

ANGELA WHITE

ALEXA'S TRAVELS

A man in a wide-brimmed hat and a dark vest over a white shirt is shown in profile, holding a tray. He is set against a dramatic, cloudy sky with a bright light source behind him, creating a silhouette effect. The overall color palette is dark blue and black with white highlights from the clouds and text.

PORT CITY

BOOK SEVEN

Copyright  
**Port City**  
by  
Angela White

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# Prologue

Gainesville

1

“**D**own!” Jacob held his breath as the water sucked him under. His heavy cloak dragged him into the cold depths.

Sharp, firm pulls on the ropes around his waist popped him to the surface. He gasped in air and held it while the wave crested over his face. Then he was able to breathe again for a minute.

“Down!”

Jacob pulled sharp and firm on the rope to his right, popping Billy to the surface. He drew in deep breaths, cramming oxygen into his lungs as the lake swelled again and sent another wave toward them.

“Check in!” Alexa held her breath and struggled to hear their answers as the water pulled her down. She didn’t have time to alert them that she was going under.

Edward jerked her back to the surface, pissed that she’d chosen to be man on the end again for this training session. It was the most dangerous place to be. “Good!”

“Good!”

“Tired!”

“Good!”

Alexa drew in air. “Brace, then break!”

The wave crested and hit them all full on.

Alexa felt panic coming from her men. She opened her eyes under the water and brought up her shield around the entire team.

The lake water lowered enough for them to suck in air as they sank. The shield filtered out most of the water, but it didn’t keep them afloat.

Alexa shivered. *Three more minutes.*

The men forced their weary bodies, and the fear, to obey.

Alexa let go of the shield and kicked hard, pulling them up. Each man in line followed, kicking hard to break the surface of the choppy lake.

Bright sun smacked them repeatedly, but there was no time to freeze as adrenaline overrode the glare and forced them to react.

David observed from the shoreline, big arms ready to reel them in with the large pulley he’d set up weeks ago. He saw Alexa go under again and got ready to bring them ashore. His session last week with her as anchorman flashed in his mind. He’d hated every second of it. He had no doubt Edward felt the same.

Edward popped her to the surface, holding his breath. He didn’t have time to call as the icy water sucked him down.

Alexa and Daniel felt the drag and pulled without the call.

Edward broke the surface and shouted over the water. “Time!”

Alexa allowed it. They were all miserable.

David began pulling them in. They went under repeatedly as the rope wound and finally tightened.

The five men pulled each other and Alexa along. Trying to swim against the waves would have been impossible without David's pulley system.

Edward plowed forward. His body protested the cruel treatment.

Mark lifted Alexa above the waves and held her there as they were pulled to the shore. His boots sank into the silt on the bottom. He forced his legs to move, to get them out of the water before he put her on her feet.

Alexa coughed out lake water and sucked in air. She coughed again and brought up more of the cold water that was making her insides shake and jerk. She didn't believe she'd ever been so cold.

David grabbed the robes they'd hung next to their fire, holding them ready as each person stripped, shaking and twitching. Their red skin made David frown, but he didn't protest the lesson like Edward had the first time he was left on the shore to watch his team sink or tread water.

Alexa refused the robe and helped Jacob strip instead. The rookie had gone quiet and that wasn't good.

Edward helped her, but he also popped buttons on her clothes while holding Jacob up. By the time she got the Preacher undressed, half of her clothes were off, as well.

The other men, now swaddled in warm robes, came over to help.

David put their wet things onto the hooks they'd attached to a long pole. They would carry it to their cozy den later and let it dry. Their pockets were empty of valuables, but full of rocks to mimic the weight of their gear.

Alexa wrapped up in the cool robe that felt amazing to her chaffed skin. She went to the fire and stood as close as the robe would tolerate.

Edward got Jacob next to the fire, then dropped his robe.

David handed him fresh gear.

As soon as Edward was dressed, he and David handed out clothes to Mark and Daniel.

Jacob and Alexa went last; their teeth chattered like woodpeckers bent on bringing down a tree.

David passed out hot mugs of chicory root coffee next, wishing he'd chosen to make the hot chocolate packs they'd gathered from the museum pallets. They each had a few left. The sugar in them would have been better in this situation than a diuretic like coffee.

Five minutes after touching the shoreline, the entire team was dry, except for their hair, and warming nicely. Alexa had created the lesson and made them practice the recovery multiple times before they'd stepped foot into the lake.

Edward waited for Alexa to speak, for any of them to talk, but the lake made the only noise as the

waves increased in strength. Edward was glad to be out of the water. These lessons never got any easier.

“Check in.”

The men all turned toward Alexa, not liking her tone.

“Good,” came from each of them, even Jacob, who was blue around the lips but warming.

Alexa sighed. “Same, though we may wish for the opposite shortly.”

Edward lifted a brow. “Something’s coming?”

Alexa nodded. “I hear it on the wind. Our peaceful break is about over.”

It was hard for the men to act sad, though they’d enjoyed some of the calm moments with their team. Nine weeks without action had sucked. All of them were eager for the rush that only came when they had a brush with death or gave one to their enemies.

Alexa lifted her face to the sky. She was able to ignore the burning sun this time. *Progress!*

Her team noticed it and shared smiles. Their misery had paid off. They all took a risk and lowered their hoods.

The sun still hurt them, but not as badly, not as sharply. They lifted their hoods to block the cold wind this time as much as to block the light.

Alexa finished straightening her spare clothes. She knelt to tie her boots, like the others were now doing.

A feather dropped into the sand in front of her.



She slowly picked it up as time slowed enough for her to actually feel it. Her hand distorted in her sight as she held the feather.

“Eagle.” Edward was great at identifying animals by what they left behind. He’d been good at it before, but he’d spent the winter reading books in the library on the subject. He was a walking wildlife guide now.

*Do I want to keep doing this?*

Alexa felt fate glance their way. It was the first time she had asked herself that question.

*We could skip the watery hell waiting for us. Safe Haven will eventually come home on their own. Yani was right about that.*

The team rotated toward her in slow motion, drawn by her contemplations and the sudden mood change. Then they noticed the time distortion. Only one of them understood what was happening.

Edward gawked at her. “It’s not just kids!”

Alexa got it an instant later. She flinched, letting go of the time stream.

Time resumed, snapping back in with a loud pop. The ground shook. A window exploded in a small shed farther down the beach.

Alexa let go of the feather, mind now blazing a path toward her next plan, the next challenge. “I can slow time.”

“Stop. Don’t.” Jacob put his warming hand around her wrist. “You’ll lead the Gate Hunters straight to Safe Haven. They’ll never stop if they find out you can do that.”

Alexa knew he was right. She shut that mental door and tried to find a way to seal it off. “You know we’re bound by ancient rules. If captured, I’d have no choice.”

Billy scowled. “We won’t let that happen.”

“Your word you won’t let them take me alive.”

Edward spoke up. “They’d have to kill us all to reach you, Boss. You’ll be on your own.”

Fire blazed across her face.

The men grinned at her and each other. They knew how to help her control the swinging moods that came from being one of the most powerful beings on the planet. Her byzan status had challenged them at first, but they’d learned how to manage it.

Alexa relaxed. “Stay here tonight or go back? Vote.”

Alexa waved at Edward to handle it.

“Stay.”

“Stay.”

“Go.”

