else. I know the code.”

Satisfied the merchant really did (his tone said he had also made a trip through hell) Alexa asked the required questions quickly. “You’d go where I do? Obey me?”

Edward didn’t consider refusing, not with her vibrant sense of authority now filling his canvas. “I would, and you have my thanks for asking.”

“It’s my honor, Horseman. You are the one called that?”

“I was.”

Alexa extended a scarred hand, head swimming with exhaustion. The battle in the desert had drained the small bits of energy she’d managed to glean since escaping the government bunker. She needed this part over with so she could recharge.

Edward let his big hand move toward hers. His reputation had grown if she’d tracked him down from inside the wastelands by that name. He hadn’t been called such since before the war, when his nature had gone from protector to life taker.

Alexa pulled hard as they touched, drawing energy. Willing killer or not, she needed him in more ways than just the obvious.

*She’s a magic user!* Edward stiffened, but didn’t protest. Her drawing was the feel of icy water on exposed skin, followed by the searing heat of flames. Sulphur and rose scents filled his nose.

He’d felt her calling out in need, even before seeing her. It had brought him from his tent when little else did. Edward shuddered as the heat increased.

Alexa let go and staggered to her knees as his energy began to merge with her own. She mentally directed it toward her wounds. Her ways were different, even for Afterworld, but she waited for his reaction without concern. He wanted to be free of this place, this life. His silence was screaming it. She doubted he would pass up the opportunity. Many creatures more dangerous than her roamed man’s roads now. Magic was easy enough to accept in comparison to monsters.

Thankfully, the rest of this apocalyptic land was slowly coming to the same conclusion. Though still shunned, magic users were no longer being driven out of the scattered groups of refugees–unlike in the beginning, when the war had first allowed nightmares to become reality. In this new world, one such as her could be useful depending upon what battle for survival was being fought, and the price, of course. Nothing was free now, and certainly not the talents that she had to offer.

Head bowed, trembling, Alexa’s breathless rasp was still one of power. “I give you one chance to back out…to *live*. After this, only bullets come to those who leave my side before the quest is finished.”

Edward didn’t doubt her words “That’s clear enough.”

Alexa heard his light steps moving away, but she still didn’t look up. She wasn’t sure that she could yet. She needed at least five minutes to recharge. That amount of time had almost cost her the quest more than once. One of those mistakes had come recently, leaving her with a slug in her thigh and rage in her heart. Regan would pay for his good aim. So would his one-eyed boss.

Despite the merchant’s respectfulness, Alexa tensed as Edward returned. His boots stopped by her head. They were sturdy, made to endure this rugged land as much as their owner was.

A fur blanket dropped over her shoulders an instant later.

“Mmm...” Alexa closed her eyes in bliss at the warmth. *It was so cold in the desert!*

Her moan sent a flare of want into Edward’s gut. He quickly moved back. He’d lost his submissive wife in the war, but this was no cheap slam to be ridden and escaped afterward. This woman was lethal.

*I’ll die on her quest.* Edward was suddenly sure of it. He should send her away… “I have a room empty.”

Her raspy chuckle in response tugged on his gentle side. Many seasons had passed since Edward had heard amusement, and even longer since he’d been the one to cause it. His presence usually only brought scorn or bloodshed.

“A canvas room is always empty.”

Edward snorted at the military joke. “So it is, Lady, but mine lies under our feet.”

Alexa grunted her consent, but she didn’t move from the warmth of the fur. His energy was repairing, aiding, strengthening, and it hurt. Her lifeforce was very defensive.

Sensing her weakness, Edward knelt. “May I?”

She grunted again, head still bowed. “My permission and my gratitude. It was a long trip out.”

“You came from the radiation zone?”

“More than one.” Alexa flashed to the battle she had clearly lost control of. The tremor storm had saved her, but it hadn’t left enough bodies. Even now, Corbin and Regan were likely on the way here. They wouldn’t find her underground, though. She was thankful again for this merchant’s defiant sign. The tattered flag said more about him than the neatness of his store or the very low prices chalked on the board over a thin wooden counter.

Steeling himself to the feel of her, Edward lifted the woman carefully but without hesitation. It wasn’t the first time he had shared his energy, though it hadn’t felt nearly as intense before. He wasn’t comfortable with magic users, but he didn’t hate or fear them. Since the war, everything had changed–even reality. Adapting was the key to survival.

Using his feet to open the cover to his hideout, Edward was aware that she was judging his value even as he gave aid. He had expected to dislike whoever finally saw his worth. There were few happy endings to journeys like these, but instead, he found his heart eager to serve. Edward frowned. *When did death become so mundane to me?* Since the war and the aftermath that had turned him into a murderer, there was no mistaking the feel.

Alexa tensed upon seeing the open hole in the parched dirt. She’d escaped the government compound, but she wasn’t free. Corbin would never give up the hunt and because of his connections, killing him wasn’t an option. He knew where the kids were, where they would be in the future. Until she had another way to locate them, that one-eyed bastard had a pass on her wrath. Regan, his henchman, did not.

The need to comfort the trembling woman made Edward hurry carefully into the darkness. “Half a minute and then we’ll have light.”

Edward immediately cursed himself for putting an exact time on it, then felt his lips curl in disdain. *Time means nothing now.*

The man didn’t fumble or feel weak as he moved down the ladder. Alexa allowed herself a rare moment of comfort. Eyes closing, she burrowed against his thick chest like a lover. His clean, musky smell was tempting, but she didn’t draw more energy. Where they were going, he would have need of it. Another of her fighters was begging to be saved, but before that, some of the government’s other captives would be set free. She would live with that guilt no longer.

The darkness was complete as Edward pulled the lid closed and drew a deadbolt that didn’t echo due to a light touch. Those outside would think they were still bartering, in one form or another. Unless they knew of this hole, then blood might spill. It was a risk to let this stranger take her below the ground, but that’s all life was anyway–a risk.

The steps went on for what seemed like much longer, but by her count, they were on solid ground before the thirty-second mark.

“Lights.”

At his call, a dim blue glow brightened the dank cavern that was really a half-collapsed section of the huge bunker that edged this town. Filled with long dried mud that had leveled the walls in places, it was an enormous room with dark doorways and tunnels leading to all ends of the abandoned complex. One small side was nearly pristine. Edward headed that way.

The other side was like looking in a museum window at a display from the war. There were rusted guns and shell casings, and even mildewed red smears on artwork dotted by black mold crawling up seams and sills. There were also graying bones in the corner, but it wouldn’t bother Alexa to sleep here. This was just another relic from the old world, one that she’d seen too many times to fear.

Stacks of cobwebbed machines lining the room winked in the soft glow as Alexa turned her attention to what lay above. The panels of lights and maps faded into sleep mode as she watched.

Alexa felt respect for his ingenuity. He had gotten some of the old technology to work. She grinned. “Clever. I am in great need of that skill.”

Edward opened his mouth, then closed it. He already liked her praise.

Aware of his response, Alexa leaned a bit deeper into his warm embrace, testing his character. Her lips brushed his jaw. “Would you have your service repaid in such a manner?”

If he chose that trade, she would honor it–she found him pleasing enough–but she would leave him here come dawn.

Alexa was gently held back and then lowered to a half-filled air mattress near the steps. For an instant, there was the sense of his body about to follow hers down and then she was alone on the neatly made pallet.

“I’d talk about it another time...” Edward moved back another step. “But Afterworld demands debts are settled while both people still live, so here’s what I need. Do we fight for New America? I can give everything to that.”

Braced, Edward waited for the scorn and mockery those words usually brought. Someone who could control horses through the violent weather was much sought after, but being a patriot was not.

Alexa understood what wasn’t said. Would-be masters came asking for him, as she may have had to if not for the flag, but once inside, his loyalties became clear and he was refused. Especially by the women, who were more than half of the leaders she had come across since the war, but also by the few men still trying to gather an army to protest that shift in power.

Her hand tensed automatically as she answered. “I seek those who came before us.”

Edward’s eyes widened. That legend was one he had soaked up eagerly. To think there was another life to be had, a second chance, no matter who you were before, or what you’d done, was all he’d dreamed of for years. He stared in shock. “I’ll owe you.”

Alexa leaned back onto the pallet. Almost clean, the smell of it wasn’t one that she would mind on her skin. “Why is that?”

“Because I’d die in Safe Haven or trying to prove that it exists!”

The woman nodded, warming to him. “You shall get your chance. We both shall.” Too weary to resist the exhaustion, her eyes closed. “I’m Alexa.”

“Edward. May I see to your wound?”

“Yes.” Satisfied, the leader gave her first fighter a stunning smile, sending him to his knees in dazed awe. Her pleasure was designed to draw, to unite. Normally used for ties with a mate, she was employing it to bind fighters to her for the quest. Where Adrian Mitchel led, Safe Haven followed. The same was true of his only daughter.

**2**

Shortly after he began to pry the bullet from her pale, perfectly scarred thigh, Alexa passed out. Edward was glad. She’d made little sound, other than to quiz him on the things she saw in the room, the technology that he’d brought back to life. She was strong, more so than any of those who’d come before.

Edward searched himself and found no revulsion at the thought of serving a female. He’d already sensed the end that was waiting, but in time, he might be willing to die for her.

“Tell me how you came to be here.”

He hadn’t known she had woken, but to his credit, Edward controlled a flinch of surprise. “As we eat.”

They were in the soft, blue glow of the cobwebbed ceiling lights now. His store above them was closed for the evening. There were hours to kill before dawn brought a start to their journey together and even the distant drip of water in the darkness was slow. In Afterworld, when nighttime fell over this dead land, time became longer.

Alexa pushed up to sit against the wall as Edward drew their dinner from a sweetly steaming pot that had once been a large coffee can. There were a variety of soothing noises down here, from the gentle crackle of the fire he had rigged to blow out of a vent miles from here, to the soft hum of the machinery running the lights. His things were few and neat, ready to be grabbed, and she counted no less than three other useable exits besides the stairs she’d been brought down. It was a nearly perfect hole up. Was he really the perfect hired hand that he appeared to be?

Making little noise, Edward handed her a plate-sized serving platter with three small bowls and a cup of what looked like milk. He moved back to collect his own meal as she sampled the food warily.

“Mmm...”

Her low groan of pleasure made Edward look toward her in need.

Alexa was impressed with his self-control when he stopped, then went back to collecting his own bowls. Descendants were hard to resist.

“I call it swill.”

Alexa snorted, scooping a larger bite of the slightly garlicky stew. “‘Tis pig, after all.”

Edward was glad she understood the main ingredient. Many people now refused to eat pork. Swine flu treatments were long gone, but the nasty beasts were abundant. Their ability to eat almost anything was both the source of their survival and the revulsion of most survivors. For a long while, human carrion had been the only readily available food source for nature.

Alexa watched him settle a few feet away, noting the strength of his body, the ebony glow of his hair in the light. He would be a solid hand when trained. Even now, he was a good addition.

“The Draft brought me here from Colorado. This is part of the bunker we were held in.”

He didn’t pray before eating. Alexa hadn’t expected him to. She doubted he’d believed in a long time. That was another thing all of her crew would probably have in common. She speared one of the potato-like lumps in the second bowl.

After a quick chew and swallow, Edward continued with his story. “There were a lot of us, too many for them to keep feeding. Six months after the war, regulations changed. If we could prove we had kids that we would return to, we could go.”

Another bite and swallow, this one to smother his anger before his deep voice went on. “I was only married, so not eligible. I killed a guard, took his keys, and let the other four barracks of Draftees out.”

Alexa jabbed another creamy bite, stomach growling. “The bunker was breached?”

“By those I set loose. Afterward, they sacked the closest towns, killing, raping, burning. Lexington was the only one to rebuild.”

Alexa met his eye pointedly. “Why didn’t they end you for it when they found out? Why do they tolerate even the sight of you here?”

His lined face flushed at the brutal honesty, but he didn’t look away. “Because there are only a few of them still alive who know, and I’m very, very good with my guns.”

Alexa’s lips curled upward. “Is that so?”

Edward went back to his meal without repeating or even confirming.

Pleased, she forked a yellow tidbit in the last bowl. “Go on.”

Alexa delighted in the taste of vanilla and crushed pineapple with brown sugar. He either had a good stock or knew where supplies were. That might come in handy.

“I went home first, as many of us eventually did, but my old life had been murdered. I came back here and opened a store with the things I’d gathered.”

“Why return to the scene?”

Edward answered with an openness that hid nothing. “I had hoped there would be someone here who could kill me for my crime.”

“And after you realized they could not?”

Edward’s tone deepened into the misery that had been pulling her to this place, to his tent. “In time, I thought maybe I would find the courage to do what they couldn’t.”

“I will give you new ways, new hopes.” Alexa’s words rang in the chilly air. “Will you swear yourself to me?”

Edward smiled slightly at the official offer. “I was yours the instant you chose my flag over everyone else.”

**3**

Alexa jerked awake in the darkness, instinct telling her danger was close. She looked around to find Edward heading up the steps.

He cast a slightly curious look over his shoulder as he blended into the shadows, but he didn’t presume to tell her what to do.

Alexa quickly gathered her things, pleased with her first fighter. She assumed it was government rats now stomping through Edward’s store. She had left loose ends in the desert. When she’d escaped Corbin’s control, she had been tracked, but she’d stayed underground to remain out of their reach. Being spotted out of her hole up had been an accident.

Voices echoed down the stairs as she moved on a leg that was nearly healed thanks to the vibrant energy of her host. She judged the time to be just before the dawn’s ugly break that would have woken her naturally.

Louder, angry words echoed now. Alexa stilled as rage flared. One of those voices was familiar, loathed. She’d thought to sneak away, but it wasn’t a scouting party. Regan was up there. *I’m not leaving without spilling his blood!*

Alexa pulled herself onto the ladder and began to climb.

“Where is she?”

Standing behind the thin counter, Edward kept his tone even. “The woman left last night after buying ammo.” He waved a hand at the rack he had emptied into his bag while closing the store. “She went south.”

Four of the soldiers stomped around, poking boxes and bins, turning over crates.

Their leader, a redhead with a fresh scar on his neck and a mean twist to his lips, pointed toward the hole they’d seen him emerge from. “What’s down there?”

“My cellar.”

Martial Law hadn’t been revoked. It made dealing with soldiers awkward. It was almost impossible to know if they were real or impostors, but it didn’t matter this time. Edward hated these men on sight. He was already sure they were the ones who’d shot Alexa.

“Search it.”

“No.” Edward’s voice was like stone.

A bit intimidated, the four soldiers looked to their leader.

Regan felt the challenge and sauntered closer. They’d followed their prey by common sense. This was the only outpost within a hundred miles and Alexa needed to regain her energy. She had to be close.

Regan studied the merchant, looking for telltale signs. He saw deep bags under the man’s eyes and a pulse that pounded slightly faster than was normal due to a low energy bank being refreshed. Yes, she’d taken from him. So why wasn’t this man a pile of bones like the others they’d found? Regan stepped closer, jealousy flaring. “You’d deny a government search?”

Edward grunted “I’ll let you know when I see government. *They* bring papers.”

Which wasn’t always true, but the insult was clear enough. Edward watched the guard’s eyes narrow without worry. The redhead wore the weapons of a fighter, but the fit was awkward. It wasn’t something that could be said of himself. His own guns were an extension of his hands and always ready for use.

“We’re going to search it.” Regan glared. “If you interfere, I’ll shoot you.”

Edward sensed Alexa listening from the open hatch. He felt her agreeing with how he wanted to handle the situation. Edward glared in warning, eager to show his new mistress a bit of his talents. “You can try. You can also die.”

“Deal.” Regan went for his gun. The soldiers with him did the same.

“Down!”

Edward hit the floor at her order, not needing to draw his own gun as Alexa’s Colts crashed.

Her first two shots were the best, hitting three of the men. One was Regan, though he was saved from death only by the smallest of flinches. The slug plunged through his arm and punched a hole in the tent. Her other bullet went through two necks within an instant of each other, killing the soldiers it hit.

Regan returned fire wildly in surprise, sending a bullet into the tent floor near the cellar entrance. “Get her!”

Beside him, the two remaining soldiers darted forward.

Alexa fired again, sending them into the side of the tent with gaping holes in their foreheads. The tent teetered from the weight, ripping at the seam. Gusts of sand flew into the canvas.

Edward was amazed. Five seconds and five bodies…except one of them wasn’t dead yet.

Alexa didn’t come out. Edward followed her lead, staying behind the counter. He did draw his gun in case she needed backup.

Regan crouched behind an overturned display, cursing his choice to come in before support arrived. Commander Corbin had said it was okay to grab her if Regan thought he could. That one-eyed man was on the way, but it would be too late. There was only one thing to try–the truth. “We have your brother.”

*Silence…*

“He was in Ocean City, waiting for someone.”

Alexa surprised both men by answering. “You know who he waits for.”

Regan grimaced, shifting his gun to his uninjured hand. All bunker guards were required to shoot well with both. “Yes, but you’re not going to make it to Safe Haven, are you?”

“Perhaps I’ll go further than your narrow mind can accept.”

“We’ll never let you bring Adrian back! If he comes here, Corbin will slaughter every child we hold!”

Edward felt the air thicken. Death was sweeping their way again.

“Why does it matter to you, killer of the innocent? He won’t keep you around so long as that.” Alexa laughed harshly. “You have no value.”

“I will when I bring you in!”

“You can try, and you can die.”

Enraged, Regan charged the hole.

*Bang!*

Alexa watched her enemy fall with satisfaction blazing across her cheeks. For his crimes, Regan deserved worse than a fast bullet to the throat, but it was still sweet. She’d hoped he was dead from the tremor trap she’d set, but the scar on his neck said he’d had a narrow escape.

She holstered as voices came from outside the tent. The gunfire was bringing the townspeople, the next danger.

Edward spun for a corner, grabbing the two large kits he’d made while she slept. He slung one over each shoulder while moving back toward the den. “Coming down.”

“Clear.”

He moved swiftly, landing a second after she did. “Front path!”

A row of blue lights came to life at his command, showing the exit he wanted.

Alexa memorized it, glad of the mental map he’d given her.

The lights went out; her eagle eyes saw him grab two more bags, then head for the exit.

“They’re coming.” Edward moved faster.

Alexa followed, listening to the angry, worried mutters of the merchants above them who were discovering the bodies. The surviving government was brutal. Hours from now, only tumbleweeds would remain in Lexington.

Edward noticed that she followed him silently, not even shifting gravel despite the darkness and unknown terrain. A wave of excitement rose in his heart. He was glad she couldn’t see his face right now. She wanted only cool control. She didn’t need to see how openly happy he was. His second chance, his *real* life, had begun!

Alexa smiled indulgently in the dark, estimating that they would travel half a day in these tunnels before he led them to light. He obviously knew them well. She turned her attention to the next part of the quest, content to let him lead. Come daybreak, that would change.

# Chapter Two

**Exploits**

**1**

**E**dward and Alexa emerged from the reeking ground almost eleven hours after the map winked off. The dimly fading sunlight was a secret relief. Man wasn’t meant to live under the ground. They’d both felt that clearly while listening to the angry earth rumble and mutter around them as they took a break for rest and food.

Eager to be back in the light, the sight of their company as they emerged was not welcome. Snakes, some the size of the decaying trees, were spread out over the rocks and boulders that lined the entrance. They were trapped.

Alexa pulled a plan from her bag of tricks, and slowly drew the crossbow from her belt. She motioned to Edward and they carefully eased back inside the shadows of the dank cave.

Alexa knelt, adding and then baiting a string with a shiny lure. She didn’t hesitate to fire it after only a bare glance for aim.

The arrow sailed from her crossbow, shooting out into the dim sky with a whistle that drew attention.

Unlike the juveniles who made a mad dash while hissing and snapping at each other, the larger snakes watched it start to fall, estimating, before they slithered toward it.

Alexa made a quick gesture that Edward couldn’t mistake as she headed for the entrance. She jumped up the side of the stone like a cat, and he followed, being as quiet as he could. He hated snakes even more than wolves.

Alexa took them toward the top, never pausing in her footing. They were fifty feet up before she stopped to look down. Seeing movement at the base of the cliff, she immediately resumed climbing.

Edward was careful to place his bigger feet where hers had been. Without being told, the man knew she was also picking the ledges with his weight in mind. The beginnings of real trust started to grow.

Alexa paused, scowling. “They’re coming.”

Looking down, Edward couldn’t see anything.

Alexa dug one-handed through her kit while holding onto the ledge. “From the inside.”

He could feel it as soon as she said it. The stone vibrated under his hands as the reptiles slid through the gaps and crevices, shifting smaller rubble. They were right behind these walls.

“This is your first test. It’s a bit rougher than I had planned to start you with, so watch me closely and continue to live your new, *real* life.” Alexa tied a thick rope around her waist, one with a small, hard knot at the other end, which she tossed to him.

Edward caught it awkwardly in his surprise. Had she pulled that from his thoughts? How powerful was she?

Edward did better with the rope already around his own waist, only needing the hand knot and the throw back so they were connected by two ropes.

“Slack is the key.” Alexa got set. “Stand pat while I jump.”

Edward started to wrap the hand knot tighter and stopped, searching for better footing instead. At that point, she began jumping and his grip on the rope was unbreakable.

Alexa swung a leg out to stop and landed gracefully on a nearby ledge.

“Shit!”

She looked back to see the stone under Edward’s feet crumbling, hungry fangs lunged.

“That’s mine!” She snapped the rope backward, hard.

It pulled Edward off the edge and out of reach.

Alexa’s arms bulged with straining muscles as she guided the falling man to the ledge below her.

Edward caught himself and remembered to breathe.

“Ready?”

He nodded, heart not quite steady. He braced as she jumped again.

It was exhausting, but effective. Fifteen minutes later, they were around the side of the granite cliff. It would take weeks for the hungry reptiles to get through the mountain and at least two days to go around.

Alexa began to move them downward, body draped in a fine sheen of sweat. Corbin and his henchmen wouldn’t even be able to see smoke from a fire, thanks to the mountain blocking their view. They would be able to sleep.

Edward was glad to see flat ground gradually moving closer. His arms were on fire; his back and neck were screaming. Alexa had to be feeling the same or worse, but he didn’t hesitate to jump and let her swing him. She was in the lead now.

**2**

As evening fell, Alexa and Edward sat in front of a small fire, freshly washed and fed. Mugs of chicory coffee in hand, they leaned against the stone cliff and watched the odd slowness of nighttime surround them.

They’d scouted this site and then hunted together, using their knives. Edward hoped he’d pleased her with his talent. The rabbit hadn’t been a real test, but it had been a neat kill. Her perfect throw had been astoundingly fast. He was already planning on more practice with his blade to match her.

Edward studied the purple sky and the layer of thick grit that never seemed to dissipate. Somewhere up there was a space station with the bodies of those who’d been there when the war came. Had they run out of water or air first? It was a morbid thought. Edward struggled to ignore the old feeling of rage. Those who’d destroyed the world hadn’t been punished. That still sat wrong with him.

Alexa listened to the sounds of the night. The wind was restless, upset. Showers of blackened leaves rained down on them steadily. Nature hadn’t liked helping her escape.

Edward broke the silence reluctantly. “Was it the redhead who shot you?”

Alexa glanced over. It was only fair Edward knew who their hunters were and what they were capable of to attain their goals. She’d honestly expected him to ask before now. “Regan, yes.”

“Why?” Edward couldn’t find a reason to kill a magic user instead of selling them. It was unusual for Afterworld.

“I escaped from a lab.” Alexa’s voice faded into a low mutter as she took two pouches from her cloak pocket. “And was found.”

Sure of the next question, she gave him a tolerant nod. “As we smoke.”

Her fingers began to twist the tobacco. The night around them seemed to slow even further.

“After I escaped, I spent two months hiding underground, evading patrols. The first time I came up, Regan was waiting.”

Edward listened intently as she told him of her battle for survival in the wastelands.

**Then**

*I’ve stayed below ground as long as I can. It’s time to go back up.*

It had been months, but it wasn’t a surprise that there was someone waiting topside for her. Only who it was caused concern. Regan should have been punished for her escape, not sent out to collect her. Maybe it was just an awful coincidence, but it didn’t feel that way.

Alexa slowly pushed the dirt and grass cover aside, other hand ready and willing on her gun, but barely able. She hadn’t regained any strength during her months of hiding. Her kind was not meant to be alone, for many reasons.

Regan tensed, sensing movement more than seeing it. He’d been here for a week, instinct guiding him. That had allowed him to pick up his victim’s trail time after time. Here and now, it had led him to Alexa. Her escape had forced big changes at the compound, including the transfer of a large number of the descendants. His part in it hadn’t been discovered, but it had lingered just the same. Regan would do anything to change that moment. *I didn’t get to finish!*

The cover moved.

Regan’s hand tightened on his rifle. In the trees on the other side of the hole, four soldiers waited for his call. They’d been relaxed a minute ago, but he’d chosen these men for their brains, not their brawn. He motioned them to get ready and they did.

Regan planned to dart her and take her back to Commander Corbin. He had volunteered for this duty to earn marks with the boss. If he became one of the favored, he would be free to kill while guarding the captives who were being tested. He’d strangled normal survivors and found no thrill in it any longer. Someone with power, though…

The waves of menace coming her way were impossible to miss. Alexa closed the lid. In desperate need or not, she couldn’t go up there yet. She had two other exits, but they were both a mile away in different directions and her weakened condition wouldn’t allow it. She needed to go topside and use her remaining energy on a meal. *Unless I steal some of what I need.*

Alexa carefully found a corner and slid down against the wall with one of her Colts still in hand. The other claw-like talon dug into the earth, drawing on a third option that she had employed many times, but never from this source. Her father’s lesson rang in her mind.

*If the enemy is out of reach, convince or force someone else to strike in your place.*

Regan scowled in frustration as the lid closed. She knew they were here. Would she run for a different hole or wait for the right moment to fight?

The evil guard thought of the glimpses he’d gotten. Emaciated and clumsy in weakness, he’d barely missed having enough time to aim before she’d dropped into a hole the first time. The shock of seeing her out in the open gathering water had cost him precious seconds that she’d used to vanish. He hadn’t been sure if she’d spotted him or not, but that was a given now.

However, her kind needed energy and she clearly hadn’t had time to search for any while the government trucks rolled in and out. After her escape, the big bunker had ordered most of the descendants transferred to other locations, and the traffic had been steady enough to keep Alexa in hiding. What had she been living off of while underground? Raw, whatever it was, because smoke drew quick attention and there hadn’t been reports of any.

Regan grinned, feeling more confident. Alexa would wait for dark and come up with the intention of killing him, but he would have a surprise in place for her instead. The thought of going in to ferret her out never crossed his mind. Underworld was lethal by itself. Add in Alexa, even weakened, and the odds of coming back up shrank to zero.

Regan waved at his men to back off and meet up at their campsite half a mile to the south. They would still be able to see her cubbyhole with binoculars, but she wouldn’t be able to hear their plans or movements. Corbin said it was best to be as meticulous as possible when you dealt with a descendant, and while Regan knew he couldn’t be perfect, he intended to win this battle. He was taking her, or her body, back to Corbin. Command had told him dead was acceptable.

Meeting up with the sixth man guarding their transportation, the recon team gathered around the dingy green hardback, working out a plan.

Under their feet, Alexa did the same.

**4**

North of them, the Spirit of Nature was dozing. When winter came, she would expend her stores of furious wrath, but in the harvest time, Nature got to rest. It was a reward for the hard work of her reproductive season, but also for the gathering she’d done. Her army was growing relentlessly. In less than two years, the last of humanity would be exterminated from shores around the world. The southern lands would be the final holdouts, but without the alpha, a beta, and a few others, humans had no chance of winning the war they’d begun.

Even if all those they needed were to find each other, something Nature would never allow, they would still have to travel to where she dwelled. It was the only place to close the gates, the only soil where she could be challenged and possibly even defeated. Should such a group make it to her shores, Nature would still be a formidable opponent, with legions of faithful followers that were eager for the fight.

*“Warning!”*

Drawn into alertness, Nature marked the feeling of a descendant and forced herself to start waking early. Someone was gathering energy from the dirt. *They’re taking what isn’t theirs!*

Nature’s fury rose quicker than her alertness; she retaliated without thought or pause.

As soon as the ground began to shake, Alexa was on her feet and lunging for the cover. Being buried wasn’t in her plans, only a much needed distraction and a small bit of energy to start her next bid for freedom. Gun still in hand, she shoved the lid over and hoisted herself into the daylight. All she had to do was get out of sight during the chaos.

The tremor raced through the ground like a bomb blast. The waiting soldiers were caught unaware. The earth under their boots split, cracking violently in protest.

“Stay still!”

Two of the men ran instead of obeying Regan, jumping gaps that opened as a loud roar rattled in their heads. *So much for them having brains!*

“There she is!”

Regan turned too late to stop his second in command from being shot in the head before he could lower the hand he had been pointing with. Regan fired toward the shadow fleeing through the shower of falling leaves. *Damn quake!*

Regan fired again and had a moment’s satisfaction when the shadow flinched, stumbled. *I hit her!*

To his frustration, she took off running again, telling him it wasn’t a serious injury.

The tremor’s strength increased noticeably, ground tearing open near where she’d emerged. Finding her gone, the roar grew almost intolerable. The tremor was also hunting Alexa. The grinding of earth shifted toward where she’d vanished.

“Come on!” Regan’s shout was distorted but understandable.

The remaining soldiers gave chase.

Taking advantage of the violent shaking, Alexa hefted herself into the first branch of a thick tree, gasping. She was almost out of energy, out of time. In half a minute, this tree would likely be uprooted.

A soldier darted under her without looking up, then another.

The ground behind them was ripping open in wide gouges that Alexa was sure were being guided by the tree she’d chosen. Its panicked pleas for mercy were vibrating through her head like a bell.

A third soldier ran under the tree as the tremor pounded closer.

Regan neared her location.

Alexa tensed.

As if in response, the ground stilled. Nature hunted her silently now, determined to recover the energy that had been stolen.

The trio of soldiers didn’t go far. “Fall back!”

“Find a track!”

Regan felt Alexa’s glare, turning, arm lifting.

Alexa dropped onto Regan’s back, arms snaking around his throat. Her lips melded to his skin, drawing hard. Energy flooded her throat at the exchange, sinking into her like water through dirt.

“Not again!” Regan slung her hot weight to the ground, finger tightening on the trigger. Dead was acceptable.

Alexa was helpless as his energy flew through her body, unable to move until it recharged her. All he had to do was fire and the quest was over. If Nature didn’t take the bait now, it was all for naught. “Please forgive me, Father…”

Regan leered, mouth opening.

The other soldiers saw the trap. “Look out!”

Behind the evil man, the tree was shoved out of the ground. Tilting backward as it fell, the earth separated. Thick roots rose under Regan’s feet, tripping him. The shifting tangles of dirt snared his ankles, seeming to jerk him off his feet.

Regan slapped the ground with his face.

Slimy roots slithered eagerly his way.

Alexa immediately darted for cover. Even in her vulnerable condition, she was behind the trees and out of sight seconds later.

Behind her, gunfire and screams filled the air. It was a common sound in Afterworld.

**Now**

Alexa didn’t need to look at Edward to know he was finding her story a bit incredible. She didn’t disabuse him of the notion that she was embellishing. He would see for himself in time. Without another word, she slid down into her bedroll and closed her eyes.

Edward watched her for a long moment, suspecting encounters like that might mark their quest. He could only hope he would be able to react through the shock.

**6**

“Should we bury them?”

The Commander’s harsh, one-eyed glare made the lower ranked man take a step back. Garbed in dark clothes and deadly gear, Corbin’s most outstanding feature was his missing eye. He kept a patch over it, but the sense of menace was still thick. “Burn it.”

They’d come too late to aid Regan in recapturing the woman and found his body instead. Regan’s skills as an interrogator would be missed, but not his clumsiness. He liked to kill, but he wasn’t good at it. It was better that he wasn’t around anymore to expose what really took place on the bottom floors of their scientific compound.

Corbin studied the abandoned shacks and tents around them as the order was carried out. This was the first sighting of their prey in months. Alexa had been careful to stay on the move after the tracking venom had cleared out of her system. Before that, she’d been traceable but unattainable due to her preference for being underground.

Regan’s call had been unexpected, though the loss of him and his squad wasn’t. When challenging someone like Alexa, four teams of men were required, and sometimes more. Corbin was glad Regan had chosen to try and lost. Corbin didn’t want Alexa recaptured, though the big bunker would never know that.

The bodies flamed up brilliantly with a little chemical help; the soldiers moved back to avoid the flying debris and the smell. When their commander motioned toward the rest of the abandoned town, his men obeyed. They had no problem with setting fires. It was a benefit of being topside. No one cared if it burned.

“Where has she gone?” Corbin glared at the short, hunched over man at his side. If she had left with someone, and their slow packing informant had fearfully told them that was the case, then she’d begun the quest. In all the years they’d tracked Alexa, she’d never taken partners. With that proof, Corbin would be able to negotiate a different sort of future for her with his superiors, one that didn’t involve death. At least, not yet. “Can you get anything, Rabbit?”

Paul shook his shaggy head. The screen in his hand showed only static. “It wore off. The tracker juice only lasts a few weeks…and you know that.” Paul didn’t want to draw fire, but he was unable to pass up the opportunity to call Corbin on something. He was only alive at the Commander’s whims, but it did little to curb his hatred. Paul had been raised in the complex, and been trained to work in the lab. He’d spent the last twenty years developing technology for the government that was holding him captive.

“Yes, I do.” Corbin glared back. He was very aware of the scientist’s talents, but he despised the gifted weakling for caving to servitude. Still, it had its uses to have a genius on the team. Paul had the blond hair and blue eyes of the descendant marker, but both were cloudy, not quite in line with the other subjects. Those few he had contact with were always sure to behave carefully in case he was Corbin’s eyes and ears. “How about a guess?”

Paul hesitated. Corbin was tall and imposing, with a quick fist and an even quicker coverup when one of his favorite men got into trouble. Paul wasn’t one of those, though he frequently wished he was. Due to the war, Corbin’s brutal research was mostly unhampered by authority. He ran his complex as he saw fit, and only the annual visit brought outsiders from the big government bunker. Four times a year he also had to send reports and specimens, but those went with a flunkey. Until the escape, Corbin and his closest men hadn’t been topside in two years. If Paul made the man angry enough, Corbin would kill him or leave him out here in this ugly wilderness. “To gather the rest of her crew?”

“Then they’ll bring Adrian back, and come for the others.”

“Yes.” Paul agreed reluctantly with Corbin’s assessment. “She knows the kids are still being held, even if it’s not in the same bunker. When she tells Adrian, he’ll come home.”

Corbin’s new personal man stepped closer. Shane had never met those he was guarding. He had been surprised to get the order to come up here. “Why don’t they use their gifts to escape?”

Paul knew that answer. “They can’t because of the bond. They’re connected. None of them are strong enough to walk away from the others. That’s why they’re so lightly guarded.”

“What about this one?” Shane didn’t return the scientist’s curious look. “She left them all and didn’t look back.”

The woman had looked back, but Paul didn’t correct the well-built man. “She’s not like the others. She’s an Alpha.”

There was only one stronger than her that they’d ever discovered. It was really no surprise to Corbin that those in charge wanted her dead. She and her infamous father were threats. “She doesn’t follow them. They follow her.”

The Commander moved toward the jeeps. Even Alexa had been unable to completely resist the pull. She had come back once, right after her escape, and found an empty compound. She’d shown up alone, but Corbin had little doubt that she would have been successful in rescuing them had the children still been inside. “Let’s go.”

“Back to the compound to deliver your report?” Paul eagerly slid behind the wheel. They were in the mountains this time. He felt safe inside those granite walls.

“No. Send it in this time. Use Shane.” Corbin started taking maps from his folder. “We’re not going back.”

Paul didn’t like the note of steel in the Commander’s voice. “Until we find her, right?”

Corbin slowly turned his head, one eye glaring furiously.

Paul braced to be hurt. He never knew if the punishment would be mental or physical, but it was always painful.

“You are never going back there, *Rabbit*. Now that the quest has begun, your days of comfort in a complex are over. You’re my tracker.” Corbin smiled cruelly. “I’m almost sure you’ll die somewhere along the way. Your kind always does.”

Corbin enjoyed the injured look on Paul’s thick face, but only a brief moment of it. There were more important things to handle than a weakling who would never grow up to take his place. Paul’s days were numbered and Corbin liked making sure the boy knew it.

Paul didn’t say anything else, but he understood Corbin was scared of the quest he’d allowed to start. The legend of Safe Haven and Adrian’s return had been smothered and twisted, but the heart of it couldn’t be changed. Alexa would find Adrian and then Adrian would come back, but not just for Corbin. The legend insisted Adrian would exterminate those who’d caused the war. Surely that meant all of the surviving government? Those in charge were terrified of it, so much so that they’d put a bounty on Adrian’s head that rivaled any in history. Assassins of all sorts would flood this land upon the slightest rumor of the Alpha’s return.

That thought allowed Paul to ignore the stench of charring flesh as they drove by the flaming pile of bodies. When Adrian came home, he and all the others being held captive would be set free. Knowing Alexa’s quest had truly begun sent hope deep into Paul’s heart. *A second chance, no matter who you were or what you’d done… Who wouldn’t want that?*

# Chapter Three

**Descendants**

**1**

**L**ong before a cold dawn, Alexa and Edward were enjoying the warmth left from breakfast embers. As they shared a rolled smoke, she told him of their coming adventure. After the snakes, she’d felt it wise to let him sleep before explaining the newest danger to be faced. “The government rats on my trail will never stop hunting me. They will be a constant battle.”

Edward nodded, easily ignoring his sore places. They were minor twinges that wouldn’t prevent him from functioning. “I assumed so.”

“They’ll hunt in every place we go.”

He heard the tone. “But?”

“We must not let them keep us from the quest.” She unfolded a battered map of the surrounding area. “We head here next.”

Edward’s eyes narrowed onto the spot she’d pointed out. It was granite mountain terrain. He shrugged. “I go where you go.”

Satisfied, Alexa shook her head at the dregs, letting him enjoy it. “Are you set for two days of straight travel?”

“Four times as much.” He opened his mouth again, to question how it would work, but Alexa’s words stopped him.

“We have no need for division. Everything is shared.”

Edward went back to his coffee and smoke. They’d spent a calm night, and after seeing her in action, he wasn’t dreading the trek. She would lead and he would follow.

It was odd, however, to be topside as dawn arrived–for both of them. There was silence as they watched the dark green sky begin to lighten. This new world was full of things Edward barely understood. Safety, what little there was to be had, came from staying in the light, but it was something he was already sure Alexa wouldn’t do.

Edward looked toward his new companion as he had the thought, wondering if her strengths included such things. Did this hard woman know how to handle that darkness? They’d camped around a small fire at the base of the cliff and she hadn’t stood a watch or slept lightly. He’d been up before her, as well. Did those things matter? Edward sensed a toughness and ability to deal with whatever came, but if she was careless, they would both die with the quest unfinished.

“Speak your mind.”

Drawing in a breath, Edward did. “We should have a guard when we camp, and use cover for our fire.”

“Do you think so?”

Her curt words made him look up to find an almost mocking expression. She already knew those things. He flushed at his own arrogance.

“I felt no need to guard what could only be had if the snakes were conquered first. The screams and gunfire would have warned us.”

His cheeks darkened further at the obvious answer.

“You are not wrong to question.” Alexa rose to her feet. “In your place, I would do the same.”

Edward hurried to kick sand over the coals and catch up. He wouldn’t again, though. One disdainful glance from those eyes had already been lesson enough. She was the leader on this quest, and the position was well-earned. Time would prove it.

**2**

They traveled on foot for the next two days, finally reaching her goal as late afternoon fell. Set on two acres of almost flat, wooded ground, the bunker was much smaller than the Utah facility, but more fortified. A mere ten feet of it was unearthed, and the single door was time locked except in case of a fire. There was no way they were storming those walls. Those inside would have to come out.

Finding this alternate underground bunker hadn’t been hard for Alexa after her escape, but leaving once she had was a torment that she still carried. Alone, she’d had little hope of keeping these kids free once she rescued them and they couldn’t come along on her quest. Then there was also the question of what to do with the children once the soldiers picked up the trail. Until she’d had that settled, taking them away from here hadn’t been an option. That opinion had changed now. She would free them before Corbin chose to use them against her again. Even a week’s hunted freedom was a small light of hope that would spread to the other captives.

And it would rattle Corbin. He knew the quest had begun. His determination to find Safe Haven matched her own, but not his intelligence. If he’d been truly smart, he would have killed her long ago. It was a mistake that either she or her father would see that he paid for at some point.

Alexa glanced over at the tired, determined man at her side. She hadn’t had an energy source to draw from then either. She wouldn’t have been able to send for the birds after her escape. The woman wondered briefly what Edward’s reaction would be to finding out that his energy was a part of why he was here. The Horseman hadn’t been with her long enough to know it was a lot more than that. She honestly needed a crew for this journey, but he would think it was the only purpose he had. Would he still be at her side after that revelation? Alexa pushed the worry away, and continued studying the bunker.

Edward stared in concern at the concrete entrance set into the granite cliffs. They’d spent almost two days getting here, hard hours where he’d copied her movements and habits, and tried not to feel inferior. She hadn’t stopped the entire time–not to eat or sleep–and even bathroom breaks were only quick trips into the brush.

They hadn’t encountered any problems, other than the wind that was cold enough to make eyes water. Edward had been glad of the goggles and gloves she’d had in her kit for him. Her own skin didn’t seem to get cold; he had envied her steady stride more than once. Now that they were here, Edward was grateful it was over so he could sit down and try to feel his feet again.

Alexa was aware of his soreness. She had her own aches and pains, but if she let him rest, he would stiffen up and be useless for an entire day.

Grimacing at the pop of her knees as she stood, she waved him to the place directly behind her. “Watch the south.”

Edward started to argue that he was too exhausted to be part of a mission, but stopped himself. Had he thought a quest with her would be easy?

They moved toward the main door openly, hands hovering over holsters.

The guards inside noticed them in shock. Other than those inside, they hadn’t seen a survivor in years. Alarms began to blare all over the government compound.

“Stay behind me, no matter what.”

“Aye.” Thinking it was to guard her back, Edward did as he was told while wishing he’d asked what her plan was.

She stopped ten yards from the reinforced door, an easy range for anyone decent with a gun. Edward waited tensely to see her shot.

Alexa concentrated, eyes fluttering closed. In her mind, doors swung open. *“The time has come… I have come!”*

Inside the bunker, guards were distracted from their entertainments by captives surging for freedom. Alexa and her companion were quickly forgotten.

**3**

Edward watched the door, hoping he would be able to kill the first one out or maybe convince them to negotiate for whatever it was that she wanted from this place. The noises behind those doors were louder than a government complex should be. His hand tensed as the lock clicked.

“Stand your ground.” Her words were firm.

Edward let go of his holster. Before he could ask anything, the door swung open and kids began streaming out. Dressed in white pants and shirts, many of them were stained with bright red streaks and splatters, telling Edward how their freedom had been gained. They helped each other, carrying the younger ones. As they got closer, he was horrified at their bruised, abused conditions.

Some of the kids moved alertly to Alexa’s side, but most headed straight for the trees and disappeared.

“Should I try to get them?”

“No.”

The group around them slowly grew from a dozen, to two and then three. Edward swallowed a frown. *How many children are in there?*

Two tall girls of about thirteen ran to Alexa and threw themselves at her boots. Crying her name, the bald twins were frantic in their grief and joy.

“We did it!”

“We killed them all!”

“There’s no one left inside! We killed them all!”

Alexa’s hands settled onto each head. “You did what you had to.”

The girls visibly calmed, quieting.

Alexa swept the large group of kids, seeing the injured and weakest had been left with her. The kids who had run stood little hope of evading the soldiers with an injured party. She looked at the bunker and then back down at the twins. “You’re sure there’s no one left?”

“Yes.” The simultaneously spoken words were eerie. “They took many to other places when we moved. This complex held only two hundred.”

They had half of that number around them now and only minutes before a patrol would discover the escape. Alexa closed her eyes, sending out the power again. Without being told, the children joined her, feeding off their joy at finally being free.

Edward listened to the waves of power with a slightly disbelieving ear. It was like a call for help and a challenge in one. He forced himself not to wince as it grew stronger. He wasn’t anxious to see what they were calling to, but he was honored to be a part of something as noble as rescuing children. He stood proudly behind his boss.

The thought of traveling with these kids all the way to find Safe Haven didn’t cross Edward’s mind until he began really looking at them. Some of their injuries wouldn’t allow a slow trip, let alone a fast flight. What would Alexa do?

*Watch the south side.*

Clearly, that’s where she expected trouble to come from. He turned his attention that way in time to see a pack of large dogs running toward them.

“Look out!” Edward started firing before the snarling animals were close enough to hurt the kids. He heard Alexa spin to do the same.

Their guns barked loudly, drawing screams and running feet that they were forced to ignore as more dogs burst from the south perimeter and charged their way.

Edward let go of his control and proved his words of being very, very good with his gun.

The pack thinned quickly as he protected the kids. Alexa stopped firing to watch. There weren’t so many dogs left that he couldn’t handle it, so she studied his technique, his fast reload with only a seconds’ pause. He was better than good. He was on her level. *Excellent.*

The perimeter soldiers followed the dogs from the trees. Edward switched targets, hitting them with beautiful headshots before they could draw and fire. He blew them off their feet, never hesitating. These men had held the kids, hurt them. *Time to pay for that!*

Alexa let him take care of the dozen guards, ready to hit any that he missed, but there was only a thick silence after he stopped firing that said he could have handled much more. The few bullets the soldiers had managed to get off hit nothing vital.

Instinct made her turn suddenly. “Get down! Down! Down!”

A second squad of soldiers came from the side of the bunker; the kids scrambled to get out of the line of fire as Alexa resumed pulling the trigger.

Edward finished the last two guards on his side, then turned to help Alexa.

More of the kids ran for the trees, unable to take the noise.

Alexa let them go. The mental ties that had kept them all captive were guilt-laden cords that no longer existed. Their kind wouldn’t leave a man behind if they had another choice, but it didn’t mean they wanted to be around each other. After the torments these kids had suffered, being left alone to fend for themselves was a relief.

The soldiers were all down, with only a few wounded for Edward to pick off from where he stood.

Alexa spotted the darkening sky. Their call had gone through. “Mind the south!”

Alexa’s words snapped Edward from his shock at the sight of so many doves diving down from the apocalyptic sky. The white and gray birds were everywhere now. He couldn’t help observing in amazement as they landed on the children. Giggles and laughter rose with the wind. The amusement was a powerful noise that seemed to improve their health as he watched.

More doves flew down, surrounding the group. The kids lifted happy arms covered with the old symbols of peace, twirling.

Alexa pointed toward the trees that held the freshly beaten path from those who’d fled. A large part of the flock took flight. The doves surged toward the woods.

Edward assumed they were headed for the other children. He started to ask what the doves were for, but the sound of engines made his gun lift. “Company! From the South!”

Alexa looked at the twin girls huddling by her feet. She didn’t speak, but they both nodded shakily.

“Yes, we will.”

“We thank you for the honor.”

Alexa’s tone was gentle. “Do the best you can.”

The girls stood up.

Edward knew to move out of their way as a large group of jeeps and trucks came into view. They rolled up the winding drive with men checking their guns, getting set to open fire.

Alexa stood behind the twins, face impassive to the threat. “You are of age. Take your place among my father’s army.”

Both girls had tears running down their cheeks, but Edward wasn’t sure if it was joy or pain that had caused it. Their hands tightened on each other as small blue flickers of magic shot into the air, merging with the gritty sky. The twins screamed simultaneously. “Barrier!”

Edward flinched back as a vivid bolt of lightning forked across the roiling clouds above them.

The convoy of soldiers hurried closer, gaining speed. Half a mile before they reached the freed kids, the vehicles in the front of the convoy crashed violently into an invisible barrier. The explosions were immense. Flaming debris bounced off the force field and sprayed the other jeeps that swerved to miss the wreckage.

Alexa placed a hand on each of the twins’ arms; the barrier lit up in a flash of white light that exploded over the soldiers. It grew blinding, forcing Edward’s eyes down. When he looked back up, nothing moved on the other side of the now very visible barrier except for smoke and fire.

Edward saw Alexa stumble to her knees and found himself at her side without a thought. “Are you okay?”

The twins had scrambled back anxiously, but his concern for Alexa was obvious. They comforted him from a few feet away.

“She just needs to catch her breath.”

The double timbre made him look up. “You’re sure?”

To his surprise, they both giggled. The sound floated over the other huddling children, telling them the trouble was over.

“She is the Alpha’s daughter.”

As if that explained it, they turned from him and moved back toward the bunker. Many of the other children followed.

“Aren’t they going with us?”

Alexa slowly shook her head at his confusion. “The doves will carry their messages. Until someone comes for them, they will live off compound stock.”

“We can’t leave them here.”

Alexa waved at the fading barrier and the fiery wreckage. “Did you not see what they are capable of?”

“But without you–”

“They are safer.” Alexa pushed to her feet. “They were drugged, beaten, starved, and threatened with each other’s pain. I have freed them in the way that will allow them to survive. Any soldiers who come will be killed.”

“And when the big bunker sends more men?”

Alexa shrugged. “Their first patrols will be wiped out if any of these kids still remain here, but it will be months before anyone important knows what happened.”

Feeling better about their future, Edward had to ask one last question. “What about those who have no one to come for them?”

“They’ll find a family, if they think they need one, but these children are not human as you know the word. Only a few of them require a mother.” Alexa’s tone said she wanted that job, but it wasn’t supposed to be hers. “From a young age, they are left to fend for themselves. They sometimes find their parents after reaching legal age, but because of government trackers, it’s not safe for them to have families before then. They’ll stay low and wait.”

“Wait for what?”

Alexa turned toward the bunker without answering, but it sent her thoughts straight to the reason she now existed. These kids and hundreds more like them were waiting for a place where the light of peace would let them grow in protection and guidance. That place was Safe Haven and that leader was her father. Adrian had no idea so many of them existed. If he had, he never would have left. She had to find Safe Haven. *It’s time for him to come home.*

**4**

They spent the night in the bunker with the kids.

There were roughly three dozen who hadn’t fled, ages ten to fifteen, and while they didn’t avoid each other, it was clear that they weren’t a close group. They didn’t talk or joke like normal children, but they didn’t fight either. The cleanup of the ground floor was done without anyone ordering it. The bodies were dragged outside, the blood scrubbed up, and food rations were distributed. Injured kids were placed on cots near the main door to be grabbed quickly if they needed to run.

All the while, Alexa spent time with them, but not normal time of comfort and care. It was more like a line of subjects waiting to see a King. They sat in a small circle around her as she answered each one of their requests in a tone that held Edward mesmerized. She didn’t intend to stay and care for them or even get them settled somewhere, and yet these kids acted like she was their savior. *What am I missing?*

“She’s an Alpha.”

It came from the twins and was spoken in an arrogant doubled tone that said he knew nothing about the quest he’d joined.

Edward gave a soft snort. “Clearly. Is it okay to ask what that means?”

The twins turned eyes to Alexa, who looked up, and then nodded. She went back to the current child’s request to learn fire making.

The twins gestured toward a quieter area in the corner.

Edward followed slowly.

“An Alpha is a direct descendant of the Creator.”

Edward blinked and then frowned. “Some joke.”

The twins were used to that response. “The war came because someone found out the governments have always known we exist. It had to be covered up.”

Edward was shaking his head. “The war was a terrorist–”

*“No!”*

The double shout shut his mouth and opened his ears. The pain their anger caused was like the nauseating jab of a headache that he vowed not to experience again.

“Descendants have been hunted throughout history. They’ve given birth to oil barons, presidents, and death with human hands.”

“To keep control and achieve their own ends, they destroyed the world.”

Edward felt the truth behind it. There was no denying it with those blazing voices in his head, too, but his heart still protested such betrayal. “That can’t be.”

Other kids had come to their table, listening to both the spoken and mental words.

The twins looked uncomfortable. Edward got the sense that it was as painful for them to say as it was for him to hear.

“They could have stopped the fighting and death at any time. All they had to do was bring us together with an Alpha and the world would have had peace.”

“But there is no power in peace. They did not want that.”

Forgetting his protest in eagerness to know more about Alexa, Edward leaned forward. “Like what you did today?”

The taller twin shrugged. “That was a very small show of what we can do together. It’s why they don’t usually keep us in the same place.”

“Usually?”

“Sometimes they have one in the room with us…when we’re doing things.”

“So that it’s stronger?” He was drawn into the mystery of it.

The twins scowled, causing him to lean quickly back.

“So the Alphas don’t kill them all like we’ve done here! They remind us constantly that they hold others like us across the world; a rebellion would cause their deaths.”

A low mutter came from one of the other kids at their table. “As it may now that we’ve risen up.”

The taller twin turned furious eyes toward the older boy. “An Alpha ordered it. You will not question!”

The teenager bowed his head immediately at the reprimand. “I’m sorry!”

Edward was in shock, but not so much that his brain had ceased to make connections. “You’re both Alphas, too.”

The twins didn’t seem as young anymore as they looked back at him with their fiery eyes. “We are Betas. Betas serve the Alpha when we come of age.”

“Gifts like ours come with age, but she chose to give them to us early for our wisdom.”

*And your help*, Edward thought, forgetting they could read his mind.

Both twins gave a scornful grunt.

“She did not need the help of untrained children.”

“She chose to give us justice.”

They turned toward Alexa and spoke simultaneously. “We are honored.”

Edward sat back, trying to soak it all in. After what he’d seen today, it was hard to deny. His mind wanted to insist it wasn’t possible, but that wasn’t the way things were in this new world. Sudden, brutal changes had come to this land so fast that it was hard to adjust… *But I’ll get to be with Alexa.* He stiffened. Alexa was an Alpha. Could she read his mind?

As soon as he had the thought, she looked over at him and raised a brow. *Will that be a problem?*

He flushed, shaking his head. *No. After all this, it will take more than mindreading to get rid of me.*

The twins giggled at the exchange. “That’s also because she’s an Alpha.”

“Mindreading?”

“The attraction.” They laughed again. “Alphas are meant to bring people together.”

“Like the world would need after an apocalypse.” His thoughts went back to Alexa. “Is that her job?”

The twins obviously knew, but a quick look from the warrior woman held them silent. Whatever the answer was, Alexa didn’t want him to know. Edward switched his line of questioning. “Will you guys be all right here? Is there anything you need done before we go?”

“We will fend for ourselves.”

The curt response drove in the impression that freedom meant a great deal to these abused kids. Edward didn’t want to believe the government had sacrificed the world to keep control of them. Why would they deny the world peace to keep the hate alive?

“As they’ve told you, peace comes with no power. They cannot use it to line their pockets or increase their importance.” Alexa moved their way. “To create a perfect weapon though, that is control in endless amounts.”

Edward nodded in acceptance. It fit together too well for it to be anything but the truth. He’d scorned the rumors before to stand in loyal defense of his country, but he’d been blind. *My faith in America was unfounded.*

Alexa denied that. “Not so. Your faith in those leaders was unfounded, but you haven’t had that for a while now anyway. The ideal of freedom is worth our support. This country was built on blood and tears. We shall shed both in our quest to see it survive.”

**5**

Morning came with sounds that Edward hadn’t heard since childhood. Shouts, laughs, bangs, and slams echoed through the top level of the compound where they’d chosen to sleep. *The kids are up.*

He smiled at the thought. He wasn’t fond of children, but those twins were handy. When bedtime had come, all they’d done was send a calm look around and the room had been deserted in seconds. He assumed the others didn’t mind following the girls, but he wasn’t sure. Their bond was something he guessed a person had to feel to understand. He didn’t yet, but after witnessing what these kids could do, he had accepted that they were dangerous.

Some of these bright-eyed youngsters had never once experienced the outside world. Edward assumed the bunkers were lined with something that kept their calls in, but he hadn’t thought to ask about it last night.

Being here in a government complex again, should have been a nightmare for him. Instead, it had been enlightening. When they left, it would be hard to walk away. How had Alexa been able to do it?

He thought about the twins saying she hadn’t really needed their help, that she’d been giving them justice. If that was true, then she hadn’t needed his help either. Why hadn’t she set them free before? And why had she come for him first if she didn’t need the help?

Those were the questions he asked as soon as he slid onto the bench across from her. He waited while a quick look from her cleared the table.

Alexa’s tone was even. “Only once more.”

He nodded, understanding his training was about to really begin. There would be no open questioning after this.

“When they keep us drugged, we get very weak. Calls have no strength to penetrate walls, fire only flickers. On medication, they can control our gifts. Between experiments, we are put back to sleep. When I escaped, my condition was the worst it has ever been. I needed time to regain my mental clarity and I had to have energy from a willing source.”

His eyes went to hers, mind replaying their meeting and that vivid bolt of blue light. She’d recharged from him. Understanding fell into place. These were carriers of the light. They couldn’t feed from an unclean source like those holding them captive and it kept them weak, under control. Now, these kids would be able to seek out new energy sources and regain their own health.

Alexa smiled patiently. “We are descendants of the Creator. He needed people, so we do, too. Without others to love us, to follow us, we are desolate. With those things, we have enough hope to save the world.”

“That’s the true quest, right?”

“Yes. We were born to this time and place to help rebuild and fix the errors of the past. The war was our fresh start. We need only take advantage of it.”

“And Safe Haven?”

Her eyes darkened with a powerful longing. “Holds the key to it all.”

*“Adrian. Adrian. Adrian.”*

The younger kids chanted it, drawing Alexa’s attention. She smiled generously, sending a wave of light through the room. “Yes. With Adrian, we will create a future to be lived in, not just survived. We will prosper and fill this dead world with our love. You are now a part of that, Edward. Do your duty with honor.”

“I will.”

**6**

Leaving was just as hard for Edward as he had thought it would be. His protective heart demanded that he stay until each of these fragile children had someone to care for their needs. He lingered in the doorway that Alexa had already gone through without pausing. Here, he could help. Out there with her, he was only a food source. Finally understanding it came with a sickening feeling of being raised for the slaughter. *This is what livestock would feel like if they knew.*

The children looked back at him without expressions, letting him make his own choice. If he wanted to stay, he was welcome. He had come with Alexa and that gave him the right.

“Would you stay, Edward, or go with me? Make your choice now.” Her tone from just outside the door wasn’t unkind.

He looked at the kids again, searching harder. Did they want him to stay?

“No…and yes.” Alexa began moving away from the door. “You are a connection to me, but you are also a killer. They fear that rubbing off. You have little use to them except as someone to train or entertain.”

Flushing, Edward spun toward her. “And what am I to you beyond an energy source and a servant?!”

The warrior woman stopped. She slowly turned back to look at him with glowing blue eyes that promised he already held great value to her. “You are a dangerous tool that I will wield against the darkness that threatens to consume us all.”

Alexa didn’t use her gift on him, but she didn’t wait, either. She walked away. To sacrifice his life for these children’s safety was worthy. That he felt the same need to help them won more of her respect. If he chose to stay, she wouldn’t hold it against him.

Edward glanced back to find the crowded room behind him now empty. He hadn’t heard them go, and it made his choice. Clearly, they were stronger than he was giving them credit for. They would be a fascination to be delighted in for sure, but would he look at the night sky and still long to be at Alexa’s side?

*Yes*. They’d only been together for a few days, but he already knew more about the world. Life with her would always be hard, thrilling, exhilarating, *real*.

The fighter pulled up his hood and stepped through the bunker doorway with grim excitement filling his stomach. He’d just chosen to leave these children to follow Alexa to his death. The first heavy guilt-cord settled onto his shoulders.

He held his head up in response. Her goals were honorable. She wasn’t settling for helping just one group of kids. She wanted to save them all. That could only happen when they found Safe Haven.

Edward caught up quickly, resuming the place she’d put him in for the march here.

Alexa didn’t wave or even look at the kids as they stared from the windows and neither did he. The quest had truly begun now. There was no turning back.

The next month was the best of Edward’s life as Alexa trained him and trusted him with her secrets during their runs for food and gear. They moved steadily east, hunting for signs of Safe Haven. His only regret was that they couldn’t remain alone. At some point, Alexa would add a new member to their crew. If not for the quest, Edward would have begged for it to never happen. He didn’t want to share her.

If not for the quest, Alexa would have said the same.

# Chapter Four

**One Last Ride**

May 2016

**1**

***B****efore the war, I was afraid of roller coasters.*

Daniel realized it with a start, allowing the quiet dirt bike to come to a slow stop on the twisting incline. Scarred and gouged from his reckless lifestyle, his sweaty legs braced the bike easily despite the angle. Set into the side of a mountain, Suicide Cliff was no easy ride and there was only one way down from this far up.

“And I hated amusement parks!”

It was a minor revelation compared to the others he’d made since the war and to what he was about to do, but for a boy whose family had run a carnival, it was a door to understanding the past that brought him to this point of no return. He didn’t care about the result. He only wanted to understand why he was doing it before it was done.

Daniel and his family, all nine of them, had been equal partners in the Ocean Walk Carnival. It had been great most of the time. He’d learned to do the performances his parents and older siblings wanted at first, and eventually he’d developed his own skill to contribute to the family legacy–stunts.

There wasn’t a bike on the planet that Daniel couldn’t ride. He’d been on them all during his years in the public view. He’d grown reckless as the thrills faded. He’d been hurt more times than he could remember, but it had never stopped him. There was little in life that Daniel had feared before the war. He’d lost the only thing he wanted before his family had bought the carnival. From flaming hoops to long gaps over cars, he’d jumped anything they put in his path, but he had been terrified of roller coasters.

“Why?” He crankily scanned the cool darkness that hung over the scraggy trees and sharp boulders. “It wasn’t the height.”

Daniel got the dirt bike rolling again, not being particularly careful on the two-foot wide trail that was blazed in the stone. Where he was headed, it didn’t matter.

“Was it being out of my comfort zone?” he wondered suddenly, vaguely aware of a humming sound coming from the west. The wastelands made odd noises, often. It wasn’t a reason for concern on a good day. On this night, it mattered even less. If the final gates had fallen, his end would come quicker, that’s all.

Unfazed by the thought, Daniel sped up as he returned to his mental dissection. Why had he hated roller coasters? His brothers and sisters had spent their work breaks in line for the biggest one that they maintained, filling the dinner table with tales of how they’d rode the front car of the Python with their arms held high.

Daniel had never done that. Every time he got in that front seat, or any of those behind it, his stomach knotted up and he worried over being sick before the short ride could end. His armpits dripped sweat and nervous gas had made the other kids laugh. When the car chugged up the hill, finally reaching the summit, the best he could manage was a weak yell with his eyes closed and his hands clenched tightly around the lap rail. It had been a large source of embarrassment during his childhood and then humiliation as he grew older*.*

*“The Daredevil’s afraid of a little thing like riding a roller coaster! Ha-ha!”*

Daniel pushed the bike faster around the last hairpin turn, letting gravity carry him through it. Gravity was something he could count on to always be there, something he would experience intensely in just a minute more.

“It wasn’t the idea of falling, or the death waiting if the coaster flew off the rails…”

Daniel found the answer as he neared the summit, the small, clear area where he planned to end his life.

“It was control!”

If he had been driving the coaster, it wouldn’t have haunted him, but because he could only raise his arms to whatever the Python wanted to dish out, he was captive, unable to do that. He hadn’t been able to surrender control.

Daniel slowed the bike as he reached the almost level ground at the top of the cliff. He didn’t see the mysterious beauty of the glowing apocalypse sky, nor the shadowy forms of two people walking steadily toward him from the west. All he saw was freedom from his torment. “One last ride…”

*“The Daredevil’s afraid of a little thing like riding a roller coaster! Ha-ha!”*

His rage flared to life, as bright as any of the explosions that had destroyed the world. “Not anymore. That world, *that* Daniel, is dead.” The war had seen to it with a few seconds and a single stray bullet during the chaos. He’d fired it. *I killed my mother.*

Pain rushed him in waves. Daniel hit the handle, sending fuel rushing into the bike.

It jumped forward eagerly in response.

As the bike neared the edge, Daniel’s hands slowly crept into the air, surrendering control for the first time in his life. He managed to keep them there as the bike went over the cliff, but his eyes didn’t open. Feeling it would be enough. He didn’t want to see it.

**2**

Alexa darted toward the man’s broken body and Edward tried to keep pace while scanning the barren landscape that surrounded them. Why they were wasting their time, he had no idea. Anyone who fell from that high up wasn’t going to survive.

Alexa increased her speed.

Edward was unable to stay at her side. She streaked across the parched desert floor, leaving him behind.

Edward hurried. As he went, he suddenly thought maybe he understood her hurry. *Maybe she’s hungry.*

Alexa was kneeling near the body before he got there. Edward turned his back to her, watching their discouraging surroundings. They were in plain view against the wall of the mountain. Edward pushed the worry aside. If they were attacked, Alexa would handle it as she had the other times they’d faced danger since leaving Lexington.

They had been together for a month and the trip had been smooth. Not quiet, though. Twice, they’d been spotted by soldiers and been in gunfights to get away. There had also been a rough hour of crossing a river in a small skiff, using oars to push away the awful debris. Black, anxious snakes had paced them the entire time, not hissing, but gliding along the water next to the skiff menacingly.

Edward looked back to see Alexa’s head lowering. He turned away without much concern. She needed energy, and if the man was dying anyway…

Alexa concentrated, drawing her strength. “Your name!”

Daniel opened his eyes, unable to do much more. He didn’t feel pain exactly, but the sense of fading was clear enough. He’d had his one last ride.

“I offer a second chance...”

*“Let me die.”*

Stung by his desolation, Alexa shoved herself into his thoughts. *“I seek Safe Haven.”*

Daniel’s eyes widened; they slowly began to fill with red tears. Even the angels wanted to be in Safe Haven.

Daniel understood that he was in the process of dying. He was grateful to see a woman’s hard countenance rather than his childhood demons. He only hoped the pain didn’t start before it was over. Being numb was preferable to reality. Isn’t that why he’d done this in the first place?

Alexa leaned closer, deep in his mind, seeing what had caused him to do this to himself. “I need your strength for the quest, Daniel. You will not die in vain!”

Her tone allowed no argument.

Drawn back against his will, Daniel blinked, trying to really see her. Safe Haven…a quest. *Adrian!*

His body arched suddenly, eyes foggy, pupils starting to dilate.

“I will have an answer!”

Alexa’s roar in his mind brought the world back into focus. Daniel gave the only response he could through broken, bloody lips. *“Master.”*

Alexa slanted her mouth over his, the blood ignored. Instead of the inhale Edward was expecting, she blew into the man’s lungs–returning life instead.

Edward tried to stay focused on the watch, but the man’s screams were terrible. Every breath she blew into him seemed to scrape away another layer of his paralysis, his injuries. It was slow work.

He’d thought she was ending the man’s pain, but instead…

“Aaahhhhhhh!”

Edward grunted, moving away. It would be a rough night for all of them and there was no telling what the noise would bring. “I’ll be up high.”

Alexa didn’t respond.

Edward’s jealous heart was appeased a bit. She trusted him to stand the watch. It would be a while before the new man was allowed that honor.

**3**

“His name is Daniel.”

Edward looked at the pale man sitting against the cliff that should have taken his life. The Horseman was grateful the screaming had stopped as dawn arrived, but he was in no hurry to welcome the new man. He had enjoyed his time alone with Alexa.

“As did I, but now, the quest grows more dangerous and we have to, as well. Alone, we will not reach Safe Haven.”

Edward hung his head. Despite it being a month, he still wasn’t guarding his thoughts from her. “Whatever you need.”

Alexa’s response was quick. “*He* needs to be trained, as I have you thus far.”

Edward’s head snapped up. “Me?”

Alexa met his surprised look with a raised brow. “Would *you* lead, while *I* teach?”

Edward flushed, hating it that he spent so much time in the wrong, but loving it that she always called him on it. A leader didn’t explain, they taught, and he had already been learning. “When shall I start?”

There was silence for an answer.

Edward obediently rose to his feet.

Alexa watched him move toward Daniel, pleased and tired. She was near to being drained again, shriveled hands hidden deep inside her cloak to be out of view. In a day or so, when Daniel was able to defend himself for a few minutes at a time, she would reward Edward for his obedience and enjoy a much needed meal. Until then…

Alexa took up the watch, scanning the apocalyptic mountains around them. Right after the war, the western destruction zone had encompassed the three farthest states. Then the gates had opened and the wastelands had begun spreading. Now, it was 300 miles beyond and steadily creeping east. Mother Nature wanted her land back. If the descendants didn’t do something soon, she would succeed.

“How long have you been with her?” Daniel was extremely curious as to what the quest had been like so far. Almost succeeding in taking his own life had given him a new outlook, a new courage that he hadn’t known he possessed until he was over the edge of that cliff.

Edward was feeling the need to jealously guard those memories, especially the one after he’d proven his loyalty by following Alexa from the bunker. She’d made him hers that night, in more ways than one. “Since Lexington.”

Edward watched the man’s scarred fingers twitch like his body was being denied something that it craved. Edward noticed that the Biker didn’t react to the healing twitches, even though the pain had to be bad still. Parts of bones and veins were prominent under his skin, clearly not where they should be. Except for his face, Daniel was covered in scars and ugly mementoes that said his life had been rough even before the war.

“But that’s almost the heart of the wastelands!” Daniel exclaimed, admiring the man’s courage. Of Alexa, he was in awe.

“Yes.” Edward didn’t want to accept the new man, but he did want to please Alexa. He held out a leather kit. “You’re never to be without this, even when there is nothing in it.”

He waited for Daniel to take the empty carry bag, and then continued. “Until she says otherwise, you’ll do what I do, down to where and how I step. Copy me at all times.”

*Ggrrrr…*

The loud rumble from the west brought Edward to his feet. The rats were back. “Shit!”

He spun toward Alexa’s post, but turned back just as quickly. He leaned down into Daniel’s confused face, delivering his first real order of the quest. “You will get into the nearest tree and still be alive when she comes for you!”

Daniel gave a quick nod and watched Edward take off running. Trouble was coming, but he would be no help. Gritting his teeth, the battered Biker slowly began dragging himself toward the closest moldy trunk. Life mattered again. Daniel was grateful.

Grimacing at the feel of dragging his broken legs across the rough ground, the man was determined to do his share as soon as he could. When his injuries had mended, he would make sure they both saw how useful he could be.

Alexa motioned Edward under cover as she waited tensely to see how many dogs had been put on their trail this time. The last two attempts had been small teams, but this sounded like a convoy of government trucks.

Not asking if Daniel was hidden, Alexa drew her gun, glad when Edward followed her lead. She was low on energy to be facing so many. His help was definitely needed.

Edward watched the trucks crest the rise, the dirt clouds trailing behind them for as far as he could see. Five team trucks… No, nine. Roughly thirty-five men. The trucks spread out as they neared the base of the cliff, like they were herding prey.

Edward looked to Alexa in concern.

Alexa’s mind was racing. The soldiers would know their quarry was close. There wouldn’t be any running, maybe not even hiding. Alone, she and Edward would win every time, but neither of them could stay ahead of the trucks while carrying Daniel. They would have to fight.

Alexa looked to her first of six with blue chips of icy steel. “Once the soldiers are out of their vehicles, no mercy will be allowed.”

Edward gave her a short nod that said he would be at her side for the fight and beyond.

Satisfied, Alexa took aim.

**4**

“I feel her.”

Paul’s words caused a round of cheers from the half a dozen soldiers in the hardback with them.

A harsh glare from Corbin silenced the men. “Where is she?” He looked through the binoculars again. The arid mountain terrain was all he could see with only one good eye.

Paul struggled to get a clear read on the woman. Her energy wasn’t as vibrant as he was used to. *She’s tired*, the scientist thought sadly. *We’ve hunted her so much that she hasn’t had time to recharge.* Aware of Corbin waiting for an answer, Paul grunted. “Keep going. It’s getting stronger.”

They’d spent the last weeks chasing, rounding up those she’d freed, listening to the tales of their travels from other survivors. Tracking them hadn’t been hard, only tiresome due to her preference for unforgiving terrain.

“Load your darts nice and tight.” The big bunker still wanted her dead or recaptured, but Corbin had set this in motion and he did not intend to back down now. He would get a tracker dart into her or her fighter, and it would be enough to buy a few more weeks to find something he could use to negotiate with the big bunker.

The cliff neared, showing them a small, neatly made camp with three bedrolls.

“There’s her site!”

Of Alexa, there was no sign, but if she’d left everything behind, then they’d surprised her again. It was the second time it had turned out this way.

Paul was sure her luck was used up. They would recapture her now, and the hope of Safe Haven would finally vanish entirely, just the way those in charge wanted it. Paul was suddenly glad that Shane hadn’t made it back from the base yet. The air here tasted like death.

Corbin studied the area, the cliff. There were no tunnels, no crags to allow an escape. She hadn’t gone up. He looked toward the trees that lined the cliff, to the thicket of dead branches that would make a perfect cover. “There she is!”

*Crack!*

The windshield shattered into a series of spiral fractures, surprising everyone inside into a harsh flinch. The thick glass was supposed to be able to stop a slug, but thanks to years of chemical rain, everything now had weak spots.

*Crack!*

The window next to Corbin’s head imploded; glass flew through the truck.

The driver swerved, automatically turning south to keep from being trapped by the cliff wall. A barrage of gunfire rained on the truck as it turned.

Corbin was aware of her target as he tied a bandage from his kit around the stinging arm wound she’d just delivered. Blood dripped in thin sheets. *She’ll pay for that!*

Alexa fired again, strategically hitting lead vehicles that were sent careening in different directions. The weakened glass had the soldiers looking for a place to use as cover and the opposite cliff wall was the only other place for that purpose. It sent the trucks right by her bullets.

*She’s herding them now.* Edward fired again. His shot took out the rest of the windshield on the first truck and he grinned. This real life was perfect.

Alexa watched the remaining vehicles turn to follow their leader. She saved the rest of the bullets she had in her gun. Waste in any form was destructive to her goals.

Edward’s smile faded as the soldiers pulled behind the huge boulders that lined the opposite cliff. Men began pouring from the trucks like water. *There are so many!*

He watched Alexa drop from the tree like it was a single step; he tensed to follow her flight.

*Bang! Bang!!*

Alexa wasn’t running now that the soldiers were out of the protection of their vehicles. Gunfire filled the canyon, echoing off the cliff faces and out into the barren wilderness.

**5**

“Get down, you idiot!”

Corbin snatched Paul back by his hair. He shoved the gifted man behind a boulder. “We’re no match for her guns!”

“But there are more of us.”

“She’s an Alpha!” Corbin watched his men get slaughtered. His three Lieutenants were trying to call everyone in, but these lower level men had no discipline.

*Crack!*

Corbin’s eyes narrowed in on the shooters, using a mirror to keep from poking his head out for her to aim at. Only Alexa and one man, but there had been three bedrolls. *Where’s her newest fighter?*

His sharp eye went over their camp again. A fire pit had a small pot simmering over it. There was wood with gouges and bloody rags. Someone was hurt. And what did you do with an injured party during a fight?

“You stash them.” Corbin scanned the area, landed on the dead branches beside the neat camp and found a shadow among the dense limbs. The big bunker wanted her recaptured or hit with tracker juice, but one of her crew would be just as good. “Stay here!”

Paul watched Corbin hurry toward the vehicles with concern that had grown into alarm by the time the commander slipped around them and out of view. *Is he leaving me?*

**6**

Shielded by the trunk, Alexa fired again, taking down one of the closest soldiers. She and Edward were running through Corbin’s men, but where was their leader?

Edward slapped the magazine in place in time to shoot the last two soldiers within an instant of each other. The chaos was complete. Bodies were spread all over the parched floor of the canyon.

Alexa waved a hand. “Make sure they’re all dead, gather supplies.”

Edward nodded. He took a step.

*Crack! Crack!*

“AAAhhhh!”

They’d heard that noise too much over the last hours to ever mistake it. They both turned toward their camp.

Alexa made a fast gesture. “Do as you’ve been told!”

Edward hated the idea of leaving her alone to rescue Daniel, but he obeyed. He moved toward the bodies with fast steps, hoping to be done and back at her side before the fight was over.

Alexa rounded the edge of the cliff and slowed to a steady pace. She saw Daniel in Corbin’s tight grip and then his newest wounds. Without hands, Daniel couldn’t fight back. Both of his palms were dripping blood.

“I’ll put the next one through his head!” Corbin dragged the dazed man further into the shadowy cover of the cliff face and its boulders. “Get out here where I can see you!”

Alexa stepped into view, Colts in hand.

Corbin’s harsh grin was full of triumph. “Toss them away!”

Alexa shook her head, hands hanging at her sides. She kept her eyes on Daniel’s. In his blue gaze, she saw determination to survive and the belief that if he were mortally wounded, she would be able to save him again. *Good*. This way, he would be willing to take risks. He wouldn’t ever be told that there was a limit to what she could do or that it was forbidden. She would eventually have to pay for playing the role of God.

“Closer!” Corbin was trying to be meticulous, but being close to her without the drugs was distracting, worrisome. She radiated a strength that made him tighten his grip on the mostly helpless man. It hadn’t been hard to figure out that she’d saved him. That made him valuable property. Corbin waved the gun at his remaining two Lieutenants. “Cuff her, put her in my truck.”

“Now, Daniel!”

Daniel shoved against his captor at her call, ducking as Alexa did the same.

Her Colts fired; the two remaining soldiers hit the ground.

Corbin, now alone, struggled to keep Daniel in front of as much of his body as he could. He needed her alive. “Get in the truck or I’ll kill him.”

Alexa’s laugh was cold. “And give up your shield? I think not.”

Realizing his bluff was called, Corbin began dragging the man toward the nearest truck. “I’ll take him with me then.”

“No, you won’t.” Alexa started to raise her gun.

Corbin’s arm tightened on Daniel’s throat, cutting off his air. “If I die, so does he!”

“He has no value without hands.” Alexa’s voice was like the dead, it was so cold. “You ruined him. You keep him.”

There was a shocked silence.

Corbin stared, not sure if she was now the one bluffing. Would she really leave a man behind?

Alexa grinned. “How about a deal?”

Not expecting it, the Commander sneered. “Deals are for the dead!”

“So they are. Would you make one to save your life this day? I will come for it in my own time.”

Corbin slowly nodded. “Perhaps if I knew the terms.”

Alexa didn’t hesitate to bargain with the devil. It was something she expected to do many times before this quest was over. “I will back up, you will do the same. Let him go at the bumper.”

Corbin caught sight of her other fighter stalking steadily toward them from the battlefield. Corbin let out a defeated grunt. “Fine! Start backing up.”

Alexa immediately began moving away, face warning Daniel not to disrupt the plan she had just put into motion.

Corbin loathed her arrogance as she stared at him impassively. That would change after she led him to Safe Haven. When Adrian was wiped from the face of the earth, Corbin and Alexa might just disappear, along with a lot of drugs to keep her under control. He wanted Adrian dead, needed him dead, but the man’s daughter would suffer for years before he finally took her life. The Mitchel family may have forgotten the insult that took his eye, but Corbin hadn’t.

Alexa knew something wasn’t right, but with Daniel pouring blood and starting to sag in Corbin’s grip, there was little choice but to get him back as quickly as she could. She watched Corbin drag him around the side of the boulders, tripping in his haste. Both men went down.

Alexa shook her head at Edward. He wanted to rush in and take Corbin out, but that would sign Daniel’s second death warrant and she had no energy left to save him.

Edward guessed her reason by the restless tap of her fingers on her gun butt. Those fingers were shriveled, ugly to look at. She was too weak for another confrontation that might end in Daniel being wounded further. Right now, his injuries wouldn’t take his life. If the one-eyed man was pushed, Daniel might be lost.

Despite not wanting a new man on the crew, Edward felt better knowing that Alexa cared for her fighter’s enough to delay Corbin’s death. It didn’t occur to him until later that she might have had different motives.

As they fell, Corbin slammed the needle into the man’s neck and shoved the plunger home. The struggling man dropped like a stone as the medication hit. Corbin cut the man’s pant leg. A few seconds saw a new scrape-like wound on his calf. Corbin shoved the heavy weight over to move quickly for the truck, not caring that he was the only survivor of this raid. Corbin yanked the door open to find Paul in the passenger seat.

“I saw what you did.”

Corbin pulled himself up behind the wheel, face a mask of hatred. “Don’t cross me, Rabbit, or we’ll have a fox hunt.”

Rab snapped his mouth shut, already sure the paperwork would state that Alexa was the one he’d implanted with the tracker. Corbin’s reports to his superiors and the truth were never the same.

**7**

“Why didn’t you kill him before he could get to the truck?” Edward had seen her shoot. He knew she could have put a bullet in the man’s head, or at least in his back.

Alexa didn’t answer, instead going to Daniel’s still form.

Edward didn’t repeat the question. He hadn’t been with her long enough to be confident, but he believed she hadn’t done it out of kindness or mercy. Those weren’t the reasons she’d saved Daniel, either. Edward doubted she had much of either emotion. The things that Alexa did, good or harsh, were all for the quest. In some strange way, it must benefit her to leave the one-eyed man alive.

Edward helped her drag Daniel’s unconscious body back to the bedroll, hoping she would tell him to papoose the Biker so they could get on the road. It wasn’t safe to stay here.

Alexa bound Daniel’s hands, tying the bandages as tight as she could get them. “Papoose him. We need to get underground until his tracker wears off.” She hadn’t seen Corbin do it, but she’d be a fool not to expect it.

Satisfied, Edward did as he was told. It was a hard new life, but one he already wouldn’t trade for anything.

Alexa looked over the battle scene, calculating how long it would be before the rats would return. Even considering Corbin’s previous pattern of behavior, it was still hard to guess. The commander wasn’t as lethal as her, but he was clever and those people often managed to come out on top in the end.

“I won’t let that happen.” Alexa’s voice was like a wave of fire cutting through ice. “My father and I know what to do with the likes of you!”

Alexa helped Edward get their new man over his shoulder for his first day of travel. They had a long road ahead and a lot of adventures waiting. With any luck, she would have a full crew by the time they reached River City. *And then things will get crazy.*

**3 Months Later**

# Chapter Five

**River City**

August

**1**

**W**hen they reached the bend of the Little River, the sight of the small town gave no comfort that what Alexa had come for was here.

River City hadn’t existed before the War. Set near the back hatch of NORAD, the town had begun as a refugee camp that was wiped out by foreign invaders and then rebuilt. A few months later, it was destroyed again by the emerging government. River City had been rebuilt a second time after the volcanic eruption that had coated everything with ash, trapping refugees inside for weeks at a time. The population had taken another large hit, but the town had remained.

It now boasted seven businesses inside real wooden frames and nearly twice as many slanted, prone-to-collapse homes made from scavenged debris. The people had adjusted, but it was not a place of prosperity. Few groups of people remained this far west.

Alexa and her small army moved toward the dusty town that had no chemical barrier. There was no pull this time, no sense of being drawn, but with the one she’d come for, there wouldn’t be. Calculated guessing was all that had brought her to River City.

Alexa and her fighters had now been on the road together through several adventures; their movements were almost smooth, almost matched. The four men tried very hard to pace her long stride exactly.

Alexa was proud of the small crew she’d gathered. Today, if she were lucky, there would be a fifth fighter–the magician. The rats that had stayed on their trail had planted a number of trackers with well-aimed darts over the sixteen weeks since the start of the quest, but Alexa knew that was on purpose. Corbin didn’t want her recaptured, only traceable all the way to Safe Haven.

A small movement in the distance caught the attention of Edward. He wore his rugged good looks proudly now, unlike when they’d first met. His full lips and hard jawline no longer hinted at how unstable he’d been before joining her. “Dust whirls. Too low for a storm.”

“How many riders?” Her voice was tightly laced with approval.

Edward studied. “At least five, maybe with spare mounts.”

“Coming to River City?” Billy had massive hands and thick forearms that had killed upon her orders and were ready to do so again. Each of her fighters had been gathered in the same fashion. Only the settings, the reasons for their despair, were different.

“Aye. Mind your six, my pets, and remember your lessons.” Alexa increased her pace, wanting a cushion of time in town before the riders came. She wasn’t sure why, but there had been too many battles won on instinct alone to ever ignore it. “Watch form.”

The males moved into a rotating pattern around her billowing cloak as she scented the air. The town looked abandoned. Alexa used her gifts to evaluate, relentlessly searching for danger. Her first crew might survive if she were careful enough. Her father’s hadn’t.

The air was thick with watery rot. It tasted no better, harsh with the chemicals still lingering even now. At that thought, she drew up enough saliva to spit. The dust had settled, thanks to the late night rain, but the hardpan under their feet was still parched. She could hear the angry roar of the river, one of the few normal sounds in Afterworld, but it was no more upset than usual. Things were calm. If not for that slightly closer dust whirl in the distance, she might have suspected there was no threat here at all.

The road into River City began to slope downward. The thick, sickly trees thinned into no cover at all by the time they hit the bottom of the dirt street. Half a mile away now, they were visible to those in the town. Nearby, parts of Ft. Collins stood as a reminder of the horrible struggle for survival that had started it all. The town that had protected NORAD had fallen with it. The fighters couldn’t see the charred frames or tattered skeletons now, but they’d passed them on their way and stepped lightly until they were out of view. Ghosts lurked in such places. That was common knowledge.

“Cover switch.”

It was impressive to see five fighters in long cloaks remove and replace their hats with slightly larger versions at the same time, all without losing pace or form. Each one was done with a simplicity that wasted no energy, but allowed an artistic flair that made the woman leading them tighten her lips against the pride. So they could switch to bulletproof hats in one neat, eye-catching move. Could they walk for a week straight? Shoot the leaves off trees? Fight to the death?

This time, she allowed the tiny grin to liven her usually expressionless face. Yes. Her men could do all of that and more. Her training had been relentless.

Mark, her newest man, frowned. “The church has a dozen people inside.”

Alexa didn’t respond. The green letters tattooed across his ten knuckles said more about Mark than anything else. *I WILL-KILL U*. It was a warning and a description.

Mark had been in an underground slam with the other killers, but that hadn’t stood in her way. When she’d left the Boulder complex, he’d been at her side. His wardens had wisely negotiated his release.

Finding Mark once they snuck inside hadn’t been hard. His level of pain had drawn her harder than any of the others. Mark hadn’t been sorry for his crimes; he felt no remorse for the killings. He also had stamina. Of all her men, he was the most fit, the most physically imposing.

The landscape hardened around their boots, becoming more jagged. The group picked out signs of the world that had once been with angry hearts. It hurt to see the smaller skeletons; felt wrong to crunch them under heavy boots.

“There’s a bunker hole.” Daniel reminded her he had a good eye for details. The Biker was lanky and limber, the smallest of their group. He was the one sent into places the rest of them couldn’t fit. His tone said he wanted to use that skill on this old world relic.

“Maybe we’ll do some digging before we go, if there’s still an interest after our work here is done.”

That pleased them. Uncovering the secrets of the past was fodder for their adventurous souls.

Alexa swung into full alert as they reached the town. Determined to get what she’d come for, she let the fire demon inside take control as they crossed from the Colorado borderlands into Wyoming.

Alexa and her four fighters moved through the town with slow, sure steps, eyes shifting between doorways and shadowy alleys. With the wind whipping black cloaks as they circled, the men appeared to be royal servants bent on being useful to their queen.

Those watching muttered quietly with impressed disapproval and fear.

Alexa’s hands stayed on her guns, cloak pushed back for access to the deadly Colts.

There was little doubt that she could use them. The surprise of seeing a woman with a male crew was the most obvious reaction from the few dozen men and women peering out of dusty windows, but there was also a hint of curiosity. River City wasn’t famous for gunfighters or even for guns. The glory came from still being a water town even four years after the war. Many things could be had here, good and bad, but of strong fighters and weapons, there were few.

*Doonngg!*

The church bell echoed loudly for a long minute, but the fighters didn’t slow. Their leader had intentionally come while the religious refugees would be holding services and out of the way. Believing this new world to be the punishment of God, the converts were often the hardest to deal with.

Alexa moved toward the only open pub and the men flanking her sent hard glares that warned the townspeople to take care. At this time on Sunday, those not attending church were either doing chores or hanging around in the bar. Not that there was real whiskey anymore, but even grain alcohol would produce intoxication and dim this ugly world for a while. With enough of the homemade brew, the eyes might dim forever. Blindness was a common result of that thievery and ignorance.

Alexa paused with a hand on the swinging door, turning to look at the small, neat blacksmith’s shed next to the pub. She gave the man standing there a nod of recognition. His sense of strength was clear.

Pleasing her, he returned the gesture with a half bow and a smile of welcome.

Alexa stared a moment longer, making sure her fighters understood the man was now under consideration for their crew.

