



Cold Bonds

BOOK FOUR

ANGELA WHITE

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Cold Bonds
by
Angela White

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Thank you to all those wonderful people who donate their time to my work. You've honored me.

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Prologue

Jackson, Tennessee

November

1

Brian entered the warm bar without showing fear, but his heart pounded. *This was a good idea a few minutes ago.*

A wide counter lined in off-center stools sat in front of the door, with a side area sporting a stone fireplace and rickety wooden tables. Booths lined the cobwebbed corners. If not for the clientele, it could have been any bar in America before the war.

A dozen heads swiveled as the cold draft carried his scent into the establishment.

Vampire ears stiffened.

Troll beards curled up in shock.

“We don’t serve normals here, boy.” The tall, pale bartender waved a clawed hand. “Get along or it’ll be your blood.”

Brian snorted, pushing aside nerves in favor of arrogance. *It works for my mom.* He kicked snow from his boots onto the wooden floor. “I’d like a beer and a job. Maybe a potion, if the troll has time.”

Surprised smoke rolled from the troll’s orange ears.

The bartender stared at Brian with narrowed yellow eyes. “Magic user?”

Brian flashed menace. “Mitchel.”

Hungry mouths drooped in disappointment.

The bartender glared. “You’ll have to prove that to stay. We don’t associate with humans and you smell like fresh meat.”

Brian chose to keep acting like his mother. He lifted a hand. “Shall I light a fire?”

Stools cleared in front of the bar.

Patrons vanished in fast blurs.

The bartender’s red cloak vibrated with annoyance. He wiped wet hands down his apron. “That was uncalled for.”

Brian shrugged. “Be specific when you address a descendant. If you don’t, we’ll always use it against you.”

“A wise lesson.” A chair shifted behind him. “You’re young to have learned it already.”

Brian stiffened at the sultry voice. He swallowed, fighting the pull. “Succubus.”

The female laughed. It sent shivers through the remaining creatures still enjoying their brews.

The succubus approached him without fear. “Need a friend for the night?”

Brian strode to the bar. “There has to be something left of me when the deal’s finished, so no.” He settled onto a squeaky stool. “Let’s have that beer. Then you’ll tell me where I can find work to get through the winter.”

The bartender glided to a cooler in the rear of the wide, smoky room.

Brian spun on the stool to observe the other patrons.

The few who remained were all staring at him.

Brian let his eyes glow red.

Hideous mouths and faces sagged. A normal teenager in this den would have given them all something to do.

Brian swept the dusky sex addict, aware of the vibes she was still sending. *Not my type*. Brian thought of his first encounter with a woman and turned back to the counter. That sweet girl had been normal, average. The succubus had purple locks and breasts bigger than his legs.

“What about now?” The woman struck a sexy pose, sensing he would be a good customer.

Brian refused to look. “Pulling it from my memory is cheating. You’ve gotten lazy.”

Her dark face went scarlet. “Asshole!”

Brian shrugged. “Not really. Not yet. But I will be in time.” *The family legacy demands it*.

The succubus stomped out into the snowstorm, perfect nose in the air.

The bartender set a cold bottle of beer on the counter and returned to the book splayed by the lantern. Like the others, he’d lost the scent of blood.

Brian twisted and sipped foam, then cleared his throat. “A job?”

The bartender shrugged, not glancing up from his coverless novel. Rowan loved to read. “We’re slow. You might ask the people you scared off.”

“For your trouble.” Brian took a pouch from his pocket. He tossed it to the bartender.

Rowan caught it out of reflex. He stowed the bag of dust in his cloak. “The boss comes in by dawn. Talk to her.”

Brian stood, taking his beer. “Thank you.”

Rowan snorted as he turned a page. “Drink up. You’re going to need it.”

Brian knew what he’d signed up for. This was the fastest way to get what he required. He settled at a tiny table in the far corner and leaned against the wall. A few minutes later, he was snoring softly.

No one bothered him. Despite his youth, the boy believed he was already skilled enough to enter this watering hole and sleep. They didn’t want him to prove it.

2

The door opened just before dawn. A female vampire glided in and went to the counter, shaking off snow.

Rowan poured a double shot from the cheap bottle and pushed it across the dirty counter. “Good night?”

“Fruitless.” Daphne downed the drink, gasping at the fire. “Don’t get upset. I’ll do better tomorrow...” She paused, hearing snores.

“Job hunter, he says.” Rowan’s lips thinned. “Magic user.” He didn’t mention the name claim.

Daphne ignored Rowan’s bitterness, studying the glow around the sleeping teenager. She scanned his golden hair, then the hard body beneath black fighting clothes. He was outfitted like a quester, but he put off the vibe of a child playing dress up. It was intriguing. “That scent...”

Brian’s lids snapped open as cold danger swept through the bar. He stared at the stunning vampire woman, trying to bring up a shield to block her coming attack. He’d never seen such a beautiful face. “Wow.”

Daphne had rules to follow. “How old are you?”
“Seventeen.”

Daphne chuckled, relieved that he was old enough to make a deal. “New meat is always best.”

Brian flushed, but kept building his mental shield. This woman was dangerous to him in every way.

“I have a job for you.” Daphne glided toward him, long red dress rustling. “A week at a time.” She bared her fangs as she came closer. “I get you first, then last. We’ll see what you’ve learned after being passed around the elite families.”

Brian swallowed his panic. “Make the official bond.”

Daphne held out a perfectly smooth hand, red nails glinting in the lanternlight. “For 10 services.”

Brian trembled, blood rushing to places he rarely used. “What’s the pay?”

“Half the service time will be training in vampire ways.” She glanced at him slyly. “That is why you came, is it not?”

“Yes.” Brian’s hand clasped hers. “You have a deal. When does it start?”

Daphne snatched him up and ran for her cellar den.

Rowan smirked. “They always think we’ll honor the agreements.” He put the dirty shot glass into the bin. “Foolish mortals.”

“No!” Brian cowered against the cellar wall where she’d shoved him.

Daphne locked the door and rotated, fangs out. “Submit!”

Brian screamed again, arm coming up to protect his neck.

Daphne rushed toward him, hungry. Hunting was harder since the war.

Brian cringed as she grabbed his arm... Then he blasted her with the alpha draw.

Daphne stiffened, mentally struggling as he pried into her secrets. “Stop.”

Brian slammed her with a wave of need next. Then he kissed her.

He used his draw charm again, locking her in place against his mouth. Brian smiled, feeling fury under the lust now trying to control her. “I’m not an easy target.”

He kissed her, hard, enjoying her mewling moans. “I’ll give you what you want, but not my blood. You have to earn that.”

Daphne shuddered, torn between the lust and thirst.

Brian kissed her again, letting go of the charm. His own body responded. “Mmm...”

Her control snapped. She kissed him back, melting in his arms.

Brian smirked against her lips. “The only thing a succubus vampire hybrid wants more than fresh blood is multiple orgasms.” He licked her lower lip. “I can give you those.”

“Yes! Please!”

Brian gave her what she was begging for, thanking his family for the inherited skill. No one could draw the opposite sex like a Mitchel. Using that talent had made them the most hated family on the planet.

3

“Again!”

Brian stood, naked. His shredded clothing was all over the floor and the twin mattress. “In a few minutes.” He looked around, frowning. Her musty den was a bare room with a bed, a table and lantern, and a tiny washtub. He was shocked at the conditions. *She’s not the boss. Leaders don’t live this way.*

He drank from his canteen, enjoying the moment. It wasn't after sex tingles, though he had them, and it wasn't from conquering the dangerous, panting woman on the bed without getting hurt. He was officially on his first quest. The feeling was indescribable.

Daphne shivered, staring at his hands. She'd never had anyone do that to her before. "Why did you really come here?"

"I need information." Brian listened to the bar above them, hearing nothing. He assumed the bartender was sleeping, like Daphne should be. Sunlight was bright in the tiny, dirty window.

"There are easier ways for a magic user to get that." Daphne shut her lids, feeling daylight's tug on her vampire half. She would sleep soon and be vulnerable, cold.

Brian sniggered. "I'll keep you warm." He was tracking her thoughts, gleaning details she wouldn't know to give on her own.

She pouted, lip coming out. "You'll slit my throat."

Brian went to the window to scan the dead town around her den. The window was covered in bloody handprints. "We have a deal in place. I'd never break it, though you would have."

Daphne growled. "Too much talking!"

"Once more and then you sleep. When you get up, go hunting before you touch me." Brian waited for her agreement.

Daphne moaned. “I’ll make it an animal hunt so it’s fast. Be ready for me.”

Brian climbed into the bed and slid on top of her. He adjusted his ready body as he rocked into her the way he’d discovered brought her the most pleasure.

She squirmed, fangs descending. “Use the draw!”

Brian blasted her with waves of need. He rocked harder, concentrating on his work. This was a job, like any other. It even came with a good feeling when accomplished. It deserved ruthless attention to detail.

Above them, Rowan slapped the counter, surprised by the noises. “She was supposed to eat *you!*” Rowan began to hate them a little more with each moan he heard. “Never did meet a Mitchel I could stand.”

4

“How did you end up here?” Daphne’s ability to think had been restored with his promise kept, but she was still fuzzy from lack of sleep.

Brian laid on his back, arms under his neck. “I followed the clues. I’m on a quest.”

Daphne chuckled. “No, really.”

Brian tried not to get angry. “You’re a slow learner.”

Daphne stilled, mind working it through. She finally scowled at the insult. “The daylight robs me of many things. Don’t be cruel.”

Brian grunted. “Never laugh at me. I won’t stand for it.”

“Don’t be so sensitive.” She ran through the conversation. “Well?”

Brian braced for more laughter. It was denial that he couldn’t tolerate this time. “I need to know how to reverse vampirism.”

Daphne stared, mouth opening. She closed it, frowning.

Brian was encouraged by that. He rolled toward her. “Tell me about the elite families.”

Jealousy made Daphne’s face ugly. “Why?”

Brian rubbed her deceptively delicate wrist in comfort. “They may have the information I need.”

Daphne fought to stay awake, to think. “Who is it for?” She knew he wasn’t one of her kind.

“My mother.” Brian wasn’t sure why he trusted Daphne with that, but he didn’t try to take it back.

“You had a mother? That’s awesome.” She dropped down and put her head on his arm. “Hybrids can’t stay with their parents. We’re shipped off to a brothel, like this one, or we’re sent to the caves to be vampires.”

Brian didn’t tell her his life story. He wanted hers. “Why can’t hybrids stay with their parents?”

“We’re illegal. They’d get caught.”

Brian sat and scooted over so she could still lean against him. “Who made the rules?”

“It’s an old agreement. The humans let us stay, but only if we didn’t breed with them.” She shrugged. “A succubus doesn’t care about such trivial differences. We were made to mate.”

Brian was fascinated. He ignored the cold draft to keep digging. “They hid the evidence?”

“It was necessary. Humans don’t like our kind.” Daphne yawned, feeling safe. *I hope he stays for a while.*

Brian kissed her cheek. “I will. Tell me more.”

Daphne shivered, body always ready. She pushed it down, able to because she was more than sated. There wasn’t an inch of her body that didn’t smell like him. “The vampires use hybrids as whores.”

Brian couldn’t help feeling sympathy. Her life hadn’t been much better than his own. “Do you want to keep living this way?”

Daphne shrugged. “Is there another option?”

Old magic filled her den. Brian was forced to say the words screaming in his mind. “I will give you freedom.”

Daphne held him when he tensed, afraid something was wrong. She didn’t want him to be upset. *If he gets angry, he might leave.*

“I’m searching the future. Go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake.” Brian used a huge blast of energy to open mental doors.

Daphne rested.

Brian memorized the coming moments, heart pounding. *There it is. The next stage of my quest.*

Daphne cuddled against his hip as sleep pulled her down.

Brian rubbed her arm and resumed scanning the future.

5

“Get up! Time to work! Earn these plush rooms!” Rowan’s shouts echoed through the basement.

Brian heard murmurs and realized there were more people in the rooms around them. “Vampires use hybrids...”

“You have to kill my owner.”

Brian turned at the sound of Daphne’s cold voice. He was at the window again as dusk approached, fully dressed and finishing his plans. He didn’t care if he’d been charmed. She was a damsel to be rescued, even at his own peril.

Daphne held tight to the first hope she’d felt in decades. “It’s the only way I can be free.”

“What did you leave out of the deal?” Brian had been stewing, but hadn’t found anything important.

“It’s hard to leave a succubus.” Daphne stretched, body arching. “It usually ends in blood.”

Brian confirmed his suspicions. “The bartender?”

Daphne shivered, voice a bare whisper. “Rowan holds me with cold bonds. I must have an owner, even if it is a cruel one.”

Brian came to her and sat on the bed. He stroked her soft cheek. “When did I lose control?”

She chortled softly. “When you fell for a slave.”

Brian sighed. “I’m already living up to my family legacy.” He stood, striding toward the door. “I need a drink.”

“I didn’t mean now!”

Brian kept going. “Mitchel’s never put off until tomorrow what we can slaughter today.”

He left her cubby, walking up the steps to the bar that was lined in fading sunrays. In a couple of hours, patrons would flood this business with odd thirsts and danger.

Brian picked the same stool he’d chosen before. He met Rowan’s eyes in the mirror as the hostile vampire wiped webs from bottles. “I want to buy Daphne. Name a price.”

Rowan snorted. “A replacement who earns me as much dust.”

Brian tried to appeal to the vampire’s good side if he had one. “If you let her go, I’ll owe you a favor.”

“She charmed you.” Rowan leered. “It’s not the first time, boy. Piss off out of here while you can.”

Brian chuckled. “I thought you said this wasn’t your first time.”

Rowan straightened, staring down a crooked nose at him. “Not for her and not for your kind, either.” He tossed the towel onto the counter. “One vampire is too much for you to handle. There are five.”

Brian shook his finger. “Lying is rude. There are three of you, with mirrors making it appear there are two sets of twins.” Brian grinned coldly. “I’m a Mitchel. Are you sure you want to do this?”

The other two vampires tensed.

“You didn’t tell them my name, only my age, right?” Brian met the eye of the nearest hulking man in the mirror. “You may know my mother...Alexa.”

“We’re out.” The hired hand rose from the rock seat. “My brother and I have no fight with your family, kid. Good evening to you.”

The brothers hurried from the brothel, vanishing.

Brian ignored them, keeping his attention on the bartender. He didn’t grin now or rub it in. The mood was too serious; he was too new to these moments.

Rowan leaned over the counter. “I hate your kind!”

“You can’t attack me because you let me stay last night. I know the rules.”

Rowan’s fangs descended. “The girls are mine!”

Brian sighed. “I might trade.”

Rowan sulked, sensing he was beaten. “You have nothing I want.”

“I have blood bonds for sale.”

Rowan’s rage faded, replaced by confused greed. “Explain.”

“I need information.” Brian reached for an empty glass, spinning it as he slid it in front of the

wary vampire. “Tell me what you see.” Brian leaned close, hidden hand now clutching his knife.

Rowan did the same, fascinated with magic.

Brian smirked over the spinning glass. “Checkmate.” He slammed his knife into the bartender’s throat and yanked down. Blood spilled over the slowing glass, shoving it to the right. It thumped to the hard floor and rolled, leaving a bloody streak.

Brian stared into the vampire’s eyes while he gasped, helpless as his blood poured out. He slumped onto the counter, still draining.

Brian propped the front door open, then pulled the body outside to the axe he’d placed there last night. “I think mom would be proud of me. Wonder if she’ll like Daphne...”

6

Brian wiped a spot on the board and picked up the small nub of blue chalk. He filled in a line.

He hadn’t changed anything in the cozy bar except what they accepted for payment. He had cleaned up the blood, though he’d considered leaving it to prove a point about the strength of the new owner. He’d decided it would scare off too much business.

“Rowan won’t like that.” Daphne took a seat at the bar, smelling bleach. She hated it.

Brian wiped the chalk dust from his hands. “Wild dogs are eating him. I can hear them chewing.”

Daphne stared. “You’re working for him now, right? He gave you a job.”

“I cut off his head and left it by the front door.” Brian gestured.

Daphne went to the door and peered out into the snow, scared to believe him.

Brian poured a shot from the most expensive bottle as she came back to the counter.

Daphne downed the shot, grunting. She didn’t ask how he’d accomplished it. She just enjoyed knowing that he had.

Brian whistled.

Daphne tensed as a lean wolf rose from under a nearby booth. It came to the bar, gazing up at the boy in adoration.

Brian waved. “This is Runt.”

“Did you charm it?” Daphne wanted to touch the wolf, but she wasn’t stupid. It reeked of danger, even more than herself.

Brian didn’t take offense. “No. He likes me.”

Daphne smiled. “Well, we have that in common. I expect we’ll adjust.”

Brian placed a hand over hers. “What’s next?”

Daphne shuddered. “His clan will come for you, for us. All the slaves will be redistributed if you die.”

“And after I kill them? What happens to the girls?” Brian had to know he was doing this for

more than one female, no matter how much he wanted her.

Daphne frowned. “They’ll be yours to benefit from.”

Brian used a firm tone. “They will be set free.”

Daphne chuckled. “We are succubus, vampire hybrids. You can take away the job, but we will still find the sex. You can protect us with your name.”

“Us?”

Daphne shrugged, trained not to show emotions like love or jealousy to an owner. “That is your choice. You don’t have to share yourself.”

Brian scanned the chalkboard.

Accepted payment: Information.

“What if I walk away right now?”

Daphne tensed. “I’ll waste away. In one day, I’ve changed.”

Brian glided into place behind the bar as the main door opened, admitting the first customer of the night. “So have I.”

Chapter One

Good Company

Alabama/Tennessee Stateline
Late November

1

“**T**hank you for gifting me.”

Alexa frowned at Edward as he laid on the frozen ground by her boots. “Concentrate!”

Edward notched the arrow. “I mean it. I’m grateful.”

Alexa huffed. “Show it by hitting your target.”

The deer herd was small but healthy, all grazing without concern despite the two people in sight. The trees were covered in an inch of snow, but the sun had melted the top branches, providing a slushy surface that made a lot of noise. She’d brought him here to hunt, hoping it would give him a challenge. His stalling was unexpected.

Edward paused again, glancing up. “I feel trouble coming.”

Alexa didn’t scold him again. She felt it, too. They were alone here, but at the same time, they weren’t. “We’ve been training hard; we’re in shape. We’ll handle what comes.” She glared at him. “Are you nervous using a new weapon?”

Edward chuckled. “Yes. The wood in my hand is frightening.”

She snorted curtly at his humor, but she enjoyed it. Edward wasn’t like Billy, who took every opportunity to crack a joke. “What’s up with you?”

He hesitated. “Can I be honest?”

“Of course.” He had her full attention now.

Edward sighed. When the wizard had warned him about the future, he’d sensed the vampire change. He’d been telling Edward a different life was coming. Now that it was here, Edward couldn’t find it in himself to regret it. “The thought of danger coming our way pleases me.”

Alexa relaxed. “That’s because we’re not meant to spend the winter playing house.” She grinned at him. “Though it has been fun.”

Edward was relieved to know his feelings weren’t singular. He didn’t want any of them to be hurt, but he longed for the need to use his skills.

Alexa pointed at the grazing targets. “Now, or the others will starve next week.” She lunged forward to scare the small herd of deer, forcing him to react.

The herd scattered, hopping over each other and the rocky ground as icy slush flew from their hooves.

Edward stood, bow lifting... His arrow hit, taking down a large buck.

He immediately jogged to it before nature could make a claim.

Alexa joined him as the herd regrouped 100 yards away. “Nice shot.”

Edward enjoyed her praise. “Never used a bow before the war. I like it.”

“So do I. I’ve always found it soothing.”

Alexa’s scarred skin glistened in the sunset. Neither of them was wearing cloaks. They didn’t feel the cold as much now. He watched her arm muscles stretch under firm skin, flashed to kissing that spot less than an hour ago. She had asked for a service right here in the woods. He’d eagerly obliged, but even during, he’d been distracted.

Edward inhaled deeply, catching her smell. He marveled at his new senses, the luster to his black hair, the sparkle that was brighter in his blue eyes. He looked younger, but even better, he felt it.

Edward put the bow into the sheath on his back, then knelt by the buck. He broke off the arrow in its chest, glad the animal had died quickly. His first kill last week hadn’t. He’d had to end its misery with his knife. That hadn’t been enjoyable.

Edward listened to the deer herd chuff and stomp their anger. The new senses were amazing, but he also had a new voice in his mind that came from Alexa releasing their gifts. Then she’d forbidden them to use it unless the situation required it. She’d also started to teach them the rules, the first of which, they all hated: never without permission.

“You’ll take the food back to Jacob?”

Edward nodded. “Go hunt. I’m good.”

Alexa glided away from him, alert for trouble. She didn't want to hunt helpless deer. She craved a human source.

Edward pulled the warm carcass across the snowy ground to their cart, marveling at his strength. In the three weeks they'd been here, all of them had bulked up. Even Alexa had put on a little weight, though it was barely noticeable. If not for satisfying her needs, he might not have. The others worried it might be pregnancy, but Alexa had informed them vampires don't reproduce.

They hadn't asked how she knew. They'd accepted that answer because it was what they wanted to hear. But they were all watching her in case the information was wrong. A few of their crew suspected Alexa was keeping the peace until the chaos had to happen.

Edward didn't. He trusted her in every way. He just couldn't stop thinking about being connected to her for life. His desire to be her mate was growing. Their trips out hunting together had increased those urges.

Edward saw Alexa had stopped a few feet away. She was staring into the west, like she did often. Her hand slid to her gun...

Edward ran to her, drawing his own.

She peered into the light snow. "We have a supplier coming."

Edward holstered. "Do we need anything he has?"

Alexa shrugged. "Let's go find out."

Edward stayed on her heels as she strode into the snowy street to meet the lone man trekking through the storm with a mule. Edward found it suspicious.

Alexa assumed it was fate. She began preparing for news that would put them back on the road. She wasn't ready yet, but she would follow where the quest led. That was the job.

The man coming toward them was buried in a long coat; he wore boots that came to his thighs. He led a mule on a rope, loaded with bags covered in snow. The deep white fluff on his hat said he'd been traveling through the storm.

The trader spotted Alexa and Edward. He waved a gloved hand.

Alexa returned the gesture. She kept her other hand on her gun. The trader was their first visitor, but there had been engines in the distance. The team had all been glad when none of them stopped.

"Hello!" The man stopped 10 feet away, studying them. After a minute, he grinned, showing straight, white teeth. "Happy evening to you."

"The same, friend." Alexa enjoyed the old speech. She'd learned it from her father, but rarely got to use it.

Tall, wearing a bright yellow scarf, the trader was a cross between a gunfighter and a pilot from the old world. His trench coat was wide with bulging pockets and the odd fit of his clothes suggested he was fat and slow, but Alexa didn't fall

for it. The dangerous strength said to be careful. She liked that.

The trader stomped snow from his boots. “Nice night we’re having here.”

Edward chuckled. “Yep. Might even get some weather later.”

The man’s laughter brayed into the storm. “That we might.” The trader tugged on the rope to stop the mule that was still plodding forward. “I have a few items you may be interested in.”

Alexa rotated toward their cabin. “Come share a hot drink, then we’ll trade.”

“I’d be honored.” The trader tugged on the mule rope again and followed.

Edward stayed next to the stranger, taking in details like he was supposed to.

The trader glanced over. “Are you the boss?”

Edward shook his head.

The trader grunted. “Didn’t think so. Might be a problem for you tomorrow.”

Edward braced for the bad news he’d felt coming. “Why is that?”

“A group of resistance fighters are marching in this direction. They’re okay with magic, and most creatures, but they don’t tolerate female leadership.”

“Thank you for the information.” Edward chose the simplest solution. “When they come through, I’ll be the boss.”

The trader chuckled. “Knew you were smart.” He extended a hand. “I’m Ulysses G. Smith.”

“Edward.” He shook, wondering if the comment about magic and creatures meant the trader had noticed they were different. Edward hoped not. It would be a shame to feed the trader to Alexa for a midnight snack.

Alexa paused on the porch. The cabin and surrounding area fit the post-apocalyptic landscape, but the steady stream of smoke from the snowy chimney told strangers someone was here. It was dangerous, but she’d refused to run a cold camp for the entire winter. She opened the door, hand still on her gun. “We have company.”

The team rose, joining her. Billy and Jacob took her right, while David and Daniel took her left. All four were in socks, jeans, and tank tops, showing strength and signs of previous battles in scar lined skin. It was impressive.

Edward waved the trader inside. “I’ll stable your mule if you like. We have a small pen.”

Ulysses nodded. “She needs to drink, but don’t feed her. She has a blockage. Needs to push it through.”

Edward led the big, docile animal around the side of the cabin.

“This is Ulysses. He’s a trader.” Alexa let the stranger enter first. “He needs a meal and a hot drink.”

Daniel had the food shift tonight. He went to get the items while observing their guest.

Hammocks swayed gently in the corners, casting shadows over neatly packed bedrolls and

kits waiting to be grabbed on a moment's notice. The bedroom held three more similar setups. The rest of the cabin was stocked with wood, dried food, water jugs, and junk that Edward was reclaiming for ammunition. It wasn't the cozy home of refugees. Daniel wondered if the trader would notice.

Billy and the others holstered at Alexa's signal, resuming their places around the cabin.

Alexa shut the door, returning them to a muffled silence broken only by the occasional thump of a tree branch giving from the weight of ice and snow.

Ulysses sank down by the fire with a grunt and a fart. "Oh. My pardon."

"Beans do that to you." She pointed at the bowl Daniel was filling. "We have deer stew."

"Sounds good." The trader dropped a small pouch by her hand. "For your hospitality."

Alexa stored it without peering into the bag. "It's our honor. Stay in peace. Leave the same come dawn."

Ulysses relaxed. "This is nice. I've never met a magic vampire."

Alexa shook her head as her team tensed. "Ulysses makes his living on catching details, my pets. Like us."

"Aye. It serves me well to know who my clients are." Ulysses took the bowl. "My thanks."

Daniel nodded, but he didn't feel right using their speech in return. Alexa hadn't taught it to the team yet, but they were picking it up. "Do you have many clients around here?"

Ulysses talked while he chewed. “Just a town almost two weeks back. Some kid was raising hell there. Scuttlebutt said he was a Mitchel.”

Alexa chuckled.

The trader swallowed. “Those Mitchels certainly know how to get under people’s skin.”

“Yes.” Alexa shrugged. “The family reputation is a bit...harsh.”

The trader shoveled in more food. “Young for so much success against vampires.” He slurped in a gulp of the hearty broth. “And alone. Kid might be a badass if he lives long enough.”

“He was with vampires?” Billy was happy the boy was already working on his quest.

“Yeah, he claimed the daughter of a prominent tribe and killed her controller.” Ulysses belched. “She was being slaved out to passing travelers. I heard the kid sexed her up. She won’t even look at anyone else now.”

Laughter floated through the warm room.

Ulysses joined them, snorting.

Edward’s arrival ended the amusement. “Your mule is going to die.”

The trader grunted. “I’ll find a new one. Always have.”

“Fate provides...” Alexa sipped the hot coffee Daniel handed to her.

“And man takes advantage.” Ulysses shoved in another mouthful, chewing and talking. “I was telling your guy about fighters coming this direction. They’re going to the bunker.”

That got everyone's attention. Silence fell except for the trader chewing.

Alexa sighed. "Resistance?"

Ulysses bobbed his head. "Yep."

"Are there soldiers left in the other bunkers?"

The trader shrugged at her. "Not around here. They got the call to come east for support. The call came from a female. They know it's a trap. They're going to wipe them out, I hope."

Alexa added her agreement. "Slavery is wrong, no matter the gender."

Ulysses scanned her men. "She's a good one."

The team snickered. They already knew.

Alexa took the bowl Daniel brought to her. "Is the resistance organizing? Here or anywhere else?"

"No contact from the west in a while now. Around here, the resistance is men and the enemy is women." Ulysses gave her a pointed look. "Towns have been split; families ripped apart. Don't get mixed up in that."

"Not unless fate shoves them into our path."

Alexa didn't say more, not wanting to make a promise she wouldn't keep. She motioned Jacob to bring over her cloak.

"What will you do when they come here?"

Ulysses waited for her answer, spoon pausing.

Alexa rolled her eyes. "I'll be playing the role of slave for a day or two."

Ulysses snickered. "Guess that's a role you don't play often."

All her crew snorted.

Alexa took the cloak from Jacob and began removing pouches. “What can we offer for a full account of your travels through this wasteland?”

Ulysses gestured. “A warm place to sleep and none of those slugs you’re all loaded with.”

She frowned. “You remind me of my father.”

Ulysses grunted. “I may have trained with a Mitchel at some of the same places, long before the war.”

Alexa was drawn. “Would you speak of those days?”

The trader shook his head. “What’s done is done.”

“Fair enough.” Alexa pushed two pouches toward him. “These are for your silence after you leave.”

Ulysses frowned. “The men coming through will tell tales.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps, but they may not see what you have.”

Ulysses snickered. “Clever Mitchels. No wonder you’ve all survived so long.”

Alexa chuckled. “Yes, we have a winning way with people when we’re not making bitter enemies of them.”

The trader scooped up the pouches and stored them. “Your secrets are safe with me. Now, what would you like to know?”

Alexa leaned in. “Everything you want to tell me.”

Ulysses stared. “I would answer *any* question, were you not already bound to a quest...”

Alexa’s eagerness dimmed. “We will not be drawn from our goal to serve any other cause, no matter how worthy.”

The trader grunted, shifting for a good spot on the floor. “Then I’ll tell you about the area you’ve chosen. It’s not peaceful here. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

2

Evening came with heavy wind, smothering the small town in icy waves. Nothing moved outside the cabin except nature.

Alexa was sorry that wouldn’t last. The trader had told them about the soldiers and their weapons, but he’d been unable to give more. All he kept saying was the Colonel would do anything to accomplish his goal. The leader of the resistance had clearly made an impression on the trader and she doubted he was easily impressed. Alexa hoped the good vibes held steady with their next guests. This one had been full of needed items and information, with a great attitude and respect for the situation. She’d enjoyed his company. It was a nice change.

Edward handed Alexa a cup of tea, aware of the sleeping, sweaty men in the warm cabin. They smelled like the best feast he’d ever attended. It wasn’t just because of the sweet blood pumping

through those arms and legs. These lives were special. He could smell it on them.

So could Alexa. She stared at Edward in sympathy and firm denial.

Edward went to the fire to pour a cup of coffee for himself. Everyone else was sleeping, though the trader was doing it sitting against the wall. His light snores were steady, almost soothing.

Alexa yawned, then emptied her cup. It had been such a good evening that she was loath to end it.

Edward wasn't sure what to offer her next. He listened for clues to anything else she wanted.

She stood, moving toward the door. "Are you coming?"

Edward was on her heels in seconds, mood improving.

Alexa pulled up her hood as she slipped out, scanning for the prey she'd sensed.

Edward shut the door without acknowledging Daniel. The Biker had woken the instant Alexa had risen. He would take over the watch now.

Wind pushed against them; snow floated over their cloaks, but neither of them felt the cold like the others would have. Alexa wished things hadn't changed, but saving the vampire baby had been necessary—not for their safety, but for her sanity. No matter the type, it was just a baby. She held a deep compassion in her heart for those tiny creatures. *I'll never have my own.*

Alexa's sadness wafted over Edward. He started to give her comfort but stopped himself. *She doesn't want that. It's not my duty.*

Alexa was proud of Edward for learning to control himself no matter the situation.

The pair vanished into the snow, following her mental map.

Daniel sat on the stool by the counter to keep an eye on the door and their guest. The trader had been knowledgeable about the area, but they'd all stayed cool with him because he hadn't told Alexa stories about her dad. She rarely asked for anything. They hated her being denied.

Daniel enjoyed the last of the strong coffee and the quiet of the cabin, but he couldn't help feeling restless. *We've been here too long, I think.* He decided to mention it to Alexa after all their company had come and gone.

Daniel got comfortable on the stool and listened hard, trying to hear the snow fall.

He was still there when Edward and Alexa returned, both flushed from a successful hunt.

3

"You could stay longer." Edward held the door for the trader an hour after dawn. The cold wind blew flakes inside. "She likes you."

Ulysses hefted himself over the threshold, loaded down. "How can you tell?"

Edward chuckled. “She gave you more supplies than you can carry. Then she made Billy and David go out this morning to find you a new mount.”

Ulysses started down the snowy stairs, pulling on his hat. “We’ll meet again. She made sure I’ll cover this route.”

“That she did.” Edward understood Alexa’s friendly behavior with the trader. Ulysses was a way for them to resupply some things through the winter, and longer if they came back here. If they didn’t, someone else would get that benefit.

“Let’s prepare for our company.”

Edward shut the door at Alexa’s order. A large group of armed fighters were coming. “Do we pack? Hide until they’re gone?”

“We gather their information like a fine harvest.” Alexa unbuckled her gun belts. She held them out to Edward. “Hold these until I need them.”

Edward took her weapons with reverence and unease. “This isn’t right.”

Alexa didn’t like how it felt to be without her Colts either. “All it requires is acting like what each of you are. My role will be harder. I’ve not been a submissive female in my entire life.”

Edward chuckled. “You’re not that, even without the guns. Your scars warn people, if they’re wise enough to listen.”

Alexa needed the reassurance. “And if they don’t?”

“We’ll kill them for you.” Edward’s tone hardened as the others nodded. “You’re as safe without the guns as you are with them.”

Alexa smiled at her team in full joy, bringing every man there to his knees.

Outside, Ulysses was also slammed by the wave. He dropped heavily into the snow. He wiped away tears as it faded, chuckling. “Yeah, I definitely came to the right place.”

Chapter Two
Mad Company

1

Everyone heard their next visitors before spotting them. Alexa had rotated the team between the roof and the tiny attic of the cabin to make sure they had a warning, but it wasn't necessary. The group of resistance fighters was making enough noise to alert anyone in a five-mile radius. Animals fled before it; birds deserted their nests. Gunshots echoed in a familiar pattern.

“They’ll scare away our food.”

Edward shook his head at David’s comment. “The animals will come back when the noise is gone. That’s the way of the world.”

Alexa studied the resistance fighters as they appeared on the horizon. She was drawn first to the heavy winter gear they were wearing. Other than the gloves, which were ragged, their boots, coats, and hats were perfect for the weather. The next thing she noticed was swords and knives. There were only a few guns in sight on the four dozen men.

She amended the count as the tail of the convoy came into view. *Six dozen*. They were also low on vehicles. She believed that was because of limited fuel. Rusting hulks were everywhere in this

apocalypse, but without tires, a good battery, and usable fuel, they were staying right where they were.

“I think I recognize a few of them.” Billy handed the binoculars to Alexa. “They were in the town where I joined you.”

Alexa studied the former captives, also recognizing them. “They’ve found a different strength to cling to.”

Edward took the glasses when she handed them over, spotting a weapons cart behind what he assumed was a chuckwagon. He narrowed in on two soldiers in the center of the convoy who were wearing medical patches. “They have doctors.”

Edward went to the door at Alexa’s motion. He wasn’t sure he could pull off this act, but he was determined to try. He had little doubt that he and the rest of her crew could eliminate most of these men before they could get their cart open, but he hoped it didn’t come to that. These were former slaves fighting tyranny. He was solidly on their side.

“Play it as if we’re *your* team. As you make the calls, we’ll shift to fit what you decide. It’s exactly the same as it’s always been. This is just a test of your skills.” Alexa had considered giving him a complete game plan, but fate never cooperated with such schemes. She had found over her years of trials that improvising often served best. This would be Edward’s turn to learn that lesson.

“Here.” Edward handed her a thin gold band, refusing to meet her eyes. He stepped around her, waving their team along.

Edward opened the door and proceeded onto the snowy front porch. He stood above the steps, hands on his guns while he scanned the group.

The rest of the team came out and lined the porch, also fingering their guns. They wanted it clear they were ready to fight.

Alexa came out last. She ignored dozens of eyes crawling over her in favor of studying the leader while he was sizing up her team. He was adorable. She could understand why a woman would want to grab him and never let go. She just didn’t approve of the methods the slavers used. A willing bond was always better. She noted the intelligence next, and understood their decoy plan wasn’t going to work for long. Edward had been trained to follow first and take charge second. A true leader would notice that difference.

Edward felt Alexa’s interest in the leader. He couldn’t blame her for it. The man had beautiful dark skin and a bald scalp that Edward knew she found sexy. Add that to bulging muscles and it was enough to draw any female. Edward was surprised the man had gotten free from his owner.

The cold resistance fighters stopped around the adorable man, letting him handle the negotiations. While they waited, they stared at the empty town, the supplies in the cabin, and the only woman in sight.

“I hope you don’t mind company.”

Edward used a polite tone. “You don’t mess with mine and I won’t mess with yours.”

The leader chuckled, hand out as he stepped forward. “I’m Marshal Sanders.”

Edward shook hands, feeling calluses. That was encouraging. Soft people didn’t last long in this world. “Edward.”