Alexa swept the horizon behind the dead city. Somewhere out there, her son had made her a grandmother. Claudia was getting heavy with Mark’s child. Lorey was enjoying morning sickness. It appeared to be dead in every direction, but life was doing what it had always done. *I can’t stop now. All those lives need hope. Every time they see or hear us, it provides that. And I’m forbidden the job I want most. This one will have to do.*

Alexa put it from her mind. “There’s time yet.”

A dark shadow with thin, descending symmetrical wingtips flew over the team and landed on the ground in front of Alexa. It opened its yellow beak and cawed loudly.

The team stopped, frozen as the eagle studied them.

Alexa almost refused. The months here with her team had been good for her in every way. They hadn't heard from any of their friends or their enemies, though Jeanie's radio addresses had been disheartening.

*I promise to continue our journey. Does it have to be this very day?*

The Eagle cawed again. It stared into her eyes. *Of course not. You can do whatever you want. You're a Mitchel.*

The bird flew off into the western sun.

Alexa sighed. *And that's why I'm bound to finish what I've started, even if we don't survive the end. The family legacy is at stake. I will repair our image or die trying!*

The men waited for her words, certain of what she would say now. She hadn't worked them daily during their downtime just to renounce the quest that had brought them together.

Alexa's heart settled back into that familiar, tiresome rhythm. She sat on the sand and squeezed water from her long blonde braids. "We leave at midday on the morrow."

That was as long as she could wait. If she stayed longer, she wouldn't go at all. This team meant as

much to her as her honor, as her father, and she'd almost picked them. Instead of shame, it brought awareness. *I have to find a way to save them.*

Edward felt her unhappiness, but he also knew the hard, resourceful woman who'd led them here was waiting impatiently to be needed again.

“We’ve come a long way, and dealt with challenges that would make superheroes weep.” Her face hardened into the stony, hawk-like profile they’d come to respect above all others. “I pray it was enough to get us through the last leg of our quest. The hardest part is yet to come.”

Jacob snorted at her. “What could be harder than having the Rabbit along?”

The men laughed.

Alexa didn't. “We have to tell the sheltered citizens of Safe Haven that the world has changed in their absence and it will be no easy task. I promise you, they won't want to hear it and we won't make friends for saying it.”

Mark shrugged. “Then it's a good thing we aren't going there to make friends.”

“Aye, but those bonds make the world a better place, do they not?”

The men saw her point. Their bonds with this team meant everything.

“Do not close yourself off to relationships once we arrive. We need them to accept us before we tell them they don't have a choice. If we do it backward, they may try to kill us and every hybrid they

encounter. The last thing we want is to go to war against Safe Haven.”

Edward met her eye. “But we will, right?”

Alexa sighed miserably. “If it’s called for, yes. We all have the right to life, and even during the crappy moments, it is still worth fighting for.”

Chapter One  
**A Warm Drink**

1

**“P**ack wisely, my pets. Trinkets must not occupy slots made for gear.”

Alexa’s words brought a pause to all six of her fighters. Midday was minutes away now. Bright sun was coming in the open window of the penthouse, mocking her order to leave.

Billy reluctantly put the finished orange Hummer model back on the shelf. He took the Camaro and the unbuilt purple Jeep instead, tucking them safely into the pouch already holding a faded birthday card that had been with him for four years and thousands of miles. “I’m looking forward to blowing this up at some point.”

The men gave a halfhearted chuckle at his serious joke. Purple vehicles would always remind Billy of his captivity.

Edward took the rifle mods from his cloak pocket and put them on the floor under the personal shelves. The mods were heavy and only useful for new builds, something he wouldn’t have supplies for while on the road. He packed the reloading equipment instead, earning a nod from Alexa.

Alexa paced their apartment, mind flying and heart hurting. None of them wanted to leave now that the time had come. Her men were dragging their feet and nursing their emotions. They'd all woken knowing they would never return here. It was depressing.

Jacob tucked two Karate books into his cloak, leaving the set of videos that he and Mark had been using to learn the new skill. The DVD player had provided fun days of entertainment. It was also left.

Mark handed Jacob the num-chuks they'd painstakingly carved.

Jacob stored his in his loaded cloak as Mark passed out the extras they'd made to each team member.

Alexa snorted as she took hers, but she dutifully added it to her cloak.

"You made her a pair?" Edward groaned. "That's it. I'm taking a helmet."

The chuckles were genuine this time.

Alexa laughed with them. "You learned to duck, did you not?"

Edward drew on his cloak and began tying it. "Yes, quickly."

Standing by the window, Daniel kept his focus on the ground below them. "Never thought we'd find something you can't do."

Alexa's lips curled; she didn't keep the joke going.

Edward and David frowned at the man.

Daniel ignored the silent warnings of his teammates. “Still, six men twirling together looks great.”

“Twirling?”

“I’d like to register a complaint with your choice of words.”

“I don’t twirl.”

Alexa sighed. “I haven’t given up. I’m just...pausing to respect my enemy.”

Daniel laughed. “The court accepts that answer. Num-chuks are definitely not your friend.”

Alexa joined Daniel at the window. She wrapped her arms around him from behind and rested her cheek against his strong back. “Thank you.”

Daniel put a hand over one of hers and kept studying the bright, lifeless city street below. “It’s my honor.”

The others understood he had pushed her intentionally, the same way she often did with them. They were grateful when they conquered whatever it was that had made them want to give up; Alexa was grateful to have someone to push her to new levels of greatness, too.

“I’m on watch now.” She straightened. Her voice dropped into the gravelly mistress they all knew so well. “We roll in five. Basic formation to start. Daniel will lead us out.”

The apartment was littered with their gear. None of them were ready to go yet. A flurry of movement



filled the rooms as the team used their vampire speed to fly through packing.

Alexa watched in amused fascination despite being able to do it, too. It was fun to observe and she had been ready to go for an hour.

She'd chosen to leave nothing behind, but unlike her men, she hadn't gathered much while here, other than the small gifts from her team and a few new tools of destruction. What she'd collected was in her mind and carried more value than anything else. The memories of their months here would never be forgotten or allowed to dull and fade. She would relive them daily to keep them alive. *This was our home.* "Three minutes."

Alexa stayed still as items flew through the air, men ducked and dove to catch them, and the sun continued to rise. They would all be miserable an hour from now, but they would tolerate it for the quest, like they'd been doing all along. A week from now, this place would start looking like a pitstop instead of a home, but it had been that and more. *I will never forget it.*

Edward pressed a fast kiss to her cold cheek. "None of us will." He hurried off again to finish packing.

"Two minutes."

The men moved faster at her call.

Daniel finished first, driven by her reward of leading them out. He stood by the exit and watched her instead of the other men. He felt her unease and

her sadness. He didn't know what to say to make her feel better.

Alexa's brows came together. "I have no need of your mothering. Perhaps Billy wants to be clucked over."

Billy slid into his place in their line, not rising to her attempt to trigger his anger. It was always there now, waiting for a release. That would never fade, but there was no need to feed it. He'd found peace while they were here. Now, it was time to continue their destiny and seek out violence once again.

Daniel faced the penthouse exit, hand lifting as Alexa's mouth opened. "We're rolling out right now. Go!"

Daniel opened the door and strolled out. He expected their first week on the road to be full of surprises and tests from Alexa to help get them back into shape.

As the others fell in line with barely a pause, Daniel was sure they would do well. All of them were questers, though they didn't always feel like doing it. This was their real life. The time here had been a vacation.