All four men took his measure with hard stares of their own while they took their assigned places for this situation. Alexa had been drilling them even during break times, making sure they could teach it as well as do it. Two of the fighters would stay on Alexa’s flank, and the other two would guard the door. It had been harder to do when there had only been three fighters to watch her six. Mark joining them had been great. Now, there would be a fifth to share the chores and loneliness.

The door creaked as Alexa swung it open, sharp blue eyes picking out a dozen drinkers that were hard to distinguish from the decaying furnishings. Both wore the same colorlessness of neglect and danger. Alexa’s lips thinned into a hard line. “I’m a man down.”

Her fire-roughened voice cut through the stillness, where many of the haggard patrons opened their mouths only to snap them shut. It was easy to guess how she’d lost a man. The Colts on her lean hips were the shiniest things in the pub.

A shuffling noise from the far, dark corner brought Alexa’s attention to the three men playing Hob-Jong with fragile, ancient playing cards.

Two of them went on with the game, but the third man, lean and unkempt, turned vivid green eyes on her. “How much?”

His gruff voice told her he was a killer, but not the kind she needed.

“The success of the quest.”

The card player grunted, dropping his eyes back to the rickety deck. The years since the war had been ugly for Rick. He’d once been the wolf in sheep’s clothing, and after that, the pied piper, leading men to violent deaths. Now, he was a scavenger, one of the best, but his mind was always in the past. “What is it that you seek?”

There was dead silence in the smoky pub at Rick’s question. There was a sense that her answer would be better than a rescue mission or a treasure hunt.

“Safe Haven.” Her words echoed eerily.

There was a flurry of mutters and gasps, but the hard case only nodded as if he’d known all along. “The biggest myth of all.” The steel in her gaze drew Rick in despite his attempts to remain aloof. “You have proof?”

The scowl was in her frosty response. “I search for what I know exists.” Alexa’s voice became scornful. “What I suspect you know exists, as well, but you’ll not be at my side, grifter!”

She spun toward the door and saw the Blacksmith was just outside it and listening intently. “*Anyone* else can try.”

Alexa flashed a hand over the bar as she walked by, letting a large chunk of gold clatter to the grooved wooden counter. “That belongs to the winner.”

The woman stepped back out into the colder air. None of those inside would leave with her. They had no true courage, even the card player. But for the man standing nearby, this town was likely already dead and didn’t know it. There had been more life here the last time she’d come.

“You might try the Preacher.”

Her gaze went to the Blacksmith in curiosity. High cheekbones creased with laugh lines suggested he’d lived happily before the war, but the lack of amusement in his sapphire eyes said differently. Taller than her other men, he wore the same dark coloring and intelligent face.

“Before the war, Jacob was government.”

The man’s tone was calm, bored even, as he ignored her protective men. Alexa felt her lips curl into a small line of interest that he responded to with his welcoming body language. It said he’d been waiting for her.

“My thanks.” She waited, hoping he would know the code.

“My honor.” David paused. “Is that right? I don’t remember as much of it now. No one talks like that anymore.”

“Like what, iron bender?”

He smiled at the term, showing neat, white teeth. “The descendant speech.”

Alexa moved closer, openly evaluating. “And where did you hear it at all?”

“From my mother, and others.” His eyes darkened with that admission, tone becoming abrupt. “The Preacher is called Jacob. You’ll know him by his scarred face.”

It was a dismissal.

Alexa left him with the scowls of her fighters at his sudden rudeness. “Set it up.”

Billy and Mark lined up large targets that they pulled from those impossibly small carry bags. The other two men, Edward and Daniel, fell into a slowly revolving guard around the woman.

People stared at them from doors and windows, whispers floating on the dusty wind.

*“Gonna try, I am.”*

*“Got no use for gold, not in trade for my soul.”*

*“You see her eyes? Kill ya, as soon as look at ya, that one!”*

Alexa tuned them out, but kept her attention on the tall, lean man watching her intently from near the pub door as the battered townspeople began to spill out. The Blacksmith would have a turn, but there was more than excitement in his expression. There was relief, the kind that said he’d been waiting for her for a very long time.

Stooped over from constantly plowing an unforgiving earth, the people of River City were tired. It was in their arthritic hands and drooping faces. Each day’s survival was hard-won. Most wore jeans and long jackets, but a few boasted the coats of gunfighters, despite not belonging to that dangerous classification of refugee. Alexa wasn’t encouraged. She waved a hand at Edward, who moved the shooters into a clumsy line. Very little was said.

Alexa held out one of her guns to the first of them with an expressionless countenance. “One shot. Do the best you can.”

It was pitiful to view. None of the first half even hit close to a target. There were only four shooters left when one of them finally clipped an edge.

Alexa waited calmly, aware that the noise had drawn the church people. The Preacher stood in front of his sweetly dressed flock of five to glare at her with dark, disapproving blue eyes framed by jagged scars that crisscrossed his cheek and forehead. The reverend hadn’t always been peaceful. Narrow hips and an unruly mane of bushy black curls spun with the wind as he moved their way.

The last shooter also trimmed the target, but none of them expected to be invited along and none were. As the townspeople slowly headed back to the pub, Edward was there to press a small bit of gold dust into each of their dry palms.

Alexa motioned. “Take it down.”

“Another shooter? Upon a condition.”

Alexa raised an expectant brow at the lean Blacksmith. “And that would be?”

A few of the barflies had stopped to listen, but Alexa’s Eagles gently moved them on, giving her privacy. Except for the Preacher. They were now aware that this might be a double stop.

“I’d know the job first. I’m not a hired killer.”

Alexa’s mouth opened, but the Preacher answered for her.

“That’s all she’s come for. A fifth trained dog!”

The Blacksmith read a small amount of satisfaction in the beautiful blonde’s eyes, reminding him of the past in hurtful waves. There was no surprise for him when she simply held out the weapon.

The Preacher barked a laugh. “Well, at least she doesn’t deny it.” Jacob’s tone softened a bit. “Go on and have your turn, David. Perhaps you’ve had enough of this place.”

Alexa ignored the bitter man, not looking away from the Blacksmith. “I search for something long gone and nothing will stop me from finding it. *Nothing*.”

David only considered for a moment, then he reached for the gun.

“The only good man here and she’ll take him away!” Jacob’s voice grew louder. “And what is it he’ll die for? Nothing!”

Alexa also ignored this outburst, as did most of her men. The one who responded had been with her the longest, had the most right.

“You’ll have a turn as well. Anyone with that much anger to spew is no religious man.”

The Preacher spun to argue with Edward, but the sound of David’s shot stopped him.

“Near perfect. Very nice.”

Alexa’s praise had the same effect on David that it did the rest of her men. She moved from his line of sight before he could fall at her feet, as they still did sometimes when she caught them off guard. Her gifts, her pleasure, gave them strong bursts of devotion. It was a descendant side effect that she’d learned to use. The witch inside was appealing to males. “Last shooter!” She shoved the gun into his hand.

The religious leader might have resisted if not for the way her scent blew over him. When he shuddered, Alexa’s fighters understood. It was a smell like no other, one that called, tempted. And she knew what effect it had; she was standing in just the right place.

The scarred man shivered again when she smiled softly.

“It’s time for you to make *your* choice, Jacob.” Her tone became merciless. “I will leave you.”

She turned from him with that and each of her men knew what his response would be.

*Crack!*

His shot was dead on the target, blowing out the entire center.

Alexa nodded without looking back. “Tear it down. I’ll be at the church. Stay within a call.”

A subtle sexuality filled the air as the minds of her men turned to the few working women watching them hungrily. Not voicing her disapproval, Alexa moved toward the rickety church that was now empty.

Jacob followed with a furious glare toward David, who was disappearing into the pub to get the gold.

The church was spotless, clean enough to eat from the wooden floor and yet, it was unloved. The candles were lit, and even the offering plate held valued items, but it had not been done with care. There was no feeling of awe or reverence, only of disappointment. To Alexa, it was clear that the Preacher didn’t want to be here. “Will you break bread with me, Jacob?”

He flinched at the name as it echoed inside the rickety shack, scarred face at a loss for words. He blew out an angry breath. “Yes.”

Alexa chose the altar purposely, laying out a simple meal of smoked meat, wine, and hard bread. She moved to wash with no thought to his feelings, but there was only a low mutter when she dirtied the blessed water. *Good*. He would have to leave these things behind to come with her.

Jacob watched her move, her firm, healthy body twisting his mind into fiery pits and sweaty fantasies. She was beautifully made.

When she pushed her cloak back to begin the meal, he felt his body harden, ache. *I want her!*

“Enough to forsake your vows, to kill on command as my sixth trained dog?” She sent out more of the pheromones that drew men to her.

Flushing in horror at having his words used that way, Jacob dipped his head. Forced to choose between his nature and keeping up the lie, he struggled. “I… Yes.”

Alexa broke the bread. “I belong to no man.”

He cringed at the tone.

“So it’s understood. You’ll share to seal your promise?”

It wasn’t a hard choice. Really, there wasn’t a choice at all. “Yes.”

His husky whisper caused her to smile. This time, she let the effect land on him. “Mine?”

Jacob fell to his knees at the altar. “Yes! Thank you for wanting me!”

Satisfied, Alexa handed him half of the bread. “We are so bonded, Jacob. Nothing shall break it.”

**2**

“I was afraid.”

Jacob’s shameful whisper drew no response as they lay together. He continued with a shaking voice. “Because of my face.”

Alexa’s bare chest rose and fell evenly in the silence.

His tone became urgent. “I’m sorry!”

She responded instantly this time. “If I told you to go right now, naked, to the whores who lay with my men and shoot them?”

Sated and wanted, Jacob didn’t even think about refusing. “I don’t have a gun. Can I use yours?”

Alexa chuckled tiredly. It was a dangerous thing, the way she’d always been able to bind men to her, and yet, it was useful. With these six, she would now be able to find Safe Haven. “When I leave, you’ll be at my side and with a weapon of your own.”

Filled with pain and joy, Jacob let her pull him close, this time to sleep.

**3**

Alexa stepped from the church to find four of her men lounging patiently around the steps. David also waited nearby with a kit and bedroll on his wide shoulders.

Alexa looked at Daniel and then back to David. “Your student.”

Daniel nodded willingly, eager to please his mistress.

Alexa stepped aside to let their newest member be seen. “This one as well.”

Gone was the traditional black and white garb of a religious man, and no beard tempered the ugliness of his scars. In their place was the complete outfit that all of her men wore.

In his mid-twenties, Jacob’s dark eyes gazed back with no expression, but the healthy color in his cheeks told the others he’d enjoyed his time alone with their leader. If not for the scars, his baby soft skin would probably have been hard for women to resist. Without them, he could have easily been the best looking member of her crew. Instead, he appeared the cruelest.

Edward smothered his faint twinge of jealousy. “The riders came in.”

Noting the deep purple of the coming sunset, Alexa moved down the stairs.

Edward fell in on her right and the others followed, showing the two new men where to walk.

“Eleven horses and eight men wearing Nazi gear and markings. They went into the pub and straight upstairs, like they were meeting someone.”

“Did they know you were watching?”

“Yes.” Edward was uneasy. “Their leader is sharp...dangerous.”

Alexa didn’t doubt his observation. She was only eager to make her own. “Daniel, take the rookies and set up camp a mile east. Get them started.”

Daniel waved at the men, turned toward the west. A direction given in public meant the opposite to keep the rats on their trail guessing.

The two new men didn’t want to go, but neither protested this first order. They moved away with reluctant steps.

Edward talked faster as Alexa’s pace increased. “White, army clothes and boots with the swastikas. The leader carries a dual sword belt, but only one saber.”

Alexa stopped at the bottom of the pub steps; her three remaining men waited while she considered.

What would their kind come to River City for? The only thing here was the town itself. It was prone to flooding and there was little of real value. Except...this town rested on top of what had once been a vital government bunker.

Alexa looked at the only mounts in sight. The Nazis’ horses, probably the last in this dusty state, were nearly dead. The blackie with the limp would be lame as soon as the swelling went down in his fetlock. What would make them ride such valuable animals into the ground? In this new world, a good horse was precious. The only reason her group didn’t have them was because it wasn’t necessary and the lengthy, bonding journey was.

Her eyes narrowed. Only three things held any power now–food, water, and weapons. They must think the bunker still held one of those.

“And my fighters want to explore.” Alexa’s smile was hard as she turned away. “Maybe we’ll meet in the darkness.”

Alexa moved them into the brittle trees, not seeing the town lighting up behind her as dusk fell, but she was aware that it was coming to life. After such a hard ride, would those men wait for daylight or head out as soon as the town settled for the night? Her pace increased again. She and her three available hands had a stop to make that would answer that question.

**4**

Glittering green eyes watched their passage with longing and contempt in equal measures. She’d excluded him for a religious freak and an iron bender. Not that there weren’t reasons for Rick’s existence other than Safe Haven, such as the riders who’d come in four days late, but to be left for the likes of those two! It was an insult the traitor took to heart.

Rick watched the woman pause on the steps with a familiarity that he instantly loathed. He’d seen her kind once before. He had tried to kill them all and failed. Had she sensed it on him?

The woman turned away.

Rick eased out the door and headed for the outside stairs to the loft. He had a goal here that would get done, but the blonde and her fighters were now in the front of his bitter, calculating mind. Cesar had been gone for half a decade. His charred gold convertible was overgrown with nature, but Rick was still looking for a way to avenge the evil slave trader he’d belonged to. The two months after the war had been the best of his life and someone would pay for ending that. Maybe this woman and her small army. He’d failed to kill Adrian, to extinguish Safe Haven’s light, but fate had just given him a second chance to keep it from returning.

**5**

Jacob and David followed Daniel into the thin trees, glancing over their shoulders repeatedly looking for Alexa.

Knowing it was expected of him, Daniel drew in a breath and spun around. “Pay attention!” He barked it loud enough to make them both freeze in surprise. “She doesn’t need you that much! Earn your place.”

The teacher turned his back and moved on.

The two men hurried to catch up, sharing rueful looks, but neither of them considered changing their minds.

“Do what I do, all the time. Start now.” Daniel began to move in a rotating watch pattern that they tried hard to copy. As they went past the bunker hole, that glint of steel was noted again and ignored. There would be time later, if Alexa allowed it.

“We do everything one way–hers. You’ll be my students, but she’s the real teacher.” He led them through the trees at a fast clip, a bit disappointed that he would miss the fight with the riders, but he was eager to help make her choices fit in. Daniel had only earned one reward from Alexa in the time he’d been with her. He wasn’t quite as fast or sharp as the others, but with a gun, he was still lethal. He was hoping he would be a good teacher, too, and be noticed for it.

Hearing their steps, the rustle of their clothes, their breathing, he spun again. “You make too much noise! You’ll get her killed.”

With that awful warning, Daniel turned toward the path. They, too, would have an apprentice someday if the mistress approved it. Mark had been his first. He had been Edward’s. They shared everything.

That sent his thoughts back to pleasing Alexa. Daniel frowned. It wouldn’t please her that he wasn’t focused on this task. He was the first to have two students at the same time. He wanted her to be proud. Daniel stepped aside, waving a scarred hand. “There’s a trail here. We’ll go on when one of you find it.”

# Chapter Six

**The Mystery**

**1**

**F**ive once beautiful horses emerged from the knee-high fog with foaming mouths and unhappy noises of misery. They were ignored.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” The riders talked openly, not worried about attracting attention. In this new world, Nazis were once again a powerful group. Only those not afraid of death challenged them.

“Didn’t like the look of ‘em.”

“Me neither.”

“Stop it, shut up.” Their leader commanded obedience. “Set up a perimeter. We’re almost there.”

“Where?”

“The bunker, idiot. *You* go in first.”

“Aww, man.”

The authority was shoddy at best, but when the dirty grubber in the center glared, the man on his far right looked away.

“Fifty-foot northeast from where I’m sittin’. Find it.”

Two of the men hurried ahead. Using small lighters to see by, their flames cast eerie shadows on the cactus and briar patches that surrounded them.

The hired hands were just that–extra fingers without brains. The leader watching them swallowed his uneasy feeling. He’d left his regular men in Lincoln to avoid splitting this reward evenly, but Donny wished he’d chosen differently now. These four were useless for anything more than sniffing duty.

“Found it.”

The metal hatch wasn’t sealed. It came open with only minimal effort, making the leader’s stomach churn. Someone else had been here, recently. “Guns out, use torches and canisters. You know the drill.”

They moved slowly, clearly reluctant to venture into the stinking darkness.

“Can’t this wait for daylight?”

“No. The dust storm slowed us up. We have to deliver the gas and vials to Roscoe in five days. He’s meeting us in Lincoln and we’ll have to hurry to make that.”

“But I thought we was...”

Tiring, Donny spun around and knocked the whining man off his horse with a single brutal blow to the temple. “Get in there!”

The bleeding man crawled the few feet and disappeared into the ground.

Donny turned to the others. “You two get the perimeter set. Ben, you’re with me.”

Donny let Ben go in first, pausing to take a map from his belt. With a last glare of warning toward the two nervous guards, he also vanished into the ground.

**2**

“Get the rabbit. A single shot each.” Knowing one of them to be unarmed, Daniel left his holster clear and immediately felt a rookie slide his Colt free and fire to the right.

The fat hare dropped with two bullet wounds. Jacob had his own gun, given to him by Alexa.

David slid Daniel’s gun back into the holster and then went to get the rabbit without being told.

Daniel hid a grin. She’d chosen well again.

**3**

Donny froze on the long ladder of the bunker as the two shots echoed. The sound of a scuffle from the darkness below was little comfort. “Give us some light, Ben.”

There was no response, though Donny could feel the ladder vibrating and knew he wasn’t alone on it. His eyes widened, realizing what that meant.

Donny fumbled awkwardly for his gun, but it was too late to stop the relentless hands that jerked him off the rope and sent him into the darkness below. “Aaahhh...”

*Thud!*

Alexa was satisfied. “Give us some light.”

A single emergency stick flared a second later, implying her men had been ready and waiting for the order, but also willing to function in the dark despite most of them fearing it. Aware of her own terrors, Alexa grunted her approval. She scanned the new bodies that had fallen on top of dozens of dusty skeletons, wanting to be sure that there were no survivors down here. There wasn’t.

The signs of past radiation sickness were evident in broken bottles of iodine tablets and dust covered stacks of empty bandage boxes, but there would be more horror in here soon. Edward had made short work of the Nazi guards topside. Their bodies would be dropped into this hole. Then it would all be burnt.

Full of cobwebs and dust, the wide space they’d found was a panic room. The number of bodies directly below the hatch suggested there hadn’t been time to get the new President to safety. Moldering furniture couldn’t hide the story of the awful ending that had occurred here. Cartridge casings and bloodstains still glared at them from beneath grinning skulls.

“Five-minute scan, in sight.”

A web of other rooms sprawled out from this one, but they only needed to look in the first open door to know searching the abandoned complex was useless. The skeleton on the revolting couch was mutated. Staying here might still be dangerous.

Alexa concentrated, suddenly sure they’d stumbled onto something she needed. There was a sense of peace here despite the nightmares filling these dark halls, a feeling of safety.

The witch inside scented the stale, stinking air and caught a ghostly whiff of Polo that was instantly gone. *Adrian!*

Alexa lit her torch with a mutter, brightening the enormous room around them to find the message sprayed across the monitors in front of her.

All of the fighters stared in stunned surprise.

Safe Haven

All Survivors Welcome

NE to WY

Channels 7 & 17

And along the bottom:

God Bless the United States and those we leave behind!

**4**

“Have a constant loyalty to New America, and you’ll fit with us. Slack off, forget your place, endanger her intentionally or accidentally, and I’ll remove you.”

Not quite sure if that was a bluff or not, neither man was willing to challenge that. Daniel’s next words eased some of their tension.

“There will not be jealousy or attempts to control any part of her. She is not yours or ours. We are *hers* and we share everything.”

Wondering, but not daring to ask if that included intimacy, both rookies continued to listen and copy Daniel as they walked.

“If you have questions, ask them carefully, respectfully. You can come to me or any of the others when you don’t know what to do. We’ve all gone through the same training you’re starting today.” Daniel said it with little emotion. “The quest matters to you for your own reasons, as it does to each of us, but don’t ever let your needs or desires come before hers. The rest of us will run you out before she has to.” Daniel glared at them now. “Do you understand these rules? There won’t be second chances.”

Jacob and David both nodded, aware that it now felt like a fool’s quest without the woman here.

“Good.” Daniel flipped a hand at the ugly Preacher. “You’re on my right; David on my left. No matter what else is going on, unless she says different, do what I do.”

**5**

Two bottles crashed to the bunker floor in rapid succession, followed by a small torch. Firelight began to glare balefully up at them from the hole.

“Cover it. The wind down there says it’ll have enough fuel. No need to advertise where it started.” That sent her thoughts back to the other Nazis waiting in town. Would those come looking for these?

After a moment of consideration, she turned away. It didn’t matter. The best had come with their leader and those hadn’t been very good. The remaining flunkies would likely run, but somewhere, there was a bigger man pulling all these strings. It bothered Alexa to leave him unpunished. It was unlikely that her father would have.

These men had said they were meeting their buyer, Roscoe, in Lincoln. Perhaps she and her fighters would get lucky enough to pass through Nebraska. To want deadly gases and chemicals meant there was someone in mind to use them on. Alexa’s heart burned with fury. Hadn’t all the hell of the war been enough to make people see the error in the old ways?

Slightly off tune to her mood swing, the three fighters followed her through the darkness toward their camp, wondering if she would give a reward. Granted, it had been only a small battle, but they had done well.

When they stepped into the firelight of camp, the three males shared smiles of resignation. What they’d done tonight was nothing compared to what Daniel had accomplished in their short absence. If there was a reward given tonight, he would be the lucky man to receive it.

Jacob and David were now dressed identical to the rest, and their tools and gear were exactly as they should be. It was easy to see the rookies approved of the new setup from the way they were working. Their hands didn’t fumble, but drew needed items without looking as they built side-by-side smokeless fire pits in front of a one-man canvas that appeared to have been set up and broken down multiple times. Near these was a larger fire with a pot charring in the softly flickering flames. Fresh stacks of wood sat nearby, as did seven freshly filled canteens.

Alexa moved into their camp with a lighter heart, her mood improving. They’d found the first message on the day they had become seven strong. Fate had led her here. If it also took them away from Nebraska and Roscoe, so be it.

Daniel hand signaled an instruction to the new men, then watched Alexa as they hurriedly began serving the meal to the others now sitting in a loose circle nearby. She’d saved him, given him a new reason for living. Did she know how grateful he was?

The rookies were as careful as their teacher had cautioned them to be, also eager to show the woman they were serious. The meal passed slowly, enjoyably. While they all ate, the others filled Daniel in on the bunker and the clue they’d found. The talk quickly moved to planning.

“We’ll hit Cheyenne and try to stock up, unless anyone knows of a better place?” There was silence, each of them enjoying the beans and biscuits. Alexa waited patiently, looking over her men. With a quick smile and a thick goatee, Billy was the quiet rebel of her group. He still favored colorful t-shirts under his fighting clothes–the kind with slogans best kept covered around strangers–and if there was a joke to be told, he was the first to do it.

Sitting next to the Driver, Mark preferred a cleanshaven scalp and spent time achieving it daily. The sexy muscles of his head and arms glistened in the firelight. Each of her men had their own addition to the uniform she’d given them. For Billy, it was the t-shirts beneath his clothes. For Mark, it was the cutoff sleeves of the black shirt that had already given his skin a deep, beautiful bronze glow.

At his side was the Preacher. Jacob’s concession to the uniform was the cross he wore next to his heart. He was a contradiction, her religious killer.

After Jacob’s scarred face, Daniel was ugliest among them with all his battle marks. He’d lived for thrills before the war and his body had paid the price in stitches, gashes, slashes, and gouges that littered his hands, arms, and legs. Only his face was unblemished, showing a handsome profile that had been protected out of vanity.

David, her future magic user, was taller than the rest of her men, both in size and nature, and carried an aloofness that matched her own.

At her side was Edward. Easily the most dangerous, the Horseman was cool and calm when it was needed. Dependable and ever loyal, he was also vain and a bit spoiled by his place as her first. He didn’t hold it over the heads of his teammates. He knew neither she nor they would allow that, but he flaunted it around strangers with no remorse. Still, there was little she could ask of Edward that he couldn’t achieve. When she’d wondered if he was the perfect student, nothing had been truer. He soaked up her lessons and repeated them in exact detail. For all his small faults, there was no one better suited to her right.

Around them, the night moved, but no more so than usual. Shadows gathered, fought, and retreated with information. It was happening everywhere, but as long as they weren’t attacked, Alexa permitted it. Mother Nature wanted all humans gone, but that couldn’t be allowed to happen. Part of repairing the world included letting Nature see how much respect they had. Adrian would retrain humanity to honor the planet. If that didn’t work, Alexa planned to do what she always had–fight.

“If we could cross the Little River, there’s a rail yard within a few hours of Laramie.”

“That’s right. That zone was so flooded, it’s probably untouched.” Mark slapped Billy on the shoulder, not caring that the area was rumored to be a hunting ground for some type of mythical creature. “Great idea.”

“And the river?” Alexa began taking things from her kit. No one knew the area as well as Billy. He’d lived near there before the war.

“The same way we handled the snakes, if we can find the right setup. Skiffs, if not.” Edward had a hint of fondness in his usually expressionless tone. He still cherished the memories of their first month alone together.

“Supplies will be replenished shortly and our first sign has been found.” She looked at them as her scarred fingers neatly twisted the small paper. “Our true quest for Safe Haven begins. Cry off now if there are doubts.”

There was silence. Alexa grinned. “I would have been surprised and that rarely happens.”

She lit the rolled smoke, inhaling deeply. She passed it to Daniel first with a nod of approval at the two silently watching rookies. “We’ll do much together, see much. Our hearts will beat with life.”

She lit a second smoke, took another deep draw. Her eyes went to the darkness that was creeping closer to smother their light. Her tone became grave. “We will also face unimaginable danger. Our enemy has begun to gather soldiers as well, and soon, we will be the target of nearly everything that breathes. Many ugly battles wait for us.”

Her gaze went to the new men, already considering Jacob to be her last. David had been hers before the first shot was fired. “Nature is furious with all mankind. She wants us gone from her shores and forests, our bones rotting under her contaminated waters. Her loathing is so strong that she goes against the limits of her power. Do not trust anything living from this moment on. We have each other for that.”

Alexa stood, eyes telling Daniel that what he’d been seeking had been earned. “Billy will take over the students. Mark and Edward on guard.”

She moved toward the shadows.

Daniel followed, heart thumping.

Alexa’s cloak covered them almost completely, caught on the tree Daniel was against. Only the barest of their shadows could be seen by the two men on watch, but there was no mistaking the sounds.

“As you would.”

Daniel’s hands slid behind her jaw, gently drawing her closer. He groaned as their lips met. He made the sound again when she slid his hand to the snap of her pants.

The men on duty moved their perimeter back a bit to give privacy, but they both knew it wouldn’t matter. Their leader expected complete control over themselves at all times, but when she took them, she wanted *all* of them. Noise was the last thing on a man’s mind.

“Ooh…” Alexa slid over Daniel with a groan, pressing close. His hips bucked in response.

“Uhh!” Daniel growled in stunned pleasure as she took him, lost in her embrace. “Ohh...never felt...mmm!”

The two guards shared a look of tolerant amusement, moving back a bit more as vivid blue light streamed from the forest around the couple. In the distance, another fire glowed as brightly; the burning bunker provided their cover.

The rookies were on guard with Billy, the others in their bedrolls, as Alexa and Daniel returned to camp. Hardened male hearts clenched with emotion as she gently pressed a soft kiss to the Biker’s pale cheek.

“My thanks.”

Daniel flushed with pleasure, voice full of devotion. “My honor!”

**6**

“It doesn’t exist.”

“I tell you it does!” Rick sneered harshly, still feeling the sting from the woman’s scornful blue eyes. She’d known him for what he was at first glance, and for her to see it so fast was more proof. Chase a myth? Not the likes of her. “Safe Haven exists.” The outcast watched the flames leap from the bunker hole.

Aware that the other three were looking at him stupidly, Rick jerked a thumb at the bunker. “Why else would they have burned it?”

“To cover the murders.”

The scavenger snorted at the old world answer. “Why? You see a police car around here that we should be hiding from?”

The others snickered.

The treacherous man now leading them ignored the instinct saying he couldn’t beat the blonde alone or with these idiots. It was a feeling Rick knew all too well.

“It would be nice to find the supplies they left.”

Rick didn’t bother to tell them that part of the myth was crap. He’d traveled with Safe Haven long enough to know the refugee camp hadn’t had any extra supplies to leave behind for survivors. It was one of those extras that always got tacked onto a legend or a rumor. If not for that lie, Safe Haven might have already been forgotten.

“I saw light to the east as we rode up. If not for being on horseback, I wouldn’t have noticed. We’ll follow, and hang back until they make a mistake.”

The slowest of them frowned. “And the woman?”

Rick leered. “After we retrain her, we’ll take her to Roscoe in payment for our failure to acquire the gas. That way, he’ll only kill one of you.”

**7**

Alexa’s chuckle woke the men on either side of her. Unpleasant, the sound was a perfect start to their day.

“There are new rats on our trail.” She closed her eyes, enjoying the comfort of their big bodies a bit longer. “We’ll handle that along the way, I think.”

Daniel nodded to the guards, sent his eyes over the two quietly working students, and then found Edward on the other side of them.

The sated man raised a brow, receiving shakes of the head in response that said there wasn’t a problem. Daniel also closed his eyes. Alexa was warm and calm between him and Mark. The two men wouldn’t budge until she did. One curled around her, the other securely in her embrace, she was surrounded by their dreams instead of her own.

“She’ll never ask.” Billy’s words to the rookies were low, explaining the situation. “She used to wake us up with screams. This works better.”

The students understood what hadn’t been said. It was an offer to be made in the darkness of the night and then accepted or refused, but never mentioned to her. Whatever nightmares chased her, she didn’t want to talk about them.

The new men had woken slowly, eyes repeatedly going to the sleeping trio as they quickly set up a morning camp. Billy’s instructions were almost silent, teaching them the basic hand gestures while letting the others sleep.

The porridge was bubbling nicely the next time the blonde opened her eyes.

When Alexa stood to greet the day, male attention lingered on her dawn swept hair. Her braids were almost never unraveled, but instead of a dreadlock effect, it seemed to protect her hair and her head, providing a thin cushion that served her well in a fight. A simple rinse with her canteen water washed the dust from those long braids and even longer body.

The men all turned their backs to give her a moment of privacy. Unless she called to one of them, it was always this way. She’d more than earned their respect. The slight silvering of her hair was something her senior men had noticed, though. It had come over the last weeks, with each of their adventures sending more of the shiny threads through her blonde locks. It was worrisome, but none of them was sure how to ask about it. As she joined them at the fire for breakfast, they still weren’t.

Half an hour after eating, they were on the road again, with Alexa proudly leading them. She now had her army. The hardest part of this quest had been finished. Upon starting, fresh from her escape, she’d doubted there were any fighters left to be found, let alone to have come upon ones so strong, so gifted. They were already a force to be reckoned with and she set her feet firmly. They would go around no more.

# Chapter Seven

**Myths and Legends**

**1**

**T**he seven fighters moved at a steady pace. In the distance, the landscape was deceptive. One crested hill of muddy brush would reveal miles of pristine land unharmed by the effects of man. An hour later, the trees would begin to turn black and the earth under their boots shifted dangerously to lead them toward whole towns nearly covered in webs of nature.

The four senior men kept the form straight automatically, and the rookies tried to do the same as they filled out the ends of the line. Making very little noise against the stillness, quiet words floated to the new men, who listened intently.

“Eight by ten, with a short wing.”

“And the rooms?”

“Three.”

Edward and Mark worked on her wants while she and Billy guarded.

Daniel looked after the new men. “Still hearing noise.”

The faint crunch disappeared. That was Jacob. He had an old injury that made his right foot turn. It was likely painful to keep it straight, but Daniel knew the rookie would make sure it was on each step now. Corrections in front of Alexa were rarely given and not usually repeated. Pain was nothing to the frost in those chips of ice that she turned on a man and used to cut him in half.

“Carry bags?”

“They already have them.”

Mark nodded. He should have known she’d be prepared for two instead of one. Their leader was the contingency analyst the old world had needed. The government had only planned to be underground for a year. Alexa would have been ready to dig in for five.

Mark grimaced, thoughts bitter. Not that the government hadn’t tried hard in some things. It had taken well over a year for his fellow inmates to begin starving.

“Rotating form. Rookies follow in place.”

The two men stayed where they were while the other four began a steady walk around Alexa as she moved forward. It had little grace. The buried debris was impossible to avoid, but it was still neat. When her call came, the rookies were ready. “Full crew, rotating watch.”

Daniel waved them to places ahead of and behind himself, noting Jacob’s careful footing as they spent the next minutes patrolling around their leader.

“Direction change.”

The four senior men spun smoothly, catching the rookies off guard. Firm shoves to the shoulders put them back in place.

“Again.”

This time, Jacob tripped over his carefulness and turned it into a roll that put him quickly back on his feet and in line, face red.

“Again.” Alexa kept working them, showing the two new men how to fit with their team.

“Standard form.”

This one was the easier, simple V they’d begun the day with, and the two River City males were secretly very glad for the break. The constant rotation was a workout.

Two minutes later, when their breathing had evened out, Alexa spun a finger. “Rotating watch.”

**2**

They continued late into the morning, with Alexa calling periodic breaks to keep her men from wearing down, but she didn’t take it easy on them. She watched, evaluating. Soon, she would need to ease their worries of not being able to keep up. Her other men were the same as they’d started. Every other day of this journey had been spent this way, but Jacob and David were sweaty, disheveled, scraped, bruised. *They look weak in comparison.* She heard Jacob fall and roll again. *But appearances are often deceiving in this world.*

Needing to wait until the rookie wouldn’t think he was the reason for the stop, Alexa subtly slowed their pace to find a spot for their lunch campsite. The ugly ground was becoming more like a swamp as they traveled. It had rained today. The dew on decaying trees dripped steadily, but the earth was arid. So much that it had cracked in huge, jagged patterns resembling glass shatters after a harsh impact. For being so damp, the trees were also brittle and dust bound. The weak branches hung over the two lanes of weed-hidden pavement like a canopy of desperation. In the distance, it looked the same, but appearances were not to be believed.

Alexa held up a hand in that soon-to-be familiar sign of warning.

Edward and Mark fell into protection detail around the group, one moving to the front, one to the rear. The other two fighters placed Alexa and the rookies between themselves, creating a barrier from each direction.

Ahead of them, something moved, but when the other fighters remained motionless, so did the rookies. They understood where they’d been placed. If someone got through the other four, the two River City men would be Alexa’s last defense.

The movement was slow, plodding. It reminded the men of the very recognizable clip-clop of a shod horse. Behind that came the soft noise of a harness jingle rigged with the tones of goods for sale.

Alexa pointed a calloused finger down and spun it in a fast circle that sent her senior men into action. They formed a crisscross line on both sides of her, with the rest lined up neatly behind. The rows were perfectly straight as the rookies stayed where they’d been put. Alexa’s switch had cleared half of the road.

Seven sets of hard eyes watched the horse drawn cart roll closer.

“Potions, charms, spirits…” Not uttered, the words were spoken with a rhyming lilt that suggested a carefree innocence. The creature who called them? Not so much.

Alexa felt her army tense as the troll came into view. Only for the new men, she spoke. “Do what we do. Consume nothing we don’t carry now.”

“Trolls will steal your memories.” Daniel instructed them from legends, not actual knowledge. “They were swamp dwellers before. Their existence was denied, but myth, they are not.”

The red and black, star-carved wagon came within ten yards before Alexa reacted. “Information for dust.”

“Aye.” The creature driving the solid gray horse slowed. “And maybe more, slayer?”

Alexa shrugged, voice carrying none of the greed in his gravely pitch. “Perhaps.”

The traveler studied them avidly; vivid yellow eyes rapidly changed from bright blue to dark brown and then back, as if he couldn’t keep himself together in his excitement. Dressed in a black robe and boots of the same shade, the tufts of long, bright yellow fur coming from his ears suddenly curled around his thick neck.

The troll bellowed childishly. “Share camp?”

With his greenish, pockmarked skin, he was a foreign nightmare with hands three times the size of a human male. His bushy brows were a deep, blood red, giving his skin the glow of a monster. His pointed nails and fang-like teeth added to the impression.

“Why not?” Alexa’s agreement surprised only David and Jacob. “Here?”

The troll grinned cruelly. “’Tis not *mans’* road anymore.” He extended a massive paw. “Jendon.”

All six of the fighters tensed.

Alexa shook her head, not smiling. “Will you begin our trading with trickery? I have no need so bad as to tolerate such as that!”

The creature cringed back from her as if slapped. “Nay, Lady. There are so few left as you. I’m sorry!”

Alexa arched a brow. “Have you seen such as me?”

“Aye.” Jendon bobbed furiously, sly gleam coming back into his flickering gaze. “Gone now, though. Culled the herd and split.”

Alexa showed him a scarred hand and slowly took a pouch from her belt. She tossed it gently, but with an intentional curve.

Alexa was proud of her men when none of them reacted to the creature’s incredibly fast movement. Jendon jumped, caught the pouch, and stored it in a blur. Back neatly in place seconds later, they continued the transaction, which was mostly overlooked by the six shocked males. Even for all they’d come through, this was a lot to accept.

“Perhaps those who follow us will not know the words.”

The troll’s eyes shifted in quick flashes. A businessman had been hired. “Aye, Lady. Without those, they’d go no further.”

“Or perhaps *you* won’t. One is harder than the rest.”

Jendon grinned again at her toneless warning, huge yellow fangs gleaming. “*That* would be something to see.”

Alexa shrugged. “I know where to place my dust.”

Satisfied with her fast response, Jendon’s ugly smile faded.

Alexa motioned for her twitchy men to set up a full camp even though they had half a day’s light left.

Edward and Mark stayed at her side as the others took care of it. She was rarely without a personal guard. If she fell, so would the quest, but with this…monster in their firelight, she would have two defenders.

Their camp was made within minutes now that they had more bodies to help with the chores, but Jendon still beat them. His speed as he unloaded things was eerie.

Alexa could feel the tension, but she didn’t offer any comfort. Nerves had to be conquered by them all and paranoia, as well. Some things carried a clear sense of menace. The troll was one of those. “Will you join us for the meal?”

Jendon shook his large head at her offer, body piled under him in a barrel shape that hid how tall he really was. “I have no need.”

“Our circle, then, tradesman?”

Jendon smiled, more naturally this time. “With honor. Let your men stand while we barter.” The note of greed was unmistakable.

Alexa narrowed her eyes in warning. “Do not violate my hospitality. Save the switch for those who come after us.”

Chastened, Jendon nodded. “Aye, mistress. Truly none such as you have I seen, but for the times right after the death horse seal was broken. Only one other group.”

“Safe Haven.” Alexa’s voice was the barest breath.

The creature’s eyes widened. “You seek those who came before!” He paused in shock, mouth open to claim that it was a fool’s quest, perhaps, and then snapped it shut instead.

Her fighters, even the new ones, understood. Her eyes were beautiful, absorbing, hypnotic. They said she couldn’t be beaten. It was hard to mock that confidence.

“Tell me, outcast. I’d know it all and every pouch of dust I’m carrying will be split between us.”

Ignoring the insult, Jendon’s bumpy profile lit up with harsh greed in the flickering light of the fire. “Deal.”

He put a hand out.

This time, Alexa allowed a brief seconds’ contact that made the creature grimace in distaste.

“No need for that!” He whined at the heat, making her men exchange grins.

She shrugged indifferently. “I thought so.”

The woman looked at Daniel, who motioned the rookies forward with cautioning words to begin serving the meal.

“Talk now, Jendon.”

The troll did as she instructed. “When the seal was broken, we such beings went further into the bogs and forests, yet many of us perished beside the humans we had felt a kindness for.”

Alexa swallowed a bite of the bitter stew that Jacob had prepared; she now knew who had made last night’s evening meal. It hadn’t been the Preacher. She’d been able to eat that plate of food.

Jendon paused at her grimace.

Alexa gestured for him to continue as she reached for her canteen.

Jacob flushed, aware of the problem. He’d used too much salt, like he’d been doing for decades. Most of his meals since the war had come from cans and pubs.

“We were content to hide, as we have always done. We survived.” The troll’s eyes widened a bit, the unsettling flicker slowing. “And then the winds arrived, much too early. They said we–the undead’s exiled defenders–had been recalled into service.”

The creature cocked his chin in wonder and confusion. “The chains that bound us before became our weapons. We carry out our new mission even now.”

This was said regretfully. Understanding came to the men at Alexa’s response.

“Humans.”

“The enemy.” Jendon hung his head in shame at the admission, though the males had a sense that it wasn’t genuine.

“There were attacks.” His rough voice filled with horror. “None were spared, not even the little ones!”

“Why were you banished, Jendon?” Her question demanded honesty.

“I gave safe passage to a human child.” His voice broke on the next awful words. “They brought her back and made me kill her!”

Alexa had no sympathy for his sobs. “Better that you had died instead. There is no forgiveness for such a sin.”

Instead of the rage that brutal truth could have brought, there was only profound loss. “Aye.”

The silence was thick.

Alexa looked toward the cart, to his sleeping horse that was still in its traces. “May we?”

The troll nodded, unconcerned.

Alexa met Edward’s eye for a brief moment of communication.

Edward called David over. As the firelight bartering continued, the two males fed, watered, and rubbed down the strong Appaloosa with quietly admiring hands and tones.

“You became a nomad?”

Jendon’s flickering eyes swung back to hers at the question. “Aye. My tribe served the rain goddess, making her potions and comforts. I do the same for those I meet.”

Alexa was sure those potions would be powerful. She leaned forward. “Of those you’ve met, I would hear now.”

Unable to resist the pull of a descendant, the troll began to speak of things that Alexa’s men had dreamed of before and during their time with her.

“Twas three full seasons ago when they came through our homeland. The bogs were especially wet and none of us wanted to leave, not even to carry out the new missions the Wind kept delivering. The swamps were perfect, more flooded than we’d ever seen them. We didn’t bother to keep a watch.” The troll’s unsettling face filled with a longing that Alexa understood well.

“Their noises drew us out. The screams and pain had become common, but this was a light in the darkness.”

“Safe Haven Refugee Camp.”

“Aye, Lady. Full of the hardest I’d seen until today.”

“They were defended against Nature?”

“She had no power over them!” Jendon whispered in awe. “Anything inside their light was protected.”

“How long were they there?”

“Near a week. They spent time in a city, the one that collapsed, and then they loaded up and went east.”

“You watched them the whole time?”

Jendon watched as she began to pull pouches from her cloak. “No one cared until the Wind found out that we’d let them pass and told on us.” His voice trembled. “Nature tore the bogs apart with a mighty shake that drove us out. Then came my shame.” Tears welled again.

Alexa tossed two of the four pouches she had dug out.

The troll’s attitude changed from sorrow to suspicious disbelief. “I cannot accept this much.”

Alexa’s smile was harsh in the firelight. “In return, you’ll stay close in case I have a need of you.”

Jendon’s eyes flickered rapidly between green and red now, between greed and anger at the trap. “For how long?”

“Until I’ve gotten my dust’s worth.”

The troll loathed her in that moment. His greedy nature was being used against him, but there was no trace of it in his response, only the proper servitude. “Master.”

Magic swirled through the chilling darkness. Brutal and ancient, the streaming green tails coiled around Jendon’s huge wrists, as the other end settled snugly into Alexa’s grip. Such a bond was unbreakable.

“Bright! Too bright!”

Alexa closed her eyes for a brief second.

Her shocked men watched the creature’s evil face relax.

“Better!”

“This binding stands. You will come when called.”

Jendon dropped his chin miserably.

He stared in confusion when Alexa added a third bag of the heavy dust to the stack at his feet.

“Timeless potion.”

Jendon made the pouches disappear. “Now?”

“Nay. I would hear more of those who came before.”

He paused, considering. “Have you heard the legend?”

Even though she had, Alexa was sure some of her army had not. “No.”

In a flash, the troll went to his cart and returned with a small harp. On the end was a disheveled fairy with golden wings and long, sharp teeth that she bared as she began to pluck the strings.

The troll paid her no notice, but started singing in a surprisingly pleasant voice:

*A light in the darkness,*

*Safe Haven once stood.*

*Sheltering survivors,*

*And serving the good.*

*A place of safety,*

*In a harsh new life.*

*Honor and duty,*

*Among the despair and the strife.*

*Blazing a path of hope,*

*Safe Haven Refugee camp came this way,*

*Arriving for many,*

*In time to be the saving ray.*

*And then they were gone, vanished,*

*Leaving only traces.*

*The new world slowly moved on,*

*And the survivors forgot their faces.*

*Years passed in hell.*

*Nuclear horror created more doubt.*

*It erased from the hurting land,*

*All the signs of their route.*

*Over the years, Safe Haven became myth,*

*A dream and rumor,*

*Scorned or ignored,*

*Treated with humor.*

*Forgotten by most,*

*The signs remain buried,*

*And the people in this hell,*

*Remain haggard and harried.*

*But for a few,*

*Ignorance remains,*

*Of the hope that once was,*

*Just after the Final Days.*

*Under the rubble,*

*Carved in the stone,*

*Are the notes of Safe Haven,*

*To lead people home.*

*Unable to stay,*

*They tried to make amends,*

*Guiding survivors,*

*To a life free of past sins.*

*On a tropical isle,*

*Civilization still exists,*

*Ruled with kindness,*

*Not iron fists.*

*Those left behind mock and scoff,*

*Throwing their hands up in denial,*

*While endless paradise waits,*

*Only for them to reconcile.*

There was a silence, thick with unspoken importance.

Alexa found David already watching for her instructions. “Bring a bottle, the red. Put out a standard watch.”

The rookie moved to Daniel for what she wanted, glad the senior man didn’t seem upset at the attention. Her invitation to join them had been clear.

“Another song, Lady?”

“Perhaps later.”

The troll sat the harp on the dirt next to him.

The snoozing fairy promptly buried her head under her shimmery wings and went back to sleep.

“What waits for us?!”

Her demanding shout was sudden and jarring, making the small fairy hiss in anger.

Jendon was only mournful. “Nothing. Nothing but trouble for your kind.”

Satisfied, Alexa took the bottle from David without looking at him. She motioned with her free hand.

David sat on her right, keeping his attention on their surroundings as much as on the creature across the dim flames.

Jendon studied the man, shifty eyes seeing what he had no doubt the woman already knew. “You’d use this one? You know what it will cause?”

“Stop.” Alexa cut Jendon off before he could confirm his suspicions. “Those are not your answers to give, nor your questions to ask.”

Jendon flinched from her reproach. “As you say.”

Alexa handed her knife to David. “A lock of your hair.”

The rookie did it quickly.

He hid a frown at her next request.

“A piece of your flesh.”

He removed it from the back of his leg, not wincing as red drops hissed into the fire during the exchange.

The troll took the items with obvious approval, stowing them beneath his robes. “Two hours.”

Alexa passed a small bandage to David without looking at him. “My thanks.”

His glance was curious; she permitted it. “As you would.”

David thought carefully. “What signs have you seen near here of those who came before, and where were they?” He could feel her approval at his choice.

Jendon looked to the woman to secure her approval before turning back. “The last I saw was a note carved into the stones of the Black Hills.”

“What did it say, layman?” David hadn’t known he was going to use the term, but the troll seemed happy enough to be called such.

“All survivors welcome. Traveling on a southeast line. Safe Haven Refugee Camp. God bless the USA.”

It was almost the same as they’d found in the bunker, bringing the fighters a wave of excitement and discovery. Safe Haven was real. They would find it or die trying.

**3**

The conversation slowed, but the night flew by. As a faint moon spun overhead, the troll turned worried yellow eyes on the blonde still sitting alertly by the fire. “Must I stay?”

Alexa shook her head, gesturing at the reddish bottle of liquid that he’d pulled from his robes a while back and set by the fire to warm. “Until it boils?”

“Not a second longer.”

“You may go in peace. Perhaps I’ll never have a need of you.”

Jendon lumbered to his feet, flickering eyes almost hypnotic as they changed from yellow to red and back again in rapid succession. “And if you do?”

“Then bring your wares and your mount. Both are at my leisure.”

The creature bowed, openly bitter this time. He was seated in the cart seconds later. When he’d hooked up the horse or retrieved the harp, none of them saw, but they were gone as the steady clip-clop and harness jingle rang out softly.

“Potions, charms, myths...”

The cart moved steadily away from their firelight, but Jendon’s voice came floating back to them.

*They came from the west,*

*Seven fighters to the end.*

*One stunning blonde warrior,*

*Leading six hardass men.*

*Through magic and death,*

*Demons and fire,*

*Clever ambushes,*

*and Nature’s ire...*

Alexa felt the moment they became a legend. She was filled with satisfaction and a longing to hurry, but she tempered her pride as they settled down for the night. There was a very long way to go. Tomorrow, they would reach Laramie and then head for South Dakota, where they would view Safe Haven’s message for themselves. This quest had only just begun.

Very tired, half of the group slept soundly just minutes later. There could have been grumbles and whispered complaints, but there was only light snoring and the light steps of those on guard. All of the males were content with the strange new life that Alexa had given them. For being in the nuclear wilderness, it was nearly perfect.

**4**

“They burnt it!”

Corbin surveyed the damage at the old bunker with a keen eye, ignoring the mutters of Paul and his soldiers. If Alexa had them set it on fire, she’d found something to prevent anyone else from knowing. What had been here?

The commander turned slowly, taking in each small scene until he had a clear idea of what had happened.

“I feel him.”

Paul’s words caused confusion for everyone except Corbin, who turned his way. “Where?”

Paul’s eyes were closed. “Everywhere. He’s been here.”

Corbin waved at the men, telling them to branch out and search the charred rubble. All he needed was a sign.

“Damn.”

Shane’s voice said it was a shock. Most of the men started to move into the next room.

“No!” Corbin glared. “Stand watch.”

The new men he was forced to work with were untrained, undisciplined, and on the edge of revolt. The big bunker hadn’t sent fresh provisions or promotions in a month. It made handling these men a careful balance. Not that Corbin was worried over his own safety. He wouldn’t be taken down by a mere mortal and he hoped these men knew it. The stories floating through the bunkers should be enough to tell them they were in over their heads if they thought to attack him and win.

“Over here!” Shane called.

Corbin and Paul stared at the sprayed words in shock. Two of the monitors hadn’t melted from the fire, protected by damp rolls of carpet.

*Safe Haven.*

Alexa had her first clue.

Elated, Corbin marched toward the rope ladder they’d used to get down here. “Burn it again, and this time, make sure it’s right.”

“But the report…”

“Should say it was Nazi vandals.” Paul informed Shane, earning a nod from Corbin.

No one else could be allowed to find these clues. If the big bunkers found out where Adrian had gone, they would probably nuke it.

Corbin marked the location on his map and settled back to be driven to their evening camp. The hunt would continue. His mood was great.

**5**

Up before even Daniel this time, Jacob and David began the morning with quiet work, hoping to please Alexa. They made coffee, pancakes, and Spam with MRE bacon refried into gravy to go over both. It was a warm meal to help them stand against what looked to be a cold, dreary day.

Edward and Mark were on duty, their rested faces showing pleasure at how well the new men were blending in. Seven strong, there would now be new sets to learn, new forms and fighting styles to practice. It would be a welcome change from the weeks of repetition they’d had since picking up Billy.

Alexa gravitated to the good smells as soon as she woke. She sat near the fire and accepted the plate of food.

The other fighters who weren’t on duty joined her.

Mark was eager to have their route confirmed. “Outer edges of Laramie by late afternoon?”

Alexa stabbed a bite with her bent fork as she answered. “Maybe a bit later, if we have to hole up while it blows over.”

The clouds in their path were ominous, but still half a day away. What would reach them soonest was the wall of rain leading the storm. They would be soaked before their normal lunching time if Alexa kept them on the road in it, as she sometimes did. Before they broke camp, the wind started to gust.

Hours later, it still hadn’t eased.

Sensitive to the changes in the weather, David moved out of formation to reach his teacher. “Something’s happening.” He jerked a thumb upward, where the sky had turned to a serene shade of blue. “There.”

Not sure how to handle it, Daniel waved him to the front. “Tell her.”

David moved quickly to Alexa’s side, but not so fast that she didn’t see him coming. He’d worked around skittish animals all his life. He knew better than to approach someone like her from a blind spot. “There’s trouble.”

Alexa’s attention was already on the beautiful sky. There was even a bright peek of long-lost sun through the heavy grit, hoping to further convince them of their safety. She spun a finger to halt their group. “What do you suggest?”

David lifted his chin against the scorn he had expected. His nature was close to serene most of the time, but being laughed at or made fun of would send him into an instant rage. Ghosts of the past like to rattle those chains. David had learned swinging back was the only cure. “Watch and wait.”

“Agreed.” If he was wrong, they had only lost time. If he was right, then his place was proven to her. “Ten-minute stop. Stay close.”

After bathroom pauses, all of the fighters gathered back around their leader, and waited tensely. The senior men knew Alexa had chosen each of them for reasons beyond their skill with a gun; they had more than just that brutal duty to perform. Was having a sense for trouble coming a part of David’s purpose on this quest?

Seconds later, that appeared to be the truth.

The invisible cold front swept out of the damp trees above them and then sank down over the road like a bucket of ice. The wind was nearly frigid, sending chills through her body. The difference in temperature told her what to expect.

Alexa untied an end of the rope that was coiled passively around her waist. “Link us up. Do it quickly.”

The fighters hurriedly tied themselves together and moved toward a nearby tree at her wave.

David started to say he didn’t feel it anymore… “Down!”

The warning came too late. The wind slammed through their tied group and sent David onto his back, as if he’d been targeted and shoved. It jerked the closest men toward him, but they didn’t fall.

Startled, David quickly regained his feet.

Alexa motioned for them to tie the rope around the tree. Clearly, this was no ordinary storm.

Now, in a loose circle around the trunk, noise roared at them from the left, but the blast of slicing leaves came from the right. A shower of tattered branches and foliage spun down to envelope them. The earth shifted under their boots.

Alexa predicted the trap and quickly cut one end of the rope. “Up!”

The last boot was barely off the ground before the dirt began ripping itself apart in furrows, searching for them. All around the tree, the ground rose and caved in, rose and caved in.

*Grrrr…Creak...*

Nature shook the tree, threatening to rip it from the ground. The fighters clung to the trunk and limbs, ropes now tangled among the swaying branches.

The wind came back suddenly, slamming into the tree. The insects living on the tree began to attack the fighters, trying to make them fall to keep Nature from destroying their home.

The tremor storm increased, sending out waves of violent upheaval that split the ground under the roots, forcing them upward.

“Grab him!”

Jacob lost his hold as the slimy trunk jumped out of his grasp. He hit the branch below, smacking his head and jerking all of them toward the ground.

Alexa hauled on the rope, wondering at the quick flash of [Déjà vu](http://search.yahoo.com/r/_ylt=A0oG7lK3YWxQYE0AdWRXNyoA;_ylu=X3oDMTE1anI5bjl1BHNlYwNzcgRwb3MDMQRjb2xvA2FjMgR2dGlkA1NNRTEzMl8yMTY-/SIG=11pcnpdqd/EXP=1349308983/**http%3a/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deja_Vue), but she didn’t have time to ponder it.

Edward and Daniel were helping her now. Straining, they pulled the others back up.

*Crack!* The grinding noise was ear splitting as the earth tore itself open.

Alexa held out a hand, choosing to return what she had taken all those months ago. Brown energy shot out of her palm and sank into the vibrating ground.

*Silence…*

*Stillness…*

It was over.

Sympathetic to the jumpiness of her men, Alexa grinned. “Who ordered the blowjob?”

The unexpected quip brought snorts and a renewed sense of calm. To David, she gave a subtle nod that made his mood brighten. He was instantly sure he would crave that feeling for the rest of his life.

Alexa waved her men down. She’d only been through one other tremor storm. It had allowed her to escape from Regan’s ambush in the desert. She now had a fondness for them despite their evil nature. They were Nature’s assassins, and totally ruthless. That was something she respected.

Alexa looked to the distance, where the real storm was still rolling heavily closer. “Come, my pets. Let’s get in a few hours on the redline before it hits.”

**6**

Hours later, the fighters were taking shelter from the storm in a barn with heavy leaks and the bones of animals still in dusty pens. The farmhouse had been collapsed.

Alexa collected the bones and spent the time grinding them into ashes, then filling her pouches with it. Her men observed in fascination, finally understanding Jendon’s potions were made with the bone dust of the dead.

“Human is more powerful, but any bones will do. Laymen are magic users. The dark charms are their strength, but also their curse. They cannot gather the dust themselves. They react to it instantly. Always be generous in your dealings with them or your purchase may be cursed.”

That brought more curiosity as she stored the bags and wiped her hands on the rough ground.

“Time for a lesson. Enough correct answers will earn a reward for all.”

Her eyes swept them, pleased to see each man had found something useful to do with their time. They were learning fast. “How many different animals and how much dust from each went into the pouches?” She began rolling a smoke as they called answers.

“Bull, chicken.”

“Goat.”

“Cat?”

“A quarter of each.”

“And why a mix at all?” Alexa wasn’t surprised when it was David who knew.

“They are domestic and therefore, equal in power. Uneven mixes will ruin stability.”

“And the last pouch of leftovers? How even was the mix?”

“Half, a quarter, and a third each of the remaining.”

Jacob’s fast response had all eyes turning to him.

The rookie shrugged, young face reddening. “I saw the even distribution and wondered what the rest would be used for. I was looking for it.”

“Very good. The answer to that question will earn someone honor guard.” She stood, not wincing at the stiffness of her legs. “Let’s share a twist and think.”

None of them were able to guess what the unevenly mixed bone dust was good for, but they spent the half an hour watching as Alexa ground handfuls of this and that from the many pockets in her cloak.

She put it into an empty pouch and then dumped a portion of it into a dirty glass vial. When she added water from her canteen, it turned a deep, dark green liquid that seemed to smoke and bubble.

Alexa held it up as she led them out into the light drizzle of the storm’s wake.

“Grab quickly when I tell you.” She moved to a limply struggling apple tree nearby. It was dying; sparse branches held only tiny, immature green balls.

Alexa threw the vial at the base of the tree with a sharp movement, shattering it. The emerald liquid sank into the ground. For a long moment, there was nothing.

*Rustle….* Soft and odd, it was the sound of new life spreading through the tree. The nickel-sized apple balls began to grow; the leaves around them turned brighter, healthier.

The men watched in amazement as the tree burst into full bloom with a speed they couldn’t properly track.

Alexa got closer, ducking as a growing branch shot out. “Get ready. Carry bags and catch.”

It would have been something entertaining to see–six men catching apples that a very fast blonde woman was throwing, but for the thinning woods and thick black corn, they were alone.

The tree was magnificent, stunning in perfect contrast to the withering branches that struggled around it, but the fighters sensed more coming than just a miracle grow session to replenish their stores.

“Enough.”

Each small pouch was full as Alexa stepped back, including hers. She gestured at the now creaking and groaning tree. “Now see what an uneven mix and greed causes.”

The rookies, both chewing generous mouthfuls, struggled to keep it down as the tree began to die.

Its beautiful leaves and fruit molded on the edges, then the middle, then fell like Christmas ornaments. It happened in seconds. The snapping twigs echoed like gunshots; larger branches started to crack and fall. The earth shifted as the roots withered violently beneath their boots.

*Crackkkk!*

The thick trunk split down the middle with a final, heart wrenching crack.

After that, came the sounds of the rookies forcing themselves to swallow.

In the distance, another noise came, unmistakable as well. A piercing scream of pain and rage rose on the wind to howl at them. Nature had gotten her stolen energy back, but lost a tree in its place.

Alexa spoke pointedly, wiping a fat, red apple on her sleeve. “Our enemy has weaknesses. Never doubt it.”

She bit off a small piece of the juicy fruit as she headed for the road. “Don’t waste even one of those. It will be long before I’d do such again without better cause.”

**7**

Now that her crew was complete, Alexa was ready to tighten the bonds with her men. As they sat around the fire, she could feel them wondering what else they might face and of course, where she’d come from. They all wanted to know about the rats on their trail, too. Would either of her new men have the sand to ask? Edward had wanted to, but after rescuing the children, he’d understood he wasn’t supposed to question. The rookies didn’t have that sense yet.

As she had the thought, Jacob turned to her.

“How do you know so much? Why are you so different?”

There was silence as the others froze.

Alexa considered his request only briefly. These seven would be with her when she found Safe Haven. That was a long trip to make without knowing what your leader stood for. In her case, it was more of what was inside, but they would understand that before long.

She pinned the rookie with a merciless look.

David moved subtly away, wary of the response.

Alexa leaned forward and fed the tension with another hard glare, not caring for David’s need to protect his own ass. “In return, I may ask for your story, Jacob.” She brought her hand up to her face and stroked her cheek, telling them all which tale she’d requested.

Jacob nodded reluctantly at the trade. “As you wish.”

“Twist a smoke and pour us all a drink.” Alexa settled against a damp tree trunk. “It would seem that story night has come.”

The men moved quickly, each admiring Jacob for helping them get something they’d wanted, but had been unable to attain on their own. Only a rookie had such leniency. They were grateful he’d used the free pass before learning that rule.

Alexa inhaled deeply, drawing smoke for a long hold that sent waves of dizziness through her mind. “After the war, I was a prisoner, like all of you were in one form or another.”

Ghosts moved through tormented halls in Alexa’s memories, gliding by death and betrayal with a human face to push open a bunker door to the past.

# Chapter Eight

**The Utah Facility**

January 2016

**1**

**“N**ow kill him!”

Unable to reach the one commanding her through the intercom, the woman did as she was told.

The soldier, like the countless others they’d forced her to hurt, wanted only for the days-long hell to be over. He squeezed his bruised eyes shut as the fire flashed out. Her tormented words led him into the light. “I’m sorry!”

There were no tears. Alexa had few left to give away now, but the woman watched him burn in horror. How many did that make? She’d stopped counting when the number went beyond fifty.

“Excellent. Return to your room.”

The woman mentally finished the order. *And take your meds.* Now that she’d performed for them, her captors wanted her back under control again. Drugs were the only way to accomplish that.

“And take your meds.”

Her eyes went over the terrified child they’d used to force her cooperation. *So, drugs aren’t the only way.* In those shellshocked depths, the woman could see the death that waited for him here no matter how well she pleased those in charge. This boy had the marker, too. They would never let him go.

Alexa waited for the door to slide open, trying not to be crushed by what she’d done. The soldier’s life had protected the child. After the war, it was more than a fair trade, and yet, there was a sense of doomed resignation that followed her back to her small cell. Willing or not, it had happened by her hand, her mind. She was no less guilty than those who played with her powers at the harm of others. If she just gave up…

Alexa flinched away from the thought, mind becoming a mask of hatred. *Never! They will make a mistake and I will get free!*

The woman went to the waiting tray, picking up the small cup with an eager hand. The pills went down fast.

She settled on the floor next to her cot. Eyes closing, her mind began replaying the past, bringing her relief from the newest chain they’d forced her to wear. She might get away from this place one day, but she’d never outrun so many ghosts.

After a long moment, the drugs began working; her hands rose as she dozed. They moved in graceful, precise movements that few of the watching scientists recognized. In that moment of drug induced trance, she was a fighter cleaning her guns, preparing for battle.

**2**

It was a month before they woke her again. She only knew because of a leaf that someone had dragged in on their shoe and left outside her cell.

It was spring now, more than three years after her capture. While staring at that leaf and realizing how much time had passed, she’d never felt more alone.

Alexa had been in Hawaii when the war came. After the bombs and the tidal waves, the rioting had devastated that island state, but with the ocean so angry, leaving hadn’t been an option. Even when the mental calls had finally come, smashing through the old lava tunnels like thunder, she’d been unable to answer. By then, she had her own wards to care for. She’d found the children abandoned in a school two days after the bombs and tried to return them to their families. After only a short time, she’d understood those people were dead. Why else wouldn’t they have come for their babies? Still, she’d kept searching; their tears demanded it. Three mothers and one blinded uncle had gratefully accepted the gift she’d given, but the rest were left to her. She’d also tried to answer her father, to tell him that she couldn’t leave the kids. It had drawn the attention of Corbin.

Alexa shuddered. The commander had been out trolling for survivors and found what he’d least expected. She had been caught off guard, making it easy for the government to surround them and force her surrender to keep those with her from being killed.

“Come to the lab.”

The voice from the wall speaker sent heat into her gut. The rest of those hurting kids, she’d begun to love. They were all dead now. The horror was staggering.

The halls she walked through were sterile, devoid of life, but flooded with offensive colors meant to keep the captives in mental chaos. There was no relaxing here, no adapting or thinking time. You survived if you could. That was it.

The narrow steps twisted downward, lined in shiny metal grates with cameras that measured weight, pulse rate, and balance in a single step. At the bottom of these prying stairs, another gateway scanned her, spitting out brain and organ conditions. Quick lights and sounds drew hearing and sight results, and for all of this, the woman was grateful. Handled another way, it would have taken an hour and all of her strength to get through it.

The sight of the test room never failed to give Alexa pause. Above, was a balcony-like viewing area. *That’s where the voice comes from, the one that forces me to kill*.

“Sit behind the glass wall.”

Alexa did as she was told, listening to the soft hiss of the door sliding closed behind her. She always did. They’d held her, forcing her to explore the dangerous power inside so they could see what the others here would be capable of when they grew up. Then, they could breed them into a perfect weapon.

Her kids, her warm, human kids, were long gone. She didn’t remember the attack, thanks to the dart that had taken her out of the fight before it began.

“Burn his arm, nothing else.”

The soldier fearfully waiting was young, already in pain from what looked like multiple burns from other sessions.

Alexa closed her eyes. They would kill one of the kids if she refused. *I have to protect the kids like me from this room.*

Flames shot out in a narrowed band of burning ribbon that seared off a layer of skin and sent screams down the halls. The glass room was bulletproof, fireproof, and a few others, but sounds were a tool the soldiers used. Every child hearing the level of agony in those hoarse pleas knew who was in the dreaded room, who was causing it, and of course, why.

Alexa was keeping them from being hurt; the guilt of it bonded them to her, as their captors had known it would. Many of these children were incredibly talented despite not being old enough to have the full power of a descendant yet and the government used them against each other to prevent rebellion. If one complex broke free, two were destroyed in retaliation. It was an awful snare.

Determined to regain the world of lavish power, those in charge of the remaining government had chosen to continue the old ways and keep blending the power. Like those who’d come before them, they were trying to make themselves as strong as the descendants, attempting to steal their gifts through experiments that included the embryos from human and descendant specimens. In short, they were still playing God.

“Make the soldier burn without dying,” the voice ordered. “Or we will bring in your cousin, Tomas.”

Alexa obeyed.

**3**

One of the guards, a redhead with a cruel sneer, enjoyed his job so much that he’d been promoted to guarding the bottom floor. Only the important specimens were held there. Regan loved the daily sessions he was now a witness to. He also looked forward to helping, to drawing blood.

Regan had been a killer long before the war. The trail of bodies he’d buried across the United States was so large that even he didn’t remember them all. Most had been enjoyed through a haze of drugs and music. Now, he had little descendants to play with, but he liked Alexa’s sessions the best. He wasn’t sure why. The others were bloodier. Some even went as far as rape–a highlight for the guards, for sure, but the woman in cell #17 was special compared to the others being held here.

Regan studied Alexa’s ass as she entered her room, body tight. He’d almost had her twice over the months he’d been stationed down here. The killer was determined that she would be the victim he hadn’t had since the war. When you were living in a compound, murders were noticed and often caught on camera. He’d had to content himself with beatings and torture on other floors before they’d brought him down here and made him happier than he’d ever been. Down here, the pain and blood stayed on the ground so much that he didn’t have to do it himself to feel it. Except, he missed it.

Seeing Alexa first brought in, naked and bloody, had given Regan a flash of his past; he’d been stewing on a way to get her ever since. He thought those heading up this little torture palace might want her gone soon. Even asleep, her brain charts were flying. She was dangerous and should be eliminated soon. That narrowed his chances to catch her at the right time, but it also said if he killed her, they wouldn’t be as mad. Regan did not intend to be tossed out into that apocalyptic nightmare that they sometimes watched on the screens, but he sensed this woman might be worth the risk.

“Lights out in three...two…one.”

Darkness flooded the quiet halls of the bottom floor.

Regan slipped from his post. Nothing ever happened on the third shift, so the guards often snuck off to amuse themselves. He wouldn’t be missed.

Alexa swallowed her pills as usual, but as soon as the lights went out, she shoved her finger down her throat and brought them back up. The leaf had fully roused her. This time, she wouldn’t go back to sleep willingly. The sense of time running out had been too heavy to ignore as she’d stepped over the soldier’s charred body. After a few more awful orders, they’d made her kill him.

Alexa listened to the walls around her creak and groan with the aftermath of the days’ misery. If she didn’t get out before they broke her like this again, she would die. This session had been brutal, going far beyond the normal exploration. It was as if they were trying to figure out the very worst that she could do.

Alexa removed the sheet from her cot, and then one of the wooden legs. Through the children, the soldiers would make her attack free survivors next. It would drive her insane to do that. Did they know? She was almost sure of the answer. They didn’t need her anymore. They had other specimens–younger, more controllable experiments that could be used for offense, defense, and everything between as soon as they came of age. Many of the hundreds of kids being held here were teenagers on the brink of inheriting their full gifts.

How long had this been going on? How many people had known of the hive of soldiers and scientists hiding beneath the Utah proving ground? How many kids had seen these halls, died in them? With so many available, the scientists weren’t careful about preserving life. She suspected the furnaces here had been busy long before the war.

Alexa moved toward the door, staying low and quiet. These cells had infrared capability, but they hadn’t used it on her for more than six months before they grew bored with watching her sleep. She’d overheard that comment and stored it for her future escape. That time had finally come.

Using timbers from the cot leg, she forced the bolt back on the door and heard it give under her talented hand. Escape was one of the first things she’d learned from her father and it was his lessons she would depend on now.

**4**

Commander Corbin was in charge of the Utah complex. He’d held the post for more than ten years. In that time, he’d seen the special ones come and go. Most were killed when he ran out of tests to put them through, but a rare few were kept alive for creating the perfect human weapon. During Corbin’s reign, there had only been three of those–two children and one adult female.

They’d found Alexa by accident as she sent out mental waves, searching for her father. It wasn’t hard to lead her into a trap with the Hawaiian kids. The data they’d gathered from her was invaluable. Until her, no adult female had ever been held for more than a month before escaping or starting to go insane. Because of that, Corbin had been careful to keep her drugged between sessions to prevent a repeat.

The power inside was one that resisted being used for any purpose other than light. To make them kill was to drive them crazy from the inside, where the guilt tore them apart. The government wanted to know how to stop it from happening so these gifted beings could be used at their whims. His was one of several similar projects going on across the country, but this was the most important. In this bunker, they were also trying to crossbreed the two DNA strands and produce a genuine species of evolution–one free of the rage disease, which was the newest threat to human survival.

Corbin watched the light above cell #17 change to green, meaning it was unlocked. She had to know the death orders were coming. An escape attempt now was wise on her part.

The Commander turned toward the button that would send the lights flooding into the halls and expose her, but he hesitated to push it. What if she was the one to start the quest?

*The Legend of Safe Haven.*

Aware of not being alone in the room, the commander hit the button with a regretful sigh.

The alarm blared loudly, thundering through the halls until running feet were the second loudest sound. Soldiers swamped the bottom floors, searching for the escaped captive, but there was no sign of Alexa.

**5**

Alexa was weak physically. Her mental gifts fed off her emotions, as they did with all her kind, but the years of being drugged had turned her into a quivering mass of limp muscles that could only hold her upright for minutes at a time. When heavy hands had grabbed her, she hadn’t been able to stop the man from dragging her into a dusty closet.

Regan fumbled with his clothes and her robe, forgetting who he was about to hurt with no child around for insurance. He didn’t talk; he didn’t need to, but he smiled at her fear as she heard his pants fall.

Alexa turned her head, mind searching for a way to save the kids. His thrusting hips she deflected with her leg, catching him where it hurt most without meaning to.

Regan’s hands went around her throat as he fell, dragging her down.

Alexa gasped for air as he choked her.

Plans ruined, Regan squeezed harder as the waves of pain wracked his flesh. The haze of blood slithered over his sight. He watched the tears roll down her cheeks in the flickering light of the lantern he’d set up before grabbing her.

Pulling from his lust, Alexa sent a blast of rage into his body that threw him across the small room and into the wall. The kids couldn’t feed from an impure source, but she was already damned and had no such limits.

Regan slumped to the floor.

When he didn’t move, Alexa struggled to her feet and moved toward his unconscious body. In fact, a good meal of killer was just what she needed.

With the alarms going off, the captives that weren’t locked in had come out of their rooms to clog the halls. It was easy to duck her head and pretend to be one of them. Even her healthy energy was covered by the fear and excitement racing through the kids at the news of an escape. They now had as much hope as was tolerable.

Not sure where to go, only that it had to be up, Alexa followed groups of guards, watching where they went, where they snuck off to. When she felt she had drawn too much attention, she ducked into another closet or dark area, staying a short step ahead of the squads now doing a full search. They’d made a mistake by keeping her presence so low profile here that their own guards had no idea what she looked like. With Regan’s uniform on, they still didn’t.

**6**

Corbin watched the dot on the screen get closer and closer to the ground floor, almost willing her to make it. In all the time they’d held her here, there hadn’t been a single whisper of Safe Haven, but the ruthless Commander knew that’s where she would head as soon as she was free. He had been sure she knew. The markings on her body were his attempts to make her tell where they’d gone. After a while, he’d realized that if she knew where the legendary camp was, she would already have headed there instead of spending so many months caring for the tattered island children.

But if Alexa left here now, she would search for it, especially since she had this secret to share with the Alpha. With her gifts, she stood a real chance of finding it. All they had to do was follow her.

Corbin watched the dot head up the final flight of stairs, amazed that no one had stopped her yet. He wouldn’t help her escape, but he wouldn’t do anything else against it either. Corbin turned off the tracking monitor before joining his men on the bottom floors to help with the search.

Lurking in the shadows, one of Corbin’s most clever scientists waited for his captor to be gone before stepping toward the screen. Paul had his own suspicions about why the commander hadn’t told anyone where the escaped woman was, but he didn’t trigger the second alarm to expose either of them.

Like his boss, Paul wanted to know if Safe Haven really existed, but not for the same reasons. Corbin wanted to conquer it and use its secrets, to fulfill the duty he’d been charged with by those pulling his strings. Paul wanted to live there. He’d dreamed of a world of peace, where he could be accepted and be with others like himself as they served the human population that their Creator had loved so much.

The scientist turned on the tracker in time to watch the small dot exit the compound through a service door used for bringing in fresh supplies. Within minutes, the woman was out of view of even the nearest guard tower. Paul switched the screen back to darkness. When Corbin finally found Safe Haven, someone would have to kill him so he didn’t ruin it. Paul hoped he might be the one chosen for that duty.

**Now**

“It took me a week to gather enough weapons and strength to go back. When I got there, the compound was abandoned.”

Alexa’s voice, full of ragged and miserable emotion, snapped the six males back to the darkness around their fire.

Alexa shoved to her feet, suddenly weary. She’d been sure her escape would cause the deaths of those kids, but she’d abandoned them anyway to reach Safe Haven and tell Adrian of what was happening here. It was a sin that she would never be free of, but one she would repeat if needed. Nothing would stand in her way.

Alexa moved toward the shadows for a moment alone.

Her men understood their dreams wouldn’t be enough to keep her nightmares at bay tonight. She would be on watch until dawn. Each of them looked to Edward expectantly.

The Horseman grinned, eager enough to tell them what he knew of her next adventure.

*“A lone woman limped into my town on a sunless afternoon…”*

When the tale was finished, the fighters wore stunned expressions that said they weren’t sure if they believed it or not.

“Let’s turn in.”

Four of the men immediately began preparing for sleep at Edward’s order.

Jacob, who had no doubt, met Edward’s eye across the fire. “You were the first. You’ve been with her the longest. Do you regret it?”

“No. This *real life* has been all I asked for and more. Come soldiers, magic, or terror, I will follow her and I don’t care about the cost.”

**8**

Rick listened from the darkness, a grinning ghost like he’d been so many years ago outside Safe Haven’s glowing borders. He now had a weakness to use if he was able to take her hostage, which was unlikely, but he knew something that her men did not. After his time around so many descendants, Rick understood them. It hadn’t been the Alpha gene that had sent her from the compound alone. It had been the need to right the wrong. It was who *they* were, these fixers of the world.

Rick loathed each and every one of them. He might have liked Regan’s job, and done it well. The government wanted to use her to create a weapon and a stronger breed of human. Corbin wanted her to find Safe Haven, as did Rick, but he knew better than the commander what might work. Her bond with these six men was what the one-eyed man hadn’t taken into account. It wasn’t lack of knowledge that had allowed Adrian to leave his own people behind. Alexa was foolish to think he hadn’t known–the same way Corbin was foolish to think she was strong enough to conquer the bond just because she was an Alpha. Those with the marker were sworn to protect the human race, not their own. He’d left them to save his sheep, the same as Alexa would. If Rick could kill some of her men or take them from her, she would bargain for them.

After watching how Adrian had lovingly trained and protected his human teams, Rick understood it better than Alexa herself. When he’d said there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do, anyone he wouldn’t sacrifice to see Safe Haven thrive, Adrian had meant his *own* kind, even his children.

*No wonder he was such a perfect leader back then.* *If only I had known his true weakness! I could be leading that refugee camp right now instead of barely being back from the dead just to slave under the curse of a petty thief.*

# Chapter Nine

**Bridges and Betrayals**

**1**

**T**heir first sight of Laramie was as they’d thought it would be–isolated and ominous. The graveyard of cattle was particularly disturbing to the fighters. Beef was a rare food now. The sight of those large bones was a reminder of their near extinction.

Alexa heard what could only be a healthy insect population. “Gloves on.”

That left their faces uncovered, something the men were all protective of enough to be distracted by the concern. When she donned her full cover, they did as well. Once the goggles were slid into place over the cloth, not a single inch of their skin was exposed.

The water had surrounded the small station on three sides even before the waves had crashed downstream and the tremors had widened the banks. Now, the whole area was an island, its treasures made unreachable by even a small skiff. The debris in the murky water would refuse to budge for their poles or maybe it would shift at the wrong time and turn them out into a liquid cemetery. Alexa shook her head. There was no way she would put her men so close to death’s hand.

Edward thought of how far he’d come since they’d met in Utah. Without thinking, he began to uncoil the rope around his waist, mind on the changes their leader had encouraged in him.

The other males followed his lead automatically, drawing Alexa’s attention. *He’s my right hand.*

Alexa gestured at the row of trees. Their huge trunks were mostly submerged beneath the polluted liquid. “Tell me how we do it.”

Edward straightened his shoulders, proud that he could. “We zigzag, and stay over the larger debris to maybe have a few seconds of extra time.”

“And if I said we swim?”

Edward was now aware that the others were viewing him oddly, but he chose to concentrate on the matter at hand. “I follow your lead.”

She showed no reaction, but he still had to fight the urge to fall at her feet as her pleasure rolled over him in waves. His tolerance was only so good, even now.

The woman grunted her approval when he didn’t move. “You grow stronger daily.”

Edward was unable to keep the awe from his tone. “Because of you!”

Alexa leaned forward to stroke his cheek softly with her roughened fingertips. “I have a great fondness for you, as well.” She turned to them with the rarest emotion they ever saw from her–love. “So, of you all.”

Alexa moved toward the line of decaying trees. “Now come, my pets. Our newest adventure waits.”

The rookies followed carefully, both still a bit stunned to find themselves already so thick into the quest. They hurried to help with the small camp when Daniel called it. Alexa wanted to wait out the darkness, the new men assumed. Traveling at night was not highly recommended, but they didn’t question the order of no fire.

Their camp was cold, basic rations as darkness fell thickly upon the post-apocalyptic land. In minutes, there was only an occasional glint of calmly swaying branches and water ripples, and then nothing. Not even a flash of skylight remained to show each other, and yet, there was no fear, no senseless conversations just to be comforted by the sound of their own voices. They were with Alexa. Her brightness was clear even in the pitch black.

**2**

A light flared a short while later, far to their right…then another. Tiny, glowing flames buzzed and dove in the distance, but seemed to get no closer. To their left, a third beam of brightness came. This one moved purposefully, heading north toward Laramie Station.

All six men knew when Alexa stood. Without being told, they followed.

The light appeared to be floating, a carried lantern perhaps. The seven fighters moved steadily closer, almost silent despite the unfamiliar ground. They were tracking prey, something each of them instinctively excelled at.

The flame stopped suddenly near the water’s mossy edge, and then it vanished. Slowing, the trackers inched closer, watching, waiting.

As the darkness brightened again, the males saw it hadn’t been a lantern, but a glow stick wrapped for control of the shine. The furry man carrying it was huge–seven feet at least–and easily supporting the weight of two heavy looking bags over each thick arm. His clothing was black, as was his long beard and hat, but the skin under them was alabaster white and glinted even in the green glow of the stick.

“Can passage be bought here, Ferryman?”

The fighters watching were shocked to see Alexa now standing only a few feet from the heavily muscled giant. Each of them moved carefully into place around her.

The Ferryman looked like he was half-human, half-beast. The enormous mounds of his arms said it might be true. Each bicep was easily the size of a human chest.

“That, and more, these days.” His tone was deep and quiet. He glanced at her with slightly curious black eyes. “For the right price, anything can be.”

Alexa dug under her robes without care for his unease, but the movement seemed to break the tension instead of increasing it. Closer now, the other two lights flitted and dove happily around the flooded forest.

A bag sailed through the air; the jingle of gold was cut off as the big man caught it. Before he could protest, Alexa gestured toward the battered pouch.

“Your price is in there.”

Interest growing, the beast-man peered into the bag and then glared at her. “You know this is far too much.”

“You will wait or come back when our time here is finished.” Her tone was sharp.

The men understood she was securing their return passage.

Greed flashed openly as the Ferryman raised a bushy brow. “What if you don’t need a way out?”

Alexa smiled coolly, confidently. “Then keep it and owe only a kindness to the next hardasses to seek passage. How much of a kindness is up to you.”

Unlike Jendon, this one didn’t hesitate. “Done.”

He pointed at a nearby trunk that was so dark with decay that it was barely visible. “Light a few of those when you’re ready. I’ll come one click from your light.”

“We would arrive before dawn.”

He nodded again, pouch disappearing beneath his robe. “Half an hour, mistress, no longer.”

“My thanks, Ferryman.”

The tall guide surprised them all by scowling. “For taking you to your death? It’s *my honor*.”

The six males knew her magic was already working on the strangely stoic carpenter. He would come when called.

Alexa turned to her waiting men. “Lighten by a third. Leave it at that tree. No one will bother it.”

Not questioning how that was possible, each of them did as instructed. Her senior men subtly watched to see what she removed. Her true weight was something they were curious about. When she removed only her long cloak, Billy gave Edward a nod to acknowledge his guess of 125 lbs. being right.

With her cover gone, any of them might have expected her to seem less somehow, but the opposite was true. Only the Ferryman stared in surprise. Even the rookies knew to take only small glimpses of their leader uncovered. Alexa was a bright, vivid swell in the darkness.

Edward threw out a hand to keep the Ferryman from falling at her feet. Arms full of his own steel, the fighter gave the huge man a hard shake.

Surprised from the trance, the beast man held himself stiffly in place until he was back in control. After a moment, the builder sent an uncomfortable grimace of recognition toward Edward. He stole only a quick look at the woman this time before turning back to the two large duffle bags he’d set down when she had stepped from the darkness. The carpenter began to pull things from the bags, snapping ends together with small clicks.

Alexa waited patiently with her men standing in a guard formation around her. The sounds continued steadily, increasing their tension. Those noises would echo.

The Ferryman kept working. As the outline of a staircase took shape, each of her men recognized it and immediately dreaded stepping onto it. When the staircase grew, rising unsteadily upward, so did their concern.

The builder set aside the frame to dig through the bags again, coming up with a small gate and a single, two-foot thick concrete block, which he placed near the water’s edge. He then put the frame’s weakest side on the brick, clicked the gate into place, and surprised all but the woman when he hefted the bags over his shoulders and stepped up onto the first thin stair.

The carpenter went back to building. When he moved up to the next step, the first began to glow. The pale, golden light pulsed in time to his clicks and clacks, as did the next, and the one after. In a groove now, the carpenter moved faster and higher, creating a golden arc.

Jacob stared in astonishment, voice a bare whisper. “The stairway to Heaven.”

Alexa denied that. “It was never to there. It is only a conveyance between hard to reach places, nothing more.”

Instructed, when she moved for the bottom stair, they still couldn’t stop quick glimpses upward.

“It’s safe now for the lightest.” The words floated through the night, spreading into a wide ripple that they were sure could be heard much further than they could view.

Edward would have protested if needed. None of her men wanted to be split up. They were glad when Alexa didn’t take the bait.

It also brought relief to their guide. The Ferryman had taken many into Laramie, but only brought back three. He wanted her to be the fourth. The males with her, so dim in comparison, mattered only to her and themselves.

It was just over the half hour mark when his call came again, floating down from far above them. “The bridge is open. Slow and steady now. The bridge is open.”

It went out with a wave of power and yet, there was only silence in return.

“Not many takers.”

Alexa snorted at Mark’s crack as she passed him and moved onto the bridge.

“We come, Ferryman. Paid in full.” She stated it softly, but the words rang out, and then echoed up.

“I see you, party of seven,” came the Ferryman’s reply. “Passage is granted. Mind you close the gate, or owe for those who come after.”

Alexa waved Edward to drag, sure he would remember, then she made a curt motion that even the rookies understood.

*Stay close!*

“Waterline formation. No interaction.”

Meaning they probably wouldn’t be alone on the bridge. Each man steadied himself and followed her onto the vividly glowing stairs.

**3**

The fog swirled around them right away, even though they’d seen none from the ground. The purplish mist moved thickly around their boots, muting the cracks and groans from the boards under their feet, but the awful sway kept them stepping carefully. The wood beneath them felt almost soft. It had a slight give that curled stomachs and raised awareness of where they were and what they had signed up for. Above them, the clicks and clacks also continued. The Ferryman was building even as they crossed.

“Rookies, down!”

The two men hit the bridge at her command, sending a ripple along the wooden stairs.

Edward shrank back as a huge, dark shadow swooped over them, just missing the newest males.

“Our enemy knows we’re here. Rookie net.”

Mark and Billy immediately stepped beside the two men, tying ropes between their waists even as they kept climbing. The ends were handed to Alexa and Edward–Point and Drag–as they went up, connected in four places.

A voice roared at them from the purple fog in a female cry of rage. “Kill for me!”

Alexa grimaced. “Keep it tight.”

The four men moved closer to the front and back of the rookies. They all knew to duck as a rushing noise came from their right.

“Freeze!”

There was silence and an uneasy tension flying through the fog.

*Crack! Crack!*

Alexa’s guns barked loudly, startling even Edward.

A huge shadow slammed against the bridge above them and then vanished into the purple mist, squawking angrily.

“Let’s move.”

The fighters responded instantly, hauling shocked rookies snugly between them.

They felt it when they reached the very top of the bridge. A cool breeze and a lighter colored mist marked the start of the climb down.

“Hello on the bridge...”

The six fighters felt Alexa pause and instantly hated the owner of the voice for it.

“We’d cross. Dust for passage.”

“I see you, party of four–price to be determined. Mind you close the gate or provide the next Judas a free ride.”

Alexa continued down the bridge, her words a bare murmur. “It’s the card player from River City. The rat must have known the words.” Her tone became grim. “Or perhaps Jendon is dead.”

The men considered that and understood the reason for her pause. To defeat a troll, the man had to be hard.

It was easy to feel the new feet on the bridge, an extra sway of running boots. They waited for the trackers to reach the place where the big bird had attacked them...

A female voice thundered in the darkness. “A deal has been made!”

Alexa’s tone held no fear in response. “She’s a bitter enemy, my pets, the Mother of all nature. Try hard to kill us on this quest, she will. Succeed, she will not!”

Because Alexa was so sure, the males were able to fall into their formation with confidence not felt by those quickly catching up. It was a feeling that held her men in place as the ground finally became closer and the steps behind them echoed nearer.

The fog thinned suddenly, rippling to reveal only darkness, and then the Ferryman’s voice echoed loudly.

“Party of seven, disembarking. Paid in full.”

Alexa grinned at the assistance, waving her men into place as the feet behind them sped up, almost upon them now. When she drew her weapon, so did her men.