Marshal gestured. “This is my XO, Dwayne.”

Dwayne nodded, but didn’t speak.

The resistance fighters stared at all of them as Marshal got the lay of the land. Their actions were wary, weary. They weren’t happy comrades fighting for a common cause. They were survivors who’d banded together because being alone meant death or being recaptured. It made them desperate, dangerous.

“We’ll take some trees, and water from the spring.” Marshal smiled again. “Other than that, we won’t mess with what’s yours.”

Edward pointed to a generous thicket on the opposite end of town that he had already decided would provide their next stock of firewood. “You can have three quarters of that. Stack the rest as payment.”

“Deal.” Marshal scanned the five gunfighters lined behind Edward. “Have you been here long? Taking a break on your way somewhere?”

Edward followed the instinct that said not to lie. “Taking a break for winter. If you survive whatever

battle you're on the way to, maybe we can deal come spring."

Marshal was glad to hear they had items for trade. "We're low on food and ammo."

"I might be able to help." Edward saw the man's eyes go to the cabin behind him. "I know where stashes are. I didn't bring them here. Moments like this are the reason why."

Marshal shrugged. "I have an army to outfit. Right and wrong mean little."

"I believe right and wrong mean everything." Edward gestured toward the springs. "Stay out of the biggest one. We use it."

Marshal began giving instructions to Dwayne.

Edward wanted to turn and look at Alexa to see how well he'd done. He resisted the urge. He had no doubt that Marshal was going to ask about her. The mood of the resistance fighters wasn't good. It was a situation any leader would be forced to deal with. Edward hoped this one made the right choice.

Marshal's men began handling the chores that had been assigned.

Marshal turned back to Edward. "Is she for rent?"

"No."

Marshal studied them, picking out details. "Is she for sale?"

Edward scowled. "She's my wife."

Behind him, Alexa twisted the uncomfortable ring on her finger. She had no idea why Edward had

been carrying it, but it was a perfect addition to their act.

Marshal motioned toward the chuckwagon. “We’ll try to keep the noise down, but the men like to drink after they eat. I’ll keep them under control.”

Edward used an ugly tone to enforce his words. “If you don’t, *I will.*”

Marshal’s eyes narrowed. “You’d kill your own over a female?”

Edward tapped his gun. “In a heartbeat. Make sure they know.”

Marshal glanced at Edward’s crew. “What about them? Family or hired hands?”

“Volunteers.”

Marshal frowned. “Volunteers for what? Why are you here?”

Edward sighed. This part was like holding a lit stick to a fuse and hoping it didn’t catch. “I’ve told you she isn’t for sale or rent. You can’t use them to get to her. We’re loyal.”

Each one of the crew nodded at Marshal when he scanned them for verification of those words.

“Where are you going? Why are you here?” Edward demanded the same answers the man had tried to get from him without observing the proper niceties.

“We’re going to the big bunker in the east. I don’t want your woman. I need your men.” Marshal smiled coldly. “And you, of course. I need fighters.”

Edward snorted. “You’ll have to look elsewhere. We’re not for rent or sale, either.”

Marshal frowned. “We’re going to conquer the last government bunker so that all men can be free. You should be on the front lines with us. In one more year, all males will be born slaves, per the new laws. We have to stop that!”

Edward yawned.

Marshal’s face froze at the insult.

Edward could tell the man was making a dangerous choice. “You might get lucky enough to win, but it’ll take all the help you have. There’s no fight against the bunker if you challenge us. I’ll personally make sure *you* never get there.”

Marshal grinned. “Hardasses. Nice.” He relaxed. “We’ll eat, sleep, and go. Thank you for your gracious hospitality.”

“Go blow smoke up someone else’s ass.”

Marshal laughed this time. “Fine.” His attitude went cold. “You don’t mess with mine, and I won’t mess with yours. That’s our deal.”

Edward felt the danger pass. He evened out his hard tone. “We’ll have a trade talk in a couple hours if you’re interested.”

“Just call me when you’re ready.” Marshal joined his men.

Edward motioned their crew back into the cabin. He followed them in and shut the door. He leaned against it, staring at Alexa.

Alexa sighed. “He’s not buying it. They’re searching the other cabins now. They think a woman is holding you hostage.”

Edward snorted, but didn’t speak his thought.

Alexa caught it anyway. “I see the similarities.”

“But we can leave. We choose not to.”

“The same is true of me.” Alexa didn’t smile, though she wanted to. “That’s what makes our setup so perfect.”

Edward drew her guns from his cloak pocket. “It doesn’t feel that way unless you have these.”

Alexa tucked the worn weapons into her cloak instead of donning them. “We’ll keep playing this until it pops. Be generous in the trades. Make them happy. I don’t want to kill them unless we have to.”

“Me either. In another time, I might have helped Marshal lead them to that bunker.”

Alexa sighed. “Same.”

2

Edward pushed the curtains aside. “I changed my mind. I don’t want you to go out there alone.”

Alexa picked up their empty buckets. “They’re not going to believe the act if you do it. I have to play the role.”

Edward’s frown grew. “Maybe we should just skip the role.”

Alexa paused. “If you decide to play it that way, that’s what we’ll do. What do you see coming out of it?”

Edward sighed unhappily. “I think we’ll have to kill them all.”

“I predict the same. Killing them will not help our country.” Alexa stepped out into the cold chill and kicked the door shut.

Edward scanned the other men, reading his uneasiness in their expressions. “It’s nice she doesn’t want to kill them... Right?”

Everyone nodded, but it was obvious they didn’t want to trade Alexa for that.

“Do you think she should have a guard?”

Edward shook his head, denying Jacob. “I’m hoping she’ll pick up details by herself that we may have missed.”

Jacob glared. “Was that Alexa’s idea or yours?”

Edward flushed. “I suggested it. She went for it. Then I tried to pull it back and she wouldn’t let me.”

Billy and Daniel chuckled. That was the Alexa they knew.

Jacob marched to the window to keep an eye on her.

Edward allowed it, not viewing that as a violation of an order. He also wanted Alexa protected. If a fight broke out between her and their guests, Edward wanted to be there for it. The time they’d spent here being peaceful was wearing on his nerves. *And I’m getting very hungry.*

3

“Do you need help?”

Alexa set the bucket down as one of the resistance men approached her in the fading sunset.

The water pool behind her rippled.

She stepped away from it. They'd learned to avoid the water here at night. Bigger predators liked to fish then.

Sylvester hurried over to lift the bucket, scanning her body. His dark eyes lit up in hunger as he reached her face.

Alexa controlled her natural reaction to punch him as he continued to leer.

“What’s your name?”

Alexa followed her instincts. “Mitchel.”

Sylvester laughed hard, almost spilling the bucket.

Alexa walked behind him, not certain which way he had taken her words. His reaction wasn't clear.

“I told Marshal you all were special. He said you probably just snap around a cock like a rubber band, but I knew!” The man laughed again.

Alexa was glad it wasn't mocking or derision, as if he didn't believe her. That was one of her few weaknesses. She didn't care about the crude language; she hated to be laughed at.

“How did you end up with hardasses?”

“I volunteered.” Alexa winced at the hard tone in her voice. She didn't sound like the situation. That was a mistake.

Sylvester didn't notice. He lifted the bucket under his arm and slid his free hand around her waist. He tugged her close. “Burr. You're cold.”

Alexa controlled her temper and used her brain. “I cost more than you can afford.”

Sylvester leaned in to sniff her. He stared, judging her value and deciding his future in an instant. “I might pay everything I have.”

Alexa felt old magic stir. She hated being bound to such awful rules and chains, but there was no fighting it. “Those terms have to be settled with my owner.”

Sylvester chuckled. “Mitchels don’t have owners. They have handlers.”

Alexa didn’t like how much he knew about her family, but that was a common feeling. Her relatives had gotten out of control too many times for people to be unaware of them.

Sylvester let go of her.

A second later, Marshal came around the corner of the cabin. He spotted Alexa’s cold expression and jerked his hand toward the other men. “The woman can carry her own water. Get back to base.”

Sylvester saluted and left, casting lingering looks at Alexa over his shoulder.

Snow crunched under his feet, drowning out a little of the noise from the men who were getting settled for the night. The smell of wood burning and coffee scorching in the pot was thick. Metal clinked, voices murmured, men laughed or called orders... Alexa suddenly missed the quiet that had been broken.

When they were alone, Marshal turned to Alexa with the same needy face.

Alexa let out a sound of misery. “Whatever you want, I can’t help you. You should forget it.”

He gestured. “I know you’re not a slave.”

“We’re here willingly. We want no part of your quest. We have our own!”

Marshal picked up the bucket. He walked toward the cabin.

Alexa followed, trying to read his thoughts.

“I feel you tinkering, but I have a shield up.” Marshal kept going. “I learned how to do it from a magic user we ran across a couple months ago. Your kind can’t get through.”

Alexa chose not to tell him all shields were weak against mental fire. “Maybe you should teach it to your men. I hear the big bunker is full of females who have gifts.”

Marshal grunted. “My men hate magic. They don’t want any part of it, except to eliminate it.”

She caught the wording while storing the fact that the trader had lied to them. “But you see the uses.”

Marshal kept his pace slow, not wanting their conversation to end yet. “I’m not afraid of magic. I don’t feel the need to eliminate it from existence. It was put here for a purpose. I’d rather use it.”

Alexa took the bucket, being careful not to touch him or spill the water.

Marshal seized her wrist. They both froze at the contact.

Edward stopped, staring at them. He had come around the corner right as Marshal grabbed her. Edward's hands were already on his guns.

Alexa gave a single shake of her head to dissuade him.

"I need your help." Marshal gazed into her eyes, heart pounding.

Alexa let go of the bucket. She leapt out of the way as it fell, splashing Marshal in icy spring water.

"Damn it!"

Alexa went toward Edward while Marshal wiped off the water. When she kept going, Edward stayed, understanding he was supposed to handle this.

Alexa pulled her guns from the cloak and put them on.

Edward breathed a sigh of relief. *Things can get back to normal now.*

Marshal kept wiping off the water, chills already hitting him. He ignored Edward in favor of watching Alexa put on her Colts. "Are you her captives?"

Edward scowled. "No. Please remember our deal. Don't mess with mine. I won't mess with yours."

Alexa wearing guns drew the attention of all the former slaves. Men dropped cups and bowls. They stood up, expressions thunderous.

Alexa kept going, hoping she wasn't forced to kill them. The things she'd viewed in Marshal's future were good for the country if he was able to

pull it off. She didn't want this to stand between them and a better tomorrow for their citizens. They needed the slavery law overturned. If he and this ragtag band could take out the big bunker, the survivors might have peace until Safe Haven returned.

Marshal and Edward came around the corner, laughing at a joke Edward had just told to calm things down. The difference in mood flipped everyone into a state of confusion that paused the coming violence.

Marshal signaled to his men. "There's no threat here." He joined them, still chuckling at Edward's joke. *I too prefer it very wet, just not this cold.*

Edward went to the front porch of their cabin and sat in the rocker. He was joined by Billy and Daniel.

Alexa continued into the cabin and began gathering items for trade. She left the door open, hoping it would keep things calmer if they knew she wasn't planning an ugly demise inside these walls. Their suspicions would turn to begging next, and then anger. She was dreading it.

She couldn't do what Marshal was going to ask of her. Marshal was impressed by her men. Now that he knew she was responsible, he was going to ask her for assistance. The worst part was that she was tempted to do it. If the slaves waited here during the winter, it would not only allow her small levels of progress with them, it would also allow for more training of her own crew.

But there was no way they would avoid violence. Some of these men were rapists, and all of them were killers. Before winter was over, she would bury half of them. It wasn't worth the extra stain on her soul to know they wouldn't have enough troops when they left here to win that bunker battle. Marshal already knew she was going to refuse. Dropping the water on him had been a warning. When begging failed, he might make a hasty plan to force her. She'd given him enough rope to hang himself.

Jacob slid closer to Mark. "Are we back to normal now?"

Mark grunted. "Just keep following Edward's lead until she tells us otherwise."

Jacob already knew to do that. He watched the big group of men settle around a generous stack of wood, inwardly wincing at all the noise. Trees were being chopped, split, and tossed into stacks. Vehicles were being parked at the entrance to the town, creating a small barricade to the main road. Shouting over the wind instead of using hand signals was the worst part for Jacob. They didn't act stupid, though. He assumed it was laziness or lack of strong authority.

He was banking on the first. Marshal was laboring alongside his men, but not all of them were cooperating. Well over half the group was standing around, staring at the open cabin door. It was a bad situation.

The others felt it too, especially David. He was getting some of their thoughts. It wasn't good. *They're going to require a demonstration, Boss, or we'll be overrun while we sleep. They're used to taking what they need.*

Alexa didn't respond to David's thought, but the rest of the crew stood, creating a line of death between her and the men.

Marshal felt the danger coming. He strode toward the hardasses. "Is there a problem?"

Edward frowned at him. "Some of your men have ugly plans for tonight. I may need to thin your herd."

Marshal swept his men, seeing they were eager to kill. That was usually a good thing. This time, it would wipe them out. He made sure he was loud enough for everyone to hear. "Safe Haven!"

Time slowed as Alexa came to the cabin door.

The resistance fighters directed confusion and distrust at her, but she held only a little of those emotions for them. She respected the males for not giving up. Now that they'd been freed, the men looked more like the Americans that Alexa had loved all her life. It gave her more pity than she was used to feeling. Their homesick faces and bruised skin said they needed the apocalypse to end soon. They weren't going to make it much longer.

Edward shifted aside so Alexa could take her place in the front.

"Now we get the real picture." Marshal gestured at her. "The daughter of Adrian Mitchel."

Alexa let her eyes bleed red to verify his claim. Then she pulled up her hood and advanced into the snow. She headed for the biggest group of killers, feet light and hands ready.

Edward stayed on her heels, motioning the rest of their team to protect from that side. As Edward reached Marshal, he stepped by him and then spun around.

Marshal didn't fight as Edward wrapped a big arm around his neck. He'd been caught off guard and he knew it.

Alexa kept walking as Marshal's men shouted and ran her way.

The first guy to reach her grabbed her by the neck. "Let him go or I'll kill her!"

Alexa inhaled, snatching his lifeforce in one huge gulp.

The other men recoiled, forgetting the desire to grab her.

She shoved the dry husk to the snow and belched hard.

Silence held among the horrified men. Before they could decide to fight or take flight, Alexa held up her hands and muttered. A huge blast of wind blew snow into the air where it hung as if suspended on wires. Time paused as the flakes became a large vision of the future.

All the men watched, most not understanding how they were able to deflect the magic blasts and block the mind spells. They didn't have that training.

Marshal also observed even though Edward's big arm was still tight around his neck, both sad and glad. The cost for defeating the big bunker was high. It would take his life.

Alexa let go of the images and sank to her knees, gasping for air.

Edward shoved Marshal aside and joined her. Without Alexa's training, these men couldn't win. A single slaughter and rape wasn't worth the cost. However, holding Alexa hostage and forcing her to fight was running across their minds. Edward put a fast stop to it. "She'll kill you all with the meal she summons, the well she poisons, the diseases she calls. You can't hold a magic user with anything but honor. Everything else fails."

"Then I'll use what works." Marshal stayed on his knees in the snow. "I'm begging for your help. Slavery shouldn't exist. You know that! It goes against everything you are!"

Alexa grunted as she stood, allowing Edward to help her. She jerked a hand; the snow in the air fell in hard chunks. Some of the pieces held their shape, while others shattered. "You have offended me. A payment is required." She stepped over the corpse as she went to Marshal. "He was the cost of the vision."

Marshal gazed up at her, ignoring the fear and disapproval of his men. "Will you take information?"

"No. Forcing me to do this is an insult." She stopped in front of him. "Pick three of your men to

die. Choose them by their value as a person, not a fighter.”

Marshal blinked, mind easily picking them out as Edward got him to his feet. “You’ll help us if I do this?”

Alexa nodded. “You’re not a good person yet, but you are a strong leader. You’ll learn from me in the two days you spend here. And you’ll die for your crimes even as you gain what you most desire. I will not interfere with that destiny, but I will have my pound of flesh for the methods you’ve chosen. Killers don’t have to be without honor. Pay the price or lose that final battle.”

Marshal lowered his head. “Sylvester, Vance, and Max. Grab them.”

A scuffle ensued as the resistance fighters turned on three of their own. Punches and curses flew, but the trio was quickly overwhelmed.

Alexa delivered their sentence. “Bind them. Put them by the spring so nature may reclaim what you’ve taken from your reckless hunting.”

Marshal blanched as he realized they weren’t going to get fast deaths. “Let me kill them first.”

Alexa shook her head. “You’ll listen to the price the entire time you stay here. When you’ve had all you can take of their screams, my help is over. Make your choice.”

Marshal was torn. Being heartless might cost him control, but he didn’t care about the actual lives.

“A strong leader is not a good leader.” Alexa sighed. “But it will sometimes get the job done.

Remove the evil from your group and gain better followers.”

Marshal gestured. “Do as she says.”

“You can’t do this!” Vance struggled against the tight ropes being wrapped around his wrists.

Alexa didn’t know why Marshal had singled them out, but she trusted his judgement. All three doomed men were evil. It oozed off them in waves that hurt her heart.

“I’ll get loose!” Sylvester’s face was red. “I’ll kill you for this!”

Alexa smirked at him. “You should have kept your thoughts to yourself.”

“Witch!” Sylvester kept screaming as he was dragged toward the springs. “I won’t die! I won’t die!”

Alexa scanned the other two. Vance and Max had already stopped struggling. Their expressions were covered in guilt, but Sylvester was going to fight it to the end. *Good. His screams will keep things moving.*

Chapter Three

Lesson Learned

1

“It’s been an hour. I hope she starts soon. The men aren’t going to take much of this.”

Marshal grunted at Dwayne’s comment over the screams from their bound companions at the spring. “Here she comes.”

Alexa emerged wearing her normal outfit, guns ready to go. She looked like what they were about to be fighting. Every battle they’d had with magic users had been against women dressed like her. From the full head of braids to the weapons belt stocked with implements of destruction, she was their nightmare.

Some of the men grabbed for weapons, while others looked to Marshal, not sure what to do.

Alexa stopped at the top of the stairs, scanning them in the evening firelight. The snow came down in thick sheets, but the clever men had erected tarps around the fire so they had protection for cooking and sleep. Around the edges of the light, large ants were gathering. Alexa doubted any of the men had noticed the insects yet, but she was certain they would. So many ants forming a perimeter would draw attention. She was betting on Marshal to

notice it first, but his guards were within 10 feet of the large ants. Any of them could trigger panic.

Marshal came to the porch. “Where do you want us?”

She waved. “Exactly as you are. You’ll know when it starts.”

“You don’t want us to get in a...formation or anything?”

Alexa walked toward the large group of men without responding. She hated to give an order more than once. Marshal might as well learn that now.

Edward escorted Marshal to the fire. “You heard the lady.” Edward knew they wouldn’t like being reminded a woman was teaching them. That’s why he did it. While getting changed, Alexa had told them to treat these men like rookies. That was easy because they were. “Why aren’t you cooking the mule?”

Marshal’s executive officer, Dwayne, gave him a dark glare. “We know the trader that animal belongs to. We held on to the body in case we need it for evidence.”

Alexa was impressed that they had planned on a trial instead of a fast slaughter. It gave her more hope that helping them was the right thing to do. “Ulysses stayed here last night. His mule died of a blockage. He had a new mount when he left.”

Marshal knew better than to question Alexa in front of everyone, but Dwayne didn’t.

He stepped forward, chest puffed out. “Do you have any proof?”

Another man supported Dwayne. “Yes! You could have buried a body anywhere around here.”

The rest stayed quiet, hoping there wasn’t a fight.

Alexa drew a sheet of paper from her pocket. “He gave me a bill of sale for the meat. People don’t usually do that if you murder them.”

Dwayne took the paper she held out, distaste clear. He skimmed the sheet, then shoved it back at her, grunting.

Alexa tucked the paper away. “I’d like to hear a declaration of innocence. Or at least *case dismissed*.”

Marshal frowned at Dwayne.

“The court apologizes for the inconvenience, *Miss*.” Dwayne’s snotty voice echoed over the fire and crunching snow. “Case dismissed.”

Alexa liked Dwayne despite him not returning the sentiment. She could tell he was a stickler for constitutional rules. That was handy to have if you were trying to rebuild a society.

One of the men approached Alexa with a mug of something that steamed. He held it out to her, mind full of chaos.

Alexa took the cup. “My thanks.” She moved by him, aware that he didn’t flinch from her the way the others had and were still doing. “Perhaps, if you prove yourself useful to me, I may be willing to give you one of the answers you seek.”

Jack was glad he'd had the nerve to approach her. He stayed close as she settled onto his seat by the fire. Jack was third in command under Marshal.

Alexa sipped the coffee and waited. She needed them to go back to their tense watchfulness instead of this alert stance. Catching someone off guard was always a better training tool than if they knew it was coming. Being surprised was a memory maker, like pain was. It didn't always have to hurt, though it did with these men.

"I'm gonna kill all of you!"

Alexa ignored the screams from Sylvester. She pulled a pouch from her cloak and began to roll a smoke.

Mostly unnoticed by the resistance fighters, Alexa's crew had moved to perimeter guard posts while she was the center of attention. Each of them had a rifle hidden under their cloak. If things got out of control, they would eliminate the resistance fighters. The sights on the rifles required more concentration than their handguns. It would allow them to spare Alexa and anyone else she deemed worthy to survive.

"While you're here, you must not kill the ants on the property." Alexa needed to get that out of the way now, before they started reacting to the blows she was about to deliver.

Marshal gaped at her. "How are we supposed to see something so small in the dark? I probably killed 20 of them when I sat down."

“The Safe Haven ants.” Alexa pointed. They had a dozen snow coated men on stationary guard duty, but they were watching her instead of their surroundings. They clearly thought she was a bigger threat. Alexa was touched. *It’s good you know it.*

Fresh tension went through the group as they realized they were surrounded by mutated ants the size of footballs.

“They are no match for you. All you’ll be doing is slaughtering our warning system. We’ll be distracted. The noise, the lights, the screams...” She paused for the next screams from the bound men, shrugging at the winces. “It will draw predators to us. If the ants go into a defensive formation, it means there’s a threat nearby. Don’t kill our canary in the coal mine.”

Explained, the men tolerated the insects, but they watched them to make sure it wasn’t a trick or a trap. Most of them had already been tolerant of the ants, but a few of them stared in repulsed disgust, hoping they received orders to eliminate the mutations.

It took a while for the men to settle down. Alexa was able to finish the entire smoke. The evening darkened, bringing heavier snow and lower temperatures. The men gravitated toward the fire ring, eager for the protection of the thin canvas roofs, but even more for the comfort of being close to each other. Nighttime in Afterworld was different. Strange things crept out of the darkness,

things that had once belonged only to the realm of Hollywood.

Alexa threw her first emotional blow at Marshal.

Marshal choked on his coffee, coughing.

Alexa hit his XO next, repeating images of Snake women taking his son away.

Dwayne's face collapsed. Tears stung his cheeks. He still didn't know where his son was.

Alexa moved on to two of the weaker men in the rear. Their biggest fear was being drugged and raped. It had happened to both of them. Those memories weren't particularly violent, but it had scarred them deeply.

Both males cringed, fumbling for weapons.

"Brick walls are what people thought of in the past to block my kind, but that doesn't work. Brick walls just encourage me to tear through faster." She ripped down the mental wall Marshal had brought up, using flames. His biggest fear was being snake bitten while sleeping. That was a real possibility in this world.

Marshal clenched his fists and tried to tolerate the images without reaching for his gun.

Alexa chose two of the harder men next, showing them recent betrayals—one by a wife and one by a daughter. Fury rose off both men, but neither of them reacted.

"You can try to block the images, but my kind is used to that tactic. However, we're not used to people using it against us. You won't be as effective

because you can't read our minds, but when it comes to females, no matter their skill level, their biggest fear will be you. They're all terrified that you're going to enslave them. A lot of what's happened since the war has been based on that fear. Women were treated horribly through history. When society fell, most women assumed female slavery would become a part of life again. To preempt it, they decided to enslave *you*. It's a self-defense mechanism."

Alexa nodded her approval as men began to slam her with vicious images. A few of them were quite disturbing, but she chose not to single them out yet. She didn't want to interrupt the lesson by skinning one of the men alive and hanging two more. "Try to keep me out. If you have ugly secrets, try very hard." Alexa began digging into the men.

Marshal watched closely. He had taken her words to heart about being better instead of just stronger. If he had men who were evil, they could die during the bunker battle, like he was going to. Marshal had accepted his fate a long time ago. He was younger than the others here, most of them anyway, and he hadn't been Drafted. He'd been sold by his family for food. He had escaped, then survived on his own for the last three years while searching for a way to encourage a rebellion against slavery. There was no way his life would end but in an unmarked grave or in the stomach of a Snake.

Alexa's men enjoyed watching her train the strangers, but they couldn't help feeling jealous.

This should have been their lesson. Alexa had already worked with them on some of these things.

Edward knew she had a schedule that she preferred to stick to. He wasn't certain what price was paid for fast tracking lessons this way, but he was positive there was a cost. Shortcutting always required an extra payment, usually in the form of quality. It was hard to get things exactly right when you were doing it too fast. Still, all her men wanted to be part of the lesson. They had come to crave these moments.

The snowfall increased, blowing in from the northwest to cover the landscape in whiteout conditions. Only the center of the small town where they were gathered was being spared the heaviest precipitation and wind. More than a few of the men assumed Alexa was responsible.

Alexa knew it was the position of the town between the hills and trees, but she didn't disabuse them of their notions. It helped if they thought she could control the weather. She actually could in minor ways, but it took more energy than she ever had to spare. It also pissed off Nature. She tried not to do that unless there wasn't another option. Nature was a deadly foe. No one was able to handle her alone.

Alexa continued around the circle, blasting the tense men with images of the war, of horrible survival situations that included the deaths of friends and family. She included the betrayals by women in their past as she uncovered them. The war

had not been kind to any of these men. With the exception of a few, they weren't corrupt. They fought for freedom. This group was not responsible for slaughtering towns of innocents as they came through, unlike most of the troops that had gathered since society fell. It made her want to help them.

Alexa kept at it until she had tortured each man there, not moving on until all of them were able to deflect her thoughts with nasty visions. She was confident it would give them the edge of surprise when their big battle came. What they did from there would determine the fate of all men, but a brief pause in the beginning could be the key to victory. If the women were caught off guard long enough, it would give the men time to remove the frontline sentries and at least a couple of the magic users.

Alexa finished with the last man, a cringing, crying Indian who had witnessed his entire village slaughtered when the Mexicans came north to fight Safe Haven. He was the sole survivor.

Alexa shifted closer to the fire where the light glinted off her hair and body in ways that drew instant attention. She slowly opened her cloak and let it fall to the ground.

Men twitched, grunted, shifted; more heads turned in her direction.

Alexa arched her body, hands behind her neck to give the full effect in the firelight.

Silence fell through the six dozen men that she'd thought were incapable of it. The noises

they'd been making since their arrival were gone. A wary tension replaced it.

“They’ll also use distraction techniques that are more time-honored.” She slowly rotated so everyone got the view. “You have to ignore your lust. *You* control your body, not the other way around.” Alexa slowly began to remove her overshirt.

Edward and the rest of the crew moved in a few steps, rifles coming up as dangerous lust flew through the air.

Alexa let go of her overshirt, showing her black tank top and bare skin. She sent out a wave of need at the same time.

Men rushed forward.

Alexa brought her demon out.

Men screamed and scrambled back from the horned horror that sniffed at them with a forked tongue.

Dwayne wet himself.

Her crew tried not to stare. It was easiest for Edward. He’d seen that form on the stairway when she’d handled the cardplayer. He’d told the others about it later, but they hadn’t believed him. *They do now.*

Alexa bent to retrieve her shirt. “The face we show to the world and the face we have inside are different, like a person’s mind. Never trust what’s on the outside. This is probably what’s in there.”

Edward and the others were relieved when the fighters retreated, but the hostility and fear in the air

said Alexa wasn't safe. Edward motioned the other men to keep their rifles in hand.

A few of the escaped slaves who noticed snorted. After her demonstration, not a man here was interested.

Marshal wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to have sex again. He would always be waiting for the demon to pop out now. In 30 seconds, she had eliminated a terrible weakness. He was impressed and stunned, and like the other men, in awe of her. *What I wouldn't give to have the time to join her crew. Imagine the things I could learn!*

Alexa faded back into herself. She went to the cabin, controlling shaking legs and ragged breathing. "Lesson's over. Enjoy your evening."

Energetic screams echoed into the storm.

The sounds were ignored by most of the fighters this time. They stared at Alexa, mulling over what she had just taught them.

"We'll do more at dawn." Alexa sat in the snowy rocking chair where they could see her. She needed to rest, but it was important that they were able to view her for a while. It wasn't easy to make a grown man wet himself, but she'd done it.

Alexa rubbed the shoulder of her demon. *You must be one ugly bitch. Very nice.*

The demon cackled. *It is my honor.*

“Nope.” Dwayne plunged his pissy pants into the icy water. “I heard you coming. Lot of noise for a badass.”

Edward wasn't offended. “Yeah, it's hard to be quiet on ice.” Over the last hour, the snow had changed from fat flakes into damp splashes, causing the top layer of snow to be soaked and refreeze. Crunching noises were continuous.

Dwayne kept working on his clothes.

Edward scanned the three sacrifices. Two gray wolves were already eating the first body. Max had died during the lesson. Edward wanted to have sympathy for the two remaining men, but it was impossible. If they didn't deserve it, they wouldn't be there.

“How long have you been with her?” Dwayne began wringing water out of his pants. It ran yellow. He stopped ringing to resume plunging.

“Over six months.” It didn't sound like much to Edward when he said it aloud, but it felt like the longest period in his life.

“Were you trained, before?”

Edward grunted. “I had some background, but everything I am right now came from her. Our lessons are amazing. As you just found out.”

Dwayne let out the sound of derision, but didn't argue. Despite not liking her methods, it was hard to argue with the truth. He would never be fooled by a pretty face again. She'd seen to that.

“How long have you been with this group?” Edward hardened his tone to discourage lying. “You’re not like them.”

“I volunteered.”

Edward read the tone and filled in the blanks. “Your town was attacked.”

“It happened to a lot of places in the west. Male slavery is spreading at an alarming rate.” Dwayne continued wringing the damp, heavy jeans, arm muscles bulging. “I didn’t have anyone left anyway. I felt like it was my duty. Slavery is wrong.”

Edward sighed. “I agree. So does Alexa.”

“What about the others in your crew?” Dwayne already knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“We all feel the same.”

Dwayne wasn’t surprised. He hadn’t sensed any weaknesses in them.

Edward scanned the withered husk next to the sacrifices, noting the animals were leaving it alone in favor of a body that had meat on it. It was gruesome, but he didn’t shy from the view. He hadn’t known Alexa was going to take a lifeforce, but he was glad she had. He could tell how tired she already was from this first training session, but she needed to do it again tomorrow. The energy would serve her well, though Edward doubted it would be enough. Like him, she needed blood. “So how long have you been with them?”

Dwayne realized he hadn’t answered. He stood up, unrolling the jeans. “They picked me up near Logan, Utah.”

Edward realized Dwayne had been with them since Alexa rescued Mark from Eden Slam. They hadn't seen Dwayne in the slave group at the farmhouse. Edward guessed they'd missed each other by about a week. "What happened to Georgia?"

Dwayne stared suspiciously. "How do you know her?"

Edward was forced to give information to get what he wanted. "We were in Logan, Utah. We had a tank."

Dwayne's face lightened. "Those women were so distracted by that tank that they didn't bind their captives well enough. The men escaped."

Edward kept prying. "I assumed something along those lines. Didn't the women come for them?"

Dwayne spat into the snow. "They did, but we learned how to fight."

Edward chuckled. "It seems like you've done a good job. None of them took off running into the night when Alexa revealed her true form."

Dwayne shuddered at the memory. He would never forget it. "They're a work in progress."

Edward grinned. "Alexa says the same thing about us."

"Doesn't look like you have many weaknesses. She's done a good job." Dwayne meant that.

Edward couldn't help the pride. He stood a little straighter, chin lifting. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

“She may have put a spell on all of you.” Dwayne slid the heavy jeans over a folding hanger. “Does that matter?”

“We’ve discussed that possibility.” Edward shrugged. “If she hadn’t chosen us, we believe we would be dead, so it’s a fair trade.”

Dwayne understood he wasn’t going to be able to get under Edward’s skin or divide the crew. Marshal would be disappointed. He had been hoping a few of her men might go with them when they left.

Edward sensed the man’s thoughts. “Nothing would get us to sell her out or abandon the quest.”

“What quest?”

Edward changed topics. “Marshal said you handle the trades. I know where two stashes of ammunition are and possibly fuel for your vehicles. You’ll have to treat it before you can use it.”

Dwayne didn’t push for an answer. He led the way back to the fire. “We’ll get into the weapons trailer. We don’t have much.”

“I’ll examine what you have and try to help you be more efficient, but I won’t take payment. You have to work that out with the boss.”

Dwayne shuddered again. He led the way to the cart, dropping his hanger on a tree branch.

Edward knew the pants would freeze before they dried. He was glad the man had a change of gear. As short as he was, none of their clothes would fit him without serious alterations. The stocky black man was in good health, but he was short. Edward

assumed the guy was a badass because of it. People were often picked on for their flaws. They either became depressed, worked hard to change their flaws, or they became so ruthless in physical confrontations that no one would bother them.

Edward applauded the man's choice. Dwayne had weaknesses, but of all the men here, he was the hardest. Edward wondered if Alexa had recognized that, then snorted at himself. *Alexa sees everything. It's my eyes that still need training.*

He thought about her true form. The demon inside her was the scariest thing he'd ever seen. Edward swallowed the lust. *Maybe she'll let it out while we have sex. That would be a thrill.*

Chapter Four
Perfect Sponges

1

Dwayne opened the battered trailer and stepped back.

Edward used his flashlight for a quick evaluation of the various boxes and canisters. The two .50 caliber guns and the small cannon were impressive, but they didn't have ammunition for them. "Not much in here." He stepped back. "I'll mark the ammo stashes on Marshal's map."

Dwayne grunted, shutting the trailer. He didn't look at Alexa as he went to the fire for a fresh mug of bitter coffee.

Edward scanned the cabin and found the two doctors on the porch by Alexa. He was a bit surprised she was letting strangers touch her, but he was also curious if they would notice the differences between her and the men they'd been treating. Being a vampire had disadvantages, but it wasn't always easy to spot them.

Edward went to the porch, taking a corner guard post so he didn't interrupt.

Alexa held still while the medics took her temperature, blood pressure, pulse, and asked about injuries.

She didn't have any. Her wounds regenerated at amazing rates now, making medical care almost unneeded. Like Edward, she was curious how the doctors might react.

Neither of the doctors seemed to notice. They finished their exam, then waited for her to tell them who to care for next.

Alexa beckoned Edward over.

He sat in the slushy seat next to her, able to feel how tired she was.

While the medics performed their examination, the team observed from guard posts, also curious as to the findings. They assumed the medics would be sent to them as well and tried to brace for it. No one liked letting a doctor evaluate their health. That hadn't changed with the war.

Edward held in a chuckle when the medic taking his blood pressure lifted eyes to his in horrified curiosity. He didn't confirm or deny the suspicions he read. He didn't need to. The medic knew what he was, which meant he also knew what Alexa was. The doctors hadn't reacted to her condition because someone had told them not to, but they hadn't been prepared for two vampires. "Help comes in many forms. Don't be fool enough to turn down what you need."

One medic nodded, but didn't reply. Alexa could feel thoughts flashing through his mind faster than he could keep up. She assumed he was assembling a report for his boss. She believed Marshal already knew. It was in his careful looks at

her team. “You’ll find injuries on my other men. Be careful. Pain brings out their temper.”

The two medics moved off to provide care for her crew. It was the price she had demanded for the items of trade Marshal was sorting through in front of the fire. Daniel had brought it out at her order. She had been generous, like she’d told Edward to be. A lot depended upon these men making it to the big bunker.

The storm increased, blowing snow over everyone, and muffling the screams. Sylvester was still going strong, but Vance was getting hoarse and putting long pauses between his protests. The only time he got loud was when an animal approached. At some point tonight, the animals would get bolder and Vance’s screaming would cease altogether. Sylvester would be awake to witness all of it.

2

Daniel woke as the cabin door opened. He didn’t react to the cold draft, listening. He identified Edward’s steps, estimating it to be almost 4 a.m.

He opened one lid as Edward and Alexa slipped out. As soon as the door shut, Daniel went to the front window. Their company had indeed gotten drunk and made a lot of noise, but they were all sleeping now. Alexa had assured everyone the ants around the perimeter would notify them if there were intruders, so no guard had been posted. *That was a mistake.*

Daniel lost track of the pair in the blowing snow. He waited, almost sure of what they were doing. It didn't bother him. He just wanted to know.