David sent his mental radar out, searching for threats while trying to increase his range. He'd been practicing his gifts while they were here, but lack of action hadn't given him ways to test himself and make sure that he was improving. That would change now.

They walked in silence to the exit of the tower, some straining to hear anything waiting outside, while others tried to memorize the sound of this place to carry with them.

Alexa lifted her hood and tugged it tight as they stepped out into the bright light of early spring. “Don’t look back. It will only make this harder.”

Alexa followed her team out of Gainesville with her hands resting lightly on the butts of her Colts. Her legs immediately protested, as did her hips and her arms.

Her lips curled. It was definitely time to go.

They’d been together for almost a year now, following the signs of those who came before. Their black, hooded cloaks billowed in the harsh wind; their battle-lined eyes and stiff bodies proved it had been a hard journey, but the love they had for their crew was clear in their sympathetic glances as knees popped and backs protested.

Their adventures together had strengthened them in more ways than she’d considered possible. It had also weakened them. Everyone was hungry right now, deep in their bones. They’d hunted a few times over the winter, but humanity had avoided their location completely. They hadn’t had a satisfying meal in eight weeks.

Alexa knew it when they stepped over the city limits. It felt like several witnesses began studying them in trepidation and expectation.

Alexa straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. *Let’s not disappoint them.* “Cover switch.”

All seven of them switched into their armored hats at the same time. It wasn't in perfect unison to Alexa's eyes, but to an outsider, it would be. The out of sync was so tiny that it barely mattered. Their time off road would have consequences, but Alexa was confident they would fall back into the old routines quickly. "Standard form."

They moved in unison this time, spreading into that dangerous V formation.

The attention on them felt approving. Then they vanished to go spread the word that she was on the move again.

Alexa passed the road that led to an airfield without scanning those dirt and debris-covered planes, but her mind wanted to linger on them anyway. Alexa forced herself to concentrate on the job. While on their break, it had been okay to get mentally distracted. Now, it could be deadly.

All of them glanced back once to view their fading den, except Alexa. She kept her attention on the cold, bright environment.

Edward gave into the emotions, sighing deeply. "Why is this so hard? Yesterday I wanted to leave."

Alexa had an answer ready. "Be grateful. It's proof that we're still human." That's what she was telling herself.

Edward replayed her words and tones, but couldn't find a problem. He knew there was one, though. Something was off with their fearless leader.

"Let it go."

Alexa's rough order sent Edward's eyes to the broken road in front of them, but his mind continued to dwell on it. Edward had already decided he was going to chase a future with Alexa after the quest was over. It had been hard not to do it during bonding and training moments on this break, but he needed to remain aloof until they finished their duty. She wouldn't be receptive until then. *Once that's done, I'm going to fight for her with everything I have left.*

"Concentrate!"

Daniel's bark drew all heads toward him.

Daniel smoothed out his face and tone. "We're on the road now. Leave that shit here."

Alexa nodded approval.

The others agreed, but it was easier said than done.

"We're being watched." David was sure of it.

Daniel swept the storm clouds in the distance and increased their pace. He also took over the practice calls that Alexa obviously wanted them to work on. "Cover change."

They switched to their previous hats in a smooth move that was still a tiny bit out of sync.

Gainesville fell steadily behind them and then out of sight as dips in the cracked, weedy pavement rose and sank under their boots.

"Update me." Daniel enjoyed being on point. It kept him from doing what the others were. He didn't want to stew on the past or the future.

David ignored the legs that were already starting to protest the walk even though it had just begun. “There are several groups around us. They’re traveling east, as well.”

“Going to the same place?”

“Hard to say, but I assume so.”

That matched with what Daniel was picking up. “Keep me posted.”

David resumed digging into the minds of those around their location. “Will do.”

Alexa wasn’t happy with how they were starting out. *But it’s how we finish that matters most.* “Pick it up.”

Daniel led them faster, eagerly. The sooner they got to Port City, the sooner they could take the next step and get him back here, on his own time to pursue the future.

“Leave that shit here!”

Daniel laughed at her words and took them to heart. He increased their pace again and scanned for trouble.

Walking without knowing they were returning to their den later wasn’t satisfying. All of the travelers felt it. Their bodies protested and their minds wandered.

Alexa knew. “This is why we haven’t taken a long break. It’s very easy to settle down. Getting a move on isn’t.” Alexa motioned to Daniel as he turned for a check in.

They switched places, giving Alexa the lead.

Alexa resumed the practice. “Cover switch.”

The men responded quicker than they had with Daniel, but the feeling of reluctance and sadness didn't fade.

Alexa scanned the land for what they needed. Her sharp gaze found a single flying carnivore circling an area with tall, yellowed grass. She took them toward it, nerves tightening.

The sense of danger rippled through the group. Men checked to be sure they could reach their guns. Except for Jacob, who wasn't doing the team checks, either. His mind was still firmly in the past. He missed the alertness of his team this time.

Mark started to shove the Preacher to wake him up.

Edward shook his head. "All of us are slacking right now. The boss will handle it."

Mark did a fast check on the rear of their line instead, then surveyed Alexa for clues about what was happening. Someone or some thing was about to die. The feeling was clear, familiar.

The magic snapped into place for Mark for an instant. Then it faded back into the pain in his feet and concern for the girl who was getting farther away with each step.

Jacob finally checked on his teammates and caught Mark's thoughts. He scowled. "Pay attention!"

Mark growled. "That's rich coming from you!"  
"What does that mean?!"

“It means you haven’t been doing your checks on time since you joined this crew and yet you’re calling me out. Mind yourself!”

Jacob flushed. “That’s not true!”

Edward snorted. “Every word of it is true. Mind yourself!”

“So he can live in the past and I can’t?”

Mark spun around. “You don’t get it. You’re afraid to have a relationship with any woman but Alexa. I’m scared Claudia and my child will die! There’s no comparison.”

Jacob remembered Alexa’s ominous words about Claudia, but his pride wouldn’t let him accept the scolding. “Don’t throw stones when your house is glass!”

“Shut up!” Daniel glared at all of them. “Remember who we are.”

All four men began bickering as they walked, not paying attention to Alexa or their environment.

Billy grinned as he drew his weapon. “This will be a fun trip, Boss. I can feel it.”

David drew his gun right after Billy. He sighed in relief as he spotted their targets. “At least it’s only wild dogs.”

Billy ignored the embarrassed men behind them who were now pulling weapons and glaring in sullen silence. “Yeah, if it had been people, this crew would only have three members now.”

Edward laughed, letting it go. He motioned toward Jacob. “The rookie’s pretty fast. I’d say there would be four.”



Weak chuckles were lost in the wind and the yipping howl of a large, filthy dog that caught sight of them.

“Movement from all directions.”

David’s call brought a rush of adrenaline that smothered the sadness and reminded them of why they were here and what they were—killers.

“Rifle squad.”

Alexa’s order brought more attention from the dogs feasting in the grass.

Edward and Daniel holstered their sidearms smoothly and drew their rifles.

Mark holstered easily; his rifle caught on the loose edge of his cloak. “Damn it!”

Edward started to shoot the dogs for him.

“No.” Alexa made them wait, letting Mark recover from his mistake.

The dogs flew toward him, snarling.

Mark jerked on the rifle, heart pounding.

Edward didn’t like this. “Boss...”

Alexa didn’t repeat or repeal her order.

Anger flooded Mark. He jerked his rifle free and began firing as the dogs charged him. He got the last one point blank with an inch to spare before it clamped down on his leg.