Alexa moved to the very side of the step, blending into the fog. The others followed her lead.

She met Edward’s sharp eyes, saw his hand tighten on the rope in his grip as he braced. She was pleased that he understood what would likely happen next. He’d more than earned his place on her crew.

Shadows flew down the steps, parting the fog.

The first to go by was a hulk of a man, the brawn of the group. His passage tilted Jacob off the edge in his effort to go unnoticed. He dropped heavily, but didn’t scream.

Edward strained to hold the rope still, to keep Jacob from swinging into the sides. He sensed the rookie might still be in danger despite being out of sight and he was glad when the last shadow went running by, damp cloak sliding across his face like a shroud.

The instant they were gone, Edward began to pull the rope, feeling the rookie’s weight, yet no movement.

And suddenly he was being jerked right off the step!

“Pull!”

They hefted Edward back onto the bridge and then began to pull on the rope, all worried for the silent Preacher.

Alexa threw a handful of dust over the side. Emerald light flared, and then there was a volley of gunfire as the fighters saw the army of wood spiders advancing on Jacob’s limp form.

The arachnids screamed in protest, but didn’t stop at the bullets now flying through the rickety stairs.

Alexa shot one about to grab an unprotected leg.

Edward pulled harder on the rope, turning to twist it around himself. It provided the leverage to haul the rookie up by himself while the others gave cover fire.

“Duck!”

A huge shadow swooped over them as Alexa tossed a second handful of dust. The glittery bone powder settled onto the bird’s wings in a thick cloud. It was the last of her uneven mix pouch.

The flying terror moaned in delight as molting feathers began to fill with health. Like the tree, the bird was beautiful in its full glory…before it started to die.

“Move!” Alexa hauled on the rope with Edward.

Jacob slid onto the bridge as the bird began to moan again, this time in pain.

“Open fire!” Rick’s voice was full of victory. He’d followed her knowing the odds of his survival were low, but the dead zone was where he spent most days anyway. If she knew where Adrian and Safe Haven had gone, he could have another chance to kill them all.

Bullets slammed into the stairs around the fighters, splintering the wood.

The senior men returned the favor, using the sweeping patterns that they’d been taught.

“Ugh!”

A grunt echoed in the darkness, followed by the whooshing noise of a body falling, and then a harsh thud as it landed.

Another lucky shot came through the fog and then Alexa held up a hand.

Her men stopped firing, all crouched protectively around Mark, who was lifting Jacob over his shoulder.

Footsteps echoed again, moving away.

Alexa’s voice cracked out. “Deny them, Ferryman, and the reward shall be great!”

The bridge trembled as the Ferryman responded with a sudden mist. The enveloping fog, the muffled thuds, and then shouts below brought Alexa’s mocking laughter. “Trapped like the rat you are, Card Player!”

There was no answer.

“Here we come, traitor! Prepare yourself!” She openly mocked him, waving only Edward forward as she headed straight down the stairs.

Knowing what she wanted, he ran with her, stabbing at shadows to be sure no one was hiding in them as they had done.

“Coming to make a man of you!” Alexa’s steps were no longer light, but shaking the bridge as they descended.

The intimidation worked well, sending them the sounds of two more thuds and wood breaking. Rick’s men had deserted him.

“They flee their Master! Mine will never do such, and mine, you shall never be!”

Rick’s fingers fumbled for another magazine, heart thudding in his chest.

“Here we come, traitor! Prepare yourself!”

*That tone!* It was the blond leader from Safe Haven!

Rick shoved the magazine into place as flashes of the past invaded his mind. He’d been one of Cesar’s slavers right after the war, the wolf sent in among the sheep to kill them all. And he’d failed.

*“Coming to make a man of you!”*

It was Adrian finally seeking retribution.

Rick heard his men abandon him, but he didn’t think to follow. Of all the things he’d been, a coward was never one of them.

*“They flee their Master! Mine will never do such, and mine, you shall never be!”*

Rick crouched low, aware that he was about to die again. *This time, I’ll take Adrian with me!*

Lost in his own mind, the traitor saw the fog part to reveal an angry, glowing man wearing dog tags and a ferocious grin of razor sharp teeth.

The vision thundered as it rushed toward him. “I sentence you to death!”

Rick emptied his gun wildly. “Die, damn you!”

Instead, the man’s mouth opened to reveal spiked teeth quivering in anticipation as he lunged.

“No-no-no-no-no!”

*Crunch! Thud!*

Fire blazed at the base of the stairs. The screams of the man matched that of nature as the dying bird finally plummeted to the ground. The skeleton hit the murky water below and shattered into bone dust.

The wind picked up, growing into a furious blast that ripped up huge, dead limbs. Sprays of water pelted the bridge with an angry barrage that the fighters endured with tight grips on ropes and quick reflexes.

A minute later, there was silence.

Before any of them could speak, Jacob stirred from the wetting. Confused at being slung over Mark’s shoulder, the Preacher glared. “Are we there yet?”

Alexa’s lips twitched, laughter snorting out, and then the sound echoed from her men as well.

“Aye, rookie.” Edward slapped Billy on the shoulder in recognition of a good battle that sent water spraying in a thick splash. “The ground lies just below.”

**4**

“Do we follow?”

Corbin snorted in response to the guard’s uneasy question as they listened to the gunfire echoing down from the glowing stairs. Alexa had been easy to track so far, but they would have to wait her out this time. If they attempted to cross that arching gateway, he was sure it would collapse. “At your own risk.”

“Should we update command? Tell them she has six men now?”

“At your own risk.”

Shane wisely fell silent. Clearly, Corbin didn’t want her recaptured.

“Why don’t you personally take them a brief report? The Rabbit will write it up for you.”

Paul kept his head down, not revealing how much he hated that nickname.

Shane nodded, eager to tell those in charge what they’d been expecting to hear, what they were paying so well to know. The Commander had decided not to go back to the complex or the rule of the government…at least, not until he had Safe Haven’s location. After that, he could name his reward and they already knew what he wanted–Alexa.

Corbin looked around. His very human soldiers would be of little use until she was back on the ground. “I want watch towers set up. They’ll have to come out of there to continue the quest. Set it up.”

**5**

The fighters stepped indifferently over the smoldering pile at the base of the stairs as they left the bridge, but the senior men knew Edward would have a story to whisper later. The crunching noise was one they wouldn’t forget.

The Ferryman had come to the bottom of the glowing steps, covered in layers of sweat and concern. He hadn’t wanted the woman to die. He’d wanted to warn her of Nature’s guardian wings, but his ways and laws were set in the seal. Break them, he could not. The early disembarking call was all he’d been allowed on his own. Denying the first four an exit had only been possible because she’d asked it of him and offered a payment.

Alexa strode confidently from the bridge, ignoring the Ferryman’s pleasure at only seeing her party. She tossed him another heavy pouch that he stashed away without viewing its contents.

“I was worried...”

Turning from his wasteful words, Alexa paused at the edge of the glow from the stairs, evaluating. The Ferryman had brought them down within sight of nothing.

After another moment to let the men have their look, Alexa led them into the outer edges of Laramie, Wyoming. Things were about to get rougher.

# Chapter Ten

**Hoppers and Helpers**

**1**

**I**t wasn’t the same here. They noticed the differences right away. Instead of dying trees and swampy fields, Laramie was more like a lush jungle than a dead cattle town. Odd sounds echoed, like an owl hooting and frogs softly croaking. It was another world. Isolation hadn’t hurt things as badly here. The wildlife they’d missed so far on their trip was here in abundance, from the small shapes of darting rodents and hares to the wide clouds of insects that hovered around the fruit trees. Their eyes couldn’t keep up with all the movement.

“On your right, rookie!”

Jacob ducked.

The thin green snake hissed angrily as they went on. Curled around a moldy limb, the reptile had been nearly invisible, but not to Alexa’s sharp gaze.

The men moved a bit closer to each other and to her, away from the thick trees and weeds that bordered the path she’d chosen. Alexa showed no such worry. It was her way.

*“Last call, one and all. The bridge closes.”*

The fighters couldn’t see it anymore. There was a slight unease among them as muffled clacks and thuds echoed next. The Ferryman was taking down the bridge. They were securely inside Laramie, with no way out.

“There is always an exit, my pets.”

All six men pushed aside the tension at her words. Now was not a good time for nerves.

The fighters saw the light at the same time and heard the moan.

“Help...mercy.”

Alexa and her hardasses found him around the next bend of the trees. They approached the rat carefully despite the left leg bent behind him at an ugly angle. Mosquitoes were currently eating him alive in tiny plunges.

“Mercy, Lady?”

The blonde ran quick eyes over the other corpse that had deserted the Card Player, gun still holstered. “You’ve earned it now, I think.”

Her tone was unnaturally gentle. It made her men brace.

The defector’s expression filled with relief.

*Bang!*

Calmly holstering, Alexa turned back to the faint path. “It was a bullet less than you deserved.”

Each of the men moving to catch up felt the reminder that traitors would be dealt with harshly, but it wasn’t a great concern for them. They knew their own minds. There was no other place, no matter how safe, that they would rather be.

**2**

The dawn’s meager light was starting to break when Alexa stopped them with a silent hand.

Finally gaining respite from the insect clouds that had been hovering all night, they picked out rabbit, deer, and wolf tracks. There would be fresh meat if one of them could get a clear shot with their blade. Wasting bullets to hunt was against Alexa’s rules. If they missed with a knife, then they ate whatever they were carrying for such a time, or nothing at all.

Alexa made a sharp left, moving into the thickest part of the jungle; the land grew silent around them. She went faster, still making no noise.

Her men tried hard to do the same as the thick, damp branches clung to their cloaks and dove under their muddy boots to trip them.

“Tracks.”

The men’s eyes were unable to make them out beneath the half a decade of debris, but they didn’t doubt her. After a moment, they too could feel metal rails under their boots. She’d found a train track to lead them to the station.

In the distance, the bridge noises stopped.

The jungle thickened as they walked, becoming a nuisance to get through, and the ground grew damp. They were nearing the edge of a flood plain.

“Someone go to higher ground.”

Edward gestured to Billy, who scaled a nearby tree as if he was part monkey. He made motions that Edward translated in the dim light creeping over the horizon.

“Woods for two more clicks in our direction, then a building, rectangular, one floor. He can’t see around it for the trees.” There was a short pause. “Ripples to our right by one click and again to our left by triple that.”

There was silence as they waited for Billy to come down. He spoke softly. “There might be the wall of a town beyond the building. It was hard to be sure.”

Alexa turned them back to the tracks in time to spot another danger. “To your left, rookie.”

This time it was David who ducked the dark shape flying at him. Caught off guard, he flushed, loathing being embarrassed. A second later, the large bat went crashing into the forest behind them and slammed into the ground.

Ahead, Alexa’s voice overflowed with triumph. “Excellent.”

Not sure exactly how he’d brought the bat down–he hadn’t even moved except to duck–David fell back into formation, content that he’d pleased her somehow.

The two clicks went fast, with mud now squelching, pulling on them. The jungle ended abruptly, cut off by a crumbling wall of bricks they moved over carefully. Ahead of them lay what they’d come for.

The train station’s main building was a dark, vine covered shape in the distance, with tracks spread out across the area in front of it like a web. But the tracks were empty. No railcars, no maintenance vehicles, no other signs that the old world had ever existed–there was just tracks and water.

Alexa swept the small station, seeing how the murky liquid was slowly covering the ground around it. “Underwater, all of them.”

The train cars were in the far corner, with stagnant water rippling gently overtop them. Car after car glinted occasionally with the movement of the debris-laden liquid.

“I assume we all swim?”

All of them nodded.

Alexa led her group toward a single line of cars that were away from the others. Mostly buried in muck rather than water, the mud pushed up to their ankles as they neared it. Dark, ominous slop shifted under their boots.

Alexa halted them, free hand bringing out a pouch of dust. She tossed it ahead of them.

The marsh grass burst into life. As it grew, the ground under them seemed to tighten, firming up enough to stand on without sinking. She threw another handful, stepping forward. The bone dust caused the quickly growing greenery to drain the water.

Alexa threw a last handful on the ground outside the large railcar; the water receded a full foot, showing them the edge of a door. “Use your own pouches to knock it back a bit further, but carefully. Too fast and it may sink deeper.”

The men sprinkled it under her watchful eye as the earth under their feet grew, groaned, became solid.

Now partially uncovered, half of the train car still remained buried in the mud. It would have to be dug out unless their fearless leader had another trick up her sleeve.

She did. The blonde had drawn on her carry bag to eat one of the juicy apples they’d gathered. Around them, the lush weeds were dying as fast as they could, becoming instant, absorbent mulch. When she was down to the core, Alexa placed it behind the railcar’s door and then dumped the last of her dust over it.

Like its parent, the tree grew fast, roots shooting through the mud like arrows.

*Crack!*

The boxcar moved, lifted by the apple tree roots growing under it.

*Bang! Thud!*

The adventurers retreated several yards, watching as each seed absorbed the dust. The men waited resignedly for the dying to begin, but were surprised when there was only silence and the thick smell of ripe fruit.

“On seeds, dust gives quick life that remains, but the fruit rots the instant it’s picked.” Always teaching, Alexa plucked an apple from the nearest branch and bit into it. Before she could chew, it turned to a black dust that fell from the corners of her mouth and hand.

She gathered enough saliva to spit. “Edward and Mark, up. Billy and Daniel, down.”

That left the rookies. Neither of them hesitated to go after her when she pried the door open and disappeared inside the sloppy darkness.

Very aware of how much noise they’d just made and unwilling to admit to how much it bothered them to let her get out of their sight, the four men on guard stayed alert, each hoping the rookies were all that Alexa’s choice of them said they were.

Despite being mostly underwater, the skids of supplies were neatly stacked and though dirty, not all damaged. Molded, paper-thin material covered the area that was no longer underwater. Alexa stepped carefully through the ankle-high debris, glad this car was still half buried in the mud. It would muffle their noises from the animals calling this swampy station home.

“Seven of each. No more.” Alexa moved toward the farthest stack of cans, soupy brown water rippling away from her boots.

The rookies moved uneasily toward a nearby skid as she faded into the dimness. None of them liked being split from her, no matter the distance, and then there was the way she didn’t make any sounds. It sometimes made them wonder if they’d imagined her. The new men felt it more strongly than those who knew this was reality now, but it was an uneasiness that was strictly hidden.

The skids nearest to the door were useless, crushed cans that had exploded in the heat. The faint scent of rotten tomatoes floated to those waiting outside, wishing she would hurry.

The rookies carried armloads of their find out of the railcar one at a time so Alexa was never alone, which pleased the watching fighters. It wasn’t that they were afraid she couldn’t handle what came or even that she might vanish and leave them defenseless. It was more a feeling of duty to watch out for her in exchange for her letting them come along.

The small stack of cans and jugs grew steadily. When Alexa added her load, it nearly doubled.

“Get it split up. We’ll prepare it when we make camp.”

The fighters took one of everything, placing them into a single, bulky duffle bag that was taken from their pockets. Later, when there was a fire, they would verify the goods were still edible and then smoke them to reduce the weight they would have to carry.

“No water.”

Edward’s comment drew a nod from the woman. “We need to keep searching.”

“Which car?”

That was the problem. She didn’t answer the question. It was impossible to tell what the submerged railcars held, but she only had enough dust in her remaining pouch to uncover one.

“David will choose.”

David was surprised, but he didn’t hesitate to step forward and scan the sunken tracks.

Alexa gestured. “We’ll hear your thoughts, too.” It was his turn to teach them something. It was how they’d already made it this far. What one of them could do, the others learned as well.

“The weight of the train has to be evened out. Things that are very heavy will either be split among every car, which is unlikely, or there will be a number of heavy cars together.”

David looked around carefully. “Bottled water was very popular before the war. Most trains would have been carrying it, no matter their destination, and these are clearly packed for a trip out.” His sharp mind calculated the distance. “Only five cars on this one. I can’t be sure.” He moved around the side to stare at the next row. “Maybe.”

The rookie kept moving, fully into the process of elimination now.

Alexa waved two of her men after him, staying by the treebound snipers.

Minutes later, all four were moving quietly back to her.

“Ten rows up, the cars are deeper, heavier. A few hundred yards in, the cars almost vanish from sight. Very heavy. I want to go under to see the markings. I’m almost sure it’s a liquid goods lineup.”

“Three hundred yards. We don’t have enough dust for even a quarter of that.” Edward knew Alexa would never send them into water of any kind without a better reason.

“I’m fairly sure we can stay on top of the cars all the way, but we’d be up to our knees by that point.” David didn’t like his own idea.

Alexa looked at Billy. “Anchoring points?”

“A metal post. No way to know how sturdy it is after all this time.”

“Show me.”

Without being told, the snipers followed, never allowing themselves to be split up or out of sight. They moved from shadowy branch to damp ground and back carefully. If anyone came, they would see only five fighters and begin their plans with a dangerous miscalculation that could cost them the battle.

Alexa scanned the softly shimmering sea of submerged railcars, agreeing with David’s choice. The water they needed was there. Now, they had to get to it. “Daniel, tell us why his plan won’t work.”

His words were fast. “It’ll be easier to show.”

Alexa gave her approval, pleased with his methods. “As you would.”

Daniel drew his Colt first and then handed the end of his waist rope to Alexa, making the rookies take an uneasy glance around to verify what the others were doing, what they should be doing. No one else had moved, so the new men turned back to see Daniel climb up onto the first roof.

The murky liquid rippled outward gently. All of them were relieved that the huge car didn’t shift under his weight.

Daniel moved forward as the metal groaned in protest.

“Movement, twenty yards to the right.”

Daniel stopped at Mark’s call from the trees, waiting.

“Fifteen yards.”

The rookies tensed, now understanding Daniel was putting himself in danger to teach them something important.

“Ten.”

They both wanted to call it off now, but they already knew Alexa wouldn’t allow it.

“Five and comin’ fast.”

Daniel began to ease back carefully, keeping his eyes on the churning waves they could all see.

“Three...two...now!”

A greenish gold shadow leapt from the water, sending dark droplets spraying.

Daniel jerked back to let the fish sail by. As it went over the railcar, they all saw it snap hungrily at the fighter with a mouth of spike-like teeth.

“Three more, on your left.”

Daniel moved quickly from the car and watched the faces of the new men as the show began.

The three amphibians leapt from the water at nearly the same time and were met by the first, taking a second try. Teeth lunged like darts; blood sprayed as all four hit the water.

“Did it have legs?”

“What the hell...?”

The questions were stopped by a noise that brought images of water rushing…then there was movement everywhere. Large, fishlike hoppers jumped out of the muddy brown water, jaws clamping down on anything in reach. Each vicious snap triggered another rush of predators to the disturbance.

Large fish snatched the scaled hoppers in midflight and then even bigger carp swallowed those. The surface became alive with carnage.

Alexa moved her men to the cover of the thicker trees.

The noise went on for a long time. While they waited, Alexa pulled things from her pockets and placed them on the damp ground. Not sure if the hoppers could survive on land, the males watched alertly.

By the time the water was deceptively still again, Alexa had slip knotted a length of rope that was nearly a hundred feet long. She tied one end to a clever pulley system that could be placed around a tree for more leverage. There was no going into the water, so they would have to pull the railcars out of it instead.

“Billy, Daniel–find a mule.”

The two men hurried off.

“In the far back corner, there are drums of kerosene. We’ll need them all.”

The two rookies moved that way without waiting for Alexa to point at them.

Alexa sent Mark with them as a guard before turning to David. “We have to clear these tracks up to the first switchover plate. I’ll pry, you guard.”

For the next hour, there was only the sound of their work and a jungle of unnatural creatures watching them. These animals stayed back, afraid of the woman and her fighters, but they whispered to each other and to the Wind. Man had returned.

**3**

Luckily, the mule was near the changeover point and still on solid ground. Once the tracks were cleared, and the plates manually forced open, five of them carried drums to the waiting engine. Kerosene was really only number one diesel fuel, and with the way it had been stored, it should still be usable. It wouldn’t work as well or for as long, but it should buy them enough power to move the sunken train.

Alexa pried the cap off the mule’s front end, glad to see no pockets of water resting on the bottom of the tank. Everyone tried not to breathe in the fumes as they took turns carefully pouring the drums of kerosene into the tank. It was only half full when they were done.

Alexa waved Billy forward. “You drive. We’ll ride.”

Billy quickly pulled himself up into the huge transport machine. Used for hauling railcars around the station, the mule was basically half an engine car with twice the amount of pulling power. It was perfect for their needs.

Billy turned the key that he found in the ignition, but there was no response. He nodded to Daniel. “Give us a spark.”

The Biker pulled a compact charger from beneath his cloak, glad he’d chosen not to leave it when they lightened their weight before crossing the golden bridge.

A minute later, the yellow diesel engine light on the dash flickered to life.

**“... oldies but goodies, folks and we’re gonna play them...”**

Billy hit the button, ejecting the cassette with a frown. Who the hell put a tape player in a mule? You’d never be able to hear it, even at that volume. The light on the console went out, telling him the engine was warmed up. Billy pushed the button with braced ears.

The engine belched out a small cloud of smoke in protest before hungrily roaring to life.

In the distance, those odd, nervous creatures watching them fled for dens and sentries. The Mother would have to be told. Man was not allowed to be here!

It took them almost an hour to get the mule into position. They had to run it over two other sets of tracks, and it made all of them, including Alexa, worry whether there would be enough fuel left to pull out the railcars.

It was hot, sweaty work to get the ends attached. They had to use Alexa’s pulley system to close the last five feet because of a dip in the tracks. The rails hadn’t split, but they were close to it as the weight of the mule rolled across them to be locked into place.

The men on duty swept continuously for trouble. As long as they’d been here now, making this much noise, anyone could be waiting nearby for them to do all the work before trying to take it from Alexa’s hands. Edward stopped a grin at that thought and then sent his attention back to the watch. He’d like to see someone try. As annoyed as she was at how long this was taking, few thieves would stand a chance.

“All right. Slow jerks forward until it breaks loose, and then slow and steady over the shifting debris.”

*Until*, not if. There was no doubt for Alexa that it would move, and because of her belief, the males were also sure of it. If Alexa said it, then it must be so. She’d proven herself repeatedly on their trek.

Billy signaled he was ready; the others moved back.

Alexa drew her Colts, eyes on the water. When her men did the same, she grunted in satisfaction. “Jacob, stay with Billy.”

Jacob pulled himself up onto the foot rails of the loudly idling engine.

She sent David to the other side. “Stay with them.”

It was an order they took well, expressions indicating that nothing would happen to Billy while they were watching.

Alexa circled a finger in the air.

Billy opened up the throttle, giving a single, vicious jerk.

The engine shot forward against the taut ropes, sending a jarring vibration down the length of every car, and then out into the center of the water.

Oddly muted metal noises came to them as debris shifted, and then there was only the engine for a count of five and the calmly rippling water while Billy waited for her call to go again.

Alexa spun a finger.

Billy gave another hard pull, watching in the mirror as the violent shudder spread into the muddy water. Debris was moving under the surface. Floating freely to see air for the first time in half a decade, the brackish water around the cars began to brighten as the bottom silt moved.

“Here they come. Movement from all sides.”

At Mark’s call, Alexa gave the motion to pull it again.

“There’s something big about fifty yards center. Huge.”

Edward sounded nervous. Alexa took a few steps back to ease his concern as the third jerk sent more movement through the water.

There was a dull thudding noise from the railcars. Alexa motioned again, nodding. “It’s loose enough. Pull them out now.”

Billy increased the power and let the mule do its job without holding back. It lunged forward, straining.

The sounds of groaning metal overpowered the noise of the engine. Water ripples swelled as more debris floated to the top as the mule lunged again, sending another shudder through the water.

“Five yards. Get set.”

The mule struggled, engine growing louder. A sudden horrendous noise echoed, making the rookies wince as the railcars began to inch forward. Then the air was moving too, and the men all struggled not to open fire until Alexa did.

The hoppers flew onto the moving railcars, covering them while trying to bite the train into submission. They attacked the lead car repeatedly, hitting each other in the process as more and more of the mutated insects joined the offensive.

The railcars were slowly moving forward now, lifting the surface of the water in an endless fall of mud and debris.

The hoppers clung to the cars, each one covered as it slid from the angry waves.

Alexa fell back further, pacing the mule. The people hadn’t been noticed yet as the furious mutations tried to kill what was making the most noise.

Another disturbance rippled in the churning water.

This one was a massive swell that pushed up and out to the left of the emerging railcars. The seven fighters had time to register bulging, *intelligent* eyes, and then the creature was back under the ripples.

“What the hell was that?”

There was no time to answer Daniel as the railcars began to roll faster, bringing hundreds of the sharp-toothed mutations onto the land. The fighters watched the large, clumsy jumps of the hoppers with outrage and twitchy fingers. Abominations offended them. Their grips tightened on guns, now eager for Alexa to call it.

The slight movement of their hands drew buggy eyes toward them.

The warriors braced as they were spotted. Nearly two hundred of the hungry hoppers were out of the churning waves now, with more lunging for each car as it rose from the flooded land. Near the waterline, another large ripple began. Drawn by the noise and vibrations, the old amphibian moved uneasily onto land for the first time since the war. Enormous and always hungry, the toad began snapping up the chaotic hoppers as they dropped from the cars.

Hoppers squealed in terror and rage.

The mutations further away turned back at the cries. Then they attacked!

The fighters watched in amazement as the hoppers began to jump on the toad, their sharp teeth drawing croaks of pain as blood and poison hit the air.

The warriors followed Alexa as she backed further into the shadows of the trees, but none of their eyes left the brutal battle. If the hoppers lost, her senior men were sure Alexa would try next. She wouldn’t allow a threat like that to live unopposed.

The toad was being driven back into the water now, its barbed tongue doing little damage against so many. Blood sprayed again as one of the reptile’s eyes was scooped out by a furious mouth.

The men felt Alexa relax when the squirming, chirping mass fell below the churning water. Without its sight, the threat wasn’t so great that she would have to step in.

Drawn, the other hoppers had mostly headed for the water as well. When Billy brought the mule to a jerky stop, only a few dozen green and gold mutations remained near them. Those few were moving slower now, some gasping as they began to collapse.

“They can’t take this air for long. They need to be in the water to survive.”

Alexa’s voice was very low, but it still made two of the mutations twitch their way. It was shocking to see how fast the woman killed them.

Her blades made only an unnoticed thud in the ground; both creatures were dead before the hilts stopped moving. It was an unneeded, but still powerful demonstration for the rookies.

Billy had stopped with the line of railcars well out of the water, but the group stayed still until not only the hoppers nearby were dead, but the surface of the water was calm again. It was impossible to know what sounds would draw the mutations back out.

The train cars were covered in mud. Brown water ran from them in large streams, with thick green and black silt on the sides and top.

The mule cut off. The silence in its wake was deafening. They noted the stopping of the engine had no effect on the creatures lurking in the water.

Alexa pulled a small tool from her belt and held it out to David. “Pick.”

David moved only a few yards before pausing. The two cars he was eying looked the same to the other men, but there was little doubt he’d seen a sign the rest of them had missed when he pointed to one.

David chose the car with no debris blocking its lock. He slid the metal cutter against the slippery lock. It didn’t want to give up its treasures, but the new man was used to working with unforgiving metals. The chain fell to the ground with a loud clank a moment later.

All eyes went to the water, waiting.

There was no response.

Alexa motioned Jacob and Billy forward to open the door. Dirty water gushed out as they forced it back. It rinsed the side enough for the others to see the Ice Mountain logo.

They were elated to discover most of the bottles and jugs undamaged. The fighters filled their canteens and watertight pouches happily, then took another share that they could carry. Their only displeasure came from having to leave so much. There was enough fresh water here to last them for months.

Alexa felt their concern and frowned lightly. “It will serve others, as well. Do not covet. Our needs have been met. It is more than enough.”

Chastened, their feeling of loss eased.

When Alexa began to get set for travel, her men followed. They had gotten what they’d come for. Now, they had to get back out.

The rail yard building was a one room hut made of cheap wood that had warped under the onslaught of water. The light they’d seen was only an illusion caused by the glow of a sunray off the metal roof.

The fighters moved around the crumbling shack, ignoring the slight sounds that suggested someone might be lurking inside. The ghosts of the past were not to be disturbed unless you were in desperate need and even then you had to be able to pay the price for such a grievous error in judgment.

Alexa stopped them as they rounded the corner of the shack, hand coming up in alert. On the ground near the shack’s broken window was a rotting body. It was missing a head. The ground under the jean-clad woman was stiff with dried blood. Her skin was full of holes.

Alexa sent her boots onward. A small cloud of gnats followed; she stepped faster to leave them behind.

The ground gradually dried as they headed away from the station, but Alexa didn’t call a break for lunch. She had them eat on the move. They had enough now for two full weeks and even the soreness at the end of this day from the fresh weight was a welcome price to pay.

Alexa moved them steadily north. She wasn’t one to sit and wait for darkness so they could call the Ferryman.

The wilderness around them became a full jungle again soon after the railcars were out of sight. It was a lush, thick oasis of green mixed with brown debris. None of them spoke as they walked. The uncommon surroundings had them all a bit uneasy. Even Alexa twitched when an unfamiliar noise for any area floated through the trees. It was a sound none of them, not even the blonde, expected to hear. It was uncommon to any of the devastated towns they’d come through, but here, it was a shock and an omen.

“Waaa...” The child’s cry was miserable, piercing, impossible to ignore.

Alexa paused as she concentrated.

Her men wondered if she would seek out the source to ensure the baby had someone to care for it.

Alexa moved suddenly, tracking the noise, and her men followed. Apparently so.

“Waaa...” It was pitiful, desperate.

Alexa’s pace increased.

It was as though she was being pulled toward the sound. Her men stayed close to her as they spotted the outside wall of a small village. They were sure nothing good would come from the place upon first sight.

“I agree.” Alexa sighed softly. “But I was not made to go around that type of need. We’ll assist if possible. Watch your six. Anything might be waiting for us.”

# Chapter Eleven

**Hunting Ground**

**1**

**L**aramie Estates had clearly been a secluded community before the war. Eight buildings were in a circle that were connected by a high, stone wall with thin, narrowly arched doorways. A wide, brick walkway made a neat oval turn to the center, where a community well sat. Made of oddly colored stones with deep furrows, the rocks around the well were falling, crumbling into dusty debris that was dotted with white droppings.

Much of the small engineering village remained intact, even mud-spattered glass was still in most of the small windows, and yet, there was a feeling of horror that lurked heavily over the courtyard. Each of the fighters rested a hand on a holster as they entered.

“Waaa...”

It came from the well. There was no doubt. Confusion came first and then suspicion.

Alexa directed her new men to the center of their group as they began a sweep of the dark homes that surrounded them.

“Waaa...”

Alexa ignored the pull of the weakening cry. She needed to be sure they cleared every room that might hold an ambush. The baby’s distress followed them relentlessly.

The houses were all simple three bedroom flats with a short attic space. The once colorful decor suggested these families had been South American. Beds were still neatly made, although cabinet doors were gone, revealing stocked shelves. With the rail yard so close, starvation hadn’t been their enemy. What had?

As if in answer to their thoughts, daylight broke suddenly; the rare sunbeams brightened the courtyard. The miserable cry cut off.

The silence it left was almost hostile.

Alexa circled her men back to the main entry, waiting. The shadows there were enough to shield them from the sun’s glare and from view as they waited tensely for whatever was coming.

A large shadow hit the ground across the courtyard, ominous in the size and the whoosh of wings. The bird dove like a streak, heading straight for the well as Alexa and her men watched, stunned by what they were seeing. Had the baby known the bird was coming? Was that why it had gone quiet? Was the sun an alarm?

The vulture was as tall as Alexa, with a wingspan nearly double that. Huge and heavy, the bird’s body was unable to fit through the average opening. Angered, the enormous bird dug thick claws into the crumbling stone, causing a large chunk to crack off under its powerful talons.

The hungry predator gave a shrill cry of excitement, trying to squeeze its head through again. It was clearly digging into the infant. Was a parent down there, too? Unlikely. Who could let a baby cry that way and not comfort it?

The vulture paused suddenly, long, red beak tilted into the air as if it had smelled something. Had they been scented? The fighters got ready.

The bird let out a furious screech, broad wings unfurling to make an escape. The rock under the massive talon crumbled. The piece fell into the well, bringing a child’s startled cry that snapped the vulture’s attention back. It hesitated, torn.

There was silence from the baby after the one surprised wail. The huge vulture turned ugly yellow eyes on the shadowy doorway where Alexa and her fighters stood. It was as if it knew they were there, but it couldn’t match their scent, thanks to the dried mud covering them like a shield.

As the bird flexed, turning slightly, each of the fighters saw a gaping wound and understood that body shots were useless. This terror had likely taken the villagers, leaving no destruction, no signs of a battle. Its nest would be a different scene all together.

Alexa muttered so softly that only Edward and Mark heard. “Cry.”

The sound rose obediently from the darkness. “Waaa...”

The bird could resist no more than the fighters. It turned back to the well, shoving its fat head into the hole as it let out an unearthly shriek.

Alexa led her men out of the shadows, drawing her guns.

The bird pulled back too late to avoid her shockingly good aim.

*Crack! Crack!*

The bird’s eyes vanished into a splatter of gore, and then Alexa opened up her Colts. As she fired, a second big shadow swooped down into the courtyard. This bird wasn’t as large, but its smaller size made it faster. It ran toward her warriors with piercing shrieks of fury.

“Rookies down!”

The two men dropped as Alexa spun, guns blazing. The smaller bird was hit, but it only slowed. It was Jacob with his .357 that made it pause when he fired twice from the hip.

The smaller vulture screamed in pain as its eyes became gushing wounds. It struck out in panic, rushing forward. The scarred Preacher fired again, emptying his newly given weapon.

The smaller bird staggered, wings flapping in an attempted escape.

Alexa and the others finished off the first predator with repeated headshots. They were there to back Jacob up as he reloaded. The smaller vulture took hit after hit; blood sprayed the plaza. A minute later, there was silence again except for their fast breathing.

“Injuries?”

There were none. Alexa nodded, pleased. “Very good.” She moved toward the well.

The smallest vulture chose that moment to strike, using its dying force to lunge.

*Crack!*

Jacob blew half of the bird’s head off before it could clamp down on her leg. Blood and gore splattered those closest.

The vulture thumped to the ground.

Jacob ignored the approval of everyone, including Alexa. He watched the two corpses to be sure they were dead.

Alexa nodded at Edward’s expression. Jacob was definitely a gunfighter. They were both grateful he was along for this quest.

“Jacob and Mark will get the child. Billy and David on sniper watch.”

There was no discussion of the short battle.

Alexa tensed when her men disappeared into the well, but this is why they were with her. Alone, she had no hopes of helping the others they would meet during their travels. With these males, that didn’t have to be. This child would be the first of many. It was impossible to guess how long the vultures had been coming to this village for food, but the stones on the well were nearly broken through. It eased her hurting heart to know that their reign of terror was over.

“Coming up.”

Alexa kept her eyes on their surroundings, fighting the urge to yank them topside herself. Control was the key. She governed her face into the impassive mask that her father had always worn. She would train them as he had trained her. In a year’s time, there would be little they couldn’t handle together.

“It sleeps as though it hasn’t in a while.” Jacob gently handed the bundle to Alexa, who immediately uncovered its head.

Swaddled in a black blanket with not even a spot of dust on it, the baby was breathtaking in contrast. The beauty of ivory skin with stunning yellow ringlets was remarkable, but even more so was its condition. The baby was healthy instead of starving like they’d expected.

Mark opened his hand to give a theory on why. “These were all around its basket.” They were bones.

“Impossible!” Daniel spat on the ground as if offended by the very idea.

Mark shook his head. “Not if he’s something more.”

The Biker frowned. “What does that mean?”

The Convict’s words were tolerant. “More than human.”

Daniel’s eyes looked to Alexa as understanding came. Perhaps the child was like their strange, hard leader.

Proving the idea, the baby stirred, yawning. Sunlight glimmered off moist, white fangs.

Each of the males took a startled step back, but Alexa only curled the child more securely into her grip and turned for the nearest doorway. “Guard stays the same. Jacob, set us up. We’ll leave when it’s dark enough to signal for the bridge.”

The men noticed how careful their leader was not to let the bright sun burn down onto the child’s fragile skin. They also saw she had the look and feel of a mother now that there was a child to be cared for, but none of them asked if she was. Too many of them had lost family in the war to bring up so painful a subject.

Faced with half a day’s wait, the group found useful things to do, such as preparing the supplies they’d gathered. There was also sewing, smoking, drying to be done. Through it all, they watched Alexa care for the baby and tried to hide their thoughts from each other as well as from her. That kind of happy family life had vanished when the first nuclear bomb slammed into their homeland. Not to mention, that was no ordinary woman and child, but a... Thoughts trailed off there. Alexa’s origins were as foreign to them as the baby’s.

Alexa studied the infant intently. The pall of horror hadn’t lifted with its rescue. She wondered what to do next. They couldn’t bring a child on this quest, but she also couldn’t leave him here.

A hand moved carefully around her, holding out a small vial with a thick, reddish liquid. “He’ll be hungry when night falls.”

Alexa sat the bottle near the basket and waved Mark into the chair. He obviously had information that they needed. “Tell me what you know.”

“It’s only what I’ve read and never really believed in.”

She nodded as if to say that was accepted.

“Vampyre.”

Alexa scowled.

Mark drew back, ready for her reprimand.

She shrugged. “They are a type of walking dead, are they not? Our country is plagued with such now. The war cracked the gates of our reality and the night has begun to slip through. I’m only surprised we haven’t seen more of it.”

Her words were a painful, terrifying trigger back to the war, to where they’d been. Only Alexa’s eyes remained focused on the future. They had an infant that was *more than human*. She used Mark’s description with a curl of her lips. More than, indeed. Should they turn him loose or endanger themselves by trying to take him where he belonged? Like the trolls, the new world’s vampires also traveled these roads. How to even begin such a fool’s... Her eyes narrowed. *Like the trolls*. “Jendon.”

All but the new men understood.

“Perfect. He’ll know where.”

She settled back contentedly at Edward’s comment. “Yes. As defenders of the undead called back to service, they will be guarding a coven. Jendon can take the child there.”

Relieved, the mood of her men improved. Alexa’s got worse. She didn’t know what was coming next, but it felt ugly. She closed her eyes and tried to rest so that she would be ready for it. Sleep had to be grabbed when it was possible in this life. The days of orderly bedtimes were long gone.

**2**

Outside, the clear day faded into a chilly dusk with grim skies and a bite to the wind. It was time to go.

The stinking carcasses were still untouched by predators when the fighters strode back through the darkening archway. Each of them was refreshed from a short sleep rotation.

“Burn it.”

Jacob and Mark lit a torch and made a lap of the village, setting fire to the dark, decaying trees on the perimeter. Daniel and Edward ran alongside as guards.

Next to her, David was studying the wind deeply. She knew a little more of him now. He liked to cross his arms over his chest, even when he slept, and in one of his pockets was a small photo album where he was already keeping scraps of their travels. From Laramie, he was taking the small bones found with the baby.

Alexa met his eye over the flickering fire. “How are things?”

David didn’t hesitate. “Under watch.”

Alexa nodded, voice resigned. “I thought maybe we’d picked up more rats, but I’d hoped to be wrong.”

David gave a brutal smile. “We’ll handle it.”

Alexa had no desire to stay and watch the brittle trees blaze. She shifted the pack with the sleeping infant more firmly onto her shoulders. “Aye. Let’s go.”

The flickering shadows of the swampy jungle faded, leaving only the distant glare of the fire as the four sweaty males joined them.

**3**

As the night began to settle in around them, the child woke.

“The bottle now.”

Mark quickly placed the sealed vial in the baby’s tiny, outstretched hand. Those closest watched in fascination as the child agilely twisted the cap and began to drink.

A minute later, the glass fell to the forest floor and the baby let out a loud belch, followed by a giggle. Alexa got them moving again as the child played contentedly with her braids.

The other normal needs of a baby never presented themselves, allowing the group to reach a small clearing a short time later without another interruption. In the distance, clicks and clacks could be heard. Carried on the sharp wind, all of them were glad to hear the sounds. Laramie’s outskirts hadn’t been extremely dangerous, but it was certainly stranger than most of the places they’d come through so far. The males were glad for once that Alexa didn’t seem to want to explore. Not all of the city was under water. The tallest peaks in the shadowy distance were actually vine and debris covered buildings.

The clearing was covered with large rocks and boulders. Something didn’t feel right about this and it was more than just the child on her shoulders. “Ten minutes, full guard.”

The others showed the rookies where to stand as Alexa gently took the child from her back and laid him against a natural rise in one of the mossy boulders.

As she did it, a new sound rose through the night behind them. Incredibly loud, the shriek of unbearable loss was earsplitting despite the distance.

Alexa’s men fell into a tighter circle around her and the baby.

“Momma.”

A first thought was to mistake the word for the confusion of a lonely, abandoned child, but this was no ordinary baby. Alexa understood instantly. “*Your* momma. Wonderful.”

She evaluated for a split second and then spun a finger. “Fall in line, my pets, and cover those throats. His guardians are coming.”

Alexa drew with her left hand, barrel pointed down.

Her men did the same, following her one, hard rule. *Always do what I do.*

The jungle around them went silent.

Alexa looked away from the child for only a split second, but it was enough. Starving for fresh blood, the infant lunged for her arm. His fangs sank deep into her wrist.

To the shock of her men, Alexa only held the baby to her chest as he drank. An instant later, the forest parted.

There were three of them. A man was in front, flanked by two snarling females. Ivory skin covered with ragged black cloaks; their beautiful, furious faces were made ugly by glowing red eyes that promised no mercy.

Alexa’s men waited tensely for the fight to begin.

Alexa noticed the concern in those evil eyes. These were not killers, only survivors. Not that those long fingers wouldn’t rip out the throats of her men. Still, it was better than an enemy who had no weaknesses.

It was a long moment as the trio took in her neatly lined up males and then lingered on the feeding child.

Without wincing, she shifted the baby more firmly into the crook of her arm. “Your family has come, little one.”

At her words, the baby’s head spun, fangs ripping from her flesh. Alexa used her sleeve to gently wipe her blood from the corner of its perfect mouth.

“Momma!”

The baby strained for the female with the stunningly round face like a china doll.

Alexa moved forward. “Of course.”

She switched him to her other hand as she moved.

Edward came forward with a bandage to cover the wound. He did it while they walked and then stayed on her right as she stepped confidently to the surprised vampires.

The trio of blood takers flinched backward half a step at her movement, merciless eyes narrowing in warning. She watched their fangs extend and voiced her thought. “He’s a very interesting baby. Will he stay this way or grow?”

Alexa’s question threw them off, breaking the tension a bit.

The doll faced woman looked to the male.

He didn’t respond, but the female’s eyes lost some of their fervor as Alexa gently put the struggling infant into her cold arms.

The six fighters watched her linger–*so close to death!–*to run a steady finger over one rosy cheek.

“We sought only to save him, nothing more.”

The mother, her baby back in her arms, nodded slowly, and the man lost some of his menace as well. Maybe this could end peacefully.

The other female had been carefully inching closer to the undefended men, the very *human* men.

“Slow your roll!” Alexa’s voice snapped out like a whip. “I’m still close enough to take his life for any of theirs!”

The sneaking female froze as the male gestured angrily, snarling something only the vampires understood.

The second woman quickly retreated.

Alexa slowly did the same. “I could have killed him as soon as I realized what he was. Anyone else would have.” She took another step back. “I could have left him to the vultures. It wasn’t my fight.”

That comment drew an agonized cry of denial from the mother. The man put a restraining white hand on her shoulder that she shrugged off.

It was a shock to see such emotions from the undead. Alexa’s men tried not to let it sway them against that sense of danger. The Vampyres clearly only wanted the baby right now, but what might happen later?

In the mother’s pale grip was now a pouch. Her movement was so fast that even Alexa hadn’t seen it.

“Take.”

Alexa did with no sign that it bothered her to touch the cold female, and then the trio of horrors fled into the forest, leaving a soft giggling echo.

Alexa opened the pouch wide to let her men see. Inside was a small, intricately carved horn with long green tassels. On the side was a crudely, yet beautifully drawn image of a wolf fighting a woman with long blonde braids. To the sides of these were six small stick figures, each holding what could have been a gun.

“A Caller.” Alexa smiled in appreciation as she stowed the gift. She caught Jacob’s confused expression. “Yes?”

He shrugged. “I don’t understand why his mother put him in the well at all. They could have handled those birds as easily as we did.”

Alexa grunted. “The father.”

Jacob’s brow drew together in confusion.

Edward explained. “The baby’s half human. His father likely hid him there and hoped she’d find him before the birds broke through the stone.”

“Why wouldn’t the Ferryman let them cross?” Jacob knew that had to be the case or the vampires would have left this dangerous place long ago.

“And what were those two lights we saw before he came?”

The rookies were banding together to ask their questions. David was now willing to split her anger if there was any to be had.

Alexa turned away without responding. The others would answer those questions and more when they finally made camp for a sleep shift. Her final moment with the card player would be among them.

There was little to say after that. The clicks and clacks of the bridge were near enough now to let them see a faint glowing outline. They were almost out of this odd place and each of the men were eager for it. So was Alexa. The sooner she figured out what to do for her injury, the better. She could already feel it starting to affect her and that was bad for the quest. She couldn’t shoot her way out of this one.

**4**

Very near where they were to meet the Ferryman, Alexa tensed, stopping. Around them, the night stilled into complete silence.

“Up!”

Alexa’s order was followed by seven leaps into the nearest trees.

“Be still!”

They were a small group of motionless shadows perched firmly in decaying, brittle branches an instant later. For a long moment, there was nothing. Not even the sound of wind rustling came; her men knew to be ready. In the darkness, something moved toward them.

There were no footsteps, no shouted orders or torchlights in the distance, but the feeling of being tracked was unmistakable. Something was in the jungle, looking for them. Did it know where they were? The thought was common property; each of them drew their weapon.

None of the men was sure what to expect as the dark, damp bushes parted. It was no relief to see faces they recognized.

The three Vampyres, one with a napping child on her back, were arguing softly. Their words were so low, they were barely audible, but the language was foreign to tense ears.

The trio stopped under the trees that the fighters were trying to blend into. All seven of them saw the baby stir. Its eyes opened. They were now blood red like its parent’s gaze.

The three walking dead glanced up in unison. The male spoke. “We have come for you.”

“But to what end?” Although their red eyes were impossible to read, Alexa knew. “There’s a bounty on us.”

The vampire mother’s voice was chillingly alien as she forced English through cold lips. “I will not.”

Alexa dropped from the tree and her men landed around her.

“Then why are you here?”

The male bared his fangs in disapproval at Edward’s demand.

Alexa looked to the mother, ignoring Edward’s question.

The female acknowledged her companions were not in agreement with her choice to spare them. “You have men. Those, they will not let pass.”

Alexa’s eyes narrowed into those dangerous chips. “They are mine. If not for their help, your infant would not be here.”

The other female hissed angrily. The mother translated. “You don’t really need them.”

“I do.” Alexa took a step back, hands ready. “I’ll die for them with your debt unpaid!”

The mother turned to her companions.

Alexa backed up further. Everything about her said get ready to fight and her men took notice.

The trio began arguing, all ignoring the baby who was watching alertly from his seat. When the conversation settled down, the female turned back.

“If we let you go, we cannot stay here, but we cannot flee either.”

“Because he is not immortal yet. He can be hurt, drowned.”

The mother’s eyes softened only the tiniest bit at Alexa’s correct guess. “Until he’s older, no such water crossing can be made.”

“If not for us, he’d never see that day come.”

“To let you live, we must die or flee! Nature wants all humans gone, but especially the males!”

Alexa waved a hand toward the sky, where the golden stairs were nearly complete. “A way out.”

“One we cannot pay for! The Ferryman never lets us cross.”

Alexa’s reply was soothing. “Tonight, he will.”

There was another short talk among the trio and then the words only Alexa had expected.

*“*They will not survive the coming war with Nature. Not even by your side.”

Alexa’s answer was far from emotionless. “Perhaps that is not what they were meant to do.” Her words grew more forceful. “Perhaps they will be witnesses when I stop our enemy. To die in such a way would be an honor for my crew.”

Alexa turned toward the glowing stairs. “The invitation stands, but the child will be the first to die if you cross me.” She spun a finger. “Rotating watch. Let’s go.”

**5**

The Ferryman didn’t react when Alexa and her men moved into view, but he scowled fiercely at the pale trio behind them. Before he could protest, Alexa gestured with her injured wrist. “Vampyre venom for passage.”

She extended her bleeding arm. “Imagine the price for each drop.”

The creatures behind her hissed in anger, but the Ferryman nodded curtly, moving toward her with hungry lips. “Done.”

Their second trip over the bridge was without excitement and full of unreadable sweeps of the three, red-eyed vampires following effortlessly behind them.

As they reached the ground, Alexa pointed to a nearby stack of bags. “Get our things. I’d travel until near light.”

Each man was looking forward to the sleep shift that would come with the sun.

The male Vampyre spoke to Alexa. “We must hunt for him.”

Alexa didn’t set rules for that like the man was expecting. “Will you stay here or search for your own kind?”

“You know of others.”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“We’ve been in Laramie since man’s war. There are no more like us here.”

Alexa studied him for a long moment. “You owe a debt now. Would you triple it, killer?”

The pale man’s red eyes flashed. “Agreed. And if you lie, we owe nothing!”

“Done.”

Alexa closed her eyes. The jungle around them went still once more. The air thickened, became sharper somehow as a ghostly green light glimmered at them from the darkness. It slowly took the shape of a rope coiled snugly around Alexa’s fist.

“Jendon, I call you!” She jerked the wispy rope violently.

*“I come!”*

Alexa donned her cloak as Edward stood guard and the slow clip of a shod horse came through the nearby trees.

The troll’s reaction upon seeing their guests was one of shock, but it was the vampires who surprised the six fighters the most. Their tones became friendly; their stiff postures relaxed.

When Jendon began to talk to them in their own language, the fighters realized there would only be the seven of them again come daylight and they were relieved. It was a revolting thought that they might have had to protect the walking dead while they slept; the males were glad she wasn’t asking it of them.

“My words are proven and so is your debt to me.” Alexa drew the pale horrors back to her, tone without mercy. “In payment, none of you, the child included, will *ever* take a human life that has not been proven evil. I command it!”

All three of the nightwalkers flinched.

Jendon’s tone was full of bitter understanding. “Come, Masters. Let me take you home.”

None of the trio acknowledged her order, and no vividly glowing bonds appeared, but her men didn’t doubt the same magic would hold the Vampyres. It was another relief that they wouldn’t be free to prey on survivors.

Alexa and her men watched them go in silence, listening to the songs of tiny, mad hoppers in the cart’s wake. Apparently, the mutations started out on land like normal crickets.

“We’ll see him again.” David meant the baby.

“I feel so, too.” Exhausted, Alexa headed for the darkness, shifting her heavier pack more firmly onto her shoulders. As soon as they cleared this area, they would rest. She was in sore need of it. The pain from her injury was little compared to the drained feeling that was making it hard to concentrate. She would need to recharge before the next battle. “It’s fine work we’ve done, my pets. We have supplies, clues, new friends, and a full crew. May the amazing adventures and moments of stunning glory continue.”

**6**

“Your time has run out, Corbin. Bring in the woman or her body. You have three days to report.”

Paul didn’t smile at the radio message, but he kept his head down anyway. Shane hadn’t liked covering for the Commander’s lies and it was worth a lot more to be a spy.

Corbin shut off the radio. Upon finding out that Alexa now had a full crew, those in the big bunker had started to panic. It hadn’t taken much for them to believe he was at fault.

Paul smothered another grin. Shane had been sweet to him, so he’d told Shane everything. That thoughtful soldier was back at the base now, filling out reports on the last few months. Corbin would be hung for his lies and forgeries as soon as they returned to base.

“There they are.” Corbin gave the signal to fall back.

Paul carefully rolled them out of view. There would be this one last attempt to recapture Alexa and then it would all collapse.

Still fighting his happiness, Paul didn’t care if Corbin found out and killed him for his part in the betrayal. It would be worth it to see the evil man punished. *I’ve been waiting for that most of my life.*

# Chapter Twelve

**My Mercy**

**1**

**N**ot posting a guard had been a mistake.

An hour after they settled down to sleep, the soldiers moved in. Alexa woke to see the jeeps and trucks rolling their way through the clouds of grit.

“On your feet!” She kicked at those who hadn’t moved, bringing them awake harshly.

The government trucks were flying over the uneven Wyoming land. Masked men with rifles slid into view.

“Fall back!” Alexa saw that all her men were now up with guns in hand. She took off running toward the shape of the only building in sight as the soldiers opened fire.

“Ugh!”

Alexa hit her knees as the well-aimed dart plunged into the back of her neck. She was certain that Corbin had fired it.

She staggered to the dirt.

Her men rushed over to carry her along as they fled. After her story, there was no doubt about who was chasing them. The men used their natural strength to stay ahead of the vehicles that were being pounded by the fast flight over unforgiving terrain.

Unable to help, Alexa’s body was hurriedly slung over Edward’s broad shoulder when they ducked into the front doors of the water treatment plant.

They didn’t stop once inside, but moved immediately to the lower levels so that the soldiers would have to come in on foot. Above them, the engines circled, rumbling angrily.

Alexa’s men pounded down the littered basement stairs. Edward motioned two of them to search for a way out while he carefully pulled the dart from her neck. She wouldn’t have headed this way if it was a dead end.

A clear liquid oozed from the hole in her skin. Edward sent his mouth to it, drawing out as much of the drugs as he could. He felt his tongue start to go numb and spat before he could swallow any of it. He repeated the process until he tasted only the coppery salt of her blood.

Daniel handed him an already taped bandage.

Edward slapped it on as the door above them crashed in. “Move! Move!”

Mark found what they needed. “Over here!”

The fighters fled into the sewer with Alexa’s body now over Daniel’s shoulder. Every time they had to stop to pick a direction, she would be shifted to a fresh man, keeping them all moving quickly through the slimy darkness.

The tunnel floors were mostly dry. Flooding hadn’t been a problem here, but there were huge cracks in the gray walls that kept the fighters watching for a collapse. All sorts of debris was in their path. Alexa’s resourceful crew snatched up items of value.

As they moved, the horrors of the war that had been undisturbed for half a decade crumbled under their feet. The bones snapped like wood. Each one sent a fresh chill of hatred through their hearts. The very people who’d caused all this were the ones chasing them, trying to take what was theirs. They fled by underground tunnels that could have taken them in any direction, but Edward kept them moving to where they would have the advantage.

When the others realized where he was taking them, they stepped up the pace. Cheyenne would be the perfect chaotic site to hunker down and wait for their leader to wake up and tell them what to do next.

**2**

Corbin stood at the entrance to the sewer as the large group of men behind him frowned impatiently. They didn’t understand why he hadn’t ordered them to follow the fugitives, but they hadn’t been there for Alexa’s sessions.

“Is it working?” He glowered at the white garbed man on his right.

Busy fumbling with the dials of a handheld computer, the bipolar genius jerked.

The computer flew into the air to be caught by Corbin and handed back. “At ease, Rabbit!”

The soldiers snickered and laughed. Chasing Beth Rider was currently circling the barracks, but the scientist had been called a scared Rabbit long before they’d found the book.

Flustered, Paul flashed a happy grin that didn’t match the years of servitude on his weathered face. Though only twenty, he appeared to be a grandfather, complete with huge knuckles and a hunched back. “It worked!”

Corbin tore the screen from his hand, cruel face fixating. The tiny dot moved east. What was there? They hadn’t been close enough to see which of the black cloaked fighters had been hit, but it didn’t matter. She wouldn’t leave one of them and they wouldn’t abandon her. “We’ll wait and see where they come up. They’ll think we’ve been left behind.”

One of the men was sure of Corbin’s shot. He’d seen her stagger. “Won’t they leave her body with the tracker?”

Corbin turned around in a blur. He pulled the trigger, not worried about the noise carrying as the ignorant man slid to the dusty floor.

“Anyone stupid enough to kill her will meet the same end!” Corbin holstered and headed for the stairs, dropping the screen back into Paul’s twitchy hands as he went. “Alive or not at all, gentlemen. If you can’t dart them, let them go.”

As he disappeared from their view, there was a short conversation that Alexa would have found interesting.

“He’s in love with her.”

The Rabbit’s flash of intuition drew the stares of three dozen soldiers.

Paul looked down at the dot on the screen, seeing they were headed toward Cheyenne. “It won’t matter when he gets her back, though. He’s been obsessed with finding Safe Haven as long as I’ve known him. Something as powerless as love won’t keep him from finding out everything she knows this time. I don’t think she’ll survive it.”

**3**

They didn’t travel for very long before Edward stopped and ducked into a wide intersection with several tunnels branching off into foreboding darkness. It would be easy to get lost down here and wander in circles for days.

Hearing no sounds of pursuit, he gently shifted her weight into his arms. “Give us some light.”

The wound on her neck was already clotting, but her face was pale.

Jacob frowned. “What was it?”

“Knock out juice.” David helped Edward move her to the floor. “If she’s unconscious, she can’t draw from us and fight back.”

“How long will it last?”

David shrugged. “Hard to tell. I’d say twelve hours at least. They’d need to be careful with her.”

“We have to hole up somewhere.”

“They’ll be on us as soon as we pop up a head.” Jacob remembered his days as a soldier. “Those darts are trackers, too.”

Daniel shrugged. “Then we’ll make ‘em come down here for her.”

David shook his head. “We only have a couple weeks of supplies. They can track her longer.”

Alexa’s men only knew the details from her story; they tried to remember every word as they struggled to form a plan to save her from being recaptured.

“What if we surrender…sort of?” Billy loved the lethal way she and her kind had trained his mind to work. It was as dangerous as his hands.

Silence held them all for a full minute as each man considered the images that brought, and then they went further into the development. If an idea couldn’t be planned, it couldn’t be done. She’d taught them to think it through from start to finish before taking action.

Edward liked the idea. “We have to do it now, while she’s still out. They’ll take our guns and separate us into different jeeps for the trip.”

“What if we use a decoy instead?”

They looked to the angry Preacher standing watch with his gun in hand.

Edward understood right away. “Half of us go one way, while the other half closes the trap?”

Jacob gave a curt nod. “If they think all of us are in the first group, a second wave would give us the advantage.”

There was silence except for the creaks of the sewer around them as they considered the idea. It wouldn’t be hard to cluster together and give the impression of seven where there were really four.

Billy pointed out a flaw. “We’ll need her awake for that. We’d have to wait until she’s ready. They’ll know the juice has worn off.”

“Maybe not. I got a lot of it out. She might come around sooner than they think.” Edward spat again, hating the taste.

Jacob finished the deadly plan, hating the death he was suggesting, but eager enough to be a part of it to secure her freedom. “When we come out, the first group turns and we catch them between us.”

“Carefully.” Mark had lost friends to careless crossfire.

“Yes. It’ll be a blur, with movement everywhere.” David was starting to feel the need to get on the move again. “Are we agreed?”

All their heads nodded. It was a big risk to plan this and give her only an hour to confirm it or change it. The location she would have no choice on.

Edward went over as much of the area as he knew, not pulling up much.

Billy, on the other hand, had driven those streets. He began to grin as he zeroed in on their solution. “Wait. I think I have something better. Get the map back out.”

**4**

“We’re picking up a message on the short wave.”

Paul’s words drew Corbin from his stare at the apocalyptic landscape. He had spent the last hour trying to outguess Alexa’s reaction to their ambush. He’d insisted on being left alone to concentrate. “Who is it?”

“Alexa’s crew. They’re trying to surrender, I think.”

The scientist’s voice was reluctant, worried.

Corbin locked eyes with him. “What is it?”

“They said she’s dead.”

Corbin’s heart turned to ice. “How?”

Paul shrugged, hating to be the one to deliver the news. “The dart got her in the back of the head and did some type of damage. They said she had a seizure and stopped breathing.”

Corbin strode to the small communications area they had set up inside a big green tent. He moved toward the radioman, gesturing him aside impatiently.

The recording wasn’t comforting. The cold attitude of the hardass who’d made the call hid deep grief. Corbin listened in growing rage. *Dead!*

*“We’re not like her. We require safe passage.”*

*“Where’s the body?”*

*“With us. We’ll deliver it or leave it, your choice.”*

*“What do you want in return?”*

*“To go on unharmed. Most of us still had relatives to find when we were…drawn to her.”*

*“I’ll talk to the boss and call you back.”*

Corbin looked to Paul. “Where are they?”

“About a mile from where they went in.”

Corbin looked at the motionless dot on the tracking screen. It was normal for the juice to keep working even after death. It led them to the bodies that way. “Do you believe it?”

Paul reluctantly nodded. “He was only concerned for their lives.”

Corbin wasn’t so sure. “What proof did they offer?”

“Her guns. We fetched them from the meeting place her man suggested and ran a test on the skin cells we found. They’re hers.”

At that, it started to become real for Corbin. Alexa wouldn’t leave her weapons behind for anything. “Where do they want to meet?”

Paul gestured at a red marker on the wall map. “They just want it to be soon. There’s a storm coming and they don’t want to be caught in it.”

“Agree to their terms. Have two extra squads waiting. When we have the body, grab her men. We’ll bring them to the new complex and run some tests. She’s been with them for months. If a trade of power was possible, maybe they’d know.”

*‘Cause you won’t get Safe Haven’s location from them,* Paul thought. He’d heard that tone of complete hatred before. The fighter who had called was pissed. Corbin wasn’t the only one planning a betrayal, but Paul didn’t reveal his suspicions. It was all up to fate now.

Corbin moved back toward his small tent. There was more than a storm coming for her fighters. He wasn’t fooled by their sudden selfishness. They were probably setting their own trap, but it wouldn’t account for everything. There’s no way they could cover it all with her dead. She was the light. They were only the energy.

**5**

“They’ve agreed.”

Alexa’s men didn’t exchange grins at how easy it had gone. There would be time for celebrating when it was over.

Edward needed the details. “How many men?”

“Two dozen.” Mark snorted. “Which means more like five.”

They’d had to go topside to place the call. Only Daniel and David had heard it all as they escorted Mark. The Convict was perfect for dealing with the soldiers. His bad attitude made it hard to know if he was bluffing.

“Any conditions?”

“They want us unarmed, but they already know it won’t happen. We’re supposed to bring her up last. They want to see all of us.”

Billy held up what he’d been working on for the last hour as he stayed beside Alexa’s barely breathing body. “Think it’ll work?”

The other men gave nods of approval, but no praise. There would be time for that later, as well.

Jacob was satisfied with their plan. “They’ll take us to the complex. From there, we’ll help her free the other kids they have.”

“That’s not *her* plan.” Edward stopped them, studying her weathered face. “We go on, to find Safe Haven. Without Adrian, we’ll spend our lives destroying bunkers and still never get them all.”

Jacob scowled. “Why’s he so special? What can he do that she can’t?”

“I don’t know, but it’s what she wants to do and I trust her.” Edward took a minute to change a few things on Billy’s drawing.

When he was finished, he passed it to the others for their approval. No one protested after seeing the second blast he’d added. The soldiers wouldn’t know what was coming. It would be rough and ugly, but it would get Alexa’s unconscious body clear of the damage path.

She still hadn’t woken. The worry over that was becoming tangible.

**6**

Corbin anxiously watched the men climb from the manhole. He was still holding onto a small hope that they were wrong and a trip to the lab would set her to rights. That hope vanished as the fifth man came out of the hole with her limp body slung over his shoulder. Her knuckles scraped the ground. Those stunning eyes were open, but sightless. It was true.

Jacob gave Edward a hand up as Mark moved toward the heavily guarded jeep in the center. No less than twenty vehicles waited, with more than four dozen soldiers with rifles aimed at them.

“’Lot of hardware for letting us go.”

Corbin stared at her hardasses with open dislike, changing his plans. These men were not going along for the ride. He looked around. “Only five. Where’s the other one?”

“Ran.” Mark snorted his anger. “The rookie split when she died.”

It clearly wasn’t the response of a close group, and it threw Corbin off. “Six or none!”

Mark slid a hand to his gun. “We’ve returned your property. Stand aside and honor your deal.” His face became ugly in an instant. “Unless you never planned to let us go?”

Corbin understood the unspoken threat and felt a first measure of fear for his life. Loyal to her or not, the men she’d gathered were dangerous.

Corbin suddenly turned reasonable. He motioned toward his vehicle. “I always honor my word. Drop her in the backseat and your group may go. She’s all I came for.”

Mark grunted at the obvious lie and shadowed Edward as he headed for the green jeep.

Edward slung her body down, but made sure her head landed on the soft seat. He walked away without showing any of the instant desolation he felt at turning her over to this one-eyed murderer for even a minute.

The second the fighters were back with the others, Corbin began to slide toward the driver door. “Open fire!”

“Now!”

Perched atop the first water tower, Billy hit the button at Edward’s shout and scrambled for cover.

*Kaabblllammm!*

Wooden and metal shrapnel flew through the air as the base of the water tower evaporated. The heavy water crashed to the ground and pounded over the arid dirt under it.

Every head turned toward the billowing sound, faces widened in horror as the water thundered relentlessly their way.

*Kaabllammmm!*

The next tower drew Corbin’s stunned attention. He watched the water roar toward him in a shocked daze. *I’ve been ambushed!*

Mark’s tattooed knuckles smashed into Corbin’s cheek, driving him to the ground. Around them, the soldiers fled the coming waves with little thought of their leader.

Edward swung Alexa’s body back over his shoulder, but he didn’t wait to enjoy the relief of holding her life in his hands again. He spun for the roof they’d agreed on, not looking to see if the others needed help. Right now, Alexa was all he cared about.

The water pounded the last half mile toward them, sweeping away the vehicles as men fled in panic. Alexa’s fighters darted among the dazed soldiers with little fear of being shot, but when Edward hit the ladder on the building, he was alone and he felt it. He lunged up the rungs two at a time, swinging his feet over the top as the first wave of water collided with the brick building.

Edward staggered at the impact, grip tightening.

Coming from a different side, David was there to steady Edward. Instead of watching the destruction, the two men laid Alexa’s limp body down and secured their new perimeter.

The roof was wide and cluttered with years of filth. The two men stayed at her side, scanning alertly. They listened to the roar of the waves and the screams below with hard hearts. This building was meant to withstand about anything. That was why they’d chosen it, but there was no need to watch the soldiers drown. Thoughts of their own men were near the surface however, and they kept a steady watch on the top of the ladder for anyone else that might have made it.

*Bang!*

The sound of Jacob’s gun crashing made Edward wave David to the side for a look.

His report came with grim words. “The rookie’s on top of the transport truck they brought. It washed up against the hillside.” David frowned harshly. “He missed! Corbin got away.”

Edward nodded, bending down to examine Alexa’s breathing. It was one of the downsides of using a tool like water. There was no controlling it and Corbin was a master of escapes. How else had he avoided the rage of so many angry descendants for so long? “What about the others?”

“They went underground.”

The unexpected voice made both men spin around to see a short, blond man wearing a white lab coat huddling behind a stack of crates. He was shivering, soaked, and bleeding from a variety of scrapes.

“I came up the b-b-back.” Teeth chattering, Paul looked behind him quickly. “Think your m-men are, too.”

There was relief to see the others come from behind the drenched scientist.

Daniel’s grin was wide as he took up a post on the ladder they’d just used. It had been a horrifying, amazing rush to dash through the tunnels, staying steps ahead of the water as they hurried for the manhole cover on the other side of the building. Then, there had been the heart stopping sight of the water smashing through the hillside to race them for the ladder. This thrill ride was beyond any he’d experienced before the war.

Edward gave Billy a nod of recognition as the Driver stopped next to the cold scientist he assumed was now their prisoner. “Good plan.”

Billy shrugged, longing to hear those words from their leader. Her continued absence was bothering all of them. “What about him?”

Paul dropped his head, as he automatically had when it was Corbin deciding his fate.

“My mercy…is given.” Alexa opened her eyes to find freedom, incredibly sweet, waiting in the happy faces of her men. She inhaled deeply of the dank air. Now they understood that she truly needed them for more than their energy.

Alexa slowly pushed up to sit against the filthy chimney; her skull throbbed in pain. She closed her eyes, controlling the effects as best she could while six very anxious males waited for her reaction to the choices they’d made in her absence. “Are they dead?”

“Not Corbin.”

Behind them, Paul shivered harder. “A d-dozen soldiers m-made it, too. They followed him.”

Taking pity on the man’s misery, Billy slid a hand into his pack and came up with a shirt. He tossed it to the captive, seeing the marks of repeated beatings. The scars decorated his alabaster skin. “Anyone have rags to donate?”

Paul quickly changed into the dry clothes that were tossed his way at Billy’s call, exposing his malformed body with no self-consciousness. That had been stripped from him, along with so many other vital parts of his humanity.

The fighters knew he wouldn’t survive out in this world for long, alone or not. Instead of questioning his future, each of her men kept quiet and tried to guess how she might handle it. After Jendon and the baby, they were sure she would think of something other than bringing him along. She’d said they were already a full crew.

“Come over here, Paul.”

The Rabbit hurried to her side, heart thumping at her use of his given name. Around them, her men took up posts and listened eagerly to the sound of her voice. It was a raspy noise they didn’t want to be without now. They’d already risked too much, accomplished too much, to ever forsake the quest or her.

Paul slid to his knees at Alexa’s feet, almost falling.

Her men frowned at his unbalanced movements. The rabbit-like behavior said if he was left here he would go straight back to the compound and report everything that had happened just to be allowed back in. That made him the enemy, didn’t it?

Paul ignored them. The time of judgment was finally here for him as he faced the Alpha. “I had no choice!”

Alexa drew in a deep breath, not sure if she was ready for the newest burden yet. Finding the scientist here upon waking was the only dark spot. “Who is your father, Paul?”

His face melted into a mask of rage that none of them had expected. “You already know!”

His snarl made two of her fighters come back to hover over his shoulder.

Alexa let them stay, but she wasn’t in danger from Paul. “And when he finally recognized the genius that his experiments had caused?”

Paul swayed, no longer angry, but hurt beyond any describable measure. “He put me with the others to be experimented on!”

The fighters muttered at such evil.

Alexa gave them a sharp look before turning back. “Tell me.”

The Rabbit’s mouth opened; revulsion spilled out. “They’re mating with us, trying to get stronger babies that can survive out here, but he…Corbin…*he* wants to be stronger. When a successful breeding gives a healthy baby, he kills it or deforms it. They never get what they need, but he has endless time to figure out how to be like us.” Paul looked at her with devoted, terrified eyes. “It’s Safe Haven that Corbin’s after. He thinks Adrian will make him like us, especially if he holds you hostage.”

“I see.” Alexa’s tone was sheets of ice laid with hair-trigger mines. “Where will they stop for the night?”

**7**

The small camp of soldiers was easy to follow in the darkness. The desolate Commander had set camp out in the open, not worried about Alexa’s fighters. Let them come. What did he have to live for now?

His shoulder throbbed mercilessly from the bullet that had slammed through the back window as he fled. Corbin swallowed the last of his drink with a bitter grimace. The fighters had gotten away with any knowledge they might have had and Alexa was dead. Tomorrow, he would go back and try to collect the body, but Corbin was only going through the motions now. Any chance he’d had of finding Safe Haven, of controlling Adrian, had died with his daughter. That man would never gift him with immortality now. His future looked bleak.

The soldiers around him were aware of it. They were protecting him and following orders, but each of them knew his execution would be ordered as punishment for this failure.

Corbin fingered the gun on his hip as he considered ending it all. Without Safe Haven’s magic, he would wither and die out here the same as the other refugees. At the bunker, he would be shot for gross negligence of duty. What was left? “I should have died too!”

“I agree.”

Alexa’s voice from the darkness was fiery…*alive!* Corbin stumbled to his feet. He froze at the sight of her standing just behind his chair.

Death swarmed closer.

Alexa whistled.

Around them, gunfire rang out as her loyal men took their revenge on Corbin’s guards, who were in no shape to fight. The dozen soldiers were no match for the fury of Alexa’s Eagles.

“Stay back.” Corbin fumbled for the dart gun on his belt, still refusing to kill her even though instinct said she was here to end him.

“Uh-uh!” Alexa’s rage rose as memories assaulted her. That voice had forced her to do unspeakable things for the discovery of information that she never possessed. This weakling had broken her down into a begging mass of emotion, repeatedly…and she’d let him, because of her humanity. Her conscience had kept her behind their walls, but now, thanks to him, she was more corrupt than he was.

Being careful not to trim their leader, the six fighters moved her way as they picked off the few remaining soldiers dumb enough to pop their heads out from behind doors and bumpers. They moved in that efficient V she’d taught them, mowing down anything that moved.

Alexa snarled when Corbin pointed the dart gun at her.

He knew she didn’t hold him in the same tender regard that he did her, but what mattered was that she followed the ways of her father. *Maybe this isn’t over yet.*

Around them, the soldiers lay dead and her fighters stood in a tight circle, ready to defend her if it was needed.

Corbin lowered the gun. “I let you go.”

Alexa finally got the answer for the ease of her escape. Her face changed into an unreadable mask.

Corbin continued, not trying to save his life, but still desperate to follow her to Adrian. “I watched out for you. I tried to keep the guards away from you.” Corbin’s pitch softened. “If not for Regan finding your hole up in the desert, they still wouldn’t know where you are. You *owe* me mercy.”

Alexa wanted to kill him anyway. Her soul certainly needed it, but he had gifted her with the most awful thing he could have–freedom. He was right. She did owe him.

In return, she motioned to the man still lurking in the shadows. “Show him my mercy, Paul. Remove that debt.”

The Rabbit stepped from the darkness with a nightmarish grin and a familiar gun that Corbin stumbled back from. It was Alexa’s missing Colt. There was only one on her hip. Corbin had lost track of them in the chaos. “What? No–”

“Hello, Father!”

“Wait, Rab–”

“My name is Paul! I’m your son!”

“No! Don’t!”

*Bang!*

“Burn it all.” Alexa turned away in guilty satisfaction. Now that they had Paul, they didn’t need Corbin for the locations of the other bunkers. Paul knew where many of them were. He also knew how to hack into the government’s remaining technology to find the others and he was loyal to her quest. All she had to do was stash him somewhere while she and her fighters brought Adrian back. This leg of their quest had worked out even better than she’d hoped when Corbin had let her go right after she’d saved Daniel. She’d always intended to repay him for that kindness. *A Mitchel never let debts add up. It’s bad for the family reputation.*

# Chapter Thirteen

**Close**

**1**

**T**welve days later, the dusty fighters stared at the message carved into the stone of the Black Hills.

Finding Safe Haven’s old campsite had been harder here, where nature seemed almost normal, but the message in the cliffs would have been impossible to miss. Jendon had gotten it word for word as it was carved, but Alexa’s sharp eyes picked out an added line along the ground, like something hurriedly placed there when no one else was around.

*“I’ll wait as long as I can.”*

Despite being sure that it would take a month or more for the big government bunker to learn of Corbin’s defeat, they had stayed on the move and made decent time. Alexa could still be tracked for weeks, according to Paul, but thanks to his smashing the control screen, those who picked through the wreckage wouldn’t be able to follow easily. Still, one woman traveling with seven men drew attention. Word would get back to those in charge. Eventually, the soldiers would come again.

“This is amazing!”

Edward looked at their companion, shaking his head at the scientist’s excited examination of the black mold on the spruce trees. Paul was clearly happy that Alexa had allowed him along for a while, but his sudden movements and unexpected noises were annoyances for her very serious fighters. If he’d been along as anything but a guest, they might have protested. As it was, the pale man had a knack for finding supplies and had already aided them with that.

Content that Alexa planned to drop the Rabbit somewhere along the way, Edward watched her pause and turn toward the mountains, where Paul had told them a complex was hidden. She was tortured over it. Her stiff shoulders said she wanted to go back the way they’d come, and it was her choice. If Alexa decided they were going to the big bunker to take on the new government, they would all follow.

Alexa let out a sigh, shuddering as she fought for control of her ghosts and her guilt. These people, this country, needed Adrian’s light. He was the only one who could bring them all together and force Nature to close the gates. They had to find Safe Haven.

The wind howled around them, blowing their cloaks back as if in defiance of her thoughts.

Alexa spun a finger. “Set us up. We head for Nebraska at first light.”

**2**

In an isolated corner of the apocalyptic wastelands, animal sentries were reaching their destination. These small warriors had traveled nonstop to warn Nature that man was once again gathering. They came with firsthand information for the war that lie ahead. There was little doubt that this new group of humans was strong enough to start the rebuilding, to begin killing the fantasy world with their harsh disbelief. They were lethal enough to battle the new environment and maybe win. Over the seasons, these would multiply until the old world was returned. That could not be allowed to happen.

“It won’t!” Nature breathed her promise, calming rapidly beating hearts. She did not intend to let man send her new warriors back through the gates.

“The only one who could have done so is gone from these shores. Without that green and gold light, man will never return to his former glory.”

But the sentries were worried. The animals tried to express their concerns with images of the ruthless female leading the fighters, of how she’d bound a troll. That was supposed to be something only the undead could do.

Despite losing one of her oldest birds on the golden stairs, Nature wasn’t overly concerned. There were many strong humans left, but without a true Alpha, there was no way humanity could heal the rift caused by their awful war. All the horror had snapped so many minds that it had been easy to push the gates open and allow the real terrors to roam free. Every human the monsters took was one less to be destroyed later. “Return to your homes, then your duties. This group will fail, like the others have.”

“But if they make it across the waters…”

Nature’s harsh laughter rang out, sending animals darting for cover under bushes and the ground.

“The waters are under my command now. They will not allow a human to leave any shore.”

“But if they do make it south, you’ll be hurt.”

Understanding how deeply the human fighters had worried her sentries, Nature felt the first tremor of unease. She’d reacted lightly before the war, and almost been destroyed. *Perhaps I should eliminate them now.*

Nature began to wake early, drawing power from the land and air.

**The End of Book One**

## **Deleted Scene Book 1**

“Attention!”

The static-filled radio blared through the truck of soldiers scouring the edges of the mountain for signs of Alexa.

“There has been a level 5 breach of compound K! All troops are required to report to the nearest base immediately!”

Corbin froze. K was *his* compound, the one he’d denied Paul the safety of. Level 5 meant no survivors. *That’s her. Alexa did it!*

The radio crunched again. “Report all sightings of escaped captives directly to base!”

Corbin’s hand wasn’t quite steady as he turned the radio off*. All the work I’ve done there! All my vials!*

Driving, Shane opened his mouth to question.

Protecting his new friend from Corbin’s wild rage, Paul shook his head. It was a result of the experiments to a degree, but mostly, Corbin was ill. He had been all along. How else could he be such a monster to children?

Struggling to accept it, Corbin refused the order to go to the nearest base. Alexa wouldn’t stay with the kids. She’d done it to send him a message, to tell him that he wouldn’t stand in the way of the quest…but she’d also made a mistake, hadn’t she? All those kids would be easy to find and they would have new information.

Corbin’s sudden, harsh laughter spilled out, surprising the listening men. When the commander laughed, it meant death was coming. They instinctively began to prepare for it, checking weapons and gear.

“Take me to compound K, but don’t use main roads. We’ll see how many of her children we can round up. We know how to make them sing. It never fails.”

## **Author Note Book 1**

Hi! It’s Angie, waving at you. I hope you enjoyed a glimpse of how this quest began and the two constant enemies that they’ll face. What the government can’t handle, Mother Nature might be capable of. Only time will tell.

When I started this story, it was supposed to be a short episode of a continuing saga that I’d hoped to release monthly. I understood that wasn’t likely as soon as I finished the first chapter, but I’ve never really known how big it should be or where it was supposed to start. I like to think I now have both of those covered.

I expect this series to have roughly half the number of books as my first series, Life After War. As you may have guessed, they will meet in the future. After the journey that both groups have made through the apocalyptic wilderness, they certainly deserve to meet and swap survival tales.

Next, we’ll be heading to the Killin’ Fields of Nebraska. Marc and Angie came through there right after the war and it was ugly then. I wonder what horrors lurk there now?

This series is almost the opposite of the limits that I face while writing LAW. This one allows me a creative freedom that always seems to have a slightly western flavor with guns and Magic–two of my favorite things... (Sorry. I was singing. It’s better that you couldn’t hear it.)

Thanks for reading my work! I hope we meet again in that distantly close realm where just about anything can happen. I call it Angie’s World.

# **Book Two**

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Copyright Book 2

**The Killing Fields**

by

Angela White

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**Author:** Angela White

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Thank you, Beta Eagles! You do amazing work.

**Table of Contents Book 2**

[Remnants](#_Chapter_One)

[The First Night](#_Chapter_Two)

[Follow the Smell](#_Chapter_Three)

[That’s How It’s Done](#_Chapter_Four)

[Small Favors](#_Chapter_Five)

[Haunted](#_Chapter_Six)

[What Devil Rains Be These?](#_Chapter_Seven)

[Undead Egos](#_Chapter_Eight)

[Then and Now](#_Chapter_Nine)

[The Wrong Side](#_Chapter_Ten)

[A Grand Island](#_Chapter_Eleven)

[Lincoln](#_Chapter_Twelve)

[Zones with Old Bones](#_Chapter_Thirteen)

[Betrayed and Repaid](#_Chapter_Fourteen)

[The House in the Corn](#_Chapter_Fifteen)

[A Hag? Oh, Hell](#_Chapter_Sixteen)

[Free Will](#_Chapter_Seventeen)

[Traveling On](#_Chapter_Eighteen)

# BK2 Chapter One

**Remnants**

Nebraska

**September**

**1**

**“Y**ou’re not going in there?”

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

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

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

“She is crazy!”

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

“Can’t we talk about it?”

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

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

“Wait! Wait for me!”

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

“Don’t leave me!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward fell in step with her, sensing a distraction might be good timing on his part. “I’ve heard stories of this place.”

“I’d hear them later.” Alexa was aware of his tactics. Her crew didn’t want Paul here. They would try to get rid of him, while also trying not to piss her off. That was a thin rope to walk.

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

“Wrong spot. Stay an arm’s length to the left.” Daniel was still teaching David. “Remember rule 2b for close quarters.”

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

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

The males making a conscious effort to maintain her basic traveling formation had big muscles and dark hair that made them appear related, but each of them wore it differently. For David, it was loose and almost long. As a blacksmith, he’d kept his hair trimmed for safety, but that wasn’t necessary now.

Edward had a tame mass of ebony that curled around his ears to give him the appearance of someone who had earned a high rank or command. Billy preferred the previously gender restricted braids. He sported two on each side that were tied together in the back with the rest of his long hair to form his ponytail. Daniel had kept the short spikes that connected him to his past, and so had Jacob with his curls. Alexa liked to admire the sexy mix of hairstyles during the nights when she refused to sleep anymore and needed to be reminded that she still had a human side. She suspected there wouldn’t be a lot of time for that during this part of their run. The Killing Fields were every bit as lethal as Paul feared.

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

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

Alexa didn’t confirm or deny that.

Edward hadn’t expected her to. She preferred silence to lies.

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

They’d reached the first cornfield two days ago, and it now felt as if the resilient crop had taken over the entire state. As they walked, cracked roads were becoming mere paths between the rows.

The wind sent a fresh round of moans through the tall corn, making the fighters peer harder through the jungle of stalks and tassels that now surrounded them. Ten-foot high plants rose haughtily in every direction and exuded a wet vegetable smell that hung heavily over the field, while the spongy ground under their boots suggested they might sink at any moment despite a lack of rain. It made them all uneasy. Paul’s loud clumping drew their emotions to an easy target.

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

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

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

“I agree.” Mark also glared at Paul. “You’ll get her killed!”

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

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

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

Alexa stopped again, shoulders rigid.

Her fighters braced.

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

Paul rose, flustered. “Please!”

There was silence as they all waited for her choice.

“Pick one of them to take charge of you. Five minute break.”

Her order surprised her fighters. If they had to take charge of him, he might become one of them.

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

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

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

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

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

David came to Alexa’s side. “I know what you need, what’s going to happen.” He looked at her arm, where the two small holes from the baby’s bite were now odd black scars.

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

“No, but if Lincoln doesn’t work they’ll figure it out for themselves.” David hesitated, expression darkening. He ran a hand through his hair in an unconscious defense. “And if it doesn’t?”

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

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

Alexa’s eyes flashed annoyance. “Carry on!”

David didn’t confirm that he would. Alexa switched topics. “What are you hiding from me?”

David winced. “Protecting myself, not hiding.”

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

“Tell me who you are!” Alexa’s voice was a deep command that was hard to refuse.

He stalled. “I’m a blacksmith on a quest.” It was still how he felt.

“Tell me who you want to be.”

“An Eagle in Safe Haven’s army.”

Alexa let a sound of longing escape her lips. “As do I. Now tell me who you were!”

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

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

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

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

“I fought against them. I wasn’t worthy.” David sighed raggedy. “I’m still not.”

Alexa understood that feeling, but it didn’t bother her that David had been with the enemy. So had Edward and Jacob. Mark had been a career criminal. None of that mattered. Alexa wasn’t good at comforting her men, but she managed to find a tone that sounded gentle. “You’ll tell them. They’ll make the choice. Until then, store up credits.”

David had already planned to do that. He felt he had a start on it, even. He was grateful to hear that there was a chance for him to earn forgiveness.

“Hold still!”

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

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

Paul stumbled backward.

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

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

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

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

“She’s getting ready to drill us to burn off some of the anger.” Mark made sure his gear was high and tight.

The others did the same, muttering.

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

Paul started to protest. “What did I–”

Edward shoved the scientist. “Let’s go. Now!”

Ahead of them, Alexa was already running.

The other fighters flew by Edward and Paul.

Angry, Edward snatched the scientist by his jacket and jerked him deeper into The Killing Fields.

**2**

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

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

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

“Useless!” Edward slid his arm around Paul’s waist as the sound of boots faded. He hefted the man over his shoulder and rushed to catch up. He ignored Paul’s cry of discomfort.

Alexa heard the heavy steps, the crashing of two bodies through the corn that reminded her of their adventure on the bridge, and brought her team to a reluctant stop. She waited for Edward to put Paul down, giving them a one hundred count to catch their breath before she started walking at a quick pace. She kept it that way for the next hour, fighting the instinct that said going faster was better. If slowing them down was the worst consequence of bringing Paul along, they would survive it.

**3**

**3 Days Later**

“It feels like we’re being followed.” David changed to walk backward, scanning. There hadn’t been much in the way of sights today. It made the Blacksmith alert to even slight changes.

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

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

“Boss.”

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

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

Alexa studied the girl, wondering who she had once been. The child wore a long dress made of simple wool that declared her origins after the war had been poor and untraveled. There were still enough old world clothes around to outfit a country, but those who controlled the items were ruthless in their pricing. The only other way to outfit a family was to scavenge for it, but this child’s clothes were handmade, suggesting a life in one place. Bare, scarred feet implied the same. Alexa wondered only at the braces still on the girl’s rotting teeth. Once upon a time, she’d had a life. It was heartbreaking.

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

The little girl hissed. “Never!”

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

Blood poured down her small face at the fatal hit, but the child only hissed again and darted into the corn.

“Word of our presence will spread now.” Alexa filled the stunned quiet that had fallen over her fighters. “Go quietly. Watch your six.”

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

Her fighters recovered quickly, but David had to bump Paul on the elbow to get him moving again.

They fell into their normal march formation, but none of them were surprised when Alexa sped up. The encounter had been unsettling. All of them scanned the abnormal corn jungle for the child.

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

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

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

“Shut up!” Edward stopped and spun around. “Don’t ever do that again!”

“What?!” Paul braced to take the blows.

“Call her a liar.” Jacob glared. “Or any of us. *You’re* the only liar here.”

“And you just saw a monster, you idiot! Wake up!” Mark shoved Paul.

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

The men hurried to catch up with Alexa.

Paul came along more slowly, now bringing up the rear. He refused to believe the child had been shot. *Alexa missed…*

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

Paul opened his mouth to spew his false narrative again.

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

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

Paul began to sob at her feet.

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

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

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

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

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

“Disable?”

“Creators? Like vampires?”

Alexa used their interest to allay their fears of not being able to kill the dangers around them. Sometimes spilling blood wasn’t possible or even needed. They were learning that. “Vampires die easily enough when you know their weaknesses. It’s a myth that they’re hard to kill. Guardians are different. They are an extension. You have to disable their visions. To do that, you would normally use the same disbelief that Paul clings to.”

“Normally?”

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

“How do we–”

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

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

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

**4**

“There’s something back this way.”

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

Alexa joined him to survey whatever it was he’d found. Edward had a nose for stashes. “You lead, we’ve got Paul.”