Movement drew his attention to the far edge of the perimeter. Daniel thought it was ants at first, but he realized it was Alexa crawling toward the sleeping fighters.

Daniel held his breath as she reached her target and wrapped her hand around his mouth. Daniel slid a hand to his gun, preparing to help.

The rest of the team stirred, feeling trouble.

Alexa took a light drink from the struggling man, letting the natural sedation in her fangs put him back to sleep. She motioned Edward over.

The Horseman slid next to her to enjoy his first human meal.

Daniel waited to feel disgust, but there was only relief when the man went back to sleep instead of alerting the others. Alexa and Edward both needed the meal and these men were healthy enough to afford a little blood. If they killed the man, that might change things, but not in how he felt, only in the reaction from their guests.

Daniel went back to bed, wishing he was out there, too.

3

“Vance died overnight.”

Marshal nodded at Dwayne to indicate he'd heard. There was no reneging on the deal they'd

made, but in the harsh light of day, sacrificing three of his most ruthless fighters for this training seemed like a bad choice. The tricks the witch had shown them wouldn't be enough to defeat the bunker women. They were only going to buy time. If the lesson today wasn't good enough, Marshal was going to order his men to capture her or die trying.

"Sylvester is sinking. He won't make it another day."

Marshal sighed. Dwayne wanted orders to save the man, but Dwayne didn't understand. Anyone who double-crossed a magic user became cursed. That was the last thing they needed on this journey.

"Some of the men have wounds today that weren't there last night." Dwayne tried again to get their leader to change his mind.

Marshal knew. He'd considered confronting her, but in vampire form, he had even less chance of defeating her than in her demon form. The only way to catch a magic user off guard was to do it to their face, but he wouldn't even have that luxury if things went sour. He was positive she was watching for trouble.

The cabin door opened.

Men stilled across the camp. Conversations halted; heads turned.

Edward appeared.

Relief ran through the resistance fighters. Activities and conversations resumed.

Edward stepped aside so Alexa could exit.

Silent stillness fell again.

Alexa looked at Marshal. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Mule gruel.”

Alexa chuckled, moving toward him. “Sounds tasty.”

Marshal nodded. “It is, actually. Our cook does wonders with alternative meats.”

The men slowly returned to what they were doing, but their attention never left Alexa. She was a known vampire out in sunlight. They forgot about Edward, who was in a hooded cloak like the rest of her crew. She was the center of attention.

Edward zeroed in on conversations, scanning for trouble. He heard a lot of complaints about bedbugs and held in a snicker.

Alexa wasn’t amused. She hated what she’d become. She pointed toward the springs. “A large herd of deer usually move through in about an hour. We’re going to do a hunt. You’ll keep three quarters of the meat and hides. Make some gloves. Your men are going to lose fingers soon. Frostbite is nothing to mess around with, as I’m sure you already know.”

“Only on this trip.” Marshal watched as she got closer. “Most of us are from the west. This is our first full cold season.”

“But not your first snow?”

Marshal accepted a bowl of gruel from the cook. “It snowed while we were in Nebraska. We found a place to outfit ourselves, but slavers came through before we could reach the last boxes. I assume that’s

where the gloves were. The group was too big to fight.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “Not the same slavers your men escaped from?”

“No.” His tone veered into ugliness. “BLM.”

Alexa’s men tensed at the name, recognizing it from the information she’d given them before Sally’s betrayal. If the BLM was here, so were the Fanatics.

“Tell me about them.” Alexa also took a bowl of the gruel, nodding to the cook.

“They claim to represent the government, but all they do is steal money and property. We haven’t seen much action against them yet, but those few battles were ugly.” Marshal’s voice grew hard. “If you can’t pay their fees, they burn you out.”

Dwayne gave more details, now stealing looks at her face. He couldn’t get the demon image out of his mind. “Some of the agents are still loyal to the constitution. They take their supplies to the bunkers like they were ordered to right after the war, but they have a lot of traitors. The local men hid with the BLM as agents when the slavery law was first decreed, but few are left now. Most were betrayed and sold. The Fanatics offer great deals to traitors to steal the supplies meant for our recruitment efforts.”

“You managed to avoid them the entire time you’ve been in this zone?” Alexa was impressed.

“Yes. They were fighting the women who wear red robes. We don’t have contact with either side of

that fight.” His voice dropped to a bitter mutter. “We know better.”

“As do we.” Alexa scooped a bite and blew on it. She chewed cautiously. “It’s good.”

Watching from the rear of the chuckwagon, the cook beamed at her, then ducked behind the wagon.

“He’s shy.” Marshal winced as Sylvester screamed again.

It ruined the good mood, but no one stopped eating. It was cold and the food was hot.

“Join me at the springs in 20 minutes. Bring a good knife.” Alexa went into the cabin, taking the bowl with her.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed. Despite not liking her, no one wanted to fight her.

4

The hunt went well. The large herd of deer was easily spooked into the path of Alexa and her crew, and then the bucks were killed with a minimum of arrows. They had perfected removing a batch of the deer weekly during their time here. It had allowed them to begin working on different items they needed. While they had plenty of gloves, leggings were still a problem. The hems of any pants frayed and split from all the foot travel. Deerskin was perfect for patching.

Alexa watched her team mingle with the resistance fighters as they dragged the carcasses to

an area she had chosen for disemboweling. The mood was better now.

Nearby, Sylvester glared at them in freezing fear and anger. He didn't have much fight left in him. The half-eaten bodies next to him were drawing bugs that ate at his flesh, too. The withered husk still hadn't been touched. It was frozen solid.

The snow had stopped; the wind had settled. With bright sunlight beating down, it gave the feel of a spring thaw. Alexa wasn't fooled. *This is the calm before the storm. I've survived enough of them to know the feeling.*

Alexa needed to be sure the men were going to leave before that storm trapped them here. She smiled at Sylvester. "Comfy?"

"I'll kill you! I'm gonna kill you all!"

Sylvester's screams brought fresh tension to the moment, soothing Alexa's troubled soul.

Marshal had been watching her, growing angry. "I've almost had enough. This lesson better be good."

Alexa smiled again.

Marshal walked away, going to the slaughter area to do his share. It was one of the reasons the men followed him. There wasn't a chore he wouldn't help with. The other reason they followed him was for moments like this. He knew when to fight and when to wait.

Bloody snow surrounded with fresh meat and hides had also put the fighters in a better mood. Combined with being able to fill their canteens, it

was a good sign. It was almost enough supplies to get to the big bunker now if they were careful. Marshal always made the cook ration their food, so it was likely they would make it. They had Alexa to thank for it. None of them were thrilled about that part, however.

The springs around them cracked and popped as sunlight melted through the top layer of ice that had formed over the water in the night. Alexa's crew found it annoying today. It made too much noise when they were trying to monitor an already noisy group for problems.

Alexa motioned her crew over, still talking to Marshal. "Keep your men working. Store details for them and repeat it later when you practice."

Everyone quieted as they realized Alexa was starting the lesson. It was disappointing that they weren't going to be a part of it, but they were all eager to watch her in action. They wanted proof that her crew really were the badasses they appeared to be.

The chilly resistance fighters refilled canteens, washed clothes, and even tried to fish, but their activities were just a cover. They didn't know what to expect. It made them suspicious, but they were also excited. Alexa found them desirable in that moment. She loved an eager audience.

Edward got the team into position, mentally running through the lesson as they lined up across from Alexa. His hood, like the rest of the crew, was around his face and his cloak was tied down, as per

her instructions upon leaving the cabin, but it still hurt. Angry bees stung his skin through the thick cloth. The sun hurt. That part of vampirism was no myth.

Alexa tossed a small fireball, quickly followed by a second.

The witnesses gasped as Edward snatched his blade from his belt and deflected the first one. He flipped the blade over for the second hit, tipping it high into the air.

Alexa switched targets as those blasts smacked into the ground and went out in the slush. “Jacob!”

Jacob ran forward, rushing her.

Alexa blasted him harder than she had Edward because Jacob was better at this despite his bad foot.

Jacob ducked her first blast and used his knife to send the second hit into the air. He stepped back to avoid the spray as it fell, twisting around to face her third blast. He tipped it up, sending the small fireball flying toward the watching men.

Billy jumped in front of the flinching resistance fighters and caught the fire as it came down. He bounced it on his Becker and tossed it to Daniel.

Daniel pinged it a few feet into the air and swung as it came down.

David was there to deflect it this time and send it flying back to Alexa, who caught it and swallowed the familiar energy with a groan of pleasure.

She paused to recharge.

“Can you do it again?” Marshal stayed where he was, fighting the growing urge to take her captive. He knew it wouldn’t work, but he needed this training and only a magic user could deliver it. “We need to see it again.”

“Anything metal will catch and deflect. Magic is drawn to metal.” Edward nodded to Daniel to keep going. He stepped closer to Marshal, aware of the man’s thoughts.

Daniel cleared his throat, hoping Alexa did feel like doing it again. He’d been bored and this was fun. “Magic is energy. If you drain the energy, magic users are like anyone else—killable.”

Dwayne nodded. He hadn’t known they could deflect the power with just a knife. He’d assumed magic was stronger than anything it hit, but they had just proved that wasn’t true.

Daniel looked to Billy, passing the job.

“The average magic user has about 10 hits in them before their energy runs out. Don’t be in their reach when that happens or you’ll get sucked dry.”

David picked it up at Billy’s nod. “Wide blades work best. Pretend you’re swinging a bat at a ball and it becomes easier.” He glanced at Jacob.

Jacob grinned. “If you throw it back at them, they’ll be shocked. Learn to aim the deflections and you’ve essentially mastered their magic.”

Mark finished the oral part of the lesson, deep voice a growl in the chilly morning air. “Don’t be afraid to throw your knife right after the deflected shot. Their shock might weaken the shield enough

to let your knife through. But be prepared for how fast it will all happen. Seconds are the difference between life and death.”

Alexa nodded her approval, always proud of how completely her men absorbed her lessons. She only had to tell or show them these things once and they memorized it word-for-word, action-for-action. They were perfect sponges. She adored them.

Alexa’s pleasure flew over her team, bringing groans. They kept their stances, but it was hard.

Wave after wave of crossfire pleasure hit the resistance fighters, bringing many of them to tears.

Marshal shut his eyes, trying not to cry. “Now I understand. She doesn’t need spells when she radiates these feelings.”

Alexa stopped. She tensed for a brief second to give her men the warning. Then she began to throw fire again. This time, it was hard and fast, in multiple directions.

Marshal and his men observed it all, learning how to kill her kind.

5

“We can take them.”

“She just used up all her energy. They said 10 hits.”

“And she threw three times that. She’s empty.”

“We need her.”

“We need those men! Did you see them?!”

Edward stilled, letting the fireball sail over his shoulder. It smacked into the water unnoticed. The quiet conversation from the rear of the crowd had his attention.

Alexa snapped her fingers, bringing her crew to her side. She stared coldly at Marshal, who was talking to his chain of command about the next stage of their journey. “Your men are making decisions without you.”

Marshal glowered at the small group he’d always worried would overwhelm his control. “I told you no.” He knew what they’d been caught discussing. It was the same thought going through his own mind. “It’s time to leave.”

Alexa’s team lined up in the V, providing an impressive line of killers who weren’t winded despite three hours of demonstrations.

Marshal pointed at his men. “Finish your chores and pack up. We leave in an hour.”

“No.” Alexa’s hard tone said her crew should enforce her next words. “I want you gone in five minutes.”

Marshal opened his mouth to protest.

Edward’s hand slid to his gun.

Jacob’s scarred hand went to his knife, not wanting to waste bullets.

Mark cracked his knuckles, grinning in anticipation.

Marshal swallowed the argument, giving a curt nod instead. “You heard the lady. Five minutes.”

Alexa's men were almost disappointed. After that workout, they were eager to use those perfected steps and throws.

The intimidated resistance fighters did as ordered, murmuring about parts of the lesson, about the speed of her men, but most of all, about Alexa.

Edward escorted Alexa to Marshal when she went that way, leaving the others in a deadly line. They wouldn't move from it until Alexa's hand left her gun. It hadn't yet.

"Last words?" Marshal sneered at her guard. "Go away, dog. She doesn't need you."

Alexa sighed. "You have no idea of my true needs or you'd fall at my feet and beg to be one of my crew."

Edward stiffened.

So did Marshal. Life came into his rugged, tired face. "Is that a possibility?"

Alexa smiled at him. "Yes. You alone among this group might have the strength, skills, and honor that I require."

For one instant, Marshal thought of saying yes. He had no doubt being one of her crew would fulfil almost all of his dreams. *Except the one I believe in the most.* He smiled, softly. "No, thank you. I'm...flattered."

Alexa had already known the answer she would receive. "You have a quest consuming your soul, even as it demands your life."

"Yes."

Alexa shifted her hand from her gun to his shoulder. “I wish you success, and a long life. May fate give you both for your loyalty.”

Marshal sighed. “You’ve predicted my fall, Seer. We both know you’re not wrong.” He shrugged out of her touch as the rest of her team joined them. “Still, if fate is kind, perhaps we’ll meet again.”

“The offer will stand as long as you do.” Alexa meant it.

Marshal grinned. “If you couldn’t tempt me, nothing else can either.” He bowed to her, low and full of trust. “Mistress.”

Alexa smiled again as he joined his men.

Edward sensed Marshal would have made a strong addition to their team. “What would his place have been?”

Because she didn’t feel jealousy in his question, Alexa gave him the answer. “Your right hand, after I die.”

Edward winced at the pain. “Damn.”

Alexa nodded, turning away. “Fate can be kind, as well as cruel. We hope for the best...”

“And plan for the worst.” Edward stayed by her as she signaled the rest of the team into the cabin. He knew she didn’t want Marshal or his men begging them to come along for the bunker fight. She hated them to feel guilty. “How many of them do you think we’ll see again?”

Alexa didn’t take her attention from the sullen, cocky men leaving their hospitality. “None, likely.

But maybe their sons will populate the new world.” Alexa shivered, mind cluttered. “Enjoy our final guest after I leave. Then take over my position until I return.”

Edward both loved and hated the order to drain Sylvester. He was the only one still alive. “How long?”

She shrugged. “A few days. I need to recharge.”

Edward swallowed a protest and the offer to accompany her. She’d given him a wonderful duty. He would do it to the best of his ability.

The line of fighters slowly vanished through the snowy buildings. Their noises echoed for long minutes after they were out of sight.

Good luck. Edward felt another pang of guilt for not going, but it was drowned out by the bond to the brutal woman at his side. *We fight for all mankind, not just the men. It’s a worthy cause to live, or die, for. I’m honored she chose me.*

Alexa walked away, leaving light tracks in the falling snow. She’d used a lot of energy to fast-track the lessons, but she also needed time to think. Things were coming to a boil in this country, which meant it was likely that foaming top was also present in other parts of the world. Soon, someone would make the call that brought them all together.

If Adrian wasn’t here, those forgotten descendants might bend to popular demand and take over the world. Adrian had to send out his own calls to keep them in line until he could get here. *It’s time*

to come home, Father. Come face the rest of your destiny and your demons.

Edward went to the springs, stomach growling.

Alexa vanished into the landscape, confident she'd left her crew in good hands.

The rest of their team waited tensely in the cabin for one of them to return and give them orders.

Chapter Five
Bad Company

1

“**H**ow long?!” Jacob scowled at Edward. He didn’t like causing problems, but he loathed being split from Alexa.

“She said a few days.” Edward locked the door and went to stand by the coffee pot steaming over their fire. “I can track her if we need to.”

“She’s weak! She shouldn’t be alone.”

Edward frowned at Jacob’s angry tone. “I follow orders, like you do.”

The cold words stopped another protest from the Preacher. He stared in resentment, mind spinning, heart hurting.

“What does she want us to do while she’s gone?” Mark was eager to keep the peace between their teammates.

“She didn’t say.” Edward joined David on the stools at the counter island. “She put me in charge. It feels like I should know.”

David handed him a mug of coffee. “What do you think?”

Edward sighed. “I think this is a punishment. We didn’t gather the items she mentioned while we

were dealing with Sally. It's been a month. She's pissed about that."

Everyone brought up the mental list, feeling guilty.

"It was food and water, medicine, defense items, transportation, and communication, right?" Daniel was ashamed. He'd assumed they didn't need half those things anymore.

"She added lights."

Men groaned at Edward's reminder.

"Lights!"

"Yes, we need a lot of light."

"I'll have the reloads covered if we can find more junk." Edward was uneasy even though he'd been gifted with her job. *I already miss her.*

The rest of the team nodded.

Edward stored the mental communication moment for later examination, assuming strong emotions opened that door. "I'll lead a scavenging team out in 10 minutes."

The others considered where to find the items they'd been assigned.

"I'll hold down the fort." Jacob wasn't happy about that, but the food and water was here. He just needed to gather more to start smoking it for their next adventure.

"Same here." Mark gestured at Jacob. "I'll use your fat and bones for candles and torches."

"I need a veterinarian clinic, a hospital that had a lab, or an animal supply store." David pointed at the shortest counter. "I'll need that cleared. And

maybe the cabin should be empty while I work. If I mix something wrong, you guys probably shouldn't be in breathing distance."

"I need a jewelry store or pawn shop, and a plumbing store." Edward explained when Jacob frowned at him again. "Lead, parts, and maybe a set of diamond arrows."

"I can scavenge what I need from almost all those places." Daniel was glad he got to go. He didn't think he could take sitting here waiting like a good wife.

"I'll handle sniper duty while I scout wheels." Billy patted his pocket, proud of the binoculars he'd gathered. He could see a goat's nuts draw up at 200 yards. "Just say where."

"We have a city close by. It has all the stores we need. The next town is smaller and twice the distance." Edward paused, hoping they would take these lessons from him even when Alexa wasn't here to approve the choices.

"Smaller is safer, right?"

Mark shrugged at Billy's question. "Someone might have taken over a smaller town. Bigger places will have more areas to hide and maybe a few shops that aren't stripped or boobytrapped."

"Sounds like we're heading to the city." Jacob checked his guns.

Edward grunted. "I'll give you something harder next time."

Snickers filled the cabin, followed by a vague tension as they waited to see if Edward could lead

them the way they needed. If he spent time giving them specific chores or warnings, it would destroy the trust he'd already begun to build. They didn't need to be micromanaged.

Edward stretched his spine. "Be on the porch in five minutes."

The tension snapped into the excitement before a run, pleasing all of them. It was a good sign. If Alexa fell, Edward would really be in charge then. This was a small test to determine if he could do the job. So far, it was going well.

Mark lifted his chin. "We want you to ask her, officially. We've made up our minds."

Edward wasn't surprised. "If she says no?"

Mark sighed. "Then we'll accept it."

"Good." Edward didn't tell them he loved them enough to die for them, but he would never double-cross Alexa to pass the gift of vampirism anyway. They already knew he wouldn't.

2

Skinning hides in the snow wasn't fun. Jacob's hands hurt the entire time.

Melting the fat to make the candles was also a hard chore. It had to be cut off the meat, chopped small, and stirred often. Mark's shoulders ached.

Both men enjoyed it. The weeks of rest had been easy on them. Neither man liked that. This was the apocalypse. They were on a quest. It wasn't supposed to be easy.

Snow continued to fall lightly over the area as they labored over the deer Edward had left on the porch steps when he returned this morning. They knew it hadn't been Alexa because the shot was a bit clumsy. Edward was still learning to use his bow.

Jacob peeled the deer meat from the skin with his blade. *I'll sharpen this tonight.*

Their slaughter area was neat compared to the mess left around them. Both men hoped it rained soon to clean away the gore. The flies were thick, drawing annoyed grunts and slaps at vicious bites.

Mark stilled, sniffing. *Perfume?*

Jacob kept working, but his ears strained for any sound. His nose reached out for new scents, searching for whatever had gotten Mark's attention.

Mark used his splattered boot to push the pot of rendering fat off the fire. He kept stirring, but he wiped his gun hand down his dirty clothes to dry it.

Jacob flipped his blade in his hand and kept laboring, ready to slice or throw as the situation required.

"Hello! Coming in!"

Both men straightened at the female voice. Only Mark turned.

When there are only two men, one keeps watch over the rear. The senior man faces the open threat. Jacob remembered his lesson, but it was hard to not even peek.

"We're agents from the Bureau of Land Management."

Mark stared at the three frumpy females, aware of small crackles falling from his stir stick onto the other boot. *It was almost done. Damn it!* “Can we help you?” The women wore fur clothes and worn boots too big for their feet. Mark didn’t see weapons, but he was sure they had them. Their attitudes said they were armed.

The center woman lifted a perfectly manicured brow. “I’m Marion. Where is your owner?”

Mark didn’t blink. “Out.”

Marion frowned at him. “When will she be back?”

“When she pleases.”

“I don’t like your attitude.” Marion swept the springs, then the rear of the buildings.

Mark smirked. “I don’t like the color of your lipstick.”

Marion’s brows went up to her forehead. “Do you know who we represent?”

Mark chuckled this time. “I could ask the same of you.”

His amusement faded when the woman stepped closer, hand lifting. Danger filled the air.

Marion felt it coming. She thought about hitting him anyway. She was a good fighter and his arrogance was infuriating, but the huge muscles under the rolled sleeves of his black t-shirt gave her pause. Her hand lowered. “We demand taxes be paid for use of this property.”

Mark nodded. “I’ll tell the boss.”

Tired of the delay, the female on the left pointed at Mark. “We demand a payment now!”

“What do you want, exactly?” Mark wasn’t sure how Alexa would have handled this, but he did remember her saying she preferred no survivors on either side of that fight.

Marion pointed. “Those hides, for starters. We’ll collect the rest from your boss.”

“Agreed.” Mark waited, not doing the manual labor for them.

Jacob kept listening, ready to react. He didn’t want to give up the hides, but they could get them back if Alexa decided to handle it that way.

Marion and the silent female grabbed a hide each, both frowning at the conditions. Meat and fat clung to one of them and neither were tanned.

Jacob shrugged, grip tightening on his knife. “You’re taking work that isn’t finished. *You* made that choice.”

Trapped, the females marched away, two of them muttering about ungrateful men.

“It’s clear now.” Mark hoped those were the only agents around here, but he didn’t see a vehicle, so he couldn’t be sure they were alone.

Jacob turned, memorizing details about the three women like he was being trained to do. “Alexa called it.”

“And we weren’t ready for it.” Mark hated the feeling of being robbed.

So did Jacob, but two hides were a small price to pay to keep from bringing the rest of the BLM

down on them before the boss returned. Once Alexa came back, then that could happen. They'd deal with her scolding eyes gladly to erase this feeling.

"We need more meat." Mark covered the pot of rendered fat, then kicked dirt over the fire to smother it.

Jacob wiped his bloody hands and put on his cloak. "Let's hunt."

Killing something sounded good to both of them now that their peaceful afternoon had been shattered.

3

It didn't feel right to stroll down a city street with only four of their crew, but it was exciting. They were hard enough on their own to handle a lot of what the apocalypse might throw. Edward stayed a half pace ahead in the lead position, ears straining to hear any noises around them. Without Jacob along, there were no occasional footsteps to give away their presence. All gear was secured. Except for sight, no one would know they were in Huntsville.

Burnt, rusted heaps littered the road to the sides. Someone had tried to clear a path here. It ended halfway across the broken access road. Bringing up the rear, Billy scanned the vehicles for parts while occasionally walking backward to check their rear for trouble. It had been cold and quiet, with no signs of people and no feel of being watched. They almost

had everything they needed. All that was left on their list was medicine and transportation.

Edward's nose for stashes had found a dozen boxes of ammunition scattered through the businesses and homes they'd explored. The jewelry store hadn't been looted at all, though several animals had died inside. All the men had avoided crushing the small skeletons. It was their way of honoring the dead. Alexa was teaching them to have respect for all life, even those that wanted to kill them.

Edward tried to lower his hood, testing how bad the sinking sun would be.

Fire flashed across his skin.

He yanked the hood up, muttering.

The others ignored his complaints, still wishing for his new gift. He was carrying everything they'd picked up so far. His extra strength was a huge benefit.

Billy squinted upward against the same glare, but it didn't burn him yet. "How about a nursing home?"

Edward stopped, waiting for David to make the decision. The chipped paint and broken windows of the three-story building towered over the parking lot, looking a little like the House in the Corn.

David scanned the large brick complex, sighing. "Yes, but there's a lot of misery in that building. Old ghosts."

"Anything we can do for them?" Billy liked how it felt to help the dead as well as the living.

David didn't sense anger, just misery. "Ignore their words, get the bottles from their pockets, then get the hell out of there."

Edward's fingers began to itch. "We can keep going."

"No." Billy pointed. "That narrow van is perfect. It should already be outfitted for group travel and it'll be easy to fit in smaller places."

The van was in the rear of the parking lot, half hidden by burnt wrecks and fallen debris from the buildings around them. This had once been a busy medical strip, but it wasn't anymore.

Edward made the decision. "We'll clear the building and ready the wheels at the same time."

Billy immediately went toward the van.

Edward led the others to the front door of the nursing home, tightening his control so he didn't make any mistakes. "Rookie in the center."

Daniel took the Drag position, putting David in the middle where he was protected.

David flushed, wondering if he would always be a rookie to the others. He was tired of the title and he knew Jacob was, too.

The door squealed as it was opened. Dust fell over the three men.

Edward used his light, scanning. Dim walls with peeling paper and dusty floors greeted them. A wide front reception area led to hallways with multiple rooms shaded in dim shadows. Cobwebs hung over everything. It wasn't encouraging. "We'll clear it from the top."

The team eased up the steps, listening to the wood groan at holding new weight for the first time in years.

The top floor was one long room with padded cells and nurse stations with smashed glass. Bones were still on the floor where they'd fallen.

The trio split up, searching what they could reach, including rotting purses and packs stacked in the corner. They came away with little.

“These patients were being admitted to the mental ward, maybe.” David peered through the window, but didn't spot Billy in the parking lot below. The hood was up on the van, blocking his view.

Daniel was guarding them from a spot by the stairs. “Second floor might be better.”

“The basement will be the best. It'll have storage areas.” Edward led them up to the next floor.

They found rows of beds divided by clear partitions. All the beds were full. So were the lockers at the foot of each one.

David and Edward filled their cloak pockets while Daniel stood watch, excitement fading. David's talk of ghosts had tweaked their nerves, but it hadn't been needed. Everything in here was long dead.

“I'm probably good now.” David stuffed a bottle of penicillin into his cloak. “We can skip the basement if you want to.”

Edward stilled. “Company.”

Daniel and David drew guns, listening.

“Billy needs us.” Edward motioned at Daniel.
“Rear door.”

Daniel disappeared, not making noise.

Edward and David trotted down to the first floor. Both men kept their weapons in hand.

Billy met them at the door, face red. “I was robbed!”

“By who?” Edward scanned the street, aware of Daniel sneaking around the corner toward them.
He’s still fast. Good to know.

Billy gestured angrily. “The BLM. Three agents took my gun as payment for scavenging here.”

“We’ll get it back.” Edward scanned the van, not asking why Billy had allowed it. They were trained to finish Alexa’s wars, not start their own.

Billy’s voice dropped into fury. “They said they’d already stopped by our place and taken a payment from our crew! They want to meet the boss.”

“Well, they will.” Edward gestured. “How long for our wheels?”

“Just the boobytrap left. It will take me a few minutes, but it comes off in seconds. The van will need two minutes when we’re ready to roll.”

“Good. Daniel will stay with you while we clear the basement.” Edward’s anger was in his curt steps as he and David marched back into the nursing home. Under it was concern. Mark and Jacob were alone. *I shouldn’t have split us up. I hope I didn’t kill two members of Alexa’s crew less than a day after she left.*

“Wait until the boss finds out.”

Daniel’s words brought the mutters and complaints to a halt. They’d only been back at the cabin for a few minutes. It had been spent trading stories of robbery.

Edward had covered this on the angry march back to the cabin. He wasn’t sure giving in was the right thing to have done. He just didn’t want to admit it.

Billy slapped the cleared counter. “We might be punished!”

“Well, we’re about to get a chance to redeem ourselves.” David rotated toward the door. “Company.”

The five men followed, with Mark and Jacob jerking on their cloaks.

David stopped before going out, remembering his lesson. *Rookies are never first, nor last, for anything. Ever.* David slid to the side to let Edward by.

Edward paused outside the door after he exited, forcing the others to wait, to think beyond payback. He finally moved when their visitors were at the bottom of the steps.

The five men came out behind him and lined the porch wall.

“Where is your owner?” The woman in front spoke to Edward, raking him from his dusty boots

to his windblown black hair. Misty didn't introduce herself or offer civility. He was male. It wasn't required.

Edward returned the favor, instantly hating her. "Out."

Jacob and Mark exchanged brief glances. That was the wording they'd used. It was good to know it had been right.

Unlike the BLM agents, these women wore long red robes with painted white crosses on the hems and stars tattooed on their cheeks. Gun belts around their hips were worn low, implying they were used to fighting that way.

"Did you pay the BLM agents who came here?" Misty was sure they had or the cabin would be in flames.

"Because that's against the new laws!" The second woman pointed. "You'll burn if you help our enemy!"

"Quiet." Misty didn't glance away from Edward's hard stare. "What did the BLM want?"

Edward saw no need to lie. "Taxes."

"They have no right!" The second woman shouted again, vein popping out on her wrinkled forehead. "They'll burn! You'll burn!"

Misty spun around and struck the loud woman in the stomach. She followed it with a second blow to the back of her neck.

The loudmouth collapsed, bringing quiet.

Misty faced Edward again, voice that same tone of calm arrogance. "We have warrants for a group

of violent gunfighters. When your owner returns, I would speak to her about it.”

“I will pass the message.” Again, Edward chose not to provoke bloodshed without an order from Alexa. “May you come and go in peace.”

Misty’s lips curled. “I smell Safe Haven on you. If we discover that’s true, death will come to this place. It’s better that you move elsewhere if you can.”

“I’ll also pass that on.” Edward waited for another threat. He’d almost had enough of the rudeness. He was certain Alexa wouldn’t have put up with it.

Misty sensed a fight coming. She chuckled, taking slow steps backward so she didn’t lose sight of the killers lining the porch. “I look forward to meeting your owner.”

The other two women helped the fallen female up. The Fanatics were out of sight a minute later.

Edward and the team stayed where they were, processing everything that had happened. Each of them wanted Alexa home right then so they would know what to do. It was clear the BLM and the Fanatics would be back. The only part of that trio they hadn’t encountered yet was the soldiers.

A piercing scream echoed through the snowy town.

Edward sniggered in relief. “She’s back early.”

Another shriek sounded, making some of the men wince. The others joined Edward in satisfaction.

Alexa strode down the street, pulling a group of women on ropes. One of them was almost dead, staggering forward only when the rope was yanked. Blood dripped from her nose in a steady trail. The rest were fighting each other. The women slapped, pulled hair, and punched as Alexa brought them to the cabin, but they didn't attack her. Alexa's expression was angry, matching the mood of her crew.

"Half BLM, half Fanatics." Edward chuckled. "Damn, I love my owner."

The others snickered at his joke. Each time they were assumed to be captives it drove them closer to Alexa, who would never hold them against their will.

Alexa stopped at the bottom of the steps. She gestured. "They have things that belong to us."

Edward quickly searched the grumbling women who stopped fighting at his touch.

Alexa's hungry eyes kept them in place.

Edward tossed the tacky deer hides to Jacob, and handed the gun to Billy. Jacob and Mark had already told him what was taken from them. "That's it."

"Take a payment for our trouble."

Edward pointed at the last woman to threaten him.

Alexa severed the ropes around the rest. "Get lost."

The women fled together, with Fanatics chasing the agents. The robed females were certainly going to be the winners of that war.

Edward took a firm grip on his prey's arm, letting his hunger build, fangs descending.

Misty shuddered. "I'm sorry."

Edward smirked at his target.

"Would you like to answer our questions now, or after he has a drink?" Alexa had no compassion for the terrified woman who would have done much worse if the situation had been reversed.

Misty used her free hand to draw a knife from her sleeve. She jerked out of Edward's surprised grip and cut off her own tongue.

Blood gushed down her chin.

Mark snatched the knife from her hand.

Edward resumed his grip on her arm.

Alexa dug into the Fanatic's mind, but got nothing beyond religious fervor. She was too tired to do more, and unwilling to let her team use their gifts yet. Without discipline, they might take advantage and destroy the harmony of their team. "Kill her and come warm up."

Misty shivered as Edward's hand caressed her neck. Then she spit in his face.

Alexa entered the cabin as Edward took his meal.

The rest of the team observed in horror and satisfaction.

Edward paused, facing his teammates as warm blood dripped down his chin. He glared at them. “And you still want it?”

All of them nodded, even Jacob.

Edward wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Secure the perimeter, then set up a watch.” Edward resumed his meal, kneeling in the bloody snow as she collapsed.

Daniel was the last one to go inside. He took a spot at the window, watching Edward drain the body. It wasn't repulsive to the Biker at all. It was a goal.

Chapter Six

Gone

1

“**T**he ants are gone.”

Alexa frowned. “They sense trouble coming.”

“I expect you’re right.” Edward closed the curtain, not mentioning the bodies Alexa had left in the street as she captured the agents and Fanatics. Edward assumed it had been the escorts of one of those groups, though he didn’t see a vehicle. He thought they were BLM because of the absence of red robes, but it was hard to be certain through the dusky shadows and light snow that was falling again. He hoped Billy was warm enough for the sniper duty atop the cabin that he’d been assigned.

Alexa felt the tension of her team, their anger. She mirrored it in her pinched tones and bad attitude. Being robbed produced an ugly taste that didn’t want to leave her mouth. She’d felt their displeasure long before she returned to the cabin to find them being bothered. Those females were lucky she hadn’t killed all of them just for that stress.

Edward began handing out the reloads he’d finished, confident they were good. He’d taken time to make sure they were done right. Alexa hadn’t let

them use reloads until now. It was a source of pride for him that she trusted his work was good.

That was a trigger for all of them to distribute the items they'd spent the last hours laboring on.

Jacob handed out packages of dried deer meat. "Buckets cooling by the fire are ready for canteens. They've been boiled."

Mark tossed soft candles, laughing with everyone else when Jacob juggled his. "They'll harden as time goes on. The process was delayed a bit."

Daniel handed out small bags. "The chalk can be left as clues. The whistles are good for finding each other in the dark or in the fog. These phones will cover everything else." Daniel gave each of them a small black satellite phone, putting Billy's items on the counter where the rest of them were stacking his share of the gear. "I've programmed all our numbers in without names. Number one is Alexa. Two is Edward, and so on." He held up his phone. "They're all fully charged with solar power."

"I'm taking Billy's stuff out." Edward grabbed the items and went to the front porch. He gave a short whistle.

Billy appeared above him. "You rang?"

Edward snickered. "Catch."

Billy examined the pouch as Edward went inside. "Cool! I can play games on my new phone."

Edward was still laughing as he shut the door.

David tossed him a bottle. “Shake for five minutes.”

Edward saw everyone else doing it with other bottles; a few of them were leering at the suggestive movements. Even Alexa was shaking a bottle. Her lips were curving, trying to hold it in.

Laughter rolled through the cabin, bringing the mood up a bit more.

Alexa didn't tell Edward they'd done a good job. She'd been upset that they hadn't already covered these things, but she was pleased they had finally remembered. There wouldn't be a punishment this time. If it happened again, they would be treated to her coldness for a day or two, and that would be enough. Her men learned fast. She waved off the last dregs of the rolled smoke they were passing.

Thump! Thump!

Alexa's team went on instant alert at Billy's warning from atop the cabin. They hurried to the windows, hands itching to pull weapons.

Alexa sat in the chair by the fire to warm herself. She'd gotten cold while out hunting, but she hadn't needed to go far for a meal. This area was now teeming with people.

Knock-knock!

Edward peered through the dusty blinds. “BLM truck. Three men.”

Alexa sighed. “Let them in through the funnel, minus a mole. React as needed.”

Edward opened the door halfway, then placed his boot and hip in front of it to keep it from being shoved open. Next to him, Daniel braced his boot and shoulder against the back of the door.

Mark took the front position to greet their guests. “Can I help you?”

The prissy blond man scanned inside the cabin, counting people. “I’m Cedrick Washington. We’re searching for Fanatics. They’ve been stealing from people around here.”

Edward studied their guest over Mark’s shoulder, recognizing a fellow badass. Cedrick had come ready to fight if it was needed; his tool belt was overflowing with scuffed, stained weapons that had clearly gotten a lot of use.

Mark shrugged. “We’ve seen Fanatics and BLM today. Both groups tried to rob us.”

Cedrick’s face tightened. “The BLM doesn’t rob! We collect taxes for use of this land.” The agent scowled at Mark. “Are you paid in full?”

“Of course. We follow the rules.” Mark waited for the man to demand proof. That would trigger a fight.

