

Chapter One
My Pets
Gainesville Lake
December 17th

1

“Is everyone ready?”

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

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

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

Alexa tucked her cloak behind her guns anyway, then casted her line. It sailed roughly over the weeds and water for a few yards and then dropped heavily into the lake.

Each team member did the same, except for Edward, who’d been assigned to guard duty. Edward wasn’t upset to miss out on the fishing. He was getting his turn on watch out of the way first.

Alexa would rotate it each time they came out so that every man did a shift.

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

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

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

"Don't lose those poles." Alexa pulled her knife.

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

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

Her crew did the same.

Edward stepped closer to help if it was needed.

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

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

Some of the team grimaced while the rest grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All of them had left their poles on the ground to come over and help. Alexa was glad they hadn’t lost

them. Most of the fishing poles in the city stores had been damaged or gone. They'd had to put pieces together to make these.

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

"It's more amazing that they're in a lake and not the ocean."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward was once again impressed by their leader. In a few sentences she’d reminded them that their quest, their group, couldn’t stay the same. It

would shrink or grow as they progressed and its members would have to adapt.

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

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

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

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

David grimaced and waved him off.

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

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

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

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

Alexa wasn’t angered by his question. “Of course, but our quest is not conservation of the animals, and the waterways are teeming with life

right now because of the squids keeping fishers away. We're doing no harm in taking her. But we have helped by removing a squid. The other fish around here can mate and give birth with one less predator to avoid."

"What about later, when we've gotten all the squid and the fish numbers start to drop?"

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

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

Alexa smiled softly at Billy. "Excellent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They walked in silence most of the way, considering their surroundings instead of their mental wounds or curiosities. The slightly weedy sand sucked at their feet and gave beneath their weight. It was clearly underwater here at least part of the year. It required them to pay attention unless they wanted to use superspeed to get across it. Many of them did, but Alexa refused to sacrifice their humanity in every way. They would use their new

gifts for training and the quest, but never for laziness.

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

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

“I see an apple tree.”

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

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

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

Billy turned back around from his own survey of their rear. He gave Edward a calm nod and kept walking. Their new hearing allowed them better distance to prepare for trouble. It also let them hear

every sound Alexa made, but their eyes were still the main alert system.

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

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

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

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

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

She wiped her sticky hands on her cloak and resumed her place, enjoying the approval of her crew.

Alexa considered what had happened here. She took a quick glance at Jacob; he was smiling happily. “Pie?”

Jacob shrugged. “A type.”

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

The others groaned and chuckled.

Jacob beamed at her.

A piercing howl split the cold air.

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

The sound didn’t come again.

Alexa motioned Edward and Billy to continue gathering the fruit.

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

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

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

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

“Something’s moving on the road to the south.” David was paying extra attention to his duty so he

didn't get distracted by knowing he would have a wonderful apple soon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward came back a minute later, using a gentle touch to drop the bar they'd installed. It effectively sealed off that level. He used a quick gesture to fill them in.

Two survivors. Injured. Sleeping.

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

Edward hadn't spotted abuse, and none of their gear had implied they were bad. He hated Alexa being denied a meal, but until she grew hungry enough to find a worthy source, they would all suffer the thirst alongside her. *We're doing it as a team.* For some odd reason, that pleased all of them and made the wait tolerable.

"Who wants to be the ghost come dawn?"

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

"I'll do it." Daniel already preferred animal blood. He was proud of his control around normals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniel was gone a few seconds later.

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

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

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

So did Mark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You okay?

Daniel flinched, hand going to his gun.

Billy snorted softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tomorrow's work list just grew. What else?"

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

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

Daniel retrieved his apple and resumed crunching.

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

"Then we may have guests until you clear their path."

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

Alexa chuckled. "Shortly, my pet. Shortly."

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

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

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

David relaxed. “I like that.”

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

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

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

Jacob motioned. “I’ve got it. Go on.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

David glanced over. “And me?”

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two
Flipping Eggs
Barrow

1

“**W**elcome to your temporary home.”

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

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

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

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

“That’s an illusion, like almost everything else. Come November 18th, the sun will set and not come

up again for more than two months. The bears are deadly and the moose hate people. Don't wander off."

Alexa rolled her eyes. "I've been making the rounds of our family. I understand the dangers of animals."