That was something she hadn’t allowed since picking him up. Edward tried to be perfect as he took over the Point position. The sense of food being hidden here was clear; he found himself falling into the tracking zone. Alexa often used words to trigger their mood changes and actions, but it wasn’t needed with him. He’d watched her closely every time. After months, it was almost natural. “There’s some sort of wall here.”

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

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

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

“Keep leading.” Alexa stayed in the bodyguard’s place.

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

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

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

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

Alexa slapped Edward on the arm. “Nice.”

Edward glowed at the praise.

Alexa called the others inside and shut the door.

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

“Inventory.” Alexa waved as the men spread out a bit to explore their find. “Hit me.”

“Bottled water.”

“Jars of canned corn.”

“Toilet paper rolls!”

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

“Five cases of canned items, no labels.”

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

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

Jacob paused.

Alexa motioned him to continue. They all wanted to hear it.

“Take the path cleared by Recon and set the charges according to the map. To ensure proper timing, the explosives are prewired and timed. Follow arming instruction with precision.” Jacob handed the paper to David to read, unable to take anymore. He’d already scanned the next lines and almost couldn’t believe it.

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

Speculation and horror ran through the group.

“This is a joke, right?” Paul was the only one who still didn’t think the government would do something so awful. “Or a mistake?”

Alexa waved at Edward to handle him as she went to help Jacob dig through the other crates. They were doing it carefully now that they knew there were explosives and deadly chemicals here. The other men stayed back.

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

Paul wanted to ask questions, to argue with the orders, but Edward’s scowl discouraged it. Feeling he’d been hit enough, Paul closed his sore mouth. He hated being with these men. They weren’t like him and Alexa.

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

“Can anyone remove it?”

No one answered her.

Alexa gestured Jacob back. “Leave it alone.”

Billy offered a suggestion that he knew was weak. “We can damage the door. Make it hard to get in here.”

Alexa stared at the medical crate and the cloth satchel thoughtfully. She didn’t want to give away their location to anyone, but it would bother her too much to leave these things out here for anyone to find. They would have to handle whatever came from here. “We’ll take the explosives and burn the rest. Clear out everything that we can use.”

Satisfied the dangerous weapons wouldn’t fall into stupid hands, Alexa’s men quickly piled the new supplies outside the door.

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

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

“I’ve watched a lot.”

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

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

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

Alexa held a pouch out. “Hold this.”

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

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

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

Billy stroked his goatee. “And there’s no way to change that?”

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

Alexa grinned. “It’s what keeps me walking. That, and the wonderful view.”

Before Billy could do more than chuckle, Paul’s loud voice came from the pile of bags and pouches.

“I thrived in the labs! The women used to ask for me.”

Silence came. Then laughter.

Paul reddened, but wasn’t wise enough to stop there. “It’s true. Many of them paid their allotments to have me.”

Now the laughter was uneasy, fading into disapproval.

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

Paul shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that. The women were breeders. It’s all they do. They’re treated well.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Billy paused. “Research about descendants?”

“Yes, and their offspring.”

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

“At first, but for the last year, I’ve been one of the subjects.” Bitterness filled Paul’s voice. “My *father* wanted fresh DNA for his experiments and I had just started showing signs of my lineage.”

It was such an incredible story that all of the men had already dismissed it. There was no way the government had been using Paul for breeding purposes. It was too much to believe.

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

Jacob smirked. “And asked for you?”

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

The men burst into fresh laughter. Even Alexa was unable to contain a low chuckle.

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

Alexa cut him off with a sharp whistle.

“That’s our cue.” Daniel smirked. “Let’s go, *stud*.”

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

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

Alexa mentally snickered at Paul’s thoughts. “Is it something we need?”

Edward wasn’t sure and didn’t lie. “I don’t know. It has a feeling…”

Alexa concentrated and caught the vibe he was centered on so intently. *“Safe Haven.”*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Things got bad that first year. The winter took a heavy toll.” She moved them on before depressing thoughts and memories could become a distraction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa gestured to the next set of plastic curtains.

Edward and Mark rushed through with guns out.

“Clear here.” Mark wrinkled his nose at the strong odor of rotten corn.

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

“They tried so hard. We’ll honor that by not burning it down.” She narrowed in on the floor, the sole surviving rug. “See what’s down there.”

The shabby rug made a loud ripping noise when they tore it up. The carpet, like many other items, had molded to the surface it had spent so long covering.

“A tunnel.” Edward dangled down by his big arms and Mark’s strong grip.

Alexa allowed herself a moment to enjoy her men. They were beautiful to watch in action. “Describe it.”

“Used to be a sewer or maybe a storm drain. There’s an old rope-n-ladder set, but the rope’s pretty frayed. Can’t see much beyond a pile of bones and a stack of crates that I wouldn’t put a feather on.”

“Water? Wildlife?” Alexa waited, body flashing need that bled through her tones.

“No, to both. Doesn’t even look damp for being a tunnel. You want me to drop down and scout it?”

“No.” Alexa felt the temperature in the room rise. “I have other duties for you.”

Both males felt her warm regard and moved her way without waiting for the invitation. What she wanted was clear and they were willing. It was something each man had already decided he could tolerate or better.

Alexa tugged the plastic back over the doorway.

Daniel grinned as he realized what was going on. Her moments of need usually came at night when they were camped, but it wouldn’t be the first time that she’d stolen a moment during the day. He signaled to Jacob; the males left the house.

Outside, David and Billy took the news the same way–they were amused and the tiniest bit jealous.

There was silence as the guards and their guest tried to hear what was going on inside that kitchen. Even the corn was suddenly quieter.

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

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

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

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

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

Edward went first, gentle and respectful, remembering to pull out at the final moment.

Mark took his place with a cry of devotion that echoed to those outside. The Convict took advantage of the moment and stroked his rough hands down her long braids, skin tingling. He tangled his hands in them and lowered his mouth to hers eagerly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**5**

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

“They were giants.” Alexa motioned Edward to cover their rear. “Would you hear the story?”

She was clearly in a good mood. Daniel answered quickly. “Yes.”

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

Paul frowned. “You’re talking like they exist.”

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

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

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

Now there were plenty of questions.

“So they were real? Why didn’t we take any of the dust from them?” Billy ignored his growling stomach.

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

Billy looked over. “Does the dust have power?”

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

It was a relief to hear.

“What could have killed a giant?” Jacob lifted his chin pridefully. “Besides us, I mean.”

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

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

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

“They were *too* different. They were probably forced out by their own kind for being advanced.”

Billy nodded. *My thought, exactly.*

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

Alexa sighed, still warm and tingling. She ignored it instead of handing out a punishment that would have been wasted on Paul. The fire from the storage room would attract a lot of attention anyway. The enemy knew they were here from her shot at the corpse child, and the fire would narrow the location, but the enemy wouldn’t know exactly where her group was by the time they tracked those signs. Paul’s clumsiness wouldn’t get them killed right now. Only time would tell about later.

The fighters doublechecked to be sure they weren’t adding any noise.

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

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

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

Not sure what had flipped her into anger, only sure who had caused it, the others shoved by Paul to catch up, each one pushing him back to the ground as he rose.

Paul realized he hadn’t been shielding his thoughts. “Why can’t I get it right?!”

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

# BK 2 Chapter Two

**The First Night**

**1**

**T**he afternoon had been hot, with no breeze to be had except for the one made in passing. Everyone was relieved when Alexa finally stopped running. It had been especially hard on Edward, who had again been forced to scoop Paul over his shoulder to keep from being left behind. The pair had traveled that way for hours.

Alexa led her tired men toward the only tree they could see in any direction. The wide cottonwood was moldy and light on leaves, but surviving–much like the people left in this broken country. They were alive despite massive damage and low faith. It was a testament to the strength and the tenacity of life in any form.

Edward dumped the drowsing scientist on the ground, angry. He moved to a guard position that was as far away from Paul as he could get. The smells of neglect were rank, but his rage was flickering dangerously. Paul snoring and drooling while being carried like a baby was a huge insult to the honor of this group. The scientist had to go. Edward was now determined to see that happen, to help it along.

“That hurt!” Paul had been having a wonderful daydream about being a king who was carried everywhere.

Alexa gestured curtly, good mood long gone. “We’ve made too much noise to go further without paying for that mistake. We’ll make an early camp and be on our way before dawn.”

Paul wisely kept his mouth shut about the early rising, but he couldn’t ignore the more pressing concern. “We’re sleeping here? Not in a barn or something?”

Edward scowled across their small area. “Shut up.”

Paul argued anyway. “But I’ll be in the bathroom area in your tent again. I get pissed on in there!”

Alexa knelt by Paul’s feet and used her knife to scrape away the thick, stinking layers of moldy tassels on top of the soil. Under it was a layer of squirming, crawling, fleeing insects and spiders that sent Paul leaping back in disgust.

“Ugh!”

“You can sleep outside if you prefer.” Alexa covered the queasy mess of bugs.

Paul was pale except for two furious red cheeks.

Alexa gestured toward the clear area next to where her men knew she wanted their tent erected. “There’s room for your own canvas, Paul. We made sure you have one. If you insist on being with us at all times, you’ll tough it out in whatever way you can.”

Paul dropped his head as the other men shook theirs. He would rather be pissed on than put up his own shelter each night. What was he doing out here with them?

When Alexa motioned to the spot beneath the tree, her two rookies hurried to get things set up. It was rare that Alexa stopped before the sun sank. Both men hoped she might spend some of that free time with them talking. They’d agreed to come along without asking the thousands of questions they had, but with the Rabbit here, Alexa was forced to be even stricter on her rules as an example to prevent her group from growing lazy. To get the answers they wanted, the rookies had begun to direct Paul into the questions, setting him up for the punishment they would have gotten.

“I’ll be back. Stay here.”

Mark went with her anyway, being careful not to get in the way when she began a patrol of the area. He trailed her quietly, listening to the wind moan through the nasty stalks that surrounded them. *This place is bad news.*

Alexa agreed with his thought. “Yes, it is and we’re only at the edge. Deeper, it’ll be worse.”

Mark didn’t doubt that. From blackened vegetation to huge insects that they’d been crunching under their boots all morning, there was nothing to indicate an improvement was coming. Mark pushed that away for the moment. “I’d like to talk to you about something that’s bothering me. Is there a time when we can have a few minutes?”

“Now.” Alexa didn’t stop her patrol.

Mark got closer before speaking. “I’m worried. One of our group might be sick.”

Alexa snorted at his carefully thought out setup. “Get on with it.”

“If we lose one of our group, what happens to the rest of us?”

Alexa wasn’t to be humbled or reached by guilt. “What do you want?”

“To help you.”

“Then do your job. Leave me to do mine.”

Mark frowned. “That’s only going to work for so long.”

Alexa spun around to admonish him and found a hard countenance that she couldn’t lie to. She stepped around instead. “Mind your words, Convict.”

Mark didn’t even wince. He’d heard worse, and he knew she didn’t mean it. Anger was Alexa’s defense, one that she insisted upon hiding behind whenever one of them called her on something and refused to back down. It worked as much as they allowed it to. After this run, it wouldn’t fly at all.

Alexa knew that, but she couldn’t have them worrying over her health instead of catching important details. She loved these men. She wasn’t going to sacrifice them just for herself. Only for Adrian would she ever trade their lives.

Mark followed her to their camp and took a spot beside Edward, covering the opposite direction.

“Any luck?”

Mark shook his head once.

Edward sighed. They hadn’t expected her to cooperate, but it still would have been nice.

Picking up the thought, Alexa turned a hard glare on both men. “Mark and Edward will cook. Paul will help.”

*Not likely.* Mark moved that way without complaint. At least between him and Edward, tonight’s meal would be decent.

Edward stiffened at the punishment, but sucked it up to do as he’d been told.

Paul approached them slowly.

Edward nearly growled. “Just watch!”

Mark quickly directed Paul toward learning to build the fire. “Hand me the logs. You remember that we collect and carry our own wood, right?”

Edward pulled things from his kit, not speaking to either of them. He was the one sulking now, and the other males understood. If they were unofficial second in command and been reduced to cook and babysitter, they would have gotten upset, too.

Alexa didn’t care for their emotions, only their willingness to follow. She also wasn’t worried about Edward recanting his loyalty. He was hers.

“I’m going to have another look around. *Alone*.” She vanished into the corn.

All seven men stared after her in concern.

Alexa didn’t plan to go far, but she had to escape for a moment. She hated to discipline her men, especially Edward. They could never be allowed to see how much she wanted to take it back.

**2**

“Is she okay?”

Paul’s question drew immediate scorn.

“She’s fine!”

“None of your business.”

“She’s more than okay.”

Paul flushed at their hostility. It said he had no idea what he was getting into, but they didn’t understand who he had been. Healing descendants was also on his resume.

“Paul, why are you with us?” Daniel didn’t plan to waste their time alone with the man. “You don’t fit. Why come?”

“I do fit. I’m like her!”

Standing next to the loud scientist, Mark roughly slapped his hand over the man’s mouth. “Quiet!”

Paul cringed down until his face was no longer in contact with Mark’s big hand. “Okay!”

“What do you mean you’re like her?” Daniel found it hard to believe.

“I’m a descendant. I have her blood.”

“No way.” Edward didn’t hide his contempt. “You couldn’t be more different.”

“She had Adrian! I had no one.”

“She has the fire inside, the drive to survive. You don’t.” Jacob pinned him with an ugly stare. “Why are you really here?”

Paul fell silent as the men all glared at him.

“You will tell us.” David didn’t feel bad for threatening the weak man. “All of it.”

Daniel pointed. “We’ll get it from you in any way that we have to.”

Billy added his support. “Nothing will ever come between us and the quest. You better tell us now.”

Realizing he was trapped, Paul huffed out a reply they weren’t expecting. “I need the time with her so she’ll mate with me and continue our line.”

Five of the listening men barely contained chuckles. The other stood up and rushed toward Paul.

“Wait! Stop! It’s what destiny says has to–”

Edward jerked Paul up by the front of his coat, lifting the scientist off the ground. He held him there. “You’re not good enough for her!”

To their surprise, Paul shoved free and caught himself before he hit the ground. “Slam you, snob!”

The name took Edward by surprise and he didn’t retaliate. *Snob? Me?*

Paul took up a sloppy copy of the fighting stance the other men used during training lessons. “Come on, then!”

This time, loud laughter rang out.

It drew immediate attention from the blood-soaked fields that hated any form of happiness. Anger rumbled through the ground.

Alexa knew it would be upon her men before she could get to them. A sharp whistle sounded a second later; she returned the call, bringing them to her.

The rumble grew louder and the corn shook, but Alexa didn’t sense an honest threat until she heard the light boots of her men. They were being chased.

Something roared, sending her into full battle mode. “Here!”

Edward, with Paul over his shoulder, came into view first. He dropped the scientist at her feet and drew his gun.

All of the men surrounded Alexa, mindful about her words of creatures.

The roar grew louder as the threat neared. Whatever they’d drawn sounded angry.

Corn moaned and fat black crows with sharp red talons rose noisily into the air as the ground buckled in front of them.

“Jump!”

Everyone but Paul leapt over the furrow of dirt shifting their way.

Edward snatched him off the ground as it collapsed, shoving him aside.

“Thanks!”

The ground roared again at the sound of a human voice.

Alexa took off running, drawing the danger.

Her men followed, with Paul stumbling along last.

Alexa stopped suddenly and dropped to her knees. Her knife replaced the gun in her hand. She stabbed the ground mercilessly.

Her men thought to join her, but it was already over. The ground ran red, though not with her blood, the males were happy to see.

Alexa motioned Edward forward, keeping her knife out and body in close position in case it wasn’t dead.

Edward used his feet to kick away the dirt. He cleared enough of it for them to determine their attacker was a big mole.

At first glance, the mole looked albino, but Alexa realized it was gray fur where the black should have been. The teeth were long and jagged on the ends, like a pair of dentures that had been used for chewing rocks. Larger than a dog, it had only a stub for a tail and claws that gave them all a creepy feeling.

“That’s a grandmother or something, right?” Daniel noted nervously. “Should we be on the lookout for the family?”

“I doubt it.” Alexa stood up. “It’s ancient even by mole years. This is a remnant of the old world, my pets.”

“And the cleanup crew is already on the way.” Edward pulled Paul back.

They all looked over to find a long line of large ants coming toward them from a wide hole in the ground. Centered between two rows, the hole was shaped like a volcano instead of the cone anthills they’d known from right after the bombs fell. The ants had almost disappeared within a year of the war. This many of the big mutations in one place was uncommon.

The ants were the size of a small boot and healthy. They marched along without struggling, going over and around the piles of moldy stalks that covered the ground. Their antennae twitched continuously, scenting the air for trouble.

The fighters stared in fascination. The ants were a part of the old legends, one that few of them had believed in.

“I thought they were all gone.” Paul’s loud voice traveled to the ants. The entire line of hungry insects came to a slow stop.

The fighters got set to battle, most of them thinking this was a better challenge to their new skills, since the mutated ants were much smaller than a human target.

“Wait.” Alexa stopped the battle as she spied something familiar. “Look at their formation.”

The ants had spread out and were now in the same V that Alexa used for fighting.

“Safe Haven.” Jacob kept his voice soft so he didn’t trigger a fight that didn’t have to happen. He actually liked most of the animals that America now offered, and the ants were something new to him. The west hadn’t seen an ant, big or small, in a long time.

Paul remembered to speak softly. “Corbin didn’t believe those stories. I don’t either.”

Alexa rotated a finger and her men got into the matching formation, leaving Paul to stand by himself.

Edward studied them. “They’re all soldiers here. Maybe the females are in the nest?”

Alexa shrugged. “Or out hunting and fighting. Women are not required to hide in their holes anymore.”

It was a reminder that Alexa didn’t usually give, but her men had to be aware that females across this country blamed them, and every other walking nutsack for the war. The days of women ruling and men ruing were in full swing, and if her fighters forgot that it could cost them their lives down the road.

The ants were clearly studying them. Paul had no choice but to recognize that fact when the ants switched their formation right in front of him. They became a simple pattern of lines and circles to form a word that all of them were exceedingly familiar with.

“FOOD/”

There was even an attempt to form the question mark at the end.

Alexa clapped in praise that surprised her men. “That’s so good!”

Paul didn’t react. He was frozen in shock.

“Please take this mole.” Alexa retreated a bit to show respect. “You may have anything we kill during our time here, as payment for safe passage.”

The ants in the front were larger than the others, with rougher pinchers and longer antennae that searched the air continuously. The two in the very front of the V were connected at the abdomen, making them appear even more ominous as they came forward to inspect the carcass.

Edward used a soft tone. “Is that a fresh mutation?”

“No, just an old one that has survived longer than the rest, I think.” Alexa was proud of the way her men were holding their positions even though more of the soldier ants were now crawling by their boots.

A simultaneous, piercing call came from the conjoined ants, making Paul flinch.

The waiting ant colony hurried toward the dead mole, chattering eagerly.

Alexa motioned her own group back toward the narrow road in the corn. The jaws on the ants were large and strong. She wasn’t sure if they would have trouble with the insects, but she suspected they’d be forgotten about if they got out of sight quickly.

“That was interesting.” David exhaled as they reached the road. The whole thing felt surreal.

“Yes. I think we stumbled upon a war that the moles have finally lost. Many fates will be decided over the next decade–humanity’s, as well.”

“You mean they’ll go extinct?” Paul was in the rear with Edward.

“We just saw it.” Daniel sneered at the scientist. “*Your* kind has destroyed everything.”

“I’m not like them!” Paul’s voice once again carried.

“Paul?” Edward’s tone was deceptively kind.

“What?”

“What did you do before the war? Before you became Mr. Stud?”

Paul flushed, mouth opening, closing, opening.

“Come on, Paul. What was your civilian job?”

“I didn’t have one. I helped my father before the war.”

Alexa added to the building wall against him. “Helped with what?”

Paul caved under the pressure. “Capture descendants. He liked my toys.”

Jacob stopped to stare in confusion. “Toys?”

“The tracking darts are Paul’s baby.” Alexa’s voice held no rancor. “They’ve always been able to knock us out, but being a descendant too, Paul was able to fill in the missing pieces and provide a way to track us *after* an encounter. It’s quite brilliant.”

“I thought you handled things like the breeders!” Mark automatically blamed Paul for that feeling of helplessness he’d gotten when Alexa had been darted and fallen.

“I told you I worked in several areas.” Paul shrugged. “I followed orders.”

Edward’s anger lashed out. “Oh no, little man. You don’t get to use that excuse. You had the knowledge to help your own kind and you betrayed them!”

“My father was my kind, too!” Paul growled. “You make the choice when you’re eight-years-old and then come talk to me about picking the correct side.”

Surprised into silence, Edward found himself considering that scenario and coming up with exactly the ugly person in front of him. It was unsettling. “Don’t talk to me!”

Alexa suddenly tensed. “Pay attention!”

“Shit!”

Jacob’s softly muttered expletive was followed by the sound of his gun leaving his holster.

“No noise!” Alexa pulled her longest knives from her belt as the shadow of the newest threat loomed over them. They’d run directly into something.

“Is that a–”

Edward sent his elbow into Paul’s jaw, knocking the man down and nearly out.

The giant was disorienting. Feet the size of small sleds and legs like saplings were intimidating. It was the width of three men and shamelessly shuffled through the corn with a huge cock that any of her fighters would have killed to possess. Alexa wasn’t impressed.

The three rookies in her group stood in shock as it charged toward them.

Mark snatched his bow from over his shoulder and grabbed for an arrow, but missed. During his second attempt, the giant’s club swung down.

Mark grunted as Alexa slammed into him, knocking them out of range. “Roll!”

They kept rolling as the club followed them, thudding violently into the dirt where they’d been.

Rows of stalks snapped under the chaos as observing crows cawed encouragement.

Alexa shoved Mark aside and ducked the swing. She darted forward as the scarred giant roared angrily, running between his legs to slice at the backs of both ankles.

The giant fell forward, roaring in rage and pain.

The giant’s agony echoed over the killing fields, but cut off abruptly as Edward and Daniel slit its throat from each side. Blood sprayed in a wide geyser, splattering them all.

Paul opened his mouth to scream, already swiping at the red gore on his chest.

David knocked him back to the ground with a rough elbow. “Shut up!” He spun to scan for the next threat.

Alexa spent a moment listening, feeling the disappointed wind, and then waved her men into a tight guarding position. Paul, still on the ground, she ignored.

Alexa knelt in front of the giant, admiring the beautiful cuts her men had made. The worn collar of slavery that had been around the giant’s thick neck was in pieces at her feet. She took the largest of these, placing it in a pocket of her cloak.

Alexa had Daniel kneel down and boost her onto his shoulders for a higher vantage to look from, but there was only what she expected at this point into their journey–corn.

Alexa slid down. “If more of those come, we’ll handle it the same way, with Edward doing the first cut. Let’s go.”

Still not understanding that his opinion wasn’t wanted, Paul started to protest.

Mark slapped a bloody hand over his mouth. “Don’t.”

Paul nodded hurriedly, cringing.

Mark shoved him into the front. “Take the lead so we can get away while the other monsters grab you.”

Paul inched forward, terrified.

Alexa allowed the treatment. Having Paul along was exactly what she’d feared it would be–chaos–but it was already too late to turn back.

**3**

“She’s here.”

“Good. I’m tired of waiting to kill her.”

“Surprised that order came down.”

“Yeah, well, she did wipe out both of Corbin’s squads. Not exactly a textbook case.”

The hired men gathered their things from the wooden platform they’d built in the corn upon arriving a week ago. It blended in with the ugly landscape perfectly.

“She’s late, right?”

“Yeah. It’s the Rabbit. We timed it right. He slowed her down.”

“That’s all he ever did to Corbin, either.”

The three soldiers had been hired guns for so long that they no longer bothered to pretend they were fighting for the government’s right to rule. They’d brought in hundreds of captives for various reasons, but it was still rare to receive a kill on sight order.

“We’ll track her down in no time now. There’ll be signs and sounds from them fighting through this hell.”

The soldiers hadn’t been sure about hearing her, but not long after the single gunshot, they’d heard the roar of a giant and the upset cry of birds. One more sight or sound would be a confirmation that it was Alexa and pinpoint her location. No one else would survive repeated attacks in just hours and keep going.

The three men had been sent on run after run since the war, collecting those wanted by the government. Once they got the needed details, they didn’t bother reading the rest. Descendants, murderers, rebel leaders–they’d been sent after some of the worst people they’d ever known, but not one of them had been female. Alexa would be the first woman they’d taken this way and that challenge, along with the boost in reputation, had been enough to keep them waiting as long as it took.

The trio finished gathering their things and then settled onto the platform to wait for the next sign. If none came, they would leave at dawn and try to track down the remains of whomever it had been. Base had said to be certain, and they intended to be.

“Ambush odds?”

“Low. We haven’t made a noise in days.”

“But the gifts—”

“She may feel something if she gets close to where we are, but as long as we stay down and still, we’re good. Now shut up. We don’t want to blow this, right?”

There was silence in response. This would be the biggest job they’d ever pulled off–one to make a person’s career. No mistakes or excuses would be allowed.

“Over there.”

Smoke was slowly winding up from a place in the distant corn to the south. A campfire in these fields was so rare that it had to be a descendant. Only a magic user would be so bold.

The three men rose. It was time to go.

**4**

Their camp hadn’t been disturbed. The giant had been drawn to the sound of them running toward Alexa.

They all quickly cleaned up. The smell of the hulk’s blood was so sweet that it was nauseating. Once finished, the group resumed what they’d been doing, but this time they all kept track of Paul to make sure he was quiet.

Alexa was sure that their location had already been pinpointed.

“When should we expect them?” Edward was stirring a pot of rice and beans.

“Not tonight.” Alexa was pleased with him. “They’ll watch first, maybe wait until dawn. It’s the way slow thinkers work.”

“What’s a slow thinker?” Paul earned more frowns for missing the obvious answer.

“*Your* kind.” Jacob sneered. “Those who can’t remember the rules, let alone come up with ideas of their own.”

Paul lowered his voice. “I don’t get it.”

“Slow thinkers never do anything differently, but still expect a change.” David glared from his post. “They follow the book and die out in the real world.”

Paul grumbled, arms crossing. “Not everyone can be a hero.”

“Yes, they can.” Alexa’s hard tone sent silence through her group. She signaled for the meal to be served.

Alexa listened to the new sound of paws padding outside their fire line, but she didn’t feel enough hate coming from the predators to worry over it yet. Nature here seemed to be as sparse as people were and Alexa had shown that they were capable of defending themselves. If the vibes changed, so would her reactions.

“We will reach a station tomorrow. There may be other travelers there.” Alexa gestured for Edward to explain so she could take a bite.

Edward kept serving while he talked. “There are groups sometimes. People gather and wait. When there’s enough, they try to cross a dangerous area. It’s the Herd Defense. They figure the more travelers, the greater their own odds of not being picked off during the crossing.”

“They’ll need our caliber and want to hire us. That is not allowed.”

Jacob frowned toward Alexa at her words. “We offer, right?”

“Yes, if we feel they deserve such an honor, but we are already on a quest. It would take a lot to detour me from our current mission.”

Paul tried to keep up with the conversation as he waited for his share of the food. “And that is?”

“To survive. Fate has set our path through Nebraska. We will not go around.”

“Is there another problem here?” Mark felt it even though he hadn’t placed it yet. “Beyond the obvious?”

“There is more than one. The biggest we’ll face is the House in the Corn.”

The ominous silence after those words told Alexa they’d heard the rumors.

Edward caught the subtle gestures of his fellow teammates and cleared his throat. “You’d have us challenge the Master of that haunted house?”

“No, my pets.” Alexa scooped up another bite, tone brutal. “I’d have you *kill* the Master of the house and burn that evil residence to the ground.”

Each man there found an immediate desire to give her both of those things, but Edward was the only one who felt comfortable expressing that emotion. “Then that’s what you shall have.”

Edward and Mark finished serving the meal that neither of them had trusted Paul to deliver, then did a quick cleanup before eating. When everyone was done, the two men would wash the dishes and repack the supplies.

“Do you feel like telling a story?”

Alexa was almost shocked that Edward would ask. Her tales came when she chose to tell them, not when her fighters desired one. They were not for entertainment. Alexa was set to deliver a punishment, but she chose to handle it differently than her man was braced for. He would still pay, only in a different form. “Did you have one in mind?”

Edward knew from her tone that he’d crossed a line, but it didn’t make him back down. If anything, he was now free to push a bit more because he already knew he was in trouble. “Anything about you. We all crave it.”

Paul opened his mouth…

Mark tossed his entire bedroll, dirt and all, into the man’s face. “Shut up!”

Paul scrambled away, swiping and coughing.

Alexa took another bite of the deer goulash. It was a very good meal for traveling. She knew the richness of it had been done to please her. She couldn’t be softened with little luxuries like they could, but it didn’t stop them from trying. “So this was planned?”

“We’re curious.” David stayed ready to run or duck.

Daniel smiled, hoping charm would help their cause. “And you tell us so little about yourself.”

Jacob chose to whine. “We only want a little more.”

Alexa held up a hand and got quiet. This wasn’t the time or place for this, but then honestly, when would that time ever come? It’s not as if she had any plans on taking a break until the quest was finished. “Fine. I’ll tell you a story about me every night that we spend in this corn.”

Edward heard her tone and braced. “The punishment?”

She smiled cruelly. “I’m going to sleep with Paul each of those nights.”

Paul glowed with happiness while her fighters bristled in anger that they couldn’t express. She’d said sleep. If they pushed her, she might actually accept him into her body and then he’d be one of them.

“That wouldn’t make me one of you.” Paul tried to rub it in that he had gifts like Alexa. “I won’t ever be.”

“No. That’s not your fate, is it?”

Paul wouldn’t look at her. “No, it’s not, but I still matter as much as they do!”

Alexa sighed patiently and finished her food. When she was done, she rolled a smoke and kept it to herself, making them use their own supplies if they wanted one. It was another way to show that she was displeased, but they knew it wasn’t true anger, only annoyance. None of them wanted to find out what she would do if pissed.

Each man got comfortable, anticipating the story to come.

“Remember that you asked for this.”

The fighters were already expecting ugliness. It was Alexa. How could it be pretty and fit her?

“I was born in captivity. My mother died during my birth, so I was told. My kind doesn’t reproduce easily, if at all.”

“Your kind?” Paul scowled. “Don’t you mean *our* kind?”

“Female. Males spread their DNA throughout the population at will because it is in their design. Female descendants are fragile. Mixed births take a toll.”

Jacob frowned. “Why?”

“Perhaps Paul would like to tell us what Corbin suspected in those areas.”

Flushing a bit, Paul remembered to keep his voice down. “It’s because the magic side fights constantly with the human side. There can’t be peace like that, no health.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No.” Paul stared at her. “I think a descendant child requires more power, more energy from the mother. Simple.”

Alexa nodded. “That makes sense. I’ve often wondered.”

It was odd to think of Alexa being curious about her origins.

She smirked. “Like you own the rights to curiosity.” She rolled a second smoke, something she rarely did.

They waited silently for her to go on.

“I stayed in the same lab until I was five. Then I was transferred to a testing wing.”

None of them wanted to hear those details, but no one interrupted.

“There were a lot of kids. We could all do things, but we weren’t allowed to unless we were in the lab rooms. If you used your gifts or broke a rule, the punishments were harsh. We obeyed, mostly. There were a few times where we banded together to get something we needed, like when we had to have medicine for one of the smaller kids. He’d been sneaking outside at night to play in the damp grass and gotten a cut that became infected. If we’d taken him to the nurse, he’d have been put to sleep.”

“Put to sleep?” David frowned. “Like when they caught you after the war?”

“Killed, like an animal.” Alexa’s voice was shakier than they were used to. “We got one warning and then one punishment usually, but being out of the lab unsupervised was the worst crime we could commit.” Alexa looked into the fire. “We were caught, plenty of times. I tried to take the punishments or draw their anger, but I was valuable. I didn’t realize they were using me that way, keeping me there, until I got out.”

“Until Adrian came for you.” Paul said the name with awe.

“He sent a group of his men to break us all out. I was taken to an island. The other kids were sent to relatives and friends, I’ve heard, but I didn’t see any of them again. I was nine then.”

Edward took a fast look around. The feeling of being stalked had grown. “How long did you stay on the island?”

“Three years. In that time, I learned who I was, who my father was to the future, and the fate of the world. It was a long time ago, but I can still hear my tutor telling me that my father would save the world.”

Daniel smiled. “He was right.”

Paul shook his head. “If we can find him, he can’t change this mess. We can only stay where he is and enjoy his light.”

“You haven’t met my father. There isn’t anything he can’t do.”

“When did you leave the island?”

“When did you meet your dad for the first time?”

“Why did he leave you here after the war?”

Alexa raised a brow. “Pick one of those.”

The fighters exchanged glances and answered together, “Why did he leave you?”

Alexa stood up. “Because he loves his humans more than his only daughter. He would do anything to keep them alive. As would I.”

Alexa dropped down next to Paul in the pleased silence, and felt the good mood change to dread and regret.

“Take off your coat.”

Paul hurried to comply.

“And those pants. The shirt as well.”

Paul slid out of his clothes with bright red cheeks; the sounds of the other men grunting and snorting kept him a wreck. How was he supposed to do it with an audience of men who were all bigger and meaner than he was?

“On your side.”

When Paul would have rolled toward her, Alexa shoved him the other way. “Not until you’ve washed. You stink.”

Understanding she’d made him remove the clothes for the smell, the other males felt better and also tried to settle down for sleep.

Paul wasn’t about to miss his chance to accomplish a goal. He scooted into Alexa’s warm embrace and pushed against her without hesitating. “My back’s comfortable.”

Alexa started to refuse, then sighed. “What the hell.” She collapsed across his body, soaking up his heat.

Paul moaned in delight.

Six heads popped up in perfect unison.

“You can draw from me.”

Paul’s open offer shamed the others. None of them had found the courage to give her such power over them yet.

“My thanks.” Alexa’s mouth lowered to his shoulder. “It has been long and long since I took from my own kind.”

Alexa’s hand snaked around his mouth as her new fangs drove into his skin.

Paul screamed against her hand. Alexa tightened her grip, drinking.

Paul tried to fight the sensation of Heaven and Hell hitting at the same time, but he quickly sagged in her grip, lost in her glow.

Jacob scowled. “Lucky bastard.”

Close enough to view what was really happening, Edward shrugged. “If you say so.”

Alexa slowly withdrew her fangs and ran a light finger over the puncture wounds, healing them. “Paul?”

Paul roused himself. “Yes, my love?”

“I’m not satisfied.”

Paul shuddered. “Again, then. I’m ready.”

Alexa drove her teeth into his other shoulder with a brutal lunge.

Paul screamed against her hand again. She drew harder and he arched in her grasp, a slick, fiery heat that she could have drowned in. Alexa slowly withdrew, healing the marks again.

“Will that help you? Hold it back for a while?”

Alexa nodded against his skin, shivering as his blood raced through her. “Yes. My thanks, Paul. You’ve bought me time.”

Paul snuggled into her embrace. “Then it was worth it. Thank you for bringing me, even if it was only for the medicine in my blood.”

Alexa laid her cheek on his shoulder. “Close your eyes. Enjoy the time you have left.”

She didn’t have a watch posted, telling them she didn’t feel the need to waste two men simply to confirm what they already knew–they were surrounded. They would sleep while they could and face the enemy when they chose to attack. Alexa could have barricaded them into a dirt row and started the fighting, but she wanted the herding they were about to get. It would put them with the rest of the travelers faster and allow her to evaluate their chances of actually surviving this trip before attempting it. The killing fields hadn’t earned their reputation by being merciful and they’d already revealed their presence here too many times in a single day. Hiding wasn’t going to be their strength.

“I don’t want to die. What should I do?”  
Paul’s low, pitiful query was met by a thoughtful pause where all the males tried to imagine making a stand or fighting on the run while trying to keep the Rabbit alive.

Alexa gave him the truth. “Go back come the dawn. The odds are low for your survival.”

Paul didn’t say anything else, but he made no plans to leave. He’d chosen his path and with Alexa drowsing on his back, there was nowhere else on earth he’d rather be, except in Safe Haven.

As the others began to snore softly, Edward and Daniel rolled toward each other and held a conversation with their hands. Alexa’s training was useful in many ways.

*She’s softening toward us.*

*Yes, I agree.*

*We’ll all come through this.*

*I’m not worried.*

*I meant Paul. She’ll protect him now.*

*You think so?*

*I’d bet on it.*

Edward grinned. *I won’t take odds against you.*

They paused for a moment, and then Daniel asked what he’d been worrying about. *Being bit by the baby made her sick, didn’t it?*

Edward nodded slowly. *Yes. I think so.*

*What can we do for her?*

Edward hated the answer. *Feed her or try to kill her. It’s the only two choices we have.*

*We lose Safe Haven if she dies.*

*More than that. We lose the future that Adrian will provide. She has to live and if it takes blood, well, I’ve got plenty.*

Daniel didn’t have anything to say after that.

# BK 2 Chapter Three

**Follow the Smell**

**1**

**“H**ello in the camp!”

Alexa’s men were on their feet in seconds, bleary-eyed, but ready to fight. The dull orange sun was just rising through the haze, barely illuminating the foggy campsite and moaning corn. Alexa was nowhere to be seen.

“Hello? Comin’ in!”

Edward quickly traced Alexa’s faint tracks to the cottonwood tree, discovering furiously waiting Colts. He tried not to smirk as he faced the strangers coming cautiously through the corn. There was no doubt about who it was. Even Paul knew the government had left them alone too long.

Edward wondered who would be the next of their group to find Alexa. Certainly not the hunters who’d come for her.

Mark’s chuckle echoed, and then the rest of the senior team joined him. David and Jacob didn’t discover the source of the amusement, but the two rookies wouldn’t have laughed anyway. They were still too green, too nervous to shove aside those volatile emotions like the senior men were able to do. They settled for still and silent, ready to kill. None of them noticed Paul staring at the hunters in recognition and hatred. He’d seen these men, had handled the captives they brought in, and listened to the awful stories. He was looking forward to watching them die.

“Don’t shoot. We’re not a threat.”

Fingers tightened on triggers in response. Alexa had told them that anyone who claimed not to be a threat after surviving in the wastelands of Afterworld was a liar. The sight of their company did nothing to dispel the black mark that had been given for the lie. The three men wore their gun belts low, holsters scuffed and cracked from constant exposure, and the half buttoned white shirts under long coats said they didn’t care much about safety or blending. These men might also be hardasses.

“What brings you around here, strangers?” Edward drew their attention, thinking the males were probably true killers. It was the one way that his kind wasn’t enslaved. A man could be free if he had the sand to fight for it repeatedly. The women now took what they wanted and if that meant stalking for months or even years, they did it. Men were slaves, soldiers, or gunfighters, with few exceptions.

These men carried their guns on the outside of their coats, hats slanted low to hide scheming faces. These were bounty hunters and Edward was glad of it. These hired guns usually ran alone, which meant there wouldn’t be a squad of soldiers nearby setting up an ambush. *That comes later.* Edward was beginning to filter things the way Alexa did to come up with her answers. It was exhilarating. “What do you want?”

Randolph had been relying on Paul’s darts and the fear of his reputation to make the men cower before him. He respected only his main target, and even that was the barest amount. “We’re just out visiting.”

The hunters snickered.

Edward was offended. “You’ll all die here.”

Randolph didn’t scan the single large tree behind Alexa’s men. No one used them anymore because of the rashes caused by the mold. He spit a wad of nasty juice at Edward’s boots as the other bounty hunters sneered and leered. “Where’s your leader, little man?”

“Don’t talk to him like that!”

Paul’s order brought snorts from the bounty hunters.

Randolph held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Rabbit. Perhaps you’d like to answer the question.”

Alexa’s men exchanged angry glances. The hunters knew Paul. Who was this loud man she’d allowed along?

“Yes, I will.” Paul stared coldly. “She’s in the tree.”

Alexa’s colts crashed as the three men finally spotted her.

She hit Randolph in the throat, sending him to his knees with hands coming up for futile protection. Her next two shots came so close together that there was hardly a pause. Neither of Randolph’s men got off a shot. Not coming into the camp with their guns already drawn had hurt them.

Jacob smiled softly as the bodies slid to the ground. “Amazing.”

“Agreed.” Edward went to the large cottonwood. Alexa had shown them how to make a lotion from bone dust that they only had to apply once to get rid of mold rashes. They didn’t fear the trees. It was a powerful advantage to have. “Good morning.”

Alexa rolled her eyes before scanning her men, the bodies, and then the corn as she reloaded. She also noted Paul’s satisfied face. “Climb up and snooze. My shots will echo.”

Realizing more threats might be coming, her men quickly gathered their things and cleared the ground of prints so that it would appear they had vanished.

Alexa wasn’t sure if anyone else would come. The masters of the dead men might assume their hunters had won. If so, she could sleep for a while longer. Traveling with Paul was quite tiring.

**2**

An hour later, Alexa got them moving.

The fighters searched expectantly for the next signs of trouble as the walk began. It was in the clouds that roiled over them, in the stalks that moaned an ominous accompaniment to their boots. Paul was the only one who didn’t notice it, but even he was quieter than usual. Edward assumed it was from Alexa taking blood. He kept his anger to himself. He didn’t like Paul at all.

The path they were on gradually grew wide enough for three of them side-by-side. Alexa signaled them into the protection formation, but the random stalks still required the group to keep stepping out of their line. None of them cared for that. The symmetry Alexa had taught them was sinking in, becoming a natural reaction, and they disliked anything that interfered with staying close to their special leader.

Alexa held up a hand. *Wait*.

Her group stopped.

Edward snatched Paul up by his coat when he didn’t.

Paul jerked away and went to stand behind Alexa.

All the other men frowned.

Alexa sniffed the air as her stomach growled. The males caught the scent a moment later and grimaced with the memories. It was a Thanksgiving dinner, a bakery, a fresh market. It was in the ground, the corn stalks, and the grit in the sky. It was Heaven and Hell.

Alexa motioned them to pull their bandanas up. Each of them did, but not before inhaling deeply of that sweet scent, hoping to carry it with them.

Alexa started moving again, feeling her nerves wake, her senses come alive with need. It wasn’t exactly hunger and it wasn’t sexual, but it tempted her just the same. She wanted to remove her bandana to stay here and inhale for hours and hours of that…

Alexa snapped around to find only two of her men in sight, both doing exactly what she’d been daydreaming about.

Alexa whistled loudly.

The sound of running boots echoed in response. The other five men, with Paul over Edward’s shoulder again, ran into view. Mark and Daniel were retying their wetted bandanas in place. It was the proper response, the one they’d been taught.

“Good idea.” Paul shoved free of Edward’s grip and clumsily handled his own.

Alexa tried not to be encouraged by him. Paul was a sacrifice and worse, deep down he knew it. His attempts to fit in were for naught.

They traveled steadily east for the next few hours and the smell grew stronger. It swirled into their noses through the cloth, pungent enough to cause stumbles and grumbles.

Alexa wasn’t worried yet. That would come later when it was needed. Right now, she kept them moving, occasionally making sure they were all still together. Wandering off into this massive cornfield wouldn’t be good.

Their lunch stop was dried meat and fruit, and both tasted like dust compared to the smell of the air. None of them ate much.

Jacob restlessly fingered the cross around his neck. “Do you know what it is?”

“Yes.” Her tone implied there was danger.

“Well?” Paul cringed down when Edward glowered at him.

“A Death Maker is nearby.” Alexa let out a sound of barely restrained impatience at the stares. “They make the undead. That smell lures people in.”

“You mean the walking dead.” Jacob caught on. “And we need to deal with it?”

“Yes. This path goes by one of them and you already know how I feel about going around.”

Her men checked their gear as Alexa lowered her bandana. “Follow the smell.”

Edward approved. “I miss hunting something strong enough to be a real challenge.”

“So do I.” Mark chuckled. “But not the way you mean. I hunt *indoors*.”

Both men shared leers.

Paul stared at them in fear.

Alexa waved Edward his way.

Edward’s good mood vanished like the dusk. “*You* ever hunt anything?”

Paul grimaced. “No.”

Edward growled in frustration. He wouldn’t be able to lead the hunt while babysitting Paul. He’d been robbed of another adventure, another moment of proving himself to Alexa, thanks to the Rabbit.

A sullen group began to track their prey, with Paul and Edward in the rear.

The pungent odor quickly grew stronger. The scent was overpowering, mouthwatering. It was easy to understand how a starving traveler would be lured in. The smell promised a warm hearth and friendly company.

Alexa put the men into a line and carefully made her way through the black brambles that sprang up where none should have been. The thick thorns were designed to draw blood, to weaken, but Alexa and her men were dressed for the road and passed through unharmed. Paul, who’d been given an outfit much like her fighters wore, still managed to scratch his hands.

The fighters reached a small clearing where there were no brambles or corn. They all knelt down on the perimeter when Alexa motioned them to.

A moment later, a woman shuffled into view. She was short and gory, a recent convert to undead. Her empty eyes sent chills over Alexa’s men.

Thinking fast, Edward slapped a hand over Paul’s mouth, not giving him the chance to make noise.

The woman slid into the shadows of the corn on the opposite side of the clearing. When the next stiff figure came through and there was no attack order, and then three more zombies behind it, the men understood the walking dead weren’t Alexa’s prey.

“Hunting for me?”

They swiveled in time to be hit with a blast of something blue that sent the two front fighters flying into the corn. It knocked the others to the ground.

The wizard had once been a man, perhaps one who’d enjoyed dressing up and going to Comic-Con. His pocket protector and faded Fantastic Four shirt were at extreme odds with the hatred coming from his dead eyes. The fighters noted his gray skin was marked with brown spots that appeared to be decaying flesh. He was also becoming undead.

On her ass between the rows, Alexa sent a blur of flames. It knocked the tall, thin man to the ground. He immediately rose and vanished.

“Over here, little toys.” The wizard reappeared. He was behind them all for a second and then gone when Edward lunged.

Already tired of the game, Alexa quickly estimated where the wizard would reappear and was there to have one of her guns at his temple when he solidified.

The man threw up his wrinkled hands in defense, shocked at her victory. He missed Mark coming up behind him.

Alexa met Mark’s gaze for a brief second, then gave a curt nod.

Mark grabbed the wizard’s head and snapped his neck.

The zombies in the corn moaned in furious rage, drawn their way. As the body fell, they rushed toward Alexa. A large zombie wearing overalls and one cowboy boot swung out to snatch Jacob’s arm, mouth opening. The Preacher brought his knife down on the man’s neck as he jerked himself out of the way. The corn turned red.

“Level three blades.”

Paul watched in awful comprehension as the fighters grinned at her order and pulled out long, ugly weapons stained with use. Each of them had something different. Edward and Alexa had serrated grass whips, while Jacob and Daniel preferred curved axes. The other two had landscape sickles with long handles and sharp edges. The shuffling, moaning zombies didn’t stand a chance of escaping the fight and as expected, they didn’t try.

Alexa swung, sliced, ducked, and switched to the next monster, but inside, it hurt her to end these former humans. They’d been people once and she hadn’t forgotten that.

Paul stayed down and still, hoping he wouldn’t have to fight, but the undead always preferred easy prey. It was usually the elderly or the kids they attacked to make up for slow wits and even slower reflexes. A cold, hard hand brushed Paul’s hair.

He scrambled forward to avoid it, screaming.

The zombie was mostly a skeleton under a checkered dress. Paul continued to scream as she crawled toward him on her remaining knee.

Daniel and Billy stabbed their blades down into skulls and necks. They went to help Alexa, and found five undead corpses at her feet. Edward and Mark were right behind her, handling the half dozen targets that had tried a rear ambush.

Gore splattered over the corn, soaking into the ground under the group. The zombies dwindled to random figures that the group quickly dispatched to the afterlife, all aware of Paul screaming behind them.

As the fight finished, Alexa and her men scanned the corn and the battlefield for more threats.

“Damn.”

They all turned in surprise at Billy’s curse.

Paul had ended a zombie, in his own lap. His computer, which he’d refused to leave, was in pieces. He had used it to shatter the zombie’s skull and save himself.

“Well, ain’t that interesting. Now if he would only learn to be quiet!” Mark glowered at the shaking scientist. “Your screaming would have brought all of them to us if there had been a herd. You’re gonna keep endangering her, Rabbit.”

“Stop.” Alexa didn’t offer Paul comfort, but she halted the coming fight. She was also surprised that the scientist was alive after all the screaming they’d heard, but fate was fate and she wasn’t going to second guess her own choices. It was a sign, though, that he wasn’t supposed to die yet. She motioned Edward to care for him.

While she waited, Alexa ripped the talisman from the wizard’s bloody robe and shoved it into her cloak. She knew her men were curious about the things she was gathering, but they would find out in time. Alexa hated to waste words on something that would be revealed naturally anyway. She’d inherited that trait from her father.

**3**

An hour after killing the wizard, they reached a clearing with edges of tall, rusted buildings covered in crow shit. Alexa had timed their arrival at the first waiting station with the longest part of the day, the lazy time when sleep snuck up and stole the ability to react quickly. She waved her men into that tight V formation, and felt them all respond by checking their gear.

In the center, Paul shivered with nervous tension and weariness. The fight with the zombie had worn him out.

“Hello in the camp!”

The station appeared to be an old equestrian farm set in a huge circle, with a dozen wide corrals, barns, and sheds twinkling in the dim morning sun. The vegetation had been pushed nearly ten feet from this weathered circle of civilization, but there were no fences around the gathering point for wary travelers. That was a mistake. The animal tracks the fighters stepped over were fresh, and dangerous in their sizes and quantity.

As the fighters came from the corn, all movement in the station ceased except for heads following their progress. Conversations abruptly stopped and a thick silence replaced them. The sight of Alexa brought immediate flashes of the war and all its horrors, but also of the legends, of Safe Haven.

The expressions said these people both already loathed and loved Alexa’s group. She had a strength that would increase their odds of survival. The strangers wanted to be able to get on the road finally. They’d been here a long time, but the loathing was for the same reason. No one was looking forward to the coming trek, and some were even hoping that she might delay here for a while.

Alexa straightened her shoulders, jaw set in a determined clench. She waited for no one. Her schedules were her own.

The expressions of love and loathing changed to dread and resignation. Stay a few days and rest? Not her. The only question was how soon she would depart.

“Look around, my pets. Remember what you see.”

The fighters assumed she meant the people and did as she said, picking out details. In the large center warehouse, Army men went in and out, working. On what, none of them knew yet. In a small shed behind the warehouse, an old woman and her grandkids were resting, obviously depending on the protection of the soldiers who ran this station. In front of the barn was a prep building where a group of slave traders and their guards had ensconced their precious wares. Beside the slave nest was a map scriber bunking in a smaller barn with three gunfighters that he’d likely hired for protection. They had a prisoner nearby in a wooden wagon cell, shackled and covered with bruises.

In that cell, the thief stared in longing at the playing children, hands clenched into tight fists. Their laughter aroused and repulsed him; it was a very good thing he was in a cell.

Alexa noted that all of the travelers wore thick layers of dark clothes and hats that blended well with the corn. They’d obviously spent enough time here to make a few things to soften the hard trip.

The shed to the left housed three messengers on their way to the government’s eastern headquarters with explosive dispatches. All mail carriers now strapped C-4 around their documents and then placed it around their chests. Trying to steal the letters ended in destroyed messages, a dead mailman, and dead thieves.

On the farthest side of the station, three families were going about their daily lives in front of tents and wagons. It took Edward a minute of watching to finish estimating the number of people there. He would spend time later observing each group, judging, getting details to verify his assumptions. “Fifty or so. I expected less.”

Billy wiped dust from his arm. “Maybe they heard Lincoln was holding on.”

Jacob saw one of the families had a slave washing clothes outside their tent. He could tell by the ugly lock tattoo on the thin man’s cheek. “Is it good or bad to have so many?”

“If you’re in the middle, it might be great.”

Edward forced a smile at her quip. “True.” He’d also seen the slave family, but it was the traders he glared at as they walked through the gawking station. Their last days of giants, zombies, and wizards had taken a small toll that was well hidden except for Paul, who didn’t understand that jokes were a great coping mechanism for nerves. He still thought complaining was the best way to go.

Alexa subtly calmed them. “You missed a few on the count.”

“Where?” Edward scanned the slaver’s shelter harder. He’d only counted five pieces of property there.

“Out patrolling, and under the main barn. They have a couple stashed. Women, I assume.”

That sent anger through their group and Alexa was satisfied. She didn’t know for sure that all the females she’d sensed were being held against their will, but at least one of them was. Her silent misery had been impossible to miss during Alexa’s mental sweep of the area.

“We’ll have to do something about that while we’re here.” Edward turned his menace toward the mapmaker and his three gunfighters.

“When they let them out to play.” Alexa led her men to the center warehouse as the watching travelers gaped and whispered. “Be careful of the slavers, as well. They used to be carnival owners. They often take their captives from an audience.”

Activity around the station resumed slowly, but the whispers grew louder. Some of it was muttered orders to get packed, but some of it was about how healthy, how hard, her men were. The slaves being guarded nearby in comparison were pale, fragile creatures that squinted and had little grace. Alexa’s men were the opposite of that and more. They were clearly unbroken. The rest of the talk was excitement about being in the same camp as the legend herself when she faced down the soldiers here. It was something that had to happen.

Alexa used their hand code to pass an order.

Edward leaned closer to Paul. “She wants you to be silent. If you talk at all, she says I’m to knock you out.”

Paul paled and stumbled.

Edward jerked him along. He wasn’t sure what Alexa was worried about Paul saying, but he had no doubt the clumsy scientist would spill his guts if he was left unsupervised.

As they came to the ramp that led to the main door of the warehouse, Alexa held up a hand. “Wait here.”

Again, Mark followed her against orders.

The soldier on duty there lowered his rifle and then let it hang by the strap after he caught sight of Alexa and her guard.

The rest of her group stayed by the ramp. No one else would go up until she was done here. As for whoever might already be inside, Mark and Alexa were a dangerous pair.

Paul’s gaze followed them through the door that was plastered on the inside with Wanted posters. He opened his mouth as he recognized one of the wrinkled faces.

Watching and hoping it would happen, Edward raised his big arm.

Paul snapped his mouth shut so fast that his teeth clicked together like a firecracker.

Edward lowered his arm, shrugging. “I can wait.”

“She can’t go in there.”

“Doesn’t she know they’re looking for her?”

“Forget her. Look at those males!”

Alexa stepped by the soldier on duty with his rifle, giving him only a disinterested glance. She opened the inner door and ignored the words and mutters of the dozens of people already gathered at this station. Alexa went to the rear of the wide warehouse, admiring the small cluster of horses in the corner. She clucked softly to them as she passed.

Mark followed Alexa alertly, aware of soldiers coming from the far rooms and the loft above them. The warehouse was stacked with crates and boxes that appeared to have been there since the war. The layers of dust and prints in grit said this was more of a drop off spot than a pickup area. The military liked storing supplies and then denying everyone their use.

Alexa glanced toward a small trap door in the floor, much like the one they’d discovered in the giant’s home.

Mark caught the hint and listened for the female captives, but he didn’t hear anything.

Alexa stopped at a long row of counters, choosing the one that was labeled for sales. The clerk behind the counter gaped in surprised curiosity. The posters of people the government was offering rewards for stood out glaringly behind the kid. Alexa scanned his wrinkled uniform and thin frame, trying to judge how long this group had been here. “I need eight tickets to cross the state.”

The Private swallowed, hand reaching for the radio. “I have to clear that.”

Alexa tensed as the young clerk radioed to someone for permission. *I know him…* Alexa locked down on her thoughts, heart thumping.

Brian keyed the radio, also locking down on his thoughts. *Maybe they won’t recognize her.* “Uh, I got a big group asking for a ticket.”

The voice that came sounded annoyed and tired. “Damn it, Brian! Sell ‘em what they want and leave me alone.”

Brian flushed. “You got it.”

He sat the radio down and began gathering the papers, aware of Alexa studying him intently.

The radio lit up again. “Ask if they have any tobacco for trade.”

Alexa shook her head. She was busy digging into Brian’s thoughts, finding interesting tidbits even through his lock. She was also changing her plans. “We’re not selling or buying.”

Brian stared at her, mesmerized at the sound of her voice as she leaned in.

“You don’t belong here. Find a new job.”

Brian nodded, heart thumping. “Sure. That’s what a lot of people do.”

Alexa turned, waving at Mark to gather their tickets.

Mark felt wrongness invade the air and hurried the transaction. He wasn’t sure what had given her pause, only that something had. He would keep an eye on the boy.

Mark scanned the notice board with the faded, stained images of people Wanted by the government. His own face glared at him from two of the chipped corners. He was glad of Alexa’s whistle when she called him to her side.

As the door closed behind them, the Private peered at the board for a final confirmation of what he already knew. Brian had escaped from a bunker and been recaptured by Merrik’s patrol; he wasn’t here willingly. He didn’t sound the alarm. He didn’t want Alexa arrested. He wanted to go with her to Safe Haven.

The soldier on the door was the opposite. He grabbed for his radio the second Alexa was out of range.

Mark had to confirm his suspicion. “He’s calling for help with us, right?”

“Yes.”

“Should we get set to go on?”

Alexa was still adjusting their plans. “Not without something I didn’t know was here. We’ll wait for our chance.”

Alexa met Mark’s eyes for a brief, intense look that said he knew what she wanted. When he spent a moment considering it, he realized it could only be one thing. She hadn’t shown a real interest in anything else since they’d hit these fields. “I’ll watch for an opening. Anything I need to be careful of?”

“Fire. It’s a common issue.”

Mark groaned inwardly. “I’ll handle it.”

“Good. Let’s settle in.”

**4**

“We’re drawing a lot of attention.” Billy didn’t like the feeling. The slavers and their protectors were staring in open need and greed, ignoring the meal that was now burning in the pan over their fire. Thick smoke rolled upward, but none of the scantily clad females noticed.

Jacob glared at the big women ogling him as if he was chocolate. “Let ‘em try.”

“They like your scars.” David frowned. “They already plan to ask Alexa if she’ll sell you.”

Jacob glanced at David, a little embarrassed. “How would you know? We can’t hear them from here.”

“I read lips.” David grinned at the shortest Powder Protector. She didn’t have as much blush and lipstick on, and had drawn his attention. “Wanna know what the biggest one said?”

Jacob noted the leer on David’s face. “No, probably not, but tell me anyway.”

“She thinks you’ll be rougher in bed because you’re obviously wild. They can charge a higher price to rent you out.”

The other males snickered.

Jacob’s face went red. “No, thanks.” He smirked. “Even if that is true.”

His joke startled real amusement from all the males.

Alexa found them that way as she came outside. Alexa soaked up their moment of happiness as if she was drowning.

Beside her, Mark did the same, only it was her joy that he absorbed. The pleasure flowing from her was enough to make him dizzy.

Edward felt it a second later, the same feeling of perfection that had Mark frozen right outside the door. Farther away, the Horseman was able to pull himself free and speak. “We’re all set.”

The hard voice helped Mark regain control, but Alexa stayed still for another moment, letting their emotions refill her heart. Some days, hope was hard to come by.

Alexa slowly came down the ramp, hearing sharpening, drawing out small conversations and reactions as she led them toward an empty fire ring at the far end of the waiting station. “Set us up.”

Her men did as they were told; those around them relaxed a bit upon finding out she didn’t plan to stride instantly into hell. It gave them time to prepare, but it would also provide time to talk to each other and make deals for protection. Until they’d been ready to go, there hadn’t been a reason to do so. More than half of the people who came to these places ended up deciding to take a longer, safer route.

Walking by the other camps to reach Alexa’s chosen place allowed them to hear bits and pieces of what the other travelers were saying.

“Alone, with all those, she’s hard.”

“Healthy. Must be eating well. She’s strong.”

“Nice guns. Bet they aren’t empty.”

“They’ll make it through, I’d wager.”

“So would I.”

It proved the stories. People gathered at a station and waited until enough protection came through to make the worst of the trip together. Strength in numbers was a way to survive this new life, and apparently, Alexa exuded enough of that to trigger the trek. It made her men proud.

Alexa was aware that her gifts were still growing. Years ago, she could pass through crowds and stay undetected by most, but now her light was a beacon in the apocalypse.

As they began to set things up, Alexa’s men fell into their usual routines, not realizing their quiet, helpful organization would come as a surprise to the others around them. It drew even more attention and made Alexa’s men briefly wish for isolation again. Being stared at wasn’t fun.

Alexa and Mark swept the roaming people as much as the corn around the station, repeatedly going to the family behind the main building. There was one old woman with two unruly children in a small shed with a tiny fire and a rocking chair in front of it. Beside the shed was a tan mule and a small cart that they obviously rode in. What was curious about the trio was their lack of protection.

“How do you think they’re getting by?”

“That is a fine question. We shall see.” Alexa had chosen to make their camp next to the main warehouse, where the corn met the cleared dirt. She had them set for the evening before the sun sank, leaving free time to observe the people around them while they ate. David’s salted bacon and beans was good enough that each of the group had seconds, including Alexa. Tomorrow’s meals wouldn’t be as generous.

The other people watched them eat, but didn’t come near. Only the gunfighters and the soldiers stood a chance of challenging Alexa’s team, but both of those had their own distractions. The gunfighters played cards, cleaned their guns, and held lowly whispered conversations. The soldiers ran their patrols and kept watch over five loaded wagons on the opposite side of the warehouse from Alexa. The former searched Alexa with a curious boredom and the latter avoided her gaze all together.

Alexa felt a shift in the atmosphere and stretched out on her bedroll. “Don’t shoot. We’ll need them later.”

Her fighters tensed, searching for the threat. They found it coming through the corn on the opposite side of the clearing. It was a group of ten soldiers carrying guns and eager expressions.

The new group announced their arrival, but only after they realized Alexa had seen them coming. “Hello in the camp!”

The soldiers stomped straight to Alexa, surrounding her crew as best they could with only two more in number. Alexa didn’t move from her bedroll.

One of the men came forward, gun aimed at Alexa. “You’re under arrest. Get your hands up.”

Alexa shut her eyes. “I just had a big meal, Captain Zale. Talk to me in the morning and maybe we’ll make a deal.”

The Captain racked the slide on the 9mm in his hand. “Get up.”

“I’m the only one who can get your wagons through The Killing Fields.” Alexa’s voice was a cold chill that carried to everyone around them. “Be nice or you won’t like my price.”

Zale considered his options only briefly. The pride quickly overrode common sense. He knelt down to grab Alexa’s arm.

Edward viciously kicked the Captain in the face as the others quickly stood between her and the armed soldiers.

Zale stayed down, cradling his mouth and nose.

“What the hell is going on here?”

The cold bark made soldiers snap to attention for the man approaching from the jungle of corn. He had no men with him. Also a Captain, Merrik wore a black leather jacket over his fatigue shirt and pants. His mirrored sunglasses twinkled as they caught the light. The scar running down his jawline added to the impression that he was a hardass. He was dark, dirty, and dangerous. It was in his step as he padded toward them from the opposite side of the cleared area that Zale had come from. This man liked being cruel and he wasn’t stable.

“I bought a ticket and they tried to arrest me.”

“On my orders. I’m Captain Merrik. You’re Alexa Mitchel. You killed three of my hunters today.”

Alexa chuckled softly. “Darius Merrik. I heard they let you out. Nice post they gave you.”

Merrik didn’t care about her attempt to embarrass him. “Get up.”

“Did you know the rains come through here only once a year now?”

Merrik hesitated. “Yes, we’ve been briefed.”

That told Alexa he hadn’t been out here long enough to have experienced the new weather. *Good*. “You should be covered then.”

Merrik didn’t like not knowing. “What happens when the rain comes?”

Alexa slowly stood up; her men closed in tighter around her. “Blood spills.”

“Ghost stories.” Merrik gestured toward the warehouse. “Let’s go. Your men can stay here. We don’t need them.”

Paul started to come forward in her defense.

Mark neatly tripped him.

“Aww!”

Edward looked at Alexa.

She denied him. “Remember what I said.”

*No shooting. We’ll need them later*. Edward got it and stood down, but he didn’t like just letting them take her. “Shall we go on?” Edward used the code for breaking her out.

“No. Dawn will bring changes.”

Merrik shoved her to end the talking, reconsidering leaving her men out here to plan.

Alexa shoved Merrik back just as hard as he had her. “Don’t ever touch me!”

The distraction worked as he pushed her again. “Go on!”

Alexa disappeared into the warehouse and the soldiers returned to their work with snickers. Alexa Mitchel, captured without a single shot fired. It was almost disappointing.

**5**

Merrik escorted Alexa to the cell in the rear of the warehouse, the one they’d only recently built, but he didn’t disarm her. He knew she didn’t need the gun to be deadly. In fact, on that level, he might have a chance. He was the best shooter of all his men. “Why are you here?”

“You need me.” She settled onto the narrow cot.

“For what?”

“There’s a shipment about to come through. You’ll be told to get it to the destination no matter what, even if it means letting me go.”

“I won’t do that!”

“That’s your choice.”

Merrik scowled and left the cell, locking it. He then told a man to radio base and find out what was coming his way. He didn’t suspect Alexa of bluffing. She had no reason to and Merrik had no intention of challenging her unless he had the advantage. It was how he’d survived since the war. He saw no reason to be reckless now. He didn’t know why the government wanted her, but he would hold her here until someone else came for her, and until then, she would be fed and left alone.

Alexa glanced toward the front of the warehouse. A second later, Zale came in, holding out a paper. His face was bruising and the wound on his lip oozed red.

“Brian says the message is still repeating if you want to listen. It was already coming in before I could tell him to call base.”

Merrik crumbled the note and tossed it into the corner of Alexa’s cell. “Shit!”

He glowered at Alexa. “We’re being sent on. Are your men going to be trouble when we leave?”

Alexa snorted. “Long before that.”

Merrik frowned deeper. “I can’t get the wagons and you across The Killing Fields at the same time. Why don’t they know that?”

“What makes you think your boss doesn’t know it? Perhaps you’ve heard or done too much?”

Merrik grunted. “I’ve only been topside for 6 months. Got sent to quell an uprising in the swamps and then they put me here.”

“Guess they weren’t happy with the job you did.”

“Not really, no.” Merrik grinned. “But I could make up for it by bringing you *and* the wagons in.”

“How do you expect to accomplish that?” Her tone said it would be a hard sell.

“I’ll make a deal with you. Help me and we’ll fight it out after all of us get through.”

Alexa actually laughed aloud. “What would force me to do that?”

“I’ll kill your men if you refuse.”

Alexa’s eyes blazed, causing Merrik to take an involuntary step back.

“Even if you could, you still wouldn’t gain my help.”

“You will if I threaten to kill these people. You’re known for helping the weak. Can you be responsible for their deaths?”

Alexa switched to a tone of submission. “They must give instructions for how to handle us now.”

Merrik lifted his chin arrogantly. “Yeah, here and there, and we picked things up from fighting your kind before the war.”

Alexa laughed again; the sound of it was chilling.

The Captain turned to leave without securing the agreement he needed. Once the people out there started screaming, she would bend.

“Fine.”

Merrik stopped. “You agree?”

“I’ll help you get these people and your wagons through, and then I’m going to slaughter you and your bunker babies.”

The Captain walked away without answering. She and her men would be taken down at the boat docks instead of the end of the trip. That was near enough to Lincoln for him to do the rest. He would take her body back from there. Alive was asking too much.

“Open her cell.”

Brian hurried to do it, glad he hadn’t had to come up with a plan of his own.

Alexa moved by him without speaking or reaching out to hug him like she wanted to.

# BK 2 Chapter Four

**That’s How It’s Done**

**1**

**“T**here are seventy people here.” Paul assumed they would be breaking Alexa out as soon as everyone else was settled down and asleep. The talk was only to kill time before rescuing their leader.

The temperature had dropped as night fell. The other travelers had gone to their shelters, but many of them still lingered in doorways and flaps to stare at Alexa’s fighters.

Edward ignored Paul’s comment. “That last group to come in only had old mule drivers on the wagons. The wagons are filled with boxes.”

“Someone’s supply train.”

Jacob nodded at Mark’s comment. “We can use that.”

Paul didn’t like being left out. “What about Alexa? We can’t leave her in there.”

“We’ll do what she told us to.”

Paul scowled at David. “I won’t leave her!”

“No need to leave me at all, pets.” Alexa came through the dusty darkness and joined them. “We’re no longer the priority.”

Edward quickly got her a cup of coffee. “Were they smart enough to make a deal?”

“Not an honest one. Merrik hopes to deliver me along with the supplies–after we do his job for him, of course.”

Daniel scanned the wheels. “Are those wagons going to a bunker?”

“I believe so, but they won’t arrive there.”

Above them, the sky had faded to black. The breeze settled to nothing, allowing snores and lowly spoken conversations to carry. Alexa studied the people.

The soldiers wore outdated uniforms even for the apocalypse. Alexa doubted many of their sidearms would fire. The government was finally running out of both men and gear. Even the canteens were a decade old. Alexa noted the same was true of the more basic gear, like bedrolls and weapons. All of it was mismatched and varied, giving the soldiers a ramshackle appearance that Merrik complemented perfectly in his black jacket over Army green as he came out to do a fast sweep from the porch. He didn’t look at Alexa or her men, but it was obvious that he was making sure she hadn’t fled.

By midnight, the station was settled and mostly asleep. Snores rolled through the quiet, occasionally breaking the silence, and those still awake were able to hear every nerve rattling sound of the night. It let them wonder what might be lurking, waiting for them to get even a foot out of safety. Giants and zombies were the least of their worries.

Alexa’s group stayed awake. Even Paul was alert, though he couldn’t stop yawning. Sitting around their small fire, the fighters swept their surroundings and each other often. They’d eaten and smoked, chatted a little among themselves, and studied the other people. Curiously in some cases, with admiration of others, but with scorn for most. It was clear that the majority of their fellow travelers were weak.

The slavers were also still awake, observing Alexa and her men, though their stock had long since been sent to bed like good boys. The slaves had gone almost eagerly, leaving Alexa’s men to share frowns. They couldn’t wrap their minds around being slaves, but even worse would be to like it.

The gunfighters were also still up, sitting in good positions around their ward as he snored loudly inside his tent. The cart and horses they shared were stashed behind the tent and the four nags appeared glad to be unharnessed. These fighting men also studied the slaves with confusion, not able to accept that type of surrender, but their hard gazes returned repeatedly to Alexa and her guns. They were obviously trying to figure out who she was. The soldiers letting her go didn’t fit with the legend, but everything else did. Someone like her got a reputation quickly and it was harder to shake when face-to-face. Edward assumed one of the gunfighters would attempt to confirm it at some point, but he doubted they would leave their current job to challenge Alexa for the reward. They looked smart enough to know better.

The only other people up and about were the two roaming patrols that Zale had put in place before disappearing into the warehouse with one of his females. Alexa was glad the woman had been willing. She didn’t plan to interfere with the soldiers until they interfered with her, but a rape would force her hand.

Alexa watched the second woman curl up in a blanket on the ramp; her brows drew together. That one wasn’t willing, but there was little Alexa would do right now without strong cause. “Volunteer sleep schedule–you pick it.” Alexa liked letting her men set their own duties.

Edward opened his mouth to volunteer, but was beaten by Daniel.

“I’ll stay up.”

“As you would.”

Everyone else headed into the tent, slightly disappointed that Daniel would get to enjoy Alexa’s last waking moments of the day. As they got settled, the men were quiet, hoping to listen as they fell out.

Alexa lit a rolled smoke and allowed Daniel to refill her coffee cup. The fire crackled softly; the wind howled gently. Alexa yawned. “They’ll hit us soon. Don’t nod off.”

“I won’t.”

Across the dirt, two of the slavers stood up. Alexa sighed. “Company.”

Daniel rose as the two huge females came over, hand resting on his gun.

Inside the tent, there was silence except for the flap opening further to clear a line of fire.

Alexa leaned against a large rock and gestured toward the now empty seats. “If you like.”

One of the women with hair in black braids that coiled around her thick neck did sit down. The other brunette, hair cut to her ears, stayed standing, watching Daniel.

The slave master smiled. “My thanks.”

Daniel scanned the Powder Protector, as they were now called because of their heavy makeup and male roles, and wasn’t impressed.

Alexa motioned toward the pot. “Coffee’s not bad.”

“No.” The braided slaver cleared her throat. “I’d like to talk about a trade, if you’ve a mind to hear it.”

Alexa laid down the law firmly. “My men are not for sale or rent. They are not slaves.”

Braids sighed resignedly. “I assumed as much. May I offer you anything at all to change your mind?”

Alexa studied the two women. “You have nothing I need.”

The shorthaired woman grunted. “You need ammunition, I bet.”

“That, I could trade some things for, but not my men.”

Braids finally showed true emotions as wistfulness flooded her voice. “What if it wasn’t a trade, just a night between a man and a woman?”

Alexa raised a brow. “Why?”

The slaver flushed. “Fresh meat.”

Alexa rolled her eyes. “That would be up to them. Enjoy the coffee or fire.” She stood up. “Excuse me.”

Alexa ducked into the tent.

Daniel went to stand in front of the flap.

The slavers shared angry glances as they returned to their site.

Daniel didn’t let himself chuckle. None of Alexa’s men had any interest in the slave masters, except in freeing their stock.

*Might be worth a quickie to do it, though.* Daniel grinned inwardly. It was one of those I could do it, but I might get hurt moments that most men had over a woman who was the same size as he was. Daniel thought it might be fun, but he wouldn’t seriously consider it unless the slaves would be freed and that wouldn’t happen. The new law of the land encouraged male slavery, and there were few who could fight those chains. Alexa and her loving ways were the best a man would get out here now.

As if to prove him wrong, the family next to them stirred.

“I want you!”

“Shh!”

“Roll over, baby. Let me hold you.”

A soft male giggle echoed. “Get under the blanket or we’ll wake up the others.”

It was almost normal life continuing. Daniel had forgotten about the small family. He continued to search the corn and the people, comforted a bit. Not all men were slaves. Some had found real homes or had already belonged to one. He and the other fighters with Alexa had done the same. She was their protector, their wife in ways and mother in others. It was odd, but it worked.

Alexa waited until Paul was almost asleep and then rolled over, taking her blanket along. She curled against him for a few minutes where a stifled scream echoed.

She then rolled over, wiping her mouth.

Behind her, Paul shuddered.

Beside her, Mark settled into sleep.

In front of the tent, tall corn waved mockingly at the single guard.

**2**

A slow, silent hand crept toward Daniel’s ankle in the darkness. Long, tattooed fingers reached out...

“Nice try, Convict.”

That startled Mark into a laugh. “Damn it, man!”

Daniel chuckled. “Next time, maybe.” He slid inside the tent and took Mark’s warm place against Alexa’s hip with a groan of pleasure. Lying down was good, but the feel of her was better.

Alexa turned toward him in the dark, arms curling around his neck. Daniel pulled her onto his chest, where she liked to sleep.

“Mmm…”

Daniel stiffened instantly and willed himself to go down. She sounded good, too.

His arms slid around her and he drifted off almost right away.

Secure in Daniel’s big arms, Alexa listened for a minute to make sure they were safe, then joined him.

Mark squatted near the fire that Daniel had nursed through the night, keeping it going. Alexa didn’t like it when they wasted the light or the warmth of their flames, but they didn’t quite have her gift of timing for adding the fuel. It appeared that Daniel had done a good job, though. Mark warmed his fingers over the glowing coals and burnt stalks that remained.

Mark swept the tall fields around them. Calling this mess a cornfield was like calling a scooter a motorcycle. The corn was twined in and around thick weeds and scraggy grass that was trying to choke the dirt into submission. In most places, it was succeeding.

Mark swept the other camps. No one was up or about yet, other than the soldier patrol that hadn’t been relieved. They stared at Mark angrily because he was well rested.

The Convict yawned contentedly and then began to make himself a cup of coffee. While the water heated, he went a few feet into the tangle of plants. As he finished relieving himself, a large rat scurried over his boot.

Mark shuddered. He loathed rats. It was something he always felt the need to kill.

Mark stomped, barely missing, and ran after it, crashing through rows before it vanished as if it had never been there.

Mark stopped as the sense of danger fell over him. The corn was tall and taunting, blocking his view. He sighed, opening his mouth to call out for a direction.

“Shh…”

The child stepped from the row next to him, giving Mark a fright that snatched part of his breath. It was one of the twins, not the corpse child, he was relieved to discover. “Where did you–”

He stopped as the child put a finger to her lips, following her line of sight. All he saw was corn, weeds, grass, and…

Mark stiffened, hand sliding toward his gun. In the corn to their left was the largest wolf he’d ever seen. It was brown and gray, with a head the size of two men.

Mark drew his gun.

Alexa sat up so fast she scared a yelp from both Daniel and Paul.

“Check on our guard.”

Jacob was the first one to come to alertness. He hurried from the tent when Alexa didn’t speak again. He noticed their empty fire, the heating water, and followed Mark’s boots into the corn.

He found the missing man a minute later.

“What are you–”

“Shh!”

Mark didn’t want to fight with a child at his side, but there was no time to get her out of here as the large wolf padded closer to where they were. Mark wasn’t sure if the big animal had noticed their presence or not. If so, it was coming to get a meal. If not, it was about to be surprised and defend itself. Either way, he wasn’t allowed to use his gun and he wouldn’t.

Jacob wasn’t sure why Mark hadn’t pulled the trigger yet. He lined up his sights to take care of it before remembering Alexa’s no gun rule was still in place. As Jacob had the thought, Mark snatched his knife from his belt and threw.

It was amazingly accurate. The blade sank into the creature’s eye and dropped it to the ground with only a whimper and then the dull thud of the body falling.

Mark retrieved his blade. The little girl remained by his side.

Jacob examined the carcass from where he stood. “It’s huge!”

“Yes.” Mark bent down and scooped the child onto his hip, where she curled as if she’d been there all her life. “Let’s get you to your family.”

Jacob trailed them, watching the corn for more predators while replaying the throw in his mind. He wasn’t nearly as good. He wondered if Mark had learned that skill before or after the war.

Alexa was at the flap as they emerged from the corn. She sighed tolerantly when Mark first carried the little girl to her shed and waited for her to slip inside.

When he returned, Mark paused so Alexa could punish him for becoming distracted, but she only returned to her place and laid back down. After a few minutes, there was silence again except for snores.

Jacob joined Mark on duty, unable to go back to sleep. Daniel and Billy now had the best places in the tent on either side of Alexa, and Jacob was still admiring Mark’s throw. He wasn’t sure he could have even hit the wolf in these conditions, let alone have killed it. “Can you teach me?”

“Yep.” Mark gestured. “Have to pick up a stronger blade than the one you carry now.”

“Okay. You’ll advise me on it?”

“Yes.”

The men enjoyed the coffee and the end of night finally coming, though they both also dreaded it. Right now, they were alive. Come daylight, Alexa would put them all in danger again. This morning was to be savored, as each one with her had been, because there was no promise of another.

In a dark corner of the circle, a shadow pulled a handful of dust from a pocket and blew it across the station. The tiny yellow spores scattered, blending in as they landed. Those who inhaled them slid into a deep sleep.

As the bodies fell and the dreams ceased, the shadow walked calmly into one of the camps and resumed a hiding place among the sheep.

The girl giggled and was quickly hushed by her brother.

**3**

The sight of a single, lanky white wolf inside their ring of protection was something of a concern to the fighters lying on the hard floor of the tent. To see dozens of glowing eyes waiting hungrily in the tall corn behind it, was terror for Alexa.

Her men shifted, waking at the feeling.

The two men outside the flap began to wake also, but it was slower, without the awareness that trouble had arrived.

“No one moves!”

Alexa’s command froze the men who were now taking aim on the wolf closest to her.

Time slowed as the animal in the open flap also reacted, baring its fangs to grin furiously.

Alexa tried to barter. “We will leave. Now.”

The predator snarled in response. Death was in those red eyes. There was a slow pause as the sun continued to rise, and then chaos ensued as the wolves attacked.

Alexa opened fire, careful with her aim. The lunging wolf in the flap was knocked into the side of the tent, clearing the exit. More wolves took its place; there was little time to plan or think as the fighters shot their way from the tent to find wolves spilling through the corn like rats. Most were going toward the warehouse, but small groups were also attacking the other travelers.

Alexa didn’t have time to aid anyone else as she and the others helped Mark and Daniel to their feet. It was a shock that they weren’t dead.

“Use the wall!” Alexa led them to the warehouse, shooting as she ran. They placed their backs to it like she did.

Paul pulled his weapon, intending to help.

Edward shoved the scientist behind him in annoyance. “Clear my line of fire, Rabbit!”

He had no idea if Paul was as clumsy with a gun as he was everything else, but he didn’t want to find out right now.

With the wall behind them, Alexa’s group was able to defend themselves and even clear a small area of safety. They were also able to keep the animals away from the grandmother and kids, but everyone else was on their own. They watched in horror as soldiers and civilians were mauled. Blood ran repeatedly over the ground.

At first, it appeared the attack was random, but Alexa’s men knew herding when they saw it. The wolves were coming from three directions, pushing the people toward the corn behind the buildings. The travelers were trying to flee toward the main warehouse, where Merrik had no doubt promised them safety if they could make it. Some of them did.

Alexa’s men fell into that deadly V formation without an order, firing at will.

“Line up!”

Merrik’s loud command drew the fleeing soldiers into a shaky line in front of the ramp. They’d clearly done it before by the way they hurried forward together without any more orders.

The wolves also seemed to know what was coming. The area emptied of the predators in seconds. Less than two minutes into the attack, it was over. Other than the moans of the corn and the wounded, there was silence.

Alexa reloaded and holstered her guns, and her men did the same. Paul stayed behind them.

“I’m sorry, I—”

Alexa cut Mark off, holding up a finger dusted with yellow pollen. “It wasn’t your fault. We were knocked out.”

Mark let the relief fill the growing black spot in his heart and heal it. Thinking that he’d fallen asleep on watch had been devastating.

Jacob echoed his thoughts, relieved and also furious.

The other groups immediately began tending their wounds and salvaging their valuables from the debris. Alexa understood the people had been suffering these attacks regularly to be so desensitized. Other than Paul, there hadn’t even been screams. Alexa raised a brow at Merrik.

Merrik felt her disapproval across the blood-splattered dirt. He wasn’t able to cover his shame. “There are only so many bullets. Base says to protect, not hunt.”

“Base doesn’t understand how bad things are out here.”

“You got that right.” Merrik waved Zale over. “The usual.”

“Wagon’s got some damage from slugs.” Zale glared at Alexa and Paul. He still didn’t care about her men, though he wore the print of Edward’s boot on his face.

Merrik’s voice rose in annoyance. “How long?”

“Three hours to fix it.”

“We leave as soon as it’s ready.”

“I’d wait another day.”

Alexa’s suggestion gained the attention of all the soldiers in hearing distance. No one openly questioned Captain Merrik, but none of them had faith in him, either.

“Why is that?” Merrik’s tone gave away none of his rage at being questioned.

“The second wave is going to do more damage than you’re used to.”

“What second wave? We’ve been living here for five months! There’s nothing you can tell me–”

“Duck!”

The red talon crows came from the corn in silent, pecking shadows that hurled toward the people who began to flee from them.

Alexa signaled for her men to get down, but Paul had been staring at the blood and bodies. He’d missed the short conversation. A line of crows slammed into his hip and knocked him into the small pile of corpses that the soldiers had been stacking.

“Nooo!” Paul screamed in revulsion. “Get me out of here!”

Seeing he was fine, the fighters left him there to wait out the flyover. The small crows couldn’t do much.

“Decoy!” The shout came from the other side of the clearing.

Everyone turned to find the wolves streaming through the corn again.

“They never hit us like this!” Zale shouted through his bruised mouth. “This is her fault!”

Alexa didn’t spend time giving orders like Merrik was now doing. She got her men into that deadly V and headed for the point where the wolves were coming in.

The soldiers joined her line, curving at the ends, and they were able to drive the wolves back, but not before the grandmother and kids had been forced from their shed and into the warehouse. Bloody handprints on the rail said one of them was hurt.

Zale pointed toward Alexa, ready to shout again.

Edward slid in front of his boss. The barrel of his gun rested against Zale’s chin.

Zale went still, but his face screamed for Merrik. None of the soldiers wanted to miss what might happen, though. No one went for the boss.

“May I?”

Alexa wanted to tell Edward yes, blow the idiot’s brains out. “No, and I’m sorry for it.”

Edward stepped aside, glowering.

Zale’s brush with death gave him a respect that was evident in his lowered tone. “You’re trouble. *You* led them to us.”

Alexa walked away, not answering.

Edward smirked at her insult before following.

Paul was wiping away blood and other disgusting things, hating everyone for his own cowardice. He’d thought about helping them during all of it, but in the end, it had been easier, safer, to let them protect him. He shoved his way by Zale.

Still angry himself, Zale stuck out a foot and tripped the scientist.

Paul fell again, right back into the same pile of bodies.

His screams echoed through the corn.

Zale laughed cruelly, turning away.

Alexa felt it coming, but she was too far away, too late, to stop fate from disrupting her plans.

Furious beyond anything he’d ever felt, Paul rolled over and shot Zale through the neck with the same gun that he’d used to kill his father.

Mark huffed in the stunned silence, grinning. “And we didn’t think he was learning anything!”

“Time to go.” Alexa scanned the scattered station’s residents, then Merrik, who was angrily moving toward them.

Alexa grabbed a camo wearing shadow on her right, wrapping him up tightly in front of her. “We’re leaving now.”

Brian didn’t struggle. He inhaled her scent and fought hard not to cry or scream.

Merrik stopped and signaled for his men to do the same. He had no doubt that Alexa would kill the boy.

Alexa scowled as her worry was confirmed. “What’s this kid doing here, Merrik?”

“I captured him.”

“From the slavers or from the Draft?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not yet.” Alexa let go of the perfectly still boy.

She moved toward the corn at a fast clip, men covering her with their guns. “There are a few possessions we’re going to want back. I’d be careful with them if I were you.”

Alexa spun and vanished into the corn; her men came swiftly behind her.

Last man to disappear, Paul shoved his gun into his pocket and tried to keep up.

Brian came to Merrik’s side with a pale face. He hated lying, but he needed to buy her time to escape “Why was she asking about me? And why didn’t she kill me?”

“Move!” Merrik shoved the boy aside, heading for the weapon room to get ready for the trip. “We leave as soon as the wagon is fixed!”

**4**

Alexa led her men in a wide circle, then brought them back to the edge of the station. She’d counted on Merrik not wanting to lose men to hunt her in the corn. She watched the soldiers pack their campsite and toss their gear into the rear of the last wagon. Alexa didn’t know if it had been an order, but nothing was stolen or destroyed. She assumed Merrik had taken her seriously about their belongings.

Alexa silently gave her fighters their assignments. She put Edward with Paul, after telling Edward to take Paul’s gun. She directed Mark and Daniel toward the wagon with their things, and took the rest with her to create the distraction. It was a simple plan that she had used many times. Simple was often the best choice. It was easier to remember the details during the chaos.

Mark and Daniel stayed on their stomachs as they crawled through a few feet of corn to the clear area. They were only a couple seconds from the wagon when gunfire echoed from the opposite side of the station. Soldiers ran that way.

Mark darted forward, with Daniel right behind him. They were in the wagon seconds later and hidden by the thick cover.

Alexa whistled.

A few hundred feet to the left, Edward fired into the air, then grabbed Paul and ran for the place where Mark and Daniel had snuck through.

A minute later, he dumped Paul into the wagon and joined him.

Alexa and her three fighters ran back into the corn as the soldiers spotted them, vanishing.

The angry shouts of Merrik and his men filled the air.

“Give yourself up!”

“Come out of there!”

Alexa began circling around again. In a little while, she and these men would be in the wagons also to rest and conserve their strength for a few hours of the trip. If they stayed lucky, they might pass a full day’s travel that way and be ready for whatever came.

Standing in front of the barn, Merrik ignored his men and concentrated. What was she doing? What did she hope to gain by drawing them out? Weakening their numbers to get their supplies? *Maybe she wants Brian.* She’d shown interest in the kid, as if she knew they were holding onto him for someone. “Get that damn wagon ready!”

The soldiers rushed to comply, but with the covers on, none of them noticed that two of the warped, wooden vehicles now had occupants.

Edward grabbed Paul by his jacket and jerked him forward until they were nose to nose. “Don’t ever do anything like that again!”

Paul squirmed, trying to get free.

Edward gave him a harsh shake, being careful not to rock the wagon. “Well?!”

Paul’s head bobbed furiously. He pulled away as Edward let go, falling into the side of a stack of boxes.

The boxes slid over, jarring the wagon.

Edward’s hand went to his gun as he glanced toward the driver.

The eyes staring back at him were not a comfort.

The driver of their wagon was at least sixty, with grizzled features set into a gray and black beard full of wild curls. His oversized hat blended into the cover of the wagon perfectly as he glared at the stowaways.