“Good. We need loyal people here.” Cedrick scanned the hammocks and kits. “Do you plan to stay a while?”

Mark gave a pointed look. “The winter, maybe. If people will leave us alone.”

“I’ll pass the word for BLM to give you a break. Just have next month’s taxes ready.” Cedrick

delivered a charming smile. “If you deliver it to my office, there’s even a 10% discount.”

“Good to know.” Mark caught Alexa’s subtle gesture and assumed she wanted more information about this area. He motioned at their small table. “Stay for a cup of mud, Mr. Washington?”

“Love to!” Cedrick signaled his two guards to stay outside. “They’ll keep watch while we get to know each other.”

His two guards stared at the team. Wearing long brown coats and blank facades, the two guards reminded Alexa’s men of themselves—dangerous.

Cedrick filled the room with arrogant power and the smell of perfume. It was an odd mix that made noses wrinkle and stomachs harden.

Edward closed the door, sliding in front of Daniel to hide the Biker as he ducked into the closet. Daniel was the mole so the agent wouldn’t know exactly how many people were here. Edward was certain Billy would stay out of sight, too.

“Nice place you’ve claimed.” Cedrick glanced at Alexa as he stopped by a chair where he could view everyone. He didn’t linger on the lone female, but he was immediately curious.

Mark joined the man at the table. “Are you hungry?”

Cedrick grinned. “Did *she* cook it? I haven’t had a good meal in weeks.”

Mark chuckled. “Jacob cooked. Brace for it.”

Cedrick shrugged. “Oh, well. Women can do other things than cook, right?”

The mood went cold in an instant.

Cedrick looked at Alexa. “I see. My apologies. I had to know the setup.”

“You could have asked.”

Alexa’s raspy voice drew a flush up Cedrick’s frosty cheeks. “Agreed.” He studied her, impressed and horny. “Any chance you’d rent one of them?”

Alexa frowned. “They make their own deals.”

Cedrick scanned the hardbodies and found no takers. He sighed in disappointment. “That’s a shame. I could have kept the BLM off your necks. Raincheck on the mud?”

Alexa snorted. “No.”

David opened the door. “Thank you for stopping by. Have a lovely evening.”

Cedrick stomped out, robbed of a parting threat.

Daniel emerged from the closet. The two men watched as Cedrick hurried to the driver seat and sped away.

“They have a purple Humvee. It’s pretty!”

Mark chuckled at Daniel’s soft cry. Billy was probably drooling, too.

Suddenly twitchy, Edward returned to the counter where he was working on more reloads. David had the counter next to him full of medications that he was almost finished mixing.

Alexa swallowed the last cold dregs of her coffee. “We can attack, run, or wait until provoked. The end result will be the same from two of those choices. Running may let us avoid...” Alexa felt

their anger growing and didn't finish the passive choice. "Go to them or let them come to us?"

"We have a good setup here." Daniel didn't want to give up the known turf. "I say we wait, but get ready."

"I hate waiting, but that's right." Mark hoped there would be enough work to keep him busy until the fighting began.

Alexa accepted their choice. "We'll face them here. Be prepared for ugliness. This won't be a fair fight."

"There's no such thing."

Everyone nodded at Jacob's comment. Nature was set for man to kill or be killed. They were just following their design.

Alexa tried to cover all the angles. "The bravest group will come first. That's the one we should expect to have a backup plan. The other two can be wiped out. We'll need a survivor from the brave ones in case they manage to grab one of us."

Men tensed.

Edward went to the door. "I'm bringing Billy in for this."

Alexa let him. She didn't want any of her men taken by the groups, but especially not the Fanatics. When they tired of holding a captive for ransom, they sold them to Snakes. She hadn't had much contact with those odd clans yet. Alexa preferred to keep it that way for as long as possible.

"When do you think it will happen?" Mark knew they all needed sleep.

“Tomorrow. Sooner if Cedrick was more offended than he acted.” Alexa went to the counter and refilled her cup.

Around her, the men began to handle nightly chores, eager to be rested, but also eager to fight again. Being stationary was hard. Combined with no killing, it was becoming torture.

David tensed. “We have a problem.”

Edward reappeared in the doorway, expression grim. “Billy’s gone.”

2

“We head out in two minutes. Get your shit.” Alexa scanned for prints around the cabin, cursing herself for not hearing the kidnapping. She was still exhausted from helping Marshal’s men. She’d fed, but she hadn’t had time to fully recharge.

Edward stayed on her heels. He’d grabbed his kit as soon as they came out to search. He was ready now.

The others had to go back for theirs, a mistake they wouldn’t make again.

Alexa knelt at the rear of the house. “It’s packed here, under a fine layer. It was probably tossed to cover tracks.”

“Why would they take him and not leave a ransom demand?” Edward assumed it had been Fanatics while they were busy with the BLM agent.

Alexa kept searching. “They want proof that I am who they think. If I can find them, they’ll use me.”

Edward replayed her words. “What do they want you to do?”

Alexa entered the thin trees, following a broken branch. “Make a call that will bring the other descendants out of hiding.”

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“All adult Mitchels can. It’s our curse. No one can get people to show up for events like us.” Alexa found another snapped branch and kept going, confident her men would catch up. If she could find the original capture party, she might be able to disrupt any plan that had been set.

“So they’re luring you into a trap.” Edward didn’t want to trade her for Billy.

She nodded. “Into slavery. They won’t release me once I make the call.”

He frowned. “You’ll do it?”

“To save Billy’s life? Yes, of course.”

Edward felt shame at her tone. It said he should have already known that answer. “What happens if it works?”

Alexa shrugged. “A big fight. It may be the one my father predicted, the one we have to make sure he’s here for.”

“There’s not enough time.”

“Fate sets the rules. If we’re meant to make the deadline, we will.” Alexa spotted the next branch, lip curling. “They’re making it too easy.”

The rest of the crew ran to catch up. They got into their places while gearing up and locking down items that might make noise. The first few minutes were louder than any of them were comfortable with.

“We’ll work on that when we come back.” Alexa didn’t want them stressing. Once on the road for a day or two, patterns and routines would return as if they’d never taken a break. They hadn’t been off the quest for so long that they couldn’t go right back to it. Alexa stopped, forcing her crew to come to a sudden halt. Hands went out to steady those behind them.

“It’s a false trail.” Alexa switched to the Drag position. “Cedrick was in on it. His men did it while we talked.”

“How?” Edward was angry with himself. He hadn’t felt anything hinky about the prissy agent.

“Darted, most likely. The spot in the rear of the house is where he fell off the roof.” Alexa cursed. “I should have known! Cedrick asked to rent men first, not me. The BLM frown on that. Damn me!”

All her men hated that. They marched to the front of the house to pick up the tracks from the Hummer. They began hunting their prey.

“There’s one of his gloves!” Edward stuffed it in his pocket, glad of the proof they were on the right trail. “He must be awake.”

“Maybe.” Alexa concentrated. “But how did they get him off the roof...”

“Magic user.” Edward and Alexa said it at the same time.

The answer made sense. Billy couldn’t refuse the spell, but he’d fought it by leaving a trail.

Or the enemy did. Edward thought that was likely, too. Billy had strength against spells, but drugs hit them all hard because they didn’t mess with pharmaceuticals unless they had injuries.

Alexa scanned, but didn’t find a sign of her kind near them. *That doesn’t mean anything. We’re great at hiding.*

“This feels like another trap.”

Alexa nodded at Daniel’s comment. “That’s because it is. If I were them, I would try to remove a few of this crew to have better odds when I do catch up. Watch your six, my pets. It would pain me to lose any of you, but it would be a dishonor to all you’ve become to die to a Fanatic blade or BLM round because you weren’t paying attention.”

The men took her caution to heart. Muttering stopped. The cold shield of battle fell into place where it belonged.

3

Billy groaned as he was pulled from the rear of the purple Hummer and hefted over a hard, strong shoulder. He fumbled with the item in his pocket, big fingers missing the buttons. He tried again, groaning to hide the vague beeps.

The ground was hard. It crunched beneath Cedrick's feet as he carried his possession without a strain.

He's in good shape. It took real strength to carry a full-grown man this way. Billy knew. He'd done it.

“Sorry about the fall from the roof. I couldn't use magic to force you into submission. The Mitchel would have sensed that.” Cedrick put his captive into the rear of the wagon and climbed in. “Can't spend the bounty if she kills me.”

Billy tried to curl into a ball, covering the phone as it began to ring. Only part of his body responded.

“Tosha will drive now. My guards are leaving this area before the Snakes arrive.” Cedrick rubbed against Billy. “They're cowards. I'm not.”

Tosha shifted into drive. Dented and rusty, her wagon was quiet and delivered good power that quickly got them rolling over the cracked ground.

Cedrick snuggled against Billy, hands exploring as the night sky rolled by. “We weren't sure who you were at first. We've been watching the cabin for a week. Your owner's antics today proved it. No one but a Mitchel has enough sand to kill members of a large rival group, then stick around to face the rest.”

Billy fought to wake the rest of his body, fear and anger warring for control. He only had use of one hand and a foot. It was beyond frustrating. Real fear crept in as Cedrick rocked against him in quick bursts, grunting in his ear.

The phone clicked. “Where are you?!”

Cedrick paused. “What, my love?”

Billy slid the phone into his pocket, hoping Alexa was listening. Her rage would match his own. “I’m going to kill you. It won’t be pretty.”

Cedrick shivered in delight, not caring about the mess now soaking into his pants. “Maybe. But I’ll have you in every way before then. You’ll live with it forever.” He ignored Billy’s fury, curling against him as the wagon chugged down the snowy road.

Billy concentrated on his anger, smothering the shame. *When I get loose, there won’t be any stopping me. I hope the boss is ready for a new war.*

Tosha drove fast, trying to gain a lead over the Mitchel she could feel coming. Cedrick had volunteered for this crazy plan as soon as he’d found out a large group of new men were in the area. He didn’t care about anything but getting flesh. *He has to go.*

Cedrick snickered. “You’re welcome to try at any point, *normal.*”

Tosha’s lips thinned into a line, but she didn’t challenge Cedrick yet. Thin and new to fighting, his gifts were too strong for her to handle. *But not too much for a Mitchel.* Tosha smoothed dark curls away from her face, watching the frozen landscape fly by. She didn’t detect any signs of life, but she knew better than to judge a field by its empty feel. The apocalypse didn’t work that way.

Tosha rolled down the window to clear the smoke from her cigar. She loved them. When she was finished, the butt would make a perfect clue to

keep the Mitchel woman following them. It would be a long, cold walk for Alexa and her crew. At the end, death waited for most of them. *Or she'll kill all of us.* Tosha didn't care either way. She just wanted out.

4

“We’re on the way.” Alexa didn’t know if Billy heard, but she’d gotten enough to begin making plans to help him deal with the trauma of being a captive. They’d found Cedrick’s purple hummer. She hadn’t spoken since then, until the call.

Alexa disconnected the phone to preserve batteries, increasing pace as her team scowled and followed. Hatred bloomed in her gut. *I’m coming for my man. When I get there, you’ll beg him for death while I laugh.*

Chapter Seven
Stone Warriors

1

“**T**here are two trucks coming over the hill behind us.” It was close to midnight, with a full moon and a stiff breeze that kept all of them ducking their chins into cloaks between scanning the frozen ground. The good part was the lack of noise. If a twig snapped within half a mile, they would hear it. David rotated to have a clear view. He was on drag.

Alexa stopped, but didn’t move to the side of the broken road as engines shattered the silence. “Try to look warm.”

The men chuckled thinly. Traveling through a snowy landscape at night wasn’t fun, but they’d suffered through underground darkness. This was infinitely better.

Two engines roared toward them; bald tires slid as they were spotted. The first truck fishtailed, shedding ice and then regained traction.

Alexa and her team waited in the middle of the road, ready to dive out of the way if needed.

The two big trucks stopped next to them. A window rolled down on the passenger side of the first black vehicle.

A BLM agent glared at them. “What the hell are you doing?”

Alexa lifted a brow.

Kelly glared through blue eyeshadow. Her blue fingernails glinted in the moonlight as she pointed. “You may not think you have to answer to me, but you do. I’m the boss in this zone.”

Alexa snorted. “I’m busy. What do you want?”

Kelly’s cheeks turned dark. “We were betrayed by Cedrick. He took something that belongs to me.”

Alexa grunted. “I repeat, what do you want?”

“I want you to find him!”

The other agents in the truck were embarrassed by Kelly’s behavior, but they didn’t speak up.

Alexa’s team understood they didn’t have any authority. Kelly really was the power in this group.

Alexa waved at the road, tone sarcastic. “You’re screaming at me for something I’m already doing.”

Kelly paused, then coldness swarmed over her expression. “I’m the boss. I yell, you jump. That’s how it works.”

Alexa’s men chuckled.

Kelly reverted to loud shouts. “Don’t laugh at me! If I call out my full forces—”

“We’ll kill them, starting with you.” Alexa waited for the woman to threaten her again.

Kelly felt the danger. She tried another tactic. “You’ll never catch up on foot. We’ll give you a ride.”

“No.”

Kelly zipped her blue jacket against the cold wind. “I don’t get you. Even the Fanatics use transportation.”

Alexa didn’t respond since she hadn’t been asked a question.

Kelly’s scowl deepened to encompass her entire face. “The world is better off without either of you.”

Alexa shrugged. “Perhaps.” Her tone said Kelly wouldn’t be the one to accomplish it.

Hatred flashed in Kelly’s eyes. “Keep going.”

Her driver spun the tires, throwing out clumps of dirty, slushy snow.

Daniel stepped in front of Alexa to keep her from being hit. He didn’t react to the snow sliding down his chest and cloak.

“Damn descendants and their stone warriors.” Kelly rolled up the window.

Alexa snickered. “Nice.”

Daniel soaked in the praise.

They stood where they were until the trucks were out of sight, though not sound.

Alexa turned them away from the road.

The team followed her through the brush. The Drag man scuffed to cover how many people were here. There would still be prints, but they would be indecipherable to most trackers.

Edward smiled as he saw the dark city in front of them. “Thank you, Boss.”

Alexa chuckled.

As soon as the others realized where she was taking them, their mood improved. Walking was

good, but in these conditions, it was a constant drain and they needed to move faster.

Alexa led them unerringly to the nursing home parking lot, following the traces of her men. Their trip out to scavenge had left signs of them here, though only she could track it. *I would know their feel anywhere.*

The team was impressed.

Alexa waved at the small van. “Get us rolling.” She took guard duty.

Daniel disconnected the boobytraps Billy had put on the van, then retrieved the keys from under the edge of the hood. Billy had gathered what he needed to get it running, but he hadn’t implemented it all so the van wasn’t stolen before they could use it.

Jacob held the flashlight while Daniel and David added the new battery cables.

The city towered over them in giant shadows. Buildings settled, groaning. The wind blew through small areas, producing eerie moans. It was a cold, dark, ugly place to be.

The sound of a weak engine filled the lot.

Daniel dumped in the bottle of fuel fix that Billy had been hoarding for a month. The engine surged to a prewar level.

Daniel waved them over. “It’s a tough old bird. Made when Toyota cared about quality.”

Edward nodded at Daniel’s words, feeling his excitement. “You drive.”

“Company.” Alexa slid her cloak aside to reach her guns.

Every man there did the same, drawn by her action. It said whoever was coming was a threat.

Three Fanatic women wearing long red robes with inverted white crosses stomped forward.

“Kill those men!”

“Get the Mitchel!”

Two more Fanatics emerged from behind the nursing home where they’d been hiding in the shadows. They didn’t speak. They weren’t here to negotiate.

Five more red robed women appeared at the entrance to the lot.

David scowled. “Another group is coming around the corner—at least 15 strong!”

Alexa drew her gun.

More red robes appeared.

Alexa fired as the first two women rushed her.

Two bodies hit the slushy ground.

The Fanatics paused for an instant. Fear crossed their tattooed faces first. Rage came right behind it.

Alexa pushed her team back against the van as she fired. “Watch our six!”

Daniel spun around, putting his back to David. He opened fire at the group coming up behind them.

Mark flanked Alexa, but fired toward the rear attackers, like David was doing.

Alexa and the others protected the front, wiping through the front line in seconds. Torches dropped to the ground, scattering sparks.

Bullets flew. Edward grunted as one of them found his flesh. He staggered toward the van, firing back.

Alexa saw another group coming, all in robes. Many of them had guns. Alexa threw a blast of fire, confirming her status as a descendant.

The Fanatics growled or shouted, rushing them.

Alexa threw more fire while her men tossed bullets. Bodies fell, but the Fanatics kept coming.

“There’s more!” David reloaded as a large group ran through the gate.

“Time to die!” A nimble woman ran at Mark, firing wildly.

Alexa burned her alive, delighting in the screams.

The woman pinwheeled into the door of the nursing home.

Waves of smoke poured into the night air as the old building caught fire. It went up fast despite the cold weather, roaring as it consumed everything that wasn’t frozen. As the building next to it began to warm, wind blew sparks onto the wooden railing. It also began to burn.

Alexa switched back to bullets, satisfied they now had enough light to fight by.

Edward dropped onto the rear seat, hand spamming the firing mechanism as he blew shot after shot into the mob rushing them.

Jacob stayed pat in front of his crew, guns belching out lead that didn’t miss. All of them were being careful with their ammunition. The Fanatics

didn't have the same advantage. They were no longer firing, just throwing whatever they could find.

A rock slammed into the windshield. Fractures appeared in the glass.

"You have permission." Alexa reloaded as Daniel and David covered her and Jacob. The Preacher was also reloading.

"Get the Mitchel!" Fanatics ran together, hoping to get someone through.

David let his magic out. A hungry demon latched onto the nearest man.

"More magic users! Get any of them!"

The crowd ran faster, hurling rocks, knives, and insults.

Jacob was the next to let the magic have control. It formed a bubble around them, preventing the objects from reaching his team.

Mark placed a hand on Jacob to feed him strength. Mark didn't want to let his demon out. It felt too dangerous.

Edward grunted as Alexa shoved his legs into the van, then stood in front of the door. *She knows I'm hurt. Great.*

Alexa chuckled at him even as she fired. It gave her the appearance of a madwoman who didn't care if she died so long as it was a fun way to go.

The Fanatics hesitated as fear finally joined their ranks. One of them took off running back the way she'd come in. "Magic users! Beware the magic users!"

Alexa fired, hitting the mob leader.

More Fanatics took off.

Alexa and her men shot them. Her words of no survivors had been clear.

“Rifle, Jacob!”

Jacob brought his up at Alexa’s call, positive who she wanted him to target.

The running woman was still screaming about magic. She fell as a bullet went through her spine. A second shot put her down for good.

The remaining Fanatics fled in all directions.

Alexa and four of her men spread out in that deadly V, firing without mercy at the injured.

Edward stayed in the van, bleeding, while he observed for more trouble from the rear.

Alexa waved at Mark. “Try it now, while I’m here to help you control it.”

Mark trusted her. He let go of the cage door.

Immense power flew out. Horned and huge, Mark’s demon ran straight at the fleeing Fanatics, sucking down lifeforces like gulping water from a canteen. It grabbed screaming women in delight, ripping them apart, taking their energy.

“Now bring it in.”

Mark didn’t know how. He lifted both hands. “Return!”

The demon continued its rampage.

Alexa put a hand on Mark’s shoulder. “Close the cage. *Make* it come home.”

Mark forced his mind to shut the mental door. The demon slammed into him at the last second.

Mark sucked in air, panting from the energy that had taken. Letting the power out was easy. Getting it to follow orders would take a lot of work.

Alexa swept the scene. The fire was spreading, but the Fanatics were dead or gone. She didn't think this had been all of them, though. It felt light to her despite so many bodies.

The team reloaded, all a little out of breath.

Alexa gestured at Daniel. "Get us rolling. We're still a man down." Alexa slid into the rear, in the middle.

Jacob took the front passenger seat as the others squeezed in around the boss. All of them groaned or sighed as the heater began pushing out delicious warmth.

A minute later, they were rolling toward the main road. The van was warming; the tires held on the ice. Daniel took them out of the burning city, surprised it had gone up so fast. He paused at the intersection, then chose a connecting road that might save time instead of resuming their route on the main street. He doubted Alexa wanted to catch up to the BLM trucks. She would want to be ahead of them.

Alexa met Edward's eye. "Status?"

He grunted. "Just a trim, Boss."

"Lot of blood for a trim." David was sitting in it.

"I'll survive." Edward brushed his cloak aside and lifted his shirt. Blood dripped through the wound where the bullet was lodged under a rib.

“Take a deep breath.” Alexa reached over and grasped the slippery lead with her thick fingernails. She jerked it out, then placed her hand over the wound. Heat flared, burning it shut.

David now wished he’d kept quiet. Edward’s hoarse shout hurt his heart.

Edward swallowed the pain pill Alexa shoved into his hand. He was certain her handprint was burnt into his skin. He was grateful for it.

He took the canteen and drank until she took it back. Water helped blood production and he’d lost a good amount in a short time. “I thought normal bullets couldn’t hurt me!”

Alexa snorted at Edward’s complaint. “Another myth, my pet.”

Sensing it might be a good time, Edward ignored the pain to ask what the others were mentally begging him for. “Your team would like to request a reward.”

Alexa stiffened. “Is this a formal request?”

Edward glanced around. He found eyes that wanted him to keep going. “So it would seem.”

“By what right do you demand this curse?” Alexa knew what they wanted. She’d known all along.

David frowned. “It’s not a demand.”

Alexa wiped her hands on the rag Jacob handed to her. “And if I say no, will you all then find other ways to get what you want?”

“No.”

“Never.”

Alexa was comforted by the firm answers. “I will consider your request.”

The men who could, relaxed. The others stewed on what it might mean if Alexa made them all vampires. None of them would be welcome in Safe Haven, but Alexa had told them that camp was coming home. Perhaps redemption could be found then.

Edward wanted to be a part of that future, but he already cherished this new body. He wouldn’t trade it for anything, except Alexa. “I’m sorry. I should have told them no.”

Alexa grunted. “They view it as a gift, as do you. In time, it may become a curse. You must know that.”

“I do.” Edward had spent a lot of nights considering the new rift in their team.

“But...”

“I still want it, and I want it for them. We should share everything—even the curses.”

“I agree.” Alexa settled against the warm seat, drained. “Watch for clues. Billy knows we need them.”

Men stared out the windows, but their minds stayed on her words. She’d agreed. They were excited.

Alexa leaned against Edward’s shoulder. “Prove you’ve earned it. Overlook a sign, miss a detail, and be forbidden until you learn your lessons.”

Alertness kicked in. Men pushed the distractions aside to concentrate on finding the next clue.

Satisfied, Alexa let sleep claim her. *Being a vampire witch is hard.*

2

“I need to throw up. Stop the car.”

Cedrick hit the gas pedal in response, flying along the slick road. He was driving now to give Tosha a break.

Billy shrugged. “It’s your fun ride with the smell.” He let go of his stomach control.

Tosha twisted around in the seat. She spotted Billy’s green face. “Use the window!” She hit the button to unlock the control.

Billy got the window down in time, but the outside of the wagon was splattered in hot vomit.

“Gross!”

Billy let it fly again, enjoying the woman’s disgust.

“He has to stop! I’ll get sick, too!”

Billy helped things along by making more noise than he needed to. He was rewarded by the sound of the woman gagging.

Cedrick jerked the wheel as he slammed on the brakes.

Tosha staggered out of the wagon, fighting her stomach.

Billy wiped his mouth on his shoulder, leaning against his bound hands. Cedrick had darted him again and tied him up while he couldn't fight back. That had been hours ago, when they'd stopped to refuel. He'd been moved from the rear cargo area to the back seat. "Not done yet."

Cedrick got out of the car, but stood a few feet away to watch for an escape attempt. He buttoned his long coat, sweeping the snowy land in distaste. *I hate nature! It's the only thing I have in common with any of these groups.*

In front of the car, Tosha gave up the fight and puked all over the road.

Billy tried to memorize the landscape, but he could barely see through his watery vision.

Cedrick kicked the bumper in frustration, but he didn't get closer, mindful of the warning that Billy wasn't done yet.

Billy stalled as long as he could, trying to buy Alexa time to catch up. The drugs had given him a queasy stomach. He could have fought it, but this was better. Now, all of them were miserable instead of just him, and the wheels had stopped turning.

"I see smoke." Tosha pointed.

Cedrick stared at it. He knew who had caused the large fire, the same as Tosha did. Alexa wasn't far enough behind for comfort. "Get in the car!"

Tosha wiped her mouth on her robe. "Can't drive my shift yet." Tosha's robe hem was splattered, along with her shoes. The odor was strong.

Cedrick was fed up with the delay. “Man up! Your stepmother would be ashamed.”

Tosha glared through haunted brown eyes lined in blue shadow. “Slam her! She doesn’t understand how dangerous men are.”

“I’ll keep driving. Get in the car!”

Tosha was afraid to refuse. When Cedrick got mad, things got ugly.

Billy was relieved. If Cedrick drove, the man couldn’t rape him again. The short stop to switch drivers had been the ugliest five minutes of his life so far. And more of those moments were coming. He hoped he was strong enough to find a way to kill the man, but if they drugged him again, he would be helpless. *Hurry up, Boss. If you don’t, I won’t be the same person anymore. You’ll be down a man even if I survive.*

Cedrick got them rolling the instant Tosha was in, spinning tires. “We’ve lost time. That’s your fault!”

Tosha stared at the cold road in sullen silence, stomach still churning.

Billy leaned against the seat, trying to recover. His body was falling in line, but his mind was still fuzzy. It was hard to concentrate. “So. Where are we going?”

Cedrick frowned. “If you’re alert enough to talk in a calm tone, you need to be darted again.”

Billy glared at the man, letting a bit of his fury show. “I’m more fun when I can participate!”

Cedrick's head whipped around so hard the wagon jerked to the right. It almost went off the road before he gained control.

Billy hid his fear. *Now I know what a slaved female feels like while waiting for the next ugly moment. Funny. I don't care for it from either side. The woman glaring at me in the mirror would slit my throat without hesitating. Maybe I can rattle her.* "Why do you hate men?"

Tosha glared at him in the mirror. "Why do you want to restart the old world?"

Billy shrugged. "Because this is illegal in the old world."

"The old world was corrupt in every way! We had to sell ourselves to get into the bunker and then they sent us right back out as spies! I barely survived, but all my stepmother wants is my dad and our old lives back! The old world destroyed me!"

Billy studied the woman, sad for her. "I hope someone gives you the help you need."

"All I need is for you to die! Just die!" Tosha punched the seat, then the dashboard. "I want all men dead!"

Cedrick drew his gun. "What about me, my dear? Do you want me dead too?"

Tosha was too far gone to recognize the danger. "Yes! All men, even gays, must be eliminated so the true believers—"

The gunshot in the car was loud. Blood sprayed the window and seat. Billy's ears ached as Tosha slumped against the door.

“There’s your help, my dear.” Cedrick put away his weapon, smiling at Billy in the mirror. “Three’s a crowd, you know?”

Billy’s stomach rolled again. He grimaced.

Cedrick lowered the rear window further, then locked it in place. “Puke all you want. I’m not stopping again.”

Billy stuck his head out the window and let it fly. *Sorry for the ugly trail, Boss, but it is still a trail.*

“We’ll get you cleaned up when we arrive.” Cedrick’s mood had lifted with the murder. “Then we’ll have a long visit before I turn you over.”

Billy wanted to ask who his next captor would be, but his guts wouldn’t let him.

Cedrick went on as if he’d been asked. “The Snake women crave male fighters. If your owner follows, I will have delivered six men and one witch. That payoff is better than anything the bunker is offering.”

Billy grunted, hoping to keep the one-sided conversation going.

“Don’t sound unconcerned. The Snakes eat their men when they finish with them.” Cedrick smiled at him in the mirror again. “I believe you’re going to a conception party. You’ll be the guest of honor, maybe.”

Billy shivered at the cold wind on his sweaty skin, but he didn’t try to talk this time. He could feel Cedrick’s interest in him growing again now that they were alone. In this condition, it would be an unwinnable fight. *I need a little more time to get my*

mind straight. Then you and I are going to get to know each other in ways you've never dreamed of.

Cedrick smiled again, lost in his thoughts. “They’re giving me two slaves who’ve never been used. I’m going to practice on you, so it’s good for them. I like my boys to stay close. Can’t have that if they want me dead.”

Billy realized Cedrick had been doing this for a long time. His stomach churned harder as the man picked up the dart gun from the seat by Tosha’s bloody hand.

Billy tried to duck, but there was nowhere to go. The dart pierced his shoulder.

Billy slumped against the seat.

Cedrick put the weapon on the dashboard. “Seven hours until I have to stop for gas. Seven hours until I can have you again! The time is going to crawl by.”

3

“It’s getting bad.” Daniel used a light touch on the wheel. “Probably going to wreck soon. Just thought I should let you know.”

Alexa didn’t want to stop, but she wouldn’t be able to rescue Billy if they all died in a car accident. When Daniel said it was too dangerous, it was. Of all her men, he loved taking risks above everything else. “Find a spot for the night.”

Daniel veered them toward the only buildings in sight. He wasn’t sure if he’d read the name of this

area on the maps they'd scavenged, but he didn't remember it if he had.

Alexa woke her men with a sharp whistle, wanting them to be alert if there was trouble at this stop. They had no way to know if news of their presence had spread. This was a new area for all of her team. "We'll need cover for our vehicle."

"You pick it, I'll park it." Daniel cruised slowly to give her time to scan. The suburb was small, with crumbling wooden structures that wouldn't remain standing much longer.

"Follow the light." Alexa pointed beyond the identical homes. A small farm held the burnt frame of a house and a large barn that was in good condition. Her crew tensed at the sight of lights spilling from under the faded barn doors.

Daniel chose a spot where two trees were close and covered in snow. "Hang on."

The team braced as Daniel gunned the gas. The van flew toward the trees.

Daniel slammed on the brakes and let the van slide. One side scraped a tree, causing a huge clump of snow to fall onto the roof.

Daniel opened his door and slammed it into a trunk, bringing more snow. He grinned at his team in the mirror. "It's covered."

Snorts went through the group.

Alexa climbed through the narrow space, pushing Edward back into the seat when he would have exited on her heels. She didn't speak.

Edward grunted as he landed hard. He grunted again as Mark hefted him up and into the center of their line, where wounded people were supposed to be.

Alexa led the way to the barn.

“I can handle the road a bit longer if you want to keep going.” Daniel doubted she would.

Alexa was already catching thoughts. “These are ours. Keep ‘em holstered.”

The team was glad to hear that, but they still surrounded the vehicle as one barn door opened.

Alexa waited for Edward, aware of his pain.

“I’m good, Boss.” Edward dragged his hurting body forward.

A face peered through the cracked barn door. “What do you want? We’re armed!”

“Good. The BLM are a few hours behind.” Alexa approached the man in the doorway, not worried over the rusty shotgun in his shaking hands. “May we share your roof for the night?”

The older man lowered the gun despite all the denials coming from behind him. “If you say the right words, you can share our food, too.”

Alexa smiled. “Safe Haven.”

The man peered suspiciously at her for a long moment. Then he lowered the gun. “Come in peace; go the same.”

Alexa held out a hand. “Mitchel.”

Cries of relief rang through the barn.

The older man shook her hand. “Bruce.”

He was rosy cheeked and jolly in a plaid shirt over dusty jeans. He even had suspenders. The only thing missing for him to be Santa Clause was the weight. He was very thin.

“This is my family.”

Alexa swept the mix of young, dark and light skinned faces behind him. “I think I like you.”

Bruce grinned at her. “I’d like to be able to say the same. Come in.”

Alexa shook her head when Mark and Jacob would have cleared the barn. She flashed a smile at the wary youngsters watching them through worn blankets and deerskin coats. “We’re not hunting here. We’re visiting.”

Chapter Eight
Skid Mark

1

Alexa's men relaxed as much as they ever did, exchanging nods with the new people. The barn was warm inside, with a cheery center fire holding various pots and kettles. The smell of burnt food reminded the team of the nights when Jacob cooked. It was encouraging. Boxes and packs were stacked neatly by a chained rear door. All the men hoped Bruce had been smart enough to find a key upon picking this shelter. Getting trapped sometimes happened, but you weren't supposed to do it to yourself.

Edward lingered by the door and tried not to look like he was in pain. Cauterizing the wound had stopped the bleeding. He should be fine once he recovered the lost blood, but it still hurt.

Edward pried up his shirt to examine his newest wound in the light.

Alexa's burnt handprint glared up at him.

Edward lowered the shirt, trying not to smile. *She marked me.* The painkiller was keeping it tolerable. He doubted it would hold once the pill wore off. He had a gunshot and a nasty burn. Both were painful injuries.

Edward switched his attention to their hosts. Alexa wanted them gathering details, even during downtime.

The new people were a mix of races, but all young. There were only 15 of them, but it was clear they were workers. All of them had calloused hands and strong arms. They sat around the edges of the barn or up in the rafters, studying Alexa and her team.

Alexa joined Bruce at the small fire. She took the cup of steaming liquid he offered. “Have you been here long?”

“A few weeks.” Bruce eased down on the moldy straw. “We hunted a bit, then stayed to prep the meat.”

Alexa heard the regretful tone. “And the BLM decided you owe taxes.”

“Yes. They say we can’t leave until we pay, but the charges keep adding up.” He sighed, shaking his salt-n-pepper head. “We’ll never have enough to pay off the debt.”

Alexa sank down next to him.

Her men took places around the walls and in the shadows. They preferred to let Alexa have the spotlight while they absorbed details.

Alexa waved off the rolled tobacco Bruce offered, positive he didn’t have enough to share. She took a pouch from her cloak and placed it on the floor by the man’s knee. “Tell them you’re moving on. They’ll try to get you to stay because you’ve paid.”

Bruce wanted to take the money, but he pushed it back toward her instead. “We won’t be able to pay the tax next month.”

Alexa enjoyed the heat from the cup. “Perhaps next month will find this area clear of them.”

“That would be a blessing to everyone.” Bruce signaled at the curious youngsters lingering around the edges to let them talk. “Join us. Enjoy the good company.”

Alexa’s anger grew as the other members of the group joined them around the fire. There were no adults, other than the older man watching her expression. The boys and girls were thin and dirty, wearing torn clothes and haunted expressions. The oldest girl was roughly 17 and beautiful. Her porcelain features surrounded by blonde curls were a stunning combination. “Both sides want her, but not the others?”

“Orders came down for the BLM to Draft all females of breeding age. They are to be sent to the big bunker for retraining. If agents bring in magic users, they even earn visiting privileges with their captive family.” Bruce’s eyes blazed. “They’re taking all the females capable of breeding and leaving the kids to die.”

Alexa wasn’t surprised, only saddened. “Have they made the demand yet?”

“Yes. We told them she’s a mute. It bought a little time.” The man stored the pouch she’d given him, changing his mind. “Now that we can pay, maybe they won’t take her.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Alexa subtly scanned her men. All of them were taking long looks at the teenager. Their glances weren’t dangerous because they were good men who would never take what they desired. They were the rarity in this new world. Alexa was forever grateful to them for their morals. It was others she worried about. “What’s her name?”

“Claudia.”

Alexa’s tone grew pointed. “Last name?”

“She was hurt when we found her. She’d fallen from a roof.” Bruce beamed at the girl. “All she could tell us was her first name, but she’s normal in every other way. Works hard.”

Alexa kept studying the silent girl. She was picking up vibes, but she wasn’t sure what kind. “Where did you find her?”

“Georgia.”

Alexa stored that. “No family?”

“She was alone in an apartment complex. No bodies.” Bruce shrugged. “We don’t know if she lived there or was brought there.”

Alexa switched topics, sensing the girl was becoming uncomfortable. “What about the rest?”

“We came from a boarding school in North Carolina. I tried to wait for their parents, but after two years...” Bruce sighed. “We were out of everything, so I decided we should go check the cities around us. The slavers found us. We ran south and got attacked by Snakes.” Bruce gestured. “We

came here and now the BLM is hounding us. We're refugees in our own country."

"Where are the other teachers?" Alexa knew the answer before he gave it.

Bruce's anger turned to sadness. "Passed on. Pneumonia, fighting, starvation. There used to be 10 of us."

"PFS has killed as many as the war." Alexa studied the group. Youth was the only advantage they had. There were few skills among them. "You could hire a protector."

Bruce perked up. "Are you offering?"

"No." Alexa softened her tone. "But there are other types of protectors..."

"You mean a creature!" Bruce's expression clouded over in fear and revulsion.

Alexa sighed. "Not all of them are dangerous to humans."

"Like vampires?" Claudia stared at Alexa. "Like you."

Alexa's men tensed at the words. Surprise came next that she'd spoken.

Alexa chuckled. She'd known they were lying by Bruce's words and tones. "No, child. Vampires crave blood. Bringing them here would be a mistake."

Claudia's childish voice hardened. "Are *you* a mistake?"

Alexa stared at the girl, now seeing the rest of the lie that Bruce let people believe. "An accident

with grave consequences.” Alexa explained it as she saw it. “I didn’t seek this form. I survived it.”