More dogs came from the tall weeds.

“Pit bull.” Edward fired.

Three large canines ran through the grass, growling.

Mark got them all in a blur, producing kill shots through his embarrassed anger.

“Coyotes.” Edward swung around to fire at two mixed breeds coming in fast. “Mutts.”

Mark and Daniel advanced as Alexa stopped. They walked in front of the crew, popping off fast shots to clear the path.

Jacob and David covered the sides.

Mark charged to the front line.

Edward slid over to let the upset Convict have the center place where he would get most of the action.

“Incoming!”

Alexa’s warning sent fresh adrenaline into their bodies.

Wild dogs ran at them from three sides; Alexa rotated to cover the rear if it was needed.

“Doberman.” Edward fired. “Two poodles.”

Daniel laughed harshly. “Showoff.”

Mark fired faster as more dogs appeared. He got three kills with two shots and then turned his rifle toward the line rushing toward Edward.

Edward snickered. “Now that’s showing off.”

“Yeah, he has gotten better.” Daniel reloaded as they walked, scanning for more threats.

Cloaks flared out in the wind as the crew cleared the threat and advanced into the heart of the dog den. Silence fell as the remaining dogs ran off; the team reloaded.

Mark tied his cloak down, making sure it was tight this time.

The entire team did the same. They’d all just learned from his error.

Alexa swept the damage path, counting and evaluating. It allowed her to keep track of how much ammunition they were using, as well as who fought and who didn't.

Her gaze went to Billy.

Billy shrugged as he holstered. He didn't need to reload. "Mark had it covered."

Alexa knew that was true. She wasn't worried about Billy not fighting. In fact, she was proud of him for not rushing in and trying to claim his share of the spoils. Still, he needed the release, too. "Billy will mop up. We'll clear the den."

Billy began walking their backtrail to give mercy to any survivors.

Jacob followed, protecting the driver. He also did a fast check on each of his teammates. Mark's accusation was burning through his brain.

Alexa and the others continued to the center of the bloody, matted grass.

"No pups." David was relieved by that. He didn't want to shoot pups of any kind, for any reason.

Edward gestured at small bones in the dirt. "They eat them."

Alexa made a face, reminded of the past. "Not just the pups."

The center of the grass was littered with bones and gore from half-eaten bodies of the undead.

"That's not okay."

Edward shrugged at Daniel's comment. "They have to eat, too."

He knelt and slit the throat of a whimpering dog that hadn't made it out of the den before getting shot. Then he lifted the animal and drank thirstily.

"Fair enough." Daniel did the same while wishing it was human blood.

Alexa and Mark stood watch as Billy and Jacob came back and joined in the feast.

Mark kept his attention on their surroundings this time. It was easier. *Because I got to kill something.*

Alexa gave a quick warning. "It's who we are. She'll have to make a choice. Don't let it happen without giving her all the information."

Mark wasn't looking forward to that moment. Claudia would have to see this side of him before making a choice about their future. "And if she can't deal with it?"

Alexa smiled warmly. "You'll always have a place with me."

Mark started to ask if Claudia was okay and stopped himself. Alexa couldn't spend time babysitting her crew. She needed fighters who were committed to finishing the quest.

"And are you?"

Mark didn't hesitate. "Of course. If Safe Haven doesn't return, there won't be a safe place for that future to happen."

"Keep that in your heart as we go forward, and have faith in the protectors we've sent."

Mark snorted and swept a different direction.

Alexa didn't scold him. She wasn't sure she'd sent Claudia enough protection, either. She hoped to rectify that as they traveled.

Edward belched loudly and came over to take Mark's place so he could eat. He wiped blood from his chin. "Tastes like turkey."

Laughter flowed over the small battlefield, calming their nerves.

The magic snapped back into place for all of them and stayed this time. All it took was death and a warm drink.

Chapter Two  
**Mitchels**  
A Mile from Alexa

1  
**Jersey group**

**“H**er crew isn’t as well trained as we are. After all the stories we’ve heard, I expected better.” Jordan automatically moved over to cover Austin’s flank as he avoided a large pothole in the middle of the broken road. “I remember what she did to the giants. Don’t underestimate her or her crew.”

“We look like them.”

They all nodded at Lilya’s comment. Everyone had noticed it.

The walkers reveled in knowing they looked like Alexa’s crew. Even the dark cloaks with pouches sewn in were the same. Their pointed staffs and sharpened stakes in place of guns were the only big difference. None of them asked if Addison had copied Alexa’s setup. It was obvious that she had.

Addison didn’t want her team to believe it was an unauthorized copy; she broke her rule of not speaking while leading unless it was needed. “I trained under Alexa for a few months. She taught me well.”

Her crew didn't doubt the words. They only wondered what that had been like.

Lilya automatically moved over to flank Jordan as the entire line of fighters adjusted for the road conditions. "What did she do to the giants? I haven't heard that story."

Jordan rotated for a scan of the rear. "I'll tell you when we camp tonight. Right now, I'm concentrating on not tripping over any of these potholes. The roads are terrible."

Austin snorted lowly. "Terrible is what the others will say when they find out she's not really a Mitchel anymore."

Jordan faced the front and did a fast check in with their leader. "She's always Mitchel."

Austin made a face. "Even as a hybrid?"

Lilya stared pointedly. "Our family is mixed with worse than vampires."

Austin rubbed his hairy arms. "True."

"Stop chattering!" Addison kept her eyes on the road even while scolding her crew. "One more word and we'll go straight through the night."

Addison understood their distraction, however. Seeing Alexa and her crew in action had been exciting. The ending had been a surprise and now they wanted to discuss it, but there would be time for that when they made camp. It was dangerous to get preoccupied while they were out in the open.

Isaac made a funny face at the baby strapped into the backpack Addison was wearing. The infant was barely awake. Easy to care for, with a great

attitude, the baby hadn't slowed their trip at all. "Are we joining her tonight?"

Lilya shook her head at Isaac, who always pushed against Addison's leadership. "We're two weeks early. When Mitchels give a meeting date, they mean it."

Jordan had recognized the path their leader had them on. "We'll parallel her, though. It's never against the Mitchel code to arrive right as help is needed."

All of them were satisfied with that answer. The males in this group were settling in nicely, except for Isaac. Isaac had been rescued from a slave market a year ago and still hadn't adjusted to the way the world had changed, but Addison was in love with him so his small pushes against her leadership were being tolerated.

Lilya knew that wasn't going to continue for much longer. Addison would soon put him in his place or stash him somewhere. Making idle threats was bad for her leadership.

Addison rotated for a fast check of her crew, delivering a sharp glare of displeasure to Isaac at the same time.

Isaac understood he was embarrassing her again and wisely kept his mouth shut this time. He enjoyed being with the Mitchels, but he had been military before the war and it was hard for him to follow anyone's orders except for his own. It had little to do with the male/female dynamic. He simply wanted to be in charge of his own fate.



Addison caught that. It softened her resentment of his disobedience, like it had been doing all along. She still delivered a punishment. “Isaac will cook tonight. Everyone enjoyed the fresh bread last week. He’ll do that again.”

Isaac held in a groan at the extra work while everyone else smiled. They had spent two months exploring New Jersey greenhouses and nurseries, collecting fruits and vegetables that had gone to seed each year and come back.