Edward slowly held up a hand, and then moved it toward his pocket. He pulled a pouch of dust free and held it out. “I have coins if you’d rather.”

The driver grunted, still studying them. “What are you buying?”

“A ride, nothing more.”

“Will I be shot in the back or hit by accident?”

“Not by me or mine.” Edward’s voice was a perfectly cold copy of Alexa’s. “We’re better than both of those.”

Edward held out the pouch, hoping the driver would make the right choice. Behind him, Mark was doing the same.

The driver of wagon one looked at Edward’s pouch for a long moment. “I didn’t see anything, hear anything, I don’t get killed?”

Edward nodded. “Agreed, but no man can speak for fate. You understand?”

The driver appeared to accept that and turned around to spit. He didn’t look back for a long time. When he did, the pouch was on the edge of the wagon bed and Edward’s hand was on his gun.

“Don’t steal anything. Keep your pay and owe me something later.”

Edward didn’t like owing a debt, but didn’t feel he had a right to argue. “Done.”

Paul grabbed the pouch and spent a minute examining the powder inside before handing it back to Edward.

Edward allowed it, hoping he wasn’t the one who ended up killing the scientist. He didn’t want to be on Alexa’s bad side, but as sure as his skills were guns and horses, Paul wouldn’t be alive by the end of this trip.

Instead of more argument, Paul rested his head against the boxes and tried to consider his options. He needed a way to prove to Alexa that he belonged at her side. There was a way, he knew. It would involve saving one of her beloved pets, but even that wasn’t too much to ask in return for what he wanted.

Edward peered through the cover to wagon two and found Alexa’s hand giving the all clear signal. Her driver was snoozing.

Edward settled into a thickly packed corner, next to Paul. He used his hands to position the scientist so that he wouldn’t be seen and ordered him to go to sleep.

Paul did it eagerly, worn out. He couldn’t wait for this day to be over and it wasn’t even noon yet!

Edward leaned his head against the wagon, exchanging looks and grins with Mark and Daniel. It was a stunning moment of life that only they understood. One day on the edge like this with Alexa was worth years of their old lives. They would never quit this quest.

# BK 2 Chapter Five

**Small Favors**

**1**

**T**he travelers were jolted from their drowsy boredom by the rear man, Private Richards, calling a halt and Merrik refusing the order. Those inside the wagons listened in anger.

“We are not stopping.”

“Their horse is injured. They’ll fall behind.”

“Not my problem. They’re not on my list.”

“What list?”

“Those who matter and those who don’t.”

“Sir, I think–”

“Get moving, Dick!”

“Yes, sir.”

The travelers kept going.

Inside Edward’s wagon, he waited for a signal to go help the family. When it didn’t come, he worried over it. Alexa would send someone. He was once again missing a chance to earn more of her affection.

Mark and Daniel felt the same way. All of them blamed Paul.

“Who will she send?” Paul didn’t notice the hostile tension.

None of them had thought Paul was smart enough to realize Alexa would help the family. It stopped them from being nasty.

“Billy. He’s good with people.” Mark sighed. “She loves him for that.”

Paul scoffed. “She doesn’t love him. Or any of you.”

“You have no idea, little man.”

Paul’s cheeks bloomed with color at Edward’s scorn, but before he could respond in kind, Edward peeled up a corner of the tarp to look outside. “She sent Billy.”

Paul tried to be brave, but it was hard. “What did she say for us to do?”

“She didn’t!” Edward nearly growled. “We’re babysitting. How hard is that?”

Paul opened his mouth.

“Shut up back there!”

Silence fell in the wagon at the driver’s order.

After a moment, they realized the man had likely just tired of their bickering. He was a lot like their fearless leader–quiet and effective. It was almost comforting.

**2**

Billy found the small family easily. They reacted the way he expected them to–fearfully.

The man stood up and ushered the children behind him, while the two women raised guns. The females were clean, with pants that fit and coats that provided protection. Their slave had a dingy white robe and bare feet that announced his status. If Billy had to guess, he would say they were from the south.

“I came to help. I’m with Alexa.”

The words allowed a bit of the tension to ease.

Billy carefully skirted around them to view the horse. Edward would have normally been sent to do something like this. Billy was determined to do as good a job.

He knelt down by the mare, listening. He examined her gently, noting the colors and conditions that Edward had drilled them on during personal lessons. “What did she have to eat over the last day?”

Billy got the information from them as quickly as he could, aware of the two women now standing over him with guns and leers. Leaving might be a little harder than getting in. Thanks to Alexa, he was also ready for that.

“I think it’s just a sore ankle.” Billy stood up. “Walk her all the way and a friend of mine will come by when things settle down. He’s much better with horses than I am.”

The women were still viewing him as if he was water. Billy flashed the asshole inside. “I’ve killed women before. Won’t bother me to do so now.”

They both retreated from the barely bridled rage in his tones.

“I’ve done you a service.” Billy glared. “You owe me a debt. How do you intend to pay?”

“We’re letting you go without a fight.” The younger of the two women clearly hated men and was likely the one who was abusive. “That’s all you’ll get here.”

Billy helped the slave male get the horse onto its feet. “I’d take everything you have if I wanted it. Be grateful my mistress isn’t evil. I’d beat you both, and then slit your throats in payment for the bruises on your male.”

Billy didn’t wait for them to respond. He padded to the front of the group, giving them no choice but to follow. He strode down the path made by the other travelers, shoulders set in rigid anger. Male slavery was something he would never submit to and he’d begun to loathe all women for it.

His mind tossed out an honest question. *But aren’t you Alexa’s slave?*

Billy nodded. “Until I die.”

**3**

The day was hot and long for most of the travelers. As the insects buzzed maddeningly out of reach, the smell of the corn distracted them. It was hard to stay awake, let alone alert and those with carts or wagons dozed miserably in the heat of the day.

Inside the two mule wagons, Alexa’s group wasn’t suffering the same way. They were used to the heat and trying to breathe through it. Getting a ride was a gift. They joked quietly, taught Paul and the two newest men needed rules, and slept comfortably with their hats over their faces. Traveling stayed that way for the first five hours. It wasn’t until the day was at its hottest that Alexa felt the need to get them ready.

“They’ll have us park away from the group to minimize losses. Stay down and still. You won’t be noticed.” The mule drivers were dressed in the same brown pants and long brown coats. The only difference was in the wild hair of the three men and the neat cut of the only woman. All dark skinned, rugged, and quiet, they were a relief to ride with.

Alexa used her hands to deliver the message to Edward.

“Let’s pick a spot!”

Merrik’s call, too early in Alexa’s opinion, was repeated by the soldiers patrolling the long caravan.

“Make camp! Set us up! Camp time!”

The shouts continued long enough to make Alexa and her men nervous. They never made so much noise, but to do it so openly in such a dangerous place was a level of incompetence they hadn’t expected.

“He hasn’t done this before. That changes things.” Alexa had planned to travel with the group, much like they were with the mule wagons, but Merrik wasn’t going to be able to handle what was coming. “Why do they keep sending these idiots out into hell?”

Their driver heard her and snorted. “That’s a fine question.”

She leaned toward the front of the wagon, sending her scent over the man. “There’s a set of buildings an hour further along. Any chance you can get him to go there?”

The driver broke out into a sweat and quickly took a swig of warm water. “Not likely. My boss says never argue unless it endangers the haul.”

“Who is your boss?”

The man spat off the side of the bench and wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve. “At the moment, Roscoe.”

Alexa considered. Fate was setting them up to cross paths. She would get a plan ready for that challenge. “Thank you.”

Alexa’s gratitude sent a bolt of hope into the driver’s dark heart. He grunted. “Men can be bought.”

“Aye. A good thing, too, otherwise people like Merrik might rule the wilderness.”

The driver wheezed out a chuckle as he climbed from the wagon. “Wouldn’t that be some new hell?”

“What of your previous employer?” Alexa had recognized his original profession easily. Old Army men were easy to spot if you knew what to look for.

“There are two bunkers holding that I know of. One east, one west.”

“Fully staffed?”

“Not even by half. This apocalypse has taken a toll on them as well.”

“Is that why they’re sending up bunker babies now?”

“Yes. They’re down to almost nothing in manpower. The hunters you ended are another example of that.”

Alexa nodded in agreement. Those bounty hunters hadn’t been a speed bump on a quiet street.

She listened to the convoy stop. It wasn’t calm enough to steal peeks with so many people in the middle of making camp, but the sounds would tell her where everyone was and how much security was being used.

“Get those wagons into the center! That’s an important shipment!”

“Slide those slaves down! Make room for the wagons!”

“Get on there, mule!”

Alexa’s group tried to disappear into the wood and boxes as her driver returned to do as he’d been ordered.

“Now spread out those sites! Give everyone some room!”

Alexa’s lips tightened. *Idiot!*

In the wagon ahead, Edward made sure Paul knew to stay awake. “She won’t be still much longer. He’s putting us all in too much danger.”

“If it interferes with the quest, remove it.” After shooting his own father, Paul had accepted that as truth.

“Exactly. Be ready.”

“What will she do?”

Edward didn’t answer. Paul should know it was nearly impossible to predict Alexa’s moves. That was a large part of why she was so hard to capture. He listened to Merrik as the man continued to call out orders in a voice that echoed.

“Perimeter patrol A, get on it. Everyone else get fed and settled in for the night.”

Edward very slowly lifted a larger corner of the wagon cover. He’d been glancing through a tiny rip, but the feeling of needing a clear view was strong.

“What’s going on?”

Edward was glad Paul had remembered to be quiet, but they needed to be silent right now. He glared until Paul dropped his head. When Edward looked out again, the driver of Alexa’s wagon was standing a foot from him. The man leaned down to check on the wheels, speaking in a quick blur.

“She said one hour further, on a straight line.”

“Many thanks.” Edward was relieved. He tried to send out that wave of gratitude that Alexa could easily blind people with.

“From you, it’s nothing.” The driver grunted as he straightened up to go to the other wheel for the same fast check. “From her, it’s an honor.”

**4**

No longer as angry as he had been, Billy left the family as soon as the noises of their fellow travelers echoed. During the walk, he’d had a chance to talk with the women a bit and to realize they were following a pattern of behavior that was expected. It didn’t excuse the cruelty, though, and he’d told them so.

The convoy came into sight as Billy blended into the corn without a word.

The family didn’t give him away when he joined Alexa’s wagon while everyone was distracted with their arrival. The slave among the relieved family stared at Billy’s hiding place with tired longing and gratitude.

Now in the wagon, Billy held out a pouch to his mistress. They usually kept individual rewards and gifts that were given in moments of aid, but in this case, Billy wanted her to handle it.

Alexa peered inside. “Are you sure? We have no rules for sharing our luxuries.”

“It’s been a while.” Billy smiled, almost harshly. “I’d rather share.”

Alexa ran a loving hand along his jaw, letting him feel her approval. “Take a rest now.”

Alexa stowed the pouch after letting the others view what was inside. The handful of chocolate kisses was worth a full night with a woman in nearly any town. Everyone’s fondness for Billy went up.

Merrik’s men made camp along one side of the wagon train. A few of the soldiers made fires, ate, and then immediately crashed. Merrik himself disappeared into a large tent with the two blue robed females who had made the trip inside a large crate on the rear of a buckboard. With his sunglasses atop his dark hair, the Captain appeared to be getting set for a party.

Alexa’s men felt her rage building over that and knew it wouldn’t stand longer.

Jealous, Merrik’s remaining men leered at the traders, but those traders had protection. Five extremely large females wearing black coats with spikes and short, bobbed hairdos stood outside the slave tent.

Alexa felt the curiosity of her men and gave in to it. “Their bulk comes from the protein powder they consume. They used to be jocks, like wrestlers and basketball players, but now, they’re called Powder Protectors.”

Billy flipped a bug from his arm. “Why do they wear so much makeup?”

“So they can still feel feminine. They’ve confused themselves.”

Their slaves, five heavily made-up middle aged men, appeared happy despite the situation. The jumpy males hadn’t been rented during the trip so far. The females in this convoy already had their own entertainment. Jacob was glad. He knew abuse happened and he couldn’t stop it all, but it was anyone’s guess as to how he might react to the proof.

*Clowns wear fewer colors on their face.* Billy watched as the slaves sat around their fire and sang softly to each other between bites. Their guards and owners did the same. The women who owned the slaves were large, with bright clothes and cigars that they smoked continuously.

The five slave owners were a mix of brunettes and redheads with weathered skin and sly gazes. They didn’t seem to be friends, despite being partners, especially the one with long braids held in a ponytail. She looked harder than the others, mean even. Daniel couldn’t help the male response when she winked at him. He didn’t wink back, however. Personal moments weren’t allowed while on watch.

The only other unprotected female in the convoy was the girl traveling with the old woman, but with her matted hair and pissy smell, she was safe from attention. Her brother was an adorable blond and blue-eyed twin that the grandmother wisely kept in the rear of the creaking carriage being pulled by three skinny cows. Followed by an old nag, it effectively blocked curiosity with odor.

The map scriber with his gypsy-style wagon and three hired guns had no fire, but they bought dinner from the family Billy had helped. As did the slavers and a few of the soldiers. The messengers ate MREs, secured their possessions inside a lean-to, and vanished for the night. The prisoner with the mapmaker had no choice but to eat the moldy bread that one of the gunfighters pitched into his wooden cage. The gunfighters were all tall and wide, with jeans and plaid shirts to keep out the weather. Their short hair and freshly shaved faces would do just the opposite.

The wagon drivers were stocked with hard bread and dried meat that they enjoyed with their boots off and their flasks in hand, after taking care of their animals. They didn’t talk much, even to each other. As the sun sank, they stretched out on their benches with ponchos and tired yawns.

The evening faded into night as Edward continued to mark the people around them and their habits. He was sure Alexa was doing the same from a small hole in her wagon cover. The corn was the same as yesterday–high and tempting, and hiding any manner of creature being drawn by the light. The sky was black, the grit was greenish, and the sounds of light buzzing insects echoed softly. It was too peaceful, too calm. Edward braced for trouble.

Alexa waited for the exact moment she would have chosen to attack, then quietly drew one gun.

A second later, shots rang out and shadows filled the area.

“Stay down!”

Her men and the driver obeyed.

“What is it?”

“Wolves!”

“Check the other side!”

“Fire!”

Shouts and more gunshots echoed, and then it was quiet except for the occasional mutter or running boots.

Flames suddenly lit up the corn beside the wagons.

Alexa hefted herself out, moving toward the front wagon.

Edward saw Alexa and quickly got his group out to her.

“Mark, go get what I came for. Everyone else goes that way.” Alexa pointed. “Two men, every hundred feet. Defend those coming down the line, stay with them. Go!”

Around them, the travelers were either busy trying to battle the fire with water they couldn’t spare or gathering their things to run.

Alexa fired, defending herself from shadows that snarled and lunged from the dark rows.

The fighters spread out into pairs and placed themselves spine-to-spine, waiting for the travelers that were now running toward them with screams and curses as the wolves continued to attack.

Alexa’s guns echoed louder than the screams, but not by much as the wolves took their toll. Outnumbered and unable to traverse well in the dark, the humans were not going to win against the animals.

Alexa grabbed a fleeing human shadow by the arm and spun him toward her first pair of men. “That way! Keep going straight!”

The messenger departed eagerly as Alexa headed toward the chaos, leaping over shadows and crashing through rows of sharp stalks in her haste. Those were her people, most of them, and she had to help.

She snatched two shadows from their flight, spinning them around. “That way! Keep straight. Get to my men!”

More people were heading her way now, some soldiers, too, but Alexa didn’t spare them a thought. “Get to my men. Go straight!”

All of them obeyed, leaving her with just the sounds of gunfire and Merrik screaming orders. His men were fleeing, leaving him and his precious wagons.

Alexa dashed through the last rows and then into the camp, where the drivers had the wagons ready to roll, but wolves were everywhere. Blood and bodies from both species littered the ground.

Alexa grabbed a reloading wagon driver by the leg, pointing. “That way. Go!”

The wagon drivers didn’t argue or waste time on questions. They put the whip to their asses and left Alexa and Merrik in a cloud of dust.

Alexa didn’t wait for Merrik to recover from the shock of seeing her there. She took off into the corn, not caring if he survived it or not.

Merrik, now completely alone, tore through the corn like a wild man to catch up.

Alexa let him, reluctantly. It really would be easier if he died here and now. What was waiting for him was uglier than wolves.

**5**

Mark slipped through the corn, shifting his prize to the other shoulder. He waited for a minute, letting Alexa’s guns draw the wolves away from him before continuing. The corn was alive with shadows and snarls. Mark kept both guns out as he traveled. It would have been an impossible balancing act if not for Alexa’s training sessions where they did exactly this while traveling. It gave the man being carried a needed break, toughened the man doing the carrying, and allowed the others to examine the struggles and make adjustments for their own training. Mark liked the way Alexa did things. Most of it was hands-on, learn as you go.

Mark crouched down as large shadows flew overhead, waiting. He couldn’t identify the flyers, but he didn’t need to in order to know they were bad news that he couldn’t handle alone. It was as if the wildlife here was using bullhorns to magnify their intimidation factor.

As soon as the shadows were gone, Mark took off running toward the location he’d been given. As he departed, the screams and gunshots faded and the worry grew. He was sure Alexa would be there before he was, but that didn’t stop the concern that she was out there alone. There were wolves, some strange flying shadows, bats, rats, and Merrik, who was likely less dangerous of all of those, but still a threat.

“She’s got it covered. Now cover your own end.” Mark increased his pace, hoping to reach the shelter before the soldiers. As he leapt over a large rut, the heavy weight over his shoulder shifted and he lost his balance. Mark fell forward, hard, to land face first in the dirt and stalks.

As he lay there, breathing evening, Mark decided it would be better to arrive with his package alive. Being first didn’t mean anything if it was emptyhanded.

“Ugh!”

Mark punched the slowly waking soldier; the male sagged against his bonds again.

Mark quickly took his prize to the concrete tunnel he’d been working his way toward since spotting it. The narrow storm drain would do just fine. Once daylight came, he would rejoin Alexa. She would know what he’d done and approve of it. She wanted the package alive and she would get it.

**6**

Alexa’s men were with the survivors running blindly through the corn. They tried to lead them like she would have, but it was hard to keep going straight in this tall hell. Fifteen minutes after Alexa disappeared, her fighters finally got the people under control and put them into a line to march. The fighters roamed around them, guns in hand, as they kept moving. The wolves hadn’t followed them yet, but there was little doubt that they would.

The sounds behind them–screams and Alexa’s Colts–were comforting. As long as they heard the guns, they knew she was okay.

“Over here.” Billy pointed at the outline of a building.

The stalks around the edge of the new site swayed angrily in the breeze, reaching out.

“Get down!”

As Jacob shouted, hundreds of the razor sharp stalks broke apart and launched at the travelers, slicing hands and faces.

Screams came from both ends of the strung out convoy as Alexa’s men shoved the people by the ambush spot. Using their bodies to shield people, the men were hit the worst.

“Get inside the first building you come to!” Daniel doubted any of the panicked people would listen or remember.

“Watch out! Get down!” Jacob hit the ground as a giant scythe swept over his curls with a vicious whine.

Jacob rolled and fired.

The shadow wielding the scythe didn’t flinch despite being hit.

Jacob rolled onto his feet and took off running with the others.

Paul gasped for air. “What was that?”

Daniel shoved him into the shed they had emerged near and the others surrounded it, ready to fight. The rest of the travelers were spread out in the empty buildings, but they didn’t go as far as the fighters had thought they would.

Alexa’s men stayed ready, but the night fell silent.

They’d come to a larger station, this one with dozens of homes and structures. After a while, Jacob led Paul to the center. The buildings here were made of rusting metal and cracking wood, set in a patch of sickly brown dirt that even the corn wouldn’t grow through.

The other men cleared it from the inside out. The spiral setup was a little disorienting. The Preacher settled in front of a storeroom-type barn with a sigh of relief. With some luck, any surviving soldiers would stick to the outer edges of this town and be picked off. They certainly hadn’t shown much in the way of survival skills so far.

Who Jacob was rooting for, besides the kids, were the wagon drivers. If they lived, they would eventually be through here with whatever was left of their supplies. Those boxes and pouches could help a lot of Americans instead of this Roscoe creep. After the attacks, Jacob was hoping the drivers would be willing to sell their cargo and lie about it being destroyed.

Edward waved. “It’ll be hours before any of them get here. Eat, stretch, and piss. Cold camp.”

**7**

Two hours later, all of them were worried.

“She should be here.” David made sure his gun was fully loaded.

Billy did the same even though he knew it was. “She’s bringing the others. She’s fine.”

The silence around them belied that comfort, but they continued to wait as the travelers with them slowly came out and wandered the new campsite. They listened, hoping to hear her guns, but nothing came.

“Go get her!” Paul glared at all of them. “Go help her.”

“Shut up!”

Paul opened his mouth to protest Edward’s refusal.

Billy interrupted him. “Not a good time, *Rabbit*.”

Paul flushed. He had finally grown sensitive to the name. “Don’t call me that!”

Edward waved at the shed. “Shut up or wait there.”

Paul glanced at the shed, then the corn, and didn’t speak. He liked being in the thick of things.

Jacob kept his voice down as survivors wandered by them. “Should we?”

Billy shook his head. “She’ll be along. Let’s get it set up.”

Each man spotted things that would need to be done to convert the area into a temporary camp and got busy, leaving Jacob and Paul to stand guard. Paul’s hands were the only part of him that was clean. Jacob tried to stay downwind.

The wolves hadn’t followed them from the corn and that was a relief, but Jacob wondered if that was because they were now in a more dangerous area that even those animals wouldn’t trespass on.

**8**

Mark and Brian stared at each other for a long time. The inside of the storm drain was mostly dry, with that black mold growing up one corner. It was colder inside the huge pipe, but also safer.

It wasn’t comfortable for the males, though, and the hostility on Brian’s face was hard on Mark. “What? You want a drink or something?”

Brian snorted. “I want my freedom, you big thug.”

Not used to the term, Mark chuckled. “There’s one I haven’t been called.”

Hating to be laughed at, Brian sent flames up his hands that immediately began burning through his ropes.

Mark grunted, understanding now why he’d been sent. He quickly leaned over and rapped the struggling soldier on the skull with the butt of his gun. None of the others would be so rough on the boy.

Brian slumped against the damp concrete.

Mark cut the boy’s charring ropes and resumed his place after making sure Brian was still breathing and the flames were out.

He hadn’t struck him that hard. In only a couple of minutes Brian was groaning and trying to sit up.

Mark growled as Brian focused on him and tensed. “We’re gonna talk or I’ll make you kill me.”

Brian thought about trying anyway, but he wasn’t strong enough to gather the energy that fast and Mark knew it. He’d been with Alexa long enough to understand that when she expended a large amount of power, she was exhausted afterward, sometimes for hours, but sometimes for days. “What do you want to know?”

“Why does Roscoe want you?” He’d had a moment to consider it and the conclusion was easy for Mark to make. Face bruised, clothes wrinkled and dusty, Brian appeared every bit the unwilling hostage, but Mark wasn’t sure that impression was the truth. Had he known Alexa would take him?

Brian clammed up as he realized Alexa had sent someone who understood how to deal with their kind. “I’ll tell your boss, not you.”

Mark was sensing a lot about the late teenage boy. He thought of what he knew about her past. “She won’t keep you. She can’t.”

Brian didn’t answer.

Mark shut his eyes, body language demonstrating that he wasn’t afraid of Brian’s gifts. “Play this hand on her side and be given your freedom as a reward.”

Brian wanted to say yes, but he was tired of running. If he were set free, where would he go? How long would he run before he was caught again?

Mark wasn’t sure what the problem was, but he could feel the indecision. He opened his eyes to find the boy shedding silent tears.

Mark’s heart broke a little, but he pretended he didn’t notice. Alexa was the healer. Mark was just the delivery system.

**9**

It was a large relief to hear the calls of mule drivers and the steady clip of boots moving forward calmly instead of in panic. Those who’d made it to the small town came from their chosen places cautiously.

Alexa’s men lined up in front of their barn door, keeping Paul behind them.

Alexa jumped down from the lead wagon and joined her men, not speaking to anyone. In dawn’s grudging light, she was beautiful. Alexa held a wildness that was complemented whenever she was forced to show what she was made of. It sent more pride into her men and more determination into her enemies.

Alexa settled into a corner, happy enough with the pallet they’d made for her from brittle straw and blankets. She was asleep a minute after finding a comfortable position, not talking to them at all. She didn’t have the strength. She’d used up her reserves and needed to rest.

Her fighters positioned themselves around the door, spreading the word not to disturb her. The males easily found things to occupy themselves while they listened to the late arrivals. It didn’t take long to discover that Alexa had saved all of them by going back, and with the exception of the soldiers and gunfighters, everyone was grateful. They’d lost two soldiers and one of the sisters in the farming family, and had multiple injuries, but the group was mostly intact. There had been four sisters to start this trip, but they could still open their market with one less. It was the loss of the food supplies that would hurt them the most.

When their lowly spoken conversation came around to the hired killers, David frowned. “We may have to handle those three before we get through here.”

“I agree.” Daniel kept sewing a small rip in a sock. “Maybe soon, while they don’t expect it.”

“What about the soldiers?” Paul squeaked from his corner. The others had made it clear that when Alexa was woken, it had better not be by him.

“She’ll decide. She saved them for a reason.” Billy looked around. “Anyone know what it is?”

No one answered. They only saw benefits in removing those men, especially since the wolves would have done it and not Alexa, who didn’t need the bounty on her to go any higher.

In all that time, none of them asked about Mark. They were afraid to curse his mission, whatever it was.

On guard duty, Jacob peered out the half open door, aware of the chill in the air and the ugliness of the sky, but his attention was immediately drawn to the corn and the little girl there. The corpse child Alexa had shot was standing just outside the ring of civilization.

Their eyes met, locked. A spark of good and evil clashing exploded, sending out a silent vibration.

The corpse girl bared her fangs at Jacob, hissing in anger.

Jacob reached for his gun.

“What is it?”

“What’s wrong?”

Remembering Alexa’s words, Jacob returned his gun to the holster. “Nothing there.”

As Jacob watched, the child vanished and he gave thanks. Not to a deity, but to the leader who had taught him how to face his fears.

**10**

Alexa woke to normal routines being carried out. She’d been exhausted when she and Merrik had finally gotten his wagons rolling through the dirt and sharp stalks. By the time this barn had come into view, she’d been running on fumes. The sickness from being bitten had stolen her energy, and though Paul’s blood was helping, it wasn’t doing it fast enough.

Alexa stretched slowly, relishing the feel. She took the coffee Edward handed her and the smoke that David tossed, spending a few minutes bringing herself to alertness without a rush or someone to kill. It was nice. “Watch rotation?”

“One more hour.” Jacob was still at his post on the door. He hadn’t seen the little girl again, but he could feel something out there watching him.

Alexa registered the nerves in her rookie’s answer and raised a brow at Edward.

Edward shrugged. “Been quiet so far, even the soldiers. They’re all still sleeping, except for a rotating patrol.”

Billy frowned. “Yeah. A very cheap patrol. They’re only doing the farmhouse that Merrik chose and the immediate property. The other travelers are clustered around us.”

“Good. And the wagons?”

“In the barn next to it, with the men he didn’t want in the house with him.” David looked away. “Both women are in there this time. We heard a fight over their order.”

Alexa’s face was blank instead of showing the anger that they had expected. “Anything else I should know?”

“The two kids with the old woman are sneaking around again. Almost been shot twice.” Jacob didn’t say one of those moments had been him when he’d first noticed them. They were similar in height and weight to the corpse girl; he’d nearly pulled his gun again without having a reason to. *I’ll get better at it.* *I’ll learn more control.*

Alexa settled onto her pallet with a bowl of the soup Billy had made. Thick, it held more than his share of the goods. Alexa gave him a look that said not to do it again.

Billy wasn’t one to encourage her praise the way the other five were, but he did tend to mother her more than she was sometimes comfortable with. In this case, the healthy meal would help her recover faster and he wasn’t sorry.

“He’s not back?”

No one spoke.

Alexa felt the calm slip from her shoulders. “I’ll be out for a bit.” She stood up, putting the steaming food aside. “Stay here.”

No one followed like Mark would have. It made them worry about him even more.

Jacob saw her hit the stalks for the moment of privacy, but upon emerging, she proceeded to a different building. The Preacher started to tell the others.

Alexa gave a curt hand signal. *No!* She didn’t want company right now.

Jacob stayed quiet, frowning.

Alexa strolled by the tent with the slavers and then the gunfighters on the porch of the next lot. She walked around the farmhouse, where a patrol of soldiers only gaped or grimaced. They’d been warned to avoid her. *Good*.

Alexa went to the old woman and two kids who had chosen a shed right behind the barn. She dropped a pouch of supplies outside the door and resumed her rounds.

The small family she’d sent Billy to help was next. Alexa received smiles and greetings from them. She found out their horse had been lost in the fight with the wolves. She might have offered to help with that under other circumstances, she didn’t this time. She didn’t like their abusive nature any more than her men did. Now they would either buy a new mount from one of the other travelers or carry their possessions themselves.

When the next couple asked her inside the quaint farmhouse for a meal, Alexa declined reluctantly, sure it would be wonderful food despite the limited conditions. The family was indeed heading for what they’d heard was a more civilized area; they’d been out here long enough to know how to pull solid meals from the land.

Alexa finished her rounds, marking where everyone was. By the time she made it back around, the gunfighters were snoozing. She strolled to the small cell wagon, staying out of sight of the porch, but not caring about anyone else who might witness.

The man inside the wooden cell was thin, but his skin was clean, his teeth were all there, and the bruises on his wrists were fresh. It didn’t appear as though he’d lived a life of crime, but rather, had been caught in a moment of such.

“Who are they taking you to?”

The man stared at Alexa for a long moment where she spotted the sly insanity glaring back at her.

“Roscoe.”

Alexa was tired of hearing that name. It made her tone sharp. “For what? Speak up.”

The man eased away from her reach before answering. “Rape.”

“Are you guilty?”

“No! Roscoe wants me because I’m the best tracker in the country. He accused me when I refused the job, so I ran.”

Alexa didn’t respond. The gunfighters were coming from their places to check on their prisoner. She vanished into the corn as they came into view.

Still observing from the barn door, Jacob blew out a sigh of relief.

Edward stirred behind him. “Something wrong?”

“Nope.” Jacob grinned. “Boss has it covered and then some.”

# BK 2 Chapter Six

**Haunted**

**1**

**“M**errik and his merry men are coming.” Daniel watched from his post by the open door. He was becoming weary of other people, though they’d only recently made contact.

Everyone waited as the door opened.

Merrik paused in the doorframe. “Comin’ in.”

“Nice and easy.”

Alexa’s voice was a surprise to the Captain and his men, but to their credit, no one fired. They had hoped she’d gone on ahead.

Edward spotted the small tattoo on Merrik’s arm, a purple triangle with old symbols, and wondered if he was the son of someone important. Edward couldn’t think of any other reason that Alexa hadn’t killed the man yet.

Alexa stood up, but kept eating. It was too good to waste. David had shoved the second bowl into her hands as soon as she’d returned. “Light us up.”

Edward quickly stoked the fire so the two groups could stare at each other. Alexa’s men were spread out, guns in hand. Merrik’s men were clustered in the doorway, making perfect targets.

“Can we help you?”

Merrik took a step into the room, trying to act like he hadn’t been caught off guard by her being here and using a civil tone. “Thought you’d be long gone.”

Alexa’s tone was cold. “Not until I get what I came for.”

“And what is that?”

“You, of course. The rebellion still whispers of you in loathing for your crimes at the refugee sites.” Alexa recognized the guilt in Merrik’s silence and on his face. She pushed harder. “I see you recall that day. The price on your head is entry to Port City.”

Merrik’s men muttered over the reward. Port City was a small haven on the east coast where almost normal life continued. Getting in as a resident was nearly impossible. Their silence spoke volumes.

“Do you hear that? It’s the sound of your men wondering if they can find a way to collect that bounty.”

Merrik snorted uneasily. “My men are loyal. We were just clearing these buildings. We didn’t come for you.”

Alexa didn’t put her gun away. “I can’t say the same, but *this* den is obviously taken.”

Merrik continued to backtrack. “I get that.”

“Then get gone.”

Merrik glared at Paul as he exited. “Your payment will come for Zale. The government will hunt you.”

Paul surprised them all by responding harshly. “They already have been, you bunker baby! Get a clue.”

“First impressions aren’t always right.” Jacob stared as Merrik stopped to argue. “Upon first sight, I thought you were a man to beware of, but you’re really just a yapper humping our ankles, aren’t you?”

Merrik flushed, face flashing violence.

Jacob grinned coldly. “Oh, yeah. Do it.”

Merrik abruptly left, taking his men with him.

David didn’t relax. “They’re not done.”

“Nope.” Alexa stood by the fire. “And when the rains come, he’ll miss the men we’re going to kill.”

Paul asked the question that none of the other men needed to. They already knew the answer. “When will Mark get here?”

“When he completes his chore.”

“What is he doing?”

“Giving us the advantage.” Alexa faced Paul, handing out his punishment. “Most of this is your fault, Paul. When we reach Lincoln, you’ll stay there. I’ve made my choice.”

Paul wanted to argue, but she cut him off. “No. You’re clumsy, prone to anger, and you don’t pull your weight. All of that, I could have overlooked and retrained out of you, but when you shot someone in the back over an insult, you chose your own fate. We have no room for you.”

“This is a mistake.” Paul’s skin faded to red on pale again. “You need me.”

“No, Rabbit, I don’t. We’ll never make it to Safe Haven while pulling your stink.” Alexa was pissed that he had shot Zale at all, let alone in the back. There was no honor in killing over meaningless words.

The men silently agreed, relieved that it was settled. Paul would remain in Lincoln while they continued their quest. With Alexa’s choice to be shed of the weight, the feeling of family, of it being time for another story, fell over the room. Alexa complied to keep them from worrying over Mark.

“I had to be retrained after my years in the lab. The truth was hard for me to accept. I resented my father for leaving me there. If he was so important, so powerful, why couldn’t I be with him? There were few answers that I accepted during those first months.” Alexa settled into the stone chair, rough fingers tracing the sharp edges of chiseled arm grooves. “We were told the government was the protector, the good guys. We were shown films of our kind, films where we killed innocent people. It was why we had to be locked up. We weren’t safe to be around anyone except soldiers and even then, things could go wrong.”

“Like what?” Daniel sensed Paul already had that answer playing in his mind in vivid detail.

“Everyone wanted to be marked as an Alpha. It meant more privileges and more care, but more importantly, it meant trips to other labs and places. It meant getting out, being free for a while. We craved that above all else. When a real Alpha exerted their power over the others, fights happened. Betas were sure if they could kill an Alpha, they would get a jump and become top dog themselves. It was ugly.”

Jacob didn’t hide his anger. “Surely you mean older teenagers? Not kids?”

“Children of *any* age have short tempers and little control over themselves.” Alexa’s voice was as hard as the stone she was sitting on. “Give those kids power and that tantrum becomes flames or the shouting match ends in a storm. I’ve witnessed both.”

Jacob was intrigued. “Can you do those things?”

“That and more. You can understand how it set me apart from the others, even as it bonded them to me.”

Paul spoke up before one of the others could ask another question. “They had no choice. We have to obey the Alpha. There’s actual pain if we don’t.”

Daniel frowned. “What if the Alpha is bad?”

Paul shrugged. “I’ve never known it to make a difference. Only a stronger Alpha can take over.”

Daniel denied Paul’s mutter. “No one’s stronger than Alexa. She’ll always be the lead.”

Alexa didn’t correct him. If they never found her father, it would be true. She was Adrian’s only daughter and her gifts were beyond what most descendants had. She was unique.

As if to prove that point, Alexa ran a rough hand over Paul’s face and healed his injuries.

There were gasps and confusion, mostly because her men didn’t understand why she would waste her energy on Paul.

Alexa shrugged, settling back with a groan as her spine popped. “I got tired of looking at his face. It was creeping me out.”

Men snickered as Paul flushed.

“Someone’s coming.”

Billy’s warning got his fellow fighters into their defensive positions.

Footfalls came through the dimness, careless and noisy. A knob creaking, a push open, and then shadows filled the doorway.

“Hold your fire, mistress.”

The old woman’s voice was followed by two young mutters.

“Cold, Grammie!”

“Hungry.”

Alexa sighed. “Enter.”

The old woman leaned on the boy as she made her way to the far corner of the wide room. As she sat down on a stone bench, she motioned toward the hearth. A bit wide, but not excessively so, wild white hair piled atop her head and spilled over her face, concealing most of it.

“No lights, no noise. And keep them quiet or I will.”

The old woman gathered the kids and tried to feed them from her pockets. After a minute of watching her pull crumbs and moldy cookies from deep pockets, Alexa rolled her eyes. “Daniel.”

Daniel handed the old woman a pouch with a two day meal kit. The kids rifled through it furiously for anything they could eat cold.

The kids ruined some of it; the old woman ignored them as the fighters expressed their disapproval.

“Why are you out here with these kids?” Jacob tossed his last two biscuits toward the filthy urchins. “You can’t take care of them.”

Grammie shifted on the bench. “Their mother took off. Been gone for years. Got a letter last month saying she was in Lincoln and wanted ‘em.”

David frowned. *A dependable mother would have come for them herself once she had a new life built.*

Alexa raised a brow.

The Blacksmith shook his head. “Nothing wrong, just being judgmental.”

“Would you care to share your opinion with the rest of us?”

David didn’t pull any punches. “They’ll all be dead long before Lincoln.”

“Agreed.”

The old woman didn’t respond to either of them. It appeared that she’d already fallen asleep.

The kids crawled into a corner with the food and wolfed it down before falling into a pile of bruised limbs and huge yawns. Their snores soon filled the room. The old woman never budged.

**2**

Merrik and ten of his men gathered on the far side of the outpost, plotting. When they thought they were ready, Merrik led them back to Alexa’s building.

“Around the rear.” Merrik pointed at his men. “You, cover the window. You two, front door!”

Three soldiers dashed around the back as two others kicked the wooden front door open.

“Behind you!”

They spun to find Alexa in the corn behind them. A few men darted for cover. One panicked soldier raised his gun.

Lined up on each side of her, Alexa’s men didn’t hesitate.

Merrik ducked the well-aimed bullets flying through his team of soldiers, darting toward safety with the sound of Alexa’s Colts thundering in his cowardly ears.

Merrik slammed the door on his warehouse, panting nervously. He’d slipped to the side and made it here, but if Alexa came for him, he had little to stop her with. This station wasn’t stocked at all.

He whirled around as the door opened, but it was three of his own men back from their rotating patrol. He barely stopped himself from firing.

“Boss! They’re all dead!”

“Shit!” Merrik swore. “How many men are still out on patrol?”

“Five.” Corporal Scott’s eyes were still as crossed now as they had been at birth. “But there’s another problem.”

Merrik glowered, not ready for any more bad tidings. “What now?”

“We...uh...can’t find Brian.”

Merrik’s face flushed a dark red. “You lost him last night?! Damn you to hell!”

Merrik wrenched the door open and stomped toward Alexa’s shelter with hatred in his heart and betrayal in his thick mind.

Alexa and her men were still standing outside. She flashed a sickly grimace. “Feels bad, doesn’t it? Being out of control of someone’s life when they’re important.”

Merrik drew up, catching the warning, but he couldn’t stop the shout. “Where is he?!”

Alexa thumbed toward corn that surrounded them so menacingly. “Out there.”

“Why did you take him?!”

Alexa was quickly tiring of the noise. “To control you, of course.” She raised a brow. “Unless you want him dead now. Then I can save us all the trouble.”

Merrik realized that if he killed her, Brian would also die. “What do you want?”

“The same as everyone else here. To get through The Killing Fields to Lincoln and then go my own way.”

Merrik wasn’t able to hide his interest and chose to ask what he wanted to know. According to the legends, her type didn’t use lies. “What’s your business in Lincoln?”

“Roscoe.”

Merrik clearly wasn’t expecting that. He started to warn her off.

Alexa began laying her trap. “I have something that belongs to him.”

Now Merrik was more than interested. He thought quickly, trying to plan it to his advantage.

Alexa wasn’t about to give him time to do that until after they had a deal in place. “Safe passage until we reach Lincoln and Roscoe. Agreed?”

Merrik had little choice since the wagons were going to Roscoe anyway. He gave a curt nod. “Fine. Bring him in.”

Alexa laughed. “Not on my life, Captain. You’ll get him when I reach Lincoln, so you can’t try to steal what I have and give it to Roscoe yourself for the reward.”

Merrik started to argue again.

Alexa flashed that cold, killer’s gaze his way.

He paused. “…what reward are you claiming?”

Alexa laid the final bait. “A Port City pass, same as the bounty on your head. I’d imagine that if you made it to Port City with a pass, they’d have to rescind that bounty and clear your name.”

“You’d give me your pass?”

Alexa nodded this time. “I would, but with something done for me after I hand it to you. You’ll kill someone for me. Then we’ll be even.”

Merrik wasn’t sure if it was a trick or not, but he figured he could always grab her after he got the pass. “Who am I killing?”

“I haven’t met them yet.”

Merrik didn’t care either way. “Fine, but if you chicken out, I’ll go AWOL and hunt you down.”

“As much as I love a challenge, I’m already on a quest. That would interfere. I’ll keep my word. You do the same.”

Merrik left, taking his remaining men along. He left the bodies for Alexa to handle. He needed to spend some time thinking about how she might be tricking him and about how he could do the same to her. He wanted the pass, but he also wanted the government reward for bringing Alexa in. Between the two, the government bounty was far more generous. Brian, he didn’t care for at all. The boy was a means to an end. What Roscoe wanted him for, Merrik didn’t know or care.

**3**

Alexa and her men returned to the storeroom and found two more people there than when they’d slipped through the window to wait for Merrik.

“Very nice.” Alexa sent a wave of pleasure.

Mark glowed at the praise.

Next to him, bound and gagged, Brian glared defensively.

Mark tossed a joke at her, grinning. “Now, my reward, if you please.”

Alexa took him seriously. “What would you have?”

Suddenly nervous, Mark forced the words out. “Don’t sleep with Paul tonight.”

Paul moaned in protest, but Alexa was glad. “Done.” She hated the way he smelled. It would be a relief to be away from it.

Mark smiled, not expecting that; the other men favored him with their grateful looks.

Alexa sat in front of Brian, noting that Mark’s secondary ropes were on him. She removed the gag, but not the binds.

Face-to-face with her again, Brian’s choice became easier, but not the agony involved in reaching it. He wanted to rail at her, to scream and accuse. He also wanted to hug her.

Alexa leaned in and sent a powerful blast of her scent into his face. It would force him to tell the truth and save her the energy of blasting through his mental walls.

Brian recoiled from the super sweet odor, and then betrayed himself by inhaling repeatedly until the cloud had dissipated.

Behind them, her men exchanged glances of pity. They knew what an accidental gust of her scent could do. This was intentional.

“Who runs the government now?”

“No one knows.” Brian’s turned his face against the cool wall of the barn. “We haven’t seen him in a year.”

“You were given paper orders?”

“Always. Only the commanding officers of each unit have access to leadership.”

“How many bunkers are still holding?”

Brian growled at her, at the voices in his head and the feelings rushing through his body.

Alexa placed a comforting hand on his brow and froze.

Brian shuddered, trying to fight the invasion of his mind.

Alexa drew back. “Why are you so green?”

“I just got out!” He kept fighting the lure of her scent as it swirled over him. “I’m in training.”

“Where have you been since the war?”

“Underground until last year. I tried to leave a few times before. They didn’t want that.”

“I assume Merrik doesn’t trust his employers. Is that why he protects wagon trains of supplies for Roscoe?”

“Those aren’t supplies.” Brian snapped his mouth shut. Merrik would kill him for giving out that information. So would Roscoe.

Alexa already knew. “Weapons. Roscoe plans to fight the government.”

“I don’t know who he wants it for.” Brian sulked. “No one does.”

“Why would anyone want you?” Paul hated Brian on sight. The boy had gifts, Paul could feel it, and that meant Alexa knew it, as well.

Brian didn’t want to answer, but when Alexa stood up, he scrambled away, panicking. “I’m an assassin! No one suspects a green kid!”

Alexa jealously relished the moments when her instinct was proven right. This wasn’t what she preferred, but if it would get the job done, in the end, that was what mattered. In this case, her intuition had provided them with a dangerous addition to their already formidable strength.

Brian stared, tone snotty. “Don’t you want to know why they picked me?”

“I recognize my own kind!” Alexa gave back just as rudely.

Outside, rain began to fall.

With her scent swarming, Brian couldn’t keep up the act. His shoulders slumped. “Got a smoke?”

Brian’s filthy fatigues and dirt layered blond hair said he’d spent an uncomfortable night with Mark. Noting the slightly yellowed fingertips, she held out her pouch of tobacco. “Roll two.”

“My bonds?”

“Handle them yourself.” She watched, verifying his identity.

Brian burnt through the ropes again in seconds, not looking away from her.

Alexa’s crew muttered. A couple of them immediately began to suspect who the boy really was.

Brian took the pouch slowly, being careful not to let their skin touch while Mark stomped out the smoldering ropes. It was hard to believe he’d found her. Hearing stories of Alexa and her infamous father were one thing. Being within a foot of her was entirely different. All of his anger, his bitterness, seemed petty.

“You have a right to it.” Alexa settled onto her ass nearby as her men got busy on various projects. “Where will you go?”

Brian didn’t have an answer.

Alexa was forced to offer the only solution there was at the moment. “The base wants you. Roscoe wants you. Hire yourself out to someone who hates both of them. Buy your protection with power.”

Brian was shaking his head, but Alexa didn’t give him time to voice the protests she’d heard so many times. “You have a duty to survive, to remain honest and good. I know the lines we’re required to walk and it hasn’t changed. Find a good group to serve and love. That’s Adrian’s command and I give the same to you.” Alexa leaned in and placed a gentle kiss atop Brian’s head. “But you’ll stay my captive until I’ve gotten my time’s worth. Is that understood?”

Brian nodded.

Alexa gave him a short hug that warmed and healed him. When she rose, the lights of devotion flashed in his violet eyes.

“I’d give you my life! *You’re* the reason I came out.”

She sighed, heart hurting. “If you follow us, you’ll die. I’ve already dreamed of it. You *are* too weak.”

Those words hurt. Everyone turned away from the boy’s open pain. This world was hard.

“We’ve got a new issue.” Jacob pointed from the doorway. “There’s a storm racing in from the west.”

**4**

The buildings weren’t sturdy.

Some of the travelers knew to secure their shelter against what was coming, like Alexa’s group, but most only hunkered down and waited for it to be over. A few even scoffed at the preparing people with thoughts that called them fools to waste such energy on a place they would only remain in for a night.

Paul was among the latter. “I don’t get why she has us doing this.” His hands were covered in mud, stalks, and other debris.

Edward didn’t answer. He and Mark were slopping mud into the cracks and covering it with twigs, being sure to shove it in deep enough to keep it tight. It hurt their necks and ankles to keep their positions as they worked. All Paul had to do was put his hand in the bucket to mix the mud. Even Brian was working, though it was from the inside where Jacob could see him as he stood watch in the doorway.

“Yuck! This stinks.”

Mark let out an annoyed breath at Paul’s whining and pushed the leaves in further.

Only drizzling now, half the sky was pale green and the other was deep gray. It was intimidating; the men worked continuously, prepping for the coming deluge. A nasty whine to the wind suggested a thunderstorm instead of a gentle rainfall.

Alexa directed a piece of scrap metal into place over the hole in the rear corner of the roof, using her hip and knee to bend it down and send the flow away. There wasn’t much precipitation yet, but the way Alexa spared no time moving onto each task had begun to draw attention from the others.

The slavers were the first to follow suit. If they lost their wares, they would be bankrupt and have to start all over. These males were slotted for entertainment in Lincoln, where fresh slaves could be sold for a healthy profit. One of the Powder Protectors stayed inside with the snoozing males as the rest of that group copied Alexa’s preparations.

Two of the families had been doing work already, and the two remaining homesteaders followed suit not long after the wind began to blow debris around.

The soldiers sat or leaned against wooden walls with holes and gaps, mocking the preppers. Merrik was still inside their warehouse. His men spent the time as if it were R & R.

Nearby, the hired gunmen had risen and were grudgingly following the mapmaker’s instructions, Unlike Alexa, he wasn’t getting his hands dirty. The mapmaker was the type to up the pay before breaking a sweat, especially when there was no imminent threat that he could spot. However, he’d heard enough about Alexa to avoid the bad odds of surviving if he ignored her. He wasn’t Merrik.

Apparently, the price was right; the hired hands were moving slowly, but they were moving.

Inside Alexa’s hut, the old woman and kids remained a burden to be carried. Already suffering Paul, Alexa’s men didn’t complain. Their honor said protecting the weak was another plus in the good column when death finally caught up and ended their competition to fill hell.

“This is a settlement that the government tried to put in place not long after the war.” The old woman came to the door slowly. “They didn’t realize it was already claimed.”

“Claimed by whom?” The old woman had kept to herself so far. Jacob was curious about her story and about her lies.

The old woman leaned heavily against the doorframe. “The corn’s Master. Whoever it was, they didn’t like the soldiers being here. All three hundred of their bodies were discovered by a supply team. They’d been slaughtered, but there were no traces of an enemy, only dead soldiers. After that, the reputation grew.”

“I heard about the ghost girls who protect travelers here for a price.” Paul shuddered. “Is that true?”

The old woman grinned, showing rotten teeth and gaps where a curled tongue poked through. “Yes, but you can’t afford the price. You don’t even belong with *her* kind.”

Paul’s mouth opened, hand dripping goop onto Edward’s boots.

Edward elbowed him in the shoulder hard enough to topple him from his overturned bucket stool.

Snickers filled the courtyard as he landed with a hard thump.

Edward turned back to the old woman, wiping his muddy hands. “You were telling us about the price of protection?”

Grammie squinted to view his features more clearly.

Edward held himself in place at his post instead of moving closer to allow her a better view. There was something hinky about the old woman that her story of a wayward daughter didn’t quite explain.

“The price is a life.” The old woman was still staring at Edward. “Would you pay it?”

“No. I can defend myself.”

The woman’s cackle was chilling.

Edward didn’t respond. That sound said he had no idea what he was talking about, and while his ego didn’t care for the feeling, it also made him nervous. What if she was right?

*Ping! Ping!*

Alexa looked up as splatters hit the roof. “Get inside. We’re out of time.”

**5**

The storm was frightening. It rolled in silent as the grave, flashing multicolored lightning in the distance as the only warning. Moans came from the corn as the wind shoved through the stalks in eerie, spirit-dampening groans and howls that left silence as everyone stopped talking to listen.

“Demon rain.” The old woman went to her pile of furs and blankets in the corner.

Alexa wasn’t wary of their guests, but she didn’t like the old lady. “And ghosts. You know how to handle them?”

The old woman shifted into a comfortable position. “I’m not bothered by such things. The children have their own protections. Don’t concern yourself with us.”

Next to the old woman, Brian was already huddled beneath the blanket that Alexa had given him, determined not to come out for anything unless Alexa was in danger.

The storm didn’t remain silent. Deep rumbling rolled through the ground as the storm drew closer, shaking the buildings and sending vibrations of ill tidings into feet and ears. Instinct said this was going to get ugly. Inside each shelter on the outer edges was someone who now wished they’d taken cover with Alexa and her fighters.

The rain fell in thick, noisy drops that pinged off the roofs and sheds like a musical instrument tuned to an evil radio station; the wind howled harder in response. Together, it was enough to muffle all other noise except when the thunder rolled toward them.

Lightning flared brightly through covered windows. Everyone braced for the hit.

*Bamm!*

The strike was near enough to shake the buildings, causing more low mutters of concern. They didn’t like the new weather. For Alexa, it was a comfort. The rain would not only wash away their scent, it would thin the herd again and give them fewer problems to handle tomorrow. If they survived the night, which she had no doubts about in her shelter. The others were not going to be so lucky. She cleared the doorway for any more that might come. Even those who didn’t know of her family and hadn’t heard of Safe Haven were drawn to her light.

As if to prove her thought, the door opened to reveal the traders, who herded their valuable stock inside before coming to Alexa to negotiate.

Alexa directed them to the corner by the old woman, refusing to discuss such things right now. The need came first.

The slavers took the place gratefully, pressing coins into the palms of Alexa’s men. These women knew better than to let a debt stand in this world. It often came back to haunt you.

Lightning flared again. The sound of a nearby building being hit echoed louder than the thunder. The shelter rattled, dirt dusting over all of them, and then the sound of a complete and total deluge came. Thick and hard, the storm covered the station like a plague.

The roofs on every building had gaps that allowed drips and or rushing torrents inside. Even Alexa’s shelter had this problem despite their repairs. She’d only had material and time to cover the largest holes. Rainwater slowly puddled on the floor. The drip became a constant noise that blended in with the howls and splatters hitting the roofs and ground, threatening the sanity of those inside after hours of the same. As soon as the men settled into a dry place, a new leak would spring and quickly soak them. Then the wind blew hard enough to rattle the doors and added a sharp chill. Nature was relentless.

In the misery and tension, it was easy to overlook a problem. Even when the puddles rippled with lines and thickened, no one noticed.

Alexa felt the chill of danger and waved her men away from the door, unsure when the storm would unleash the worst wrath. The stories told of travelers being lulled to sleep before death; she made sure her men were alert. She glanced around at them to confirm that, only to discover danger everywhere.

Shadowy ghosts with gleaming weapons and evil red eyes rose from nearly every puddle.

“Son of a bitch.” Filling with cold fury and concern, Alexa drew her gun.

# BK 2 Chapter Seven

**What Devil Rains Be These?**

**1**

**“D**o as I say!” Alexa saw a shadow demon rise like liquid steam from a puddle near the door. “Close your eyes!”

Her men obeyed quickly, but those who had come here for protection didn’t understand why Alexa wasn’t reacting.

“We do not believe in you! You’re not real.” Alexa repeated it until her men were also chanting it, barely audible over the screams and clashing of weapons as those nearest to the door were attacked by the shadows. She didn’t open her eyes, but she still tried to help them. “They are ghosts! Your belief gives them life! Shut your eyes.”

It sounded as if no one was listening. Alexa grunted unhappily. She couldn’t let them be slaughtered, not in here with her.

Alexa’s guns crashing brought her men into the fight and for a while, there was only the sound of gunfire and screams.

The door opened suddenly, letting in a blur of shapes and sizes.

Merrik recoiled when those Colts flashed his way. “Don’t shoot!”

“Get down and close your eyes!” Mark’s fury returned. They’d almost had it under control!

Merrik and his men were just as confused as the other travelers had been, causing the chaos to restart.

Alexa shoved two soldiers into a corner, smacking their cheeks against the wall. “Close your eyes!”

She ducked under the swing of a shadow fighter and nailed a soldier in his ankle. It dropped him in time to avoid the same warrior’s swipe.

Alexa shoved his face into the corner. “For our lives, stop looking at them!”

Alexa circled the room, grabbing fighters, directing them on what to do and slowly, the sounds of fighting eased. The shadow warriors almost immediately left these people alone to attack those still struggling.

When it was only Alexa and Merrik, she closed her own eyes and didn’t care if he did the same. The bodies of his men were strewn across the compound leading to here.

“Alexa!”

Paul’s shout was terrified.

She snapped around to find one of the shadow men bringing an arm down to kill him. The next instant, Edward rolled into Paul’s place, shoving the scientist into the wall. Paul slumped to the ground, knocked out.

Edward took the slice of the knife through his upper arm.

Alexa fired to draw the warrior to her. She gathered herself as they all rushed her way, sending out her wrath in a powerful spell. “You’re not real!”

The warriors screamed in rage as they burst into a million bits of sand and grit that covered the room and everything in it.

Alexa eyed Paul on the floor and shook her head when Edward would have checked on him. “Leave him alone. He’s being helpful right now.”

Her men laughed, much to the surprise of the others. Even the soldiers were shaken.

Alexa’s group was observed worriedly as they pulled bodies outside, chatting lightly. Death did not faze them unless it was extreme and this hadn’t been anywhere near that.

As if to mock, the rain picked up again and the smiles fell from their faces. In Afterworld, when nighttime fell over this dead land, time became slower somehow. This had only been round one.

It was the longest night that most of them had ever spent. Shadows swam in the puddles, tassels flew through opened doors, both drawing blood and screams. The wind moaned through hollow stalks and wolves pawed at the doors and windows in steady waves. Decay weakened wood couldn’t hold up against Nature’s fury, and the travelers realized it as their hastily chosen shelters collapsed. It wasn’t long before everyone was with Alexa and her fighters, trying to copy her.

It was an odd style of fighting that none of them were familiar with, including Alexa’s men. Shooting rats and wolves while ignoring the shadow warriors was unsettling, but there was no denying that it worked. The instant a fighter pretended the ghosts weren’t there, the shadow demons faded, only to reform in the nearest puddle. Those who couldn’t pretend were cut down where they stood. Their *belief* killed them.

The ghost knights returned each time the rain did, but Alexa had her group under control. They passed the time chanting about reality not being broken. At some moments it was hard to keep going, especially when the family in the next building over began to scream. The five people had gone there during the last break in the storm, despite warnings that it wasn’t over yet, saying they needed privacy. No one had asked or argued, and now the family was too far out of Alexa’s light to be saved.

The sounds didn’t stop for a long time. Everyone knew it was a ploy to trick Alexa into coming out with her men. When she returned, it would be to all of these people being corpses.

The screaming grew louder. It was meant to torture her and it succeeded. By the time the dawn finally lightened their compound, tears had streaked a permanent path down Alexa’s cheeks, but she hadn’t ventured into the trap. *I’m not meant to save them all.*

**2**

Everyone was glad when light finally seeped through the windows.

Merrik and his men had once again taken the greatest hit. The Drafted soldiers had spent the years since the war underground. They hadn’t understood how sheltered they’d been, how betrayed they were, by the very government they now worked for and died for. Half of Merrik’s men were now dead or injured, leaving him with only two dozen to complete this trek. Two of the slave traders had also succumbed, along with one of their precious males and one of the gunfighters, who wouldn’t survive his wounds. They hadn’t checked on the family yet, but there was little doubt they were also dead. They’d lost twenty people in one night. When she’d thought about the herd being thinned, she hadn’t thought it would be this bad.

When Alexa waved her men into sleep and sentry shifts, the other camps followed without any argument, even the soldiers. They were all too relieved to be alive to protest.

Seeing her men had Brian covered, Alexa settled down between Edward and Paul, but she didn’t take blood from one or comfort from the other. She fell into a thick sleep that worried those who knew her best. After a battle, Alexa was usually wound up. She was worsening, and they still weren’t sure what she needed to become healthy again. Over the months they’d traveled together, she’d shown signs of use and wear, but it had sped up since being bitten by the vampire baby.

Edward covered Alexa with his thickest blanket, being sure there were no drips falling on her. The storm had gone, leaving drizzle and puddles of blood that they wouldn’t even try to clean. Once Alexa woke, they would go.

David had first watch, along with two of Merrik’s men. He noticed the fog lifting, but didn’t point it out. A debate about leaving now would wake Alexa.

David scanned the empty, half demolished buildings around them and then the corn. Nothing moved. He scanned the settling travelers. They were exhausted, but David noticed the old woman and two kids were relatively calm. He couldn’t remember seeing or hearing them during the fight. He assumed they’d found a way to hide.

David subtly examined the two females who were with the soldiers. The tall blonde was clearly willing, but the younger girl flinched at loud noises and her haunted gaze darted nervously to the door, as if weighing the risks of running. Under her short dress was a thin body covered in bruises and other evidence of misuse.

David slowly moved away from the door to give her the chance if she wanted to run. As casually as Alexa might have, he dropped his smallest knife into a pile of molded straw, positive that she was watching him.

Across the room, their wagon driver tossed a small pouch toward the old woman. The four drivers hadn’t helped battle the shadow knights, but they hadn’t gotten in the way either. It had angered David then, but they had just helped a stranger, an old woman with young children, so they were probably okay to travel with. That reduced the possible threats to Nature, the fields themselves, two healthy gunfighters, and Merrik. Everyone else was far below Alexa’s group in skills.

David went to the side window to observe from that angle and froze. The corpse girl was standing beneath the filthy glass frame.

David picked out details, like the dirt in her hair and the bloody fingernails. Her torn clothing and vacant expression suggested she’d climbed from a grave…or had recently dug one.

David shivered.

The apparition eyed him adoringly, then sniggered.

Unsettled, David watched her fade away before returning to his post by the main door. Going outside wasn’t a good idea right now. If the younger woman wanted to run, she would have to pick another time. Letting her go out there would be murder. However, he left the knife where it had fallen. Maybe she would kill Merrik the next time he tried to take her and save them all the headache later.

**3**

Fog came in through the afternoon, covering the corn and then the buildings until it was impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. The drizzle wasn’t far behind.

When she woke, bleary and grumpy, Alexa immediately changed the travel plans. The horrors in this fog would be nearly impossible to fight. “I’m not leaving until that clears out. Set up a base site.”

Alexa’s men were relieved that they wouldn’t be going into the fog, but they were also disappointed. If they survived that, they would feel like even bigger badasses than they already were. The constant improving and sharpening was a perk of being with her and they all craved it.

Jacob was on guard now. He leaned against the outside of the door, vaguely aware of people digging graves, of men laughing and telling jokes as they celebrated being alive, and of the corn waving in the breeze. The rain had gone when the fog came, but Jacob didn’t think that would have been better to be out in. This part of The Killing Fields was designed to keep travelers around to face another night of horror. In their case, it had worked. Everyone was dreading nightfall. It didn’t help their nerves to look around their shelter and see pile after pile of leaves and stalks that they’d brought in to cover and soak up the blood. It was a constant reminder that they were still here and it was starting to rain again.

Jacob turned to scan the other side of the small station. The corpse child was standing between the rows, baring her teeth.

“This is getting old.” Jacob closed his eyes. “Not real, kid. Not real.”

When he looked, the child was still there, only now, blood was running from the corner of her mouth. Her hands came up with something bloody. She took a big bite, tearing away flesh and muscle. Jacob was almost sure it was a human arm.

He opened his mouth to call for his relief.

Alexa’s hand on his shoulder was a comfort.

“Someone is curious about you, I think.”

He was relieved to have her at his side for this. “Who?”

“The Master of the house in the corn. It knows that we’re here.”

Jacob signaled his relief over. “I’m off guard duty.”

“Yes. They’re watching you for something. Try to figure out what they want.”

Jacob wondered if it meant he was the weak link. “I won’t slow us up.”

Alexa didn’t answer. If the Master of the house decided to take Jacob, she would go in after him. When she left the corn, all of her men would be with her, including Paul.

Alexa glanced over to find that one sulking in the corner. He’d given up the minute she said he wasn’t going any further than Lincoln. It was a weakness that she simply didn’t have the time or inclination to conquer. If he went further than Lincoln with them, he would die. She didn’t want his blood on her hands. There was far too much of that already there.

**4**

As evening approached, the fog hadn’t left, making the travelers antsy. People muttered and grunted about the cold chill hanging over the station. Soldiers snapped at each other; animals refused to sleep. By sunset, it had only gotten worse. All the groups took shelter before full darkness hit. Most of them stayed close to Alexa.

As night covered the corn, Alexa kept in mind that nerves were often the hardest part of a battle. She settled down near the fire to clean her guns.

When she motioned David to roll a smoke, her men gathered around, noting that she hadn’t set a guard.

The others inside the barn with them observed curiously, but kept their distance. Except for the male slaves. They went to enjoy the fire when their owners said it was okay. The makeup and jewelry on the male slaves wasn’t discussed, but Alexa’s men were more confused by that than by women bulking up to have a male body. They needed the size to survive in the world. The male slaves had no excuse for such wallowing, was the consensus among the fighters. Any of them would die before surrender and it was hard to understand males who were the opposite.

The old woman and her children were already sequestered in the far corner, but the trio was keeping track of things. Whenever things went crazy, the old woman and the kids had been no help, but it didn’t stop Alexa’s men from offering them bowls from their meal. Nor the old woman from accepting the gifts.

Alexa was aware of faint howls coming through the corn, of the battle trying to restart, but she started speaking, causing all other conversations to cease. Without Merrik and his men, who thought they now knew the secret and didn’t need to bunk with Alexa, it was almost a peaceful moment. “The first time I saw my father, I was ten. I had spent a full year being freed of brainwashing before they would even let me near him. Too many of our kind were traitors. It turned out that they were wise to keep us apart. I was angrier than I realized, but that part of my story will come later. For now, hear of our first meeting.”

**Then**

Alexa, ten-years-old with long pigtails, sat on the stone stairs of the old ruins of the tower, watching the tiny town below. She’d spent hours here, staring at the sea, and at the running, laughing islanders. She never wanted to leave.

Footfalls behind her were a reminder of her captors, though she no longer viewed them exactly as such. A year in gentle hands had done well for her.

Alexa stood up, assuming it was time to go in, but the man standing behind her wasn’t a guard.

“Hello, Lexie.”

The sound of his voice rang in her ears, called to her…

Alexa subtly searched for her protection. She spotted her guard studying their surroundings instead of her and understood this man had permission to be here. “Do I know you?”

“You don’t, but you will.” The man smiled at her. “Walk with me?”

Alexa didn’t consider refusing. She knew better than to challenge an Alpha like this one, but she was also curious. She’d only had teachers and shrinks since coming to this island. There hadn’t been a new face in the entire year.

They strode toward the beach, toward the playing children there. Alexa worried, even though her guard was following at a distance. She wasn’t allowed to have contact with the island people. They weren’t even supposed to know she was here, though Alexa thought that ship had already sailed.

The blond man led them straight to the children who were throwing balls through a hoop set in the water. It required a few of them to be in the waves to fetch the ball before the ocean stole it. Alexa observed their fun in longing.

“Do you know how?”

She shook her head, but didn’t speak, busy putting pieces into this newest puzzle. *Maybe I’m entering a new level of retraining.* Her spirits dampened further. She’d been perfectly happy surveying from a distance. She didn’t get along with normal kids.

“Today, you’ll learn how. If you do well and behave.”

“I always do well.” Her tone was a bit annoyed at the challenge. “As for behavior, I’ll make my own choices.”

“Why bother?” The man raised a brow.

The familiarity of the gesture made her stammer. “I… I like it, living here. That’s why I behave.”

Her mind was flying through clues, sorting the end pieces (eyes, hair, height, skin tone) and stacking the centerpieces (expression, stride, reactions) to come up with a possible answer. “You’re family, right? A cousin or something?”

Before he could answer, the children on the beach spotted them.

“Adrian!”

“It’s Adrian!”

“Over here! Come and play!”

Alexa gaped in shocked silence at her father.

Adrian smiled sadly as the children surrounded them, returning their hugs and greetings. “This is my daughter, Alexa. She wants to play with us. Is that okay?”

Before she could refuse, the children had tugged her into line and begun teaching her the basic rules. Alexa took her first swim in the ocean a short time later, with her father at her side.

**Now**

“It was the best day of my life up to that point.” Alexa didn’t look at the raptly listening travelers. “And only a few since have compared.”

Her audience had forgotten about everything except her story. Alexa obliged as the rain began to fall harder in protest.

“We spent the next year together. He took over my retraining and handled it personally. I learned new skills, strategy, new gifts. He was a wonderful teacher.”

Alexa let the power of her voice out as the fresh screams echoed outside, keeping her group together. “I was eleven when he gave me what he said was the root of life and death. For a long time, I simply called it my gun. Now, I understand the difference.”

**Then**

Alexa handed the target to her father, proud. When she’d first come here, she hadn’t known how to clean a gun or reload it, only how to shoot. At that, she’d already been good. Now, she handled a gun with ease and respect.

Adrian held out a small box. “When you master this, you get something more powerful. More useful.”

Alexa opened the box and giggled at the gift. “It’s a Derringer, right?”

“Yes. There’s also a shoulder holster. You’re to have it on wherever you go. Wear it at night and you’ll get more sleep.”

Alexa’s startled gaze flew to his.

Adrian ran a loving hand over his daughter’s brow. “I see the bags you try to cover with makeup. I know what it’s like to lie awake at night.”

Alexa slowly put on the holster and demonstrated that sharp Mitchell intelligence. “When are they coming?”

Now Adrian was the one a bit startled.

When he only stared, Alexa gave him his own words back. “The worry in your touch. And I recognize the tones. They’re coming for us.”

“Yes. Our time is limited.”

“I want to stay with you!”

Adrian hugged her tightly. “Find me when you’re of age. We’ll lead together.”

Alexa knew she had to be content with that and conquered the tears. She would hold onto the time they had left.

Six months later, the island was raided and Alexa was snuck away as the native residents were captured and killed or tortured for information they didn’t have. She watched her only happy home go up in flames as she sailed away, disguised as a crying old woman.

**Now**

“It was years before I was with him again.” Alexa stood, glad the rain had let up, but it wasn’t done yet. “I’m finished for now. Perhaps someone else would like to tell a story?”

Her men were disappointed, but they understood she wanted out of the spotlight. Her tale of the past was enlightening to her fighters.

“I know one…”

It was the slave owner that all of them were already mentally calling Braids.

Alexa nodded agreement. “I’d hear.”

The woman smiled at the attention. “Right after the war, I was with a group of survivors who had formed a convoy store to trade as we traveled west. We’d heard there was safety there. We were in Oklahoma when we topped a hill and found a sea of tents inside fenced walls. It was your Safe Haven, only a woman was the boss. We traded and then kept going when we found out the soldiers were coming for them. We listened to our radios and heard the updates, some of the battles. It was an awful time.”

Alexa sympathized. “For everyone. Go on if you have more.”

“I was ill after that. I don’t know what happened to my group or Safe Haven. I was in a deep sleep for a long time. I woke up with a tribe of Snake women who didn’t have radios. I stayed with them until I earned enough cash to buy my first slave. Been with this lot since, but I never forgot that fenced camp. The people there were special.”

She looked over at Daniel. “I’m Carol. I used to work security at a hockey rink. You ever skate?”

“Only on thin ice.”

Carol didn’t laugh at his joke. “That’s all life is now. Black ice and bottomless sinkholes.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” He noticed her braids had been freshly cared for. She looked good. He smiled back.

Alexa interrupted the moment. Romance was fine, but they needed a stronger distraction to keep away the ghosts. “Anyone else?”

The night passed with stories of Adrian and Safe Haven. It held the horrors away. The rest of the travelers who had returned to the buildings around them were not as fortunate. Their screams echoed like bait. Alexa felt every nasty jerk of the fishing line, but she resisted. If she went running out there, she would get her men killed.

A short time later, the patrol she’d advised against returned to the safety of her group, bloody and terrorized. Alexa was sorry to see Merrik among them, but she didn’t turn him away. That wasn’t how she handled problems like him. She had already seen his death, and warned him about it. There was nothing more she needed to do.

As soon as the dawn rain became drizzle and the wind faded, Alexa collapsed on her bedroll, asleep almost instantly.

Her men exchanged looks that said she wouldn’t be disturbed this time.

**9**

“Don’t do that.”

Merrik’s man stopped at the ugly tone. Upon seeing the corpse girl in the corn, he’d frozen for a second, then drawn his gun. He’d been about to open the door and go out.

Mark was ready to handle the man if he had to. Alexa had only been resting for a few hours and the noise was sure to wake her.

“You’re not the boss.”

“I am until she gets up.” Mark flashed an ugly glower. “Don’t push me. I don’t like you.”

Private Peters, who had threatened to starve himself when they’d been ordered to leave the shelter of base and then hadn’t been strong enough to follow through, caved immediately. He was used to following orders.

Mark turned back to the corn to find the corpse girl now standing at his side in the doorway of the barn. This time, *he* drew his gun.

Richards reacted accordingly. The deep echo of a gunshot in tight quarters woke Alexa and everyone else.

Mark knocked the gun from the man’s hand, grimacing as the force of Alexa’s disapproval smacked him from behind.

Instead of delaying, Mark turned around to look at her. He replayed the entire scene in his mind for her, hoping it would ease her ire. He wasn’t worried over whatever punishment she would give, only her disappointment.

Alexa sighed as soldiers panicked and Merrik shouted for someone to cover the goddamn door. “It’s clearly time to go.”

Mark viciously shoved the Private out of his way.

Richards banged into the barn door and slid to the ground, knocked out.

Alexa motioned Daniel to cook and for Edward to watch after Paul and Brian. “Keep them alive.”

Edward resented the tone–he hadn’t screwed up–but he understood she needed to be an asshole to get everyone to follow her. Merrik would argue with every sentence that came out of her mouth if he thought he could get away with it.

Alexa took a spot outside the door, glaring. Everyone gave her clear berth as they got ready to leave. Jacob and David packed their things. Billy delivered a bowl to Alexa where she stood, then retreated. No words were exchanged. They knew to do their chores and get ready, but they also knew she wasn’t nearly as upset as the other travelers thought she was. Alexa understood they were rookies.

Twenty minutes after waking, Alexa’s group was ready to go. The others, not so much. Unless she wanted to take over each camp, she had no choice but to wait for them to get ready.

An hour into the morning, the wagon train still hadn’t left and Alexa went back into the storeroom. Her fighters followed. They’d already caused this particular punishment during their own training and knew what to expect.

“Where’s she going?” Merrik hated not being the only boss. “We’re set to go.”

Alexa settled into her spot and unloaded her gear. When she leaned back, preparing to sleep, the mutters increased. A few of the travelers gathered around her, waiting for an explanation.

When she was satisfied with the number of people waiting, her unflinching gaze swept the entire group as she spoke. “I’ll leave right after dawn. If you expect our protection, be ready before the sun hits the sky. I will leave you behind and so will they. Don’t doubt it.”

A few of them protested lightly, but Alexa wasn’t having any of it. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Her crew got set to spend a day catching up on things like sewing and washing and scavenging for small, needed items.

The other travelers reluctantly also got set to stay. Except for the soldiers. Merrik ordered them and the wagons to roll out. Alexa’s men shared smirks as the wagon drivers refused to make the run with so few people for protection. Merrik tried to insist, but was told to drive them himself if he wanted to go that badly.

Unable to make them leave, Merrik chose a far building at first, but when the black-eyed, filthy Private reminded him of the previous evening, Merrik sullenly agreed on the building next to Alexa.

When Alexa fell into another deep sleep, her men assumed she would need her strength later. So far, that had been the pattern, though this time she did seem to be recovering much slower. By now, she was usually bright and chipper.

*She hasn’t fed in a while*, was a common thought among the six of them. Paul, who wasn’t very observant unless it concerned his own needs, hadn’t noticed yet. When he did, they all expected him to make a fuss. They also weren’t looking forward to the actual leaving of Paul even though they wanted him gone. They expected him to cry and argue until Alexa was forced to be cruel.

Outside, noises of men working and muttering stayed at a muted level. The occasional animal call echoed softly as a light breeze dripping with that delicious scent roamed the station. It was a quiet, peaceful transition to evening.

Mark didn’t like it. The noise earlier should have at least drawn the wolves to them. They should be under attack again.

Mark swept the town and the snoozing, working people. They’d been at that first station for a long time. They’d gotten used to following and doing what they were told. He didn’t expect to have trouble with any of them except for the soldiers and the two remaining gunfighters. Their injured man had died. That trio was busy digging the grave. Even the mapmaker was taking part, suit rumpled, face sorrowful. The two gunfighters exhibited signs of stress and grieving, but the mapmaker’s cold glares toward the thief had gotten stronger.

Mark didn’t think the mapmaker looked like what his profession was. Instead of suspenders and glasses, the man wore a gunfighter’s long coat and two machetes. He was also toting a handgun on his hip and a rifle on his back.

Mark slowly became aware of an icy chill running almost casually up his arm. He looked down with dread.

The corpse girl from the corn was at his side. Her hand, ghostly and faded with disease, was wrapped around his.

Mark tried to think, but it was almost impossible with her red orbs glowering at him in adoring hatred.

“If you wander off, you’re mine.”

Mark flinched as the girl bared her fangs at him. Blood and drool rolled down the corner of her chin in a long line.

Mark felt the adrenaline kick in.

David was right behind them. “Don’t react.”

That helped Mark regain control. “You see her?”

David swallowed, partly from nervous tension, partly from revulsion. “In a way that you can’t, I think. She’s walking. *Dead*.”

Mark watched as the child caressed his tattooed knuckles lovingly. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Any ideas?”

David motioned Billy over, but the rookie couldn’t pick anything out even when they pointed to the shadow and dripping blood. Billy saw none of it.

During all this the girl stayed, giggling softly. It was clear that she liked to torment her prey.

Mark felt the wind shift and shivered at the cold wave swarming him.

The little girl looked up at them with disappointment. “I have to go now. Master’s tired.”

The girl flashed her fangs one last time and slowly faded from view.

For a moment neither man spoke, just let their thoughts go where they wanted to. It was a long few seconds where they both resolved not to say anything. Alexa knew evil was following this wagon train.

David met Mark’s wide gaze with a face that was devoid of all expression. “Interesting world we live in.”

“Yes. On levels these people can’t begin to understand.”

David took a place on the other side of the door; the two men returned to watching without another word on what had happened. Mentally, it was often hard to be with Alexa. Her men handled things as best they could, but their minds didn’t stop dwelling on the child until they were relieved and able to join their mistress in slumber.

**10**

Come dawn, the other groups were ready to go. There hadn’t been another night of rain and therefore, no attack. The unbroken sleep had been good for all of them.

Alexa waved two of her men into place on either side of the convoy, where the men spaced themselves out to create a front line. Edward and Billy took Paul to the rear. They tensed when Merrik sent soldiers to walk near them, but the men didn’t look as if they would follow an attack order, so the fighters let it slide.

Alexa’s men defiantly swept the corn and the variety of shadows that mocked them. They were used to walking with their mistress, but this was a spread out formation that none of them cared for. The sooner out of these slaughter conditions, the better.

Alexa marched at a brisk pace as the travelers trailed her sullenly. Few of them were used to being up so early, let alone already being on the road. The bleary behavior and stiff bodies caused too much noise, but Alexa didn’t offer reprimands that would be ignored. These people only learned the hard way. That was the response of most people since the war. It was amazing that any of them had survived the apocalypse.

As the morning faded into early afternoon and Alexa didn’t stop for lunch, there was a bit of grumbling but no one openly complained. Between the tempting smell and the shadows following them, darting out of view when spotted, it wasn’t a path that any of them wanted to linger on.

Alexa increased their pace a short time later, sweat dripping down her sides in a familiar, almost comforting pattern. She didn’t care for the damp air or the blue of the sky, but it was the peaceful sense of sleepy contentment stealing over them that caused true concern. Nothing was this calm in Afterworld.

The corn lining each side of the dusty, weed dotted dirt path began to look better as they traveled. The black mold faded and the yellow of the ears became visible again. The dirt at the base of the corn also changed from black and brittle to warm and inviting. The travelers noticed, sending fresh mutters around the convoy.

“It’s better here.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Can we eat that if we boil it?”

“Maybe the wolves don’t come in this area.”

Alexa kept marching and so did her men. When Edward and Paul caught up to the slowing rear of the train, they stepped around it and continued after Alexa. She hadn’t given an order to stop or reduce speed, so they didn’t. In a matter of minutes, most of the wagon train was out of their protection.

No longer as concerned since the area didn’t appear as dangerous, the travelers didn’t worry about catching up.

Alexa stopped when the screams began, but she didn’t send her men back. She waited, hands resting lightly on the butts of her deadly guns.

The chaos died down quickly; the travelers caught up with one fatality and one serious wolf injury. The soldiers weren’t doing well.

Instead of listening to their complaints about the lack of protection, Alexa taught them a lesson. “Stay with us or fend for yourself. We don’t break ranks for people who don’t obey my rules.”

She started walking again and this time, the travelers stayed much closer. Despite the feel, this wasn’t a good area and she’d reminded them of that by doing nothing.

The soldiers hated her for it. The brief wolf attack gave hope to some of the train, though. If that little hit was all Nature had left, then humans were finally making a dent in the predators. In time, these might not be killing fields anymore.

The group settled back into walking and searching the corn, but the previous laughter and conversation was missing. The mood said not to get distracted by emotions when death could be only a row away.

Alexa approved. It was the attitude that she had rolled through life with, and then carried into an apocalypse. Without it, she wouldn’t have survived and neither would these travelers. Life held no sympathy for the weak.

# BK 2 Chapter Eight

**Undead Egos**

**1**

**T**he hut was pristine. That made it something to be leery of. Alexa passed it with only a short glance. She sensed the trouble inside.

The convoy had been walking since dawn. It was now approaching evening and nearly everyone was moaning and muttering, whining for Alexa to call it a night. As the shadows lengthened and bladders stretched, the complaints grew louder.

Alexa’s men kept pace easily, waiting for their mistress to deliver the news. Whenever she kept going after dark, she continued until dawn and then camped for a full day. They’d spent weeks’ worth of hours on the road with Alexa before they started traveling at night. It had begun right after she’d overheard the rookie say they never explored after nightfall. Jacob had been listing it as a pro, but Alexa had viewed it as a con and informed them their lessons were being expanded.

“Hey!” Merrik’s shout drew attention, but no one stopped. “Yo, warrior woman!”

The second taunt was met by Edward moving toward him from the rear.

“Leave him be.” Alexa had turned, sure of how her men would react.

Edward pulled the punch, bumping violently into Merrik instead as he stormed around and went back to his post.

Merrik wisely didn’t follow. He strode to Alexa instead. “Where we stopping at, *Lady?”*

It was an insult disguised as respect. Edward growled from his place on the line.

Paul, who already hated Merrik, snickered. “I can give him a headache.”

Edward’s head snapped down as if jerked by a string. His eyes narrowed into approving slits against the glare of carelessly held flashlights. “Do it.”

Paul concentrated on Merrik. “Corbin didn’t know I could do things, too. I’ve hidden it all my life.”

Edward saw Merrik rub his temples and felt a reluctant respect for Paul. “What else can you do?”

Paul shrugged, trying not to trip now that it had gotten darker. “I don’t know you well enough to answer that.”

“And you won’t!” Edward shot back. “You heard her. No amount of headaches or pencil pushing will change it.”

Edward motioned Paul to go in front of him, refusing when Paul would have protested. “Save it for your fit at the end.”

Paul, face red, flipped Edward the finger, but did as he was told.

In the front of the train Merrik was raising hell and being ignored, but as the hut came into view, everyone listened to his angry words.

“We’ve been on the road for twelve hours. We need a break!”

Alexa didn’t answer.

Merrik stepped in front of her, forcing her to halt. “That hut is fine. We’re stopping.”

Alexa sighed, stepping around him. “Only death waits in there.”

Merrik reached out for her arm.

Alexa spun around and dropped low, kicking the Captain’s legs out from under him.

Merrik smacked into the ground with the side of his face, drawing blood.

Paul snickered quietly. “She gave him a nosebleed.”

Merrik jumped to his feet and scampered after her.

Mark stepped in his way, slamming their chests together.

Merrik fell backward and smacked his head on the ground this time.

“You heard her, same as everyone else! Keep going or be left here alone.”

Most of the wagon train stayed inside Alexa’s perimeter. The soldiers, however, had no choice but to follow the leader who climbed to his feet with more ego than brains.

“Clear that hut!” Merrik waved three of his men forward. “We’re making camp right here!”

The men muttered, but didn’t protest. Merrik was ready to shoot someone.

The hut was small, with a bamboo roof that should have blown away in the weather years ago. Small iron rails led to the doorway that was covered in a fine layer of yellow cloth that shimmered in the wind.

The trio of soldiers stepped into the hut reluctantly, one holding the curtain back for the others to pass. They advanced together, lights on their guns illuminating the small, round building. Piles of graying bones near their boots were the only thing to see. The rest of the room was bare and dusty, without a single stick of furniture. Only old remnants of the dead remained.

“Over here.” The taller soldier had spotted a doorway.

The men went into the rear area, finding only a broom and mop next to a rusted bucket. They returned to the round room, relaxing.

“Tell the Captain we’re clear.”

Before the Private could do as he’d been told, the third man pointed. “What’s that?”

The men turned to find a yellowish light behind them, glowing from the same closet area they’d just cleared.

“Did we miss that?”

“No way.” The tallest soldier nervously brought his gun back up.

The three men moved toward the light, staring in fascination at the orb. Hovering in the center of the room, it spun slowly, rainbow color fading and brightening each time it dipped and rose.

“What is it?”

The tall soldier had lowered his gun. “*Beautiful*...”

The orb lit up brilliantly, blinding them.

As arms rose to shield eyes, a long, clawed hand shot from the orb. It raked clothes and skin from bones, spraying blood and screams.

Gunfire lit the room this time, hitting the walls, the orb, and the other soldiers.

That long claw raked out again and took the last soldier’s head from his tall body. It thumped to the floor, face frozen in agony.

A soft mewling echoed and then there was silent darkness again.

Merrik waved two more soldiers forward.

Both men shook their heads.

“Do it yourself, *sir*.”

Merrik drew his gun. “Do it!”

“No, sir.”

“You will.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll kill you.”

The men exchanged quick glances, choosing their fates. They took off running.

Merrik shot both of them in the back while his remaining men stared in disbelieving shock.

“I want that hut cleared!”

This time when he motioned men forward, they went.

The screams and gunfire had halted many of the travelers in the convoy, but not Alexa and her men. When she kept walking, the other travelers nervously caught up. When Merrik and his few men joined the rear, Alexa didn’t say anything and neither did anyone else. It was a hard lesson, but they’d all learned it. Merrik was going to get them killed.

**2**

The fog found the group again a few hours before dawn and surrounded them. It was an ugly feeling. The shadows in the dampness twirled and danced, making them all uncomfortable, but it bothered their animals the most. The mules tugged restlessly against their harnesses, occasionally letting out a soft bellow of concern. The horses whinnied, prancing sideways even under the easiest grips; chickens gurgled in alarm. It all combined to create an atmosphere of near panic.

Alexa didn’t stop, though she was aware of the unrest. The first days of control had to set rules and limits. If she calmed them and explained her ways every time they got scared, she would always have to do it, but there was never enough time for that when things exploded. They had to follow her without question or take their chances on their own. She’d given her men some basic knowledge, however. They’d earned it.

Edward traded places with Daniel, eager to use his calming skills on the livestock. Alexa had told them there would be a short time of safety. Edward was assuming this was it by the way she wasn’t tightening their guard or checking her weapons. The rest of the group didn’t know anything except that they were terrified. It made for a long transition to dawn.

Alexa’s fighters didn’t like the limited view, but they always felt that way during moments like these. Other than that, they didn’t have complaints. They were well fed and well rested. It was all they needed, unlike the rest of the convoy that still twitched at the wind even though many of them had been here for a long time. If they hadn’t adjusted in those weeks or months, it meant something had kept that from happening.

Jacob drew leather as a cold chill came over him. He spun around to see a large shadow swooping down.

“Grab it!”

Jacob stared in surprise as one of the family’s hogs was lifted into the air and taken away by a creature with an eight-foot wingspan and irises as bright as the sun. He grunted tiredly, rubbing at his face scars. “What is this place?!”

“Hell.” The family slave walking nearby kept his head down. “Endless roads of eternal hell.”

Jacob holstered, resuming his place in line as he scanned the sky for the big flyer. “Yeah, I get that feeling, too.”

**3**

As the sky finally lightened, Alexa increased their pace. She wanted to be camped, fed, and sleeping. She steered them around a narrow curve in the corn and raised her hand. Behind her, the wagons slowed and stopped. Each driver waited for the call to stay or go on.

Alexa’s tilted head worried Edward. She was trying to figure something out. Anything she didn’t know was trouble for everyone. He switched with David and joined her.

Alexa felt Edward come up beside her, but she didn’t react. A light vibration on the wind suggested problems were coming. She was trying to determine what type.

Alexa’s fingers tapping the side of her holsters snagged Edward. She didn’t stop the restless tell and he recognized the feeling. He spun a hand in the air to alert the other men and then began checking his gear. It was time to survive.

“This way.” Alexa led them into the corn, hoping for cover.

The convoy was quickly surrounded by the tall stalks. She directed them into a quick trot as the others noticed the vibration that quickly became a flutter of panicked hunger.

“What the hell is that?!”

“Look out!”

The butterflies were large, with glowing wings shaped like puzzle pieces. Their black eyes glared insanely at the sight of the travelers.

The animals in the convoy sensed the coming chaos and saved time by acting up right then. A lead horse bucked violently, a mule pulled the reins from an unsuspecting hand, and three chickens ran into the side of their cages, popping open all the doors on the entire rickety coop. All hell had already broken loose before the butterfly swarm hit the travelers full blast from the left side and smothered them under darkness. The sky vanished under black and white wings and tiny, razor sharp teeth. Screams filled the air.