Brandon chuckled. "It doesn't sound like you're impressed."

Alexa snorted.

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

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

Now Brandon snorted.

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

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

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

Alexa assumed her Uncle Brandon was lingering for her to wave to the driver or maybe even to get upset that the man hadn't told her

goodbye. *I didn't like him and he didn't like me.*
Move on.

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

"So I've been told."

"Did you like any of them so far?"

"No."

Brandon stepped around the bushes lining the front walk. "This way."

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

"You'll be here for a few months. Get settled and unpack."

Alexa stared. "Most of my stays have been a few weeks."

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

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

"You've excelled at every location."

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

Brandon kept his back to her so she couldn't see his amusement. "We may get along then." He held the door open for her.

Alexa followed the mental map in his thoughts. She went straight to the rear of the large house. She

admired the dust-free domicile, but she didn't think it was his real home. The farm had the feel of a vacation residence.

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

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

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

"I won't." She was glad to know there was an escape route.

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

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

"What chores do you want me to do?"

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

"That's it?"

"We'll do the rest of it together."

Alexa didn't want to get lazy. "What about lessons?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sighed again. “Until then I get to suffer through being passed around the family like a bad

penny so I can absorb everything they have to teach me. But I will remember every lesson and use it later to keep my team alive and accomplish my goals. Nothing will stand in my way, not even the love I have for my father.”

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

“All of them?”

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

“And did you change for the others?”

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They’re going to harden.”

Brandon shrugged.

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

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

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

Yellow yolk popped into the non-stick skillet.

She looked at Brandon.

The man ignored her.

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

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

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

“Damn it!”

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

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

“We’re almost out of eggs.”

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

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

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

Alexa flinched, caught off guard.

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

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

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

Alexa understood what he meant. She was able to flip the first egg this time without breaking it. Her

wave of happiness filled the kitchen and lifted both their moods.

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

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

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

“Finish up.”

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

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

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

“Why did you do that?!”

“I wanted them soft fried.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon shrugged. "They weren't good at flipping eggs. I am."

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

Brandon sighed happily. “All my life.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa tensed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon stared. “That brain is magnificent.”

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

“Why?”

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

Brandon took a long time to recover.

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

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

"That isn't an answer."

Brandon picked up the empty egg bowl. "Let's fill this up."

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

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

"So it's not just for me in case I decide to go search for my dad again?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You could settle for a partnership.”

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

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

Brandon laughed. “Thank you.”

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

The hens began to scatter, leaving their eggs behind.

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

Alexa began putting the eggs in.

“My hens come when I whistle.”

Alex groaned. “I didn’t ask again!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa was comforted. She was young, but she already understood how lessons functioned. Most of them weren't mastered in one session.

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

"Relax." Brandon took a scrub brush from the wallboard.

Alexa reached for the other one.

"Do it by hand first."

"Why?"

"You won't always have a brush."

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

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

Alexa shoved the pictures of the future back into her mental cage. She glowered at Brandon. "Not right now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa glared. “It’s clean.”

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

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

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

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

“Three minutes.”

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

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

Alexa handed him the last one.

"Ten seconds left. Very good."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Most portions are double what a person's stomach needs at one time. Some are even triple. When you're doing without, or preparing for hard times, shrink the portions and increase the health

benefits if you can.” Brandon picked up a shovel. “Bring over the wheelbarrow. We’ll clean the coop first.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa smirked. “And?”

“You’re a killer.”

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

“Yes, but not at your age. And you enjoy it. They know you for what you are—a true Mitchel. And they fear it. You sensed their fear and it turned

into contempt for them. That's why you couldn't like them. You were right. They aren't your kind."

Alexa jumped to the next logical conclusion. "You are."

Brandon was still shoveling. "I'm also on a break. I enjoyed it too much, so they gave me off time I didn't want and a duty I wasn't sure I could handle."

The bond between them grew at his revelation. It made Alexa willing to talk. "It's wrong."

"Yes. It's also right. Someone has to thin the herds or overpopulation will destroy them."

"Why me?"

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

"Tell me what you're getting from this visit."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“About what?”

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

Alexa immediately got started.

Chapter Three
It Matters Right Now

1

“Tell me the difference between duty and honor.”

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

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

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

Alexa frowned. “I prefer to have both.”

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

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

"That was another reason they didn't like you."