New Jersey had been a large agricultural exporter before the war; they’d done well on gathering food, but the entire group felt the most valuable thing they had found in that coastal state were the tree nuts. They were healthy and light to carry, but also had the extra benefit of being used for baked goods. Fresh bread was incredibly hard to come by now. The fact that Isaac knew how to bake was one of the things that Addison had been drawn to about him.

“Do you think Alexa knew we were close to her?”

Jordan rolled her eyes at Lilya. “She probably spotted us before we spotted her.”

“It sounds like you have a lot of respect for Alexa. Does that come from stories of her travels, or do you have a personal relationship, too?” Isaac didn’t care if he was punished again. He was already in trouble, so now he was going to talk as much as he wanted to.

Jordan also ignored their leader's tensing shoulders. "We were in the same lab for a while. She was a strong leader even as a child. The government didn't do that very often, though. They were afraid of Mitchels banding together and taking over the world."

Isaac laughed. "And for all their interference, that's exactly what happened."

Austin frowned. "That Jeanie bitch is in control. It's not a Mitchel."

Jordan couldn't let that go. "And yet Alexa still called a Mitchel meeting. There are dozens of us going to Port City right now. What happens there will shape the future of our family for the next decade at least. I seriously doubt that Alexa will leave it in the hands of an outsider who supports slavery."

Ahead of them, Addison stopped.

The rest of the crew stopped behind her, tensing. They scanned the coming dust storm and the dog paths in the grass behind them in anticipation of a fight.

"When we stop for the night, I may call a leadership vote." Addison held up a sharp hand to stop the protests of her crew. "You're losing respect for me because of the mate I've chosen. It might be time for someone else to lead us."

Addison started walking again.

Her subdued crew followed, regretting their disrespect.

Isaac regretted it most of all. He loved Addison deeply. He sent her mental apologies that didn't receive a response. She was angry and he had already learned that when you angered a Mitchel, they didn't get over it lightly. Camp tonight would be full of baked bread and genuine apologies combined with a lack of their normal entertainments to make up for their transgression.

Satisfied that she had gotten her crew in order, Addison increased their pace and led them toward Port City with her chin up and her heart hurting. Like Alexa, she hated to punish her team. *They mean more to me than my family ever has. And for that reason, Isaac has to be removed.*

## 2

### Canadian Group

“I feel her. She's close.”

Levi quickly shook his head at the driver. “Keep going. My niece won't be happy if we arrive this early.”

Colton agreeably eased the van into a faster speed and continued to take them toward Port City. The overpass was surprisingly clear through here, allowing them to make good time. “Why do you think she called us?”

Levi shrugged. “I assume there's a challenge to be conquered. That's usually what brings Mitchels together.”

Ava, Levi's wife, smiled at him in the mirror. "We've all heard the radio calls. Maybe it's the politics."

"Alexa hasn't been on the radio in months. She's not involved in the politics anymore." Levi did a fast scan through all the windows, checking on each member of his snoozing crew as well as their environment through the dusty glass.

Their van was faded green this time. They'd used many colors over the years, but the inside was always the same. It had three rows of wide seats, a generous storage space in the rear, and an engine that could take their fights and flights. The reinforced walls of the glinted on the inside, giving no clue to the untrained eye. Bags of neatly packed gear sat by each person's boots.

A stack of fur hides covered one of the seats, waiting to be sewn into needed clothes. Their northern hunting trip had yielded enough big game to keep them clothed and fed for months.

The rest of the van was clean and empty. They kept it that way to make sleeping easier and to allow for ditching it without forgetting any of their things or letting people know who it had belonged to. They didn't bother wiping prints like they'd done before the war. The government wasn't hunting them now. That world was finally gone.

Colton didn't trust anyone. "We all know what she did to the Livingston twins in the lab. What if this is a trap so she can wipe out more of our family?"

“Then we’ll act like what we are.”

Asher, the youngest, dirtiest member of their group, lifted a brow toward Levi. “So we’re not going to talk about the fact that she’s a blood drinker now?”

Levi had already suspected it from listening to the radio calls. “As long as she honors the code, it doesn’t matter what she’s become.”

Asher frowned. “What code?”

“Family first, rookie, always.”

“Even when we’re wrong?”

“Especially when we’re wrong. That’s when we need our family the most.” Levi leaned back in the seat, but he didn’t allow himself to get too comfortable. Traveling in a vehicle made it easy to be lulled into complacency, but he had decided on the vehicle so they would arrive a little early. He had a feeling that whatever was going to happen there wouldn’t just be once Alexa showed up. He wanted to get his nine-person crew in place before the action started.

“That last train we cleared out had two jars of strawberry jam that’s still good. Who wants a PB and strawberry J?”

Fingers went up from every member of the crew, including the people who had appeared to be sleeping.

Ava began preparing their lunch. She was the cook in their group, as well as the sniper. She enjoyed both jobs immensely.

“When we stop for the night, we’ll spend a few hours prepping things from that last train haul. In a few days we’ll find a place to stash the van and our extra supplies. We’ll walk into Port City.”

No one was surprised by Levi’s decision. It looked lazy for them to arrive by vehicle, but it was also loud and would let everyone know they were coming. They often used vehicles between locations and then stored them to go in on foot for appearance or the element of surprise.

All of them were grateful their leader allowed them to have small breaks like this. A lot of Mitchels refused to take it easy on their crew in any way, causing resentments that had to be dealt with. Levi didn’t have that problem. All of the men and women now doing fast checks and preparing for lunch were completely loyal to him. The only way they would ever go against him was if he forgot to obey the code. Except for the two rookie miners they had invited in after their last adventure in Canada, every member of this crew was a true born blood Mitchel.

Asher, now a Mitchel wannabe through his relationship with Levi’s daughter, brushed dirty fingers down his dirty jeans to clear them before taking a thick sandwich. His cloak was tied to his tank top; it was too hot in the van for full gear right now. “I saw another group back there. Addison was leading them.”

Colton regarded Levi. “Are you still upset with her?”

Levi's eyes turned bright red.

Colton turned back toward the road, letting out a sigh. "I guess it's good to know some things don't change."

Levi didn't confirm or deny that they were going to have a confrontation with his ex-wife and her team. He didn't need to. It was common knowledge that Addison had left him and then replaced him with a grunt who didn't know anything about their family. All of that could have been tolerated, but she had given that novice something she had refused to give Levi for over a decade. The minute she had birthed another man's child, they'd become bitter enemies.

Colton found another topic. "I wonder if Elliot will be there."

Asher frowned again. "Who?"

"Alexa's brother."

"Why haven't I ever heard of him?"

Levi scowled. "My nephew is the black sheep of the Mitchels."

Asher chuckled. "I didn't think Mitchels could do anything bad enough to get that status. What did he do?"

Levi stared at the mountain in the distance. "He helped the giants, *against* Alexa. He broke the code and there's no coming back from that."

“We can try now, while it’s just her and her crew.” Wyatt lowered the binoculars. “They aren’t that good.”

Madelyn laughed sarcastically while making sure her boots were still tied. Loose laces while on a bike could be deadly. “You should probably take a nap before we head out again.”

Wyatt frowned as he stored the binoculars and lifted the kickstand on his blue bicycle. The bikes were all professional, adjusted meticulously for each person. Every few months they spent time at bike shops to repair, replace, and readjust the rides that were priceless to this crew. The rest of the time they preferred to camp in malls and hunt anyone who came by for supplies. “Why?”

Madelyn also used her heel to lift the kickstand on her bike. “Because you’re dreaming while you’re awake. That’s dangerous.”