“This way!” Alexa slapped at the worst of the insects around her face.

One of the soldiers rushed by her in panic, blindly stumbling through the corn. His face was covered in blood.

The butterflies were vicious. Blood came in trickles and rivulets as the larger insects swarmed together around the throats of animals that couldn’t swat them away.

“Help!”

The rear wagon had stopped as the mule pulling it fell. Two of Alexa’s men grabbed the driver on their way by and rushed after the group, dragging the older man between them. No one cared about the wagon.

The butterflies, hungry and angry, were effective. They evaded swats and swipes and dove in to take a drink of blood or slice open a source with knife-like wings. Impossible to avoid, the flying menace would take a toll if Alexa didn’t do something.

Everyone expected to hear her guns, but bullets were useless against so small a foe. Alexa led them through the deepest part of the corn, following her instincts. “A little further!”

“We’re almost there!”

“Keep coming!”

The travelers tried to keep up with Alexa, forcing panicking animals to obey, but it wasn’t enough to keep them together. Three soldiers were cut off by a fleeing wagon and flailed blindly into the corn as they were swarmed. Daniel veered off after them and grabbed their arms, shoving them back in line. “Run!”

Loud screams broke out in front of them. One of the slaves had fallen from their cart when the horse reared up. Jacob was there to scoop the cart onto its wheels, saving the others, but the fallen slave fled into the stalks. A large wolf immediately lunged. Snarls and screams said they couldn’t help the man. Jacob kept going.

Alexa stepped aside as she hit the clearing. “Get down!”

She repeated the order to each person that came through behind her, regarding the specks in the distance. “It won’t be long.”

The butterflies, now in the open, attacked with renewed energy. The sky darkened with the enormous swarm swooping down to cover people and animals.

“All here!” Edward tried not to think about the people that they’d lost as he herded Paul. He’d seen another of the gunfighters go down under the huge horse that the man hadn’t been able to control when it reared up.

“Get them under cover!” Alexa ran to the nearest animals. She used the wagon covers to drape over the bleeding, moaning mules, then moved on to the horse beside them.

Edward understood what she wanted and waved the others into caring for the livestock first, and the screaming, bloody people second. In the chaos, several travelers were overwhelmed and fell. The insects hadn’t had fresh blood in a while and the travelers didn’t help each other.

“Stay down!”

Everyone stared in shock as the sky faded from dark to pitch black.

The cranes, resting during their yearly migration, had spotted the coming swarm of butterflies in delight. Wide creatures with long legs and double rows of mutated wings rose into the dim sky to feast.

The butterflies, unable to leave the scent of so much needed blood, didn’t stand a chance against the flock of cranes. The huge birds swooped in between the shocked travelers and covered animals without hesitation, eating, squawking, and flapping in happy abandon. A buffet like this one was rare in Afterworld. They enjoyed it.

Alexa and her men stood to the far side of the bloody field, waiting for it to be over. They visually assessed damage and injuries, counted survivors, and tried not to be revolted by the gorging fowls’ mutated features. It was only an extra set of wings, but watching them attack the butterflies was a vicious carnage that flipped their stomachs.

Alexa motioned toward the area where the cranes had been resting. “We’ll set up camp there. Find a clear spot, but don’t bother the birds. They probably have chicks.”

None of her men argued, but Merrik sneered at the order. “Tell you what I’m gonna do, *Lady*. Shoot five of them cranes and have the best meal any of us has had in a year.”

“No, you’re not. They saved your life and you will respect that by sparing theirs.”

“I will not! We need food!”

Alexa waved at the birds now gorging themselves from the layers of butterflies on the ground. “The rest of us would rather have a good night’s sleep. You’re outvoted, *Captain*.”

Merrik opened his mouth to argue.

Travis, his best friend, frowned. “Let it go, man. We’ve got jerky and beans. And we’re all tired.”

Travis wore civilian clothes and carried a Glock, giving the impression that he wasn’t regular Army. The quiet way he handled himself was another sign that he was an independent contractor.

Alexa remembered the storeroom they’d burnt. *He’s probably an explosives expert.*

Merrik was smart enough to let his friend lead him off. The way they continued to whisper drew concern from Alexa’s rookie.

“That’s a coming issue.”

“Soon, I hope.” Alexa gave Jacob the ghost of a smile. “His voice makes my brain bleed.”

Her men snickering seemed to be the cue for everyone to settle down. They followed the men to the new campsite and set things up or tended injuries. Those who were missing weren’t searched for, but it didn’t feel out of place. These fields were littered with bones. Now there were a few more.

**4**

Edward took first watch without being told. After their long walk, he wasn’t ready for sleep.

Nearby, the old woman and kids were digging beneath the layers of dead and decaying stalks, pulling up small handfuls of something that they stuffed into grimy pouches. They hunkered along the ground for almost an hour before they finally returned to the wide center fire that Alexa had directed Paul through making. Edward swept the two kids for injuries from the wolf attack, but didn’t view any.

The boy disappeared into the tent behind the old woman, but the girl approached Edward and held out a hand.

Edward looked at the pile of bug corpses with revulsion. “What?”

The child motioned to his injury. She crumbled one of the beetles between her fingers and quickly smeared it over the wound.

Edward jerked away, grossed out.

Alexa looked over at them. “Leave it. The antibiotic properties will prevent infection. It’s what they use here.”

“It heals?” He controlled his stomach at the gory smell.

“Yes.”

Edward forced himself to leave it alone, but he couldn’t stop a light shudder of disgust. He hated bugs.

“How did it happen?” Edward had been worrying over it. “The wolves in our tent, I mean. We never fall asleep on watch.”

Alexa had been studying the same question. “These fields have their own type of magic, I assume. I’ll take part of the night sentry chore until we’re out of here.”

That satisfied him, but the unanswered question didn’t lend comfort to the mood. Neither did listening to the cranes clean the ground of butterfly bodies. The constant crunching and cooing was irritating, but it was worse when Merrik and his men returned from going back for the wagon. They’d attached it to two of their horses and were beating the overwhelmed animals to keep it moving.

Edward rose in anger.

Alexa reluctantly stopped him. “That’s not our problem. Or our target to remove.”

Edward tossed himself back to the ground, not speaking.

Alexa understood. She wanted Merrik’s blood on her hands, too.

**5**

Two hours after the attack, the travelers were all sitting or lying around the fire, their carts, wagons and gear between them and the corn. Alexa had four of her men, and two of Merrik’s, defending the convoy from atop the sturdiest vehicles. As the sky faded to black, weariness settled over the group. It was a perfect time for a new problem to rise.

Alexa spotted a shadow fleeing into the corn.

Unfortunately, so did Merrik. “Get her!”

Merrik ran after the woman and quickly gained ground.

Only ahead by a little, Tabitha spun and threw her knife.

Merrik hurled himself to the ground, barely missing being impaled in the throat as the woman took off again. Her checkered red dress twirled around her as she spun for the cover of the stalks.

Merrik wanted to go after her, but Peters and Travis were there to take his arm and whisper lowly. No one could hear the conversation, but it seemed to be going well until one of the soldiers picked up the knife she had thrown.

“That’s mine. If she’s done with it, I’d like it back.”

Everyone stared at David in surprise.

“You gave her a knife?!” Merrik moved toward him.

David grinned coldly. “I’d have given more than that if she asked for it.”

The suggestive tone was enough to cause Merrik to leap at him, swinging.

David ducked and punched. The stomach shot was brutal.

Merrik slid to his knees, gasping for air.

“Stay down.” The big armed Blacksmith grinned again. “The next one will hurt.”

Merrik didn’t hear. He was still trying to get his breath back.

David held a hand out to Peters.

Those bushy brows drew together as Peters placed the knife in David’s palm. He didn’t like Merrik, but he really disliked these arrogant assholes.

David waited to be scolded as he returned to her hearth, but Alexa didn’t react except for a tired sigh.

He frowned and went to make her a cup of hot tea.

Merrik slowly returned to his place on the opposite side of the fire from Alexa, glowering in hatred.

Once the cranes settled down into a group huddle, the night became quiet. Those enjoying the fire began to slip into their bedrolls, worn out after a day with Alexa leading. Even the blond female, along with the soldiers, went into their tent early, showing only exhaustion. It was odd, considering that her cousin had run off. Peters had confided to the other travelers that Merrik had forced them into slavery to get them safely through the corn. While rare, women as slaves still sometimes happened.

The only reason slavery was possible at all was the Drafts that had taken place around the world. Many of the women who’d been left alone had gathered and taken control of their lives. Then they’d refused to hand it back over to the few males who’d survived the bombs, riots, and starvation.

Alexa’s men took the next shift, with Daniel and David up high. Most of the travelers drifted to sleep, reasonably sure they would see dawn. A few of them stayed awake for personal pleasure or morning preparations, and then they too joined the others in sleep.

After an hour, the guards were the only ones still moving.

Daniel spotted a shadow creeping toward where Alexa lay dogpiled among Billy, Jacob, and Mark, and waved at David to handle it.

David moved silently to intercept as Daniel waited to see if he needed to wake everyone.

David ducked behind a wagon and grabbed the shadow around the neck as it tried to sneak by.

“Hush.” David’s arms locked tighter around the offender’s throat as he recognized Merrik. “Guess you need some help getting to sleep.”

David carefully strangled the would-be assassin until he sagged. He made sure Merrik was still alive and then hefted him over one shoulder. He took Merrik’s unconscious form to the wagons and placed him underneath the middle one. He would be reasonably safe, but if he sat up too fast, he might knock himself right back out.

Snickering at the thought, David climbed up and rejoined Daniel on the top of the first wagon.

“You’d think he would learn quicker.” Daniel had enjoyed the show.

“Didn’t hurt to remind him.” David made sure Alexa was fine before giving his attention to the corn.

Both men continued to protect the travelers until an ugly dawn broke. Listening for Merrik’s thud upon waking kept them alert and amused. It was an easy duty this time.

**6**

Dawn brought a dim sun and bright gunfire.

*Bang! Bang!*

Alexa’s Colts crashing woke the entire camp.

*Thud!* “Son of a…”

Daniel and David, still atop the wagon, heard Merrik’s expletive as he jerked upward and hit his head. The two fighters broke into laughter.

Edward and Mark had jumped to their feet, but upon spotting Alexa, they realized what was happening and let the ignorant travelers mutter. They took longer to understand that she had killed four of the cranes with her two shots and was now cutting their heads off with her knife.

Daniel yawned, still chuckling as he stretched. His much enjoyed movement brought him instant attention from the nearby slavers. Need and greed flashed in equal measures.

“Breakfast is from Alexa.” Daniel’s big arms came down to rest on his guns. “I serve something else.”

The women weren’t sure if he meant that suggestively or not. Braids found her courage. “How much for a sample? In case what you’re serving doesn’t suit me.”

Daniel ran hot eyes over her, from dirt layered boots to well-placed curves, and locked their gazes. He wasn’t usually shy or forward. It was a nice moment for his ego when she flushed and giggled like a girl under his regard. “Samples are free.”

Braids immediately came toward him.

David smirked as the Biker paled. Daniel hadn’t thought the woman would rise to his challenge.

Daniel held still, lust, concern, and guilt warring in his mind. He was supposed to be on watch.

Braids sensed his withdrawal and stopped at the edge of the wagon. “You sure? Lookin’ a little green for a big, bad legend.”

Daniel thought of how he’d died and how Alexa had brought him back. He snorted, confidence returned. “See me when I’m off duty. I don’t slack.”

Braids liked his answer, sauntering back to her surprised partner without promising it. But they both knew she would. It was in the air and the sharp, sweet looks they would exchange for the rest of this shift.

“She said we couldn’t eat them!” Peters had begun to get loud, unaware of the moment he’d interrupted or Merrik being missing. “Why is it okay for her to do it?”

“We wanted to sleep in peace.” Daniel sneered, angry at the disruption. “Sleeping is over.”

Realizing they’d been made fun of, the soldiers proceeded to disturb the morning with round after round of gunfire that took down the cranes that were too slow to take flight. Feathers, shit, and squawks of terror filled the air.

Alexa didn’t reprimand them, but she did toss her birds to Jacob, wipe her hands, and begin checking her guns.

The soldiers noticed, realizing they’d made yet another mistake, but they didn’t stop the noise.

Billy took over the watch, leaving Brian with Edward.

Alexa waited for Daniel to get close enough to speak privately. “Where’s Merrik?”

She followed Daniel’s line of sight to the wagons and spotted a slumped form under one of them. She was able to see that Merrik wasn’t bound and was still breathing. She didn’t need to know anything more. He’d gotten out of line and her men had handled him. That was their job. “We leave twenty minutes after we’ve eaten. You can crash for at least half a shift in a wagon.” Alexa had caught all of his exchange with Braids. She grinned. “Doesn’t have to be alone, as long as there’s sleep at some point.”

Blushing at the teasing, Daniel went to get coffee. He saw the male slaves gather the dead cranes that the soldiers had shot. They began to clean them for trading with the old woman, who would be paid well by the other travelers for providing a meal with fresh meat. The soldiers wouldn’t have to pay since they’d shot them, but they wouldn’t have had to anyway, since all government workers got everything free. It was one of the benefits of being government staff.

Breakfast was quick but peaceful, with biscuits covered in gravy for a side to the fried crane. Without Merrik’s negativity, it was enjoyed by all of them. The group chatted lightly, the kids played, and the tension was absent for the first time on this trip.

“Who the hell snuck up on me? Someone hit me!”

Alexa sighed as Merrik’s ugly shout shattered the peace. “Time to go. Load it up.”

# BK 2 Chapter Nine

**Then and Now**

**1**

**T**hey reached the river around noon. The cloudy green water wasn’t a welcome sight. The grass and straggly corn lining the muddy bank waved in the light breeze like normal foliage, but underneath, the same layer of bugs waited. Immediate grumbles broke out when people realized there was no bridge. No one wanted to enter the water.

Alexa paralleled the bank for a while, picking a good place to cross. Her caution once again caused impatience in the soldiers.

“Where is she going?” Peters motioned Travis to watch over their other woman while he went to Merrik. He handed over the leash without noticing Edward’s eyes narrow in anger. The Horseman didn’t like slavery on either side.

“No clue.” Brian had always hated lying, but lack of common sense was something he didn’t tolerate well, either.

“It’s shallow here.” Merrik motioned two men forward. The purple bruises on his neck and forehead glared in the daylight. “Cross over and throw a rope. We’ll tie it off.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Alexa’s warning was heeded by the two soldiers. They backed away from the bank.

“Stay out of this! You’re not the leader!” Merrik was still wound up over being strangled. He had conveniently forgotten that he’d been trying to sneak close enough to kill Alexa when he was caught.

Alexa’s tone didn’t change, but her air became cold. “Fine.”

She continued down the faint path; the convoy went with her.

Merrik glared at the two soldiers he’d chosen.

The two men slowly inched down into the knee deep water, feeling their way across the lightly rushing creek. They made it to the other side with relief.

“Let’s go.” Merrik waved the others forward. His boots sank into the mud, icy water covering the tops.

Merrik looked down to see that the creek had turned red. He lunged back onto the safety of the bank, gawking in shock at the bleeding men on the opposite bank.

“Help me!”

“It hurts!”

Merrik saw streams of blood running from the legs of both men. It flowed steadily to the ground and back into the water where small air bubbles told him something was alive in there. “What is it?”

The screams faded quickly as both soldiers slumped to the ground and slid into the water. They went under and didn’t come back up.

“Damn it!” Merrik glanced to where Alexa was almost out of sight and angrily stomped that way.

Alexa heard his heavier stomp rejoin the group and didn’t say anything. Inside, she was growing more and more upset with the way Merrik was sacrificing his men. He was acting as if he had an inexhaustible supply. He should already know that every set of hands was a blessing to be protected.

Birds fled ahead of them, disturbed by their noises. The travelers braced for more butterflies. When none came, they continued in nervous apprehension.

**2**

Alexa marched them through the corn without a break. They were in another bad area. The stalks had gone to solid black and the dirt under them was sunken in, like something very heavy had been here for a long time. That tempting smell was also gone, replaced with a mildewed odor.

“We’re nearing the center of the fields now.” The mapmaker stared at her from his place on the cart.

The two grieving gunfighters sauntered around him in tense silence.

A slave owner in the wagon next to them looked over. “What’s in the center?”

The mapmaker shuddered. “Giants, I heard, but who knows for sure? Something bad.”

“That why you brought such strong help?” The slaver eyed the nearest gunman’s big arms and wide shoulders.

The mapmaker flushed, face folding into itself. “Don’t mind my help and I won’t mind your slaves.”

The slaver felt the sting of his refusal to talk to her. “In a few more years, your kind won’t be free either!”

The mapmaker straightened his shoulders. “Well, until then, I am, so slam you!”

The woman angrily slapped her whip across her horse to get ahead as the two gunfighters shared smirks. The brothers didn’t usually befriend those they escorted across this broken country, but Jim had been the exception. They’d already stayed with the map man for double the amount of time that they’d spent on their longest job. They liked his boldness in a world that was now mostly female. They also wanted the reward he had sworn to deliver.

Jim, a former bank executive and rock climber, was aware of having their loyalty because of more than a promised payment. He was careful to maintain the image they expected to see. After escorting their prisoner to Lincoln, he hoped to stay with them. Waiting on enough travelers to gather had been hard on Jim. He’d grown more bitter every day that the thief had been in his custody. He no longer dreamed of rebuilding his old life.

Alexa motioned Edward, with Paul in tow, to the Point position. He would hold the current speed unless she told him otherwise.

When Edward was in place, Alexa dropped to where the mapmaker was now flipping through old sketches of this area. She stayed next to him, ignoring the gunfighters that moved closer for his protection.

Jim became aware of the tension and finally looked up. He was a bit startled to find the leader of their wagon train by his cart. He glanced forward and found one of her men leading them. He watched in nervous fascination as Alexa dug out a meal. He swallowed a sharp remark.

Alexa held out a slice of pumpkin bread that Billy had made half a week ago. The old bakery they’d found had revealed a single can of pumpkin pie filling under the cabinet. After declaring it still good, the Driver had treated them all to warm pumpkin bread and strong coffee from his personal stock. It had been a wonderful evening.

“Are you sure?”

Alexa nodded, mouth full.

Jim slowly reached over to take the smallest corner. He was leery of anything pulled from someone’s pocket like a tissue.

He nibbled a corner of the bread and immediately grinned. “Hey! That’s good.”

Alexa took a swig from her canteen. “One of my men has cooking skills.” She delivered a stunning, rare grin to the mapmaker. “Maybe we can trade?”

Jim, now starving for his wife’s pumpkin bread, didn’t answer right away. He’d missed Elaine every day she’d been gone, but it was always the tiniest things that triggered that awful moment of heartache and frustration.

Aware that he was drifting, Jim looked over to tell Alexa yes and found her gone. A generous slice of the bread was lying on a foil square by his leg.

Jim ate it slowly, uncaring that tears were occasionally rolling down his cheeks. The flashes were very vivid, painful. He wouldn’t have stopped them even if he could have.

“What did she do to him?” Peters was next to Merrik.

Merrik shrugged. “Beats me. Got ammo left?”

“Just two mags.” Peters stepped over a deep rut, not about to give up his supply of bullets. “Why? You out?”

Merrik snorted. “Me? Out?” He lowered his voice. “Just making plans. You ready?”

“No. I’ve talked to the boys, but they won’t help until we’re on the boat.”

Merrik spat into the corn, nearly tripping over another of those deep, scratched ruts. “Figures. You tell them if they don’t support me, we can’t finish this job and that means we don’t get back on the inside.”

Neck and face bruised, occasionally rubbing his shoulder and head, Merrik now looked rougher than everyone else in their convoy.

Peters grunted. “I’ll tell ‘em.”

“You don’t sound like they’ll care.”

The Private wasn’t going to be drawn into betraying confidences. “Let me talk to them and then I can answer that.”

Always angry and unable to do anything about it, Merrik spotted Alexa walking nearby and verbally attacked her again. “Where are you taking us? We should be at the dock by now!”

Alexa, in the middle of enjoying a slice of her bread, gave him a glower as she finished chewing and swallowed. “No pumpkin bread for you. Asshat.”

She dropped back to the wagon and hopped onto the seat next to the driver before Merrik recovered.

The driver sped them up a bit, so she didn’t have to be there when he finally came up with a response.

Listening from behind them, Mark snickered. He loved being with Alexa. She knew how to put someone in their place in such a way that they had almost no defense against it.

Mark scanned the corn to his right and slowly rotated, making sure he met the gaze of every member of his team. It was an alertness that all of them had learned from Alexa and it was effective under these circumstances. Every few minutes required eye contact. Mark often did his early, as did Edward. Jacob and David still forgot sometimes. To remind them and teach them at the same time, the other men would pepper their backs with small stones until they turned for the check in. It was taking time, but they were getting it.

Paul, however, had interrupted their lessons. Alexa wasn’t teaching them right now, though escorting these people certainly was. Often unexpected, Mark already missed their special session where Alexa revealed something they hadn’t known existed or gave them a new skill to add to their already impressive resumes. It had now been weeks since they’d shared a moment like that.

Mark watched Alexa slowly slide from the wagon to walk alongside the prisoner’s cell. She showed a small foil square to his guards to get their approval before holding it through the narrow bars.

The man took it gratefully and wolfed it down as if he was starving. The prisoner stared at Alexa with a slick gaze. “Some more?”

Alexa rewarded the begging with a second foil.

The man grinned through dark teeth. “What chu need, Lady?”

Alexa raised a brow. “How do you know I need something?”

He laughed cruelly. “Don’t nobody talk to me unless it’s an order. A gift like this? Never.”

Alexa shrugged. “You have nothing on you that I want.”

Sly, the man settled back into his cage and enjoyed small bites of the bread. Between swallows, they chatted lightly.

“If you make it to where you’re going, you’ll be hung?” The thief’s name hadn’t been brought up, so Alexa didn’t know what to call the sly man who peered at her through the bars.

“Knifed on arrival is more like it.” The thief shrugged shamelessly. “I ain’t got no friends in Lincoln.”

Alexa let that stew and started a new pot. “Are you sorry for your life of crime?”

“Nope. Got rich stealin’. Also got caught, though, so maybe it ain’t even. Hard to say at this point.”

“And why is that?”

He grinned. “’Cause I ain’t there yet, of course. There’s always hope ‘til I hit the rope.”

“Papers some people carry might still give hope, as well.”

“Things from the old days? Sure.”

Seeing she had his full attention now, Alexa flicked her eyes to the messengers, to their chests. The three hunting buddies had signed up to be mail carriers for the excitement, but once out here, they’d realized how dangerous the job was. They stayed twitchy, hands always ready to pull the switches to the explosives strapped to their chests.

Alexa didn’t say anything else to the thief, just stayed there until Edward sent Paul to tell her there was a silo and the outline of a barn ahead of their convoy.

As she left the prisoner, Alexa gave him a quick glance and got the single nod she expected.

She paused by Mark. “Is he guilty, my pet?”

“As sin, Lady.” Mark snorted harshly. “Shoot him now and save your headache.”

“In due time.” Alexa eased his concern. She continued forward to join Edward in the lead. The challenge she’d given the thief was one that he wouldn’t be able to refuse, not if he was as good as she thought. Very few pickpockets were worth the trouble of a barred wagon and guards. If a man was so violent as to need all that, he was usually just shot and his body taken back. Life in America had changed drastically. Courts and cops were things of the past. Lead was now the law of this land.

**3**

Alexa sat down near the single center fire and eased off her boots, as she did most evenings. Taking care of their feet was a priority for a group who traveled on them.

The other fighters, seeing things were okay for the moment, gathered around her. They ate, cared for themselves, and waited in longing.

Alexa was aware that evenings had become story time. She didn’t mind that, but chores would be finished first. “Two senior soldiers on sentry duty–up high. Three on a constant patrol.”

The soldiers reluctantly followed her directions when Merrik remained silent. He and his female slave were sitting as far from Alexa as he could get, glowering while the tall slaver woman took care of his multiple injuries. He’d suffered scrapes and bruises from dealing with Alexa’s men, but he’d also gotten a gash on his cheek from the wagon. The tall slave owner was as close as they had to a doctor on this trip.

Edward and Daniel quickly organized the sentry posts, while Billy watched Brian and Paul. All of the soldiers were glad that there was little wind to distort or muffle their hearing. They had also been looking forward to hearing more of Alexa’s past. Little of it mattered now, but it was still fascinating.

Alexa took her time, being sure they were all on edge before beginning. She knew how to help a legend flourish. “When they came for us, my father and I were in the bunker, using the range. We’d finished shooting and he was telling me about controlling my reactions. To this day, I still regard it as one of the most important things I was ever taught. That entire day was a guide for the rest of my life.”

**Then**

“Pay attention.” Adrian’s thumb was gentle as he swiped a tear from his only daughter’s soft cheek. “I’m going to teach you control.”

“Will that help me shoot better?” She was disappointed that she hadn’t matched him.

Adrian smiled, flashing love and understanding. “Yes, but you need it for more than that. Control, when used correctly, can move mountains.”

Alexa tried to concentrate, to understand what he meant. Some of their conversations were easy, like hunting and evading, but sometimes they were so deep that he had to explain it to her in a few different ways before she was satisfied. He said her brain required a complete picture, that he’d been the same way about some subjects.

“One example is a man trapped in a burning building. If he controls his emotions and thinks, he may be able to find a way out. If he panics, he’ll die. A second definition would be when someone makes you angry. You are a killer. Never doubt it. With that comes responsibility. You can’t kill someone, except when there is no other choice. Without being able to control yourself, you would kill no matter what.”

Alexa couldn’t argue that point. She had been hard as a child, but training under her father had brought out the ruthless side. There had already been times when she couldn’t stop herself from reacting to one of his goads during a defense lesson. She hated it when anyone got a hit on her and the fact that the men were only tagging her like a goal post made it worse.

“A more complicated form of control is over other people. You already have a good deal of experience with that one, so I know you’re clear.”

“I’ve only ever used it to help other kids like me. I don’t know the rules on that.”

“That’s an area we’ll have to get into another time. It has a lot of little details that we’ll miss if we try to fit it in here.”

Alexa suddenly shivered with dread and sadness. “What about when you leave? How will I know these things?”

Adrian opened a kit near their chairs and handed her a thick notebook. “I have hundreds of these. You’ll read my words when you can’t hear my voice.”

Alexa grabbed him for a hug that Adrian allowed himself to enjoy. She was so much like him. Being the oldest, he had expected that up to a point, but her gifts were stronger than his were. He had chosen to start her training early. Normally, they wouldn’t have had much contact before she was of age, but the world was changing. There wasn’t time to let her grow up.

Adrian started to push her into the chair and pulled her onto his lap instead. “Your mom wanted me to wait until you were safe before I told you anything about her. She was afraid you wouldn’t be able to control yourself.”

Alexa left her head on his shoulder, loving being with her dad. He was perfect. “What did she think I would do?”

“Cause the end of the world.”

Alexa stiffened, paling. “I dream about that. It’s coming. Soon.”

“Yes. And nothing you can do will stop it or cause it. Your mother assumed you would be our weakest link because you were stolen from us so soon after birth, but even with five years at my side, your brother Elliot has that honor. Beware of him.”

“I will.” Alexa shivered again.

Adrian gently slid her into her own chair. “It’s in the notebooks. And there are copies, typed and sent out for all of you. Keep to our kind.”

Alexa paled further. “They’re here.”

Adrian sighed, now kneeling at her feet. “If I stay with you, they’ll keep coming and you won’t have time to learn this, to become what our country will need.”

Alexa held the tears, but threw her arms around his neck. “I love you, daddy!”

Adrian held onto the bittersweet moment with a mumble of powerful words that sent bright green light curling around their embrace. “You’ll always be a part of me!”

Alexa let him set her back so he could stand up. “Get your vest on. Take your safety off.”

Alexa hurried, suddenly furious that her time with her father was being interrupted. She wanted to spill blood.

“So do I. Got that vest on?”

Alexa let him tighten it, hearing heavy footfalls coming down the hall that didn’t belong to their light-footed guards.

Adrian slid the gas mask over her face and quickly donned his. He pulled the pin from his smoke grenade, then pitched it into the hall as the enemy neared. Shouts and coughing echoed.

Adrian waved Alexa into a far corner.

Alexa slid against the wall and went over her lessons while she waited to kill her first man. Before her father gave the order, she fired.

*Bang!*

Adrian stared in shocked admiration as the first soldier through the door fell to his knees, blood oozing from the wound in his forehead. Then he started firing, too, and neither of them stopped until nothing moved except smoke and small rivers of blood.

**Now**

Alexa stopped talking long enough to get a drink and a few hits from the smoke that Edward tossed to her from his place atop the lead supply wagon. She stretched, listening to the field around them, but it seemed like even that predatory threat wanted to hear the rest.

“When it was over, we’d won. My father’s men were still the best I’ve ever seen. They drove the government troops off the island.” She sighed. “But we had to leave. Burning it kept the enemy from finding clues, but it also drew more soldiers. They attacked who they could reach–the island residents. I forced myself to watch it. I controlled myself until I didn’t feel anything except the hate and vengeance I’ve nursed every day after that. The feeling of losing my father, of being robbed, has never faded.”

Paul broke the moment with his too-loud voice. “Did you see him again?”

“Once.” She stood. “It’s time to sleep. Dawn comes again soon.”

Alexa’s men were almost in shock. They’d never heard Alexa speak about emotions or show as much of herself to strangers as she had tonight. It was surprising to hear her talk of youthful insecurities and scarring events. It was also intriguing to have these newest pieces to her puzzle. It explained more and more for her men. No wonder they had always assumed she’d been doing this as a career before the war. It was worse than that. She’d been battling and surviving like this her entire life. It was all she’d ever known.

**6**

“Incoming! Everyone up!”

“Look out!”

Everyone in Alexa’s tent snapped awake instantly, grabbing for guns, except for Mark. He’d only been asleep for an hour. He rolled onto his feet with a bitter anger. “I’m getting really sick of this place.”

Alexa’s crew began shooting the bats and wolves as they spotted the chaos, and a few of the soldiers joined in, but it only took a couple minutes to understand that the colony had simply been going overhead, not attacking. Alexa had given the last shift to Paul and Edward. She faced them angrily.

“I couldn’t get my damn hand around his mouth quick enough.”

The growled words cleared Edward of the actual mistake, but he was in charge and he’d let this get out of control. Even the wolves still pacing their perimeter hadn’t been attacking, only investigating.

Paul cringed to the ground as Alexa moved toward him, but she kept going to Edward.

Edward waited tensely.

Alexa placed a hand on his arm, again shocking all of her men. “We’ll be shed of him soon. Keep trying.”

Edward managed a nod to confirm the order, feeling even more uneasy without the punishment. *Her illness must be worse than we thought.*

# BK 2 Chapter Ten

**The Wrong Side**

**1**

**“T**en minute break!”

Alexa’s call was unexpected. It brought Merrik to her side.

“We are not stopping!”

“Then don’t.” Alexa pointed to the rough walls of a small town that had appeared. “I’ll be in there.”

She signaled for Edward to take charge and then headed for the stone barrier that clearly hadn’t defended its people. Skeletons were hanging over the guard towers like gruesome ornaments.

Paul followed, hoping she would allow him to come.

Mark only let the pair get a few feet away from him. He’d made a private vow to be her shield and he couldn’t do that if he remained with the wagon train.

Alexa didn’t care about the two males trailing her. She needed something that was inside these crumbling walls and she would have it.

Mark stopped Paul from going inside with a heavy hand to the shoulder that the scientist cringed away from in surprise.

Mark held a finger to his lips and pointed at Alexa, who was currently stomping on the skull of a skeleton with pale tatters of clothing and little else.

Alexa knelt down to fill her pouch with the small chunks of bone, then filled another with the dust. She repeated this step several times as she explored the town’s small courtyard. There was no damage that Mark could see, only bodies, and it was eerie. It was as if something had swooped down and killed everyone, leaving only remains.

Mark gave Alexa space, keeping Paul in line. They stayed by the break in the two walls, a barrier between her and Merrik.

Recognizing her guards, Merrik marked the site as a place to check out after the rewards were claimed for Brian, Alexa, and the wagons. Alexa had the upper hand right now, but that would change.

Merrik spotted Brian talking with Billy, who’d had charge of him the entire time. With Alexa’s men, Brian looked almost happy. It was salt in Merrik’s open wounds. Brian had been a sullen soul the entire time he’d been with them.

*That boy’s a problem.* Merrik didn’t like the voice in his mind, but he listened to it. Right now, it said of the three required deliveries, Brian might be the most important.

Busy thinking, something he didn’t do much of, Merrik didn’t realize he was shorter on men than when they’d first stopped. He noticed it as Alexa came from the walls with a pouch in her hand. It was dismissed as bad counting during the last chaos.

**2**

“Where are we?”

Peters shrugged. They’d seen a bloody little girl and gone to help her. Now, they were totally lost. They couldn’t even hear the wagon train. “Come on. They’re going due south now. We’ve got compasses.”

Private Nicholas eyed the corn and the shadows. “Did we really see her?”

Peters shrugged again. “No idea at this point. Let’s move. We’ll catch right up.”

But they didn’t.

Fifteen minutes of hard running still gave them no hint of where the wagon train was. Neither man pretended that there was an explanation. They slowed to a march with their guns out, trying to decide what to do.

Neither of the soldiers heard the feet shuffling toward them over their own heavy steps, nor the faint moans over their own conversation. When the hand came through the stalks, it was able to grab one of the men before they could react.

The undead were thin and runny, rotting with every shuffle forward, but they still had enough life left in them to chase a meal.

“What the… Shoot it!”

Nicholas screamed as the bony teeth sank into his arm.

Peters took off running in blind panic.

Alexa’s lips tightened as the screams continued, sounding near enough for them to see the person shortly.

“That’s one of my men!” Merrik stomped toward Alexa. “Help them!”

“What are they doing out there?”

“I don’t care. Help them!”

“What will you give me?”

Merrik cursed and spun around. “I’ll do it myself!”

Alexa didn’t stop him, or didn’t motion for her men to. The sooner Merrik was dead, the better.

Merrik reached the corn closest to the screaming, but before he could enter it, a bloody man came barreling out and slammed into him. Both males dropped in a heap of shouts and groans.

“It was dead! It got Nicholas, and it was dead!”

Merrik shoved the blabbering man toward Travis and turned to yell at Alexa, but she was already ahead, getting their convoy moving.

“Wait! I have a man out there!”

“Not if he was bit.” Billy shrugged as he and Brian passed nearby. “Good as dead, and better for you if he were.”

Merrik’s tone became snotty. “What do you mean?”

“They haunt their old friends and family.” Billy sneered. “I’d guess that being soldiers together would make you like his brother, right?”

With that hanging in the air, Billy increased his pace and got away from Merrik. He didn’t like the man, but he also didn’t enjoy needling him. He still had a small hope that Merrik, like Paul, could learn and change.

Brian caught up with Billy, drawing Merrik’s attention.

“I want the boy now!”

Billy sighed. He’d given the man too much credit.

“I’m talking to you!”

Billy didn’t turn. “Talk to the boss. You get him when she says so. Not a second before.”

Merrik was stopped from chasing her by the gunfighter this time, the only one who had made it this far. He and the mapmaker were no longer smiling.

The remaining gunfighter glared. “Leave her be before you get all of us killed!”

Merrik wanted to argue, but he’d witnessed the brothers practicing their techniques on the wolves before Alexa arrived. He couldn’t match it.

“When it’s all over, I’ll remember!” Merrik jerked his slave’s leash away from Travis to march her toward the opposite side of their wagon train.

The gunfighter grimaced. “Me too, son. Me too.”

**3**

The steadily flowing river wasn’t a welcome sight, not after the creek. Everyone surveyed the angry green liquid in apprehension.

Alexa led the convoy through the trees to where they would be able to board small boats that would carry them the rest of the way to Lincoln. Alexa stopped as the dock came into view, shoulders tensing.

That was a bad sign. It sent fresh tension through the waiting travelers.

“Wait here.”

Alexa’s order was obeyed by everyone except the soldiers and Mark. The man at Alexa’s hip stayed close to her as Merrik and his goons hurried by.

“Oh, shit.”

No one echoed Merrik’s expletive, but they were all thinking it. The boats were there, as was the dock, but the men guarding it and those running it were in pieces. Blood washed over the dock with each wave that was tall enough to reach a body part.

Alexa cautiously began the short descent.

Travis pulled his bandana up to cover the smell. “What happened here?”

Merrik frowned. “Wolves?”

“No way, man. Their heads have been severed!”

The scene was gory enough to make the soldiers dread the dock. None of them wanted to set a foot there. Bodies, and pieces of them, littered the wood.

Merrik cupped his hand around his mouth to add volume. “Anyone here?!”

Alexa’s quick glare warned Merrik that if he made one more mistake, she would handle him.

Travis, reading the moment, stepped in front of his friend in an attempt at distraction. “What do we do now?”

Merrik scowled at Travis for asking her, but Alexa was encouraged. Merrik’s men weren’t all the fools that he obviously was. “Clean off the dock, load the boats, keep moving.” She didn’t say to burn the bodies or to bury them. Left, their skeletons might provide a bit of dust for future travelers, as well as a warning of the dangers that lurked here.

The wooden dock was lined in flatbottom boats that bobbed lightly on the water. The front two even had canopies over their center.

Alexa didn’t have them clean the large rear barges. There weren’t enough people to fill them now. “Let’s get going. My men will guard the wagons. Yours will work.”

Merrik thought to protest, but her men were harder, more likely to save the cargo waiting behind the corn. He gave in resentfully. “What’s first?”

“Make brooms, get cleaning detergent from the wagons, scrub when the water flows over.” Alexa moved toward the corn and began pulling long stalks that she would bind together to use as brooms.

When she stepped back onto the dock without hesitating and started sweeping at the blood, the soldiers joined her.

When they rolled bodies into the water without a thought, she didn’t tell them to do anything differently, but inside, she protested. The loss of life, of any life, needed to be respected.

It took them two hours to clean the dock and boats enough to use. The wagon train enjoyed the break from Alexa’s relentless pace through the corn. They ate and rested while surveying the water for signs of life. There were none, but everyone stayed clear of the bank anyway. When the call finally came to load the boats, sunset was nearly upon them.

Alexa supervised the loading of each boat, directing people, vehicles, and animals into the proper places for good balance. She didn’t give anyone a choice. She just pointed and expected them to do as they were told. Eager to get on the water where he would have control again, Merrik didn’t argue.

Their animals didn’t like the smells of the new area, nor the water. They shied at being led across the narrow ramps. Edward ended up being the one to do that chore. Paul and Brian were now sheltered under Mark’s annoyed protection.

The mules were the easiest to handle, as they’d been through rough places before. The injured mule driver was able to control his own wagon, but he was in the vulnerable rear, swaying in his seat. The loss of blood and lack of sleep was taking its toll. The man would recover, if given time–something Afterworld didn’t often do.

Edward allowed the other mule drivers to assist him with loading, aware that they were old soldiers with supply and animal experience. The fighters were relieved to have them. The wizened old men knew how to take care of things. The other travelers had animals that shied nervously and bucked against the hands that were trying to take them onto the water. Their natural instinct said they belonged on land. It was obvious they preferred to be there.

Tension thickened when the largest of the horses came across the bridge. The stallion had reared up when the saddle was removed, then nipped the gunfighter who had been riding it. Ten hands high, the horse was impressive. *And very nervous.* Edward waved Billy off as soon as he had the reins in his hand.

Edward stayed still for a moment, gently stroking the horse along its nose. “Easy, baby.”

Everyone stopped to stare. The tones of Edward’s voice, the waves of peace he was emitting, were strong enough to have an effect on all of the travelers.

Alexa blinked. “Edward.”

He turned to discover the entire group yawning or rubbing at their eyes. They were all dazed.

Edward flushed. “Uh, yeah, sorry.”

He led the now docile horse onto the boat.

Loading resumed while the remaining slavers once more approached Alexa about buying her men. The slave males weren’t doing well. Of the five the slavers had started out with, only two were still alive. The men looked broken as they sat quietly, grieving for their comrades.

“No.”

Braids scowled. “But our stock has been mostly killed.”

“Then you’re not very good owners, are you? Get loaded or stay here.”

The big females were angry and offended, but knew better than to delay, especially since there were only a few protectors still alive. When Alexa said they were leaving, she meant it, and no one wanted to be left behind at this horror scene. The flies and smells were awful, but it was worse to view the carnage. The bodies they’d dumped into the water were being stacked up along the far side of the bank by the current.

Alexa and David got the old woman and kids settled near the center and gave them vests. The orange life wear was incredibly filthy and ragged, but still functional. The kids wore them happily. Their own clothes were little more than rags, sporting more filth and rips than when Alexa had first met the trio.

David tried to confirm something that had been bothering him. “Are you looking forward to being reunited with your daughter?”

Grammie nodded slowly. “A bit afraid, too. She doesn’t sound like she’s changed.”

David handed the kids a food pouch and then took the time to cover them with a blanket from his kit. “It will get chilly tonight on the water.”

He didn’t receive verbal gratitude, which was a rudeness, but David let the insult slide. He continued with his questions, sure he had Alexa’s attention as she got the old woman’s tiny cooking stove lit. “How long has she been gone? Time will occasionally allow true change.”

“Years.” The woman settled back into the extra blanket that had been freed by David donating his. “And some days, it ain’t been long at all.”

The cryptic answer was one the Blacksmith found hard to argue with or work around without seeming too curious. He went on carefully. “I have…had a daughter go missing during the war. I’m glad for you, to know *yours* made it.”

The expression that flashed on the old woman’s face said she believed his tall tale. David gave her a small smile. “You look like my grandmother. Sorry if I’m bothering you.”

“David, enough chatting.” Alexa fed the impression that he was trying to send. “Missing your family isn’t an excuse for breaking my rules.”

David’s voice dropped into defensive adoration. “I’m sorry, Lady. Truly.”

“Yes, David. I hear your apology. Finish your chore and then the next.”

“Yes, Lady.”

Alexa left them.

David apologized to the old woman again. “I’m sorry. I’m a rookie.”

The old woman patted his hand comfortingly. “You’ve been a help. Worry about it no more.”

David felt the wrongness when she touched him, but without a reason for it, all he could do was nod and smile.

David finished settling the family in and then helped Edward with the livestock. The chickens he was chasing didn’t seem to like his way with animals. They knew they were being taken onto the water, but they wanted to get in it. The fact that it would kill them was hard to explain to livestock; the men spent a few humorous moments chasing the chickens around the boat dock, clucking like fools.

Nearby, the captain was trying to recover his Joe Cool look and attitude. Leather jacket tacky with blood, Merrik grumbled as he nervously dunked it into the river a few times. He hung it on a nearby tree to dry, then slicked his hair back with water from his canteen.

Feeling Alexa about to call him out for slacking, Merrik joined the workers. While he loaded his boat according to Alexa’s direction, someone knocked the jacket to the ground as they passed the branch. And then someone kicked it into the water, where it quickly sank.

Alexa’s men watched this in amusement and then shared laughter when Merrik started to get aboard without remembering he’d hung it up in the first place. It was a lot less than he deserved.

“Uncrate your woman.” Alexa glared at Merrik, voice like stone. “No one goes on the water in a box unless they’re dead.”

“What about the prisoner?” Paul’s question drew dark looks from her fighters.

Alexa wasn’t angry. “Not my choice. Criminals don’t have rights in Afterworld.”

When all the animals and gear were finally loaded, the rest of the people were brought on board the two wide boats. Merrik, his pale female, and his men claimed the largest vessel only to find themselves alone on it except for the wagon drivers, who had no choice. They went where their cargo did.

As the last of the soldiers boarded, a shadow came running from the corn.

“Hey, is that… Look out!”

Travis turned around as Private Nicholas, freshly undead, lunged for him.

Peters ran from the corn behind him, eager to rejoin the convoy.

Alexa fired twice from where she stood.

Merrik saw she had shot both Nicholas and Peters. “Why did you do that? He wasn’t undead!”

Alexa pointed toward the pile of bodies that Travis was now crawling out from under. “He would have been, as soon as the poison sank in. He was bitten.”

Merrik couldn’t argue with the teeth marks on Peters’ horrified face, nor the bullet in his brain.

“Let’s go.”

No one argued.

**4**

Being cut loose from the dock was an unsettling feeling. Curses echoed as gear slid and personal balance was challenged. The current tugged relentlessly at the boats, then jerked them into the center. They were underway.

Long and flat, the boats were much like the old barges used before the war, except their power was the current and poles strapped to the sides. Enough men could propel it, but for the most part, river riding was an adventure much like The Killing Fields themselves. Merrik didn’t know that because he’d never been on one. Few of the travelers were surprised when he puked over the rail only fifteen minutes into the trip.

Alexa listened to him retching from the boat in front of hers, sighing. “We’re about halfway through, my pet. Halfway through.”

Mark, staying close now that they were back in confined quarters, heard the mutter and forced himself not to respond. He wanted to be out of here, too, but he had the feeling that the second half of this trek would be the worst.

“It will. The slaughter chute is about to narrow.”

Mark took a short cigar from his pocket and lit it. The rare treat was given envious glances by most of the travelers around them. When he passed it around his group, those jealous tendencies increased. Everything these people had witnessed said a life with Alexa was rewarding enough to be worth the risk, but more than that, she cared about her men and they were devoted to her. How many people could say that now and be telling the truth?

The water under them was smooth and calm to start their voyage. The exhausted travelers set up pallets and bedrolls almost immediately, eager to rest. The tugging of the water was soothing. It lulled the soldiers and the weaker of their wagon train into sleep.

Alexa’s men didn’t relax. Letting their guard down wasn’t something they’d done much of. It felt wrong, unnatural to them. Alexa had spent too much of her life like this to be comfortable any other way. In time, the same would be true of her fighters. It wasn’t what she wanted for them, but it was what had to happen for them to complete this quest. They were only months into the trek of a lifetime. She was toughening them up as quickly as she could.

“We have debris here.” Daniel was enjoying his place in the front of Alexa’s boat. “Logs and branches, a few bodies.”

Alexa wasn’t worried over what they could pick out. It was what they couldn’t see that was likely to hurt them. “Let me know if it gets bad.”

“You got it.”

Mark watched as she took a rationed drink from the canteen. “Can we fill up around here?”

“Not until Lincoln.”

“I’ve been wondering about the others. Shouldn’t they be getting low on food and water?”

“If we are, they should be.” Alexa swept the snoring people, the tensely settled animals, and felt the mental door open to the place where she was able to feel safe. This was as calm as it would get before hell restarted in new ways.

“Stay alert.” Alexa settled into her bedroll eagerly. She’d never felt so tired.

Aware of her discomfort, Mark curled behind his mistress and rubbed her arm and shoulder until she fell asleep.

Two hours later, Daniel was almost the lone pair of drowsy eyes on their boat. Everyone else was asleep. Daniel stood up to scan the shoreline and stared in shock, forgetting his duty for a moment. It wasn’t every day that he saw a raggedy band of women in loincloths with torches and spears.

Daniel shook his head and wiped at his eyes. “Must be getting slaphappy.” He fought the urge to look over his shoulder. “Seeing shit again.”

**5**

Billy was near the thief, who was now chained directly to the boat. He was aware of the prisoner giving him hard looks. Billy was becoming their planner, often working directly with Alexa on travel routes and rationing. They had come up with half a dozen new plans to evade surprise attacks in just the last week. Because of that, Billy suspected Alexa needed this man freed. It was why she’d given care of Brian to someone else for the night, leaving Billy the only unassigned fighter. If he was supposed to go to sleep, she would have told him so. The break from their routine had reminded him of their talks, of the codes she wanted used whenever they were around other people. Mark had known to grab Brian without being told. Billy had picked up the same signal about this thief.

Once Billy struck up a conversation with the thief, it didn’t take long to find out that Alexa had indeed hired the man to do something, though he wouldn’t say what it was.

“Can I help in some way?” Billy was determined that if Alexa needed it, she would have it.

The thief shrugged. “Maybe. Can ya let me loose?”

“I could.” Billy frowned.

The thief grinned, flashing neat teeth and a deep intelligence. “Don’t go worryin’, none. I got a date in Lincoln. I ain’t runnin’ off anywhere.”

Billy waited for them to be unobserved before using his knife to cut the man’s bonds. “I’ll hunt you if you run.”

The thief smiled bitterly. “Spent my life bein’ hunted. Soon, it’ll be the other way around.”

Billy disliked the man. “Anything else?”

“Could use a distraction, but I reckon the river will provide that.”

Billy snorted. “Yeah, I’d guess so.”

The two men continued to chat lightly as the wide boat sailed the slowly moving river like no one had been here before them. It was easy to forget that wasn’t true. The trees along the riverbank hadn’t been trimmed in years. They were now an intricately entwined canopy that protected the water like a wicker roof. Birds in that canopy saw the humans pass in outraged shock, many flying off in protest and anger. A few of them dropped loads onto the boats or pecked at the standing men. A quick flash of wings put them out of range of the soldier’s unthinkingly drawn guns.

Billy noticed that the debris continued to thicken as they sailed through the center of the wide channel, but his mind was on Grand Island. Things got narrow there in places, or so he’d heard from the few stragglers who’d made it west. What did Alexa have in mind for that?

He kept at the problem, hoping to be an asset at that moment. He missed the shadow at his side until boots entered his vision.

Billy stifled his reaction to look up coldly. The gunfighter had his piece out, aimed at Billy’s head. The remaining gunfighter’s red eyes and shaky hands said grief was driving his emotions, not logic.

“Get away from him.”

Billy sighed. “Don’t make me do this. I don’t want to.”

It was a clear warning, but the gunfighter, slowly breaking down from the loss of his brothers, shoved the gun into Billy’s face. “Now!”

Billy brought his hands up. “Sure. Step back, I’ll move. We’re all good then.”

The gunfighter retreated a step.

Billy rose up in a quick lunge. He wrapped his big hands around the gunfighter’s legs and hefted him over his shoulder.

The toss from the boat drew only a light splash, but the screams of pain and horror woke everyone on their boat.

Alexa’s bloodshot eyes focused on Billy’s face.

He shrugged without regret. “Just dumping a bit of weight. Nothing we needed.”

Alexa nodded and went right back to sleep.

Jim, now a mapmaker without any protection, didn’t say a word. He understood his predicament.

So did the thief because he stood up and walked around the boat, trying to stretch his muscles. He’d been in that cage for a long time.

Jim glowered at Billy.

Billy could see the mapmaker wanted to go for one of his many weapons and was glad when the man didn’t. Billy felt sorry for everything that the scribe had gone through, but that was no excuse for stupidity. “Why are you taking him to Roscoe?” Billy wanted to be clear on what the mapmaker had done.

“It was my wife he raped!” Jim’s eyes filled with furious tears. “He’s lucky he’s not dead!”

Billy felt there was a lie in there somewhere, but wasn’t sure which part bothered him. It was another horror story from this new world, one that wouldn’t be investigated, filed, or tried by any court other than the one right here. Billy already doubted Alexa would allow the thief to be handed over to Roscoe. If she’d hired him for a job, he was hers now. That’s how it worked with Alexa. If you pleased her once, you did it repeatedly. But Billy was curious. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

“Roscoe’s orders!” Jim spat to the side. “Anyone who knowingly kills this piece of shit will earn Roscoe’s wrath. He wants to do it himself.”

“Interesting.”

“It’s what’s right!” Jim fought for control of the rage filled tears. “We have to try to repair this world. He’ll stand trial. Roscoe promised.”

The conversation was being followed by several people, but not Paul. He was already drowsing again despite the recent commotion. Edward’s chortle shook him awake. He looked over, not caring that Edward was being snotty to someone other than him for a change. How he’d come to hate that man! The other fighters had moments where they were civil and showed signs of accepting him, but not Edward. He would do anything he could to stop Paul from being allowed to stay.

*I’ll do something about that.* Paul was furious that he would be left in Lincoln. Alexa had said he would have a month to prove himself, but it hadn’t been that long. “Not fair! Not fair at all.”

**6**

The slow, quiet ride lasted for a while. The river, benefitting from the cleaning it was getting by the wide boats coming through, chose not to dispel the uninvited riders.

Wildlife swam alongside and behind the boats, devouring each other. It didn’t draw attention from the travelers, but if it had, they would have only been glad that it wasn’t them being torn to bits. Beneath the boats was another world, one littered with relics of the past. If the travelers had gone under, and survived, they would have recognized dishes and phones and hulks of boats from those who’d already tried to come this way and failed. They would have seen the bones and piles of debris that had been washed down over the years. The river was a foreign, forgotten landscape that held keys to the past and links to the future that would never see the light of day.

The travelers weren’t immune to the effects of such relics being under them while they slept. Their dreams were haunted with memories of prewar days and the political ways that had destroyed them all.

Mark shoved Paul against the rail, tiring of his moans and mutters as they tried to sleep. “Shut up!” The Convict pushed himself away from the cringing, sleepy scientist. “You stink!”

Still refusing to clean himself daily, the scientist was now giving off a thick stench.

Mark got up to look for coffee, leaving Paul to glare in embarrassment and fresh hatred.

“All of you will go first! I’ll be the last one here.” Paul curled into a ball, wishing this nightmare was over.

Mark rejoined Billy on the watch, aware that a few things had changed. He’d joined Alexa not long after she’d crashed. They had both woken at the splash of something going overboard, but when Alexa hadn’t risen, neither had Mark.

“Current picked up.” Billy stretched his back, glad Mark had joined him. “Should we wake her?” Billy wasn’t sure.

That was reason enough for Mark. “I’ll do it.”

Both men paused as they caught shadows moving on the bank. They gaped at the sight of five black women, fishing. The boats passed within feet of the stunned females.

Mark automatically tipped his cover to them. “Ladies.”

When no alarm came, the two men understood there was no one awake to see them on Merrik’s boat.

“Figures.” Mark was concerned for the wagon drivers. “I’ll let her know that, too.”

The women on the bank stared at the boats until they were out of sight, positive they’d just seen the ghost wagon train from the Legend of Lincoln. It was a common story during the nights they were trapped in their den because of the weather.

“Was they real?” One of the younger females scanned the shore. No one had moved yet.

“No. It’s just The Killin’ Fields reading our fears. Keep working.” The girl’s mother continued to stare, despite that declaration. For one brief second, she’d felt safe, protected...

The girl and her three sisters got back to their labor, but the mother remained motionless. Seeing a ghost convoy wasn’t the problem. The feeling of complete desolation that she now carried was. The second those glowing boats had gotten out of sight, she’d felt like all the light was gone from her soul. She was slowly recovering, but it was unsettling. Ghosts weren’t comforting, *guns* were.

Chuckling lightly at her mental joke, the mother joined her children in securing this week’s food. The night fish were only here once every seven days. If they missed this, they would go hungry. Filling a refrigerator was a lot harder now.

**7**

Mark put a gentle hand on Alexa’s arm, feeling the current of energy flowing around her in steady waves.

Alexa’s eyes opened slowly this time, unlike the normal way that she instantly flipped into awareness upon waking. Her head lolled.

Mark felt his already growing concern for her become dread. “Alexa?”

“Hmm?”

It took Mark long minutes to rouse her. The open sign of her illness was heavy in the silence.

Alexa sighed wearily, drawing on her determination as exhaustion threatened to pull her back under. “Get me up.”

Mark put an arm around her waist, using his big body to support her to the edge of the boat. She trembled under his hands.

“Tell me what to do for you and tell me right now.”

Alexa didn’t have the energy to scold him. She looked over the edge, fingers weak against his skin. “The current will continue to increase. Should be a problem around dawn.”

“Alexa.” Mark’s tone was ugly.

Alexa gave him what he thought he wanted, too tired to keep resisting. “It steals my energy, thins it. I crave meat…blood. I’m fighting the change, but in another week or two, I’ll become like them.”

“The vampires.”

Alexa’s lids shut, then fluttered open. “Doctor in Lincoln. Paul now.”

Mark helped Alexa to where Paul was dreaming again, laying her down.

Mark smirked as the Rabbit woke up screaming into his hand.

In the corner, Billy watched in concern. He hadn’t realized that Alexa was ill. Could he help her? He knew legends, stories…

Dreading the emotions that would surface, Billy began to run through the people he’d met, the groups he’d traveled with since the war had destroyed his life. Maybe he’d heard or seen something that would save her. If he had, he would break the vow of silence on his past to tell Alexa everything. Saving her life was worth the banishment that might come when she discovered who he had been and how he had trained to hide his thoughts from her. He should have already shared the tale. She might never forgive him.

**8**

The predawn hour came with a light guard shift guiding the boats through the water that had begun to move faster. The men used mud-stiffened poles to keep the boats from drifting too close to the bank. The tough work made them respect the power of the water even more than they already had.

“She needs to eat.” Edward came to take his shift on security. In the boat ahead of them, tired guards grumbled at the shorter shifts that Alexa had her men on. Merrik’s remaining soldiers were on the edge of mutiny, but he wasn’t smart enough to realize it.

“Sleep’s good.” Mark observed Alexa’s rough breathing against Paul’s back. He wasn’t sure if they should wake her until she finished with the current dream. It wasn’t good to wake people from a nightmare. Answers never came until the end.

“Yeah. David has dinner. You need anything?”

Mark shook his head, now staring at the dark water. “Nope. I’m awake and not on the take.”

Edward snickered at the joke and went to make sure the others knew to let their boss sleep.

Mark saw the messengers slowly get up and start a cold meal in the far corner of the boat. He assumed the messengers were supposed to return to the government with information on Roscoe. The government wanted to know if he was stockpiling weapons to use against them. The messengers had chosen to ride with the soldiers at the last second, hopping over while the boats were tugged free of the dock.

Mark spotted the thief, who was now on the boat with the soldiers. How had that happened?

Mark saw the mapmaker and the thief exchange glares. *That explains it.* Mark was also aware that Alexa wanted something from the thief. *Billy let him go so that could happen.*

Mark put his back to that scene and studied the other waking travelers.

Of those who’d started out with them, less than half were here. Nearly everyone blamed Merrik for his lack of knowledge and refusals to listen to Alexa. If he hadn’t gotten so many of his men killed, they would all have better protection right now. Mark agreed, up to a point. Merrik wasn’t the kind to listen to anyone without something to gain. His employers had to know that. They’d sent him on this mission hoping he wouldn’t survive it. That meant he was either a liability or dead weight. Mark was betting on the latter. He doubted Merrik had enough intelligence to be special in any way.

Mark listened to the water grow louder. It felt as if they were going a lot faster now. He picked up a stiff pole to be ready in case steering was needed.

A few minutes later it was and Mark threw himself into his duty. The water wasn’t something he would underestimate. Even those who could swim were at an extreme disadvantage.

Mark dipped the pole and shoved away a large log rolling by, then did the same for the biggest pieces of debris coming toward them. He hadn’t heard anything from the boat to imply it was water-weakened, but that didn’t mean they should encourage hits.

Mark was pleased when all of those on duty followed his lead and began clearing the debris around them. It got a bit exciting between the men, trying to shove logs and wood and thick, spongy piles of leaves far enough to keep them from being dragged back against the boat. Their small calls and moans woke the rest of the sleeping travelers.

The jokes and laughter were a nice change from the screaming they were all used to.

The old woman and her kids were the first to come from their box shelter near the slavers and the mapmaker. Jim, clearly still angry that the thief had been let loose, ignored everyone except that small family. As the children looked through his books, he worked on a pot of tea to go with his hard bread. The slave owners, slipping further into depression with each wave, sat on their blankets with rolled smokes and vaguely bitter expressions as the other camps ate and performed morning rituals behind clumsily tied sheets.

Alexa allowed herself to stay still for a moment before rising. She felt better, stronger. There was a lot to do now that she understood what it was that she needed to recover. Paul’s blood would hold it back and the doctor’s skills might even cure it, but it was mostly her own heart eating away at her. Each time she delved into the past, it became harder to leave. If she wanted to heal, she had to remember what was at stake, what she had right here. Stepping backward would never get her to her father’s side and that was unacceptable. It was fine to dream, but the time for it was before or after a quest, certainly not during. That was how she would get them all killed.

Alexa felt the boat shift into a faster speed and got up, handled her morning routines without a care for the way that her men surveyed her in happy surprise. She knew they’d been worried, but she would be fine as long as everyone, including her, did their duty.

**9**

Alexa’s recovery was quick and impressive, leading to Mark ending his glares of jealousy. When Alexa had asked for Paul, he’d felt like killing the man. Knowing how badly she’d needed his blood eased it enough to allow Mark to kick a food pouch toward Paul after watching the scientist hungrily wolf down his last one. “Keep eating. She needs you strong.”

Paul went red, but for once kept his mouth shut. He felt like he was starving.

It was almost dawn and the location Alexa had given them was fast approaching–literally. The current had them flying along at a speed that had even Daniel concerned.

David surveyed the narrowing river and the overgrown banks. At some point they were going to need to stop. “Is there a brake on this thing?”

Alexa waved a hand at a weathered structure coming up on their right. “Aim for a bumper.”

Those who heard her words felt their stomachs drop. They hadn’t thought about getting off, only getting going.

Billy kept packing their night gear. “How long until we reach our stop?”

“Half hour, maybe less. Secure the animals.”

Unsure exactly how to do that, her men used David’s blacksmithing knowledge to rearrange the animals and supplies. Alexa took pole duty and got busy shoving the larger piles of debris away from the boat. Every now and then she checked on their progress and scanned the rushing water. Estimating, she was also keeping track of the soldiers. She didn’t like the way they were whispering in a small group. She couldn’t see what they were doing, either. Merrik had switched their boxes and wagons to the rear during the night, unbalancing them and blocking everyone’s view. It screamed of trouble.

Alexa gave a noise of scorn. If Merrik thought she hadn’t been expecting this, he had underestimated her yet again. This time, he wouldn’t survive it.

The water continued to pick up speed and the debris piles in the churning mass thickened. It wasn’t long before every member of the wagon train was awake, packed, and worrying over how they would land. The banks on either side of them were lined in thick corn, with nothing else visible as they rushed along.

The force of the current quickly became strong enough to jerk the boat through the water, attempting to spin it. The land blurring by was now a concern to the travelers. How hard would they hit it, and who would they lose this time?

# BK 2 Chapter Eleven

**A Grand Island**

**1**

**“G**et her over here!”

The narrow curve in the river drew Alexa to the stern of her boat instead of answering Merrik’s order. “Brace for a bump or two. We’ll be spun into the current and continue on our way as long as the bank doesn’t stick us too deep.”

Edward frowned, estimating. “Less than a minute.”

Paul panicked. “We’ll hit their boat! Tell them to turn!”

Daniel jerked a hand at the rushing water. “How? You can’t steer in this with only poles!”

The travelers watched in nervous fear as the boat ahead of them slammed into the bank, violently jarring those aboard.

Wagons tilted toward the shoreline, digging the soldiers further into the bank.

The boat came to a halt, groaning.

“Hang on!”

They hit Merrik’s boat hard enough to knock it loose. Their own vessel shuddered at the impact, nearly coming to a stop. Screaming people and gear scattered across both decks.

Tugged by the current, the two boats bobbed and bumped nauseatingly until they were dragged back into the center of the river. The travelers quickly grabbed for items and animals that had shifted toward the edges.

Alexa observed both boats as best she could, making sure people were there and alive, but her mind stayed on the glimpse of what she’d discovered as Merrik’s boat spun. They had a large gun set up under an army tarp, with at least one man hiding with it. That would have to be handled, and soon, as the city of Grand Island was now approaching. The city looked dead from a distance, but as they began to pass small sheds and stores–an Auto Zone, a Radio Shack–there were shadows and forms that said life still existed there.

The closer they got to Grand Island, the faster the water drew them along and the narrower the banks became.

Alexa braced her feet near the rail. “This may get ugly. It looks like the bumper is missing.”

Thanks to years of mud and debris piling up, the narrowest part of the river was barely wide enough for the old boats. Merrik’s shot through the gap without touching, but the larger vehicle in the rear was too wide. Alexa’s barge hit both edges of the debris widened gap and came to a jarring halt that sent people and animals flying again. Wood cracked from the impact, spraying shrapnel as the entire boat dissolved.

“No!”

Merrik’s protest was echoed by the wagon drivers as the other boat vanished beneath the waves. The current quickly carried them away from any survivors.

The wagon drivers were devastated to lose Alexa and her men. They had already come to care for her. Merrik and his men regretted the two bounties they’d just lost.

The sullen, grieving load of men slammed into the next rotting shore bumper a few minutes later and exited the crazy ride.

Three rapid explosions tore through the peaceful silence, sending flesh and water into the air, but it wasn’t noticed by the travelers from Alexa’s boat as they fought the swirling water. Thanks to Alexa and her fighters, most of them were saved. All seven of them were excellent swimmers, and the wild current and debris here discouraged marine predators.

Alexa and her men hauled themselves and their fellow survivors to the bank, shivering in cold, wet clothes that most of them would have to walk dry. If it had been much colder that wouldn’t have been possible, but the day was surprisingly warm for this apocalyptic hell.

As they staggered to the bank with the last of the survivors, Alexa noted a waiting shadow and proceeded that way. Mark and Daniel were on her heels.

Alexa took the bag that the thief held out, not asking how he’d acquired it. He was as soaked as the rest of them, but there were also streaks of red in his hair. He’d obviously grabbed the bag and jumped while the messengers pulled the explosive cords. He had to be ghost-level good to have gotten it and survived.

The criminal laughed cruelly but didn’t speak.

Alexa turned away. The stink of evil was all over him.

She took the case to a dry spot to break the lock with her knife. Her men kept the other travelers away as they swept the muddy corn. Everyone hoped Merrik’s barge had hit the shore further down and sank.

“2013.” Alexa scanned the faded papers. “A government order to destroy Lincoln.”

Jacob frowned. “That makes no sense.”

Billy nodded. “It does if Roscoe wanted weapons because he knew this was coming.”

It made the fighters wonder if they’d been right to kill the men in River City.

Alexa put a fast stop to that. “Make no rewrites of history, my pets. We’ve only ever eliminated evil from our country. We are not the same as those we travel with.”

It was something each of her fighters had already struggled with in their own way. They were all relieved to know that it wasn’t a sin.

Alexa answered their thoughts with another frown. “I did not say there is no sin. There is always a cost for killing, make no mistake about it. That is a stain that each of us will carry forever.”

Alexa glanced toward the lingering thief. “Say it now, so that our business may be closed.”

“We’re even.” The thief was edging toward the corn. “One message for one slice of bread.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond. The thief darted into the corn and quickly vanished.

No order came to chase him down.

Her men were glad they didn’t have to go crashing through the nasty stalks again, but they didn’t like letting him roam free.

“We’ll run into that one again. Before that, we’ll see Merrik and his big gun. Get ready for it.”

**2**

“Send the wagons on and set us up.” Merrik was hopeful. They were in sight of both the river and the only road within miles. “Just in case she survived.”

“You saw what happened to our guys who tried to cross the creek.” Travis watched as the wagon drivers took off. They were all eager to be away from the destruction wrought by the blasts of the messengers blowing their packages. The three men had been conversing near the corn, with no threats in sight and they’d blown themselves up, taking Merrik’s big gun and two soldiers along for a hot ride. Those who weren’t hit by shrapnel had been lucky. Most of the men here were now bleeding, ears ringing, moaning, and ruing the day that Alexa had strode from the corn. The body of the blond slave woman wasn’t something to be concerned over.

“Alexa’s gone.” Travis scowled. “And we’ve lost half our remaining men in the blasts from the damn messengers! It’s a wonder we still have the wagons.”

“We’ll look for her!” Merrik wasn’t happy to have lost two of his mission objectives. Brian and Alexa would have paid the best rewards. All he could do now was hope she survived and brought Brian through it with her. If that happened, he had another chance. If not, he at least had the wagons. That would be enough to keep Roscoe from killing him. He hoped. Merrik planned to offer up the incompetence of his men as an excuse to provide Roscoe a target for his infamous temper.

“We’ve got company.”

They all turned at Travis’s call.

Merrik hoped to discover Alexa stumbling up the riverbank like a gentle, drowned kitten. The old woman and her two kids were unexpected. Dry from head to toe, the trio looked as if they’d come from a leisurely stroll.

“How did you get here?” Merrik paused. Was that blood on the little girl’s hands?

“We flew!” The girl giggled, bringing her bloody hand up to tear a fresh bite from what she was holding. “It was fun!”

The little boy spoke for the first time, blue eyes glowing like sapphires in front of a light. “Never flew before. I was an orphan in my other life.”

Merrik and his men stared in shock, not moving even when the old woman stuck a gnarled hand into her waist pouch.

“What happens to them, Grammie?” The girl swallowed and peered up at the old woman. “Can we eat them now?”

The old woman cackled as the soldiers flinched in fear and revulsion. She tossed the handful of dust into the air, where it hung, suspended, until she blew.

Now the soldiers tried to duck and flee, but the dust dropped the males into a deep sleep with no thought for their resistance. Thuds and squelches of falling bodies echoed.

The old woman chuckled. “Ah, to be in the slaving ports. This lot would make us rich!” She cackled again.

“So would mine.”

The old woman scowled angrily at the sound of Alexa’s voice behind her. “Go away, warrior woman. Go on your doomed quest and leave us.”

The children bared their teeth, their fangs, at Alexa and her soaked fighters, but stayed behind the old woman as she turned to face Alexa’s determined countenance.

“You’ve earned passage with your deeds. Go on to your deaths in some other terrible land.”

Alexa’s hands rested lightly on the butts of her Colts; those tapping fingers sent fresh tension through her men. It meant get ready, but none of them were. They didn’t have a clue what was going on.

Alexa sighed heavily, sweeping the unconscious soldiers and animals. “You’re responsible for us waking to the wolves.”

The old woman didn’t answer, but the little girl stuck out her tongue in confirmation.

Jacob was suddenly furious. “We’ve been protecting you! Why would you do that?”

The little boy suddenly reached over and grabbed the remaining piece of bloody meat from the girl’s hand. He took off into the nearest field with it.

The little girl gave chase, screaming like she was being sliced open.

The fighters recoiled in disgust.

The old woman’s cackle was becoming annoying.

To get the sound to stop, Alexa explained when she usually wouldn’t have. “They needed to eat. No one counts bodies during a wolf attack or a shootout.”

Jacob crossed himself. “I will fear no evil.”

“Yes. It’s an abomination to be eliminated, nothing more.”

The old woman reached for her waist as Alexa pulled the trigger.

She missed.

Or the woman moved.

None of the men was sure, but the old lady seemed to have rolled aside and reappeared exactly where she’d been.

Grammie grabbed a handful of dust and tossed it high. “Nighty-night, my pets.”

The dust was impossible to fight.

All of them fell to the damp ground.

The old woman went to where Alexa lay and knelt down long enough to cut a thick yellow curl from her crown. She lingered over those deadly Colts now lying useless by Alexa’s hand, but she didn’t take them.

“Can we eat now?” The girl rubbed her stomach as she and the boy returned from their game of chase.

“Not these. I won’t give her father a real reason to come here. She provided aid along our trip. We will reward her with their lives. Someone else will rob them of that gift, have no doubt. Eat the soldiers instead.”

“But you said I could have him!” The girl pointed to Jacob. “I want my Preacher!”

“Nooooooo!” The old woman’s face changed to all teeth and black pits of hell.

The little girl fell to the ground, cowering while the boy screamed for mercy.

The travelers who had survived the boat crash also reacted to that shouted command of death. They immediately fled.

Alexa had left them behind for their safety, fearing Merrik would have a trap set up for her that might get them caught in the crossfire. Right or wrong, it now appeared there had been worse things waiting ahead. They had all chosen to give that side of the river a wide berth.

They used a rope and debris piles to run, jump, and fall across the river, counting on the strong current to wash away predators. It worked, allowing the survivors to continue to their destination without Alexa. They were a somber group that realized they were lucky to have gotten this far. That luck had come from Alexa’s light. Now it was gone and the horrors of this hard new world were all around them once again.

**3**

Alexa and her men woke over a slow, nauseating space of ten minutes. Each of their reactions was nearly identical.

Jacob groaned, lids opening to scan for his crew.

The bodies next to him, half eaten, jerked the fighter to his feet and put his gun in hand.

“Easy.” Alexa was standing a groggy watch a few feet away. Mark and Edward were next to her.

David and Billy were nearby, both emptying their guts. Daniel was the only one still unconscious.

Jacob stayed close to him, automatically taking over for Alexa as she went to retch. He would assist their final man when he woke. It was their usual chain, but she hadn’t been first to recover. It was another confirmation that she was ill. They ate together, slept together, bled and killed together. With the new awareness that she’d given them all, if one of them hadn’t noticed it by now, they didn’t belong in this group.

Jacob studied the mess of tracks around his feet, trying to determine how long they’d been out when Daniel jerked awake. The Biker was in a low crouch an instant later, gun ready and eyes wild.

“Easy.” Jacob didn’t stare at the carnage. Merrik himself appeared to have only been snacked on lightly.

“Brian isn’t here.” Daniel controlled his guts. “Merrik’s face is half gone. True?”

*Must taste bad.* Jacob had already noted the other bodies had bites and gouges all over them. “True. We were ambushed.”

Alexa knelt down by Merrik and began to remove objects from the very dead Captain’s body. “You’ve given me something that I needed. We’re even.”

She tucked the items into her pockets and then stood at the edge of the corn, away from the death and insects. After stripping the rest of the soldiers of their guns and ammo, her fighters followed.

Alexa stared at the corn and the foggy landscape behind it, not speaking. They were able to see the edge of a house through the next massive field. Even with a limited view, her men didn’t want to go there.

“Neither do I. Right now, we have no reason to. Let’s go.” Alexa turned them toward Lincoln, keeping to the bank of the river.

Her fighters were relieved. They’d had as much of the corn and its secrets as they could tolerate. Another two days in the fields and some of their sanity might go missing.

Alexa understood. She also knew they could take much more than what they’d been given so far. The going hadn’t really gotten tough yet.

Alexa led them straight toward Lincoln, not searching for the other travelers. She mourned the wagons, but if luck led her quickly enough, the wagon contents might still be a part of the trade. Why they needed to be, she still wasn’t sure, but instinct said whoever got the wagons and the boy to Roscoe first held a needed advantage.

Alexa wanted it. She didn’t know what was going on in Lincoln, but if it were as populated as the rumors implied, then the secrets being kept there could be important–not to their quest, but to the recovery of the country. If Roscoe was dealing openly against the government, then the government had reared its head again and restarted the old ways. Afterworld was hard, especially at night, but it was honest. You knew it was trying to kill you. The government did that with a glad hand. They could never be allowed to gather enough men to fight another war.

Alexa flashed to the conversation where her father had predicted this future for the world.

*“There’ll be a space of time where the government isn’t heard from for a while and most people will believe they’re gone. Even if they aren’t hunting you anymore, don’t fall for it. They’re regrouping and planning how to come out in a way that returns control over us. When that happens, get people together and fight.”*

*“Fight the government?”*

*“Yes, as hard as you can, with every breath you have. If they come up and reassert their control unopposed, we’ve lost it all again.”*

Alexa thought about the growing number of soldiers they’d been running into, how they’d been hunting her mercilessly and throwing away man after man while doing it. Like they had a new source of manpower.

It appeared that the time was nearing for their fellow Americans to make a new stand, but Alexa didn’t think there were enough true patriots left to handle such a battle. Even if there were, Adrian was the only one who could bring those people together. He was the real Safe Haven. Without him, everyone was doomed.

**4**

“We’re being followed. Again.”

David’s observation was met with resigned sighs.

“It’s the thief.” Paul had been the second one to wake up. When he joined Mark on the watch without talking, the Convict had been surprised and glad. Mark didn’t like Paul and didn’t want him along, but when he’d woken to discover all the bodies and blood around him, he’d been eager for any of their group to wake, even the Rabbit. “Should I collect him? I’ll be gentle.”

Alexa waved him on.

Billy darted into the weeds alongside their faint dirt path and disappeared.

Edward scanned and found no one watching him. He quickly scraped off the bug goop the girl had smeared on and was astounded to find the deep slice almost healed. “Wow.”

“Yeah, the old world would have charged for that. Here, it’s free.”

Edward hadn’t heard Jacob come up behind him. He controlled the flinch that came from being sucker punched twice by the same fist in one trip. “Not really. Millions of dead Americans paid for it in blood.”

Jacob couldn’t argue.

Less than five minutes later, Billy reappeared with his prize, bound and gagged. The thief had picked up a black robe and boots that gave him the appearance of a monk when he was set on his feet.

Alexa motioned for the gag to be removed, but kept them rolling forward. She wanted to be in Lincoln ASAP. “Why are you following us?”

“I want to join you.”

“You’re joining Roscoe.”

The thief shook his head, tongue shooting out to run across his cracked lips. “You can’t give me to Roscoe.”

Alexa raised a brow. “No?”

“Please, he’ll kill me and I didn’t do none of it!”

The loudness of his protest drew an immediate reaction from Mark. He replaced the gag.

Alexa didn’t stop.

Her men made sure the thief stayed in the center where he was protected, but also under tight scrutiny. If Alexa decided to help the thief, they would be doing this anyway.

Paul scowled thickly at the new guy.

The thief made a face at him.

Paul spat toward the thief, wiping away the sloppy grin.

The thief muttered through his gag. Impossible to tell what he was saying, all of them quickly tuned him out.

“Why weren’t we killed too?”

Paul’s question was one all of the men were wondering about. They waited instead of shushing the scientist.

“Did we have some sort of protection because of you?”

Alexa sighed. She’d done more talking on this trip than she’d done in years. “Partly because of my father, but mostly because of the unspoken rules. We protected them, fed them. A debt isn’t something to leave unpaid.”

“It felt like more than that.” Paul was sure of it now. “Like we were protected.”

Billy reminded them of the tracks they’d found at Merrik’s slaughter. “The wagon drivers weren’t killed. They didn’t help the old woman.”

“Our guy paid a fee.” Edward now realized what it had meant. “A couple of us saw him give them a pouch. I thought he was being generous.”

“They knew the whole time!” Billy was finally angry.

Alexa shrugged. “We didn’t have a deal for anything more than a ride. It doesn’t matter anyway. They’re coming.”

They all turned to discover the wagons slowly rounding the farthest bend behind them.

“How did you hear that?” Paul stared in wonder. “I still don’t.”

Alexa didn’t answer. She’d felt them, not heard them. The driver in the lead had spotted her. His relief had been a loud mental shout of devoted joy.

“Don’t scold them for leaving when they woke.” Daniel looked at Paul. “They came back. It’s enough.”

Paul nodded. He didn’t feel like yelling anymore, only sleeping. The weariness had settled over him suddenly and he wasn’t sure how much more walking he could do despite being rested from their boat traveling. Fighting the water had worn him out.

The wagons stopped by Alexa. The lead man waved a hand at the seat next to him.

“Thank you.”

“My honor!”

Alexa climbed up and peered into the wagon. She spied Brian’s violet eyes lit with contentment as Mark and Edward greeted him like friends.

She turned around without ruining the good feeling now flooding her men. They thought the worst was over*. And I’d hoped the boy was gone again, off on his own where he might have a chance to live. At my side, he doesn’t.*

**5**

The ride through the nighttime wasn’t calm and pleasant, despite the better company. The thick fog hid small, chittering black forms that scurried between the feet of the mules to make them snort nervously. The drivers handled them as if they’d made this trip a hundred times. For all the others knew, maybe these tough old men had.

Alexa stayed in the driver’s seat of the front wagon. When they needed a break, she and her men took over. The drivers had to have rest, but their mules were fine to keep going until daylight. Alexa wasn’t stopping before that unless she had to. There was a feeling, a pull toward a peaceful place, and she planned to spend a few hours resting there.

As the night wore on, Alexa slowed their pace to give the mules a small break. When the shadows thickened and the huge animals twitched and snorted, she sang words and tunes from childhood memories. The mournful notes drifted over their convoy like a protective mist.

In the rear, Edward and Paul listened to the faint, haunting song with silent appreciation. In front of them, Billy and David shared grins and a smoke. Directly behind Alexa, Daniel and Mark listened with increasing worry. They were close enough to hear the song. It was about accepting death, not fighting it.

“When are we going to talk to her again?”

Mark loosened his hold on the reins as the mules began to calm. “Not sure. She isn’t open to personal questions and observations, you know?”

Daniel snorted. “Yeah.”

They listened to the chorus in dismay.

*“We’ll travel far, travel far*

*We’ll reach a star, reach a star*

*We’ll hold our guns and give our sons*

*We’ll bleed and die*

*We’ll touch the sky*

*Our quest undone…”*

Mark sighed. “I’ll try again.”

“No. I’ll take a go at it next.”

Mark didn’t argue with Daniel. He hated confronting Alexa on anything. It wasn’t fear of her temper or even of being cast out. He’d just never respected anyone as much. It felt wrong to question her. He hadn’t cared for anyone his entire life, until her, until these men. And now it looked like she was dying.

“Lights ahead.”

Alexa sent the alert softly, sure that her men were listening. Dawn was still a couple hours off and they were all exhausted. Sometimes the sound of a voice after so much quiet could bring alertness as fast as a gunshot. Voices usually meant trouble.

Alexa didn’t stop or consider steering around. She suspected whom those lights belonged to, but even if she were wrong, they had to stop. The sleep dust hadn’t been restful. It felt like they’d been traveling for weeks without a real break.

The path they’d been on narrowed; the result was a once again limited view through the corn. Alexa was sick of it. She’d just as soon set it all ablaze and fight the flames instead.

The light ahead became brighter. Low mutters echoed over the clip-clop of the tired mules.

“Who is it?”

“Is it her?”

“I told you she’d come!”

The other travelers hadn’t fled far before stopping. They’d felt naked without Alexa’s protection, but they’d also felt a loyalty to her that had allowed them to agree to wait one day for her to catch up. They’d spent the time resting and listening for her Colts.

“It’s her!”

Alexa’s wagon was surrounded as she entered their small camp. She was pleased to find them all sharing one fire. The deaths had bonded them. They could fight together now if need be.

Alexa only counted two dozen here and hated herself for not saving more of her people. She tolerated the greetings and gentle touches, but inside, she cringed in shame. *I lost so many!*

Mark and Edward understood what she was feeling. They eased the people back, telling them she needed to sleep. Alexa let them lead her to a small but clean tent where she surrendered to the darkness that held no accusations.

**6**

“How long to Lincoln?” Jacob was standing guard outside Alexa’s tent with Jacob.

“If we leave at dawn, we’d be there by nightfall. But we’re not going at dawn even if she orders it. Tell the others.”

Jacob didn’t argue with Billy. He went to where Edward was standing watch over the most vulnerable side of the small, long ago emptied orchard. Near them, the mules and drivers were settling down. The thief had been forced back into the mapmaker’s wooden cell shortly after they’d arrived.

Alexa’s men hadn’t protested. They didn’t trust the sleaze either, but they also assumed he had something else that Alexa wanted. They made sure he wasn’t hurt.

“Billy says we’re not leaving on time, no matter what the boss says.”

Edward pulled a face. “And who gets to tell her that?”

Jacob shrugged. “All of us, I assume.”

“It won’t be enough to keep her here if she decides to go. You know that.”

“I do, but Billy was pretty sure.”

Edward ran a tired hand over his face. “Might as well nail her on the bite too, find out what we’re in for.”

Jacob gave his support eagerly. “Agreed. There’s gotta be something we can do for her.”

“I also think, if we’re gonna do this, that we should do it all the way.”

Jacob’s brows drew together in confusion. “I’m not sure…”

He followed Edward’s line of sight to where Paul was curling up in a bedroll under the wagon next to Alexa’s tent. She’d gone out quickly. All six of her men had denied Paul entrance to the canvas. She hadn’t asked for him or anyone else, and unless she woke with a ni–

“Ahhhh! No, you won’t!”

Alexa’s roar disturbed the entire camp, bringing the people and animals to panicking alertness.

“Damn!” Edward cursed their oversight, grabbing a mule’s lead as it tried to escape Alexa’s hoarse shouts and screams. “Get someone in there!”

“I’ve got it!” Daniel ducked into the tent and used the method she’d taught them to wake her when she was dangerous. He talked to her, keeping his distance. “Alexa, Safe Haven waits for us.”

Alexa’s shouts ceased; her lashes slowly opened.

Daniel sighed in relief and eased down onto the bedroll with her. “You were…”

“Screaming.”

When she shut her eyes, Daniel was horrified to watch tears roll from beneath her lashes.

“Alexa?” Daniel was lost. He hadn’t thought she was capable of crying!

Alexa’s tears were a waterfall. The Biker gathered her into his arms and held her. He couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Daniel came from the tent a bit later and waved Paul inside.

Paul hurried. Her screams had been blood curdling. He never wanted to hear them again for as long as he lived.

Daniel joined the small group of shaken travelers around the fire, waving off their concern. “She had a nightmare. Who doesn’t have those in Afterworld?”

The travelers understood that all too well. They returned to their beds to wait for sleep’s second visit.

Daniel waited until they were the only ones awake, and then gestured to his teammates. When they were all gathered close enough to hear, he put them into Alexa’s back-to-back watch formation for the conversation. “She’s changing inside. She’s weaker during the day, stronger at night when she’s fed. She needs to have a transfusion, something only the government can provide now.”

“We could break into a bunker.” Billy thought about it for a moment. “Maybe find a scientist who knows how to get it done?”

Edward shook his head. “Too risky. And even if it succeeded, we’d never get her back out.”

“What about keeping her fed and accepting the fact that she’s now a fucking vampire!” Mark hissed lowly. “We can’t cure her and I’ll strangle any man who says we have to kill her.”

There was a thick silence for a long time as they stood watch and contemplated those awful words. They’d only had her to themselves for a short while and the effects of the quest were already interfering.

“There has to be something else.” Daniel was sure of it. “We just don’t know about it.”

David nodded. “We don’t. But we know someone who might.”

Edward frowned. “If you mean the troll, how would we contact him? We don’t have her…skills.”

“Do you suppose getting rid of the infant…killing it, would cure her?”

That question earned Billy five nasty glares that only resumed sweeping the landscape after he lowered his head in shame for suggesting it.

“Sorry.” Billy was. He didn’t like the idea either.

Edward forced out words around the need to strike his teammate. Alexa would leave them if she found out they’d thought of something like that, let alone discussed it. “I don’t know what to do yet, but I do know it’s not that. Who else has an idea?”

The six men stayed close as dawn slowly approached, coming up with ideas and then shooting them down until each of them was weary beyond words.

When daylight came, the mule drivers took up guard positions without being asked or told.

Alexa’s men all piled into the small tent with her for a few hours of much needed rest. They hadn’t settled on an idea. They didn’t have a clue what to do for her, other than to make sure she got the food she needed. Right now, that seemed to be Paul’s blood. Later, when she needed something hardier, they would talk again. Leaving her side wasn’t discussed, despite the danger she would pose to each of them. They’d been risking their lives with her all along. It was a part of the job and inside, each of them believed they would die on this quest anyway. She’d as much as told them so upon picking them, and yet, they were all here. It was fate. There was little point in fighting what each of them had secretly hoped for in the first place. Men without a death wish wouldn’t have signed up for a quest like this.

# BK 2 Chapter Twelve

**Lincoln**

**1**

**L**incoln, Nebraska was a welcome sight to only a couple of the travelers. The wind that had haunted them for the entire trek fell silent as they stared at the skyline. Grand Island had been something to view, but these towering buildings and deserted overpasses were impressive. The feats of the old world were easy to marvel at when facing structures that rose into the green haze. That technology no longer existed, but those tall, slowly eroding buildings were a symbol of a world gone, yet still longed for. Most of the group understood it was dangerous even after all this time and braced for trouble as they topped the last miniscule rise. The road that led into the city was long, allowing those in the city a clear view, a clear shot.

Alexa motioned her fighters into the same formation and cover that they’d used when she collected David and Jacob from River City. “Let’s go.”

The road was narrow dirt, kept clear of weeds and corn by being used as a garbage dump. Alexa waved at the drivers to walk alongside it instead of trying to force the mules to ignore all the rotting scraps. It clearly drew a lot of wildlife. The scat was abundant.

Alexa admired the hunting grounds even as she hated it being so close to the city gates. Garbage encouraged diseases and there were few doctors left. “Bring him up.”

Mark brought the thief to the center of their formation, ignoring the mapmaker’s protests.

As the road wound down the tiny incline, it gradually widened and connected with two other small dirt and garbage roads. All three paths led into different areas of the city.

Alexa surveyed the thief as they reached the intersection. In the distance the city was still and silent, foreboding in its absence of expected chaos.

The thief answered her silent question. “Straight ahead for Roscoe. Right for black, left for white.”

Alexa and her men didn’t like those words, but race issues were still as ugly as they’d always been. Self-segregation was common.