Claudia glanced over at Edward. “Not him. And the others want it. It’s in their thoughts.”

Bruce reached for his gun, scowling at all of them.

Claudia held up a hand.

Bruce paused, waiting for her to make the choice.

Alexa pinned the girl with a hard glare. “You’re the boss here.”

Claudia frowned. “I have to be careful.” Her face scrunched up. “And I’m scared.”

Alexa understood. “Of being alone?”

Claudia’s arms crossed over her ample chest. “My family was murdered by slavers!” That sweet voice was gone now, replaced by darkness. “I killed them all.”

Alexa’s men understood they’d fallen for a pretty face.

Alexa hadn’t. “You’re a descendant.”

“I have a great shield.”

Alexa motioned her men to get set for the night, then eased onto her side.

Alexa’s team dropped to the moldy floor, eager to rest, then get back on the road, but they watched the girl, no longer admiring her beauty.

“I’ll sleep a bit now.” Alexa’s lids shut.

“Promise me!”

Claudia’s shout startled her group, and the male fighters, but not Alexa. She understood how volatile

the power inside could be when the host was scared.
“I give my word. We will not help your enemy.”

Claudia’s orbs glowed red. “If you betray me...”

Edward snorted. “You’re the one we have to worry about. You lied. Now you’re threatening us.”

Claudia started to cry.

“Oh, hell.”

Alexa snickered. “You can always tell a good man from an evil one by the way they respond to a woman’s tears.”

Claudia scrubbed her face with her fists. “I’m sorry for my rudeness. Please accept our hospitality.”

“We do.” Alexa yawned. “Now let me rest. I need to be ready.”

“I’ll help.” Claudia smiled at her small group.
“We’ll help.”

Bruce and the others smiled at her or nodded.

“If a fight starts, protect your group. Run if you have to.” Alexa hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Claudia paled. “There’s a bad storm coming. We have to stay here.”

She’s a weather tracker. Alexa yawned again.
“Keep them out of the line of fire, then. We’ll do the rest. One time.”

Claudia’s eyes narrowed. “And after?”

Alexa’s tone turned back to raspy stone. “We’ll move on to finish our quest.”

“All of them do!” Claudia slapped the floor.
“I’m always alone!”

“I understand your frustration. I’m sorry.”
Alexa motioned.

Daniel came to sit by Alexa, taking over the conversation. “You have a small army here. Train them to help you. One leader can’t do it alone, no matter how smart they are.”

Alexa let sleep claim her while Daniel worked on their host. She felt bad about this situation, but nothing would deter her from the quest. Billy would be returned; they would carry on. She refused to allow all their suffering to have been for nothing.

Most of Alexa’s men were surprised that she was willing to sleep around strangers, but mostly that she was sleeping at all. With a man missing, they’d expected panic or remorse.

Edward settled near Mark, where he could view the people, Alexa, and the rear door. “She didn’t get to recharge after Marshal’s group left. I’m sure she got a meal, but that isn’t all she needed.”

Mark frowned. “Do you know how they...we recharge?”

“I only have one known way so far. Tell me what it is.” Edward enjoyed teaching, no matter the situation.

Mark thought about it. “The lifeforce she took.”

Edward nodded. “I thought that would be enough, but the lessons right after the vision drained her.”

Mark kept working on it. “So, another lifeforce...?”

“She doesn’t like doing that. I saw her expression.” Edward let Mark into one of the moments from his first month alone with her. “She once told me she needed five minutes to recharge—after she took energy from me.”

Mark frowned. “She doesn’t do that to us...right?”

“She does, at times when we don’t notice it.” Edward leered.

Mark chuckled. Almost a growl of lust, the sound drew attention from the beautiful girl sitting across from Daniel.

Claudia shivered as the tattooed man stared at her.

Daniel noticed. “He’s a good guy. I promise.”

Claudia slowly nodded. Her lower lip quivered.

Daniel was sucked in. “Hey. It’s okay. He’s not dangerous to you.”

Claudia shivered. “I was hurt. We’ve all been hurt. Has he?”

Daniel glanced at Mark, voice grim. “More than any of our team. He was locked up like an animal, for years.”

The girl shuddered this time.

Daniel frowned. “So were you.”

Claudia stiffened. “I was born in the labs.”

All the team frowned. She sounded just like Alexa.

Mark’s scowl made Claudia drop her eyes. She liked looking at his tattoos when he moved. The firelight made pretty designs on him. “He’s big.”

Daniel felt self-conscious. “We’ve noticed that, too.”

Edward and the others chuckled.

Mark pulled his knife.

The barn people froze.

Mark took a small chunk of wood from his pocket. He began to carve, falling into the zone. He knew exactly what he wanted it to be.

His teammates laughed at the strangers.

Claudia breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn’t help the fear. She’d been hurt a lot, but the worst one had looked like Mark. *I’m terrified of anyone with two bald heads.*

David swallowed a frown at the girl’s wording. Her thoughts were easy for him to follow.

“I’m letting you in.” Claudia frowned. “Though you didn’t ask permission.”

David flushed, caught.

Edward chuckled, then winced at the fresh pain from his injury. He yawned to cover it.

Mark knew anyway. He nodded toward the fire. “She’s not comfortable. Go rest with her.”

Edward stood, holding in a groan. He pointed at Jacob. “Bedroll in the top corner. View of all exits.”

Jacob took their kits to the loft while Edward knelt by Alexa. “Boss.”

Alexa forced her body to work, letting Edward and Daniel help her up. She hated to show weakness in front of anyone, including her crew, but she was exhausted. She needed energy and sleep, in any order.

Bruce poured four cups of hot tea that he delivered to the other fighters. He was thrilled to have protection for the night. He knew they weren't going to stay, but he tried to make friends anyway, glad they weren't mad about the lie. Bruce gave Mark an extra portion in his cup, hoping the bald man wasn't offended by Claudia's fear.

Mark took the cup. "Thanks." He turned back to the window, attention snagged. *Just a lightning bug.*

Edward settled Alexa on the open bedroll, then covered her with his cloak. He tugged the bedroll over her chilly body and laid next to her, feet against the wall. He had a clear view of all exits and the people. He was proud of Jacob for covering the people without being told.

Jacob settled at the bottom of the loft stairs with his coffee and the tattered bible he enjoyed reading.

Mark resumed carving, able to feel the girl's nervous glance return to him. Her fear made him feel bad. He carved faster.

David broke the silence. "That's an ugly cut. I can sew it, give you medicine for it."

Claudia pushed her sleeve up. "I tried to cut firewood today. The axe slipped."

"Well, that happens sometimes." David dug in his kit. "It's not infected yet. A couple stitches and some ointment will take care of it."

Claudia decided to trust him. "Can you help everyone else, too? We all have something that needs care."

David was happy with how things were going so far. “I’d be honored. Let me start with you so they’ll know I’m not a threat.”

She smiled back shyly. “Okay.”

Watching from the loft, Edward’s mind clicked David into place on the team. *He just became our medic. It’s amazing the way this quest is providing everything we need...* Edward realized they’d all wanted some action, gut sinking. *This wasn’t what I had in mind.*

In the distance, fate laughed. *Foolish man.*

2

“Where are we going?” Billy had been awake for an hour, but he’d waited to let his body purge more of the drugs. He’d watched the sunrise in bitter anger.

Cedrick grinned at him in the mirror. “You’ll see. We’ll be there by noon.”

Billy’s stomach twisted at the news and the smell of fuel that Cedrick had left on him after the last stop. He tried to delay. “I need to piss.”

“Go on.”

Billy tried harder. “I also need to shit.”

Cedrick knew a bluff when he heard one. His captive hadn’t been fed. There was little in him to evacuate. “Won’t bother me.”

Billy sighed. *Just leaves one option.* He shoved himself up and shoved through the half-open

window, cracking it. He fell out, taking a slab of glass.

Billy hit the frozen ground with a hard thump. Breath gone, he struggled to his feet, dripping blood from his desperate grip on the glass.

The wagon slid to an angry stop in the middle of the icy road as Billy sawed through the stretched, weak ropes binding him. They snapped as heavy steps crunched in his direction.

Billy faced his captor, too weak to run.

Cedrick shoved a dart into the gun as he approached his target.

Billy watched him, timing... He ducked.

The dart sailed over his shoulder.

Cedrick hurried to get another dart from the car. “Don’t move!”

Cedrick grabbed the dart and spun back around to find an empty street. “You won’t get far!” He searched for tracks, anger growing. “When I find you, we’re going to have another private moment. I want a payment for this hassle.”

Cedrick stalked toward the tree line, the only place his captive could be hiding.

Billy scooted from under the car and lunged into the driver seat. He slammed the door as Cedrick ran toward him.

Cedrick banged on the window with the dart gun. “Open up!”

Billy flipped him the bird. Then he put the car into drive.

Cedrick gaped as the car left... “He’s turning around.” Cedrick frowned. “Why would he... No!” Cedrick brought up a shield, but it was no match for the wagon barreling at him.

Billy plowed into the shocked man with a cry of delight, knocking the body into the air. He slammed on the brakes to watch it hit, hoping for blood.

Cedrick slammed into the icy pavement spine first. Something cracked. “Ahh! My back! My back!”

“How’s it feel?” Billy revved the engine, foot on the brake. The wagon lurched under his fury.

“No!” Cedrick couldn’t move as the wagon flew toward him again.

Billy slammed on the brakes right before hitting his target. Then he rolled over the man, slowly, enjoying every scream, snap, and squish.

Billy patted the dashboard as he kept going. “When there’s time, I’ll wash you.”

The car purred at him, shifting into a faster gear before he could do it. Billy grinned. “Awesome. Let’s go home.”

Billy steered toward the line of thin smoke still rising into the air, positive Alexa had been there. He expected to run into her along the way, though not in the same manner. Fury still burned hot in his heart. “Someone else will pay the rest of the bill. Alexa will see to it.”

Pop! The front tire blew out, sending the wagon to the right.

Billy fought the wheel, but the ice under the tires took control. The wagon went off the road and flipped into a ditch.

Billy blinked blood from his lashes, feeling more of it running down his face. He tried to get out of the crushed car, but his legs didn't want to work.

Billy tensed at the crunch of footsteps. *I just got free!*

The door screeched as it opened, revealing a dozen boots.

Susan lowered her rifle. "I told Cedrick to wait. He couldn't handle this bounty alone."

One of her guards pointed. "Tosha's body is in the front floorboard. She was shot."

Susan examined the scene, seeing the girl had already been dead before the wreck. She spotted a bag next to the body and took it.

"Cedrick did that." Billy let the red robed women tug him from the car, bracing to take whatever they dished out until he could get free again. He'd never felt so weak. "He kept talking to the body."

Susan stepped in front of Billy, scanning him for weapons. "Why did Cedrick kill Tosha?"

The woman's red hair and green eyes might have drawn his attention in another time or place. Here, Billy hated her perfect curls and the large star tattooed on her cheek. "They were both traitors. It wasn't going to go well."

Susan chuckled. “We told him that, too, but he insisted he could get the Mitchel female to come to us.”

Billy laughed, snorting from the pain in his bruised ribs. “Well, she’s coming, so he might have been right.”

Susan scanned the beaten, bloody vehicle. “Where is Cedrick?”

Billy’s grin was cold. “He’s a skid mark about a mile back. You’ll need a big spatula to pry him up.”

Susan scowled. “Where was Cedrick taking you?”

“He mentioned a Snake party.” Billy scanned the group. He found a lone male driving a BLM truck. The shaved, tattooed, earring wearing man refused to respond to his stare.

Susan signaled two of her females to check it out, then she turned back to Billy. “Hold your hands out. If you resist, I’ll shoot you in the stomach. You’ll bleed out while we travel.”

Billy sensed it wasn’t a bluff. They wanted Alexa. He was expendable. Billy held out his blood covered hands, fury becoming rage. “You’re all dead. I hope you know it’s coming.”

“We do, but it won’t be from you.” She bound his hands, tightly. “Your owner will give us what we need, then you will be disposed of. There can be no breeding with unbelievers. They must be sterilized. The future of the—”

Billy headbutted her in the mouth as hard as he could, knocking her to the ground. He ignored the

pain as he stared down at her, braced to take blows from the other females rushing toward him. “That crap is why Tosha was shot. Unless you want me dead right now, shut the fuck up!”

Susan gaped at him as blood ran down her chin from the split lip and loosened tooth. “I could shoot you!”

Billy didn’t back down. “You could, but then my boss will never give you what you want. I’m her favorite.”

Susan let one of the nervous females help her up. “Put him in the truck.” Susan went to the passenger seat, unwilling to get in range again. Her lip and tooth were throbbing.

Billy couldn’t resist taunting her as he was brought to the truck. “A scared leader isn’t in charge for long, *doll*.”

Susan glared through the window, but she didn’t speak.

Billy got into the warm truck, not sure if he would recover. He’d taken a lot of hits, and really, he wasn’t Alexa’s favorite. *If I was her favorite pet, I’d be a vampire by now. I’m not jealous, but I recognize the differences. The others do, too. At some point, that may cause trouble, but I probably won’t be there to witness it. My time on her team is almost over.*

Chapter Nine
Faster, Please

1

Billy woke as the truck stopped. He was in the very rear, bound, lying on his side. He'd fallen asleep listening to the soft tunes of a CD Susan had played on a loop since she'd found him. It was still playing now, though it had been turned down. He judged it to be around noon. Billy mourned being ahead of the storm clouds. His team wasn't. They would have the storm to get through before they could reach him. *I need to escape, or at least buy them some time.* Nothing was familiar outside the truck. He needed to stop the wheels again.

Billy used the glass windows to study his captors. Three women were in the middle bench seat. All of them were leaning against the doors or each other, sleeping. In the front passenger seat, Susan was also resting with her starred cheek against the window, though Billy thought she wasn't actually out.

He noticed all of the robed women had a star tattooed or carved on their cheek. *I just learned how to tell groups apart. That's good information.*

The tall male driver eyed the rearview mirror, then pulled onto a narrow path that ran through the

woods and rotting buildings. The truck bounced over the broken road and potholes.

Billy worked on the ropes around his wrists, trying to squeeze his hands free. He'd tensed while being bound, hoping when he relaxed there would be enough room. He stretched harder, hoping no one noticed what he was doing.

"I'll dart you with a double hit." Susan didn't open her eyes. "It will probably pop your heart."

Billy stopped moving, fury boiling. "When my boss gets here, she's going to kill all of you. Let me go now. Save yourself."

Susan snorted against the window. "I'll die for my beliefs."

"Yes, you will." Billy shoved himself into a sitting position. "What do you want with my boss?" He refused to say her name in case these people didn't know exactly which Mitchel they'd targeted.

"Alexa Mitchel is the only female of that clan. As such, she is the rightful leader of all descendants." Susan's tone deepened. "After we reprogram her to serve the true faith, she'll be *our* boss."

Billy kept digging, needing the distraction from his physical misery. Her bruised chin and split lip were pleasing to Billy, but he didn't gloat this time. "Then you'll finish enslaving all men."

Susan shifted in the seat. "Only the adults. The boys are being spared for labor and future breeding programs."

"But female children are allowed to live free?"

Susan shifted again, wishing the ride was over. “We will always keep a small stock of breeding adults to prevent extinction. We’re not stupid.”

Billy kept laboring on the ropes. “No, just crazy to think that will succeed.”

Susan finally sat up. “Once males like you are gone, the world will be a beautiful place!”

Billy understood she wasn’t going to be converted by words. It would take something stronger to reach Susan, but Billy didn’t want her to regret her choices. He wanted her dead so all those men would be safe.

Susan stared at him in the side mirror. “Why do you fight for a woman if you don’t want female control?”

Billy tossed it right back. “Why do you hate men when you know you can’t survive without us?”

“We survive fine!” Madness spilled over, waking everyone. “We just need you to squirt and die!”

Billy grinned at the other women who were now staring between him and Susan. “I think she needs to get laid.”

“Slam you!” Susan gestured. “Pull over. I need to piss.”

Everyone hid snickers except the male driver. He pulled over and stepped out to ensure the area was clear for a bathroom break.

Billy hadn’t seen the guy smile, frown, or show any emotion. It made him nervous for a reason he couldn’t identify. *It’s like he’s been neutered.*

“He has.” Susan twisted in the seat to smirk at him, confirming her descendant status. “Like you will be. She may rescue you, but you’ll be of no use to her. I love my job.”

Billy’s amusement fled. The cold shield of battle fell into place.

Susan tensed for a quick fight.

The other women fled the vehicle, slamming doors to keep Billy inside with Susan. Their crazy leader didn’t care who she hit while trying to nail a target.

Billy stared. He didn’t blink or look away. He let her see what was coming.

Susan gathered energy, deciding to neuter him now.

Billy timed it like he had with Cedrick’s dart. He ducked as she fired, letting the blast hit the rear window. Glass shattered, raining shards over the seats and street.

Susan fired again. “You can’t escape me!”

Billy curled into a ball behind the thick seat divider as her blast blew stuffing and cloth into the thickening air.

Billy shifted his legs to imitate sound, but he stayed where he was.

“Gotcha!” Magic blasted into the other side of the divider, followed by Susan’s grunt. “Where are you?!”

Billy rolled, hoping she didn’t have much energy left.

Susan panted, trying to pull energy for another blast.

Billy used the pause to piss her off. “Tired already? Alexa can do this for hours. You’re weak.”

“I’ll show you weak!” Susan tossed the last of her energy in a crackling ball that set the truck on fire. It trapped Billy in the rear. “Get out of that you bastard!”

Billy pushed himself through the rear window hole, grunting as glass shards raked his arms and neck. He immediately lunged from the truck bed.

He landed in another breathtaking thump, sucking in oxygen.

Susan hurried out of the truck, but she didn’t have energy left for more magic. She ran at him with her gun, pulling the trigger wildly.

Billy dodged the first two shots, running toward the other women who had stopped to watch the fight.

They fled, screaming.

Billy dove behind a thick tree as more bullets sprayed the ground and woods.

Click!

Billy ran from the woods straight at Susan, who tried to reload. He dove, butting his head into hers.

Susan staggered, falling.

Billy let his weight crush her as they fell together, slamming his head into her chin. He did it a third time as they landed, then again as they rolled. Blood splattered the ground from both of them.

The driver rushed over. He lifted Billy off Susan and slung him toward the other females.

Billy got to his feet and ran at the robed women, brain cramped in pain. He slid on top of the knife Susan had dropped as she fell.

Billy sawed on his binding, growling at the three women trying to gather the courage to stop him.

The Fanatics ran into the woods this time and didn't come back.

Billy flexed, snapping the remaining threads. He rotated to confront the driver.

The driver fired the dart gun he'd been given in place of a real weapon.

Not expecting the neutered man to be armed, Billy wasn't ready to duck. The dart plunged into his neck.

The driver watched him fall, then looked down at Susan. She was unconscious. Blood dripped from her mouth and nose. The driver glanced at the burning truck. He grunted, hefting Billy over his shoulder. He vanished into the snowy landscape while the truck burned.

Susan didn't wake up. Snow fell over her as the storm restarted.

2

"I'm coming!" Alexa jerked awake.

People in the barn cringed.

Edward put a hand on her arm, but didn't move otherwise or speak. Dusky shadows floated through

the barn loft as sunlight finally faded. The full day here had been good for brains that needed sleep and injuries that needed to heal, but it had been hard on their nerves. None of the team liked waiting.

Mark motioned the barn people to calm down, though Alexa's shout had startled him, too. He'd forgotten about her nightmares. She hadn't had many since being bitten by the vampire baby, but it was obvious that issue hadn't gone away.

Alexa shuddered. "Time to go."

Her men began gearing up, packing things. The storm hadn't lasted long, but it had dumped a copious amount of white flakes. They also drew on winter gear.

The barn people observed, expressions needy.

Alexa joined Claudia. "You can't stay here. A lot of fighters will use this route to reach the eastern bunker."

Claudia frowned. "We've been traveling for a year. I don't know where to take them."

Alexa jerked a hand. "West."

Claudia felt Mark turning in their direction. She refused to let him scare her this time. "But that's radiated. Nothing lives there now."

"We've passed many towns where you would be welcome, even as a magic user." Alexa took her cloak from Edward as he came down with all their gear. "Just pick carefully."

Claudia tried to be brave. "I'll pick a good one."

“I believe you.” Alexa pulled on her cloak, mind in chaos. “The agents will be here soon. You need to go now.”

Claudia sighed. “We’ll be gone in an hour.”

“Time’s already up.” Daniel peered through the cracked barn door. “Two BLM trucks. They blocked our van.” He was angry they’d discovered the van at all. “I’ll do better next time, Boss.”

“I have no doubt.” Alexa stepped outside, flanked by her team.

Claudia got her people dressed and kept them quiet, hoping Alexa would be able to make the agents leave again. If not, everyone would lose their freedom right here.

“We lost the trail.” Kelly frowned at Alexa as she exited her truck. “You need to get on the road now.”

Alexa drew her knife and tossed it.

The blade pinned Kelly to the truck by her hair.

“You bitch!” Kelly ripped the knife free. She drew back to throw.

Alexa’s men stepped in front of her, glowering.

Kelly blanched, lowering her arm. She knew her backup agents weren’t enough. “Damn you all.”

Alexa strode forward, hand out.

Kelly gave her the knife, fighting not to attack.

Alexa walked into the middle of the road. “Daniel, our vehicle.”

“You got it, Boss.” Daniel hopped into the van and fired up the engine. Before Kelly could order

someone to move their truck, Daniel shoved it out of the way. Snow flew up. Agents recoiled, shouting.

Daniel pulled the van over to pick up his team.

“You owe me for that!” Kelly’s shout didn’t hold much anger. She was at a huge disadvantage.

Alexa slid into the cold passenger seat. She placed a hand on Daniel’s wrist. “When we’re far enough to buy Claudia time to go, I’ll want us on this trip alone.”

Daniel smiled at her soft touch. “Anything you want, you got it.”

Alexa sighed, leaning the seat back as the rest of their team climbed into the rear. “I want to go back to our cabin with a full team and finish our break.”

“Same.” Daniel shifted into drive and steered toward the main road. “We’re the badasses now. If we can’t do it, the rest of the country is screwed.”

Alexa chuckled. “Speaking of screwed...”

Kelly and her agents hurried into their vehicles, glaring at Daniel for the damage.

Alexa concentrated. “Go north. Then west for a while. We’ll leave our company around there.”

Daniel drove by the BLM trucks, not gloating to give them warning of what was to come. He had the patience to wait for it.

In the rear, Edward dug through his kit for one of their pain pills while the others checked gear as if they were about to start walking again. The needs were the same.

As the barn faded in the mirror, Alexa wished Claudia luck, then put the group from her mind. She had her own people to care for and one of them was in trouble. She could feel Billy's life sliding toward the edge. "Faster, please."

Daniel sped up.

The other men frowned. Alexa was only polite when she was scared for one of their crew. Nothing else rattled her.

3

"Let me go. My boss will reward you."

The big driver kept crunching through the drifts.

Talking was the only option he had at this point, but Billy couldn't make himself keep trying. He now hated the man carrying him. Billy couldn't wait to slit the driver's stomach open and yank out his guts, but he had to. The drugs had him locked down again, except for his mouth and brain. He wasn't even certain if he was a whole man still. He couldn't feel anything below his neck.

The driver crunched through the hard drifts as if they weren't three feet deep. *Like a fucking zombie.* Billy assumed Susan's spell would have done the same to him.

The ice broke. Both men fell to the ground in a heap.

Billy twisted his head to keep from smothering under the deep snow, searching for air.

The driver rose, grabbing Billy's arm. He dragged him across the field, face down.

Billy struggled to suck in air between smacking into tall drifts. He ordered his arms and legs to work, but they refused.

The driver hefted Billy up. He dropped him over a hard shoulder.

Billy gasped in oxygen. Tears welled as he coughed and drew in more.

The driver increased his pace through the snow.

Smoke hit Billy's nose, alerting him to civilization. Fear hit next. He could smell it coming from other captives even though he couldn't see them yet.

A scream echoed, making Billy wince. There wasn't just that one scream for mercy. There were dozens. Billy strained his neck for a view, heart pounding.

He counted 50 tents and multiplied it by two people each for a count. Vehicles made a thick barrier near a wide corral where bleeding, broken men shivered or wept. His heart thumped again. The campsite was dotted in red robed Fanatics who turned at the sound of feet crunching through the ice. Expressions lit up in hunger and hatred.

"I'm in deep shit."

The driver grunted. "Yes."

Billy was surprised by the response, but there was no time to work on the man as he entered the camp.

Women came to meet him, ready to kill or reward. It was often the same result.

The driver dropped his load at their boots.

“Good work!” Carrie stared down at Billy. “Where is Susan?”

Billy sniggered through the pain. “I got this migraine from her.”

Carrie noted the purple bruises on his forehead. She made a note not to get in range of his lunge.

Billy’s stomach turned as he realized he’d given away one of his few defenses.

Carrie evaluated him “You have many injuries. How long since you were taken?”

“Two days, 19 hours.” Billy was counting the minutes, too.

“How long without water or food?”

“The same.”

Carrie was impressed. “The Mitchel family knows how to pick amazing fighters.”

Billy waited for more, too dizzy to figure out a way to escape. *Man, I feel rough.*

Billy’s skin broke out in goosebumps as the Fanatic leader kept staring at him. She wasn’t weak. She wasn’t even armed as far as he could tell. There was nothing to be scared of, but he suddenly was.

Carrie motioned to her personal guards. “Take him to my tent. Call me when the drugs wear off.”

“I can talk now.” Billy grunted as two zombied men grabbed his arms and hauled him up.

Carrie chuckled. “I don’t want your mouth, sweetheart, though I will use it.”

Billy grimaced. *This must be what it feels like to be a woman. It sucks!*

Dori, second in command, slid a hand up Billy's arm as he was led by. "Nice."

Billy scanned the short, squat blonde who had arms as big as his beneath her faded robe. "Not a chance."

Dori chuckled. "I do want his mouth."

Billy's neck hair lifted in the cold afternoon breeze. His attention was snagged by the sight of men on chains. The slaves on leashes also wore red robes, but the cloth was very short. Some even had sleeves cut off to show more skin. It provided no protection from the weather and no dignity. The broken men didn't look at Billy as he was taken toward the center tent.

Carrie turned to the weary male driver waiting for her instructions. "You've done well."

The man relaxed. "Thank you."

Carrie waved at a guard. "Put him in the corral with the others."

The driver froze, face stunned. "Why?"

Carrie chortled. "You're too old. We have your DNA in your two-year-old son. I don't need you anymore."

"Go to hell!" The driver didn't fight as Dori took a tight grip on his arm.

Carrie nodded. "Yes, I will, but first, I'll make sure women rule this world." She strode toward her warm tent.

Dori followed. She wanted fresh meat. She loved this new life. “Will you share?”

“He’ll be available for public use after I break him in.” Carrie kept walking. “Members who have taken the loyalty oath may have an hour if they can pay the fee.”

“How long will he be here?” Manda hated using men at all, even for breeding, but she was only in charge of security. She didn’t make the rules. “He needs to be sent to the bunker for the reward—before the Mitchel arrives. She already has five good fighters.”

Carrie stopped, frowning at Manda. “Do you want my job?”

Manda immediately retreated, hand coming up. “Please. Don’t.”

Carrie wanted to send her ice power, but the bookworm was also the best gunner she had. “Don’t ever do it again.”

Manda sank to her knees. “Thank you!”

Carrie marched by her, nose in the air. “Don’t thank me, Manda. I’ll celebrate your death when it comes. Weak women will not be in my final command structure and you are definitely that.”

Manda pushed her glasses up as Carrie strode away. She shoved her bandana around loose black hair and stomped to her tent. *Maybe I can use this opportunity.*

Billy stored that conversation as he was taken into a warm tent and shoved into a folding chair. *Maybe Manda would like to ride me out of here.*

Billy worked on regaining control of his body, not sure how the leader intended to have sex with him when he held no attraction for her. She wanted men in chains. Knowing she was actively chasing that goal made her the ugliest woman in the world to him.

Billy scanned the sparse tent and found a table with several syringes on it.

His stomach dropped. *Alexa!*

The guards tied his hands, then left the tent.

Billy fumbled for the phone, sliding to his knees to reach into his pocket. He hit the buttons in the order he'd memorized since getting out the first call. He sucked in air as it began to ring, positive he was about to pass out.

“Where are you?!”

“By a high—” Billy was knocked over as the phone was taken from him.

Carrie cleared her throat. “We are waiting for you, Mitchel. Follow the highway to the smoke.”

“Price for his unused return?”

Carrie laughed and hung up the phone.

4

“It’s time.”

Daniel had been waiting for her order. They were rolling along at 30 miles per hour, with the two BLM trucks on their bumper. The agents were driving side-by-side, trying to make sure Alexa didn’t ditch them.

Mistake. Daniel eased off the gas, but didn't hit the brakes to give any warning lights. As soon as he dropped even with the two trucks, windows came down, assuming Alexa wanted to communicate.

Alexa gave Kelly the finger.

Daniel laughed, jerking the wheel. He hit Kelly's truck in the rear panel, sending it spinning off the icy road.

Daniel gunned the gas to catch up to the other truck of shocked agents who were now reaching for weapons. He slammed into that one, shoving it ahead of them. Metal groaned.

Daniel hit the brakes, then gunned it again, searching for the perfect spot. He attacked.

The second BLM truck slid off the road and flipped, scattering metal, plastic, and bodies.

Daniel straightened the van, grinning. "That was fun!"

Men laughed, settling in for a real ride.

Now that they were alone, Daniel increased speed until they were flying along the slick street.

No one worried over it. Daniel and Billy were hell on wheels.

Alexa concentrated on her missing man, able to feel his fear. Billy wasn't frightened by much. None of her men were. That's why she chose them. If they were scared, there was a good reason for it.

Alexa lowered the window a bit, unable to take the smell any longer. It wasn't the dirty bodies they needed to wash, or the muddy gunk on their boots.

Billy's thick scent was missing. It made the air thin, weak.

The frozen landscape blurred in the windows as Daniel went faster. He could feel the danger, too. Miles went by quickly as heat poured from the vents. Steam began coming from under the hood.

"He was here."

Daniel slowed at David's mutter, catching a glint of metal. He pulled over behind the burnt wreck and waited for orders.

Alexa opened her door to the cold wind. "Two on duty. Everyone else search in sight."

"These are the tracks I've been following." Daniel examined the tire tracks frozen into the snow while Alexa and Edward stalked the accident scene together. They'd passed a lot of wrecks along the way, but none of those had carried the feel of their team.

David had Billy's signature clear in his mind as he scanned. His nose was too cold to smell, but he still tried. Icy air swarmed in, stinging, but not giving anything.

Alexa studied the frozen body of a Fanatic with red hair and a large star tattooed on the cheek that wasn't smashed in. She had a split lip and bruised chin, but those hadn't come during this fight. The bruise was yellow where it should have been purple. Bruises didn't keep changing color on dead bodies.

She saw two sets of identical footprints next to it... *Except one set is heavier.* She stood, following

that heavier print toward the trees. “This way. Lock it up.”

David had been expecting her decision to leave the van. Like the others, he’d also been tracking their man mentally. He’d gotten several flashes that confirmed Billy was in trouble. They’d found the first crash site before the weather had forced them to take shelter in Claudia’s barn. This one was better because it was clear that Billy was still alive and fighting hard to get free.

Mark locked the van and put the keys under the hot hood. He and Daniel fell in with Alexa, putting her in the center. The snow had stopped, but the wind hit them in the face in icy blasts that stole their breath.

Edward stayed close, ignoring his aching injury. He felt guilty for even noticing it after finding all the signs of what Billy was going through.

Alexa followed the prints, mind spinning on what would happen when they found Billy. She wanted all of her men to be alive when the fight was over, but she also wanted his kidnappers dead. *No one takes what’s mine. It’s not a matter of ownership or loyalty. If I let my people be taken, the Mitchel name means nothing. I’ll die before I allow that.*

The night went silent around them as the team began crunching over the icy field.

Chapter Ten

Mind Your Business

1

Late evening fell with a heavy breeze and another snowstorm. It came in thick layers that coated their cloaks and headcover. The temperature dropped swiftly, making foot travel through the woods a miserable experience.

Alexa wanted to keep hunting, but she refused to sacrifice all of them to nature. The weather was dangerous. She had to hope Billy was strong enough to survive. “Find a spot.”

The men were both relieved and worried. It was good for them, but bad for Billy.

“A shed or a garage?” Edward pointed in two directions.

Alexa chose the one closest to their destination. She strode toward the garage, spotting the collapsed home attached to it. “Spread out. Clear and secure.”

The V felt wrong without Billy. It wasn’t even. It didn’t move smoothly. Edward slid into the middle to fill the blind spot, missing his friend. He liked knowing Billy was right behind him. He trusted Jacob, but the Preacher was still a rookie. Billy was seasoned and he’d come from Safe Haven.

Jacob flushed, realizing he should have covered the blind spot since he was last in line and odd man out. “Sorry. I got it.”

Edward resumed his place. Jacob had a lot to learn, but he was quick on the pickup. Edward didn’t doubt there would be a time he felt as safe with the Preacher as he did with Billy.

David scanned the area, also sniffing. Over the last weeks, Alexa had been training them to use all their senses. They’d done several more sessions in the dark, but also under water and in trees. David had excelled in all of them. Alexa was a wonderful teacher. He was never bored.

Alexa didn’t draw her gun as they opened the garage. She knew it was empty. If anyone had been inside, they would have already fled and nature would have already attacked.

The garage was built for two cars, with a door between them in the rear, where it met the collapsed home in a huge pile of rubble that completely blocked off the shelter. Even the wind wasn’t coming through.

Edward cleared the two rubble littered rooms of the home while David stood watch on the door.

Daniel covered the garage windows.

Jacob and Mark stayed with the boss, shining lights as Alexa roamed the debris, digging things out.

When Alexa was satisfied she’d looted everything they could use, she went to the door.

She began to make a fire in front of it, frosty breath coming out in steady streams. Normally the team would have done this chore. Alexa used the labor to keep her hands busy. It would be a long night.

Alexa began pulling out her supplies, surprising them that she was going to cook.

It feels wrong. Edward rolled his eyes. He sat his canteen by her knee, like she usually did for them, not certain if he could adjust. Alexa was the leader. Anything else was wrong.

Alexa motioned toward the far corner of the garage. “Beds there. We’re leaving the front door open, the fire burning.”

Most of the men liked that. It said she wanted someone to provoke them.

Edward wondered why. He knew why *he* wanted to fight right now, but Alexa never let her emotions rule her choices. He knew there had to be another reason she wanted to be the badasses in view. He stewed on it while clearing the ground for their bedrolls.

Alexa scraped her knife against the fire rod, using the spine of the blade. The spark ran down the metal in a neat, quick flare that shot into the tinder. Small flames began to grow.

Alexa blew lightly, helping the tinder catch fire. She’d taught her men to carry dry firewood for moments like these, as did she. All of them had been collecting pieces during this trip, stuffing branches and sticks into pockets to thaw against their bodies.

She had enough for the first fire. As it burnt down, her men would toss theirs on to keep them toasty. Thanks to the wind direction, the smoke from the fire would stay out while the heat collected in the rear, where they would sleep. If it shifted during the night, there should still be enough open air to keep it safe.

Alexa took the kettle Mark handed her and dumped in the water. While waiting for it to boil, she settled onto her ass and dug more baggies from her pockets.

Edward pointed at Jacob. “Watch and learn.”

Jacob joined Alexa at the fire, hoping he could become a better cook. None of them had been able to increase his skills in that area so far.

“Spoon.”

Jacob dug his out, taking it from the baggie. It was pristine, like the rest of his gear.

Alexa scooped a spoon of brownish yellow powder. “This is ground chicken bouillon cubes. If you use too much, it all tastes salty. If you use too little, it comes out watery. One even spoon for our big pot.”

Jacob listened closely, trying to memorize it. He hated not being good at something, no matter what it was.

“More water.”

Jacob gave her his canteen.

She added it. “Wait for a full boil before adding anything else. That prevents the mushy issues.” She

tossed him a baggie. “Tell me what’s in it, by the smell.”

Jacob sniffed the dark baggie without opening it. “I like Peas and carrots.”

Alexa chuckled, taking the baggie back. “So do I.” She tossed him another one. “And that?”

Jacob sniffed again. “Uh... Dried chicken?”

“Good.” She tossed one more. “And that?”

Jacob took a deep sniff and blew it out, nose wrinkling. “Mold?”

Alexa frowned, taking it back for her own sniff. “Good call. It used to be dried pasta. Must have gotten wet.” Alexa dumped it out next to the fire to dry. She would burn it later when the fire needed it. “I think I have one more...” She dug deep in her cloak and came up with another dark baggie. She sniffed it, nose wrinkling like his had. “Cheap baggies.” She dumped the goop out with the rest of the mess, sighing. “Okay, we’ll improvise. Who has a box of pasta?”