This crew wore mismatched sports gear and biking boots, with tight gloves that freed their fingers and headbands that keep short hair out of their faces. They only donned cloaks when they went visiting or hunting on foot.

Each of them had a backpack, a fanny pack, and a double holster that hung perfectly for their hands to reach while riding. The bikes carried pouches and bags in strategic places, all filled with weapons or ammunition. The rest of their gear stayed on them at all times.



Wyatt wasn't ready to give in yet. "But there's only seven of them in total and we saw that her men aren't as good as we've been led to believe."

Standing behind them, Alice also put away her binoculars. "Anyone can have an off day, even a Mitchel." She changed the subject. "I've never been to Port City."

"I have. It's a wild place. Perfect for our family." Madelyn rolled her bike into the XO position and got ready for another fast ride.

"Are you sure we shouldn't try now? If we wait until we get into the city, the rest of the family will help her."

The leader of their group, Emmie, gave Wyatt a questioning look. "Are you feeling okay?"

Wyatt flushed at the tone. "I just don't want to pass up a perfect opportunity."

Emmie straddled her bike, signaling that she was ready to go. She didn't answer Wyatt.

The rugged females on her five-person crew hadn't expected Emmie to attack, though it did seem like a good moment. None of them liked Alexa very much because it was hard to live up to her infamous reputation and two of this crew actually hated her.

Wyatt got ready to ride, exchanging a quick glance with Damon, who was riding the drag position today.

Damon glared toward Alexa and her walking crew below the ridge where they'd stopped, then straddled his bike. Like Wyatt, he wanted to attack,

but he also agreed with their leader. Alexa wasn't an easy target. None of their family was.

Alice rolled into her place and put a foot on the pedal so she would have a fast jump start. Their leader didn't believe in casual rides where they enjoyed the scenery. "Why do you hold onto grudges for so long? You're barely a Mitchel anyway."

Damon flushed and didn't respond.

"I forgot you're new on this team." Wyatt put a foot on the pedal and tensed his grip on the handlebars that had seen years of use. He adored his bike. "Alexa refused his proposal. Mitchels don't let stuff like that go."

Alice made a face. "But you're related."

Damon had to defend himself against her disgust. "We're only fourth cousins, and our family commonly picks mates out of our gene pool. The scientists have mixed us with a lot of other families. We usually do best with our own kind."

"Except for Alexa." Emmie rolled them out, surprising her crew by not taking off like a bat out of hell as they were used to. "She's the only Mitchel who was ever mixed with someone else and came out better than the original product."

Madelyn took advantage of their leader's amiable mood to keep the conversation going. "Are you saying she's better than her father? Because I find that hard to believe."

Emmie steered them into the center of the weedy, cracking road. "She's just as deadly, and

though I haven't seen her in years, after listening to all the radio calls, I'm inclined to believe she's just as intelligent."

Madelyn steered around a wide crack automatically. "Those two alone don't make her better."

"No, her ethics do. Most of our family will stab you in the heart if it benefits them. Wyatt and Damon are proof."

Neither man took offense. Those traits were the reason they were on a scavenger crew and not Alexa's team.

Emmie didn't care if they got upset. She ran her crew with a magical grip where needed. The rest of the time, she used the cold hard truth. "Alexa isn't like that. She's actually the black sheep of our family even though her brother Elliott holds that official title."

Madelyn peddled slowly to keep pace. "I've heard that story. Why did she let him live?"

"Mercy and compassion are a basic foundation of Alexa's makeup. It allows her to create plans that even her father can't. She can out-guess and out-plan any of us."

"Why does everyone hate Adrian if he's so good at his job?" Madelyn hadn't met Adrian yet.

Emmie laughed. "His male relatives are the haters. The females love him."

"And that's why the men hate him, right?"

"That, and he's slept with most of their wives and girlfriends. He can't keep it in his pants."

Damon frowned. “The women don’t encourage him to stay away, just to be clear. Can he be blamed for responding to open invitations?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Madelyn grinned. “So noted. Do not sleep with Adrian Mitchel.”

Emmie sighed. “You’ll tell yourself that, and then you’ll meet him. His eyes will light up, his body will call to you, and you’ll find yourself sneaking out of your father’s house and climbing into his car for a few hours of magic that never leaves your mind for long.”

Emmie fell silent as she realized everyone was staring at her.

The others laughed.

Damon didn’t. He wanted that experience, too, just with Adrian’s daughter. He’d met her once and fallen hard. Then she’d walked over him with those dusty boots and scarred him for life. *No woman refuses me!*

Emmie looked over her shoulder at Wyatt and Damon. “I owe you both one favor. If you choose to insist on my helping you against Alexa, I will honor it, but you’re both off my crew after that. If we survive.”

The men exchanged eager looks again, but neither of them verified that was what they wanted. They had learned to be quiet until they were sure of their plans. Then they dove in and wallowed in the results, good or bad.

Emmie already knew what was going to happen. She sucked in a deep breath of cold air and began peddling as fast and hard as she could go. It would be easier to crest the hill coming up in front of them if they were at a good speed.

Caught off guard, her crew lagged behind for a few seconds before quickly catching up with smiles on their faces.

Riding bikes had become a way of life. It was just as dangerous as motorcycles because the brakes didn't respond as quickly and the roads were awful, but after years of doing it, they were finally able to maintain high speeds. They loved every minute of it. They were Mitchels. Risking their lives in crazy ways was a family mantra.

Chapter Three  
**We'll Do Dinner**

1

**T**he small group of seasoned fighters had been traveling together for almost a year now. The grit-layered mountains in the distance mocked their efforts, as did the colorless dirt being whipped about by a constant, impudent wind. The bleak landscape revealed more of the same. This was not a friendly place they had come to, but even the post-apocalyptic weather could not erode the signs of who had lived traversed these jagged peaks right after the war.

*Stone Mt 7-13*

*All survivors welcome*

Carved into the leeward rock wall where it would be protected, Alexa and her team stared at this latest message with hope lingering in their thoughts, but also with remarkable patience. The date was four years gone. In that time, the United States had become nearly unlivable. The gates between reality and horror had opened; nothing was the same.

In the distance, another sandstorm brewed menacingly; the six men regarded the lone female

leading them on this perilous journey as she came to a stop in the middle of the road.

“Set us up. Jacob will cook.”

Alexa’s raspy voice got an immediate response from the well-trained men.

Her hawkish gaze swept the barren environment continuously as the men made a small camp along the engraved stone wall. Their movements were smooth, practiced; the men kept track of their surroundings, each other, and their leader. Alexa was a hard soul, the first to fight, the last to rest. Slavers, soldiers, zombies, ghosts—they’d faced it all at her side. Seven to start the trip, that number hadn’t changed. They would go where she led.

The spiteful wind threw showers of sand over the fighters and the woman protecting them with calloused fingers resting on the butts of well-tended, heavily used Colts. Restless, the feeling was clear to Alexa. Something other than the dust and rock was here.

The men smothered the flames as soon as the food and coffee was finished, holsters staying open, ready. The hardened men didn’t ask if something was wrong; they didn’t need to after traveling together through this alien world. Their blonde guardian was more alert than usual. That meant death was either waiting ahead or coming fast on their heels.

As darkness began to invade, the seven travelers gathered around the ring of glowing embers.

“What’s this night’s horror?”

Jacob's scarred face flushed at the chuckles of the others, making the old injury appear fresh.