Alexa led them straight, not ready to fight either side of that war. She had both black and white among these travelers, along with Chinese and Mexican. Her own group probably wasn’t welcome at all.

“We’ll get to Roscoe Street about half a mile in. You’ll know it when we get there.”

Edward and Mark tried to guess.

“Traps? Guards?”

“Soldiers?”

“No, to all three. Roscoe wants people to come into the city. He trades with everyone and then sends them on their way.”

“So, there will be soldiers?” Edward didn’t like their guide one bit.

“No. He makes them come in on foot, in pairs. They have to camp outside the city limits, like any other armed group he deems to be dangerous.”

Alexa and her men immediately began examining the terrain for the best vantage point to camp at when Roscoe declared them unsafe to bed down inside.

“So what’s the plan for me?” The thief moved to her side.

Daniel shoved him over and stayed between them.

“Where are my other messages?” Alexa slowed but didn’t stop.

The thief slowly took a roll of faded, wrinkled papers from his pocket. His thin face was covered in fear and mistrust. “You’ll save me from him?”

“Yes.” Alexa’s voice was cold. “Neither Roscoe, nor his men, will kill you.”

The thief was happy with that. Her kind wasn’t allowed to lie. “Here then and good luck. I don’t know that code.”

Alexa stopped to scan the papers, uncaring that they were in plain view of all three roads. She didn’t want to end anyone here except Roscoe, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t react if fired upon.

Paul knew the codes. A quick glance over Alexa’s shoulder gave him inside information on the second letter that she opened as they walked. The third missive she tucked into her cloak, disappointing them all.

“Any idea what that means?” The thief studied it. “I’ve read a lot of codes, broken a lot too, but never saw one that used so many full words for each letter.”

Alexa had recognized it immediately. It had taken her years to learn. “The government was making first contact with Lincoln. They wanted to know who had control, how things were being run. They were requesting a full city inventory. It’s dated before the destruction order.”

“Wait ‘til he hears that!” The thief laughed harshly. “Just what he wanted.”

Alexa understood the thief knew a lot more than he’d let on and chose his future right there. “He’ll pay for you, and then lock you up. We’ll get you out.”

The thief frowned. “He might kill me as soon as he spots me.”

Alexa didn’t change her plans. “I’ll handle Roscoe.”

The thief didn’t argue further, but it was obvious from his face that he didn’t like her plan.

Alexa was counting on that, as she was counting on Roscoe not being what everyone said he was. She wasn’t going to promise to kill a good man to save a thief and rapist, even if he was useful. Alexa now held little doubt that the man was guilty of everything he was wanted for. She would always take something like that into account. He’d lied to her repeatedly. She wouldn’t forget it.

When he didn’t think it would be noticed, Edward took Paul’s arm and slowed them a bit. “What was it?” He and the others were slowly learning the codes, but Alexa refused to let them write it down except for teaching moments in the dirt. It was taking them all longer than they were happy with.

Paul shook his head. “Bite me!”

Edward tightened his grip until the scientist’s face turned red.

“Fine!” Paul jerked away to rub his newest bruise. “It’s a bounty order for Alexa Mitchel, daughter of the most wanted fugitive on American soil!”

“But he isn’t here anymore.” Edward was confused.

“No shit! Now get us into place before the eyes in the back of her head open up and I get blamed for this, too.”

Surprised, Edward did as he’d been told.

As they neared the signposts, it was easier to detect the racial divide that waited inside for them. The sign on the white side had a skeleton hanging from it. The black sign had the same, only there was another pile of old bones beneath it.

The sign for Roscoe Street was a simple wooden board with that exact title scratched across. It gave a feeling of being neutral that only Alexa’s men didn’t fall for. The other travelers were murmuring and chatting softly in excitement at reaching their destination alive. Even their animals perked up.

Alexa drew one gun and let it hang along her hip. Her men did the same as the travelers behind them all tensed, scanning for the trouble.

“You won’t need those.” The thief was now out ahead of Alexa, swaggering cockily through the first decaying buildings. “I told you. He wants people here.”

David concentrated. “All people?”

The thief nodded. “His crew is a mix. Everyone else stays to their side of the lines. We don’t have problems.”

“The bones back there say otherwise.” Daniel didn’t hide his sarcasm. “Keep lying, dead man. She sees right through you.”

The thief flushed scarlet and turned to protest to Alexa.

Alexa’s cold expression discouraged him.

“No eyes on us yet, Boss.” Mark stayed close to her. He was the middle, right spoke on the wheel. He didn’t intend to leave Alexa’s side while they were in here.

Alexa didn’t comment on his words or thoughts. She liked it that her men were protective. It was a result of their bond. They cared for each other, respected each other. She would do the same for them that they did for her and they knew it. She pitied any woman who fell in love with one of her men. That female would never be able to live up to what these men needed. Only her kind would ever be enough for them now.

“How does he handle groups who cause trouble?” David watched garbage roll across the broken street ahead of them. The dirt was about to become concrete, but it was full of ruts and weeds.

The thief pointed to a small rise where a large prison sat in glorious abandon. “He has them locked in the prison until they agree to follow the rules.”

“Or he sends them on their way?” David continued to get details.

“No. He keeps them until they agree. A year in a cell will settle anyone down.”

None of Alexa’s men liked hearing that, but it was hard to argue with. As long as the people were fed, it wasn’t exactly right or wrong. And it was miles ahead of simply killing them.

Paul caught something the others had missed. “So, they can’t leave the city either, right?”

“No one wants to. Roscoe has a great setup here. You may not want to leave, either.”

“Tell us about it.” Alexa swept the tall buildings, dark alleyways, and dead streetlights. There were abandoned, rusting automobiles and all the other debris they’d come to associate with the apocalypse, including fading bloodstains, shell casings, and bones.

“He uses the river for power. His street even has running water.”

“Hot water?” Mark hadn’t had a hot shower in years. A used bath in grimy, tepid water was usually the best to be found in any town now.

“Yeah, it’s Heaven.” The thief turned around to examine them as he walked backward. “He serves a nightly buffet with steaks and burgers, and corn that you can eat without getting sick.”

Alexa’s men felt the draw, but they resisted asking any more questions.

Alexa also stayed silent, willing to let the man ramble on with his lies. Steaks and hot water were only memories in most of the places she’d been, and even the few who’d had them couldn’t sustain them for long. There was no wealthy class anymore.

*Clop. Clop. Clop.*

The sound of a horse echoed. Alexa motioned them to keep going. If Roscoe had a welcome party waiting, her men would handle it.

The fighters tensed at the sight of a large wagon rolling around the corner and into their path. It only took a few seconds to see that it was piled with fresh garbage.

The travelers made their way to the side of the cracked, weedy street.

The garbage wagon was being pulled by two oxen and driven by a heavily bearded old man who stared curiously at them as he passed. “Good day, folks.” The man’s eyes slid to Alexa’s Colts and then to her men.

“Good day to you, sir. Where can we find a town merchant?”

Almost by them, the driver had to swivel around to point. “Straight ahead to that old church and go left, Lady. Can’t miss it.”

“My thanks.” Alexa turned toward the downtown area. She didn’t look back and her men didn’t either. If she wasn’t worried over it, they needn’t be either, was a rule they were adjusting to.

“I told you where to go.” The thief stared at Alexa in reproach. “I’m not lying.”

“Then why do you mind if I verify that information?”

The thief glared at her dry tone. “It’s my honor, that’s why!”

“Do you have a lot of that?”

The thief flushed before taking a place by Paul.

Mark and Edward exchanged amused glances and then sent their attention back to the ominous landscape. The buildings above them implied they could crumble at the slightest vibration and while both men knew it was an illusion, it didn’t stop the worry. These old structures might have been built to last a lifetime, but they hadn’t been designed to withstand a war.

As if to prove the point, several roof tiles dropped heavily to the ground in front of them, throwing up clouds of dust and dirt.

The men stepped over the rubble, staying in formation. They’d been worse places while fighting with Alexa, but most of them had been in worse areas even before joining her quest.

“Questions, my pets. Everyone ready?”

It was fascinating to watch her men brighten as if suddenly filled with life. Their heads rose and strides became lighter, faces easing into eagerness like rain sweeping across a thirsting landscape.

“The best meeting place for a group that gets split up.”

The men searched their steel landscape, but no one spoke right away or tossed out clumsily given guesses. She wanted her men to think about their answers first. Even Paul remained silent.

The other travelers quieted to be able to hear the lesson, as Alexa had intended.

“The tower at two o’clock.” Edward pointed. “We’d be able to view the entire city from there, I’d bet.”

Mark, who’d been about to suggest the same place, nodded. “Exactly.”

“Then that is our spot.” Alexa shifted slightly to show Edward a different location by hand code. He would make sure the rest of their men knew, but not anyone else. “Name three items that can still be scavenged from a city even after thousands of survivors have come through.”

That one was harder. They all paced forward in thoughtful quiet as they swept buildings and signs for the answer. It wasn’t until the library came into view that anyone felt confident enough to try.

“Books, right? Information?”

“Yes.”

Billy grinned, but he knew it hadn’t been a full credit because the crumbling brick building they were now passing had triggered the idea. He struggled to think. What else would people ignore? “Materials, like from the buildings?”

“Perhaps, but not on my list as useful in the same way that books are.” Alexa increased her own alertness while she had them distracted.

Daniel gave them the second answer. “Equipment, like medical machines and electronics. There’s so much of the computer stuff that it won’t ever all be looted or destroyed, and the medical stuff needs too much power and training to use.”

Alexa nodded. “One more.”

David gave the final response. “Cars? Vehicles?”

“Yes. They won’t have power or fuel, but cars and trucks will always be in these cities, usually right where their owners left them. And a few, my pets, will be useable.”

“After you charge the battery and add gas?” Paul liked knowing how to get a car rolling if he had to. Transportation was something he’d been thinking about a lot.

Edward answered his student reluctantly. He still didn’t want Paul with them and he was glad they were here, where the scientist would stay. “Yes, though luck will matter a great deal this long after. Internal parts erode. And you’d have to check other things, like having water in the radiator, no water in the engine, oil filled. It’s just basic mechanics.”

Paul didn’t respond. He was trying to imagine himself doing all of that alone and failing badly.

Alexa sensed they were nearing a contact point. “Tell me what we should *not* do while we’re here.”

“Make noise.” Mark glared at Paul.

Paul, still in his thoughts of vehicle hell, missed it.

Daniel also frowned at Paul. “Get split up.”

Jacob gave the next answer. “Become distracted. We keep our eyes on you.”

Alexa straightened her shoulders and the command of a leader flowed from her lips. “My rules, one through five.”

The men recited them together.

“My life is your life to give. Mercy only goes to those who deserve it. Justice, the true law of the land, will always be honored.”

Their voices in harmony were fascinating. The travelers listened studiously.

“There is no order that I am given that I won’t follow. I will never quit this quest, even when I’m dead!”

They shouted the last, sending birds into the sky and snorts through their animals.

The men checked their weapons and silenced their gear.

The thief realized she’d gotten them set to fight. “What are you doing? Roscoe wants people here!”

They ignored him, making sure weapons they already knew were ready, were ready. It was a habit that Alexa had insisted they get into.

“Wait!” The thief stopped in front of Alexa in panic. “You can’t do this.”

Edward looked at Alexa with a raised brow.

She nodded. “Take care of that.”

All six of Alexa’s men rushed forward before the thief could react. As they marched his struggling body forward with Edward’s huge hand over his mouth, the other men tied his hands and secured the gag.

Mark jerked the thief’s arm out and swung him up over his shoulder so the others could tie his ankles. Now secured, Mark and Edward took the struggling thief to the rear of the first wagon and dumped him roughly inside. Daniel then climbed in next to him.

The shocked travelers put a bit of distance between them and the fighters, but the other men resumed their places by Alexa without glancing at anyone else. It was proof of their vow to follow any order given.

Their reputations increased with the fear. Those who had survived this trip now had stories that everyone they encountered would pay to hear.

“Final question.” Alexa saw the corner that proclaimed a change in scenery. The edges of bright green trees were waving gently in the breeze. “Where is the sniper they supposedly don’t have?”

Silence came.

Alexa glanced around pointedly. “Exactly. Our chosen meeting place would be an excellent spot for a sniper. Watch your six.”

It was an important detail that none of them had thought about, but now they knew to beware of that if they did have to meet somewhere. The travelers wouldn’t be surprised when they fled there, and Alexa’s group wouldn’t be surprised when they tried to help the travelers escape the city. Alexa wouldn’t allow these people to be held against their will.

The trees ahead of them became larger, clearer, revealing themselves as large plastic displays that were moldy and cracked throughout their length. It gave the trees a realistic appearance that caught attention. It would have been easy to miss the forms of people standing behind those trees. Alexa hadn’t, but she waited to discover if her men had.

Daniel was eager for action now. “Want us to flush ‘em out?”

Jacob wasn’t. “I’ll negotiate, if you want.”

Alexa loved him for it. He valued all life and hated to shoot before talking.

“We’ll let them come to us.” Alexa said it as they neared the first person who had to know they were no longer hidden. “We’ll talk, trade, stay a night, and be on our way.”

A female voice came from behind the trees. “You’d have to cross the line to talk. We can’t.”

Alexa slowed her stride to allow the shadowy girl to keep pace. “Black or white?”

“Both, and therefore, outcasts. We stay on this side of the city and the others leave us alone.”

Alexa spotted the welcoming party posted beyond the plastic trees and gave a quick promise. “I’ll stop by your area while I’m here. Find me then.”

“I’ll be at the ceremony seeing my dad off. Talk to Robert.”

The shadow ran away, leaving Alexa to frown as they reached the line of men waiting for them.

Behind the townsmen was an iron gate as tall as the nearest buildings. The ten men, two clusters of sagging shoulders and bearded faces, slowed the convoy, but not Alexa. She strode straight to them, talking.

“I have several deliveries and I’m only making them to Roscoe. His orders.”

The tallest man had a dusty clipboard. He rifled through the papers. “Sorry, ma’am, but he’s out in the neighborhoods right now. You can give me the ID numbers and I’ll send someone for him.”

Alexa was aware of the wagon train very slowly following her through the gap in the men, forcing them to retreat a few paces to make room for the mules and horses. “Tell him I have all three of his packages.”

The pen stopped and the thin, haggard face came up. Cliff shifted his glasses further onto his nose. “Really? All three?”

“We also met one of Roscoe’s scavengers on the Stairway of Hard to Reach Places. He won’t be making *his* delivery.”

“Rick, too?” Cliff groaned. “That’s sure to improve Roscoe’s mood. He’ll be here at lunch time–”

“I’m not waiting. Send someone out now.”

Cliff scowled at her. “Hey! Roscoe isn’t to be called to your side like some adoring lover. He’s the Mayor here, our leader and we don’t–”

“He has two hours. After that, I’m taking my three possessions back out into the wilderness. Maybe to Port City.”

Cliff motioned to one of the closest men, grunting. “Go get him.”

“Where do you want us to wait?” Alexa subtly drew every drop of energy from Cliff that she could without him noticing.

Cliff struggled to break the sudden lethargy sweeping over him. He was exhausted. “We have an area for new people. Nice hotel once upon a time.”

“And our animals? Supplies?”

Cliff surveyed the few wagons and families, and shrugged. “How about a warehouse next block over?”

“We’ll all take the warehouse. And my thanks.”

“Sure, sure.” Cliff wasn’t sure why he was so tired. “Go left at the next block and down Roscoe Street to the fencing. It borders the warehouse.”

“My thanks.”

Cliff watched them all pass in a daze. He needed a nap.

Alexa smirked once he couldn’t observe her face anymore.

**2**

It was soon clear why Roscoe made newcomers travel the length of his street. The citizens already here were lining their windows, porches, and doors to get a good view. There were even a few people taking pictures on old camera phones.

Alexa increased her pace a bit. There were dozens of people on both sides of the street, more than enough to overwhelm them. She wasn’t worried over her men, only over those who might be hit in the crossfire. She nodded politely to several of the more curious people now approaching the street. Alexa was sure if there were problems, others would join in and she wasn’t fooled by their civilized appearance. Suits and neat hairdos didn’t mean much in comparison to the fact that these folks had apparently survived the fall of this city. Alexa was willing to bet that most of these gawking residents had lived here before the war.

The homes sheltering these residents drew her attention next. She admired the small gardens in front of each. She didn’t care for their trash pile being in the middle of the street, though. There was so much garbage that her group had to move to the side again to get by it, but she understood that was where people would throw it anyway and so it saved a stage of collection. She wondered if they were using the same type of setup with human waste. Other than manure, she didn’t smell much in the way of bad odors, despite the landfill piles. She assumed they were dusting it with something. That implied organization.

The clothes caught the attention of her men–the clothes of the women. They hadn’t been around females dressed for success since the war, and it was enough to keep them doing second takes. Alexa didn’t scold them.

Many of the travelers were staring. There was a lot that they hadn’t expected. There were vines of fresh fruits and vegetables that they hadn’t had in years, livestock pens and meat hanging from eaves. There were butter churns and washboards, and on a few of the porches, camping stoves that replaced cooking fires. It was impressive, and yet, sad in some way that the fighters couldn’t define. The faces of these residents were long and tired, like there was an invisible weight holding them down.

“No kids.” Edward had no hopes they would find a good man in charge here. He understood harshness was called for, but segregating a city was wrong. To function properly, a city needed everyone.

“No elderly, either.” Jacob tried to be hopeful. “Maybe they send both of those inside whenever new people come through?”

“Maybe.” Edward didn’t believe that. There were rockers on these porches, but they were covered in cobwebs and while the gardens were growing, they had the look of sparse care. Elderly populations usually took care of gardens and rocking chairs in ways that these hadn’t experienced in a long time. Edward was sure if he sat in any of those chairs, they would collapse. “Nice show we’re getting.”

Alexa heard, but didn’t comment. There was a lot going on in Lincoln. She wanted to know all of it. Her men would pick up much of it, and she would put the rest together to come up with an answer. She would have it shortly after meeting their leader to decide his fate. Unfortunately, she’d already discovered too much to simply shoot Roscoe and be on her way. He’d either put this city together or kept it together during the collapse. That type of person was rare, maybe even special.

Descendants had their own ways of doing things, including gathering dangerous objects to keep them out of the hands of others. If that was the case, then Roscoe might still be in charge here when they left. As for the segregation her men were having trouble with, Alexa thought it was a tolerable idea for so large of a city without a police force. In time, the race lines would blur on their own, like they always did. Letting people live with their own kind often made them more grateful to have other places to go. Surviving with family was rough, no matter who you were.

None of the people were armed and no one spoke to them. The silent staring was a bit unnerving. The travelers were glad when the chain link fence around the warehouse came into view. The number of people in the lavish homes on each side of the street had only increased the further they got into the city, though it was clearly the less respected folks who lived this close to a holding area. The travelers could tell the difference in the gaunt bodies and absence of gardens. It looked as though they weren’t given as much as those closer to the center of the street, where large homes rose into the sky.

The mini mansions had belonged to politicians before the war and still did now, Alexa guessed. One of them would belong to Roscoe, and the other two were likely his second and third in command’s living quarters. She didn’t care for a leader who set himself so far above his people, but she was willing to bet that was also intentional. She was detecting things that reminded her of clever, careful leadership. She motioned Edward and Mark to open the fence while she stood still and searched for more clues as to what they were heading into.

A painted sign, and then three more lined up next to it, grabbed their attention.

*Be in by dusk. Gates shut at dark.*

*Respect the zones. Stay with your own.*

*All ages must be reported to the Lincoln Council.*

*Theft from gardens or livestock pens earns a grave.*

Alexa saw no sentry posts, no way to control an unruly mob. She assumed Roscoe didn’t feel the need for any. If he was evil, she would make him sorry he hadn’t done that. She and her men could turn this street into a gallery in seconds.

The Bayer warehouse was lined in a reinforced chain link fence with barbed wire on the top that had been bent down from years of bad weather and no maintenance. The front door was open, showing a main room that was dusty and devoid of everything except for a few cots and barrels to be used as chairs.

Alexa directed the animals and wagons through the loading doors after her men cleared the inside, then the travelers were allowed to enter. It wasn’t plush, but after the trek they’d all just made, it was still nice. The group settled down gratefully. They’d made it to Lincoln. They were here.

Alexa’s men cleared the rest of their lodgings, sharing deep frowns. Other than dust and basic provisions, the warehouse was a huge, completely empty set of rooms. The impression of a holding cell became stronger. This was a jail.

Alexa put two men on watch and sat down near the center of the room to roll a smoke. The others would relax, maybe even sleep a little, but she would stay alert and be ready when Roscoe came. She wanted no more surprises.

**3**

“Hi, I’m Roscoe.”

Alexa and everyone else stared at the boy in the doorway, shocked. He was short, thin, and dressed like a dandy in a flowing blue robe over a once expensive suit.

“Welcome to Lincoln.”

Alexa advanced toward him slowly, studying. There was intelligence in that somber blue gaze, but not the type to have done everything they’d seen. “Where’s your father?”

The boy’s smile brightened. “In his place, of course. Come along now.”

Alexa’s men strode to her side, but the other travelers stayed where they were, even the mapmaker, who had realized he’d lost his reward but didn’t care so long as the thief was punished. The travelers had agreed it was safer to let Alexa meet Roscoe alone and miss any shooting that might occur. The wagon drivers, who’d made this stop once before, said they hadn’t dealt with Roscoe directly. They also stayed behind.

Edward carried the thief over one shoulder and kept watch on Paul, who had insisted on going to any leadership meetings that happened here. When Alexa hadn’t refused, none of her men could think of a good enough reason to deny the scientist. In fact, it was a good idea if they were leaving him here. The sooner he met the town, and vice versa, the better. Brian had also wanted to go along, but Alexa had denied him. She wasn’t going to deliver all three packages at once.

Alexa followed young Roscoe from the warehouse and out into the small crowd that was still lining the street. There was surprise and outrage when they recognized the bound, struggling thief over Edward’s broad shoulder.

Alexa’s men exchanged wary glances and surrounded their mistress with their bodies in case the crowd grew hostile. A few dozen wasn’t a match for them, but it would mean risking Alexa and Paul during the shooting, two lives they were sworn to protect.

A whispered call came from their right. “It’s her! Safe Haven!”

The words spread through the crowd like a disease, lighting up faces in abject hatred and misery.

Alexa wasn’t confused about the reaction, only about the cause. She took her hands away from the butts of her gun. “Easy, Eagles.”

Her men followed her lead as much as their own instincts would allow, but each of them was ready to draw–even Edward with two charges to care for. The fact that she’d called them Eagles was stored for later personal enjoyment.

Paul, feeling the unrest, moved closer to Alexa so that Edward could do the same. Over his shoulder, the thief had stopped struggling and was now banging his head repeatedly against Edward’s hip instead.

Edward delivered a jolting shake to end the bad behavior and then continued on his way.

Young Roscoe stopped outside the Lincoln State building to give Alexa that same fake smile. “He’s waiting for you.”

Alexa didn’t hesitate, but when her hand revisited her guns, the fighters understood they weren’t to trust young Roscoe.

Alexa felt like it might be an ambush. Thanks to her fighters learning to read her body language, she didn’t need to say it. All of them expected to discover soldiers filling the hallways as Alexa opened both wide front doors.

The hall was dark and cold. Alexa’s men stayed close as the doors shut behind them.

Like any other former State building, Lincoln’s was marble, brick, and metal combined to create an atmosphere of authoritative tension that lingered even now. On the walls, paintings remained, along with notices not to smoke and court docket copies for families and lawyers. It looked recent, wrong. Everything was in place.

“This way.” Young Roscoe led them toward a faint yellow light showing from an under a distant door.

Alexa stopped and waited for her men to be set. Her own orbs had adjusted immediately to reveal dark, dusty halls, stacks of books, and no people.

Jacob was usually last on this point. “I’m good.”

He often tried to conquer that weakness by using his long distance sight at night while they were camped. He wasn’t sure if it would help, but he figured there was little harm in picking out small, far away objects while on guard duty.

Jacob caught a glimpse of shadows moving under the tall door in front of them and felt his nerves coil into a tight wire.

Young Roscoe pulled the door open, holding it for them. “To the right.”

Alexa went in first. She immediately moved aside to allow her men through. She didn’t sense a threat yet, but it was how she trained them–by example.

Once they were all inside, she allowed their guide to hold a second door that led into a long, rectangular room with three men standing at the far end of an old, wide desk. David guessed it weighed as much as any nag that he’d ever shod.

“Welcome! Welcome to Lincoln!”

The greeting was sent with eagerness and affection that surprised Alexa’s men. Three heavily robed males, one black and two white, all with long, graying beards, were not what they’d expected. Nor had they thought to discover canes and slow, old feet. There was no threat here.

Alexa allowed the older men to touch her hands, to chatter at her in surprise. Her kind was often recognized by the elderly, but Alexa thought maybe these men had been hoping for someone like her, as well. It was in their careful, respectful words and loving caresses.

Paul wanted the same adoration, but before he could speak, Billy shoved a gag in his mouth and grabbed his hands so that David could secure them. When they let go of him, Paul started to rip out the gag. He stopped when Billy raised a big fist.

Paul lowered his arm, glaring furiously.

“All set, Boss.” Billy grinned cheerfully.

Alexa studied the council as her men took up guarding posts around the large room. Through the windows, the fighters could see what they assumed was the black side of the city by the line of dark flags flapping in the wind. It reminded Edward of his first sight of Alexa.

“Stop.” Young Roscoe pushed his way through the trio. “Let her sit down.”

Alexa was ushered to the table and given a wooden goblet filled with a cool red liquid which she drank without stopping until it was gone.

Alexa let out a loud belch that drew impressed chuckles from the trio and eye rolls from her men. Those they met never respected how much she could drink until they were losing consciousness. She had a bottomless pit instead of guts.

When they were all seated, young Roscoe proceeded toward the door. “I’ll be back with father.”

He chuckled mirthlessly as he shut the door, leaving an awkward silence where Alexa’s fighters understood this was indeed some sort of trap.

Alexa made a sharp gesture. “Tell me and do it quickly.”

The trio was relieved. They whispered in low bursts of guilty outrage.

“He has to be stopped!”

“He’s insane, no question.”

“We need your help.”

Alexa held up a hand. “Tell me who you are.”

“We’re his counsel from each of the city zones. I’m Zachariah. This is Porter, from the white side, and Avery James from the outcasts.”

“Outcasts?” Alexa pretended she hadn’t known. “We were only told of the white and black zones.”

“Those who have mixed families or refuse to pick a side live beyond the race line.” Zachariah gestured. “They suffer without help from anyone.”

“We’re nomads in our own city.” The tiredness in Avery’s voice suggested he’d said as much too many times to believe it would ever matter. “Most of the children come from the outcasts.”

Alexa motioned Edward toward the door. “Start from the beginning.” Alexa didn’t want anyone to interrupt them.

Edward clicked the lock quietly before placing his back against the peeling paint. He scanned the gagged, sulking scientist and the bound, unconscious thief in satisfaction as he listened to the conversation.

“After the war, Roscoe was Mayor here. He tried to protect everyone at first, but the rioting was so bad! He lost control and then the war in the city began. Most people fled.” Zachariah wheezed.

Porter picked up the tale. “Those who stayed hid from each other, but Roscoe wanted all of the killing to stop. When he realized we were already segregating ourselves, he suggested we draw up zones and stick to them to keep the peace.”

“It worked, for the most part.” Zachariah sighed sadly. “But then the corn began coming for our children and Roscoe made deals with the dead!”

“The corn?”

Zachariah wheezed. “The Master of the corn.”

“A demon.” Porter kept his voice down. “Tell her the rest and be done. He’ll be here soon!”

Avery leaned forward until he was almost resting on the table. “We need your help. Please save us!”

Alexa waited for more, but footfalls outside the door stilled their tongues and sent anguish over their faces. Alexa recognized their terror. She turned to view the door, gesturing for Edward to unlock it.

Everyone tensed as the door swung open.

Young Roscoe was first, followed by a hulking man that caused Alexa’s fighters to advance quickly. They formed a line of glowering flesh between her and the big man.

When the hulk only slid to the side, they understood he was security for the short, balding guy who stepped into the room last.

Roscoe Sr. beamed at his guests, a blue eye roving over their gear, while the brown one lay dead in its socket. “Welcome to Lincoln, my friends. Have they hired you to kill me yet?”

Silence and furiously flushed faces filled the room.

Roscoe laughed while his son cringed away from the arm he tried to throw over the teenager’s shoulder.

The father seemed not to notice the slight. He strode lively to where Alexa now stood, waiting for him.

Roscoe didn’t seem curious about the gagged man in the corner, but his gaze went over the thief with recognition and a promise of retribution. He extended a hand, moving by Alexa’s fighters without fear.

Alexa met his hand in a firm shake that told both of them more than they’d asked for.

Alexa felt need and hunger run up her spine.

Roscoe felt a shudder of fear, of coming closure. He swallowed it to grin again. “Please, sit. Let’s talk about the delivery you’ve made and where Merrik is. After that, we’ll discuss my counter offer.”

Roscoe settled Alexa into her chair and turned to glower at the three cowering representatives. “You have a ceremony to prepare for, do you not?”

All three of the men fled the room in terror and hatred. The waves were unmistakable.

Alexa’s men wondered why Roscoe let them live at all if he knew they wanted him dead.

Roscoe stared at her.

Alexa stared back, marking his knowing eye and his confident posture, but also the erratic tick in his jaw and the knuckle grip under the table that he thought was out of her view. He was nervous about her being here. He knew she could do the job if she chose to take it. He was dangerous.

“So, here we are.” Roscoe observed the thief snoozing uncomfortably on the small futon frame. “I see the first of three. I’m grateful to you for bringing these things where Merrik failed.”

The thief was unconscious, but Alexa could feel Roscoe’s loathing, his need to spill blood. The thief would be shot the second she was out of the room.

Roscoe turned to her. “And where is the missing Merrik?”

“Dead. The corn’s Master didn’t like him.”

“And the messages? The boy?”

Roscoe didn’t act as if he cared, but Alexa saw the anger behind the blind casualness.

“In the warehouse, as I’m sure you already know. I’ll have my rewards and be on my way. You and yours will not lure me into delaying here and protecting your city.”

Roscoe did pause this time, clearly confused. He covered himself with more questions.

“Are you sure we can’t convince you to stay? The outcasts of your group would even be considered for inclusion on my street if you and your…fighters will protect us.”

Alexa recognized snow when it was blowing over her, but she played along. Better to have an enemy think you were too stupid to know you were being mocked, than to have them know and account for it. “Maybe we could, if the price were right.”

Roscoe both glowed and paled at the same time.

Alexa leaned forward. “The others can’t afford us, but you can, Mayor. What are we worth to you?”

Roscoe frowned slightly, backpedaling a bit. “I’d have to clear it with the council of course. We have voting here, but there’s no reason why we–”

“I want my reward.” Alexa’s voice grew angry. “Now!”

Roscoe nodded, leaning away from her as his big guard moved a few paces closer. “Fine, fine. We’ll come by in the morning to collect the papers and boy, and pay you. Happy now?”

“Yes.” Alexa flashed a calming facade. “My apologies. It was a long trip here.”

Roscoe beamed again, giving that sickeningly fake smile that made Alexa long to shoot him in the throat.

“Good. Maybe we’ll convince you in the meantime.”

“Both sides are trying to hire me, but I haven’t evaluated the layout, the security, or expressed a single ounce of eagerness to get involved here.”

“Lady, please.” Roscoe’s lowered voice had dropped into a tone that was meant to be charming, but came off as creepy. “Tours are dangerous here if you’re on the wrong side of the line.”

“Don’t want a tour, only my money.”

Roscoe stood up, tiring of the charade. “I’ll have it brought to you.”

Alexa waved toward the thief.

Edward immediately collected the groaning man who was waking from the light clip that had knocked him out.

“Wait! What are you doing?”

“We’ll hold him until we’re paid. Just to keep you honest.”

Roscoe had little choice as she moved toward the door with a hand on her gun.

“We’ll be waiting for you.” Alexa let her men go first. “Come afternoon, we’ll bury both bodies and burn the papers on our way out.”

Roscoe stopped at that, scowling.

Alexa gently shut the door in his face.

As they jogged down the stairs of the Lincoln building, Paul tore the gag from his mouth. He threw it at Billy. “Asshole.”

“Worked, didn’t it?” Billy laughed, but made sure Paul stayed in front of him. He hadn’t forgotten what had happened to Zale.

They made the short trip back to the warehouse in the same curious, watchful crowd, but now there was twice as many people. Word had spread.

Alexa quickly got her team inside, where she motioned Edward to release his captive.

The thief, glad he hadn’t been left with Roscoe, wisely kept his mouth shut.

Alexa settled onto her bedroll again, thinking while her men got ready to bed down for the night.

Humiliated, Paul huddled in the corner away from everyone, mind still working on car engines and being out here alone. He couldn’t convince Alexa to let him come along, but he wasn’t staying here either. He intended to follow her. When she found Safe Haven, he would be there. He would still get his second chance.

The other travelers were happy to have Alexa and her men back with them.

Alexa put two men on watch and gave the others the time off to do as they pleased. They all needed personal time.

The warehouse had a double sink setup with gallons of water under it. The Eagles took turns cleaning themselves and some of their gear, as well as filling their water bottles and skins. A small room had been set up for washing, but the layers of rust in these areas told them few people had been here to use it.

Braids delivered cups of hobo soup to the fighters, lingering with Daniel, and there was a peaceful time as they all relaxed while they could.

Paul accepted a cup of the soup, too, but he knew the others with them didn’t think of him the way that they did Alexa and her brutes. He hated them for it. He knew Alexa felt honor bound to help those who couldn’t help themselves, but he also knew she liked doing it. That was the part he didn’t understand. Heroes risked their lives to save people, but why did they like the danger?

Paul continued to stew long after the meal was over and most of the travelers had gone to sleep. *Why am I so different?*

# BK 2 Chapter Thirteen

**Zones with Old Bones**

**1**

**A**lexa rose from her bedroll without waking her sleeping companions or any of the other travelers. She pulled on the cloak that Braids had washed out for her and hung to dry, tugging the hood up.

She padded toward the window silently.

Edward materialized in the gloomy shadows ahead of her.

Mark appeared next to him.

Alexa sighed. They’d predicted her actions. Her voice sounded annoyed, but it masked her respect. “Either will do.”

Mark drew his hood up as Edward faded back into the darkness. They’d already discussed it.

Alexa let Mark boost her up to the window; the pair snuck from their cell without drawing attention from the two sleepy townsmen sitting by a fire can in front of the warehouse. Alexa went straight to the fence behind their building and climbed up a spot where the barbed wire had been worn down. She dropped into the black side of the city, then strode toward the tallest building in view. It wasn’t as high as where they’d chosen to meet the other travelers, but it had a clear view of the entire city, minus a corner of the white zone.

Alexa took a piece of dried goat from her pocket and chewed contentedly while doing her reconnaissance.

It appeared that the residents of Lincoln were using nearby creek water, but they’d devised a system of long hoses to collect the precious liquid instead of going to the bank with buckets. They’d clearly learned that water was dangerous.

Alexa spotted the hoses that ran from the creek to a large cistern-type tank, but not to Roscoe’s main street. Alexa was willing to bet that he still had clean, pure water left over from before the war. Water plants would be under his control, and that precious liquid stayed good forever. It only required a good stir or shake to aerate it.

Mark stayed close, enjoying being alone with the boss. He and Edward had covered it over a smoke, one of the last between them unless they found a new stash. They’d come up with what they had thought she would do upon waking, and it felt good to have the unanimous agreement validated. If they could accurately predict her actions and reactions, it meant they were learning what she was trying to teach them. Signs of progress that they could point out to each other were ones they held onto during the harder times.

Alexa led them onto a main street and continued toward the shiny building. She didn’t remember what it was called, but she was sure it had some ridiculous title. All the tall towers of the old world had been named–another of their problems that led to the fall, in her opinion. Buildings didn’t need names unless they were important in ways that benefitted most people, not just the controlling few.

This side of the city was full of structures that had once been museums, art galleries, and high dollar apartments that would have had a front room view to the most cutting-edge entertainment the city had to offer. It was dark and spooky now, but that only enhanced the elegance somehow.

As they reached a main street, Mark moved closer. “We’re being followed.”

“Keep an ear out.”

There was a small group of men behind them. Edward knew the longer she went without acknowledging them, the louder the group would become. He’d picked out no less than eight voices.

They turned the corner at the next dead intersection and stopped in front of the tall tower that had barely visible lights flickering in the upper windows. From a distance, it would look like moon glare or star shine. They were both impressed with the black netting over the window screens. It allowed secrecy and extra protection from determined insects, while still providing a view and fresh air.

Alexa sat down on the top stair, now facing the small group of men following them.

Mark placed himself between them and her, arms crossed over his wide chest.

The black people weren’t dressed in suits and the fancy hairstyles of those on Roscoe Street. They wore layers of pants and shirts under thick worker’s jackets and woolen stocking caps. They clearly weren’t the type to have an hour to spend on picking out just the right clothes.

The ten males were large, with faces that held fascinated curiosity. Alexa motioned Mark to move from in front of her. She wasn’t in danger.

He leaned against the nearest marble column with deceptive casualness.

Alexa waited for the quieting group to come to her, aware of footsteps also echoing from inside the building. In a moment they would be surrounded.

“Do not fire without an order.”

The men muttered as Mark nodded. “Never, Lady.”

“Aye. But if you feel that I’m in danger…”

“I’ll kill them all.” Mark knew he could do it. He was already planning the order of fire that would account for those who were now approaching the door from the inside. Alexa wouldn’t be harmed or taken captive, not by anyone here, and she’d made sure they knew it.

“Does anyone have something to discuss with me?”

The door opened. Three of the blackest men Mark had ever seen came to stand in front of her.

“Who are you? No one comes here anymore.”

“Adrian Mitchel is my father.”

As soon as she said that infamous last name, the mutters and hopeful comments started, but they were drowned out by the fear.

“She can’t be here!” A second man flanked the first. “You know what we were told!”

“It’s against the rules anyway. She’s white!”

“Shhh!”

Alexa waited calmly for them to get by this part. It would have to happen with each group she met if things were as she suspected. And all of them would want Roscoe killed. They would try to hire her or anyone they thought was strong enough to get the job done. Moreover, there was likely nothing she could do for them and deep inside, they knew it.

“What do you want?”

Alexa looked up at the first hostile tone they’d heard so far. “Ask me and be done with this act.”

Gregory, who had family in all three zones, responded with resentful anger. “Can you kill him?”

“No one can. He’s not real.”

Scoffs and fearful taunts came, but Alexa ignored them. She waited for the words that mattered.

“Can you kill his Master? Will that free us?” Gregory felt hope enter his heart when she didn’t immediately refuse.

Alexa stood up, surveying their pathetic faces without pity. “You’ll have to fight for it.”

Gregory blew out a tired breath. “We’ve got one more in us and after that, we’ll be gone.”

Alexa’s hand dropped to the butts of her guns, making the crowd flinch.

Mark followed her lead, causing those closest to flee.

She glared around at all of them. “We kill. And violence spreads once unleashed. We’ll not be responsible for innocent lives lost or destroyed.”

“Just kill it!” One of the men gestured angrily. “We beg no miracles save that one! End our curse!”

Alexa turned toward the street. “I will.”

She and Mark left much the same way they’d come, only this time the street was lined with black faces who had hidden from them the first time. Eyes peered from cracks in boarded windows and lifted sewer lids. Light chatter also followed as word spread of the conversation. It increased when Alexa went right at the last intersection, instead of left and back to the warehouse.

Mark hadn’t expected anything else after watching her manipulate them into hiring her for her own ends. It was slick and also a bit irritating. *I hate how weak people are now!*

“As do I, my pet. We’ll help them where we can, yes?”

“You know it.” Mark nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Alexa gestured toward a chicken wire fence running down the street at the next intersection. “I need a half hour in there, but they’ve already heard that I’m out. Town sentries are heading toward us.”

Mark thoughtfully observed the debris. “Hasn’t rained much. How about a fire?”

Alexa pointed a finger at a nearby pile of molded papers and boxes that were apart from the other debris. She didn’t want to burn the city down… At least, she didn’t think so. That decision hadn’t been fully made yet.

Mark got the small fire going and then followed Alexa over the short fence with a neat leap that flared out his cloak.

Those watching murmured in appreciation and apprehension. Roscoe wouldn’t like anyone out roaming freely. His dusk curfew had held for years, and why not? He had support that couldn’t be argued with.

**2**

Unlike the black side of the city, the whites weren’t dressed properly. They had thin sweatpants and raincoats, with old gym shoes in place of winter boots. It was a glaring difference that made Alexa dread discovering what passed for clothes in the outcast zone. Other than that, it was identical to the black side. The same debris, depression, and lack of gear was everywhere. The only difference so far was between Roscoe Street, which was neat and clean, and the rest of the city he governed.

*A clever trap for new visitors.* Mark was glad his boss wasn’t the type to be fooled by something so awful. She felt the wrongness.

“Stopping it will be hard. I still have a small hope this isn’t what I’m planning for.”

Mark was almost afraid to ask. “What is it?”

Alexa swept the cornfields they could barely see. The fields lined the city like a huge trim. Or the walls of a cell.

Mark followed her line of sight and felt his heartbeat increase. “The House in the Corn.”

“Aye. She let us go because she knew what we’d discover here.”

“But if she’d killed us, she’d be safer. She had to know we would return.”

Alexa shrugged. “I don’t know why she let us come here. That worries me more than the thought of going back there.”

“Are we going to?”

“Help!”

The scream startled them both into drawing as they spun to find the threat.

“She’s gone! Help me!”

To their horror and shock, no one came to help the woman running down the street, screaming.

“They took her! My baby!”

Alexa put a hand on Mark’s arm when he would have followed. “Always study the people first.”

Those who had come to doors and windows were sad, but they didn’t react as if it was something new.

“It happens often, I’d guess. Missing kids. Ghosts in the corn. A possessed Mayor. This is an odd town we’ve come to, Convict.”

Alexa using that name told Mark she felt the loss of the woman’s child even though she was acting as if she hadn’t. *Probably feels all of them.* Mark felt the sense of loss and pain, too. He took the liberty of putting his arm around Alexa’s sagging shoulders as the woman’s screams faded. “We’ll shut it down, Boss.”

Alexa sighed miserably. “Yes, but not until we’ve experienced it all and taken it so deep into our hearts that we can never forget it.” She shuddered under his arm.

Mark understood. This is who she was. She couldn’t just storm into the corn and blast away. She had to follow traditions and she had to know that it was needed. Killing wasn’t allowed any other way. It was the first of the rules she’d started them on and though her five rules were the guidelines they used regularly, that first one meant the most. Murder wasn’t allowed. She said if they ever crossed that line, they would be unworthy to enter Safe Haven.

Alexa went to the parallel road closest to Roscoe Street, staying to the white side of the line.

Mark felt people from both sides staring at them as they cleared the corner.

The next street was cleaner than the rest. Alexa headed for the small community center. There was a small light coming from the first floor window.

Alexa knocked sharply on it before Mark could think to ask her if it was wise. Not that he would have.

The window opened immediately. The people inside were waiting for her.

“Back door!”

Alexa shook her head. “That’s for other than the likes of me. Come out and ask your question so that I can end this night’s waste of my time.”

She ignored their protests to plant herself on the top stair of the front porch.

In the other zones, there were nearly two dozen people lining the fences, ignoring each other to stare at Alexa and Mark as if they were aliens.

Mark took up another casual post nearby as the doors opened and a large group of white faces surrounded Alexa. Again, he had little doubt about clearing them from her if trouble started. They were all so thin! He didn’t think they’d had three square meals since the war. *This side is poorer than the black side*. *How are the outcasts living?*

Alexa listened to their arguing about her presence and the trouble it would cause for all of them, patiently remaining silent until Mark wanted to interrupt them just to have quiet for a minute or two. If he was feeling that way, she had to be. “Are we done here, Boss? Fire’s gonna be out soon.”

Alexa nodded at Mark and stood up. “We’ll be on our way since you don’t require anything. Good night.”

As they walked away, attitudes changed drastically, as they always did.

“No, don’t go!”

“Stop her!”

“Wait! Please, wait!”

Alexa stopped, voice cold. “Ask me.”

Melissa, the elected leader of the white side, stepped forward slowly. “I’m against it, so you know.” The older woman with her librarian’s hairdo pulled her ragged shawl closer. “It’ll only get more of us ejected.”

Mark frowned. “Ejected?”

“The troublemakers.” Melissa sighed tiredly. “Along with the elderly and the strong men.”

Alexa studied her, noting abusive natures that hadn’t subsided since the war. She was shaking as if she needed a fix. Alexa curled her nose. “Resign your place. You’re not fit to lead them.”

Melissa’s face paled, and then reddened as the chatter around them stopped. It was replaced with shock.

“You’re still using?”

“She’s drugging again!”

Alexa turned from the woman to face the angry residents. “What would you ask of me?”

“Kill him!” came the response, in many forms.

Alexa left them while they were still shouting out the things they wanted done to Roscoe’s body.

Mark wasn’t sure why these people hadn’t needed her to explain that it was really the Master of the House in the Corn as she had before, and realized word would spread. She didn’t need to keep repeating all of it. Mark was glad for that as the last zone came into view. The construction field was fenced and walled in a clear warning not to enter unless you were able to handle whatever might be on the other side.

Alexa climbed the wall and dropped inside with a small leer of anticipation that curled Mark’s stomach. She was pissed. She wanted blood and she would be free to spill it as soon as she received the same expected response from the outcast zone.

Mark grinned. “Roscoe’s Master doesn’t stand a chance.”

Alexa didn’t answer. She was too furious to make claims or boast. She was sure that this last zone would send her over the edge. There was no way the outcast’s lives would be better.

**3**

“Someone started a fire. The townsmen are fighting it.”

Those words caused every head in the underground room to swivel toward the door, as if to see Alexa and her fighters there.

Robert scanned them all. “You saw her?”

“Yes. She has one man with her. She’ll be here next, I’d wager.” Emmerson wheezed, out of breath from his run.

The room cleared within a minute, except for Robert and Emmerson.

Robert sighed resignedly and pushed himself to his feet with the aid of his cane. He wasn’t old enough to need one, but the wasting sickness had crippled some parts of him and weakened the others. Some days were good. This wasn’t one of them. “Send for our council.”

Since the war and being ostracized here, word of mouth was the only reliable communication. Even writing letters and notes had become things of the past. Paper was too easily ruined or stolen. What was in a man’s mind was harder to get to. Robert gently shut the door for a quick moment of peace and quiet in which to reflect and make his choices. Leading the outcasts hadn’t been easy since the war. Robert didn’t lack for courage, but Alexa and her men were killers and he wouldn’t forget that.

Robert knelt in the center of the room and bowed his head in prayer. “Oh Lord, hear my pitiful pleas and have mercy on my people.” Robert’s voice roughened with emotion. “There are so few of us left, but we still believe!”

A door opened behind him, but Robert didn’t hear it. He was in that place where he was sure that his God was listening intently to every syllable and every tone, searching him for the worthiness that all helpless cases must carry.

“Please, don’t let them be hurt. Take them under your wing and remove them from the path of these strangers and their guns. Let them continue in your light.” Robert felt a tear roll down his cheek at the silence. “Amen.”

He stayed where he was for another minute, getting himself under control. His people expected a leader and he would give that to them. He would hand this fight over to Alexa and hope it was the correct choice.

Robert stood up slowly, feeling his sixty-eight years more than he had in a while. The sense of a bad storm coming was unmistakable in his joints and sinuses.

“Does he answer you?”

Robert turned too quickly and lost his balance. He sprawled at Roscoe’s boots, moaning heavily.

Soft, menacing laughter flowed through the dim, dusty hall.

“Easy, old man.”

Robert cringed away from the hand that would have helped him, instead rising on his own. “Be gone, Satan!”

Roscoe chuckled. “I’m nowhere near such perfection as that.”

“Only my God is perfect!”

Roscoe pointed a hand at Robert’s arm.

The man moaned in pain again.

“Be careful of your words.” Roscoe stared down in vague contempt. “Or I’ll kill them all the second she’s gone.”

Robert shut his lids. “Please, Lord. Please. I believe!”

When he opened his eyes, Roscoe was gone. The sound of voices came down the hall and through the open door.

Robert shoved himself up awkwardly. Alexa was their only hope, their one chance to be free. He was taking it no matter what the others here wanted. It hadn’t taken an eternity in Hell to break Robert. A world war, an insane Mayor, and four years had done irreversible damage. *Only my faith remains of the man I once was.*

**4**

The outcasts wore handsewn clothes and old shoes that had been stuffed with papers or wrapped with tape of every kind. It was obvious to Alexa that the stores in each zone were off-limits to those from the other sides. The faded neon of Emmerson’s shoes lead the way through stacks of corroded cars and trucks that would never meet the shredder they had been intended for.

The main junkyard building was where Emmerson took them. Alexa motioned to Mark to be careful of the sharp, rusted metal edges that would encourage infections in even the smallest of injuries. They went down into the basement of the junkyard warehouse and then down another flight of stairs to a tunnel lined in stones and torches. At the end of it was a wooden door with deep gouges that said the wolves came this far into the city.

The earthen walls and floor of the single room had been covered in wood and sheet metal scavenged from the dead city above. In the center was the black and yellow hood of a car on a large crate. There were four people of mixed race sitting on the floor around the makeshift table. They stared with all the desperation that Mark and his mistress had expected.

Alexa didn’t waste any time; she took the only empty seat as Mark leaned against the door. She looked to Robert. “Tell me what happened here and why I’m being haunted to kill your leader.”

Robert’s face clouded over. “He stopped being our leader long ago.”

“Tell me. Leave nothing out.”

Mark considered himself ready to handle about any story that was told, keeping one eye on Alexa and the other on their company.

“After the war, Roscoe was the Mayor here. He and his family were in charge and he tried to do right by us. He had the gates erected, put out guards and curfews, and interviewed anyone who came in. He and his men were sometimes forced to kill rovers who wanted to take over the town, but for a while, we had a semblance of peace.” Robert broke off in a fit of coughing. Those closest hurried to comfort him.

Emerson took over the tale. “It was then that Roscoe split the races. The infighting and gangs already here were taking their toll, always robbing, raping, killing to get to the few stashes of food left. Roscoe grew tired of it and arranged a radio broadcast. He gave orders to divide the city in half, black on one side, white on the other. He promised to send a fair share of all supplies each month to both sides of the line.” The messenger looked back to Robert, who’d caught enough breath to resume.

“It had to be expanded shortly after that. Roscoe hadn’t counted on the other races wanting an area, or those who had family on both sides being kicked out by their own kind. The blacks didn’t want white sympathizers and spies on their side of the tape. The whites threatened to shoot any blacks found on their side. After a bit, Roscoe declared an outcasts area where everyone else could go, but when he wanted to give them a supply cut, too, both the white and black sides protested until he was forced to give up that idea.”

“That’s when he started changing.” Avery sighed sadly from the place of honor at the dirty stone table. “Then *HE* came.”

Robert frowned. “Hush now. You’re going out of order.”

Avery fell silent as Robert looked to Alexa. “There was a vote to kick those people out of the city. Everyone saw what the desperate survivors did after the war–the open murder, the violent thefts, the kidnappings–but Roscoe stepped to the front of the crowd and begged for their lives. He said he would build a security system here that nothing could get through. He promised us we’d be safe.”

“And you believed him.”

“Of course. We were those desperate people.” Robert had no shame in his tone or on his face. “He forgave us, let us stay. How could we not believe?”

The feel of extremism filled the room.

Alexa grunted. “Finish your story.”

Robert took up where he’d left off, not showing signs that the order bothered him, but Alexa knew it did.

“Three months after the war, a small group of survivors were let in. Among them was a woman with a purple stripe in her hair and a man who had the feel of trouble, though he said the right things. Your prisoner. Roscoe found out these two had come from the west, a direction we never heard from. He took them into his home. Once there, the man became fast friends with Roscoe’s daughter.”

Mark knew what would come next and steeled himself against it, hating his own kind. Why couldn’t men have been born differently? Why did they always have to take?

“He stole Roscoe’s only daughter from her room and took her from the city. When her body was found, she’d been abused and strangled. The man was gone.”

Mark scanned. “And the purple haired woman?”

Robert waved angrily. “She escaped, though we heard she was shot and died. We hunted the entire city for her.”

“It was dark days.” Avery nodded. “The nights grew longer and the days shrank. Our leader, in his grief, no longer met new arrivals or cleared them. The gates were left open to wanderers who were as bad as the man who’d taken his child. We demanded protection, safety, but when he finally raised himself to listen, he gave us damnation instead.”

“He blames you. Because those people would have been put here, with the outcasts, if he hadn’t taken an interest in them.”

Robert nodded at her guess. “Yes, and there was nothing for us after that but vengeance. The passing ceremony was made a law and the limit on children came next. The food dwindled to near nothing. When strangers wandered in, the guards stayed with Roscoe, in the town hall.”

Robert had another coughing spell and Emmerson picked up the tale again. “We tried to leave after the fire, but it was too late. He owns us.”

Alexa was glad to be through the recap, but those details had connected several pieces and confirmed more. “You believe now that if he dies, you’ll be free?”

Robert shook his head gravely. “We are damned. We would save the future.”

Alexa rose at those words, satisfied. “As would I. You have a blessing for me, I think?”

Robert allowed the others to help him up. He chanted lowly while pulling a long knife with a golden handle from beneath his robe. “It has no mercy. Pick your targets well.”

“I always do.” Alexa slid the new knife into her main belt, moving her well used knife to the rear. “We’ll go now. Unless there’s anything else we should see or hear?”

“You should go quickly. Another ceremony is taking place tonight. You don’t want to be discovered by Roscoe or his men.”

Alexa agreed, though not for the same reasons. She wasn’t afraid, but she did want to keep the element of surprise as long as she could.

Mark and Alexa slipped out the back door, able to feel their relief when the cellar shut and the lock turned. The entire town was frightened.

It also stank. Pigs, the new world’s excess food, were used in all three zones, but again, not on Roscoe’s road. The rest of the residents were lined in pens and reeked of shit.

Alexa was offended on their behalf.

**5**

When Alexa stopped near a line of bushes, Mark knew what she intended to do. It enabled him to be with her when she vanished behind the trees lining the bushes. No one noticed.

Mark kept his eyes on their rear as Alexa stayed facing the front of the street. They’d been on this signless road after leaving the black side of the city, but Alexa clearly wanted an unscripted view of what went on here.

The water rushing alongside the outcast zone was dark and held any number of threats, including the fish. The people here appeared to avoid the water, but from the damage and waterlines on buildings, Alexa was sure it was a battle that Roscoe had hoped would eliminate them. A flooded area was a place where accidents happened and were overlooked.

Mark wasn’t sure what was coming, but he was fine with waiting for it. It was rare for her to have only one fighter with her and he savored the moment.

Alexa crouched lower as voices came from the west of them.

Mark did the same, hoping his big shoulders would blend in.

The voices grew loud enough to be recognized as low singing and humming. The two hidden fighters stayed still and silent as the small crowd came by. Nearly fifty townspeople were walking sedately toward the front gates of the city, some black, some white, some both.

The five people in front of this small crowd were older and dressed in long white robes that both fighters recognized, though Mark didn’t make the final, gruesome connection yet. He saw the other people were also dressed up and realized this was a ceremony of some sort.

The singing and humming continued as the group went on. It was still audible even after they were out of sight. Slightly eerie but mostly sad, Mark liked the tune and tried to remember it for later.

Alexa rose and stayed to the tree line as she followed the group. She kept far enough back to avoid being seen by anyone in the parade, but the other residents that she passed gawked at seeing her moving down the street. Alexa didn’t warn them to silence or rush ahead. She concentrated on the big group.

Mark understood that’s where she thought the threat would come from.

Alexa spent a minute lingering in the shadows of the alley by a long abandoned bakery to observe the group as they halted at the front gates of the city.

Roscoe appeared ahead of the group, carrying a small stack of books under one arm and a lantern in the other. His words didn’t carry to them, however.

Alexa crept closer. She had suspicions to confirm.

The gates opened and from the corn beyond the garbage field, a harrowed hag floated toward them, angry red eyes glowing brightly.

The five elderly people were upset by whatever was going on. Alexa forced herself to stay put as Roscoe shoved the last woman outside the gate. His face was a blurry leer from this distance, and then gone as he strode away.

Mark wasn’t surprised when Alexa crept closer.

The gates clanged closed as the hag reached the garbage field and the five people cowering along it began to scream for mercy, to be let back in. Alexa and Mark recognized Avery, then Zachariah and Porter.

The hag didn’t attack them like was expected. She extended a long arm toward the corn. After a minute of useless pleading, all five elderly sacrifices began the long trek. The hag floated behind them, herding.

The townspeople watching from the gate cried silently at the loss of their loved ones. The others were already drifting away, eager to forget that the same fate waited for them when they reached the age limit.

Alexa didn’t wait for the smaller crowd to dissipate. She took the middle of the street straight to the gate and shoved it open with a furious glare at the single sentry who stepped forward to stop her.

The guard looked around for him before shrugging, and stepping back. “It’s your funeral with the hag awake.”

Alexa spit at his boots before leaving the protection of the city with Mark’s clenched fists right behind her.

The sentry quickly closed the gate, then went to tell Roscoe that the rules had been broken.

**6**

Alexa and Mark had to run. Despite the elderly people dragging their feet, the specter had them a clear mile from the city before Alexa caught up.

Mark expected her to attack, to rescue the people, but Alexa shook her head. “No.”

Mark frowned, not sure how he felt about watching whatever the hag had planned for the older folks, but in the end, he had no time to answer the thoughts.

The specter screeched, coming to a stop, and the area flooded with activity. Undead, all dressed in the same flowing white robes, ran toward the five people with hungry growls of eager delight.

Mark turned his head, unable to watch, but Alexa refused to look away. She’d chosen not to save them, not to give away her advantage yet. It was only fair that she had to wake screaming later from the view.

The transformation from live to undead was ugly. After being bitten repeatedly, the five people were then revived by the hag. She pointed at several small beetles on the ground. The bugs crawled up the bodies and scurried inside their mouths. A few seconds later, the corpses began to twitch, bodies cracking, shitting, pissing, farting–all the humiliating sounds and actions that only a medical professional used to hear. It was another insult added to what had already been done to them.

Alexa gestured to Mark, and the pair eased out of the area, neither of them waiting to see the people wake and start the hunt for flesh. What they’d already seen was too much.

“What happens to the kids?” Mark couldn’t hide his emotions. “I mean, we know one was taken. Maybe we could–”

Alexa silenced him with a hard look, but it hurt her to do it. “If we can’t kill the source, we don’t pick the fight.”

Mark didn’t argue. He didn’t like the feeling of her displeasure, but more than that, if he couldn’t help them, he didn’t want to know about it. The guilt was simply too heavy to carry on this quest.

“Yes, it is.” Alexa led them back to the city. “And we’ve really only just begun.”

**7**

As Alexa and Mark dropped back into the fenced lot that surrounded the warehouse, it lit up with men holding torches.

Alexa put a hand on Mark’s arm as Roscoe came through the glaring guards. “Not yet.”

What they’d seen and heard tonight had sent rage into both their hearts. They wanted Roscoe dead.

“I see you took a walk. And did some visiting. How nice.”

Alexa waited, arms hanging loosely.

Roscoe frowned lightly. “I suppose they’ve convinced you. Seeing all that poverty and dejection would be enough to sway anyone, right?” Roscoe barked a laugh. “Does my side of it matter to you?”

“I’m listening. Explain the missing kids and the elderly who sacrifice themselves as food for the monsters in the corn.”

Roscoe winced, but didn’t back down. “It’s the price we pay to keep our city. I don’t like it any more than they do.”

Mark was horrified. “Why would you ever agree to such a thing? What kind of a Mayor are you?”

“Dad?” Young Roscoe came through the crowd, eyes glassy. “Is everything okay?”

Roscoe looked at Alexa with abject terror. “Not a Mayor anymore, only a father.”

Alexa took the hint and put another piece into the puzzle. Whatever trance Young Roscoe was in held his father hostage.

Mark grunted angrily as he put it together, too. He scowled at young Roscoe, but the boy didn’t seem to notice.

“Dad?”

Roscoe put an arm around his son’s shoulders, again ignoring the flinch. “It’s fine. The new people went for a walk. We were about to go searching for them, but they’re here now.”

Young Roscoe nodded happily. “Good. Can we have hot chocolate in the morning with the biscuits?”

Hearing they ate the same thing as the people in the black and white zones helped Mark and Alexa to understand that though it looked better, Roscoe Street was really just the same trap in a different package.

Roscoe waved off the guards and took his son home without saying anything else to Alexa or to the travelers who had come from the warehouse to help kill him if it was needed.

Alexa and Mark waited until all the residents were gone before sharing what they’d discovered with their group. It took a while.

Paul listened from a distance, still plotting. He almost had a real plan now. What he needed was a little luck.

# BK 2 Chapter Fourteen

**Betrayed and Repaid**

**1**

**T**he sound of struggling and curses brought the travelers awake as a squad of soldiers flooded into the warehouse, guns drawn and ready to die.

“Do not resist.” Alexa didn’t kill the soldier who grabbed her by the hair and forced her to her knees. This is why she hadn’t posted a guard. It was easier to handle some enemies when you made them think they had the upper hand. She gave the code for a distraction and gunfight to follow. “Plan C.”

“Shut up!” The soldier slapped her.

Mark, still at her side, lunged forward and bashed the soldier in the face with his head. Blood gushed.

The other soldiers rushed forward, beating him with their gun butts and boots until Alexa rolled in front of him and glowered with red orbs.

“That’s enough!”

Roscoe’s voice was whining, scared, and clearly not in control. Sensing weakness, the soldiers abused their authority by tripping bound people as they herded them outside, grabbing female asses, and slapping slowly moving men.

Alexa, enraged by the treatment, caught Mark’s eye and directed him to where the mapmaker had his supplies spread out. He’d been working on a quick sketch of Lincoln last night. The smell of paint thinner was still in the air.

Alexa glanced to a pile of clothes next.

Mark took the hint. While he inched toward the materials, Alexa stuck her foot out and tripped the nearest soldier.

Those closest responded with kicks and hits that drew Alexa’s other men and the travelers to her defense. It bought Mark time to get a small fire going behind his back.

Busy, none of the soldiers thought it odd that he was just standing there instead of trying to help his boss like the others were doing.

Mark rejoined Alexa as the soldiers retreated, helping her up as best he could with his hands bound. A few seconds later, the smell of smoke drew notice.

“Fire!”

Most of the soldiers rushed over to stomp out the flames that had quickly grown into a nice blaze.

Alexa muttered. Her ropes burst into flames that singed the hair on her hands as it burnt through. She quickly shed the remains and untied her men. She was leading them toward the cart with their gear stacked on it when they were noticed.

“How did you get–”

Alexa punched the man in the throat and darted by him to grab her Colts.

The travelers knew to get down and stay there as both sides began to fire at each other. In the chaos, Braids was hit in the stomach and fell, screaming.

Spotting a perfect opportunity, Alexa fired three fast shots and took out the three highest ranking men in the room as more slugs flew and more travelers fell. “Get out of here! No bounty today!”

The soldiers, outgunned in only minutes, fled.

Alexa waited until they were all out and Mark had locked the door before turning to evaluate the damage.

The slave owner was dying, sounding like a pig, and the mapmaker had no face left to speak of. Other than that, everyone was alive.

Alexa reloaded both guns and holstered before going to the door to call for help that wouldn’t be able to save Braids.

**2**

Braids was dead by the time the town doctor arrived. The haggard looking physician was twenty pounds too light and thirty years too young to be in charge of an entire city, but he assured Alexa that he was the only legal doctor as they walked outside.

“There are hacks in each zone passing out herbs and such, but when Roscoe catches them, they’re banished. We only want legal medical people here.”

Alexa didn’t ask any of her questions. All sorts of crazy formulas had come with the war. She understood the strict rules, but it wouldn’t help her.

“Was there something else you needed?” The doctor delivered a knowing scowl. “You’re sick, right?”

Alexa held out the hand where she’d been bitten, tolerating the doctor’s touch while he examined it. The fighters in the doorway watched tensely.

Alexa expected him to tell her a rabies shot would help, or that nothing would. She was surprised when he sighed and glanced to the east.

“They have better doctors, the government. Maybe you should let yourself be taken long enough to get a cure.”

Alexa pulled her hand away, but not rudely. The doctor wasn’t as bad as many of those she’d found since the war. “No, thank you.” She handed him a small pouch of dust, which he put reluctantly into his pocket.

“I didn’t earn it.”

Alexa nodded toward the city, the outcast’s side. “I saw some of your work. I assume you shouldn’t let Roscoe know you’ve been slipping into the city to treat the people he wants dead.”

Alexa returned to the warehouse and her men, aware of the doctor staring at her in fear. He was worried she would tell on him, but the only thing she planned to do about it was keep her mouth shut.

**3**

The entire city of Lincoln came to see them off.

Alexa’s men kept their eyes on the road and their minds on their lessons. Embarrassing their leader right now wouldn’t be good.

Alexa couldn’t have cared less. All she was concerned with now was getting back to where they’d already been. She did not have patience for the speech that some of the residents wanted to make, nor for the gifts that a few of them tried to give her.

“We have it covered. Keep what’s yours.” Alexa led her men from the warehouse and toward the front gate, not surprised to find they now had no guards.

Roscoe was in front of them, waiting at the gate.

Mark moved to Alexa’s side. “Now?”

“The house first.”

Mark grunted agreement, though he wanted to open fire. Alexa was the boss, even if he didn’t always understand her orders.

“I see you’re leaving.” Roscoe scanned on the thief and the boy still being held. “You’ve no plans to leave my property here?”

Alexa looked at Edward. “Cut him free.”

“Hey, wait!” Roscoe stepped forward.

Mark stepped in front of him, smirking. “I can’t shoot you, but I can deaden that other eye for you.”

Roscoe had to complain from a distance.

Brian saw Alexa’s look and sighed. He headed for the city gates.

“You can’t do that! The Master needs him!”

“That’s why I let him go.” Alexa went to the thief. She opened the cell door and let him out. “You also need closure, Roscoe. I offer that to you now.”

Roscoe viewed the thief with confused hatred, forgetting about Brian, who paused at the gate to watch.

“Why?” Roscoe’s voice overflowed with a father’s pain as he faced his daughter’s killer. “How could you do it?”

The thief grinned, uncaring. “She was cute. She offered me her candy bar.”

The crowd gasped in horror.

Alexa looked at the thief. “Do you have last words?”

“You can’t hand me over!” The thief flew toward her with his true face finally showing. It was ugly. “I’ll teach you, bitch!”

Before Alexa could raise a finger, three guns fired.

The thief flew backward, smacking harshly against the street.

Roscoe screamed again, this time in joyous delirium.

Two of her fighters holstered as everyone stared in shock at Brian. He’d stolen Edward’s gun while Alexa and the soldiers were fighting.

Brian tipped the barrel toward Alexa in respect and then turned and walked calmly into the corn.

“Didn’t see that coming.” Edward liked Brian much more than he did Paul.

Alexa stepped to the gate during the chaos.

Confused, her men hurried after her.

So did Paul. He caught up to her side instead of falling in line with the other men as the gates clanged shut behind them. “Did you send him away because he’s a killer?”

Alexa sighed. Brian would add too much power to their enemy. “No. Now be quiet. We’re not done here.”

Any questions the men wanted to ask died on their lips at her warning. The group walked toward the corn in silence.

As they left Lincoln behind, a sense of doom settled over the fighters.

Paul also felt it. “We won’t see any of them again, will we?”

No one answered, but he didn’t repeat the question. That’s why Alexa hadn’t taken their supplies. Those people needed everything they had and it still wouldn’t be enough.

*Am I like that? Are her men right?* Once again not paying attention to where he was going, Paul tripped over his own feet and hit the ground.

“Yes, you are. That’s why you’ll stay.” Alexa pointed to a small shack they were passing. “There.”

Instead of the argument everyone expected, Paul turned that way with a curt tone. “I’ll be here.”

“We’ll stop by for you when we bring back their kids.” Jacob hoped he was right. It didn’t feel okay to leave the helpless scientist out here.

“Let’s make time.” Alexa increased their pace until she was almost running.

Paul was quickly out of their sight.

Paul stayed in the doorway of the decaying shelter for a long time. He watched Alexa and her chosen men as they faded from view and then kept watching. A small part of him believed she would at least glance over her shoulder to check on him.

She didn’t.

Paul stood there, mind a furious blur of thoughts and emotions. She had left him. He was supposed to wait here like a good boy. When she returned, he would be left again, this time in Lincoln.

“I won’t stand for it.” His hands clenched into fists. “She can’t leave me behind.”

Paul remained standing, fuming. The wind grew colder to suit his mood. He’d never felt so angry, so in need of revenge. And he would have it.

Paul finally turned to the shack that he now viewed as his temporary holding cell and evaluated it. The small shack had two rooms and a door, piles of rubble and dirt. Vines grew through holes in the roof and animal tracks littered the rotting floor. If he had to be here overnight, there were chores to be done. It was what Alexa would expect, what he needed to do to survive, but instead, he flopped down on the damp ground and continued fuming.

**4**

“Damn it!” Mark unsnapped his holster. “Those guys just won’t quit.”

The fighters came to a stop as Alexa did, all of them scowling at the newest squad of soldiers blocking their path. Positioned between the garbage road and the cornfield, all of the soldiers were pointing guns. The green men were dressed to impress, but Alexa didn’t give them a chance to show their virgin skills. When one of them moved toward her, cocky steps saying he wasn’t afraid, Alexa took personal offense.

“Kill them all!”

Alexa’s men weren’t surprised. They responded faster than the soldiers, drawing and firing with serious intent. Their mistress had given them license to kill and they were eager.

Alexa drew down on the now running Captain who’d thought she was an easy capture. She pulled the trigger.

The cocky man, Aaron, screamed as the first slug tore through his ear. He jerked down, hands coming up. Her second shot slammed into his hand and through it, taking a finger. Her third shot drilled the back of his ankle. Piercing shrieks split the chaos.

Alexa ignored the other soldiers who were stunned into submission by her brutality. She fired again, hitting Aaron in the other ankle. He collapsed into a screaming, bleeding ball of remorse.

Alexa stopped with her boots against his face, feeling particularly evil. It was only the steps of her men as they quietly took the soldier’s weapons without further violence that kept her from torturing him further.

Alexa stared down at Aaron, not caring that he’d only been doing his job. “You chose the wrong side.” She pulled the trigger a final time.

Aaron slumped to the dirt with a hole in his head.

Alexa scanned the captives while reloading, noting that her men had killed half a dozen soldiers in the rush. One each wasn’t nearly good enough for the situation, but she didn’t let them know that. It took time to build the type of skill she needed.

Alexa picked out another Captain and stared at him. “Where were you going after grabbing me?”

Captain Wells swallowed nervously. “Into Lincoln, to resupply.”

“And where was *I* headed?”

He clearly didn’t want to say, but when Alexa lifted the Colt she’d reloaded, he changed his mind. “West. Three of us were supposed to keep you sedated for the trip to the base.”

“And my men?” She used a deceptively civil tone. “Killed?”

Wells slowly nodded. “If they wouldn’t join the government. We need men.”

Alexa waved a hand. “Go to Lincoln and tell them what happened here.”

Not waiting to see if she was obeyed, Alexa headed for the corn. Her men followed, keeping an eye on the soldiers until they disappeared from sight.

**5**

Alexa ran them for the next hour, getting to the river in less than half the time it had taken to reach the city. Not having to care for anyone else made a huge difference.

Grand Island was small and clean compared to other places they’d been. They walked down Plaza Square where Alexa led them by the tall hospital that she was sure held people. What type of people, she didn’t know and wasn’t keen to find out, thus the reason for strolling down a main street. A good view of them would convince most people to stay hidden.

Alexa stopped in front of a decrepit old building with no readable signs. She waited, listening, letting her men catch their breath. They were much stronger now than when she’d first picked them up, but still not at her level. She didn’t expect them to be. She’d had decades of training for these moments.

Alexa put Mark and David on sentry duty. “We’ll be inside for five minutes. Any longer, come in.”

Alexa led the others around the back, to the broken window she’d spotted. She smashed out the rest of the dust-grimed glass and then hopped inside with four men on her heels.

The bike store smelled bad. Rubber, rot, and a hint of fish odor permeated the building. All of them pulled their bandanas up over their mouths and noses as they moved through the broken, fallen shelves and piles of molded items. It didn’t appear that anyone had come through here since the war.

Alexa directed them to gather what she wanted in large bags that she took from under the register counter. Inner tubes, basic bikes, spare chains–they grabbed everything she told them to. The far wall of this building was lined with rusting hulks of bikes. Being on wheels would give them a slight advantage if they had to get away from something quietly.

Mark and David kept watch on the town and corn uneasily, both counting to that five-minute limit. Even though they knew she could handle most problems, it was always a relief when she rejoined them.

The team spent the next half hour replacing inner tubes and chains on the bikes. The other new supplies were divided and repacked into their kits later. All solid red, the mountain bikes were sleek and sweet even though they were dull from time.

Alexa tied up her cloak and swung a leg over, not asking them if they knew how. It was something she assumed everyone knew. “Let’s go.”

The bike ride was pleasant. If not for their mission, it could have been a fast ride on a cool morning. Alexa kept them rolling quickly, but it wasn’t so fast that her men got the impression she was rushing in to save the kids. In her mind, those captives would have already been transformed. All she wanted to do was eliminate the Master of the house. Time would have to heal the rest of this area’s ugly wounds.

Paralleling the swollen river made it easy to keep track of where they were, but the soggy ground made riding their bikes a challenge in some places.

Alexa led them around most of the worst areas, but she also forced them to roll through some of it so they would have that experience under their belts. She’d used bikes many times in her adventures, but she doubted the same was true of them. This would add another skill.

By the time the dim sun began to set, Alexa had them within hours of the house. They stopped to stash the bikes with fondness, each man hoping Alexa would let them use the quiet wheels for the return trip to Lincoln.

They left the bikes under an overturned dumpster in an alley of Grand Island, all hating the way their boots echoed on the cracked concrete. They’d gotten used to being on dirt and weed covered roads. This wasn’t a welcome change.

The damaged and weathered stores they passed held no signs that people had been through recently. Alexa made a mental note to make a stop here on the way back if it was convenient. There was a lot of gear she could take. Most of it would have to be prepared first, but she had a feeling that after handling the Master of the corn, she and her fighters would be ready for a break anyway.

Mark and David, still on sentry duty since they hadn’t been verbally removed from it, stayed to each side of the walking team and kept their eyes on the dark doorways and shadowy alleys around them. There was only a little wind to disturb things, but each sound that echoed was one to worry over. The wolves could be lurking and so could the old woman and her evil kids. The tense men walked with hands on the butts of their weapons, ready to shoot the first thing that acted like a threat.

The fork they were coming up on veered to the left and right. One appeared to wind back the way they’d come; the other headed into the tall, moldy corn. Alexa stepped to the left, making her own way through. Her men did the same, widening the path with their wider, heavier bodies. The ground here was drier, harder, and jarred them with each step, as if warning them not to continue.

A gust of wind came from nowhere and pushed against them violently as another warning.

Alexa laughed harshly. “Is that all you’ve got left, old woman?”

An angry screech blasted through the sky and then there was stillness and silence again.

Alexa’s taunting smirk remained as they topped a small hill. Tractor parts and long since mildewed buckets of corn ears lined this area. The fighters stayed clear of the shadows that likely held a predator of some kind.

“Smell that?” Billy brought his bandana up.

The others sniffed. Stomachs growled from the tempting odor of freshly roasted corn.

“Damn.” Mark sighed. “It’s thicker this time.”

“We’re closer to the source. Her manifestations, her minions, will have greater power here.”

“What is she? Who was she?” Daniel shoved his spikes off his sweaty forehead. “We need to know how to kill her.”

“Those are questions for later. The first two, anyway. As for how she can be killed, you’re wearing it on your hip.”

It was a relief to know that the monster could be stopped with bullets. Confidence rose to full levels again. Being knocked out had rattled them.

The house that appeared below as they reached the end of the massive cornfield was more than simply intimidating. It wasn’t right. The layers of fog that surrounded it shouldn’t have been there in these conditions. Nor should the second floor tilt or the third floor that appeared to be caving in. The columns holding up the three-story Victorian plantation home were too thin to support that much weight. Not to mention there was a solid black oak tree growing through an upstairs window. The entire property was like that. Fences were upside down, roots of weeds were waving among the moldy stalks, and the grain silo was shaped like a horseshoe.

Alexa let out an annoyed sound. “Wait for the real house.”

Her men waited a bit impatiently for something to happen.

It came all at once in a thick cloud that obscured the entire property. It lifted just as fast to reveal a busy city hotel. People, happy and wealthy, roamed the expensive grounds, laughing and drinking. It was clearly from before the war.

The fighters didn’t move.

The next fade was to a pitiful home with a bamboo roof and a swampy landscape that didn’t fit in the middle of Nebraska.

“Here we go. The next one is how we get in to her. You six must stay together. She’ll split you up if she can.”

“If we do get split up?” Billy checked his guns like the others were doing.

“We meet at the very top.”

The males would have questioned further, but the mirage in front of them changed again, this time becoming a castle wall with a single door.

“Let’s roll.” Alexa took off at a fast clip, and her men tried to keep up. She was incredibly quick.

Alexa let a large gap widen between her and the men as two large wolves came from the corn in front of her. They charged with thick snarls.

Alexa struck them both with a vicious swipe of both long knives across leaping faces. The animals fell as she kept going. Her men would finish them off.

Alexa picked up speed as she spotted the next pair of angry animals, going into that place where only she and her men existed. Switching guns for knives, she fired twice, taking down both animals. She didn’t slow as she saw the pack waiting ahead.

“Hurry up!” Mark pulled more speed from his body.

Alexa began shooting into the large pack, flying toward them as her men did the same. Rapid gunfire ruptured the air as Alexa cut straight through the center, killing six of the twenty-four. Three of the lunging animals were hurt when she ducked, letting them collide overtop of her. She rolled and was quickly back on her feet, reloading as she ran.

“Keep going!” David aimed. “We’ve got this!”

Alexa did, heading for the castle door.

The birds came from the corn next, forcing Alexa to battle her way through with hard swings of her guns, using the butts like hammers.

The large crows tore at her clothes, scratching her exposed skin, but she didn’t stop. Alexa darted up the three stairs and yanked the door open.

Reloading on the move, Jacob thought of the massive flying creature with the vivid yellow eyes as he brought up the Drag position. The Preacher pushed it away. He wasn’t a hog. He couldn’t be carried off… As everything vanished, there was no helping the pause in his steps, the unsteady stride. The crows, fog, and wolves disappeared, leaving only the castle wall, the open door, and the corn.

“It’s not a wall.”

David’s comment would have drawn argument, but the other men were too grossed out to respond. What they’d all mistaken for a high castle wall was actually a barrier of bodies, both gray and rotting. It was three bodies wide from what they could see; each peeling, gory face glowered at them in horrid warning.

“How many…” Billy trailed off, but it was already out.

Everyone tried to estimate it.

“Ten thousand.” Alexa almost choked. “About the population of elderly and kids that would have been taken from Lincoln in four years, plus a lot of travelers who tried to brave the corn.”

“That can’t…” Daniel spun around and threw up.

Mark and Edward flanked Alexa, who was still in the doorway. The other four men slowly drifted over, faces green.

Billy tightened his bandana. “Why don’t we smell it?”

“Glue. It holds the bodies together while nature melds it all into a wall. If it stank, it would draw predators and be torn down each time a hungry wolf dragged off a fresh body. The glue is stronger than the rot, sealing it.” Alexa was still looking through the door. Instead of the inside of a castle or the courtyard of a palace, there was another wall with seven tall doors. Unlike the first wall, this one was made of brick and that, at least, was a relief. The path to each of these doors was dirt, lined in corn and ominous gray shadows.

“Rats?”

Everyone heard the revulsion in Billy’s tone.

Alexa took it into account. “Anyone else?”

He was the only one of them with a phobia of the rodents. Alexa made him go first. “Time to conquer that.”

Billy wished he’d kept his mouth shut, but he was also glad for the chance to do something good, big, or even perfect for her.

Edward was the last one through the door. He gently shut it behind him, sure that if they needed to leave it open, Alexa would have told him so. She’d been training them to close doors, windows, and other telltale signs of their presence.

As soon as the door shut, the rats rushed toward Billy, running up his legs, biting and scratching as he stomped to the closest door. When he made it to the stairs, the rats slowly faded into the ground as if they’d never been there.

“How does she keep doing that? She’d need a solid block of energy to be able to…” David’s face transformed into a rage that made Jacob retreat a step to be out of the danger path.

“The kids.”

Alexa, who’d already figured it out, nodded. “We’ll handle it.”

Alexa assigned each of them to a different door. “We go through each one at the same time. One of us will be missing. That’s the right entrance. Ready?”

When she dropped her hand, all of them turned the knobs and stepped through.

The sight of that wall of bodies said she’d been sent back to the beginning. Alexa glanced around for her missing man. “It’s Edward’s door. Let’s go.”

They were reunited with Edward a minute later, in the courtyard that they’d expected the first time.

The house hadn’t changed, though. It was as wrong as it had been on their first view.

# BK 2 Chapter Fifteen

**The House in the Corn**

**1**

**T**o the far right of the old mausoleum was a large thicket of trees. The wide trunks in the front of the grove had branches that had almost grown together to effectively block the entrance. Edward and Billy were forced to veer to the left of these trees as three large wolves rushed them. Firing as they jumped, the men ran toward the nearest part of the house to them–the rear porch. Covered in thick green vines and crusty water spots, the wood shuddered as the fighters stomped up the short stairs and yanked the screen door open.

Billy slammed it shut behind Edward and fired through the filthy screen, hitting the wolf about to come straight through the flimsy mesh. He fired again, wounding the second snarling wolf.

The other animals turned tail toward the cover of the corn.

“I think we’re okay for a minute.” Billy tried to control his breathing as he reloaded.

“Um, Bill?”

Edward’s tone increased the speed of Billy’s fingers.

Edward grimaced as the wolf snarled, tensing for the leap. He was too close for a straight aim. He dropped to his knees as he fired.

Billy’s shot went through the wolf’s eye.

Edward’s tore its throat open.

Blood rained onto the wooden slats like a flood.

Edward shoved the gory carcass off his legs and joined Billy at the door.

“I’m starting to get the feeling we’re not wanted here.”

“You too, huh?” Edward grinned back, preparing to kick the door open while Billy covered him. “I thought it was just me they didn’t like.”

Billy nodded once, indicating that he was set.

Edward kicked hard, shattering the lock on the door. It banged against the frame with a thick crack, then slowly swung back with a haunted screech that echoed to all corners of the huge house.

Edward sighed. “So much for the Master not knowing exactly where we are.”

Billy shrugged, stepping into the old kitchen. “Won’t matter in the end.”

Edward now covered Billy as he moved farther into the wide room. “No, it won’t.”

The kitchen looked straight out of a history book or a painting. The old stove used the moldy wood stacked nearby and the sink was filled with buckets. The long tables were designed to hold massive amounts of food that would have been served to the partiers by dozens of maids. *Or slaves*, Edward had noticed a riding crop propped by the double swinging doors. It was a harmless object until you asked what it was doing in the kitchen. Then the implications came.

“An old plantation?” Billy’s voice was barely audible. He almost expected to see ghosts of slave women come from the giant pantry that took up an entire wall. The cabinet should have held dishes and serving items, but Billy had already spotted dried red drops on the floor in front of it.

“Someone’s in there.” Edward noticed the same things as Billy, but also a dusty footprint.

Billy reached for the handle, confident that Edward had him covered. He opened the pantry, braced to see bodies.

“Don’t hit me no mo’!”

Billy jumped, startled.

Edward’s finger nearly pulled the trigger anyway.

The woman was old, short, and black, wearing a white cook’s uniform covered in bloody streaks. She peered up at them from the bottom of the pantry with one black eye and one brown eye. Her long gray hair was full of dirt. On her wrists and ankles were thick scars that revealed signs of her abuse.

Compassion overwhelmed the fighters.

Billy knelt down. “Are you okay?”

The cook shuddered, mouth opening to reveal missing and chipped teeth. “Y-yes, Master.”

Billy scowled. “I’m not your Master.”

Edward sensed Billy’s revulsion and knelt down. “We’re letting you go, helping you. Can you walk?”

They weren’t sure for a minute if she was going to scream or cry. Her face changed emotions so many times that it made the two men a bit dizzy.

“I’ll cook for you! To pay you! Master’s gone. She won’t know.”

To their surprise, the little black woman climbed from the pantry as if she’d done it often and started pulling down pots and gathering utensils.

“Will cook you up big thanks!”

Her cackle caused the two fighters to eye her warily.

Billy flashed a question to Edward. *What should we do?*

Edward wasn’t sure. Information was handy in an unfamiliar area. Alexa was teaching them to find the locals, and what would be more local than the cook of the house? “We’d be happy to eat a fast meal.” Edward took a seat at the table. “But if we hear gunfire, we’ll have to run, you understand?”

The cook shrugged. “Not upstairs. The dog guards it too well. Better to stay right here, my pets.”

The woman’s speech was slowly becoming something else, and the shade of her skin–that deep ebony–was lightening even as they watched.

“Is this real?” Billy suddenly felt very dizzy.

“Of course, my friends! All is real in the house in the corn.”

Edward nodded thanks at the cup of tea the cook put in front of him. Billy already had one. Neither man was sure how she’d heated the water so fast, but it was steaming and stinking wonderfully. “What can you tell us about the Master of the house?”

“Oh, a hard one! Better to stay down here with me, my friends! I feed you well.”

The table was now heaped with temptations–the ripe smelling kind that these men hadn’t seen or scented in long years. Mashed potatoes with roasted chicken, pumpkin and apple pies, pudding, stuffing, greens. It was a holiday feast that brought all rational thought to a stop as hunger took control.

“Whoa.” Billy fought to control his hands. They wanted to rip off that chicken leg, scoop up a handful of stuffing, and demonstrate that yes, men really were pigs.

Edward had skipped their last meal, mind on how to help Alexa once Paul was left behind. His guts growled noisily. “Yeah.”

The cook viewed them with glittering, evil orbs, but neither man had attention for her. The sight of so much food was almost confusing.

“Can we take it with us?” Edward fought the spell. “We have friends we’d like to share it with.”

“Sure! Sure!” The cook cracked an eager grin that now revealed a mouthful of sharp fangs. “But try it first, my friends! Just a bite.”

Billy saw his hand go out and rip off the chicken leg. It slipped and burnt, like a real meal would. He laughed. “It’s good, right?”

Edward had the pumpkin pie in one hand and a fork in the other, face flushed. “We should make sure.”

Billy chuckled in agreement as both men brought the food to their mouths.

“Now!” Edward forced out around the smell that claimed to be the best taste he’d ever had.

Both men dropped the food to draw their guns. The plates hit the floor and burst into moldy corn that ran with weevils.

Edward opened fire before the cook could recover, shooting twice.

The woman was knocked against the stove in the impact. Her head landed in the flames, where the fire quickly spread. The smell was horrendous.

Edward’s bullets had hit her in the chest, but all the men could see of them was a single dark round stain on her white uniform. The fire, however, killed her. She went down in the flames, screeching like a banshee.

They let her burn.

Wary of the noise and still feeling like he was under a spell, Edward motioned Billy to the blind side of the double doors before taking the opposite area for himself.

“It’s wearing off.” Billy now felt like he may never be hungry again. The table of holiday sustenance had become what it really had been all along. The piles of body parts were sickening on every level. There were bowls of fingers, a platter of small legs, a tray of bloody cookies. It was revolting.

“What is this place?” Billy was sure he was about to be sick.

“A house of death.” Edward pulled his bandana up over his nose. Now that the glam was fading, the smells in this kitchen were that of a slaughterhouse. The smoldering cook didn’t help. “Let’s get–”

Gunshots split the air, echoing harshly inside the enormous house.

“Alexa!” She’d been at the front door… Full memory returned in a slap. “Come on!” Edward pushed through the doors.

Gagging, Billy went gratefully.

**2**

Alexa and Jacob kicked in the front doors.

David and Daniel shut them, using their weight to keep them that way as wolf after wolf tried to break through.

“Find something to block it!”

“The lock’s too broken to hold.”

Alexa grabbed a floor lamp from the lounge area and smacked it against the floor hard enough to break off the top end. She shoved it through the handles of the large front doors so that her fighters were able to let go.

The first thing all of them did was stay still and scan the room for trouble. There was a large, clean, tiled floor at the base of an enormous, winding staircase. On each side of the stairs were two dark shadowy places that hid doors to other rooms.