Three hands lifted.

Alexa snickered. “One will do.”

Mark tossed his to her.

Alexa opened the box, putting the garbage with the goop so it didn’t blow away before it was needed. She checked the box of macaroni. “We’re good.”

The others gravitated toward the fire, enjoying the sound of her calming voice.

Cold wind blew in, bringing a light shower of snow that quickly melted onto the floor. The garage was warming.

Mark handed her the lid for the pot.

Alexa covered it. “They say a watched pot never boils. Obviously, that isn’t true. What does it mean?” Alexa slipped off her long sleeve shirt, enjoying the breeze.

David hung her shirt on the wall to dry. All of them were soaked from trekking through the storm. “Hit me.” He’d already chosen hanging spots on the same wall.

Clothes flew through the air, followed by boots and cloaks that were balled up to prevent the loss of their treasures.

David impressed them all by catching or ducking nearly everything. Closest, Jacob had been able to get his boots by the man, but that was it.

David grabbed them as he staggered to the wall, enjoying the laughter of his team.

While David hung their items, Alexa looked around with a lifted brow. “An answer?”

“Stay busy while you wait.” Jacob knew this lesson was aimed at him. He tried to do well. “Get other things ready.”

“Both.” She continued. “Give me the old world interpretation, then the real meaning. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop?”

Jacob frowned. “The mind needs to be busy or the hands do stupid shit. Also, the opposite. But it

means if you stew on bad thoughts, like revenge or hatred, it will consume you. It's all you'll hear."

"Close enough." Alexa blew on the fire again to get it burning hotter. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

Jacob frowned. "Slang too?"

"Yes."

"It's calling someone stupid. Interpreted as not expanding your mind is a waste. Real meaning is every mind is important, that education should never be denied to anyone."

Alexa didn't smile like she wanted to, positive he already knew what was coming. "The connection among the three?"

Jacob snickered. "I got it on part two. It's this moment, this lesson. It's important. You want me to remember it."

"Do you know why?" Alexa scanned the darkness outside the garage while she waited for his answer.

Jacob laughed this time. "Yes. You're tired of heartburn."

"Excellent." Alexa chuckled with her team, resisting the urge to stroke Jacob's shining hair as he leaned over the pot. He kept himself clean as much as possible. She loved that. She didn't favor any of her men over the others, but rookies needed more love at first than the others. After, they cherished every drop of affection, like she did.

Jacob felt her regard. He enjoyed the personal time with her, no matter the lesson.

The others frowned. She was being nice again.

Alexa lifted the lid from the boiling water. A nice smell wafted, bringing stomach growls.

Alexa pushed the rest of the ingredients toward Jacob. "Finish it."

Jacob stopped laughing. "What do I do?"

"What do you usually do?"

He flushed again. "Dump it in, stir, and hope."

Alexa grinned. "That's all you have to do now."

Laughter spilled into the night.

Alexa tensed.

A minute later, she rose, grabbing her wet things from the wall. "Follow at dawn, fast and hard, but not before then. Let nothing stand in your way." She was gone as soon as she dressed.

Tension filled the barn and the five men.

Jacob added the items to the boiling water, wishing her luck.

The others settled around the fire, except Edward. He stood by the door, aware of his responsibility. He had to keep them all alive, no matter what came. He had Alexa's job now. *I don't want it, but I'll do it right.* He caught Jacob's attention. "Keep it stirred. Time 10 minutes, then we'll all taste it."

"You got it." Jacob tried to keep it going, like the rest of them would do. "What about the leftovers?" He always had that when he cooked.

"There won't be any tonight."

Jacob brightened at Mark's words. "You think?"

“Alexa made it. Even you can’t screw that up.”

Jacob laughed with the others. Good-natured ribbing didn’t bother him. He held his own in every other way.

“I hear an engine.”

Edward’s words stopped the amusement. Everyone listened, ready to grab their wet gear.

Edward picked out thoughts from the arriving people. “The BLM. Looks like they found another truck.” He glanced around. “Should we invite the ladies in?”

The other men snickered.

Edward stepped out, cold soaking into his bare feet with no sign that it bothered him.

The BLM trucks eased toward the firelight, trying not to get stuck or run into any of the covered debris. Many of the homes and farms around here had small ponds, both fishing and septic. If they judged wrong, they would fall through the ice and be stuck until a spring thaw.

Kelly rolled down the window, face cool.

“We’d like to share your shelter. Please.”

Because she asked, Edward agreed. “If you leave when I tell you to.”

“Fine.” Kelly exited the truck, frowning. “If you attack us, we’ll recommend death at your trial.”

Edward pointed at the side of the garage they’d cleared. “Bedrolls go there. Fire’s all yours when our meal is done.”

Kelly scanned the half-naked men, then the gear drying on the wall, seeing the garage had been

lightly cleared with beds in the rear and the fire in front. Kelly frowned at the backward camp.

Edward saw her disapproval and shrugged. “You hide in your dens. We don’t.”

The smell of the garage finally convinced her. Kelly’s stomach growled. She wore a deep frown as a mask while she directed her girls to places around the garage where they could see all the men. She was sick of traveling. The lives she’d lost in the accident were also on her mind, but Kelly forced herself to wait for that revenge. “Where’s your boss?”

“Out.” Mark recognized two of the women. Alexa had spared them in front of their cabin.

“I’m not staying here.” The driver of the new truck stormed back to it. “I’m going on. Anyone want to come with me?”

Edward waited while the women made their choices. As the truck drove off, too fast in his opinion, eight BLM females settled into the barn.

Jacob didn’t comment on the women wearing the same shade of eye shadow and fingernail polish, but he found it odd.

David leaned closer to the rookie. “Different groups have different colors.”

Jacob made the next connection. “Like the star tattoos on the Fanatics.”

“Exactly.” David’s worry of always being the rookie faded a bit at being able to teach something.

A coyote yipped outside, echoing into the barn. Another coyote answered, sending shivers through the women.

Shana scowled at the calm men, pink eye shadow smudged. “Your owner is out there, alone! You should be helping her. Those animals are dangerous!”

Mark chuckled. “You don’t know our owner.”

Kelly pushed off her boots. “You sound like you want her to be attacked by wild animals.”

Edward grunted at Kelly’s accusation. “If she is, one of us will have a beautiful new fur coat. What’s the issue?”

Their faith in Alexa to win against a pack of coyotes made the women jealous, and then angry that they didn’t inspire the same loyalty from their followers.

Women began disrobing, hanging wet things, pulling off boots and socks.

Mouths went dry. Edward exchanged a glance with Mark. *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.*

Mark flashed a hand message.

Edward’s lips twitched. Mark was right. If they could handle Alexa, these women didn’t stand a chance. No one was as hungry, as demanding, as relentless. She’d made them strong enough to resist the charm of eight enemy agents who wanted them in chains.

David gestured. “Let’s see that gunshot.”

Edward obliged, lifting his shirt.

The women gasped at the ugly hand burnt into his skin overtop the hole.

David inspected it. “She does good work.” He smeared on a dab of ointment, then returned to the fire circle.

The women waited for David to offer his medical services to them. Their various cuts and bruises glared at him.

David held silent, refusing them service unless they asked for it. If they did, he would charge them a fair price.

Edward studied the women as he stood by the door, enjoying the cold. While he stored details, he listened to their conversations and tones, judging the danger.

Kelly sank down by the fire, running fingers through her wet hair. “What are you having?”

Jacob stirred the thickening pot of food. “Improvised chicken noodle soup. You?”

Kelly grimaced. “Beef stew. Rehydrated?”

“Yes. You?”

Kelly straightened her button up blue shirt as she sat, ignoring their glances at her tightly wrapped legs in the wet jeans. “No. We ran across a farm that hadn’t paid taxes. We took a package of beef.”

Jacob didn’t ask if they’d forced the man to kill his cow or if he’d sold that meat willingly, but he wanted to. “Drinking?”

Kelly gestured at the open door. “Water. Snow melt. You?”

Jacob tried to encourage a friendly evening. “Maybe hot chocolate if the other men feel generous.”

“We may have a few packs of chocolate, too.” Shana tugged her fur lined pink jacket off, glad to be out of the truck. Her arm hurt from all the driving.

“Cool.” Jacob replaced the lid, turning on the charm. “After we’ve eaten, we can sit by the fire and tell stories or listen to music.”

Kelly scowled at him. “No sex, and we’re not your maids.”

Jacob put a hand on his hip. “Hey! I was about to say the same to you.”

They both laughed.

Kelly realized she liked the scarred man and withdrew a few feet. She had one huge goal in life and until it was accomplished, she didn’t have time to train a slave.

A good vibe went through the barn. Magic wasn’t used, only charm. Edward memorized that good vibe, monitoring it for a change that said danger was coming again.

“Do you care that your daughter was killed?” David ignored Edward’s frown at him for using his gift.

Kelly’s face tightened. “Tosha was my stepchild. She ran away to join the Snakes instead of staying with me to rescue her father. If she’d been alive, I would have executed her.”

The men stored that hardness, all losing the mood to please the angry women.

“Is it okay to ask you some questions?” Shana was the communications officer in the next zone. She’d been getting an update when the call came about Cedrick’s betrayal.

Daniel sat next to her, digging through his pocket. “If we get the same privilege.” He took out a small mp3 player and began flipping through the music.

“Agreed.” Kelly pinned her hair up. She kept her wet jacket on. “Where did you come from? Before you got to the cabin?”

Edward frowned. “West.”

The chattering females quieted, attention drawn.

Kelly’s blue lids arched. “How far west?”

Daniel picked a long playlist that he and the men always enjoyed. “As far as the US goes without getting wet.”

“Anything...different there?” Shana was hoping for a new life.

Daniel sighed. “No. Worse in places.”

“I had to ask.” Shana still had hope. *There has to be somewhere we can be safe.*

“I understand.” Daniel checked the power level on the battery. “Anything else?”

Shana had more, but she didn’t want to ruin the mood. “Will you tell us about the west?”

Edward made that choice. “Stories have to be earned.”

Shana frowned at him. “Earned how?”

Jacob gestured with the spoon. “Information. Start by telling us why you’re doing the government’s dirty work.”

Shana didn’t see harm in telling the truth. “They have our sons, our husbands. If we don’t bring supplies, they aren’t fed.”

Mark scowled. “What about the crazies in the robes?”

Shana didn’t like the Fanatics either. “They’re a result of the BLM being reactivated. Each family we split, each person we rob, becomes a potential enemy. The Fanatics gather those we piss off and turn them against us.” Shana ignored Kelly’s glares at her wording, flaunting the equal rank.

Jacob stirred the pot. “Where did they come from? Or are they a local problem?”

“They’re out of state invaders!” Kelly’s red face glared at them in the firelight. “They came from Pennsylvania.”

Jacob kept pushing for information. “Any idea why?”

Shana shrugged. “We heard they used to have a town, but it was abandoned when Safe Haven came through.”

Tension went through the garage before it was banished by Daniel turning on the playlist.

Edward noted it. *That’s the feel of danger with this group.*

Soft music filled the garage. Daniel adjusted the volume so they could still converse. “We only have

an hour of battery time. If you hate a song, speak up and I'll skip it."

Many of the women smiled at the reminders of their old lives, of the times they'd sung or danced to the familiar lyrics. It was a nice moment.

"Do you have kill orders for the Fanatics?" Mark took bowls from his kit and gave them to Jacob.

The women all nodded, but Kelly answered for them. "Of course. It makes them ruthless. Their ranks keep growing, but we have to feed our families."

Jacob dipped a spoon of the soup and held it out to David, who was by his side.

David sampled the food. "Nice. Full bowl for me."

"Same."

"Same."

All the men wanted a full portion.

Jacob blushed in pleasure as he began to dip out the bowls.

The men were good eaters in front of people. They didn't slurp or splash, or chew with their mouths open. The women were delighted. They began their own meal with growling stomachs.

Kelly waited for the males to be half finished, aware of Edward eating while he stood by the door, before picking up where they'd left off. "What's your story?"

Edward motioned at Mark. "He'll tell you about the zombies."

All the women chuckled.

“Zombies don’t exist.”

The men shared amused looks at Kelly’s claim.

“Okay.” Edward gestured to Jacob. “How about trolls and vampire babies?”

The girls laughed again.

Edward shrugged. “Demons, witches, telepathic wolves?”

Kelly tired of the game. “Tell us how you joined up, and where you’re going.”

Now the men laughed.

Edward enjoyed the mood, waiting for her to pick again.

Kelly didn’t want to show emotion to these hard men, but like Shana, she wanted a new life in a different place after the Mitchel call was made. “Are there survivors in the west? Places we could go if we ever get our families back?”

“A few. We found a large group in a bowling alley...” He stopped at Kelly’s fresh glare. “What?”

Her blue nails caught the firelight as she pointed. “You should help us. At least help our sons!”

Edward’s demeanor went cold. “Everyone around here keeps telling us what we should do. We have a leader. Mind your business. We’ll cover ours.”

Mood broken, the women drew into themselves and observed with dangerous expressions.

The men went about their nightly rituals, hoping they weren't forced to kill the females sharing their shelter. All of them now regretted letting them stay.

Chapter Eleven
Her Friend

1

“You’re going to die soon.”

Carrie smiled, naked body still clenching around his. “That one was worth dying for.”

Billy jerked away from her loving touch on his cheek. He used her weight to flip the cot, spilling them both to the floor. Chained by the arms and drugged, he landed face down, cot on his back. It was a relief to be free of her cruel weight.

Carrie left him there, pulling on her silken red housecoat. She poured a drink, pleased. The drugs they’d combined worked well with males of nearly any age. They didn’t care about pain or fear. Lust ruled them.

Using his knees, Billy rolled his battered body back over, grunting in pain as the cot landed. He sucked in air, concentrating on his hatred. He’d been raped multiple times, with more lined up for tomorrow.

Carrie sat in the chair by the cot, studying him.

Billy glowered, imagining the many ways he could kill her when he was freed.

She raised her glass. "I hope your child is a wild female!" She drained the glass, eyes dilating as the potent homemade aphrodisiac began to take effect.

Billy blanched. "I can't. It's too soon."

"The drugs will help you." She shivered as the homemade brew immediately began to bring a response.

Billy shook his head as she reached over to refill the syringe that she'd jabbed into his thigh three hours ago. "My heart can't take it. You'll kill me."

"Alexa Mitchel has five more just like you." Carrie shrugged. "I'm giving your boss a body either way. Might as well have fun before I gut you."

Billy realized he wasn't supposed to survive. He tried to think of another way to delay, but she let the robe fall. Billy wanted her as much as he hated her. Carrie's naked body was beautiful. The leftover drugs in his system woke him. "No."

Carrie knew. "We've been using this cocktail for a year. Many babies have been conceived, but few of them are strong enough to survive this new world."

Billy fought his body, mind torn apart as she ran hungry eyes along his battered flesh.

"When I give birth this time, my infant will not be too weak to breathe. You are good stock." Carrie leered. "You've taken well to being rode rough."

Billy groaned as his body betrayed him. "No. Please."

Carrie left the syringe, seeing she didn't need it. The drugs still in his system were working well. She knelt next to him. "When I am done with you, this will be the only thing you crave. It makes for controllable captives who can be ridden until they die."

"Help!" Someone screamed outside, sounding as if they were in a lot of trouble.

Feet rushed by the tent where Billy had been since arriving.

Carrie glanced at the dark doorway. "She's early. Guess there isn't time for one more ride."

Billy felt death coming.

Carrie grabbed her knife from the floor.

I refuse to die this way. "For my honor!" He flipped the cot as she lunged at him, slapping into her leg. She went down, screaming as her ankle broke from his weight.

Billy slammed his head into her again, then again, trying to keep her from flipping the cot back over.

"Grab her!" Another voice filled the tent.

Carrie was lifted into the air. A knife plunged through her chest, stopping her struggles.

Billy shut his eyes as her blood fell over his naked body. *Thank you for taking her first, God.*

Penne dropped the body to gawk at the bound, naked man with need and sympathy. "Even we are not so cruel. Our men receive fast deathsss."

Billy saw a scale covered woman with a yellow and black Snake on her arm. He blinked, trying to

see her through double vision. *Hair. I think it's dyed hair.*

Penne scanned the bare tent. She gathered the bottle of drugs and the stack of syringes. She tossed them into the fire, expression satisfied. "We do not use drugs in reproduction. Our men are willing."

Billy didn't give her his thoughts. He wasn't stupid. He also didn't fight as he was cut free and tossed over the strong shoulder of another Snake woman. He used the last of his strength on five words. "I belong to Alexa Mitchel."

"Wait." The Snake woman's orbs glittered in the smoky flames of the tents now burning around this one. "He might be valuable. Bring him. Look for clothes." She strode from the tent, scanning the Fanatic camp. It was swarming with horse riding Snake women wielding long knives that stabbed, impaled, chopped.

Penne grunted. "It hasss been a good day." She pointed at the slaves the Fanatics had been using. "Bind those. Kill the wounded. We ride out in 10 minutesss."

She waited for Billy to be brought out, then led the way to her vehicle. Most of their group used horses. Penne preferred something that didn't slow in the cold or rain. Her jeep was painted like a cobra.

Billy, semiconscious, began struggling as they took him to the mouth of a giant snake and shoved him inside. He cringed into the floorboard, mind bending. *I'm in a snake. Can't be. I'm breathing. It hurts.*

Penne tossed a blanket from her kit, covering him. She stiffened as their leader approached. “Hemi.”

Hemi scowled at the sight of the wounded man cowering in the jeep. “Kill him.”

“He said Alexa Mitchel is his owner.”

Hemi paused. “He belongs to the Mitchel?”

Penne shrugged. “So he sayssss.”

Hemi leaned in, grabbing Billy’s arm. She shook him. “When were you taken?”

Billy struggled to think, to answer. “Days... Four days.”

Hemi eased out of the jeep. “Not long enough to know if he was abandoned or if his owner is on the way.” She nodded to Penne. “Keep him safe. We want no war with that family. Yet.”

Penne slid into the jeep and began helping Billy. She ignored his weak protests. “Drink this water. Eat this jerky.”

Billy tried to fight the firm hands, but he’d been abused too much. He slumped in the floorboard and let the Snake have her way.

Around the jeep, harsh cries for mercy echoed into the cold night air.

“Burn it all.” Hemi rode her horse through the chaos, noting who had died in the fight and who was still with her. She spotted a cell phone on the ground near the biggest burning tent and kneed her horse toward it. She slid down and scooped it up, impressing her crew with her ability on a horse.

Hemi beamed. *Wait until they see how well I fillet our meal.*

She hadn't been in charge of this group for long, but she'd been a bounty hunter for their council since she came of age. She and her clan had been Snakes before the war. After, they'd been one of the few societies that hadn't changed. Most of the missing men of America had ended up in a Snake stomach since they were created in the 50s. The government hadn't just split atoms back then.

In the hot jeep, Penne tugged Billy onto the soft bench seat. "We will get you dressed."

Billy pushed his body into the clothes as they were held out or open, trying to help. He was once again grateful to Alexa. Without her name to use, he would have been killed like the other wounded men. He assumed the Snakes didn't want to waste supplies healing their food.

Hemi opened the front door and leaned in, scanning him.

Billy stared at the woman with long dark hair coiled down her shoulder and hip. Scales gave it the appearance of a green and gold snake crawling down her arm. Her bright yellow eyes added to the effect.

Hemi opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out, tasting his scent.

Billy grimaced. "Why do you do that?"

Hemi humored him with conversation. "We are forcing evolution. We eat contaminated cropsss,

drink from polluted streams. Humanity must become one with the environment to survive.”

“I meant the sniffing. You can’t smell with your tongue.”

“We drink the venom; we bathe in the blood.” Hemi laughed. “We are evolving. Smell came as soon as we split the tips. All Snake children have this done at birth to enhance their new abilities.”

It was too much for Billy. He stopped talking, stomach rolling with disgust and acid. He forced his hands to help the Snake woman tug boots on him that were too large. He wanted to be fully dressed. Billy tried not to think about who they might have belonged to an hour ago.

Hemi didn’t want to waste time on a man if he was lying. “Prove your claim. Now.”

Billy held out his arm. “Almost every scar on me came at her side.”

Hemi saw he was layered in scars under the fresh cuts, scrapes, and bruises. “Who are you to her?”

Billy chose the one that mattered the most to him. “Her friend.”

Hemi continued to study him as Penne finished dressing him. She didn’t speak again.

Billy took the canteen, and then the help holding it when his shaky hands wouldn’t.

Wild shouting filled the smoky air.

Hemi left to control her fighters. They got excited after a victory.

Penne dropped into the seat as three more Snake women got into the jeep or stood on the outside footrails.

Billy touched Penne's scaly hand as the group rolled and rode out of the destroyed camp. "Thank you."

Penne pulled away, but tension filled the jeep.

One of the other Snakes flipped around, hand flying toward Penne's neck.

Billy cringed into the dirty floorboard as the Snakes fought over him.

Billy's door flew open. Strong hands grabbed his arm and pulled him up onto a horse.

Hemi slowed as she seated Billy in front of her, getting away from the jeep. The horse snorted at the extra weight.

Hemi felt him shiver and dug a blanket from the pouch on her mount. "Cover up."

Billy sank into the blanket and the warmth of her body behind him, mind trying to shut down. He almost understood the abused males he'd met now. It was hard to have hope when everything else had been ripped from him.

Hemi rubbed his arms to warm him up. "You will stay with me until the Mitchel comes. My girls are too wild, even for one of her crew."

Billy might have argued, or at least thought it, but the Snakes around him were eating burnt arms, chewing on fingers, stuffing heads into bags. She was right. Even Alexa's crew wasn't this ruthless.

Billy waited for the horse to start moving, tension growing as the rest of the group kept going.

Hemi rubbed his arms again. “Our rulers travel in the rear, to protect us. Only those who can be trusted are given this honor.”

Billy tried to stay conscious, hoping for a chance to leave Alexa a clue. “Am I allowed to talk?”

Hemi shrugged against him. “If you are careful with the words.”

Billy heeded the warning. “Why do you fight the Fanatics? If the two groups banded together, you’d be strong enough to defeat the soldiers.”

Hemi shifted in the saddle. “But would it be enough to defeat Safe Haven when they return?”

“Ah.” Billy respected that. “Wise choice.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “We must make a deal when the time comes. It will be harder if we’ve killed their family...and friends.”

Billy saw robed bodies every few feet around the burning camp. “All sides attacked, four riders per quadrant.”

Hemi heard his mutter. “Very good.” Her tone sharpened. “How many total fighters? How did we coordinate?”

Billy’s training allowed no refusal of her demand. He counted, forcing down the pain and fear. “Twenty...one, counting you.” He listened to the rattling of their weapons. “You didn’t use those.” He felt her scales pressing into his hip. “The scales reflect light.”

Hemi's stomach tightened. "You are well trained. The Mitchel will come for you."

Billy's voice firmed. "That's what I'm talking about."

Hemi didn't like the worry his confidence produced. She tried not to make bad plans that the Mitchel would probably catch. It paid to be careful.

Billy took the canteen she offered, using both shaking hands. As he drank, Billy swept the area, praying to find a sign of his team in the darkness.

He didn't.

Grief and misery swamped him as she took the canteen back. He passed out.

Hemi held him close, oddly touched.

2

Billy groaned as he woke, body screaming. "Where are we?"

Hemi was impressed that he'd woken at all. She had thought he might die overnight. "Five miles from where we found you. It is almost sunrise."

Billy counted as best he could through the hangover, filling with disappointment. Alexa hadn't had time to catch up yet. Billy began rooting for his newest captor to linger. "Where does your group come from?"

"Many places. Little Rock was a common ground." Hemi rotated to view the front of the long line of jeeps, horses, and bikes. "We have settled into the swamps of Georgia, where no land bars us

access to the water or the hills. The war terraformed a perfect home for us.”

Billy had always been curious about the structure of the Snake clans, and about how they survived without men, but he doubted it was okay to ask those questions. He fought the pains and his need to pee. “Have you been to the mountain, where Safe Haven made their stand against the soldiers?”

Hemi nodded. “I have. Our people will preserve those areas for history.”

“I was there.”

Hemi wasn’t surprised. “The smell is on you. Your time with the female Mitchel has added to it.”

Billy pushed gently for her loyalties. “Safe Haven hates slavery.”

“Yes.”

Billy’s mind swam as she spun the horse around. He held tight to the animal with his knees, lids shutting.

Hemi hated to show weakness, but she couldn’t help the concern. “You have been badly treated. I hope you will tell your...friend that we did not do you injury.”

Billy slumped in her arms.

Hemi shifted him so she could direct the horse, but she didn’t leave that spot until her Snakes had camp set up.

3

“We made breakfast.”

“Time to eat!”

The female call rang through the garage.

Edward was still by the door. He shook his head at the waking team. He didn't say it wasn't safe. He didn't need to.

Mark and David began gathering their gear from the wall while wiping sleep from their eyes. Edward's body language was ugly. They needed to be ready to fight.

Jacob and David joined Edward for an update, smiling at the females to keep them from knowing there was a problem.

The women's gear and personal items were strewn across the garage now, in contrast to the packed kits and neatly hanging things from Alexa's team. They'd stayed between the men and the door, except for Edward, who they'd left alone.

Edward had been standing right here all night while his team slept and the women chatted, read, and stared at the sleeping hardasses in need. Except Kelly. She'd replaced her makeup multiple times and watched Edward. Things had been fine until two hours before dawn. Then the vibe had changed. “Don't eat or drink anything.”

Jacob scowled.

It smelled wonderful. Edward had watched them prepare it. He hadn't spotted anything tricky, but he'd sensed it more than once in their fast glances.

David tugged Jacob toward the wall of gear to get him dressed. Jacob hated being betrayed. It sent him into a dangerous place.

“But we’ve been cooking for an hour. We made real biscuits.” Kelly’s face became ugly; her body tensed.

Edward let it happen, growing angrier by the minute. Jacob wasn’t the only one who didn’t handle betrayal well. The vain woman was about to trigger a fight she couldn’t win. “We have to go.”

The female agents exchanged scared, determined looks.

Edward brushed his cloak aside to reach his guns.

Tension filled the garage. “You eat the food.” Edward had waited for his team to get the rest they needed. Now, he was ready to call these females out for their attempted murders. “Go on. Eat it.”

None of the women moved or spoke.

Edward motioned toward the team. “We’re leaving in two minutes.” Despite the dark sky, it was too dangerous to stay.

The agents exchanged guilty glances, not sure what to do.

“Don’t move for two minutes. We’ll be gone. You’ll be alive.” Edward was furious at the betrayal of their hospitality.

His team hurried. They left several items around the fire, hoping they didn’t get the order to kill the women.

Shana took a map from her pocket. “Wait. Show me where we are.”

Jacob started to go to her.

Mark put a hand on his arm. “Hold up, rookie.”

Jacob knew that meant he needed to learn something here. He let Mark go in his place.

Mark held out his hand for the map, timing it.

Shana extended the paper. She sliced at him with the long blade in her other hand.

Mark jumped aside, grabbing her arm.

The other women flinched away. None of them were armed. Kelly didn’t allow it. She knew she might end up caught in the crossfire.

Kelly drew her blade and rushed to help Shana.

Mark shoved Shana into her path.

Blood splashed down Kelly’s shirt as Shana staggered back with the blade sticking out of her stomach.

Screams filled the garage. The women rushed to their fallen comrade as the men slipped out.

Edward led them at a quick pace. If the women chased them, they would die.

“Smoke.” Daniel pointed.

Edward picked up more speed. “We’ll be there a little after dawn.”

Screams echoed from the barn like gunshots.

The men kept going, satisfied they’d handled themselves well.

Alexa felt attention on her as she knelt to examine chalk that had been ground into the pavement. The rainbow colors were being lit by dawn's early light. It proved Billy had been here recently or the snow would have covered it; the rain would have washed it away. She swept the smoldering campsite, trying to determine how the attack had happened. The hoof prints all around said it had been coordinated. She spotted scales littering the area, stomach tightening as she identified the victors. *I'm too late again.*

The ruined camp held little debris. What the Snakes hadn't taken, they'd burned so no one else could benefit from. Animals were sifting through the smoking wreckage around her, but she paid them little attention.

Alexa spotted the center tent by the burnt spot being larger than the others. She felt the number of people watching her double. *Two so far, but no attack.* Relief entered her heart. Billy was still alive or the Snakes would be running, not waiting for her arrival.

Alexa stalked the site anyway, checking the male bodies.

"He is not there."

Alexa kept examining the scene as two Snake women on horseback came from the trees. Behind them, she heard more and counted five. She kept a hand near her gun as she waited for them to approach.

“I am Elsie.” The Snake scout waited for the courtesy to be returned.

“Alexa.”

“Good. You are who we came for.”

Alexa studied the green cloaks, admiring the camouflage. Scales had been painted or dyed, then sewn onto every inch. Alexa saw it could be flipped over for a different color, depending on the environment. “That’s good work. You’re very detailed.”

Elsie’s lips curved. A compliment from a Mitchel was worth a lot to her. “I will trade you for it, if there is time.”

Alexa stood. “If so, it will be.” She remembered some of the Snake language and codes, but most of it had left her mind. “The formalities have been observed. Where is he?”

“With our main camp, where he is safe.” Elsie studied Alexa. “We were sent to escort you in good faith. His injuries were not caused by us.”

Alexa straightened, scanning the tall, thin woman. Before she could answer, a familiar, dented truck came roaring down the road.

The Snakes faded back into the woods, except for Elsie. She stayed by Alexa, hand on her knife hilt. “Friends?”

“Not in any world.” Alexa stiffened as the BLM agents rushed toward her, bringing up guns.

The Snakes didn’t wait for more. They attacked the agents, not giving any warning. Arrows flew through the air, all finding targets.

Alexa waited for it to be over, heart hurting.

The Snakes looted the bodies, then resumed their positions in the woods.

Elsie joined Alexa. “Where are your other men?”

It bothered Alexa that the Snakes had that information already. “With the other half of these agents in a garage five hours south of here. They’re on the way to me as of full dawn.”

“You wish for an escort?” Elsie was following orders. Hemi had made it clear they needed to appease the Mitchel.

Alexa immediately liked that. “Yes. Take the truck. Have the advantage of surprise. I’ll take your horse.” It was Alexa’s way of saying she would keep the animal if Elsie failed to retrieve her men.

Elsie chuckled, dismounting. “It is a good plan. We will meet you in our main camp. Follow the smoke.”

Alexa understood the Snakes were conquering as they traveled. She didn’t protest. That could come later. “Tell my crew two words.”

The woman’s eyes glittered. “Safe Haven.”

“Good enough.” Alexa leapt on the horse while the Snakes decided who would ride in the cab of the truck. Alexa retied her hood as the horse shifted under her, snorting. It could sense how different she was, how dangerous. The bright sunlight made no difference. Nature knew she didn’t belong.

Alexa got out of sight, then tried to increase speed. She pulled too hard on the reins. The horse shied, then bucked.

Alexa jumped as she was thrown, reaching upward. She snagged a tree branch and held on as the horse ran off.

Alexa sighed, hanging there. "I miss Edward." She pulled herself up onto the branch and spent a minute getting her breath back. Movement snagged her attention.

Alexa surveyed the line of soldiers traveling across the distant road like ants bent on finding food. There were at least 1000, all going east.

Alexa crouched on the branch, blending in. She picked out artillery, vehicles, and rifles over every shoulder. *They came from an armory.*

Alexa dropped to the ground and took off running. She had to get her team out of this area. There was no way to know which side the soldiers were on, but either one would have orders for her capture.

5

Hemi rode to the nearest Snake on horseback. "Make it here. Pass the order."

The guard rode off to do as instructed while Hemi waited for the convoy to turn. The area was wide and surrounded by trees, with a frozen creek alongside. It was perfect for a day of preparing the

meat they'd collected. She shook the man in front of her. "You are alive?"

Billy grunted, shivering. It was all he could do not to let his teeth chatter. He tried to take stock of his condition, but his stomach churned and his mind spun. He knew he was bad off, but it didn't feel life threatening anymore. The Snake leader had shoved him full of water and forced jerky into his mouth when he'd refused to eat. His body was grateful even though he'd already started to hate these strange new women.

Hemi rode to where she wanted her tent placed. "We will feed you and return you. Or you will be dead when she arrives. Fate controls most of the world, not humanity."

Billy didn't argue. He kept digging deep and finding more strength to tolerate his situation. The cowering men around him were farther gone. They shouted as the Snakes neared the line where they'd been bound and walking for hours through the snowy road. A few of them had fallen. The Snakes had collected the bodies in a truck.

Billy tensed against his newest captor as he realized their convoy was making camp. He was frozen, but he didn't want to know what came next.

Hemi's forked tongue slid along his neck.

Billy shoved himself off the horse. He landed hard, breath rushing out as his lungs froze.

Hemi chuckled as he recovered enough to glare, proving he was nowhere near dead or broken. "Your defiance is better than fear. Hold on to it or my girls

will rip you apart. I will not be able to stop it, even for the friend of a Mitchel.”

Billy shoved to his feet, swaying. He reached out as if to steady himself and slapped her horse on the ass.

The animal reared.

Hemi slid awkwardly out of the saddle and jerked herself back into it.

Billy patted the horse this time, grinning through the haze. “How’s that?”

Hemi laughed. The sound rattled across the camp.

The women responded, laboring harder, faster.

Billy looked away as he realized this one was more like Alexa than he’d first thought. *She’ll hurt me as much as it takes.*

Hemi motioned to Penne, who had come from the jeep. “Get usss set up.”

Penne blanched, hearing the anger. “I’m sorry. I can take the man now.”

Hemi slid from the horse, not repeating herself.

Billy was oddly comforted by it. “My boss is like you. Don’t lie to her when you make your deal. She can hear it.”

“Thank you for the caution.” Hemi kept a hand on his arm as a large, three-room tent was erected in front of her. Other tents went up in a half circle on each side of hers, creating the shape of a coiled Snake waiting to strike. Billy thought Alexa would have admired the design if not for the situation.

Hemi led Billy inside and let go of him.

Two young girls also wearing scales entered behind her, carrying bags.

Billy tried not to fall as the girls worked. The empty, clean tent became a nest of silken draperies and candles. Pillows soon covered the floor. Soft fires flickered in cutoff grills. Billy's lids began to droop as the canvas warmed.

Hemi pointed to the pillows. "You may sleep. I will wake you for a bath."

Billy went to the pillows and collapsed, grunting. "Thank you."

Hemi watched him. The strength of the man was incredible. He hadn't been fed in days. He'd been beaten, drugged, raped. And he still had the honor to show gratitude. "If your owner doesn't claim you..."

Billy didn't hide his loathing. "I'd rather be put down than serve you."

Offended, Hemi slithered toward the flap. "So be it. If she does not make a good deal, I will sell you to the bunker. They are offering a generous bounty for any of your team."

"You'd have to kill Alexa."

Hemi nodded, eyes glittering. "I know."

Chapter Twelve
Do I Need to Ask?

1

Gunshots echoed behind them.

Edward kept walking. “Not our problem.”

The others agreed. Even when the screams came, calling for them by name, the team refused to answer. The BLM agents had lost all chance at a rescue.

“Be ready. We’ve left a clear trail.” Edward was sorry for that, but he didn’t want to take time to cover their tracks. If someone challenged them, there would be a battle.

More screams echoed, making Jacob wince, but he didn’t ask Edward to change his mind. *Safe Haven gives second chances. We don’t.* “The smoke is fading.”

“We’ll be there in an hour.” Mark was timing it, wishing he could move faster. If Alexa gave them all her gift, the team would be able to travel quicker over any terrain, in any conditions. Right now, they were cold and slowed by the landscape. The drifts were knee-high and the road under it wasn’t even. Debris lurked everywhere, waiting to trip them.

If not for the truck tracks, travel through here would have been almost impossible until it thawed.

The first BLM truck that insisted on continuing last night had gotten further than Edward had thought it would.

More sounds of ugliness came from behind them.

“Not many gunshots. It isn’t soldiers.” Mark wanted to know who the next enemy was before they attacked.

“Or other BLM.” Jacob knew they were almost out of ammunition, too. Kelly had let that slip.

Mark shrugged. “That means more Fanatics found them.” Mark was eager to fight the red robed devils who’d shot his teammate.

David frowned. “Doesn’t feel that crazy. It’s uglier, colder.”

Edward grunted, now feeling the pain of his healing injury. “Snakes.” He took longer, faster steps, forcing them to keep up. “When I give the call, climb and fight for your freedom.”

All of the men scanned the trees as they hustled through the woods, picking an escape.

“Truck coming. Says BLM.” Daniel squinted through Billy’s long-range lens. “I see scales!”

“Up!” Edward stayed on the ground as the rest of the team climbed the snowy trees. He didn’t budge as the truck raced toward him, but he prepared to fire.

The truck skidded to a halt as he was spotted.

One scaled woman got out. She came toward them in a movement that was half walk and half slide.