Alexa raised a brow, showing no sympathy for his discomfort or his anger. *Well?*

"Beans and biscuits with dog meat skewers."

The teasing turned to contentment. It was a meal the rookie knew how to make. The last to join the quest, it was often a surprise to the others to find the gentle man of God among them, and always a slight shock when he used the deadly .357 slung low on his hip. Jacob believed in peace. He would go out of his way to achieve it, but when the battles came, he was just as dangerous as the rest of her crew.

The other men assumed his wounds had caused that, but their leader knew better. Jacob was a born hunter, a perfect killer. Why he had been masquerading as a priest, she hadn't asked. All she'd needed was the determination that so few in this new world still had. Her fighters had been chosen by that line.

Each in their twenties or thirties, her crew was healthy, vibrant compared to the decaying souls they'd met so far on this quest. Alexa had culled each of them from the dwindling herd of mankind because they were the most likely to survive the trip. The harsh battles fought at her side had forged a bond that was rare in a land where death lurked in every shadow. Now, they were a week from their next destination. If Port City still existed, they'd soon see.



While they ate, there was little talk among the fighters. Words seemed unsettlingly out of place right now. This road was littered with dead cars and the bones of their owners.

Alexa pushed aside her own morbid contemplations to draw them out of their own mental slams.

“How long do we have before the storm?” Her words were rough, coming from a throat that had seen smoke in all of its forms.

Her men hurried to answer.

“An hour.”

“Half that.”

“That base is a mile wide. It’s big and slow. Two hours.”

Alexa nodded. “My XO has been paying attention. We have more than enough time to prepare, but should we wait?”

Edward, flushed with pride at having his place mentioned, shook his head. “No. Never.”

The sandstorms they’d survived were tricky, sly. Other survivors they’d talked with all believed Nature had turned against them. None of this group would argue the point after seeing what Nature had done to Rachel back in Gainesville. They still felt bad for her husband, Jerry.

“It shifted. We’ll move to the other side of the stone, out of the path.” Alexa said it while staring at the message. The scouring gusts were starting to erode the letters. Hardly obvious now, in another year, the wind would start to make real progress.

Some of the words would remain forever, but the sand would take a harsh toll. Nothing stood unchanged before time.

Alexa held up a hand as the men started to put the tent overtop metal grates long since clogged with debris. “Clear the path first.”

They understood right away, doing what she wanted without complaint. They quickly uncovered the grates, but didn’t go into the sewer below it yet. Alexa just liked having an escape route if they needed it; so did her crew.

Alexa had strengthened her team in any way that she could think of, but time was almost up. The hell they usually faced was about to get hotter. These men believed there was nothing worse than two thousand miles of walking dead, bloodthirsty wildlife, attacks from enemies, and storms that tried to freeze or drown them, but those had only been training tools. Land was nothing compared to being on the water.

She shook her head at the last dregs of the rolled smoke they were passing, letting them have it. A whirlwind rose from the ground a few feet away as if in response to her chaotic thoughts. It flew closer with an audible whine.

Slamming into her side with the power of a slap, it blew her cloak back violently and covered her in sandy grit.

Alexa calmly wiped her face. “Get the long stakes out for the tent. Nature knows we’re here.”

“We’re being watched again.” Edward studied the distant road. He could almost see a small group of people out there with binoculars. The sandy wind was interfering with his vision.

Daniel felt it, too. “It’s annoying.”

“There are teams all around us now, some traveling, some paralleling in case we make a mistake.” Alexa capped her canteen. “We got used to having privacy.”

“And no soreness!” Billy grinned. “I never considered vampires having sore muscles.”

The others agreed silently, not wanting to seem weak, especially Jacob. His ankle was throbbing, but he refused to show signs of it. The all-day walking was still being felt by the entire team even though they’d been back on the road for more than a week now.

Alexa kept an eye on the coming dust storm. “Find out if we’re in time for the radio address.”

Daniel got the radio out without commenting on Alexa’s choice. She usually listened to Jeanie’s addresses once a week and they’d covered it a few nights go. She said they didn’t need to get distracted again and lose sight of their quest.

Daniel brought up something he’d realized a few weeks ago. “We didn’t talk about Safe Haven at all with Marcella and Jeanie.”

Alexa had done that intentionally to keep their enemies from getting more information about her

father or any of Safe Haven's citizens. "They were glad of it. None of that group wants my father to come home yet, including our new Pro Tem. Even she now wants time to shore up her plans."

"What will happen when Safe Haven returns?"

She shrugged at Daniel. "People will pick sides in that final battle. They'll gather and try to prepare. And then we'll all go to war again, with only one end this time—the complete annihilation of our enemies...or ourselves."

Voices blared out of the radio as soon as Daniel activated it, making everyone jump.

"...lost her in the dust storm."

"Alexa Mitchel was sighted out of her den. She's on the move again!"

"Presidential address..."

"Try to surround her!"

"Have to find her first."

"President Pro Tem. Good evening, New America!"

Mark scowled. The jumble of calls was quickly getting under his skin.

Daniel lowered the volume.

"Calling all Gate Hunters! Alexa Mitchel is headed for the mountain!"

"Clear this channel for the President!"

"We're on the way!"

Alexa held out a hand for the mic. She had to wait for a clear spot, much like Jeanie was having to do.

“We’re near Gainesville now. Be there—”

“Get off this channel!”

“...low on ammunition. Do you have extra?”

Alexa quickly keyed the mic. “I have a little to spare. Come see me. I’ll send it to you in quick pulls.”

The radio went quiet.

Mark sighed in relief. “Much better.”

Alexa groaned into the mic. “I’m very hungry. Drop into my hole later. We’ll do dinner.”

Her men all laughed at the invitation; their stomachs growled. They’d only had animal blood for months.

The radio lit up with threats and an angry woman who couldn’t do her address.

Alexa motioned. “Switch it off. We’ll catch her another time.”

None of them knew if she meant that literally, but all of them hoped for it, especially Billy. Anyone who supported male slavery was a target he wanted to hit.

### 3

The dim, purple glow of dusk found them all standing in an alternating back-n-forth row,

watching their dusty surroundings. Using bad weather to cover an attack was a tactic that more than just people had perfected. They were in the waterline—a universal formation that had served them well in past challenges. They waited eagerly for the thrilling excitement of facing it all at their leader’s side. Alexa had chosen her companions well.

The pale wall of sand slowly devoured the barren landscape. It moved steadily closer, advancing like an immense column of soldiers intent on destroying anything in their way. The gusts tugged at the tent stakes and dust showered their boots. Hearts sped up as the wind shoved harder, pulses starting to pound in that familiar thump of danger. Then the dust wall was within half a mile, and the cold, hard shield of battle fell into place.

Alexa gestured. “Stakers, hit them again. Everyone else inside.”

Two of the cloaked fighters rushed to pound their mallets on the pegs, while the rest of the team ducked into the large, black tent.

Edward and Mark stood by the portholes. Jacob and David hurried to the rear wall for added weight where it mattered most. Alexa waited in the center, not hiding from a vicious blast of grit that hit her in full as Daniel and Billy ducked inside.

Normally, the large tent was hung with sheer canopies to create three rooms. One was a very small wash area with doubled curtains. One was a

wide sleeping room covered in blankets. The last was a sitting area for those who were having trouble with the nightmares that were a common part of this new world. Now, the tent was barren; their gear was in the kits on their backs to keep from being lost if the storm succeeded in tossing them out. It was zeroing in with a single-minded fury, as if angered by their very presence.