“Which way?” Daniel was eager to find their missing men.

Alexa pointed at the stairs. “The boss is always high.”

The men might have snickered at the video game reference if the situation hadn’t been so serious. They didn’t care for being sent against the boss without two of their fighters, but none of them hesitated to go up those gaudily decorated stairs.

Alexa sensed the trap right before it sprang, but they were already too far up to evade it. She holstered her gun and grabbed a rail as the ground rumbled. “Hang on. We’re going for a ride!”

The men barely had time to follow her lead before the stairs dropped out, leaving them dangling above a black void.

“Shit!” David tried not to panic. “Shit! Drop or climb?”

“Wait.” Daniel was studying Alexa. “Jump?”

David saw Alexa picking her falling position, and groaned. “Okay, great.”

Alexa let go of the cracking rail and sailed into the darkness without a word.

Her loyal men followed, leaving David to stare into the abyss with fear. But he wasn’t his own anymore. He belonged to Alexa now and there was no going back. David closed his eyes, then let go of the railing.

It felt like he fell for a very long time. David heard the grand staircase replacing itself above him, but he couldn’t see it. It was a fall through the blackness where he wasn’t sure how he kept from screaming.

“Everyone here?”

Hearing Alexa’s calm voice helped. David tried to master his true emotions before he landed. He peered downward, trying to get a glimpse of what he would hit, and felt himself come to a jarring, cold stop in water up to his waist.

David wiped away the splash, wondering why he hadn’t heard the others. He let Daniel pull him to his feet. That crazy man was grinning from ear to ear, face alive with danger and mysteries revealed.

“I was too screwed up to enjoy the fall the first time.” Daniel also wiped at his face. “It was great.”

David hadn’t known that was how Daniel had died, only that he had and Alexa had brought him back. David knew it hadn’t been magic exactly, but an accelerated form of healing. He’d heard of it over a card game and hadn’t been sure he truly believed the grifter telling him the story. They’d discussed many things that night. The rumors of a descendant of Adrian, and of a new group of safety coming through, had bent many ears in the bar after the sun had gone down. That tale had clearly been true.

David looked around to discover that he was almost alone again and hurried to catch up to his group. This swampy area appeared to be exactly that, as if they’d left the ground floor and found the Florida Keys at night instead of a basement. It was spooky.

“Look out!”

Daniel’s shout ahead of him still sounded excited.

David drew his gun, splashing faster through the muck.

**3**

“Ahh!” Alexa screamed in pain as the fire animal grabbed her, squeezing. “Hit the collar!”

The gigantic firedog was a full story tall and covered in constantly shifting flames. Five long arms swept out at the fighters.

“Shoot it!”

All four men opened fire on the legendary creature. They were too scared to do anything more than obey.

The animal was tall, wide, and covered in small, glowing red feathers that brushed over the collar like a protective shield, deflecting even the best shot.

“Reload!” Daniel heard the gunfire cease. It let Alexa’s cries of pain echo as the firedog tried to crush her when the heat did no damage.

David and Jacob were last to finish reloading; the Blacksmith grabbed the Preacher’s arm, pointing to a ledge. “Up there!”

Jacob took off for the platform while David fired at the creature’s ankles, hoping their thinness meant they were a weak spot.

The creature roared in pain and anger as David emptied his mag.

Alexa fell into the muck, groaning and coughing.

Jacob swung onto the platform that had probably once been used as secondary stairs into this wasteland. He drew down on the creature as it lifted a wide foot to crush Alexa.

The shot was perfect, but Jacob followed it with five more, being sure the collar was shattered.

The firedog cried out in horrible agony and then exploded into a million tiny red flames that sizzled angrily in the dampness before vanishing.

The stunned men rushed to Alexa’s side, helping her to her feet. They kept a hand around her until she was steady enough to walk on her own.

Above them, familiar gunfire split the air.

The five muddy fighters moved toward the set of stone stairs that Alexa had spotted through the swirling fog and plant life. It wasn’t over. They still had three levels to go.

**4**

Alexa and Edward met at the bottom of the grand stairs, each group relieved to see the other.

Alexa went to the side of the massive staircase. “Things okay?”

“We ran into a delay, but we handled it.” Edward noticed fresh bruises and blood on her skin.

“Good.” Alexa pointed to the second floor landing. “We’re going up there. But not by the expected route.”

“Yes, please.” Daniel’s joke was half grumble. “No damn stairs. The ones to get back up here lasted like, forever.”

David and Jacob nodded their agreement. Only Alexa and Mark hadn’t been gasping by the time they got to the stone door at the top.

Alexa found a place to climb. The seven of them scaled the sides of the staircase like the demon monkeys from OZ.

Alexa dropped onto the second floor landing but didn’t go anywhere yet. She evaluated the sudden sound of ballroom music that floated through the air around them. This house was ancient and held many ghosts. She’d expected that, but the song was the one that Adrian had used to teach her to dance during that perfect summer. She fought the urge to rail at fate for the cursed duty that had been placed on her family.

There were three doors on this floor. The voices and music were coming from the one at the far end. They had to pass by the other large doors to get there.

The men switched into that deadly V without being told. Alexa would want those rooms cleared to keep anyone from trapping them.

Mark and Edward kicked the first door open and rushed inside with the rest of the group on their heels. The instant they were in, the door swung shut, throwing them into total darkness.

Alexa struck a match and held it to the torch that Edward pulled from a cloak pocket. Their rear man, Daniel, also lit a torch from her flame. The wooden torches were standard gear that gave them a small circle of light to see by.

The fighters moved forward, trying to adjust to the darkness. They made it to the center of what appeared to be a large round room made of a glimmering stone and then a strong draft blew through hard enough to put out both torches.

Alexa sighed, understanding the house was reading their fears. “Think of amusing tales, my pets. We need no mental terrors here.”

Alexa wanted to give them an idea of what to expect, but was unable to. It was a part of her story that she hadn’t gotten to yet. Much of her information hadn’t come from actually doing things, only reading the notebooks. Instinct took over from there.

Alexa led them forward in the darkness, listening, sensing nothing but empty space.

“Whoa!” She twisted away from the hole in the floor just in time, lunging to the side to stop the domino effect from pushing her over anyway.

Mark, boots touching the edge of nothing, pulled on her arm.

A quick view by a match flame that was again blown out revealed a rope ladder leading down into the hole.

Alexa rose to her feet instead of lowering herself down. “If you want me, come and get me.”

The answer was almost instant.

A blinding blue glow sped from the bottom of the hole, growing larger and more brilliant.

Alexa waved the men back.

There was no trouble seeing now as light flooded the stone and tile room. It bounced off the glittering rocks and took the shape of a vast man with a long staff that formed an arrow at the bottom.

Alexa stood still as the man pointed his staff at her.

The men ran to place themselves between the pair, not sure if bullets would help. They hadn’t thought to ask about anyone other than the master of this haunted house.

“Who wakes me?” The wizard’s odd voice echoed. His long white beard looked like every magician the fighters had seen in the movies, all combined into one. The result was a young, old man who stood twice as tall as Alexa. He glared down at them with vivid purple orbs.

Alexa placed her hands on her gun butts. “Alexa Mitchel.”

The old man attacked, raising the staff to fire a brilliant beam, but Alexa’s draw was incredibly fast. She fired, hitting the staff. It flew into the air.

“No!” The man scrambled for his power.

Alexa beat him to it, kicking the powerful object into the hole, where it clattered against the sides and snapped several times. The cracking noise was the loudest sound in the room as Alexa turned on the man, face glowing with anger. “Demand it of me now, I beg you!”

“Die!”

“You first!” She placed her gun to his temple and pulled the trigger as he cowered.

She was blasted across the room by the explosion of blinding light that quickly faded into the smoky air.

Edward helped Alexa to her feet, and motioned Billy to lead them out. “Clear.”

The chuckling group moved into the hall, closing the door behind them.

Alexa kept them right there for a few minutes, letting her men adjust. What they were going through was hard on both body and mind. She too should need recovery time, but despite the new injuries, she felt almost invincible.

As they waited, each of them was aware of the music and voices being louder, as if the party was just winding up.

A feeling of weariness spread among the men. It had already been a long day.

**5**

“Ready.”

The second door burst open just before they reached it. The landing filled with undead guards who ran toward Alexa with snarls of rage.

Alexa swung her arm out. “I’ve got these.”

Her fighters fell back to let her work.

Alexa was angry and she took it out on the zombie people who staggered toward her. She used her blade, putting them down quickly.

Edward and David didn’t like being left out of the action and joined the fight, enjoying the ease with which the undead went down. Except, more of them were flooding through the narrow doorway now–a lot more than three of them could handle alone. The other fighters rushed forward to help.

Alexa was battling her way to the door, using anger to fuel her energy, but she was grateful when her men appeared at her side. They fought their way in the direction she pointed, finally reaching the door in relief. Until they peered through.

Jacob moaned. “That’s not possible. That can’t happen.”

The room was too big to measure. There were no ends or edges, no walls or a ceiling, no doors or curtains even, just a harsh, desert landscape filled with undead. Thousands of them roamed the wastelands, many of those being drawn to the open door.

“Oh, my God!” David jerked on the heavy door. “Close it!”

Alexa’s instinct whispered quietly. She shoved her way through as her men handled the next wave of undead to reach them.

Alexa saw the glowing sign of a portal and removed the golden knife given to her before she’d left Lincoln. She threw it as hard as she could and then ran, not waiting to see if it landed where she needed it to. The group of undead coming toward her numbered more than she could count as the first wave of the horde arrived. She hurtled herself back through the door as her men slammed it shut.

The undead crammed against the door. The wood bulged under the pressure, but because it opened inward, they were trapped.

Alexa turned toward the final door without taking a break this time, still catching her breath. There was no explosion or other sound to let her know if her blade had closed the portal. It hadn’t appeared to be between worlds, but between continents. The possible effects it could have caused over four years was staggering.

Behind them, a loud bang echoed. The door shimmered as if it were going to melt, then it became a solid wall of stone instead of a door.

*That one’s closed now.* She was grateful, but she didn’t let her guard down. There was still one room left on this floor and she expected it to be the hardest to clear.

**6**

They opened the last door to find a spacious ballroom decorated in Civil War era furnishings. The wide drapes and the hooped skirts of the belles were a testament to the times. Even the blood dripping from painted faces seemed to complement the impression that the fighters had stepped back in time. The only difference that stood out at first was that these dancers and drinkers, these drunken daughters, were dead.

“Holy shit!” Jacob’s swear surprised the others into an uneasy snicker. It was rare for him to curse.

Jacob ignored them, staring at gaping sockets, the dangling limbs. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“It’s the Dance of the Dead.” David observed it in awe. “I didn’t think it was real.”

Edward tensed as the ghosts started to turn toward them. “What is that?”

“A story about travelers who get trapped in a haunted house. They’re all killed horribly–disfigurement, impalement, fire, and then they become part of the vengeful ghosts. The dance happens every night. It’s a repeat of their death to provide entertainment for the royals of court.”

“The what?”

“What court?”

They didn’t understand exactly what it meant, but it didn’t matter as the ghosts flew toward them.

Alexa started shooting.

The slugs didn’t kill the ghosts, but it did cause them to disappear and have to regather themselves again to become visible, buying time.

“Coat room!” Alexa shot her way through as the mass of bodies converged upon them.

From the doorway it looked like a massive swarm of dead had the fighters surrounded in the middle, to their doom. The sound of gunfire was constant, unyielding. The clouds of dust from imploding and reappearing ghosts were like a sand storm flying across the ballroom. It allowed for tracking the progress of the crew as the cloud moved steadily toward the rear of the wide room.

With no chance to reload, all of the fighters were using their knives to get through long before they reached the small door that Alexa had spotted.

Billy yanked it open. He saw only coats and began pulling his fellow fighters inside. He didn’t hesitate to grab Alexa’s swinging arm either, though he did let her kill a rather gruesome woman in a serving frock first. It looked like a relative of the cook from downstairs. Billy wasn’t sorry when her head blew apart.

They slammed the door behind Billy as he hurtled himself through. For a minute, the group stood there, reloading and panting.

“I’m almost out.” Mark popped a fresh magazine into his gun.

“Me, too.” Edward did the same. He wasn’t worried over that as much as he was concerned about what help bullets would be against the Master of this horror house. They couldn’t kill the ghosts on this floor. They were stuck in a coatroom. The odds weren’t good.

“I think there’s another door here.” Jacob was in the far corner where the roof and the floor no longer met evenly due to time and weather. The result was a rut that made Jacob seem a full foot shorter.

“A door in the floor.” Jacob tugged on the handle as everyone came over. “Not normal.”

Billy broke more of the tension. “Normal is as normal does.”

Even Alexa gave him a small smile. Those great attitudes during the fights were part of why they’d been chosen. Not only reliable, her men were often a balm to fraying nerves.

The door sprung open with a loud snap, triggering fresh thuds and bangs on the main door that they’d simply locked by the handle.

Alexa waved Mark forward. “Shoot first…”

“Apologize later.” Mark agreed with every word. He slipped into the hole in the floor and found a wooden slat under his boots almost right away. “Feels like a staircase.”

“Right behind you.”

Mark headed into the darkness and the six others behind him waited for their turn, trying not to think about how long they might be in there.

Other than Edward, who preferred it, Alexa and her men didn’t like being in the dark. Mark was barely able to tolerate it. Alexa hoped this would cure him of the weakness. The sooner they had two solid darkness fighters, the better. Once freed, Mark would help Edward protect them during those times that the panic became too much to ignore. She and the others would keep working on their fears of the dark. As it was, Mark would lead them and Edward would bring up the rear, where they would be the most vulnerable. It was a group effort, this questing, and even she still had a few flaws to be conquered.

The hardest task waited for them at the top of the stairs. They pushed open the final door to reveal a dingy attic space with covered furniture and peeling walls. On one side there were three large wolves, each tensely pointed toward the door. On the other side were three more of the lanky creatures that the fighters were tired of. Behind this second group of animals, a leader lurked in the shadows. Covered from top to bottom in a long, black shroud, the figure was tall and thin, but that was all the fighters could see.

Alexa used her boot to slam the door shut. Some leaders would have used this moment to instruct their team, but Alexa didn’t know what was waiting any more than they did. She filled the scant seconds with what she thought mattered the most in that absence of information–the two basic rules. “Aim small, miss small. Watch your six.”

The shadowy form in the corner came to life at those words, as did the wolves. The fighters quickly found themselves in their first upper level battle where the reality they knew no longer existed.

“Kill them all!” The evil figure threw a cloud of flies that had appeared to be a part of her clothes.

The scaly hag rose to full size, stubby head sliding along the ceiling.

Alexa’s men didn’t wait for the wolves to reach them. They fired, aiming for heads and hearts while battling the flies that tried to blind them.

Alexa knew bullets wouldn’t work on the crone, but the wolves were quickly taken down before they could do damage. While her men handled what they could, Alexa stepped forward to meet the hag.

Without her veil, the specter was mostly a skeleton. Alexa huffed a sigh of relief at it being this kind. The stronger, harder to kill specters were flesh-bodied. Only fire would end them.

Alexa shoved her knife through the crone’s neck and stepped back as the body fell. She saw that all the wolves were down, her men reloading and sharing snickers. She shook her head. “Rookies.”

All of the men turned toward her, brows drawing together in confusion and then warning as they saw the hag rising from the ground behind Alexa.

The wolves lunging for their boots an instant later was also unexpected.

The men scrambled back to clear room for shooting as the battle restarted.

With no time to do more than react, the six men spent an ugly minute putting the wolves back down. Jacob fell over his own feet, causing Edward to cover two wolves this time. They were glad when all of the animals were dead.

Alexa had already dispatched the hag and reloaded. She shook her head when her men would have questioned. “Not right now.”

That told them it wasn’t over yet. The fighters quickly got into better positions to handle the wolves that were already reviving.

Alexa used her knife for a third time, remembering to duck the swipe and then jump the falling corpse that tried to bite her.

Jacob didn’t trip, but Edward still covered his wolf and Jacob’s. He was slower to understand that the Preacher had adjusted.

Silence reigned for a moment, broken by reloading and faster breathing than when they’d come up here.

The hag cackled tauntingly as she stood up in full form and began the play all over.

Alexa’s knife, duck and jump was now followed by the knife again, across the skeleton’s neck this time, but Alexa knew she’d have to reset it soon. Remembering steps wasn’t easy in this situation.

Jacob, who’d come close to being bitten when Edward avoided his wolf to protect Jacob after he’d fallen, slammed his last mag home with a grunt. “New plan. Back up and stay shoulder to shoulder.”

Alexa sighed heavily as she put the hag down for the fifth time, feeling the daze of monotony trying to take over the adrenaline. If allowed, that would get them killed.

The men handled the wolves easier this time, but Jacob’s words reminded them it was about to get harder. “I’m out.”

Edward pulled his knife as the wolf by him stirred. “Straddle them; take them out as soon as you can.”

It was a great idea that let the men keep the wolves down enough that they were able to watch Alexa’s artful death strokes on the hag. As she tired, Alexa also straddled her target and simply slit the throat each time it tried to revive.

Alexa met Edward’s eye as she added a neck snap. “Pace yourselves.”

Edward groaned as the wolf under him snapped back to life with a thick growl. He plunged the blade into its thick body yet again. How long would this go on?

Alexa answered the unspoken question. “Until we’ve killed them enough times to draw attention. It may be a while. When it happens, you’ll know this part is done. There won’t be any mistaking it.”

Those words were not a comfort to the already tired men who began to conserve their energy, using the less artful, more efficient moves to get the job done.

Above them in the room’s only window, the sun sank, leaving a nightmarish darkness that stole over them like a second skin.

**7**

Edward plunged and pulled, knees locked down. Then he waited, hearing his own ragged gasps for air. The sets were reviving closer together now, like something was finally headed toward them, but at this moment, he had no will left to keep fighting.

“That’s what this is designed to do.” Alexa kept her knee-numbing hold on the wiggling hag. She plunged her knife in, pulled it out, and found Edward through the darkness. “Soon. Hold steady.”

Desire and determination came back to her men in small words like those. She felt their warmth around her as the next set started… Except the rumbling wasn’t coming from the body under her that now felt cold and heavy, with no life of any kind. “Stand and be true–Ahhhh!”

Alexa screamed as she was grabbed by a huge, clawed hand with a relentless grip. She got a fast view of the real specter–fiery, snotty, and seriously pissed–and then she was flying through the window and out into the open air.

“Alexa!” Edward and Mark shouted it together. Without a thought for anything else, the two men followed their leader by tossing themselves out the broken window.

The remaining four fighters faced the Master alone.

**8**

Paul snapped awake. The distant gunshots sped up his heart as they continued. Those were Alexa’s Colts. She and the other men were now fighting to the death against whatever target Alexa had pointed out. They would shoot on command and she would smile at them in happiness.

“Should have been me.” He went to shut the rickety door of the shack. It was getting colder, and though he hadn’t formed a plan, he would have to stay here for tonight. With anger in his mind, he covered the broken window with a tarp from the kit that he knew how to pack correctly now. He then leaned the half a cupboard against the door to hold it closed and keep out the draft. After he made a bed in the corner, gun in his lap, Paul dropped back into his mental prison. He didn’t start a fire or even use his penlight–a gift from Billy for making the trip to Lincoln without getting any of them killed. He sat in cold darkness, occasionally fingering the gun. He didn’t move again until dawn broke over the smoky landscape.

# BK 2 Chapter Sixteen

**A Hag? Oh, Hell**

**1**

**A**lexa landed in a tree branch that immediately felt different from the moldy trunks she was used to. She felt two thick thuds of her men hitting the branches behind her and gasped in pain as she tried to shout. At least three of her ribs were broken.

“Get that whore down here!” Alexa gasped out.

Mark grabbed her and hauled her into the fork where she could hold on.

Edward used his gun to get the attention of the hag. He shot the wolves under the trees, quickly using up the last of his bullets.

There was an astounded roar from inside the house and then their four men came hurtling through the window. Two had been thrown, two had jumped.

Alexa held on tightly as the small grove of trees shook and smacked into each other under the impacts.

The roaring got louder as it moved closer. The Master was furious at the deaths committed so boldly in her presence.

Alexa knew her timing had to be perfect; she couldn’t spare even a minute of explanation for her scared, confused men.

The hag came from the windows on the second floor, bursting through with an evil wail spilling from a mouth that crawled with disease. It ran from her eyes in streams of virulent typhoid, proclaiming her identity as she tried to infect them through sight, touch, sound, and smell.

Alexa lifted herself up so that she could kick at the wood below her. Following as always, the men did the same without understanding why.

Power emanated from the specter as it rushed closer. All of the fighters felt a heavy weight settle onto their lungs and begin to steal their air. Even from a distance, it was a horrifyingly debilitating weapon.

David quickly found himself on the ground as he ran out of air and had to let go of the branch.

Daniel dropped down to help him, slowly choking.

Panic had sunk into David’s mind. Doors there flew open as he began to grey out. A force shot from his mind like a bullet.

The hag coming toward them screeched again in blind rage.

Daniel felt the heaviness on his lungs ease. He hefted David to his feet.

David struggled to stay alert, climbing awkwardly as the other fighters grabbed at his arms to assist.

Furious, the hag rushed toward the small thicket of trees, but drew up again, wailing her outrage as the two trees closest to her lit up with a brilliant blue light.

Jacob brought a hand up to shield his eyes. “What is that?”

“They’re holly trees!” Alexa dropped to the ground, smothering a cry of pain. “Come on!”

Alexa ran forward and stabbed the hag with the sharp end of a thick branch, aiming for where a heart should have been. The light from the trees blinded the specter, disorienting her as Alexa’s men used their own branches to stab wherever they could reach.

The specter roared in pain this time, starting to retreat.

Alexa ran to the other side, gasping as she hunkered down with her branch lodged firmly against the ground. “Hey! Slam you!”

The crone turned too quickly and impaled herself on the tree branch. She poured blood that was as black as the mold on the other trees.

Her cries of agony summoned nearby living things and then things that weren’t alive. Rats and wolves came from the corn, eyes glowing with vengeance as the hag died, sagging on the branch. The corn around them rustled under undead forms struggling closer.

“Damn it! Get back to the house!” Alexa grabbed a pouch from the dead hag, recovering the lock of missing hair the others hadn’t noticed. She was glad the hag hadn’t thought to use it against her during the fight.

The fighters grabbed her and fled to the front porch, but they were surprised when Alexa only motioned them into a fighting stance in front of the doors. They flanked her, kicking and knifing the animals who were closest. The undead were also coming for them. More and more of the elderly sacrifices of Lincoln were being drawn toward the promise of blood.

Alexa pulled the last of her strength and raised her hands in ancient, powerful motions that sent flames shooting from her fingertips. They leapt eagerly onto the window frames, onto the wood railing of the porch, and the slats under their feet. In seconds, the porch was on fire, causing the vengeful creatures stalking them to pause in wary confusion.

Alexa spun around and kicked the doors open for the second time in the same day, nearly falling through. “To the rear!” She groaned roughly as Edward caught her.

The fighters ran through the kitchen, ignoring the withered corpse of the cook as they headed for the back door.

Alexa stopped them. “Not until it’s almost gone.”

Realizing they would have to stay inside the house while it burnt, the men began pulling up bandanas and wetting their sleeves. Alexa stayed in the chair that Edward placed her in, breathing in heaving gasps as she tried to gather enough energy to finish this job.

Smoke poured into the kitchen from under the swinging doors, gathering in a thick layer along the ceiling.

Edward helped Alexa get her bandana up and motioned the others to stay down low. He took a place by the screened porch door, hoping to see nothing out there waiting for them. “Shit! There are more zombies.”

“Undead.” Jacob faked a cheerful tone. “Zombies are the things from movies.”

Edward snorted out annoyed amusement. “Looks like zombies from here.”

The house was old and brittle. It burnt quickly. The group in the kitchen listened to the front porch collapse and then the living room walls came alive, flooding the kitchen with thicker, black smoke.

“On the floor!” Alexa coughed so hard that she puked, moaning in agony between heaves.

Edward dragged her down and toward the back door. “We have to get out!”

Alexa nodded, unable to speak as Mark also came to help her.

Edward used his boot to open the door.

An undead face immediately loomed above them, growling hungrily.

Edward shouted in anger and fear. He kicked out, catching the zombie in the chin. She cartwheeled down the porch stairs, clearing a brief path.

“This way!” Edward led them down the stairs and into the corn, shoving zombies aside, jumping large rats. He had an arm under Alexa. Mark’s hand was entwined with his to keep her upright.

They fled the burning house without looking back. There was no need to. They could all hear the padding feet, the rustles of hastily moved cornstalks.

“Why did we burn the house?!” Billy came up to help drag Alexa forward. She was trying to run, but her feet mostly peddled after each step, a beat off.

Even as he spoke the words, a large wolf about to lunge in front of them burst into flames, yapping and howling. A rat by his feet also caught fire with no visible source.

Jacob shook a fist. “They die with the house! Yes! Take that!”

Alexa drew in smoky air through the agony. “Keep moving. Until dawn.”

Edward knew what was coming and gently swung her up into his arms before she could fall out completely. “We will. You rest, Boss.”

Alexa grunted, eyes closing. “Pass out, you mean.”

Edward forced a chuckle. “Yeah. We’ll have that idiot doctor in Lincoln examine you again when we get back.”

Mark took the lead. “Let’s move it!”

The men picked up speed, outdistancing the smaller animals and shoving through the undead that were still being drawn to the noise and smoke. The farther from the house they got, the fewer obstacles there were to evade.

They actually felt it when the house gave. Alexa’s body sagged as she also surrendered to the inevitable.

Edward motioned them into a fast walk as he turned to get a last view of the house, but all he could see was a bright glow and pillars of thick smoke billowing into the night sky. Around them, small spontaneous combustions crackled like fireworks as predators and rodents exploded in showers of flames that caught the corn afire.

“Son of a–”

“Yeah.” Daniel interrupted Mark’s curse. “I am so tired of this place.”

“Where to?” David took Alexa’s body as Edward turned to give that order. After their last adventure in the sewer tunnels, the men had this part of the quest down pat.

“There!” Billy pointed to a shadow. “I think that’s a silo. We’ll hole up there!”

The males ran despite the danger being gone. It didn’t feel safe yet and Alexa had taught them not to let their guard down until it did.

“There’s no door!” Mark ran ahead of the others. The frame of what had once been a large barn would offer them no shelter. The men crammed into the narrow silo stairway and began to climb.

“It’s concrete.” David pointed when Edward paused them halfway up. “If we climb into the bin, we’ll be covered on air for a while, maybe long enough for it to burn out around us.”

Outside the silo the burning corn made thick popping and crackling sounds, sometimes snapping against the silo as if in anger at their escape.

Edward and David settled Alexa into a bottom corner of the damp bin, laid across a sawhorse they created from rotting boards. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but none of them were willing to lay her in the muck that layered the bottom of the old silo. It obviously hadn’t been used for a while even before the war.

The men stayed by their mistress as thick smoke began to drift into the open silo.

Unlike inside the shut up house, the silo’s top had also been damaged, creating a vent that drew the smoke from the bottom, up the stairs, and then out. Only a bare layer entered the actual bin and it stayed near the top, searching for an exit. The fighters were relieved to have caught a break.

Billy checked his cloak even though he knew he was out. “Anyone got spare ammo?”

The fighters searched their gear for any bullets they may have overlooked.

“Damn.” David had them covered, though he hadn’t realized it earlier. “She said someone had to account for Paul’s bad aim when he started learning to shoot. I’ve been stashing boxes for two weeks.”

It gave them three full magazines worth of bullets to each man, and four to Alexa. Edward reloaded her weapons while Mark placed the extra mags in her belt. When she woke, she’d be glad to find them there.

Edward settled on the small shoveling ledge that was built into the wall of the silo, then leaned his head back. He let out a weary sigh.

The other men followed his example, eager to relax and be semi comfortable. They shared what room there was and kept eyes on Alexa, who had begun to snore.

Billy sank down with a grunt and shifted his kit until it was the pillow that Alexa always used hers as. He hadn’t had a need to do it until now.

He found it comforting when the others did it as well. Alexa would be proud of them.

**2**

A scratching noise snapped the men awake just before the coming dawn, making their balls draw up and their stomachs drop. It was the sound of someone or something climbing into the silo with them.

Edward motioned David and Billy to stay by Alexa as he and the others slowly and quietly went to stand where they could see the hatch above.

The face that peered down at them was familiar.

“Uh-uh.” Jacob groaned, starting to shake. “No…”

Daniel scowled. “Uh, no. I can’t.”

The little girl leered down at them, dripping blood and gore from her mouth. She swung a leg over the ledge to find the ladder, giggling.

David wanted to be strong enough to do it, but he’d looked into her eyes! There was still an innocent child in there.

Billy placed himself between the girl and Alexa, who hadn’t woken yet, but he wasn’t sure that he could use the gun that appeared in his hand.

Mark and Edward exchanged a glance that said it had to be done, and they could do it, but only if she attacked. It had to be in defense.

“My Preacher!” The little girl jumped from the ladder, clawed hands reaching for Jacob’s stunned face.

The two men pulled the trigger.

The child’s body splashed in the muck as it hit the bottom of the silo.

Mark promptly leaned over and vomited.

Edward holstered in disgust and waved toward the ladder. “A few hours have passed. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

He didn’t have to say it twice.

**3**

Paul heard the boots and felt his heart pound. Alexa and her brutes were back. He’d heard the vicious battle and seen the fire, but it hadn’t reached his shack. He’d hidden from the passing animals in surprised fear, but now, in the light of day, he felt like a coward.

Alexa would expect him to fall in line for her triumphant walk back into Lincoln. He would have to suffer the feelings of pride and the boastful comments of the men who’d done the fighting, and he would have to tolerate their scornful glances at him for being too weak to join her. It was humiliating.

Paul didn’t get up as the boots stopped, not sure if he would refuse to go with them. He’d almost made his choice. A bunker was looking better and better. Underground, he would at least be with his own kind. He understood now that he wasn’t enough like Alexa to make it, but he wasn’t sure about going to the bunker either. He had enough information to be let in, but there, he’d be a prisoner again.

“Maybe I’ll go off on my own.” He ignored the boots now stopping outside the door. “She doesn’t need me and I can survive without her.”

The front door was jerked open, causing the broken cupboard to crash over.

Paul glanced up angrily. “I’m not going.”

The chuckle in response was unexpected, mostly because it wasn’t who he had expected.

“Yes, you are. Right back to being the bait, where you belong.”

Unlike the others, these soldiers were harder, meaner, older. They were a real threat.

Shane laughed maliciously as the others brought Paul out. His strawberry red hair gleamed in the dim sunlight. “Load that good luck pile into a truck and get set. She burnt the house down. It won’t be long now and she’ll be back here to collect her rabbit. We’ll get a double reward.”

Paul had once loved to stare at Shane’s smooth red curls and pretend they were his. It had gotten the soldier jobs and attention that he didn’t deserve. Paul had almost been friends with Shane. Upon killing his father, Paul had even missed Shane, but his time with Alexa had already changed him. He could now spot the evil, the madness.

Paul spun in the grip of the two men who’d expected a frightened rabbit, snatching his gun from his belt.

Before Shane could do more than put up a hand, Paul began to pull the trigger.

**4**

Alexa came to an hour after they climbed from the silo, snapping into alertness all at once.

Daniel immediately stopped to set her onto her feet.

Ribs throbbing, Alexa stared at the charred landscape, noting that the fire had run ahead of them. It would be stopped at the river, but the bikes they’d made would be nothing but charred piles of metal by now. Her men hadn’t bothered to go check, she noticed. They’d kept going toward Lincoln, and were now within a few miles of it. From the look of the land, the stores she’d hoped to clean out had been destroyed. Fire was merciless. “You’ve done well.”

Her praise was the topping on a fine dessert. All six men grinned happily.

Alexa resumed their walk toward Lincoln, stretching carefully to discover they had tightly bound her ribs with a cloth. It was helping her breathe and move without as much pain. She was also a faster healer.

She took the water and biscuit Jacob handed her, picking out signs that animals had tried to run ahead of the fire. Burnt corpses of all varieties littered the road. “You’ve done very well. We’ll move to the next levels of training from here.”

None of the men protested. Each of them had spent the last hour of walking considering their actions on this run, their reactions and deeds. Each of them had performed well, but if the next missions would be harder, more training was definitely in order. However, it was already somewhat amazing how well they’d adjusted to this lifestyle. It was as if they’d been born waiting for this time to arrive so that they could shine.

“We all have some questions. If there’s to be a reward, we’ve agreed on that.”

Alexa allowed Billy’s boldness. After this, she may or may not crack down on their arrogance a bit, but for now, they could do little wrong in her eyes. They’d come through the first real test. It was enough. “Such as?”

Billy grinned wider. “Sweet. Uh… The hag. Why did the two trees hold her back?”

“Holly trees have long been used to guard against foulness. They only glow when true evil is present.”

Daniel had a question, too. “And the branches we stabbed her with?”

“Dogwood.” Jacob had been thinking hard on that one. “With the religious associations, it makes sense.”

Billy frowned. “Religious associations?”

“Supposedly that was the tree used to crucify Christ. It even has a discolored center that resembles the nails in the hands and feet.”

Edward brought up something he’d noticed. “Did you notice those trees didn’t have mold on them? Weird.”

Daniel pulled up an old tidbit of information. “They were all fast-growing varieties that had to have been transplanted. Holly trees used to only grow in swampy areas.”

David shrugged. “Well, if we ever meet the person who planted them, we owe a big thank you.”

Alexa kept her thoughts to herself. Safe Haven had traveled this way. She couldn’t help but wonder if those trees had been put there intentionally by someone who’d known they would need the material. Dogwood and Holly were both popular at Christmas time, which it had been when the war came, so she wasn’t sure what to assume. In the end, she settled for fate taking care of the descendants, as it always had. “Did you bring a few—”

Alexa stopped talking as the men held up small handfuls of the branches they’d used against the hag and then a small stack of others that would be divided as soon as they made their stop for the night.

Alexa smiled at them, full strength. “Excellent.”

It was a moment before any of them could remember how to walk.

Billy waited until Edward filled her in on everything she’d missed. “What about the little girl? Why didn’t she die with the house?”

“None of the undead was destroyed except by the natural spread of the fire.” Alexa saw that they were now beyond the burn line. It hadn’t come this far. “The undead aren’t connected as strongly to their creator once they’ve had fresh blood.”

“Then the other one could still be out there?” Daniel grimaced. “Attacking travelers?”

Alexa nodded. “Yes. Do you want to go back and hunt him down?”

“I thought he was only an extension of the master?” Jacob was confused again.

“He was during the changing process, but after a few days, each victim becomes their own master. Most stay with their creator simply because it’s the life they know, but these children were taken from their families and brought here, so they’ll roam.”

Jacob smothered a chill. “Are there more of them?”

“Oh, yes. The Master of the house hadn’t been challenged since the conquest of Lincoln. Scores of townspeople and travelers fell prey.”

“And we’re going to leave them out there to hunt?” Mark was surprised by that.

Alexa shrugged, voice gentle. “Say the word, my pets, and we’ll turn around.”

As much as they wanted to, none of the men spoke.

Alexa kept walking. It would take them years to hunt down all the undead children that had been created here and it was hard, soul killing work, as they’d already found out.

*Bang!*

The gunshot echoed through the corn and sent birds fleeing toward the fighters. They were less than a mile from the shack where they’d left Paul.

Alexa took off running, and her fighters stayed on her heels. They’d all recognized the sound of his gun. Who had he killed this time?

# Bk 2 Chapter Seventeen

**Free Will**

**1**

**A**lexa and her men stopped at the edge of the corn to scan the shack that was surrounded with soldiers. They recognized the men they’d spared yesterday, but the redheaded body on the ground nearby wasn’t familiar to any of them.

“Come out, Rabbit! Or we’ll burn it down with you inside.”

“There’s no reward if I’m dead!” Paul was clearly terrified.

Another man laughed. “Bodies still get a pass. You know that, *Rabbit*.”

“I’m worth more alive!”

“You should have thought about that before you shot Shane! Now get out here, you little scum!”

Alexa’s men waited for her orders, but she had none to give. She backed away from the shouting soldiers and their frightened prey.

Edward recognized the silence of a teaching moment. He assumed she wanted them to plan the rescue. “We use a decoy formation and take out the front row.” The Horseman looked at the others.

“Sure.” Jacob was glad when the shouting at Paul stopped. “But maybe the sight of us will stop it. They might trade.”

Edward was tired of killing right now. “What do we have that they want?”

“Just me, pets.”

All six men frowned at her.

Alexa shrugged through the pain of her mending ribs. “I don’t know why you’re about to rescue a man you hate. Do you?”

Edward paused in his planning. “You don’t want him back?”

Alexa calmly walked away.

The confused men hurried after her, throwing anxious glances over their shoulders.

David hated feeling uneasy. “So, we just let them take him back to the labs?”

“Oh, he won’t make it to the bunker. The redhead was well-liked.”

Realizing what that meant, and that she was leaving Paul to die, drew a hard silence that brought her around to face them in annoyance. “You don’t want him along. You don’t want him around me. Why would you insist on this?”

“It isn’t right to leave him.” Jacob frowned. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“Interesting. How was it right for all of you to pick on him and try to drive him out?”

Silence.

Alexa started walking again. “I’m hard on you. I was hard on him, many times. You were cruel.”

Mark hated it that she was right. “You need him. We’ll go get him.”

Alexa drove in the final nail. “Why not let him die quickly at the hands of true enemies? A little dignity and honor is better than the abuse he’ll suffer with us.”

The guilt was crushing.

“The members of this team have to get along, to bond and be friends and brothers. If you can’t do that with the Rabbit, then let him die.” Alexa kept walking as her men stopped to share unsure, guilty glances. She didn’t stop even when she felt them fall out of her sight. This was their choice to make.

**2**

“Burn it!”

The call brought a handful of men with lighters and torches forward to set the shack on fire. It caught quickly; flames raced over the roof and walls like wind.

“In two minutes, you’ll be dead from the smoke!” The new leader was getting angry. He needed to hear Paul scream for what he’d done. As soon as Paul came running out, Raphe planned to beat him within an inch of his life. Then was going to skin the rabbit and have dinner. He’d loved Shane.

“Hey!”

The soldiers spun around to discover all six of Alexa’s men lined up in the road, out of range of their sidearms. Two of the soldiers grabbed for their rifles.

Before anyone could take aim, the fighters dove into the cover of the corn and disappeared.

“Damn it!”

“Where did they go!”

“Get down!”

A long volley of gunshots echoed across the corn as Alexa’s men rushed through the tall stalks, firing. Behind the dying soldiers, the shack flamed up.

Paul started screaming.

Raphe hadn’t moved from his vigil on the door. He caught the smoking Rabbit who came barreling from the shack. He twisted Paul’s wrist to get rid of the gun and used his fist to beat the scientist into submission.

Paul quickly sagged under the onslaught.

Wanting him dead, Raphe hefted Paul up to throw him into the inferno. He didn’t have time to skin the little man, but he would die just the same.

“I have an offer!”

Raphe paused with Paul over his shoulders, face ugly in the strain. His eyes widened in betrayal as Edward’s slug smacked into his chest.

Raphe fell heavily with Paul mostly on top of him.

“Thank you for accepting my offer.” Edward saw the scientist had been hurt in several ways. His guilt grew.

Daniel helped him get Paul over a shoulder. Both men were glad he’d passed out.

They were joined by the others quickly. All the soldiers were dead. After the bad feelings they’d brought into this shootout, there was no way it could have ended any differently.

Alexa didn’t speak as her men fell into their places. She also didn’t look at them or their burden. They were learning well, but allowing them to see how pleased she was again by their actions wasn’t a good idea. A year from now she could do that and it wouldn’t leave wiggle room on the rules. Right now, she had to remain steady and hard, and she would.

**3**

“Stash your treasure there.”

Alexa’s order surprised and pleased her men. They’d been unsure what would happen to Paul, but in his condition, the guilt wouldn’t go away if they dumped him on Roscoe’s mercy.

They put Paul down on the dusty bed in the center of the empty house and left a two-day kit, assuming his had been lost. The farmhouse was fully stocked for people, as if the family here had just left for an errand and never returned. It was an extremely lucky find, making the fighters feel better about leaving him there.

Alexa led the rest of the way to Lincoln in silence, refusing to give them the satisfaction they were hoping for. It would keep them on edge, where she needed them. Right before they topped the rise to Lincoln’s garbage roads, Alexa slowed them long enough to give a cryptic instruction. “Things that pretend to be something they are not always give themselves away with an oddity.”

Edward frowned. “We’re not done.”

“No.” Alexa stopped, but motioned them forward. “Tell me what you see.”

Mark and Edward peered over the rise as the others stood sentry, then switched out as they answered.

“Gates are shut, but the garbage wagon is heading that way.”

“Roscoe has a welcome party behind the gate. Small arms, big bodies.”

“The zone fences are lined with people. They’re watching for us.”

“They’re scared. More than usual.”

It was the last two men that Alexa studied as they took their turn.

“It’s not the same.” Jacob saw oddly shaped clouds that were the wrong color for Afterworld. “It’s too…”

David sighed. “Serene.”

Alexa drew them to her side and waved a tired hand in front of each face, repeating the same thing. “As it is, not as it seems.”

When she finished, she led them over the rise.

Edward started to confirm a suspicion, but Lincoln came into view again and everyone halted, attention snared. “It’s gone!”

The city had been burnt to the ground, but it wasn’t smoking. It had happened years ago, and the clouds above the destruction was the white fog of ghosts.

Mark saw the corn covered roads they’d come down the first time, and the huge gates buried halfway in the mud outside the city entrance. “What the hell?”

“How can this… This isn’t…” Jacob fell silent as he noticed the shadowy forms among the ghosts. It wasn’t only the dead down there waiting for their return.

Alexa stared at the outcast side, noting Robert and Emmerson coming her way. They were transparent, like in any movie. It was shocking to learn that legend was also accurate. The notebooks had mentioned ghosts, but she hadn’t ever seen a live one.

Alexa snickered at her mental joke and headed down the first dirt path.

Edward caught up, forgetting the formation in his shock. “Were they real before? When did this happen?”

Alexa shrugged. “They were always real, thus having personalities, but no, they were not alive when we brought them through the corn.”

“When did you know?” Jacob hadn’t felt anything wrong spiritually at all and he tried to listen for those things, even now that he’d become a killer.

“Know? Now, the same as you. Suspect? During the first fight when we found the bloody handprint but the kids weren’t injured. It had to mean they were helping the wolves.”

As they got closer to the city that wasn’t there anymore, they picked out more details. The ghosts swirling above the city were a blurry mass of white, but those on the ground still retained their human shape, appearing exactly as they had before. Except for the glow coming from them. It was as if each of them was in their own cloud.

Billy paused. “What is this? What’s happening?”

“I’ve been able to remove the magic that keeps this trap camouflaged. It won’t last long, but for us, it’ll be more than enough.”

“None of this is possible.” Jacob tried to keep control of his sanity. “This isn’t how it works.”

Alexa didn’t argue; she let the evidence speak for itself. The crap they’d been fed most of their lives was just that—crap. Adrian had known and he’d left that dangerous information for her. She would honor it by teaching her fighters that death wasn’t something to fear, only to avoid as long as possible, because with death, there could finally be peace. It was something they would long for in time.

The fighters walked straight to the city entrance without slowing or stopping, but their gazes were drawn repeatedly to the sky where the souls darted and dipped dizzyingly. As they neared the charred street, they could see someone waited for them on the other side. It was the Roscoe family, pale and out of place.

Jacob stared in surprise. “He’s not dead!”

“No. And maybe we can get a full story this time.”

“Are we… I mean, should we be ready to…” David was nervous, in awe, and not sure he could pull the trigger against some of these spirits. They felt angry, vengeful even, but not at the fighters, only toward Roscoe.

“They can’t harm us.” Alexa led them to the cowering family. “I suspect that’s why we were sent to the Master of the corn, because she could.” Alexa rubbed her ribs. “She did.”

“I am so confused.” Billy was too astounded by the views to be honestly angry at any information that she may have withheld. Never in his lifetime had he expected to be a part of such things.

“Patience, my pets.”

Roscoe and his son were the same men they’d left, only somehow, they weren’t. In comparison to the souls above, these two were the dead ones, devoid of life.

Roscoe begged as she stopped in front of them. “Please. For my son.”

Alexa studied the glassy-eyed boy without compassion. “He can’t be saved.”

“Mercy!” Roscoe’s hand came up in defense.

Alexa waved Mark forward. The instant he was in range, young Roscoe lunged, baring fangs and revealing his transformation.

Roscoe screamed in denial.

Alexa gently turned him away as her men used their guns again.

Above them the ghosts grew louder, humming their approval of what was happening. They couldn’t stop it or help it, but their justice was sweet.

“Tell me. Free yourself, Mayor, and I shall give you mercy.”

Roscoe collapsed at her feet as her men stood a close sentry so as not to miss a word.

“Please.”

“Not until you admit your sins.”

Roscoe crawled to his son’s body in defeated misery. “I sold them. To keep control and protect my son.” He looked up at her with anguish. “I had already lost my Sophie. I couldn’t lose him too.”

Alexa ignored the loud, furious buzzing from the ghosts, busy playing judge and jury. “Quit hiding behind your lies. Be honest for once in your life.”

Roscoe began to weep, shaking as his final moment neared. “I wasn’t really the Mayor. I was his golfing caddie.”

Alexa knelt down to hear the rest, needing the break from her throbbing ribs. “Finish it.”

“I found him in his office.” Roscoe stared at Alexa’s Colt. “I look a lot like him, you know?”

Alexa didn’t respond.

He gave her the rest in a choked tone that said he was almost ready to face his maker. “He was hiding under his desk when I came in. He didn’t even scream when I started hitting him. I was going to throw him out the window, but some dumb secretary found me and thought *I* was the Mayor. She snuck me by the mob demanding city protection. We stayed in the sewers as the Draft trucks came.”

Alexa sensed the final sin coming and felt her mind go a bit gray. Evening was nearing.

“Right after we came back out, the woman, Mariah, figured out what I’d done.” Roscoe glanced toward the sewer drain under Alexa’s feet. “She’s down there.”

The noise from above them had gotten louder as each betrayal was revealed; the ground under them now rumbled in outrage and the need for justice.

Alexa slowly stood up, aware of Mark and Edward subtly coming to each side. “I find you guilty.” The din magnified further at her words. “I sentence you to the fire.”

The ground split open under Roscoe. Flame hands rose from the abyss to surround him.

“No!”

Alive, he couldn’t be taken. Alexa quickly used her gun to end his suffering and start his torment.

The ground closed up as if it had never opened. The sky above them became a shooting star sunset of freed souls. They’d been held to the earth because of their hatred and their many crimes, but Roscoe’s death released those bonds into a stunning show of a true afterlife.

Jacob watched the souls blink out of existence with a slight wave of bitterness. Unlike the other men standing here and contemplating Heaven and Hell, he was railing against a silent God who still hadn’t come forward to claim his people. That was the bitterness he carried daily now and it allowed him to commit the most grievous sins upon Alexa’s command. He’d lost his faith.

Alexa felt Jacob’s unrest and placed an arm around his waist, as much to comfort as to lean on unnoticed.

Jacob did notice it, feeling her heat and the ragged rise and fall of her chest. He supported her weight as much as he could and felt her gratitude when she relaxed against him.

“I’m sorry your belief was destroyed.”

Jacob sighed. “I am, too, sometimes.” He smiled softly at her. “But most days, I’m not. It brought me to you and there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Alexa was overwhelmed with emotion and with exhaustion. She stepped back to scan the sky and the dead city, picking out a few shadows remaining among the rubble. She wanted to go to them, to ask what awful thing had been done to them that Roscoe’s death hadn’t paid for, but Edward took her arm. “No, Lady.”

Alexa could have refused. She had a last reserve of strength, of energy, and she wanted to cleanse this city in a way that could never be undone.

“Alexa.”

She shut her lids, exhausted, depressed, hurting. “Tell me why.”

Edward didn’t want to, but he understood it was the only thing that would get her to leave. “You can’t save them all. Only Safe Haven can.”

A single tear slipped down her red cheek.

Edward felt the heat baking from her then. She’d gotten worse.

She stood on her own. “Get us settled. Quickly.”

Edward waved the men into their basic formation and immediately got them moving, only this time, he kept an arm around Alexa’s waist to help her. As they walked, she gradually became slower and less responsive until Edward finally swung her up into his arms. He put Daniel in the lead.

Daniel got them back to the farmhouse where Paul was stashed. Each of the men noticed they didn’t encounter a single obstacle. Other than the few remaining souls in the city, Alexa had cleared this area of problems. It was impossible to guess how long it would stay that way, though. Without Alexa here to defend it, the land would once again go wild, though the Master of the corn would no longer haunt weary travelers. The leftover undead would do that.

**4**

Edward jogged up the stairs and into the house. David had gotten there first to hold the door.

They took Alexa to the upstairs bedroom that Edward had already chosen. It had a bathroom and a mini kitchen, and a wide living space that all of them could share without being cramped.

Once David stripped the dusty top cover, Edward put her on the bed and then leaned against the webby wall to catch his breath. He’d never been so tired. “First watch volunteers?”

“I’ve got that.” There was no way Jacob could sleep yet, not after all they’d just seen.

“Great. Someone get Paul up here in case she wakes up.”

“I’ll do it.” Mark was in the doorway.

Edward delivered the good news. “Off duty time, boys, and damn, did we ever earn it!”

There were small nods and chuckles of agreement. They all felt good about the role they’d played, but waiting for Alexa to explain it all would be hard.

Edward planned to sleep through the wait. He settled down against the bed that Alexa was on and leaned his head back. When his lids closed, he didn’t try to stay alert. Even if he only got five minutes, he wanted it.

“He’s gone.”

Edward’s eyes flew open as he realized who Mark was shouting about. “Damn it!”

Alexa’s hand on his shoulder was a comfort, though her grip was nearly nonexistent. “Let him go.”

Edward was relieved. “You heard the woman. Let the Rabbit run.”

Alexa’s hand went slack as she grayed out again.

Edward left it on his shoulder. When she stirred, he would be the first to know.

**5**

“Hello in the house.”

Company was the last thing that any of the fighters wanted. They rose from an hour’s sleep to fight with their remaining bullets. They would be out quickly and die in a hand-to-hand gory mess of glory. It was what Alexa would want.

“Coming in.”

The voice was female, familiar.

Edward motioned Mark to open the door.

“Hi!”

Tabitha and Paul stood on the porch. Her arm was wrapped tightly around his.

Paul shrugged at the looks from the men. “I told you. Most women like me.”

Tabitha smiled at Paul with a deep affection that made every man there want to know what the scientist had done to deserve it. Noticing his bruises were already mostly healed came second.

“Tabby knows a few things about vampires. She mentioned it while we were traveling, but I didn’t make the connection until she’d already run off. After that, we didn’t get a lot of time alone and, well…” Paul blushed. “We didn’t talk then.”

Tabitha flushed prettily, giggling.

Paul swatted her on the ass, making her laugh. “Upstairs, Tabby, and go slow. They don’t know you.”

The woman didn’t seem to mind the big men who scowled at her in warning. She climbed the steps eagerly and flounced into Alexa’s room without saying anything else. She sat on the edge of the bed, studying their mistress as the helpless males watched in concerned frustration.

After a moment Tabby hesitantly reached out and placed her wrist over Alexa’s mouth.

Alexa lunged so fast that none of her men could have interfered. She rolled Tabitha off the bed and landed on the floor straddling her, fangs inches from the woman’s throat.

Tabitha whimpered, but didn’t struggle. “Please.”

Alexa’s men didn’t know what to do, but Paul did. He gently put a hand on Alexa’s rigid shoulder. “She is innocent.”

Alexa wanted to gorge herself on the blood and that told her that Paul was right. This woman had committed no crime. Only innocent blood called that hard.

Alexa rose in a painful growl and tossed herself back onto the bed. “Get out.”

Paul took the shaking woman downstairs, where Edward got as much information as he could from her before loaning Paul his sleeping bag. The couple disappeared into the basement bedroom a little while later, leaving the fighters to stare in surprise at the sounds that came. It wasn’t the Paul they’d come to know.

**6**

“Is it possible that we underestimated him?” Mark heard another moan that clearly wasn’t faked. Tabitha was enjoying whatever Paul was doing to her, and it had been six hours.

Edward sighed, mind taking him to images that he wanted no part of. “I think so. He’s still alive. That’s bigger for me.” As he said it, Edward heard a female groan of climax and shook his head. “I’ll be upstairs. Let me know when he’s…available.”

“You know it.” Mark chuckled. He still didn’t like Paul and perhaps he never would, but at this moment, Paul had impressed him. That wasn’t an easy feat to accomplish.

Mark and Jacob took up posts at the front and rear of the farmhouse as the sun disappeared and darkness fell over the land. Time slowed as shadows filled the yard to obscure the corn. And in the blackness, a pair of blue, rage-filled eyes watched the men with hatred.

Jacob saw it and knew who was out there drooling over him. “Come on out, boy. Don’t be shy.”

But the child knew better and stayed out of the Preacher’s view.

Jacob started to call for Edward and then spotted a second shadow in the corn. He tensed. *More undead?*

No, he realized as he caught a quick flash of a uniform. It was Brian sneaking up behind the corpse boy. He jerked his knife across the undead neck and then snapped it.

Jacob thought about telling the others, but when Brian only tipped the bloody blade to him and walked back into the corn, Jacob chose to wait. So they had a protector outside. It was worlds better than the alternative and he saw no reason to wake the others for it. Alexa’s green bunker baby was turning out to be more valuable than any of her men had realized.

In the basement, Paul growled as he finished.

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Come on, Rabbit! You can’t have that much energy left.”

In the rear of the house, Mark burst out laughing. He’d been thinking the same thing.

**7**

Edward heard the laughter and let himself drift down into a deeper sleep where the war hadn’t come and it was his wife’s hand on his shoulder.

Across the room, Billy and David had also fallen out, but Daniel was still awake. He was having a smoke and going over their battle with the hag. The moment where David had fallen still had him confused, so he was running it through his filters, still trying to figure out what had happened. The conclusion he’d come up with the first time, that David had caused the hag to retreat, was too unbelievable. He planned to ask Alexa about it. There had to be another explanation. How could David have a power like that and Alexa not know? Daniel was sure that he’d missed something. He settled against a peeling wall to run through it again.

On the bed, Alexa was awake. This mission was over, with only the explanations left and she felt like a failure. There were still souls to be freed in Lincoln; she mourned them in place of being able to help. It was a wound that wouldn’t be able to heal until she did something about it.

As for her own illness, Alexa now understood more than she wanted to. When she gave her men the final answers they would soon expect, they wouldn’t want to know it either, but there was no going back. She was about to change forever.

# Bk 2 Chapter Eighteen

**Traveling On**

**1**

**T**he sound of music playing woke the house.

Haunting strains of a world that had passed by flowed from the basement of the farmhouse. It floated to where Alexa and four of her men were still snoozing.

Alexa stretched carefully, missing the harshness of the ground. It was who she was.

She scanned the room, meeting the eyes of those coming to alertness under the haunting notes of Hotel California. For Alexa, it brought instant memories of her father. For her men, it gave them flashes of wives and children, and of happier days before everything had all gone to hell.

Alexa felt a shoulder under her hand and gave a brief squeeze, recognizing the feel of her thick Horseman.

Edward sighed in pleasure as she ran her fingers through his messy hair, caressing.

He turned around to meet her eyes and found glowing red orbs where bright blue should have been.

Alexa’s tinted vision was something of a concern for her fighters, but she only shut her lids and tried to sleep a bit more. She was drained, with nothing left to give. The virus had done its damage. She wasn’t the same as she’d been yesterday. The differences were in the textures of the blood running through her veins. For a minute, it was all she could think about.

“Lexie?”

Her eyes flew open at the nickname her father had called her. “What?!” She didn’t want their pity.

“We love you.”

Alexa had no defense against that. Tears slid from her lashes.

“We have to know if this is the end.”

As Alexa sat up on the bed, each of them saw the tear streaks were scarlet.

“That will be up to you.” Alexa held out her arm. “But see what I am before you make the choice.”

She used a nail to slit her arm downward, catching a vein that gushed blood.

The men rushed her way, but Alexa slowly licked the wound and then held her arm up.

“It’s healed.” Jacob stared in panicked shock. “You’re not human anymore!”

Alexa sighed, staring at the floor. “I haven’t felt that way in so long that I’m not sure if I should miss it.”

“What can we do?” Billy came over to wipe away the blood that remained.

Alexa’s glowing orbs went to his throat.

Billy didn’t flee. “Whatever you need.” He had complete faith that she wouldn’t hurt her crew.

“You may eventually be in danger from me. This thirst is…powerful.”

The men were all tempted to swear their lives to her again, but Alexa wouldn’t allow them to hide from the truth. “You’ll have to watch me as much as our enemies. You should leave now. Go salvage what you can of your lives.”

Denials filled the room and brought her other two men up the stairs. Each one waited to be heard. Alexa had no choice but to listen.

“We’re a team. We’re not going anywhere.” Mark pointed angrily. “The quest ends when we reach Safe Haven and not before!”

“You don’t scare us.” Edward lied easily. “We’ll stay.”

Alexa had to keep trying to protect them. “I won’t be able to control it. You’ll all be in–”

“We’re staying.” David said it firmly. “And so are you. We’ll adjust.”

Alexa felt more of those red tears slip from her eyes as she understood their bond had finally sealed. Very little would be able to come between them now.

Jacob cleared his throat, curious. “So, do you have any, uh, extra gifts?”

Alexa snorted, reading the thoughts in the room. “A clique of vampire fighters. Yeah, Adrian will let us in that way.”

Realizing they would be denied entrance to paradise, the men didn’t ask her to share the virus so they could be like her. They’d all thought of it after seeing her fangs so close to Tabitha’s throat, but discovering that Adrian would view them as evil quickly changed their minds.

Alexa was glad. She wouldn’t have refused these men anything they wanted, but it wasn’t right and it would cost them everything. Considering their leader was now a legendary creature who had to feed on the weak, Alexa wasn’t sure if they might not already be doomed.

“Paul brought Tabitha back while we were gone.” Edward scanned her. “She came up to help you.”

“Keep her away from me until I have more control.”

“Maybe she can help.” Billy stayed back. “What if we stand between you?”

Alexa reluctantly agreed to let the woman come up, hoping her willpower was strong enough to keep from ripping out Tabitha’s throat. Alexa had never been so hungry, but she did prefer to test her strength on strangers before her fighters.

Paul and Tabitha came up the steps slowly, eyes wide as they took in Alexa. The glow on her skin was a lie, an appearance of health that the Rabbit knew she didn’t really have. “You’ve completed the transformation.”

Alexa nodded, trying not to breathe deeply. “Suggestions?”

Paul glanced at the fighters without speaking.

Alexa shook her head, voice sharp. “They’re not cattle. I’d never do that.”

“You did with me.”

Alexa stared at his exposed skin in anguish and control. “Yes, and I thank you for that. It allowed me to finish this part of the quest. I’m grateful.”

Paul frowned. “So why wouldn’t you–”

David cut him off, annoyed. “We’re not like you, *Rabbit*. We’ll change if she… Hey!”

All the men understood at the same time and turned to sweep Paul with fresh accusations and curiosities.

The scientist flushed, confirming their suspicions. “It was one of the first things Corbin did when he realized I had gifts.” Paul’s voice was scornful. “He thought he could make me a man, but crossing descendants and vampires didn’t work for me.”

Mark looked over. “What do you mean?”

“It cancelled out my inherited power. I became almost impotent.”

Next to him, Tabitha giggled.

Paul brushed a hand down her arm in affection. “I’ll find you some Advil.”

The men stared in shock. Where was their frightened scientist who couldn’t survive on his own?

As if to remind them that he was still the same man, Paul took a step toward Alexa, caught his foot in a blanket, and went sprawling.

Chuckles filled the room.

Alexa soaked it in as deeply as she could, trying to mend her heart.

“Tabby made breakfast.” Paul picked himself up, still bitter about being laughed at, but not as much as before. Facing his fear of the fire and of Shane had helped him grow mentally. In time, he may not even hate the big brutes that Alexa had surrounded herself with.

Paul led Tabitha to the bed and retreated a step. He shoved those big knuckles into his pockets and waited. This was his last chance.

Alexa and Tabitha had both frozen as they scented each other. Alexa in ravenous hunger, Tabitha in horror.

“It’s too late. You’ve already changed.”

Neither of them spoke again for a moment, where Paul’s future hung in the balance.

“Would you give yourself to me?”

Tabitha shook her head as if coming from a daze.

Alexa smiled gently. “Then get the hell out of here.”

Alexa turned her head, holding her breath as Tabitha fled all the way to the kitchen downstairs.

“Food? A little?”

Not sure she could take a single bite, Alexa reluctantly let Edward help her from the bed. She’d never been so tired.

Edward noticed that her smaller injuries were healed and wondered if her ribs were slowly doing the same.

Her slow grunts and breaths as they went down the stairs said the vampire process didn’t fix everything.

Edward was almost glad despite not wanting her to be in pain. He’d been looking forward to caring for her.

Alexa’s hand tightened on his arm. “Thank you.”

Edward carefully hugged her. “It’s my honor.”

**2**

The nine travelers enjoyed a meal together, but Alexa stayed in the corner with her men providing a wall between her and Tabitha as she finished cooking. The powdered eggs and dehydrated bacon had come from the house stock, but the biscuits and gravy were fresh. For a while there was only the sound of eating as the men got their fill.

Only Edward noticed Alexa wasn’t actually eating her food, but dropping forkfuls onto his plate to make it appear that she was. He began to understand right then how hard the rest of their quest might be. Her diet was now drastically different from theirs.

Paul and Tabitha served the food and made the rest of them feel invisible in the way that only lovers can. It seemed like a good match for the twitchy man; the fighters were even a bit jealous. Until Edward muttered about descendants having an unfair advantage and the others realized Paul was using his gifts to keep Tabitha with him.

Daniel used the hand code. *Do we need to help her?*

Edward studied the barefoot woman humming with the music as she served them all. Between rounds, she gave Paul small smiles of contentment and happiness. *No. Let them have a chance. He won’t hurt her.*

Daniel agreed. The two men put it from their minds. It also eased their feelings of inadequacy to know Paul had help as a lover.

“I’m not cheating!” Paul answered their thoughts, proving his lineage. “She’s sad over her cousin. I’m helping with that.”

Edward raised a brow. “No help for you?”

“No.” Paul flushed with male pride. “I’m just that good.”

Tabitha giggled again. “Yes, Rabbit, you are.”

Paul swung around to deliver another swat to her behind as she passed.

Everyone chuckled except for Alexa. She was staring out the window, trying to pretend that the smell of the food wasn’t making her stomach churn. To control it, she’d been counting the corn stalks, but a shadow had caught her attention. She knew who it was.

Pain flooded her in fresh waves. She remembered her own days of being on the outside, of waiting to be old enough to join her father. It had felt like forever while she peered in windows and tried to stay alive.

“Why doesn’t he come in?” Tabitha followed her line of sight. “He’s one of the nice soldiers.”

An awkward silence fell as the men saw Brian sitting at the edge of the corn, eating something that looked dry and dusty.

Edward glanced at Alexa, but the emotions made her sharp.

“You have spent this trip talking, drawing stories, and filling in your blanks. Enough. I’ll not be badgered into giving away information that it has taken me a lifetime to earn. You’ll get it when you need it or when I’m ready for you to have it, and not a second sooner!”

Paul, feeling braver than he had in a long time, retreated a step and provided the answer.

“He can’t join his mother until he’s of age. It’s a law among our kind.”

Gasps and shock filled the kitchen.

Alexa rose without speaking. As she staggered from the room, she paused long enough to slap Paul.

The scientist fell into the cabinet, knocking down a stack of pots that thumped into him repeatedly, nearly rendering him unconscious.

Tabitha wanted to run to Paul, but she hadn’t forgotten her terror. She stayed still until Alexa was gone.

Paul let Tabitha help him up, noticing the fighters hadn’t risen to assist him. Even though they were grateful to know who Brian was, they agreed with Alexa that he should have kept his mouth shut.

“That’s why I have to stay here.” Paul rubbed his head and neck. “I know the rules and our ways, but I …”

“Can’t follow them.”

Paul shrugged at Edward. “Maybe I could, but not with you guys. I’ll spend the entire trip doing what I just did to get you to like me. And it won’t work.”

New guilt rose to suffocate the fighters. Each of them shifted uncomfortably or glanced away.

Edward sighed. “Yeah, about that, Paul. We were rough on you against her wishes. She didn’t want you abused.”

David grimaced. “She wanted you trained.”

“She can’t force that on you, so it backfired. I get it.” Paul’s face was growing red, showing the weak scientist they were used to. “You were jealous and you didn’t want me there to take up your time with her.”

None of them could deny it and they didn’t.

Jacob was ashamed. “There are already six of us.”

David sighed miserably. “And she told us we were a full group.”

The other men stayed quiet, trying to figure out what to do. Alexa was upset, they were upset, and so was Paul. Something had to be done to fix it.

“Unless we go the other way.” Billy chose brutal honesty. “Paul, the truth is, we know you’re like her, a better choice for a mate, and our DNA insists that we get rid of you. It’s nature, you understand?”

Paul, who enjoyed studying everything, did. “Sure. All species are territorial.”

“Exactly.” Billy forced himself to continue. “But it was the same when each man here joined. We all wanted to be alone with her. We got over it because we saw the benefits of being stronger in number. With you, the balance tipped us back to chaos and took away our strength. If you had tried harder, we would have accepted you in time. I know that because there isn’t anything I won’t do for the men in this room and they feel the same. You broke our harmony somehow.”

“Because he only cares about getting to Safe Haven.” Alexa was listening from the rocking chair in the front room. “If you all died tomorrow, he would celebrate.”

Paul wanted to deny the accusation, to say if they could be reasonable, he could too, but the hatred had already set into place. He turned toward the stove to start cleaning up.

Alexa’s men couldn’t take much of the tension after that. They abandoned the kitchen for packing their gear in case Alexa wanted to get rolling.

As he padded through the front room, Mark spotted her dozing in the rocking chair and went to place a soft kiss to the top of Alexa’s head. “I’m sorry.”

Alexa sighed, leaning against his arm. “So am I. This wasn’t what I envisioned when I took you from that place.”

Mark flashed to the chains and the bit, to the tests and the torture. Instead of fading, it had remained vivid in his mind, often tormenting him in dreams. “You could rip my throat open right here and now, Lady, and it would still be a kindness compared to Slam.”

Alexa froze as doors swung open in her mind. Awful, terrible images came to her. She shuddered.

“What is it?”

Alexa looked up at him with dead eyes. “I won’t be able to stop it.”

Mark understood immediately and felt panic sweep over him. “Keep me by your side! I want that! I don’t care in what form.”

Alexa hugged him tightly, but she didn’t make any promises as Mark wept lightly on her shoulder. He wasn’t ready to die yet, and not because of fear. He couldn’t handle the thought of being away from Alexa.

“I feel the same, but no future is set in stone. We’ll guard against it. For now, get me out of here. I can’t stand her stench.”

Mark helped her when she tried to rise and had to stifle a groan, then kept an arm around her hot skin as they limped up the stairs.

Thirty minutes later, they were all going out the front door. None of them bothered with a goodbye or well wishes for Paul. Guilty of causing it or not, Paul hated them and there was no point in wasting their time with words they didn’t mean.

“Shouldn’t we get more information from Tabitha?” David frowned. “Paul brought her to help.”

“No, he didn’t. He knew if I had an innocent meal, I’d be tainted and no longer able to deny him a place in this group. He betrayed me. And her, but she wants to die anyway, so there was no sacrifice on her end.”

The men weren’t sure what to say after that. The fighters walked into the corn in silent contemplation.

**3**

Alexa’s mood was ugly, but the men with her, minus the one following against her wishes, were ecstatic to have succeeded and ditched their noisy burden. Their thoughts were full of misconceptions and assumptions that could be dangerous, but she didn’t have the strength to correct them yet. That would come during her recovery.

Sensing Alexa wouldn’t berate them right now, the two rear men held a low discussion and managed to clear up a few of the questions for themselves.

“He said the tracking juice should be out of her system now. We might get a break from the soldiers for a while.”

“Good. We need to find an ammo stash. Only four mags among us.”

“Yeah, none of them were carrying much in the way of supplies.”

“Neither were those other travelers. I didn’t understand why they were never concerned with water or food. Until we hit Lincoln that last time, anyway.”

“Ghosts don’t need those things. Creepy.”

“The death dance is still freaking me out. They have to spend eternity dancing out their deaths for entertainment? That’s weird.”

“Agreed. What about that room with the portal she shut down? Have you ever seen so many?”

“Only in movies.”

“This should have been one. Might have become a classic. A ghost wagon train would be awesome if you hadn’t actually been there firsthand.”

Both men chuckled and fell back into silence as Edward gave them a sharp look to curb the noise.

He had been studying Alexa, wondering how long she could travel in the daylight before she collapsed or started to burn. The baby had been sensitive to the light. That meant Alexa would be, too.

“Do you think he’ll survive?”

Jacob’s question was muttered, but Alexa heard it and let out a heavy sigh. “Only if he goes back to the bunker.”

Alexa took the weed dotted road at the first intersection.

All the fighters were glad to be on the cracked pavement this time. They’d had enough of the corn.

Alexa walked until her ribs and lungs were burning, determined to be out of reach of their enemies here. Until she healed, they were weak. She wasn’t going to seek shelter near Lincoln.

As the day wore on, her straight line became blurred, but the men didn’t speak. This slower pace wasn’t hard for them, but it had to be murder on her. They respected her will to keep going.

**4**

Sunset saw them barely moving as she trudged along. Edward couldn’t take it anymore. He gently scooped her into his arms.

Mark hurried to take point, relieved.

Alexa mumbled in his ear, trying to stay conscious.

Edward listened carefully to her instructions.

Those around them didn’t need to hear it to know what she wanted. She’d walked herself into near collapse again to be away from here.

“She needs meat.” Edward’s voice didn’t betray his true feelings. “Bloody.”

“I’ll hunt. One hour.”

Daniel took Point as Mark disappeared into the tall grass with his knife in hand.

Edward delivered the next order. “We need a shelter across the state line.”

Billy dug for his map. “I’ll find that right now.”

“We also need the nearest mall and a good plan for scavenging with only half a crew. Ammo, water, and tools this time.”

David was already thumbing through the telephone book from his kit. He hadn’t understood why Alexa gave it to him, or why when she’d taken it as they reached Nebraska and found a small library. Now, he was thankful and held more respect for his mistress. Every day she proved herself worthy to lead them on this quest.

With the entire group distracted and night falling over them, danger lurked nearby, but the fighters didn’t concern themselves with what might happen. This was the way they lived now. There would always be times when they were unprotected. It was part of the risk.

“If we keep going up 77, we’ll hit Fremont by morning.” Billy stored his map. “We can take 43 and be in Sidney this time tomorrow.”

Alexa muttered again. Edward passed her words on. “She said it doesn’t matter where we want to be, so long as we avoid Kansas completely, especially Leavenworth Penitentiary and the state line towns.”

Billy snickered. “I say we cross into Iowa and find the closest hotel.”

Alexa forced out words. “Agreed. Put me down.”

Edward gently set her on her feet.

Alexa spent a minute pulling herself together. She stayed in the center as she waved them into a normal pace.

Edward wasn’t sure she could keep up, but nightfall had returned some of her strength. She even managed to stay in the right spot. Around her, the men monitored her progress as they continued with their preparations.

Daniel looked over his shoulder. “We’ll have to hole up when daylight comes.”

Alexa ignored them, concentrating on regaining her rhythm, her stride. Not being in the lead was an adjustment.

Billy shrugged. “Wahoo is the closest town, due north.”

“East, to Syracuse. I can make it that far.”

No one argued, but their thoughts were full of doubt. Even with the extra night boost, she was still weaving as she walked.

Alexa sighed. “The noise coming isn’t a threat or an option, so put both notions from your mind.”

The men twisted around to discover headlights behind them, chugging down the road at a slow speed and a low rumble.

Brian behind the wheel of the long black van wasn’t a surprise, but none of the men got into the inviting vehicle. They stopped only because he pulled across the street and forced them to.

“Put her in here.” Brian peered out the window that gushed wonderfully warm air over the fighters. “But be clear, she wouldn’t allow this for any of you and she resents you doing it for her.”

Alexa had a scathing retort ready. She was shocked when Edward scooped her up and deposited her in the rear of the van. Billy held the door and quickly shut it in her face.

The two men exchanged worried grins as they went to hang on the side rails. They didn’t want to be in there with her right now. No one did.

The other men also found a place to hang on, sure that Mark would know where they’d gone and with whom.

The van rolled quickly, covering ground too fast to see most of it.

Alexa’s sarcasm spewed all over the inside of the vehicle, chilling it. “Stop and let Mark climb in. He’s behind the trees. You just scared off my dinner.”

Brian ignored her anger, but did as she told him, glad to still be driving. If she were truly offended, he would be on the ground writhing in pain.

“I won’t accept you yet. I won’t cause your death.”

Brian also ignored her warning. There was nothing she could say or do right now to hurt him. Her men had accepted his hospitality.

Brian took them straight to his hideout. He’d been waiting for Alexa since the season changed. He’d gone to the station intentionally and let himself be captured so he would be there as she came through. The dreams had told him to be ready.

A short time later, Brian stopped the van to let everyone climb inside.

The men were relieved when Alexa only glowered.

An hour later they were sorry in a number of ways, including the upset stomachs from Brian’s wild driving. He didn’t believe in taking it easy.

Edward took the spot on Alexa’s right and Billy took the left, there to hear her anger or her directions, but Alexa had neither for them. The driving had been rough on her as well. She slumped over into Edward’s lap with a groan.

“Damn kid!” Billy helped Edward get her into a more breathable position. “Slow down!”

But Brian didn’t. He wanted her safe in the den he’d created and he wasn’t pausing for anything, including broken roads. “Hang on. It gets bumpy through here.”

“That’s what we’re used to, kid.” Edward shifted Alexa’s head to rest on his kit. “Wouldn’t know we were still alive any other way.”

**5**

Brian stopped in front of his hiding place a little before dawn. The men climbed out of the van warily, not sure exactly where they were or what to expect. Edward and Mark stayed with Alexa as the other four cleared their surroundings.

When they returned to the van, their expressions said trusting Brian had been a good idea.

“There’s a lake, a bunkhouse, and a cave down by the creek. Two roads, no power lines. Hell, I can’t even find it on the map and I used these every day as a dispatcher.” Billy was happy with the location. “We’re good here.”

Alexa was unloaded and carried into the long bunkhouse where a rear corner had been made into a private bedroom area. The female decorations told the fighters that a woman had lived there, but Brian’s words disproved the theory.

“I hope she’ll like it. I made most of it for her before Zale recaptured me.”

Edward noticed the boy’s roughened hands then and the quiet intelligence. “You really her son?”

Brian shrugged bitterly. “When she claims me in two years, ask again.”

He left them alone, going out to pull the van under the cover of the trees.

“He knew she was coming. And how did we miss those eyes being the same shade as hers?” Mark didn’t like how much they’d overlooked on this run. “What else don’t we know?”

“Shut up, will ya? I’m busy here.” Edward watched shadows on the wall. The lantern was throwing an amazing play.

The others joined in his silent admiration as they realized it was Alexa undressing. The silhouette was perfect except for the bandage around her ribs. Calm filled the bunkhouse.

“Guess it doesn’t matter, does it? That she hides things from us, and risks our lives for her gain.”

Jacob confirmed Daniel’s words. “No. Because what we’ve gained is enough to drown the bad things.”

David hated himself, but he had to voice his concerns about that. “And when that isn’t the case anymore? If we lose respect for her, or each other, we’ll fall?”

“Yeah, but after Paul, which one of us feels good right now?” Edward sighed. “She’s right that we drove him out and helped that temper of his get out of control. Don’t we deserve to pay for that?”

“Of course, my pets.” Alexa came from the private area in only a long blue robe that stole their breath. “But not today. These things add up for death’s tally. Right now, you’ve succeeded in your mission. Allow yourselves a moment’s peace. You have earned that.”

Alexa handed each of them a chocolate from Billy’s reward and popped the last one in her mouth, grinning at them.

“She found the pain killers.” Brian came inside. “We may be able to stand her for a while.”

Alexa grimaced at the tasteless joke, but her men scowled.

Brian understood his disrespect wasn’t allowed. “Fine, whatever. Here are the keys to the van in case you have to split. Half a tank of gas in it, but you know how the old shit works. It really doesn’t.” Brian handed the keys to Edward, staying away from Alexa. He pointed toward the cave. “I’ll be there if you need something. Thanks for coming.”

As the boy left them, Mark frowned. “Why can’t he stay?”

“Because of who he is.” Alexa took the seat Billy guided her to. “A descendant.”

Edward, who understood things more clearly than the other men who hadn’t helped free the bunker kids, changed the sore subject. “We figured on a week here.”

Alexa rested her head against Billy’s hip, hurting all over as she listened to the wind. “I think we’re ready for a break, my pets. A long one.”

“Here?” Edward didn’t mind being around Brian, but he still felt too close to Lincoln.

“No. We’ll remain here until I’m good to travel again. Then we’ll pick a place to den for the winter and get it ready.”

The men were a bit surprised to hear her say that. They’d wondered occasionally what she planned to do once winter came, but they’d assumed she would get a vehicle and try to keep going.

Alexa answered the thought without scorn. “Many people have frozen to death out here trying to do that. The cold is merciless and I’d not risk you just to gain time. Safe Haven will be there when we are.”

Alexa took the warm cup of chocolate Jacob handed her, noting the marshmallows from his personal store. She took a tiny sip, knowing what to expect. “Better.”

She waited for him to turn away before wiping at her mouth. When she began to lick the pillow on the armchair to get rid of the taste, the other men burst out laughing, sending light and love through the bunkhouse.

Brian watched without bitterness. He’d waited for this for a long time. As she improved, she would teach him the other things he needed to know to survive until he was of age. If he learned the lessons well and completed the final test, he would be free to join her as an equal. He would never ask if he had to play Paul’s role. That life would be intolerable.

Brian listened to the group until they put up a sentry post and bedded down. Dawn was coming and Alexa needed rest.

Brian closed his eyes to replay his moments with her. None of them was particularly special, but in a way, they were more than that. Rumors and legends were built easily. Backing them up was something else, but Alexa was able to. She was an alpha, a leader, and the mother that had been stolen from him. Brian couldn’t wait to get to know her. It was killing her that he was dreading.

**End of Book Two**

## **Deleted Scenes** **Book 2**

“I’m off duty now.”

Carol spun around, caught off guard. “What?”

Daniel kept his distance as she made up her mind. The slaver’s tent was full and he’d watched her make a bed behind all the gear to have a bit of privacy.

Carol was suddenly afraid. She hadn’t been with a real man since the war, and back then, she hadn’t been willing.

Daniel sensed that and more as he slowly removed his jacket.

Her nervous gaze went to his arms and chest, and lingered on his lean hips. The formfitting black shirt was tucked messily into his waistband, but Daniel held still against the urge to fix it. He hoped it was coming off.

Carol swallowed, not sure what she wanted.

Daniel draped his jacket over a stack of crates, but he didn’t move toward her. They stared at each other, one with incredible longing, the other with infinite patience.

Carol found her voice. “You won’t…hurt me?”

Daniel delivered a soft, inviting smile. “Not even if you wanted me to.” He moved a bit closer, keeping his hands still and his eyes on hers. “Would it help to know what I want?”

Carol nodded nervously, tension flooding her stomach with pangs of fear and need. This was what it felt like to be alive. *I’ve missed this!*

Daniel carefully reached out and stroked his thumb down her weathered cheek, body tightening when her lips parted in a gasp. They had great sparks. “I want your pleasure.”

Daniel unbuckled his gun belt and put it with his jacket, then dropped down into her bed with a sensual grin. “Can I hold you first?”

It was the perfect thing to say. Carol crawled into his arms without any more delay and Daniel closed his eyes as sensation rushed over him. He couldn’t help but compare the feel of her to Alexa, but he refused to decide which was better. Ruining the moment wasn’t part of the plan.

Carol trembled when he gently tilted her head up so he could look at her. “We can just stay like this.”

Carol answered him with a kiss that begged him to take her all the way to the edge and shove her over.

Daniel groaned in response, grip tightening. He didn’t let her pull away when he felt fear trying to creep back in. She’d obviously not been treated well. “I won’t hurt you, baby.” He kissed the corner of her mouth as his hands pressed her close. “I’ll just love you.”

Carol was helpless to the rush of emotions and hormones. She held tight to his big arms as his tongue danced with hers. When his long fingers found a rocky peak and gently squeezed, she arched in his embrace. The erotic promise in his touch was enough to conquer her fear. Carol gasped again as his body pushed against hers.

“I want you naked under me.” Daniel kissed her lips, hands roaming, bringing bolts of pleasure. “Take your pants off.”

Carol did as she was bid.

The feel of his hand sliding over her slick flesh brought a cry to her lips that Daniel let ring out in male pride. He tried to muffle the rest with his mouth while he made sure she was glad she’d chosen him. *He* was certainly grateful.

Carol was unaware of anything shortly after the man began touching her and she didn’t want it to end. When the edge slammed into her and then so did Daniel, she clutched his shoulders and let him have his way.

For Daniel, it was a release for all the tension of killing and waiting, of waiting to kill, and he didn’t hesitate to spill himself inside her. It was something women usually had to pay for now; he gave it freely, but Alexa’s face never left his mind.

When it was over, Daniel curled around her and dozed for a while, not pretending anything, simply enjoying a peaceful moment. He might have been able to make a connection with Carol, but Alexa had found him first and there hadn’t been another female since then that he’d bonded with. He didn’t expect that to change, but he was content anyway.

**Deleted Scene #2**

Daniel didn’t want to, but he forced himself to go to Carol as she lay dying. He was prepared to hear anything except what came from her bloody lips.

“It didn’t happen. But I wish it had.”

Daniel wasn’t sure what she meant, but the life ran from her eyes and then her body, and he was left alone with yet another corpse.

“Tell the boss we lost another one.” He shoved to his feet. “Where the hell is that doctor?”

Daniel stormed to the door of the warehouse, ready to hit anyone who got in his way.

Alexa was the one who stepped in front of him. “I need a minute.”

Alexa studied him, seeing what was really causing the anguish. She placed a gentle hand on his cheek. “I’ll make sure you don’t witness it. Does that help?”

Daniel shrugged off her hand for the first time. “No. I’ll still know that you’re dead.”

He went outside to stalk around the perimeter.

Alexa left him alone. Daniel didn’t want to get close to anyone and she understood. It hurt when you lost them. Right now, her illness was reminding her men that she wasn’t invincible. At some point, they would have to watch her die. It wasn’t easy knowledge to carry.

# **Book Three**

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# Copyright Book 3

**Night Must Fall**

by

Angela White

**Title**: Night Must Fall

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Thank you to all my Beta Readers. I don’t know what I would do without you.

# **Table of Contents Book 3**

[Prologue](#_Prologue)

[Multiple Targets](#_Chapter_One)

[Slam](#_Chapter_Two)

[Do it Fast](#_Chapter_Three)

[You Are Awake](#_Chapter_Four)

[For Your lives](#_Chapter_Five)

[On Your Call](#_Chapter_Six)

[The Right Thing](#_Chapter_Seven)

[We’ll Go From There](#_Chapter_Eight)

[Ready To Go](#_Chapter_Nine)

[Initiated](#_Chapter_Ten)

[Circle Of Love](#_Chapter_Eleven)

[A New Lesson](#_Chapter_Twelve_1)

[Big Things](#_Chapter_Thirteen)

[Old Friends](#_Chapter_Fourteen)

[No Regrets](#_Chapter_Fifteen)

[Rule Number One](#_Chapter_Sixteen_1)

[Let Us Pass](#_Chapter_Seventeen)

[My Honor](#_Chapter_Eighteen)

[Wish Me Luck](#_Chapter_Nineteen)

[Cursed Ground](#_Chapter_Twenty)

[Mind Your Lessons](#_Chapter_Twenty-One)

[Tough Love](#_Chapter_Twenty-Two)

[Night Must Fall](#_Chapter_Twenty-Three_1)

[Close](#_Chapter_Twenty-Four)

# Bk 3 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 adaptions 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.

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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.

**4**

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 happened. 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.

**5**

“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.”

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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.

**4**

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.”

# BK 3 Chapter Five

**For Your Lives**

**1**

**A**lexa 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 belong 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.

# BK 3 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.

**2**

“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.

# BK 3 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 Pruetts 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.”

**4**

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.

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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 Mitchel 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.*

# BK 3 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.”

# BK 3 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 yelped. “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.

# BK 3 Chapter Thirteen

**Big Things**

**1**

**A**lexa 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 dowse 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.”

**3**

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.

# BK 3 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. Ironic.”

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.

# BK 3 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.

“**S**ally’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.

# BK 3 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 contemp. “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.

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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.

# BK 3 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.*

# BK 3 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 bootsteps 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 smiled 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.

# BK 3 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 jealously 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 thought 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.”

# Bk 3 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.”

“Favorsss 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 though 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 bootsteps 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.

# Bk 3 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 bootsteps 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.*

**2**

“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.”

# Bk 3 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?**

**[Text

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## **Deleted Scene Book 3**

“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.

## **Character Bios**

**The Horseman**

Edward was taken in the Draft and held in a bunker for months after the war. While gone, his wife was murdered. When the food began running out, Edward helped breach the compound to free everyone. Those freed men then destroyed the nearest towns. The Horseman, so called because of his touch with animals, has never forgiven himself. Until Alexa saved him, he only wanted to die.

**The Biker**

Daniel liked to risk his life for thrills before the end of the world forced him to see that there were more important things to die for. He lost his mother in the aftermath of the war and tried to take his life because of it. Alexa healed his injuries and his heart.

**The Preacher**

In his mid-twenties, Jacob has jagged scars that crisscross his cheek and forehead. Before the war, he worked for the government. After, he was a Preacher in River City. He believes in peace and will go out of his way to achieve it, but when the battles come, he is just as dangerous as the rest of Alexa’s companions. The other men assume his wounds caused this deadly reaction, but their leader knows better. Jacob is a born killer.

**The Convict**

Mark was a criminal when she came for him, being held in an underground slam with the other killers. That didn’t stand in her way. When Alexa left Boulder, he was at her side and happy to be there.

**The Blacksmith**

David is the normally silent member of her group. Taller than her other men, he wears the same dark coloring and intelligent blue eyes. His future role in her crew is their magician, but he doesn’t know it.

**The Driver**

Billy was a limo driver before the war. He can scale a tree like a monkey and drive anything with wheels. He’s the only one of her men to have hair long enough to keep in a ponytail. Little else is known yet.

**The Leader**

Alexa is a leader of men. She culled her companions from the dwindling herd of humanity because she sensed that they alone might have the strength to make the journey. Each battle fought at her side tightens that bond. For her, their quest is about more than just finding a safe place. It’s about the search for missing family. With her scarred fingers and fire-roughened voice, this stunning blonde warrior will lead these six badass men through hell and back to reclaim what she lost in the war–her place at her father’s side.

## **Jendon**

Jendon, they call him,

The Troll from the bog.

Banished to roam man’s world,

In the storms and the fog.

His yellow eyes flicker,

Greed in their depths.

One he won’t steal from,

There be few left.

Traveling merchant,

With a Gypsy cart and gray horse.

Powerful potions he makes,

Just don’t ask the source.

Huge green fists,

Ready to strike.

He hides by the day,

And lurks through the night.

Peddling his wares,

Potions, spirits, charms.

Trading for bone dust,

While memories he farms.

Eat his food,

Drink his liqueur,

And in your life,

You’ve never been sicker.

Bewitched by magic,

Dreams unprotected.

Secrets revealed,

Weaknesses detected.

The sly salesman,

Clever merchant.

Nightmarish barker,

Kin of the serpent.

Steal you blind,

In more ways than one.

Ruing your fate,

Before all’s said and done.

Nothing, but trouble,

To no one willingly loyal.

Yet if it can be earned,

The value is double.

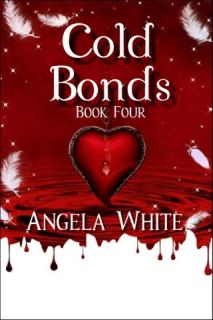
Beware of Jendon,

Of playing Fate’s card.

To cross this one,

You’d better be hard.

## **Book 4 Sample**

[](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/cold-bonds-at4.html)

[**Cold Bonds**](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/cold-bonds-at4.html)

**“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.”

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Book Four

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