Up in a tree, Jacob blanched. “Did she slither?” He looked at David, who was one branch above him.

“Yep.” David’s balls drew up and tucked under his anus. *Call us when she’s gone.*

Elsie swept the man standing bravely in the middle of the street, aware that he was ready to shoot. “Your owner sent us. The agents you ran from are being handled.”

Edward studied her, not correcting the impression. *We didn’t run. We let them live.*

The Snake scout grunted. “Safe Haven.”

Edward snapped his fingers.

Men dropped from the trees, landing all around him.

The other Snakes laughed, pointing at the men from the warm truck cab.

Elsie chuckled. “We have the right group. Get in. We’ll take you to our camp. Your other man needs his team, I think.”

Edward and the others jumped into the bed of the dented BLM truck, trusting their hosts. It wasn’t because of the code word, though it had been correct. It was the feel. The mood was high. The Snakes weren’t stealing a crew from a Mitchel. They were delivering them. It made all the difference. The men got settled, ignoring the inches of snow they sank into.

Elsie opened the small rear window. “Do you need anything? We have water and jerky.”

Jacob frowned. “What is it with women trying to feed us? Do we look hungry?”

His team snickered.

Elsie turned back to the wheel, hissing.

The amusement stopped. Revulsion took its place.

The truck rolled out.

Edward studied their three hosts, aware of the women staring. Some of the looks were sexual, but most were just admiring. They recognized fellow fighters.

The same was true of the men. Unlike the Fanatics and agents, the Snakes were hardcore survivors who lived from the land. If not for their need to eat flesh, they might have been allies. As it was, they were under a truce brought about by Alexa’s name. Edward hoped it was enough. The Snakes would be a real fight. He didn’t want that to happen until the team was back together. *Then we might kill all of you as a reward for your kindness.*

2

“After you clean up, you will eat.” Hemi was becoming worried. She could feel his owner catching up.

Billy’s stomach clenched. “No, thank you.”

“The Mitchel must not think we have treated you this way.” Hemi scowled. “You will eat, or I will force you, again.”

Billy tried to move faster, but it hurt to undo the buttons and his fingers didn't want to cooperate. Hoping to get the Snake off his back about food, Billy encouraged a conversation. "What are you doing so far from home?"

"We are having a party for all clans, to celebrate our survival of four years in the wastelands." Hemi swallowed something pink from the bowl in her hand. "The Fanatics leave many bodies. We follow them and collect the meat. Then we conquer those Fanatics and add the survivors to our stock."

Billy pried off his torn, stinking socks. "Wouldn't it help you to let them kill the soldiers first?"

"Yes." Hemi put her bowl down. "But calling magic users may bring Safe Haven home."

Billy stripped his pants, skin crawling when she stared. "You can't spread if that happens."

Hemi nodded. "We must make a deal. My people are not strong enough to fight Safe Haven."

"Yet."

Hemi shrugged. "We hope it won't be needed. The final battle may find us on the same side. Then, a permanent deal can be made for our future."

Billy dropped the shirt next, guts churning at being naked in front of a woman. "You could kill the BLM agents, too."

Hemi kept staring at him. "We will not force people to join our enemies out of anger like the soldiers have done."

Billy held onto the tent pole as he stepped into the washtub. Warm water surrounded some of his pains, bringing a bit of relief. “You’re letting them kill each other.”

“Yesss.”

Billy began to use the rag and soap she’d provided, shuddering and shivering in the warm tent. The fever had come a few hours ago. He was ill on top of everything else.

Male shouts of terror echoed outside.

“Lunch will come soon.” Hemi smiled at one of her young servants. “Maybe it will be the black guy in the middle pen. I love dark meat.”

“So do I.” The girl refilled Hemi’s drink.

Billy stared at the red liquid, not disgusted, though he wanted to be. “You have a lot of bodies. Why are you still...butchering when you don’t need to?”

Hemi rubbed her belly. “We are gestating eggs. We need twice the meat now. Most of the bodies from our victory were gone with breakfast.”

Billy staggered against the tent pole, grabbing it to keep from falling.

Hemi frowned. “Try to hurry. I want you in better shape when she arrives.”

“Too late.” Billy sank to his knees in the wide tub, heart thumping as his body tried to give out. “She’s here.”

Hemi hurried outside to greet their guest.

Where are you?

Billy tried to stand, soapy body trembling at Alexa's voice in his mind. *Center!*

Alexa entered the Snake lair with murder in her heart and the threat of it on her face. She came in alone, bringing a stop to movement as she was noticed. Stubby tails began rattling in warning of a coming attack.

Alexa stopped, turning to glower with angry red orbs.

The rattling faded at her warning. It was silent and more effective.

Alexa resumed her walk to the center tent, marking who needed to die first and who could be used against themselves. Alexa considered bringing up her shield, but she wanted to save that energy for Billy. His weak, desperately grateful voice in her mind was echoing in her brain, hurting her. He'd been mistreated. Someone would pay the ultimate price.

Alexa didn't spot a trap, but she did recognize fear in the guards who knew she would use her guns and her magic. Those 21 women didn't want to fight her. Alexa couldn't say the same.

"Your male is inside, cleaning up." Hemi hurried to Alexa to be certain there was no misunderstanding. Two big female guards jogged at her side.

Penne frowned at the fawning tone of Hemi's voice as she dealt with the Mitchel woman. *She's*

showing weakness. It's almost time for a change in command.

Alexa kept walking. *You're right.*

"We rescued..." Hemi stopped talking when Alexa held up a hand.

Alexa entered the tent. She scanned quickly and found a broken man trying to rinse bloody soap from his beaten, starved body. "Billy."

"Boss." Billy braced to hear she'd sold him to the Snakes. "I'm useless to you now."

Alexa dropped her cloak as she went to him, pushing up her sleeves. "That is not a concern for this moment."

She took the pitcher and rinsed him, rubbing lightly at places to determine if it was a bruise, a cut, or dirt.

Billy held still, trying to show her how strong he'd been, but tears of gratitude rolled down his cheeks at her tender care. "They know who you are, Boss."

"Good." Alexa dried him with a towel that Hemi rushed over. "I have your guns." She dug them from her cloak and led him to a chair. "Cedrick left them in the Hummer."

Billy found the strength to give a report. "Cedrick was supposed to take me to the Fanatics. He was sliding under the slavery radar because he was gay. He knew the laws were about to be enforced. He made a deal with the Snakes so he could take the payoff and go west, hoping he'd be able to stay free." Billy wanted to tell her everything

he knew. She needed his information before he passed out. “It wasn’t this group. Cedrick said we were still hours away by car.”

Hemi watched Alexa dress the man. Saving him had been a good decision. It was obvious the Mitchel woman loved this one.

Alexa pushed a pain pill into Billy’s hand, then her canteen, helping him hold it up. She whispered something only they could hear.

Billy whispered back, voice breaking.

Hemi sensed she should keep waiting patiently, but she didn’t like it. To show so much emotion over a male was a weakness.

Alexa patted his hair dry, hearing fresh chaos outside. “That’s the rest of my team. Send them to the tent you’ll put up for us.”

Hemi’s brow arched. “I have not invited you to stay.”

Alexa stiffened. “Do I need to ask?”

“No.” Hemi signaled at her youngest girl. “Tell the guards to let them in. Get a large tent up. Fill it.”

The girl rushed out.

Alexa strapped Billy’s guns around his thin hips, then turned to Hemi. “Thank you for returning my property.”

Hemi relaxed, smiling. “It is good. We can talk later, over a meal.”

Alexa didn’t answer. She tugged her cloak tighter around Billy and fastened it.

“He is strong.” Hemi gestured toward the two mounts tied to her tent. “My horses mean as much to me.”

“What about the men in the corrals? Will you put up a tent for them?” Billy felt he could push a little now that his team was here.

Hemi frowned in confusion. “Why? The weather is a perfect refrigerator. The meat will not spoil.”

Alexa’s lips thinned into narrow lines.

Billy breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Boss.”

“It’s my honor.”

Assuming he was grateful Alexa had come for him, Hemi escorted them to the flap. “Go, collect your crew and enjoy a rest.”

Alexa helped Billy from the tent and into the next canvas over as it was going up. Fury radiated from her rigid form. *This isn’t over. Not by a longshot.*

3

Male screams and the smell of blood kept Alexa’s crew alert even though the Snake women were smiling at them as the truck pulled into a large camp. In some cases, the women even leered. It was clear they respected strength.

“Full cover and V.” Alexa had given the order many times. It only felt wrong because she wasn’t the one saying it now. Edward nodded to their

escorts, then strode through the camp behind the young Snake girl who had come to get them.

As soon as they saw the center tent, Alexa appeared in the next flap over, expression grim.

“She made the same choice we did on the way here.”

Edward grunted at Mark’s observation. Listening to the Snakes talk about what flavor flesh they liked to eat had been hard. Hearing them gloat over their last battle, where they’d conquered six dozen resistance fighters, had been the limit.

There were no slaves here and no males, other than the food pen. The team assumed the camp hadn’t stayed where they’d found Billy because the smoke might draw BLM to them, or any surviving Fanatics might return. Edward wanted to know how the Snakes had beaten the magic users that had been with the Fanatics.

David scowled. *Ruthless fighting...and they know how to deflect the hits, like we do. That’s probably why everything was burning.*

They’d ridden by the site but hadn’t been able to see much. There hadn’t been much left to view.

Edward’s hood blew back in a sharp gust of cold wind. Sunlight stung his skin with needles.

Walking behind them as an escort, Elsie saw his flinch. She kept watching him as the sun brightened. She loved the sensation. When someone didn’t, it drew her attention.

Edward had no choice but to leave the hood down or show weakness in front of their newest

enemy. He refused to do that. He let it burn, face impassive.

Elsie frowned, now not sure if she'd seen him react at all.

"That's Marshal." David didn't point to the corral. His team already knew. They'd spotted him at the same time.

"Please, help us!"

Marshal's cry was hard to ignore, as were the sight of his injuries and the terrified men cowering behind him. The team hardened their hearts and renewed their vow for justice. They studied the camp and the barren fields around it, aware of the courage it took to camp out in the open. They did it often.

None of the team acknowledged Marshal as he kept begging for help, but their rage grew. *We taught them to fight magic. We forgot about the Snakes.*

Despite saving Billy, all these women were on borrowed time. The entire team was now eager for a kill order.

4

"It's not good, Boss." Edward and David were medicating Billy, wrapping bruised ribs, sewing and bandaging his wounds.

David swallowed guilt as he worked. He'd been due to relieve Billy from guard duty atop the cabin. If Cedrick had come an hour later, it would be him

suffering. “He has a fever. Two of his cuts are infected. He’s got needle marks all over him. He’s...raw, in certain places. He’s lost a lot of weight.”

Alexa stirred the hearty broth she’d labored on. “Get him to drink all of this over the next few hours. Shove water into him. David will administer medium level antibiotics for the next 10 days, three times a day.”

The two men got on the chores, waking Billy to take the pills.

Their gifted tent was a copy of the one she’d found Billy in, down to the wooden washtub and huge pot of water over a grated firepit that had been dug for them. She admired the sewn hole in the center for the fire, but didn’t approve of it. The Snake women didn’t mind bugs crawling in to sleep with them. *We aren’t like the Snake women.* “There are rose hips in one of my cloak pockets. Make a tea. He needs the vitamin C boost between water.”

Edward dug the item out, reading the instructions Alexa had written on the baggie in marker. Almost all her pouches and baggies were labeled, making it easy to find what she needed.

Mark watched the Snakes from the open flap, hating them even more as he observed their slaughter area and slurping, crunching lunch of legs. They bit into the chunks of meat and ripped off bites like it was a barbeque. It didn’t make him ill. It made him furious.

No one had bothered them once they'd entered. All the Snake women had taken turns peering in, but no one had stopped. Mark was almost sorry. He wanted them to make a mistake.

Jacob rummaged through their gear and the cloaks they'd all taken off, trying to reoutfit Billy.

Daniel, hidden in the corner by the shadows of their gear, loaded ammunition into everyone's guns or cloaks. He also slid in a fresh blade and a charged phone. Billy's gear was put in his pockets and the cloak around his shoulders. Alexa had left hers on him, making them all feel loved, but also very angry that his had been taken.

"Th-thank you." Billy tried to stay alert, but his mind was spinning. "Don't leave!"

Moods dropped another level at the broken tone.

Edward squeezed Billy's hand. "Not for anything. Sleep. Heal. Wake up ready to kill."

Billy smiled weakly. His eyes shut. His body relaxed.

Alexa's fury almost popped right then. She stepped out of the tent, searching for a willing target.

The Snakes avoided meeting her eyes or walking near that tent. Anger was filling the entire camp, with her at the epicenter. Everyone felt a nasty storm coming.

Hemi signaled from her open flap. "Would you like to get drunk?"

Alexa turned back to her canvas. She dropped the flap.

Hemi signaled Elsie over. She whispered, hoping the Mitchel woman couldn't hear them. "Find a sniper position. If there's a problem, take her out first."

"Yes, Hemi." Elsie went to her own canvas to get her gear, mind spinning through options. *If I keep serving Hemi, that's all I'll ever be—a servant. If I get the Mitchel to kill Hemi, I can be a leader.*

5

"Someone just...slithered around the tent."

Alexa and her men watched the shadows, waiting for an attack. "Edward and I will protect Billy. Everyone else clears a path." Alexa had been working on a different plan, but it hadn't come together the way she'd first assessed.

Scratch... "Hello in there."

Alexa kept her voice low. "May I help you?"

So did the mystery Snake outside the rear of the tent. "Plans have been made to kill you. I've come to offer different terms."

Alexa settled on the floor near the shadow. "I'm listening."

"I will help you escape. In exchange, you will tell Safe Haven to let us live in peace. We will stop our invasion of other states. Many of us are tired of constant war."

Alexa negotiated, thanking fate for the help. "I would agree to that deal, providing I lose no men."

“I will guarantee you leave here with your entire team. I will also make sure you get safe passage through our lands if you need it.”

Alexa put that into the first plan and came up with a perfect fit. “I agree. Wear bright colors so we can tell you apart.”

The shadow slithered along the ground, away from the tent. “Come dawn.”

“Thank you, Elsie.” Alexa had recognized the voice. She glanced at her men, then at Billy, who hadn’t fully woken yet. It was almost dark. The captives outside were screaming again.

“It’s dinnertime.” Mark was still watching from the closed but cracked flap.

Alexa grunted. “Steel yourselves one more time. There won’t be a breakfast buffet.”

The team returned to caring for Billy and securing their fighting gear, hearts heavy with sadness that would have to have an outlet.

“Boss!” Billy shot up, face wild.

Edward calmed him, talking in low tones, saying key words he hoped would break through. It was obvious the man had been terrorized.

Billy panted, struggling to calm down. He was pouring sweat, hurting. Chaos swirled in his mind, stealing his sanity.

Alexa placed a hand on his ankle. “Easy.”

Billy stared at her, face slowly dissolving.

Alexa opened her arms. “Forgive me?”

Billy broke down, tears streaming over his gaunt cheeks. “Always.”

Alexa wrapped him in her arms and laid them down, holding him while he cried. "I will give you justice. Name it."

Billy sobbed against her, unable to speak through his pain.

Alexa cursed herself again for letting him be taken.

The rough mood in the tent sank like a rock as a slave outside, Marshal, began screaming.

Billy shuddered. "I want to help them. All of them!" He drew back. "They need you! Give up the quest and help them!"

Alexa's heart broke all over again. She wiped the tears from his cheeks, then slowly stood. "No."

"Okay, Boss." Billy slid back to the bedroll, sobs resuming. "Okay."

Alexa left the tent, covered in his tears and her shame.

The others hated her in that moment. They also loved her for her strength. It was an ugly mix that kept them ready to kill anyone who threatened them.

Alexa strode toward the corral of half frozen, terrified males. They perked up upon spotting her, begging for a rescue.

Snake guards tensed, ready to call the alarm.

Drawn by the tension, Hemi came to the flap of her tent, ready to give the order to attack. *Elsie should be in place now. Make a wrong move, Mitchel and I'll have a final reward for you.*

Alexa made eye contact with Marshal, shoving into his thoughts.

Marshal was willing to take the option she offered since there was no other. "Please. Kill me."

Alexa flew into the corral and grabbed him before anyone could react.

Marshal's eyes shut, body relaxing. If he had to die here, at least Alexa would get the benefit and not the Snake women.

"Thank you for the gift." Slaves cringed away as Alexa bit into his neck.

Chapter Thirteen
Circle of Love

1

“I knew it!” Hemi clapped, laughing in surprised delight. “The Mitchel’s a hybrid!”

The Snake guards waited for orders, confused.

Alexa drew back, gasping in air.

Marshal sagged in her tight grip. Two red drops beaded on the holes in his neck.

Alexa looked at the terrified men around them who had nowhere to run. “Distract the guards at dawn. Make a run for freedom.”

The slaves nodded fearfully, afraid to trust her.

Marshal screamed as her teeth sank back into his neck. He shuddered, fighting to stay alert. He had one more thing to do after she finished. Then he could go in peace.

Alexa shoved venom into him, mourning the man she was killing and the fact that she wouldn’t get to train him.

Marshal groaned at the pain. He let the darkness have its way.

Alexa dropped the body, rising. She wiped her arm on her sleeve, covering the words to the terrified males around them. “Come dawn.”

She left the corral, jumping over the rail in a long leap that kept attention on her and hid the sudden hope of the doomed men.

Hemi held up her bottle.

Alexa stumbled that way, licking Marshal's sweet taste from her lips. She took the bottle and washed away the blood with two long gulps.

Hemi took the bottle back, studying her.

The blonde Snake woman at Hemi's side scanned the gaudy necklace Hemi was wearing.

Alexa stored the glance. She was always eager to turn the enemy against themselves and she sensed these women could be twisted over simple things, like that necklace.

Alexa went into Hemi's large tent.

Hemi frowned, realizing the first invitation had covered her tent indefinitely. "I see I have to be more specific."

Alexa sank into the chair by the fire, taking the one that had been waiting for her.

Mollified that Alexa hadn't taken her seat, Hemi joined her, leaning back in the comfortable chair.

Alexa belched, stomach finally full. "You have good fighters here. Are they loyal?"

Hemi glared toward the flap. "They are daughters of all clans who couldn't best me in the ceremony for leadership of this mission. I will go home in glory. They will benefit as well if they obey."

Alexa scanned the necklace around Hemi's scarred neck. "A token?"

Hemi fingered the golden amulet. “Sacred relics, mined from our home in the west.” Hemi lifted the bottle. “What shall we drink to?”

Alexa belched again. “Men. Nothing tastes as good.”

“To men!” Hemi laughed and drank.

Late shift guards passed by the open tent flap, peering in to be certain Hemi was still unharmed.

Alexa saw their hope. They wanted her dead. *Hemi is strong, but she inspires no loyalty. Good to know.*

Alexa kept her own mental walls locked in place, but she didn’t dig into the other descendant. There were rules to follow and the Snake hadn’t provoked her into breaking them yet.

Alexa settled in for a long night, ignoring the young Snake girls sleeping or staring at her. She would get details on them later. She narrowed in on the Snake leader, openly evaluating.

Hemi took a healthy swig before sitting the bottle on the table between them. “Have you considered my offer?”

Alexa nodded. “I will pass your words when Safe Haven returns.”

Hemi sneered. “Everyone knows Mitchels are the only reason Safe Haven survived.”

Alexa picked up the bottle and drank.

Hemi felt the disagreement and respected Alexa for not violating the unspoken rules of hospitality. She also stored the loyalty, along with a mental note

not to make the same mistake. If Alexa could broker a deal, Hemi wanted it.

“Troops are marching nearby.” Alexa replaced the bottle. “Going to the bunker, I believe.”

Hemi stiffened. “Where were they? How many?”

“A thousand. They were on the interstate that is half cleared.” Alexa belched a third time, hating the taste. “Good stuff.”

“It is interesting that they are going to the bunker instead of fighting the Fanatics.” Hemi began working on new plans.

“I thought so, too.”

“Have you told anyone else?”

“Just you.” Alexa shifted to have a clear view of her host.

“Good. I will send word in the morning, so our main camp will know these things. I have already dispatched riders to inform them of the warrants for your arrest.”

Alexa knew she was being tested. She shrugged. “And?”

“The Fanatics are ready to have the final battle now. They want the rest of the female magic users on their side and they know a Mitchel calls to the very best fighters. They plan to kill or enslave the males who show up. They hope to have enough magic and weapons to beat the soldiers before Safe Haven returns, then use what they get from winning that fight to beat them, too.” Hemi frowned. “Safe Haven will land near our home. We would rather

greet them with a welcome party in place of a war line. Our elders will deliberate on granting passage through our lands.”

Alexa kept the honesty going. “I sensed my kind.”

“With the soldiers?”

“Yes. And here.”

Hemi froze for a bare instant, then sighed. “I should have known you’d pick it out. Took a few hours to pinpoint me, though, right?”

“I narrowed it by the fear of your army as I entered your camp.” Alexa shrugged. “Only descendants draw that reaction.”

“Fear is useful.” Hemi waved away a guard who came to the flap. “Do you enjoy the vampire side as much?”

“More.” Alexa saw Hemi’s true fear, but she didn’t mention it. Being afraid of your own people wasn’t good for a leader.

Hemi was curious. “How does the vampire compare to the magic?”

“It increases the speed and sight. For instance, I see the objects in your pockets, hear the hair on your legs brushing your pants.” Alexa could also hear her own light stubble. She hadn’t shaved in years, so it no longer grew well. Her men didn’t seem to mind.

“Impressive. Their meat does the same for us. A perfect food source.”

Alexa nodded. “As long as we don’t hunt them to extinction.”

“Yes.” Hemi enjoyed talking with someone who understood. “That’s why we don’t take females or young ones. Like hunting in the old world, we must be careful to preserve the herds.”

“Yes, they must be protected.”

Hemi pushed for more clues to Alexa’s true feelings for her male crew. “What of your men? Do they enjoy being hybrids? I’ve found men hard to train.”

Alexa snorted. “I would never give males this power.”

Hemi relaxed. “You care for them, yet you will not gift immortality.”

Alexa shrugged. “I have favorite pets. They are beloved, cherished. When their time comes, I will mourn them.”

“But?”

“But men can never again be allowed to have dominion over the earth. With this power, there would be no stopping it.” Alexa meant that, though she’d omitted the word evil. She had no problem with honorable males.

“Agreed.” Hemi wanted to ask Alexa to bite her, but she knew it had to be earned. “I have kudzu root for my favorites. The antioxidant properties give our fighters health.”

“Thank you.”

“I will have it delivered, with instructions.” Hemi went to the flap.

Alexa swept the resting girls in the tent. Their eyes blinked rapidly and their chests heaved as they

sniffed, even acting like Snakes in their sleep. She inhaled, using her new nose to identify diluted Snake venom.

She noted the high temperature from several fires burning around the edges. The children were being warmed. *Maybe Snakes slow down in the cold.*

The children didn't wake or even register anyone in the tent with them. They also didn't turn, shift, snore, or have other normal nightly habits. Alexa avoided looking at them again.

Hemi returned to the fire, a fresh bottle in hand.

Alexa drained the first one and sat it on the floor by their feet.

Hemi popped the top.

"How did you beat the magic users Carrie had in her camp?"

Hemi wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "They think we cannot hunt at night." Hemi had traveled overnight with Alexa's man in her arms. There was no way the descendant wouldn't know that by now. "Magic users can be taken off guard like anyone else."

"You killed those first, I assume." Alexa took the bottle. "Wise." She drank until she thought she might gag.

Hemi glanced over. "Elsie said you have a fondness for our cloaks."

"They are clever."

Hemi brightened. “Yes. We’ve adapted quite well. Even now traders come to our camps for our sewing skills.”

“Sewing and tracking.”

“Yes. There are always traders seeking deals and traitors seeking different lives. We are connected through three states, and of course, our main clan in the west.” Hemi gestured toward her own cloak. “It took three pythons to make it, not counting scales. I killed them all with my knife.”

Alexa studied the shiny cloak. “What do you do with the heads?”

Hemi waved at the children. “We evolve our young. Python venom is not lethal, but it bridges the gaps between our DNA when it is mixed with freshly dead brains. It’s as if the venom wishes to continue living, in any form.”

Alexa patted her gurgling guts. “Does it help against the cold?”

“Barely.” Hemi refused to say more.

Alexa didn’t need her to. She handed over the bottle. “Do you have much contact with vampires?”

Hemi frowned. “No. They are a natural enemy. Like us.”

Alexa shrugged. “My family has no fight with Snakes.”

“Your father does.”

“Not until he returns.”

Hemi felt that truth. She lifted the bottle. “To Safe Haven!”

Alexa echoed her. She didn't hear any slurring. Hemi wasn't swaying or pausing like she couldn't remember. She wasn't drunk yet. Alexa reached for the bottle, glad of the open flap allowing the cool breeze to temper the high heat. Outside, it was freezing. In here, a person could melt.

Hemi hung her cloak on a tent pole, finally warm enough.

Hemi's formfitting black pants came to her waist, where a half top of brown scales formed a layer of clothing over a body Alexa admired. The rest of Hemi's skin was exposed, revealing layers of scars that said the woman was a great fighter. She had knife cuts, a bullet hole, four large bites, and more tiny scars than Alexa could identify.

Hemi saw her interest. "Would you stay the night?" Her eyes brightened to an entrancing yellow.

Alexa stared back, red orbs flickering. "Would you release the slaves for it?"

Hemi chuckled. "No, but I will think about it and mourn the choice later."

"As will I." Alexa lifted the bottle. "To the future!"

Hemi clapped. "Yes. The meek have finally inherited the earth."

2

"Here she comes." Mark had guard duty now. He snickered at the sight of the two women holding

onto each other and the almost empty bottle. “They are smashed.”

Edward’s lips twitched. Alexa was a drinker. She put all of them to shame. He was betting on her acting smashed while digging weaknesses from the Snake leader.

The other men tried to keep busy. They’d sorted, cleaned, planned, helped Billy, and they’d worried. Even with her in the tent next to them, the team had been split up.

Mark held the flap. He ignored Hemi, who ran hungry eyes over his body.

Alexa entered the tent, stumbling. She fell down next to Billy.

Mark dropped the flap before Hemi could enter.

Alexa slowly rolled over, sighing when Billy’s hand went around her wrist. “Easy.”

Footsteps slid away.

Alexa stared at the ceiling of the spinning canvas, waiting. Their tent was warm, but not smothering. It didn’t hold the layer of tension that Hemi’s had. In here, there were no enemies, only survivors on a quest.

More steps staggered away.

The men kept doing minor chores, waiting for her words.

“How is he?”

David grunted. “Fever broke. The tea is almost gone. One of his cuts had to be re-stitched. He woke with a nightmare and popped two of them.”

“Camp update.”

Edward took over the sitrep. “We confirmed the number. They change patrols every five hours. They have few real fighters. The Snakes aren’t doing as well as they’re trying to project.”

“Anything else?”

“They’re violent, even with each other. We witnessed three fights and heard a few more. We can use that.” Edward already had ideas on how to do it.

“How many?”

“Forty-three now, with seven out on runs.” Edward had triple counted it while she was gone, listening with his better hearing to guard conversations during the last shift change.

“Weapons?”

“Knives, bows. Half a dozen rifles. A lot of handguns, but we think they’re empty by how light they pull on the belts.” Edward had gotten Jacob to confirm those numbers.

“Manpower?”

No one spoke. Edward wanted to say they were at full, but he refused to lie. Billy was rough.

Alexa sighed. “We’re going to have four more long hours. When the sun starts to rise, be ready. Spare bright colors. No other survivors.”

Jacob frowned. “There are a lot of kids.”

Alexa didn’t repeat herself. She rolled over to Billy.

He stared, tortured. He didn’t speak. He had no idea what to say.

“Do you wish to be released from this quest?”

“Never!” Hatred filled his expression. “I need justice! I don’t even know if she’s dead!”

“She is. Hemi told me they took the heads. We’ll sort through them after we eliminate this danger to humanity.”

Billy hadn’t understood the effect rape had on a victim. He’d assumed it was simple to go on once there had been closure or justice, but he wasn’t sure now. It was eating at him. “I feel helpless!”

Alexa’s tears filled the tent with sadness. She rarely cried. All of them felt it, and fought not to join her.

“I can make sure you never feel that way again.”

Billy shut his eyes, voice bitter. “I don’t want it because you pity me.”

“I don’t, actually. I’m sorry I failed you. What I offer comes as a reward for surviving.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” Billy hated pity.

Alexa snorted. “Hemi and her group were following the Fanatics. She told me your strength was incredible. They’ve been living, partly, from the bodies the Fanatics leave. She wants to buy you.”

Billy laughed.

It sounded wrong, but it was progress. Alexa kept going. “I told her it would cost her entire army. She actually considered it. I don’t think they’re friends here.”

“Different clans, all gathering meat for a war anniversary.” Billy replayed his few brief

conversations with Hemi. “She’s smart. She’ll be expecting trouble from us.”

“She’ll try to use you against me.” Alexa waited, needing a confirmation.

“As long as I have my team, I’m good.” Billy hoped that was true.

“Don’t stray from us. You’re the easy target right now.”

Billy hated that. “How do I let it go? Block it? Kill more people? Hate all women and gays?”

The team understood he’d been hurt by Cedrick, too. Fresh rage flowed through the canvas.

“Each victim must make that choice. I decided to accept it as a hard lesson and never repeat my mistake.” Alexa sighed. “I failed. When it happened again, I did the same. At some point, I may be abused a third time. We live a harsh life, in an ugly world. All we can do is survive.”

It helped Billy to know she’d gone through this. “I won’t know the limits. I hate them all!”

“Hate is healthy. Uncontrollable rage is dangerous.” Alexa patted Billy’s wrist. “You’ll feel the difference.”

Billy tried to smile at her. “Thank you for still wanting me on this team.”

“It’s my honor.” Alexa lunged forward and sank her fangs into his bruised shoulder.

Billy arched, smothering a shout. It hurt, driving all other thoughts from his mind.

Alexa motioned with her free hand.

Edward joined them, holding Billy in place as Alexa forced venom into his bloodstream.

“Now you. Push it in lightly.”

Edward drove his teeth into Billy’s other shoulder, bringing another hoarse shout.

The rest of the team observed in hope and horror.

Outside, the guards laughed and pointed at the shadows on the tent, assuming Alexa was eating her wounded man, like they would have.

3

“I feel drunk.” Billy held still so they could finish outfitting him. “I can’t fight like this.” It had been an hour since she bit him. He felt as rough, but without the pain.

Alexa handed Edward her bow. “You’re feeding arrows.”

Billy stayed in the center, letting them stuff items into his pockets. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“I had a lot to drink. It’s dulling the burn for you.” Alexa belched, making a face. “Snake wine stinks the second time around. I miss whiskey.”

“Why aren’t you drunk?” Jacob had expected her to need time to sober up.

“Another family curse. Mitchels are not allowed to drown their sorrows. We can’t get full drunk except on rare mixtures.” She shrugged. “Jendon probably had something that would have made me fly.”

The men chuckled, nerves coming down a notch. Alexa had that effect on them. She knew when to build the tension for the fight, and how to calm the stress during the wait for that battle to begin.

Alexa listened to the tension grow outside their tent, able to time the sun's rise by it. "We're close. Make every shot count when it starts rolling. The scales work as a wearable armor. Aim for the darkest spots. That's where it's sewn or welded together." Alexa checked her guns.

Her team did the same, glad the wait had been shorter than most, but all of them were worried that Billy hadn't been given more recovery time.

Billy slipped out of her cloak. "I'll get mine as we roll. I saw it out there. Hemi took it from Carrie's tent."

"If our secret friend doesn't come through, we'll roll like usual." Alexa pulled on the cloak with insanity sparking in her eyes. "Stay in the tent unless I need to be covered."

"Yes, Boss!" The low shout from all her crew was covered by a screaming slave.

"Please! No! I can cook! I can hunt! I sew!"

Alexa dropped onto one knee by the flap. When she held her hand out for the bow, Edward dropped it in, with two arrows already pointing in the right direction.

"A male is running! Catch that male!" A Snake guard called the alert.

So did Alexa. "Open it."

Edward lifted the flap, holding it so only Alexa's bow and eyes were showing.

She stared at Hemi's tent, waiting for the perfect shot.

"Kill the Mitchel!" Hemi held onto her tent pole, still drunk and furious at the betrayal. "It's the Mitchel!"

Dori appeared at Hemi's side, pointing. "Elsie betrayed us!"

Hemi spotted Elsie and watched her stab a Snake guard. "Kill her!"

Dori ran toward Elsie as Hemi staggered out of her tent, gathering energy to engulf the canvas with Alexa and her men.

Too late. Alexa let the arrow fly. "Drop!"

Edward let the flap go and peered through the tiny crack he'd slit. "Hemi is down! Arrow in her neck. Nice shot, Boss." He scanned again. "The guards see her now. Snakes are coming our way..." Edward frowned. "Wait. They have a problem in their own group!"

Alexa stayed ready to act. "That's Elsie, honoring our deal. Call it when she needs help."

Edward foresaw that coming soon. "The patrol is back. Elsie miscounted the front line. Go in three...two...one!"

Alexa slid under the flap, bow rising. She hit Dori in the back as she fought with Elsie.

Edward handed her the next arrow.

Alexa targeted the guards who were returning, evening the odds for Elsie's group as they rode through the camp.

Billy shoved two arrows into Edward's hand while the other men stayed around them, guns ready. He needed to feel like he was helping.

The attacking Snakes had warmed themselves. They ran faster than their campmates. They were also on something Alexa had never witnessed before. Their eyes didn't blink, at all, and they glowed yellow as they chopped off heads, threw knives, and strangled other Snakes with their own hair.

Alexa fired again, then gave the bow to Edward to store. The five women she'd hit were the strongest shooters, minus Elsie. She'd gotten the list straight from Hemi's mouth while they were drinking. She waited for more threats to come toward them, thrilled that their tent was along the frozen riverbank. The Snakes were scared of water, even the frozen kind. They could escape that way if needed.

Elsie and her group were wearing purple ribbons tied to their hands and horses. Some of them used those ribbons to strangle the offspring of their rivals.

Alexa loathed it, but she didn't interfere. *Nature made the rules, not me. New alphas often kill pups that aren't theirs. Hate Nature for the design, not yourself.* Alexa made a note to say the same to her men when they saw the little bodies.

Bright sun broke over the camp. Pain slammed into Edward. He flinched back into the shadows. He'd forgotten to bring up his hood.

Alexa saw Elsie watching Edward.

Edward cursed himself, jerking up his cover.

Elsie's expression glazed over. "You traitor! You turned them!"

Alexa didn't reply since the answer was obvious.

Elsie slid from her bloody, muddy horse.

Three of Hemi's guards ran toward Elsie, hissing.

Elsie waited for Alexa to attack. The three Snake women were almost upon her before she realized that wasn't going to happen.

Elsie ducked and lunged, sliding her knife through a stomach while bringing it up to slice open a throat. She spun again and plunged the blade into the last unprotected throat.

Elsie yanked her blade free and rotated toward Alexa with blood dripping down her arm, face like thunder. "Why aren't you helping?!"

"I removed leadership." Alexa pointed.

Elsie rode over, triumph spreading. "It's mine!"

"Not exactly," Alexa muttered, holding out an arm to stop Edward from leaving the tent.

Edward paused, searching for the threat he'd missed.

Elsie knelt by Hemi's bloody body to snatch the necklace. She fumbled with the clasp. "It's mine!"

Hemi's eyes opened. She used her last bit of life force to lunge up and plunged her teeth into Elsie's neck. Hemi ripped her throat out and collapsed. She had saved her last breath for whoever tried to take her leadership token.

Both women stopped gasping at the same time.

The Snakes around them stared at the bloody bodies in shock. Many of them glanced around for a challenge, a new leader.

Alexa strode forward. She pulled the necklace from Elsie's dead hand. "Who wants to be the boss?!"

Three Snakes ran forward.

Edward and the others hurried out, forming a line in front of her.

The three women kept coming.

"Circle of love." Alexa dropped the necklace on the ground and met the first Snake Edward let into the circle that the men formed around them. She punched Snake one, knocking her right back out of the circle. She ducked a swipe from Snake two and punched her in the throat. It crunched under the blow. The Snake dropped, gasping.

Alexa timed a coming attack and grabbed the third woman's throat with both hands. She sank in fangs, sucking down blood.

The other Snakes fled. They couldn't accept a leader who wasn't like them, but they couldn't reclaim the token, either. Their best fighters were dead. They ran, howling over their destroyed nest.

Alexa kicked the Snake trying to bite her ankle. She stomped on the throat of the gasping woman and rotated in time to catch and lift the first fighter as she lunged. Alexa tossed her into the air, grunting.

The Snake landed on a fence rail and slid down.

Her scream faded into a tense silence that filled the battlefield. The only ones standing were her men. The captives were on their knees in the corral, already waiting for their new owner to take possession.