"But it's my duty." She didn't like his disapproving tone.

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

"Then why don't they like me because of it?"

"Because you'll be continuing the family legacy of not having honor except when it's convenient."

"It's a trap."

"Of course. The correct answer is honor."

Alexa didn't answer.

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

"I have."

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

"I guess I could have let them kill the smaller child."

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

"I don't like this lesson."

"Neither do I, but it's required." Branson put his book on the table. "You've been condition to protect the weakest and sacrifice the strongest. They do that to keep us weak. If we only protected the strong, they'd lose their power over us."

"I still can't do it. I'll always make that choice."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And?”

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

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

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

“You mean duty?”

“No. I was able to ignore the bonds and the urges to help those less fortunate. What I couldn’t take was the hatred of the other kids because I was more valuable, more protected. Their hatred broke

me and I caved. It's not easy to be hated, and I was able to help some of them by doing my duty. I did it for that reason. Honor meant nothing to me."

"And now, when faced with that choice?"

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

"And the twins?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happens if you don't use a skill for a long time?"

Alexa shut the suitcase. "It's gets rusty and is no longer dependable."

"Your gifts are the same. If you need them, they won't be ready."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon pulled the trigger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon reached back. "Tie this rope to your belt."

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

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

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

“Faster now!”

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

3

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

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

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

Brandon stopped and turned.

Alexa sliced through the last of the rope.

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

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

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

Cold laughter greeted them.

“I told my boss you’d have trouble.”

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

Alexa kicked him in the shin with her heel.

Brandon knelt over, groaning.

Alexa punched with her free hand, catching his jaw.

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

“You should have knocked her out for this.”

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

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

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

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

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

Alden laughed again. "Says the newest family spy."

Alexa reached for a gun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He held out her knife. “Tell me why.”

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

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

Alexa slowly holstered and followed him back into the darkness.

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

Alexa snorted as he hung up. “Funny.”

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

“He didn’t want us to fully bond.”

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

“I still don’t.”

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

“That’s why I couldn’t shoot you.”

“But you killed Alden without hesitating.”

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

“It’s wrong.”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The hurrying when we reached the end of the tunnel. People being hunted don’t hurry into danger.” Alexa decided it was a good time to point out all the clues. “You didn’t negotiate with Alden when he first arrived. You didn’t argue with the

person on the phone. You went to sleep after the call and didn't have trouble. I heard you snoring." Alexa had spent the night worrying over where she was being sent to next. She'd barely gotten any sleep.

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

Brandon grinned. "No, but good job expecting it."

"Whatever." She didn't believe him.

"How do you feel about being used as the bait?"

Alexa snorted. "Shouldn't you be asking me how I feel about being an executioner?"

Brandon winced. "I was working up to it."

"I know. I don't need the therapy session. This isn't the first time, remember?"

Brandon sighed. "That doesn't mean it's easy."

"It was my duty to kill Uncle Alden. We don't tolerate traitors or those who threaten us."

"And?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where are you going?”

“To see my father.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa stopped. “Come out.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian hated it that they had an audience at all. This was a moment of weakness from both of them

being witnessed by the family spy and a dozen cousins who'd volunteered for this duty. None of them could be trusted, but Adrian's emotions overruled his caution. He swept the girl up and hugged her back, nuzzling her cheek like his mother had always done to him after a separation.

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

Neither of them spoke. Words weren't needed.

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

Adrian dug in his pocket and brought out a card.

Alexa opened it.

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

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

"And why is that?"

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

Brandon flinched at her words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon stiffened at Adrian’s disapproval.

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

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

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

“And what’s that?”

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

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

“Thank you.”

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

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

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

“How do you know?”

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon glanced back.

Adrian nodded to him. *Thank you.*

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

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

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

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

Alexa grimaced. "That's disgusting."

Brandon shrugged. "It depends on the situation."

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

Brandon rose. "It would be a lie."

Alexa decided to like him anyway. She stared.

Brandon tensed. "What?"

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

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

Alexa nodded. “Yes, it is.”

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

4

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

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

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

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

The others nodded in agreement.

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

“No!” Jacob grinned. “I love them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa groaned through her mouthful.

So did Edward.

The others took bites and stared while chewing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

honor. The minute she stops caring, she'll lose her team with it.

Alexa glanced over, blue eyes flashing hotly.

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

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

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