The portholes were already useless before the storm hit them. Flying sand was all they could see. The front edge of the storm slammed into them with such force that they felt the rock wall shudder against their meager shelter. Then the wind became an enraged force trying to rip the tent apart.

Sand hit them in waves, hard enough to punch dents in the thin canvas that faded into the next blast. The howling increased, thrumming through their ears like a scream. The ground vibrated, canvas walls vibrating violently. The entire group gathered in the rear of the tent now, waiting tensely for a hole to appear.

“Masks up.”

Face covers were quickly donned. Hoods were tightened over them to provide another layer of protection.

Alexa felt the air shift and realized the storm had changed directions. Coming from the side, they would be blown away. “Clear that hole!”

Edward slit a wide gash in the floor of the tent. Billy and David wrenched the top iron grate free, turning their faces from the waves of dusty showers

now coming into their shelter through small rips and tears in the seams.

The bottom metal lid had a simple pull ring handle. Mark and Daniel used their big arms; the heavy steel slid aside, revealing a dark, unfamiliar world.

*Rip!*

The tent shredded; stinging dust tried to smother them.

“Go!”

Edward dropped a green flare into the abyss and then followed it down, foot secure in the looped rope that Jacob and Billy were lowering.

“Soft landing, ten feet.”

Now holding her breath against the smothering sand, Alexa waved the others on, dropping through last. As she went, she tugged the cord on the bent center pole, collapsing what was left of the tent into a flat lid that would give them a little shelter as long as the wind didn't rip it away.

Dust and bits of debris swirled as she fell, cloak billowing. She landed in a braced crouch, in the center of six ecstatic men. They were in the proper formation—elbow to elbow with their guns out—but alert to possible dangers, they were not.

As she saw why, Alexa stayed the rebuke she'd been about to deliver.

They'd gone into a sewer, but instead of dank, empty tunnels hiding untold hardships, they were enclosed in a single large room filled to the very ceiling with debris, except for the 8'x8' area



directly below the hatch, where thick stacks of unrolled red carpet had cushioned their landing.

Glowing green in the flickering light of their flare, the stash ranged from stacks of tires and water canisters (*Full? Alexa wondered. We'll soon find out.*) to tall bales of yellowed newspaper. There were bags and boxes they would eagerly explore, crates and pallets with goods wrapped securely in dirty plastic, but the writing had their attention.

On one wall, a small square of space was covered with a list of names that all ended in Mitchel. At the top was *Adrian*. At the bottom, two more magic words: *Safe Haven*.

“Do a sweep.”

The sound of her voice snapped them back into place. Alexa waited patiently for the males to do their normal check. She was already sure this area held little more than crawlers, but even those were dangerous in high numbers.

“Clear north.”

“South.”

“West.”

“East.”

“No exits.”

“All clear.” Edward stepped toward their leader, revealing none of his contemplations. “Set us up. One lantern.”

He took the tent string she was still holding and tied it to a copper pipe coming from the nearby sewer wall.

The dusty air was settling. Bits of dust landed on them and was left where it fell. If they were attacked, blending in with the environment would give them another advantage.

“Search and gather.” Alexa began to hunt through a filthy desk next to the carpet. When she found the battered notebook, she took it out carefully.

***Adrian’s Journal***

Heart thumping happily, she found a corner seat on the newspaper stacks and began to read.

*We were hit by another damned mud slide. This time, it took out my rig and washed us up in danger. We had to take shelter in the sewer. The people here are like those we handled in McCook, but alone, with a rookie to protect, there isn’t much I can do yet. When the Eagles find us, that will change.*

Alexa flipped to the last page.

*We’re leaving the United States. They’ve finally realized we have to, making the mood of Safe Haven dangerous once again. The Eagles are our strength. How I wish you were here to help teach them! I beg fate endlessly to guide your journey, but I fear my wants are of no consequence to that fickle bitch.*

*Remember that I love you...and please forgive me. The duty to these people was one I couldn’t abandon, even for my children.*

Alexa's men were delighted in their finds, replenishing stocks with items they hadn't seen in years. They'd been meant to find these things. Fate had taken Adrian's wishes into consideration.

"Why would someone do this?" Jacob's words were low, and received no answer.

Alexa flipped back to the beginning of the notebook. Her father had known she would have need of it, like the trees in the Killing Fields that had saved their lives. Thousands of miles away, Adrian was still looking out for her.

Alexa's heart blazed with fresh determination. The bitterness that wanted to spew forward was drowned under waves of understanding. Didn't she have her own small herd to protect? Wouldn't she do anything to keep them alive? She couldn't fault her father for the same emotions.

A loud shriek paused the good moment. Mark and Billy froze, hearts pounding. The howl sounded exactly like a woman desperately screaming for help.

"It's just the wind."

Edward stared in surprise at Alexa's comforting tone.

The others missed it in favor of resuming their explorations.

Alexa met Edward's eye.

Edward glanced away, maintaining his aloofness, but it was harder this time. He wanted to demand to know what was wrong with her.

Jacob rotated for a check with his team. He was timing it now. He caught the brief, silent exchange and was glad he'd been scolded. *I would have missed that.*

"It's nothing." Alexa leaned back, ignoring the dust and occasional bug.

Billy spotted a familiar object stacked on another rotting wooden desk. He picked it up.

*Safe Haven Logbook.*

He began flipping through the pages, searching the names.

Edward knew why Billy was hunting ghosts. "What's the date on that logbook?"

"It doesn't have one. Dates weren't important to Safe Haven's people." Billy settled on a dusty box to look through the book.

"No more reloads for a while." David lifted a stack of rugs to reveal several large green ammo cans.

Content again, Alexa returned to the first page and settled in for a good night. This book would be burned before they left. She was going to cherish it now.

#### 4

Alexa stiffened. The storm was still blowing angrily on top of them three hours later, but there was another noise now. "Company."

Her resting crew snapped awake, tensing.

Edward's hand went to his gun.

Alexa put the notebook aside. “It seems someone decided to drop in for dinner after all.”

Jacob stood to reach his gun easier. “It might be someone you called.”

“There’s absolutely no chance of that. Mitchels arrive when they say they will.”

“Family thing?”

“Of course.” Alexa shook her head at the crew now checking their guns. “Daniel and David have been practicing their skills. Let’s find out how well they do in the dark.”

Edward quickly extinguished the lantern.

“It will be a while for our next meal, my pets. Take it all and make it last.”

The tent cover slid open, releasing a cloud of dust into the room. Three agile shadows began to descend. Four more jumped in after them.

Daniel lifted his shield and blocked the hole as soon as they were through.

David yanked a man down with his mind, using a giant fist and a vicious mental jerk.

“No!”

“Help!”

One of the Gate Hunters grabbed their radio instead of their weapon.

Alexa bit into the man’s throat before he could get words out. Death gurgled into the radio, sending another clear message.

The vampires rushed forward and began eating as the screams of the intruders flowed over the open waves in awful blasts.

Alexa bit off a finger and sucked out the blood, moaning. “So sweet!”

Edward sliced open a struggling wrist with his nail and murmured in comfort. “This won’t hurt for long. Go to sleep now.”

More screams flew through the radio as the vampires took a meal and reminded their enemies that they were dangerous.

The hour before dawn found them sleeping deeply, all but Alexa, who dozed lightly with her ears still turned toward the wind. When she finally slept, it was to visions of the war and the ghosts of the people she’d read about.

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