A few survivors were fleeing in vehicles, spinning up mud and ice.

Alexa let them go. She wanted this story to spread.

She knelt, unbuttoning Elsie's cloak. She tugged it free and tossed it to Billy. "Wear that."

Penne watched from the top of a tree, hidden by snow, foliage, and a flip of her cloak. The white scales blended with the winter environment while giving her a protected view of the carnage below. Snake women were dead everywhere, including Hemi and all of Elsie's traitors.

Penne narrowed in on Alexa. She was carrying their leadership token as if she'd earned it. *I'll see you again, Alexa Mitchel. And I'll eat your men.*

Penne stilled, sensing danger. She strained to hear through the chaos below and the wind up here. Trees made a lot of noise when they were weighted by snow.

A clawed hand settled on her shoulder. Another slid over her mouth.

Alexa glanced up in time to detect a blur followed by complete stillness. She narrowed in, scanning.

“Things okay?”

She nodded slowly at Jacob’s query. “As far as I know.”

Jacob didn’t like that answer, but he was forced to accept it.

Alexa stored the necklace in her cloak. “We leave in five minutes. Scavenging team stays together. No survivors.” Alexa went to the scared men in the corral while her team went to clear the camp.

She observed them for a minute, thrilled with Billy’s recovery. He was in his normal position, following his training. He would get extra attention for a week or two, and an evaluation. If he couldn’t move on, he would be left behind. *That might kill me.*

Alexa looked at the slaves. “Your decoy worked?”

Marshal stood on shaky legs, stunned to still be alive. “I ran. The guards followed.” He didn’t say more. The blood on his mouth was the detail. He knew she wouldn’t miss it. “Thank you.”

Alexa opened the corral. “Do not waste that gift. And don’t try to create more. Only females can pass it.” That wasn’t true, but it did involve giving venom instead of taking the blood. Hopefully he

wouldn't learn that trick for a long time. "I like you. Don't make me hunt you down."

Marshal blanched.

She licked her lips. "Don't let that fear fade. I like the way you taste."

Marshal went to help the other broken men, eager to be out of her sight.

Edward and the team returned, minus Billy.

Alexa spotted him across the camp, searching through the pile of heads.

"He sent us off." Edward kept watching to make sure no one was sneaking up on Billy. "I have his cloak. It needs a scrub." Edward didn't tell her it stank like bad sex.

The team watched Billy and their surroundings, hoping he found what he needed.

"He's got it." Mark chuckled when Billy kicked a head like a football. It rolled onto the frozen riverbed, leaving a trail of gore.

Billy picked out two more heads, bringing fresh anger to his team. They hadn't known how many people abused Billy.

"Will he be okay?"

Edward nodded at Jacob's muttered question. "He has his team now. We'll help him."

"What's the biggest problem from this?" David hadn't known Billy long enough to guess.

"That he'll come to hate women, and then me." Alexa veered toward Hemi's tent. "It won't happen. We'll make sure he remembers that my kind have a

good side as well. We'll help him find that balance, as I have."

Because Alexa had never acted like she hated men, the team believed her. Whatever method she'd used to recover from her rapes would work for Billy. It had to. None of them were willing to give up the quest.

"Whatever he needs, he'll get it." Mark went to stand by his teammate while he fought the ghosts. Billy was staring at the heads now, remembering.

The others joined him.

4

Full sun broke over a smoking, cold camp covered in blood and bodies. Alexa picked up a torch and tossed it into Hemi's tent. Her men helped her set it all on fire, enjoying how it felt.

She summoned the slave men. "You have three options. You can join with a larger group for protection. There's a convoy of soldiers not far from here. They have 1000 men. You'd be safer, but you'll also have to fight with them."

None of the slaves spoke, but their expressions said they didn't want that option.

"You could try to go west, right now, like you are." Alexa waited to see if they would insist on that.

Marshal sighed. "What's the third option?" He was sure it wouldn't be staying with her.

“I know of an inexperienced guardian already headed west with a group of youngsters. They’re searching for peace and hiding from everyone else.”

Moods lifted; small smiles broke out.

Alexa grunted. “We’ll escort you to her. She’ll be glad to have the help. Be good to her. She’s been hurt, too.”

The men didn’t care that it was a female because she came with Alexa’s recommendation. They were just thrilled to have an escort and a safe group to join. They gathered on the frozen street with their chins up, waiting for her call to go.

Billy came over to take his place with his team, mind spinning, heart aching. *I’m not the same, in any way. If Alexa doesn’t know how to fix me, I’m done.*

Chapter Fourteen
Is it Working?

1

“**W**hat happened?” Billy handed Marshal his canteen of tea. They’d been walking for most of the day. The sun was about to set.

“We were half a day from the stash of guns Edward told us about. We ran across a camp of women. No robes, no ugly feel. We got laid, ate their food.” Marshal’s hand shook. His grip tightened on the canteen. “We woke in a different camp, tied up and disarmed. They started using us right away.” He shuddered. “When the drugs wore off, we tried to escape.”

“Carrie caught you?” Billy hated her even more.

“She killed half of us—Dwayne, Jack, our cook.” Marshal glowered at Alexa. “She showed me a false vision!”

“You deviated from what we saw.” Billy was positive of it. “Where?”

Marshal’s expression fell. “Inviting them in for a truce. Her vision didn’t show it.”

“You should have killed them.”

“Yeah.” Marshal walked in silence for a minute.

The escaped captives had crossed the country on their feet, but not in this condition. Alexa’s crew

was proud of them for the lack of complaints as she kept a steady pace. They were eating on the move. Her men assumed they would need to reoutfit the entire team when this escort run was over. All of them were sharing supplies.

When Marshal looked over again, Billy knew what he was going to ask. He sighed. "I made the same mistake. I gave my enemy the benefit of the doubt." *I didn't think one BLM agent and two guards were a problem. When Cedrick went into our cabin, his guards double darted me. I was too shocked to do anything but fall.*

Marshal sympathized, but there was nothing he could tell Billy, or himself, that would make it better. They both had to live with those mistakes now. *And that's the hardest part.*

Billy nodded, catching the thought. He was suddenly terrified of living.

Marshal hoped it was okay to keep asking questions. He had a lot of them. "Why did she change me?" He tugged his hood tighter against the painful sunlight, grateful for the loan from David.

"You're one of us. She felt it at the cabin."

Marshal beamed. "So her offer was real. I wasn't certain after we left."

"Alexa never makes that offer unless she means it." Billy wasn't jealous. Marshal understood him more than his own team did now.

Marshal scowled. "Are you going to let those evil bitches ruin your place on her team?"

Billy didn't answer.

Alexa looked over her shoulder, brow arched.

Billy met her eyes, seeing her fear. She was worried over the same thing. *I'm trying, Boss.*

Alexa turned back to the road. *That's all I'll ever ask.*

The afternoon wind was cold, making people shiver, but it felt wonderful to Alexa and three of the others marching down the center of the weedy, tree lined road. They were eager for full dark. The sun was not a friend anymore.

Marshal kept pushing, wanting to help. It would have been obvious that Billy had been abused even if Marshal hadn't heard the man's screams. "Is it because your leader is a woman?"

"No." Billy sighed. "She's carrying guilt now that I can never erase. I hurt her."

"Ah. You think she'll hold it against you later."

"Never. She'll hold it against herself." Billy didn't give more details. Only their team knew how Alexa punished herself for mistakes. It stayed with them.

Marshal understood anyway. "Then you have to convince her that she has nothing to be guilty about."

Billy snorted. "She's trying that on me."

"Is it working?"

"No."

Marshal decided a topic change was best. "How long before we get to where we're going?"

Billy estimated. “Assuming they’re on the move, too, about 20 hours.” Edward had filled him in about the barn people.

Marshal glanced around at the snowy trees and frozen landscape. “We need to camp for the night. We’ll start out again come dawn.”

Billy didn’t answer. It wasn’t up to him. He stopped when Alexa called it and not before.

Marshal’s face tightened. “So we keep going until we catch up? Some of these men can’t handle that.”

As if to prove his statement, a thin, bruised male in front of them staggered. He dropped to his knees and stayed there, panting.

Billy kept walking. As he went by, he hefted the fallen man onto his back. The vampire venom had healed most of his injuries and given him more strength. It just couldn’t erase the memories or the feel of his secret shame.

“Thank you.”

Billy grunted, stride not changing.

Marshal was ashamed that he hadn’t done it. He tugged his hood tighter to block out the sun, vowing to carry the next one.

David dropped back next to him.

Marshal realized Alexa had him under guard, specifically. “Why?”

David shrugged. “She’s expecting trouble on the way. Stay alert.”

“I will.” Marshal didn’t want to fight anymore, even with this new body. He wanted peace and a

loving home. “More Snakes or Fanatics?” Marshal was scared of both.

David shrugged, not picking up the vibe yet. “Hard to say. We’ve pissed off both sides of that war.”

David nodded at Alexa when she rotated to view behind them on her schedule. She liked to do it every five minutes to be certain they were all together and no one had missed a coming threat.

When she stayed backward, expression darkening, David sighed. “Coming soon. Watch her for clues on how to handle it.”

Marshal tensed, locking onto Alexa.

Alexa held up a hand.

Her crew stopped, putting arms out to halt those who hadn’t noticed.

A tense silence filled the air as Alexa evaluated their options.

Horse hooves echoed.

Alexa pointed at the weeds along the road. “Get in there.” Alexa spun a finger, bringing her crew to their places around her.

The escaped men threw themselves and each other into the muddy weeds, some whimpering.

Alexa scanned them and judged it wasn’t enough cover. She led her team down the middle of the street. They would be what the riders saw right away. Hopefully, their enemy would miss the hiding men in favor of an obvious target.

“There she is!” Horses pounded toward them.

“Watch your crossfire.” Alexa turned, drawing.

The two front Snakes tried to pull up, but they were going too fast. Alexa fired while they were trying to stop.

The next two Snake women weren't scared. They both dropped to a side of their horse, drawing knives.

Marshal lunged from the weeds, knocking one of them from her horse.

More escaped captives jumped from the weeds, tackling the other women. They rolled through the mud, punching.

Alexa brought up her rifle to pick off females who appeared to be winning.

Her men did the same, except for Billy. He turned to watch their backs, frowning.

Jacob cursed himself again. He was always forgetting that last man in line had to cover those spots during a fight. He spun around, reloading. "I got it."

Billy stayed facing the rear, hoping the timid males were better fighters than they seemed. He didn't trust Jacob not to miss something during the chaos.

Alexa felt Billy's big shoulders slide against her. She leaned on his support, immensely glad it was there. She fired, hitting a Snake woman in the shoulder. The slave she had been strangling flipped her over and wrapped his big hands around her throat.

Alexa switched targets, picking the Snake with a charm around her neck. She aimed carefully and shattered the token.

The woman flipped off the horse, landing in a bloody pile behind it.

Alexa's men kept firing even when she put her rifle away. She hadn't told them to stop.

Alexa was proud of the escaped males. A few who'd she thought were too far gone had been the first to attack. It gave her hope for Billy, and a possible new level of her plan to help him.

Edward observed their surroundings, impressed when the victorious males began looting the bodies. It was hard to remember that this was mostly the same group who'd spent two days with them at the cabin. Those men had been arrogant fighters determined to secure their freedom. The Fanatics had completely changed them in a short time. The males now needed a lot of care that Edward doubted Claudia would be able to handle. They weren't delivering timid men who just wanted peace to rebuild their lives. They were bringing two dozen furious killers with black spots on their hearts.

2

“We're close.” Alexa shifted an exhausted man higher onto her back. “Run ahead—half mile, by two.”

Edward summoned Jacob.

The two men lowered their loads and took off at a fast pace.

The rest of the team carried exhausted men while trying to watch their surroundings. All of them were carrying someone. Edward's attempt to round up the Snake's horses had failed. They didn't trust him, but he wasn't sure if it was because he was changed or because he was a male.

The other males limped along, but they didn't complain. It was daylight. The miserable hours trekking through the night had been hard on them. Most were grateful to be stopping before it got dark again.

Marshal's memories of the night before weren't all bad. Alexa had spent an hour walking next to him. She'd given a brief training lesson on his new gifts, then finally demanded the price for her rescue and escort. *"Keep Claudia alive and unharmed, no matter how you have to do it. She's special to every member of the team you plan to join."*

Marshal had gotten the impression that this Claudia person might be invited to join Alexa's crew at some point, but he hadn't asked.

"We made good time." David hadn't been certain how fast they would be able to travel with the slaves. "Thirty-four hours. Badass."

The slaves smiled, egos boosted.

"We walked faster in the dark." Marshal knew he had. His leg muscles were sore, though not cramping like before Alexa had bitten him. "Hiding

while the Fanatics drove by got our hearts and feet pumping.”

David snickered. “So did sneaking by the soldier’s camp.”

Claudia’s group came into view ahead of them. The girl cast wary glances over her shoulder as Edward and Jacob jogged back to Alexa.

Bruce was gone. Alexa saw in Claudia’s thoughts that the man had died a few days ago from a snake bite. She didn’t mention it and bring more sadness to their group.

Edward noticed Jacob was a little out of breath and made a note to work the rookie harder. “She’s willing. They’re making camp now. She wants you to pick it.”

Alexa sighed. “You told her no?”

“Yes. She understands we’re not taking over.”

“Here she comes.” Jacob was proud of Claudia for her choice to come back and help the hurting men.

Her healthier people took the burdens from Alexa and her fighters with shy greetings.

Alexa’s crew was glad to have full use of their bodies in case of another attack.

The escaped males stared at their new benefactor in surprise but not desire. Fear came as they saw her eyes glowing red.

Marshal was relieved. “She’ll care for us.”

“She’s just a kid.” Mark smiled at the girl, causing her to blush. “You’ll learn to care for each other.” Mark didn’t want the girl to be

overwhelmed. “But if you get out of line, she’ll hurt you more than any of the Fanatics did.”

Not possible. Billy kept the thought to himself, nodding to show his support. He approved of Mark’s attempt to protect the weak girl.

“Would she mind if I give her people some gloves?” One of the slaves had looted the Snake laundry tent.

Alexa shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

The thin man ran on quick feet, waving at Claudia.

Alexa was pleased when the girl treated him kindly. Both groups had been hurt. She doubted they would survive, but it felt good to give them a chance. As long as they avoided the Snakes, they might at least make it out of this zone.

“She begged for an escort.” Edward didn’t think Alexa would do it, but he was honor bound to tell her.

“No.”

Edward was glad. He liked helping people, but he was now eager to be back on their own, be it on the quest or in their little cabin. They’d spent enough time around other people.

“She’s picking the house over the factory.”

Alexa shrugged at Edward’s disapproving tone. “Their needs are not the same as ours. She wants her group to relax and bond. I want hardass killers who pull the trigger at my call.”

Each of her men walked straighter, stood taller.

Alexa veered toward the car factory, waving Claudia on when the girl would have changed her plans. Alexa went to the end of the gate, searching for signs it was occupied. They hadn't tried to find a vehicle to transport the escaped men because the noise would have drawn too much attention, but also because Claudia's group would have hidden at the first sound.

Alexa rejoined her team as they waited for Claudia to hand out orders.

Claudia summoned two of the healthier men to come with her. "Let's clear inside. Everyone else can clear out here."

Billy moved in perfect time with his team, keeping the V straight. He was aware of the searching glances from his crew, but he was fine when they were working or walking. He had no problem defending them or being part of the team. His hell would come during lessons and at night, when no one else was awake to suffer with him or distract him.

Edward scanned their surroundings, confident Alexa would take them to clear the factory at some point. There was a lot in there they could use for reloads, repairing weapons, and other things. He loved it that Alexa knew without being told. Women were taking over the country, but they lacked a lot of the knowledge men had earned a long time ago. They would have to catch up. *Good thing Alexa isn't bad. She could lead an all-female team.*

The Snakes and Fanatics should have tried to hire her.

Alexa rolled her eyes, catching his thoughts easier now. “Do you know how catty women can be? The Snakes are too busy fighting each other to spread the way they’d need to. Girls are mean, man.”

Edward laughed with the others, but he was sure she could have pulled it off. *Her mentor paid attention to the job.*

Alexa’s mood lifted. “My father. I hated it at first. It was hard. His standards were so far above me that I could never reach the bar.”

“But you didn’t quit.” Edward hoped she would keep going. He wanted to know everything about her.

“He didn’t let me quit. He knew I would be amazing at the job.” Her joy faded. “Life taught me the rest, painfully.” Her eyes slid to Billy. “As it is all of you.”

Billy frowned at them over his shoulder. “If you keep babying me, I’ll need a diaper.”

Edward laughed, delighted with how Billy was bouncing back.

Claudia led them toward the farmhouse. It felt weird to be leading an alpha, but it was also an honor. Her chin lifted. Her mood improved.

Alexa worried over the girl. *She’s not strong enough to keep them alive. What else can I do?* Alexa caught a wave of tension between Mark and Claudia when the girl turned to issue orders. *She*

looked at Mark first. Alexa stored the observation as Claudia hurried into the home.

Everyone else entered when Claudia called clear. The fighters searched for any threats the girl might have missed.

Alexa joined Claudia in the wide main room of the house. “Where do you want us?”

Claudia stared at Alexa in surprise. “Really?”
“For a bit.”

Claudia grinned. “Awesome.” She pointed toward the woods. “Food and security—all of you. Stay in sight of each other.”

Alexa and her crew did it immediately.

Claudia summoned half a dozen others who were already mingling. “Everyone else, start on dinner or injuries. Let’s hurry and we’ll have a reward tonight.”

It’s instinctive. Mark matched the style to Alexa’s way of handling them. *Some people have it. Most of us don’t.*

3

Claudia had a full camp made in an hour. The hurting males had been given medication, clothes, and gear. The girl was followed without protests or problems. It reminded Alexa’s men of her.

Edward had to know. He looked at Alexa, then nodded toward the girl. “Who is she, really?”

“Ask her.” Alexa had expected these questions at their first meeting.

Edward opened his mouth.

“I’m the last of my family.” Claudia joined them at the fire ring, but she sat away from Mark, still scared of him.

Jacob smiled at the girl to encourage her.

“Many powerful families have been wiped from existence. Mine will not survive the final war. I have seen it.” The girl brightened. “But I am responsible for helping a lot of people along the way.”

Mark didn’t like hearing that. “Can your future be changed?”

Claudia shrugged, fingering the butterfly carving in her pocket that he’d left for her during their last meeting. “Sometimes we can change the future, but not for selfish gains. Anything I do to save myself will backfire.”

“I’ve already interfered with that prediction.” Alexa popped a piece of deer into her mouth while people stared, figuring out what she meant.

Claudia glanced away. “It’s not enough. I die in childbirth and the baby with me.”

Alexa chewed, swallowed. “Father?”

Claudia’s face darkened. “A soldier.”

Mark’s head snapped up. *How can I help you?
Be the father.*

He slowly shook it, denying the girl’s fearful mental request. “I would never do that.”

Alexa tossed a piece of deer meat at Mark, smiling when he caught it and snapped it down. “Is it her age, or having a child that you might never

know?” She was already certain Mark wouldn’t give in, but she was curious about why.

Mark shrugged. “A woman has to earn that honor from me.”

Alexa shrugged. “Descendants sometimes gift children to those who deserve or need them. It’s been part of our culture for as long as we’ve been around.”

Mark glanced at the girl again.

Claudia blushed, but she was filled with fear that he would agree.

Mark shook his head. “They also have to be willing.”

Claudia let out a sigh of relief even as the light of desperation refilled her eyes. Even to continue her family line, she couldn’t submit without being forced. She never wanted to be touched again.

Alexa beckoned. “It’s time for a lesson.”

Her men perked up, turning to see who she wanted.

Alexa crooked a finger at David.

David rose, a little nervous with so many witnesses. It didn’t matter that most were only children. It was still nerve-wracking.

Alexa brought up a shield, bringing instant attention from the rest of the people in the drafty ranch house. “Now you.”

David copied her, trying to conserve his energy while doing it. Shields took a lot of concentration.

Alexa gestured. “Training routine three.”

David drew his knife, but walked through it instead of doing it fast, like he was normally able to do. The shield stayed up.

“Again, quicker.”

David made it through three speedups before he had to drop the shield.

“Excellent. We have an advantage in every fight. They’ll know I’m a magic user.” Alexa smiled coldly. “They’ll never suspect all of you are, as well. We have to keep that advantage. Work with Claudia for a few minutes. She has a method of using less energy that we’ll both practice later.”

“You got it.” David grinned at Claudia as the girl joined him. “Be nice. I’m new.”

She giggled.

Satisfied that session would go well, Alexa waved at Daniel and Mark, then Billy. “Hand-to-hand, two on one.”

Billy automatically took the role of victim. This lesson was to help him. All of their brief training moments since his rescue had been. It would stay that way until Alexa was confident in his skills again.

Daniel and Mark rushed Billy, both swinging real hits.

Billy, threatened, roared at them, fangs dropping, magic swelling.

Both men stopped.

Alexa grunted. “Again.”

Billy pulled in the anger, fighting for control. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Alexa understood. “But you do have to learn to handle it. Again.”

Mark and Daniel rushed.

Billy ducked the hits, spinning out of their reach each time they tried to grab him. His footwork was the same—quick and neat. His moves and choices were the same—solid. But his eyes never lost their wildness.

Billy grunted at a light shoulder hit. He swung out harder than he should have, taking Mark to the floor.

Daniel stopped, not sure how Alexa wanted to handle it.

Alexa stepped in front of Billy. “Again.”

Mark and Daniel rushed him at the same time as Alexa.

Billy forced himself to do the moves and take the hits, trying to restore the calm tranquility he had enjoyed on her team. *I used to love this. Why doesn’t it satisfy me now?*

Billy took two more hits and stopped fighting.

Alexa waved the others toward David and Claudia. “Go offer them a challenge.” She stared at Billy, evaluating.

Billy looked back, regretful. “What’s wrong with me?”

Alexa sighed. “You’re grieving. Something was stolen from you that you can never get back.”

“How do I fix it?”

“You keep fighting, like you’re doing.”

Billy braced. “Again.”

Alexa rushed him.

Edward observed both groups while keeping an ear on their surroundings. He was glad to see Billy do better when it was just him and Alexa, but if he couldn't relearn to be a part of the team, his time with them would end. Edward didn't want that. He liked Billy; he didn't want a new member. *We'll help him through it.*

Alexa nodded. *Yes, we will. He's one of us. We don't leave a man behind.* She rushed Billy again, hand raising.

Billy ducked it, spinning. *I can do this. Alexa would never hurt me.*

Alexa slapped him, proving that wasn't true.

Billy growled at her. "You bitch!"

Alexa nodded as everyone else stared in shock or disapproval. "In every way. You belong to me, not her fucking ghost!"

Billy let the tears roll. "Again."

Alexa rushed him, giving him what he needed.

Billy hit her, hard.

Slap!

Alexa kept coming, even when she felt blood roll down her lip. She struck him back, rocking his head.

Billy punched her.

Alexa rose from the floor and headbutted him.

No one else budged, surprised by how ugly it had gotten.

Billy punched again, tears rolling.

Alexa took the hit and delivered it right back, splitting his lip.

Billy spun away and punched the wall repeatedly, cracking the plaster.

Alexa panted, hands on her knees. She was hurting, but it was nothing compared to the darkness eating at his soul. “Again.”

Billy turned around, expression almost calm.

Alexa tensed, sensing real danger. So did the rest of her team.

Billy drew his gun.

Alexa didn't hesitate. “Let's go.”

Billy followed her through the door, eager for a target who deserved his anger.

Edward breathed a sigh of relief, glad she knew how to handle Billy's rage. It could have gone badly for all of them.

Edward slid his gun back into the holster, glad he hadn't had to shoot a teammate. *Because I would have.*

Chapter Fifteen
Time to Recover

1

“**T**hey think I drew on you.”

Alexa kept looting the corpses of three Snake women Billy had heard lurking around the property. “Give them time. We’ve suffered a fracture as a team. It will heal, then be tougher than the other bonds.”

He grunted. “Also a weak spot for future injuries.”

“Of course. Life rarely hits us without leaving damage.”

Billy stood watch while she finished clearing the bodies. He felt more in control now that he’d killed someone. The rage inside would rise and fall, but he wouldn’t always have an outlet. He would have to learn to live with it.

Alexa stood, scanning the darkness. “Marshal may join us at some point. If so, I’d like you to train him.”

“I’d be honored.” Billy paused, tone lowering to a mutter. “Hard and fast...or like you’re doing with me?”

Alexa’s lips twitched. “Saw through that, did you?”

“Yes. If it had been Edward, you would already be riding his ass again.”

“Perhaps.” Alexa kicked dirt over the fire that had given away this small group of survivors. “But if it had been Jacob, I would already know he couldn’t continue. Each of you are different. I treat you as you need.”

Billy stored the items she handed to him without examining them. “I’m better now.”

“You are. During yesterday’s training break, you couldn’t swing back at all for fear you would hurt us. Tomorrow, it will be better again.” Alexa hoped.

He looked at her. “You do know it’s crazy that you judge mental health by how willing we are to hit you and each other, right?”

Alexa chuckled, striding into the darkness. “Thank my father. He taught me. None of it’s pretty.”

“But it works.” Billy could think about his time in Safe Haven now without feeling bad. “Your father was our hero for a while. When he couldn’t handle it anymore, his successor took over and she held up.”

Alexa wasn’t surprised. “He was never strong enough to be a true leader, but he’s the best teacher on the planet. That’s why the government has spent so long fighting to get him under control instead of killing him.”

“That’s about how the vote on his crimes went. He was too valuable to execute.” Billy had told her everything.

“As am I, as his successor is, I would imagine. He reaches into your soul and changes you forever. Then he gives you complete freedom to run with that power. Even his enemies respect him. It’s a hard legacy to live up to.” She shrugged. “My brothers often failed.”

“Why were you able to do it when they couldn’t? Is it a female thing?” Billy didn’t care either way. He just wanted to know.

“The scientists think so. Tell me what you think.”

Billy concentrated. He loved these moments. “He trained you differently.”

“Yes. Dig deeper.”

Billy thought of the stories she’d told, of how alone she’d been. “They weren’t isolated.”

“Yes. Deeper.”

He got it all at once, frowning. “He wasn’t bonded to them.”

“Very good.”

Billy switched to another topic that was bothering him. “Would you really give this up if Brian finds a cure?”

“In a heartbeat.”

Billy thought he understood. She wanted to be allowed in Safe Haven.

Alexa brought them back to the problem that needed to be handled now. “What happens when we rush you?”

Billy tensed. “I want to kill.”

“Because of the pain?”

“Because I might lose. I get scared of being taken again.” He sighed. “The Fanatics used me against myself, and now, every time I see a red robe, I...”

Alexa waited for him to fill it in, hoping he would trust her.

Billy turned away in shame. “It’s nothing. I’ll work through it.”

Alexa placed a hand on his arm. “I’ll help you, if you let me.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think you can on this one, Boss.”

“Maybe not. Some things, a man has to handle on his own.” She glided by, able to be her new self with him and Edward. She wasn’t using most of her new gifts around the others yet. They weren’t ready to know how much she’d changed. “When you’re ready to trust yourself, I’ll try. Until then, keep soaking in the love of your team and the love of your leader.”

“I will.” Billy liked talking to her. He kept it going. “Why aren’t your brothers like you, deep down?”

Alexa led them back toward the ranch home. “Adrian loved my mother. All the women he loved had children capable of great deeds. Those he had

no bond with were corrupt long before puberty. I love my students, my team, the few people I gift with my attention or time. Many of my brothers detest normals. They want descendants to rule the world and the rest to serve them. We may meet one or two on our travels. You will be able to tell the difference in seconds.”

Billy stored that, hoping they only met the good ones. The idea of a corrupt Mitchel still on this soil was disturbing, but he had a bigger concern. “How do I get their trust back? Edward would have shot me.”

Alexa knew that was true. She was both proud of it and saddened by it. “Each fight will ease it, but only you can erase it. As long as you’re not sure of yourself in training, they’ll worry.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“I know.” Alexa waved him on. “Make them think you’ve made a big mistake, then I’ll come in. That will help for tonight.”

Billy did, hiding his grin.

Alexa lingered on the porch until it was time to enter, laughing on the outside, but inside, she was still fighting her guilt over him being taken. Billy wasn’t the only one who needed time to recover.

2

“Company?”

“Sure.” Billy was glad Edward had woken. It was two hours before dawn—the worst time for his

mind and the new voices in there. The hour spent cleaning his cloak before bedtime had kept his thoughts ugly.

Edward saw Billy staring at the drying cloak that he'd hung by the fire. "I can listen, if you want to talk."

Billy grunted at Edward's offer. "Maybe. It runs together when it's too quiet."

"Maybe you need to get laid." Edward was pursuing his own idea of what might help.

Billy grimaced.

"So if the boss woke and opened her bedroll..."

Billy faked a snicker. "That's different."

Edward chuckled. "She does make it memorable."

Billy listened to the crackle of the fire and snores from the people in the rooms around them. It was peaceful, but not calm. The freed males were having nightmares. "Will they survive?"

Edward shrugged. "Some of them. Time around Alexa always swings things." Edward poured a cup of mud. He grimaced at the taste. "Jacob made the coffee."

Billy made a face. "I passed on it. Boss had a cup that ate through the bottom. I thought the ceiling would catch fire when she belched."

Edward forced it down, coughing. "Damn."

"Yeah, it's a good thing he has gun skills." Billy sniggered. "I don't know how he didn't starve to death before he joined the team."

“I ate at the town diner.” Jacob laughed with them. He’d been listening from his bedroll, also hoping to find a way to help Billy. “Or begged the town widows. So did David.”

David lifted his head. “Hey, widows need love, too.”

Soft male amusement filled the room, calming nightmares. It felt good to be protecting the group in the warm ranch house, but it was also crowded, smothering. None of them liked that part.

Claudia had declared the upstairs off limits because of a weak floor. The two downstairs rooms had been transformed into an efficiency apartment, creating areas for learning, sleeping, and cooking. Mark was impressed with Claudia. Despite her meek appearance, she got things done.

Billy noticed the calming effect and found a nugget of hope. *The darkness feels far away right now. My team really does push it back. Maybe I can hold onto that.*

Edward heard another noise. “You too, Mark?”

Mark rolled over, grinning.

Edward snorted. “We’re going to be beat in the morning.”

Alexa slowly sat up.

Silence fell. The men braced for a scold.

Alexa held her hand out for Edward’s cup. “Let’s see if I can really belch fire.”

Laughter woke a few of Claudia’s group. They drifted right back off as they realized it was Alexa

and her crew. If they were laughing, things were okay.

Alexa slid up against the dusty couch. “I’m changing our schedule, as of right now. We’ll keep third shift until we’re ready for a change.”

Billy opened his mouth to protest.

Alexa’s orbs glowed bright red.

Billy dropped his chin, mouth closing.

Alexa let it slide. She needed him to understand that things had changed for all of them, not just him. “Three of our team can’t stand the sunlight. We tolerate it, but even my gift doesn’t keep it out completely. Travel will be at night now. Prepare your minds for it. Try to enjoy it. It will be much cooler and avoiding people will be easier.” She chewed a drink of the coffee, smacking her lips. “Crunchy.”

They broke into fresh laughter, glad to know the shift change wasn’t all because of Billy. Excitement built.

Pleased, Alexa pulled her pouch and began twisting a smoke.

Contentment filled the air, calming nerves and the rest of the nightmares.

Billy let their love fill his heart and temporarily banish the darkness he feared would always live there now.

“You can blind them long enough to escape, if it becomes necessary, but never make them into slaves.” Alexa finished packing items into her cloak as she gave Claudia last minute instructions. Now that late afternoon had come, it was time to go.

Billy entered the house with Jacob. That was the end of their bathroom breaks. Alexa held out his cloak.

Billy nodded at her. He’d been enjoying outside time without sweating or freezing. The Snake cloak was in his kit.

Alexa turned back to Claudia, swallowing her pleasure at seeing him once again dressed like the rest of the team. “We stand for the light, for freedom, for America. Never dishonor that.”

Claudia smiled at her group. It had doubled in size. “We’ll be fine. They don’t want control or violence. It’s a good match.”

“They are honoring you by accepting your protection. Never betray that trust.” Alexa hugged the girl.

“I won’t. Thank you for helping us. You’re always welcome.”

Alexa kissed the girl on the cheek, then stepped back.

Claudia’s face was flush with pleasure. “For as long as I live, you have my love.”

“Happy days and easy nights to you.” Alexa turned away.

Claudia lifted her hand, muttering.

Alexa and her team felt safe as the girl's spell landed. It was nice.

Alexa led her team straight to the factory. "We'll clear inside. Billy will find us wheels."

Billy switched to the center of the V. The person hunting for something was distracted. He was put in the center, where the rest of the team watched out for him, but it didn't escape Billy's notice that it was the weak place as they pried open the main door to the factory. He tried not to let it bother him. They needed a vehicle and he was their number one wheelman. Daniel was also good, but he preferred things with only two wheels. Billy loved anything that rolled.

The factory halls were wide and dark. Three of their members enjoyed the coolness. The other four stayed tense and became more determined to earn the reward so they could enjoy moments like this, too. Their human souls couldn't help fearing the unknown, especially when they lived with daily proof that there actually was something in the dark.

"We're being watched. It's distant, thin..." David scanned again. "Not like us."

"Outside?" Edward wasn't getting anything.

"Yes. This building is empty."

The team relaxed a little. They trusted David's instincts the way Alexa did. If he made a mistake and lost that trust, those reactions would change.

"Once a minute scans until we leave." Alexa liked it that David had done it without being told.

She planned to give him more workouts to expand his range. She'd learned her lesson, too.

David was eager. He began counting down 60 seconds.

Alexa tapped Billy. "Light."

Billy brought out a small flashlight and passed it to her. *She's on my left now. Why didn't I hear her and Edward switch places?* "My hearing isn't right."

Alexa already knew. "We went through it our first time in the dark. It snapped back in after an hour."

Each man settled in for at least an hour in the factory. Alexa wanted new gifts to be usable, no matter what type. She'd often given them an oral lesson and a physical test in the same day. They knew what to expect.

Alexa swept as they walked, evaluating each room. There wasn't much left. Car frames on assembly lines glared at them for not being finished.

"Find the stairs."

Edward had the lead. "Up or down?"

"Down. People are scared of the dark, terrified of basements. Put them together and you have...?"

"Treasures for us." Billy enjoyed her chuckle, feeling better with each minute of being reunited. "Small rat coming on the right."

Jacob braced in case it ran over his boot. It would take a big mouse, or a lot of little ones, to be a danger, but he still didn't like rodents.

“Another rat on the left.” Edward followed Billy’s lead and warned the team. He’d forgotten they needed to cover for the men who didn’t see as well as they did now.

Mark put a hand on Billy’s shoulder. “I’m blind in here.”

“Steps coming.” Billy followed at the pace Edward was setting, nerves settling another notch as he contributed.

Mark listened for the steps to lighten so he would know when he hit level ground.

“We’ll clear this floor. Rookie roll on four.” Alexa counted silently and slid to the right.

The men around her moved into their places with no errors, rotating the sides while Edward lined them up on point.

“Full light. Secure and set. Four hours.”

The men fired medium length torches to place in the corners, then secured the wide room for the four hours they would be here.

Shelves lined this basement room, all full, with a layer of cobwebs over the valuable contents. Before the war, tools had been readily available, as had solvents and soap. Those were rare now. It was a good find.

“No bodies in here.” Edward added it to his long list of things that didn’t fit. “Looks like they ran, but there wasn’t any violence.”

“I don’t feel ghosts, either. Maybe they were closed except for a short staff.” David gestured at old Christmas lights hanging over doorframes.

“Makes sense.” Edward still scanned the scuff marks in the dust, frowning. He hated to leave a puzzle unsolved, even this many years later.

Jacob picked an empty barrel for their fire, certain they would need it for working with metal. They didn’t have electricity for the power tools on the neat shelves.

Within a few minutes, the team was humming along to Daniel’s playlist as they labored. They were alone together. It was perfect.

Alexa sang along with parts of the song, surprising her men with the decent copy. Her voice was so raspy they’d thought she couldn’t hold a tune.

Alexa chuckled. *There are many things you haven’t seen yet, my pets. I can’t wait to live up to your expectations and then beat them. Unlike my father, I adore my role enough to never abuse it.*

4

“They’re coming out.” Marshal was on duty at the front of the ranch home.

No one joined him or asked questions. Claudia had told them the fighters wouldn’t be back, to let them go on about their quest unhampered by emotions.

Marshal kept watching, wishing he was free to join them. *But I’m not. She demanded a price for*

this gift. I agreed to help Claudia make it to safety and I will.

Marshal joined the other men who were learning to sew hides into gloves. He took his place and tried to concentrate on Claudia's lesson, but his mind remained on Alexa. If not for the mission she'd given him, he might be going with her.

Alexa and her team didn't look at the ranch as they opened the factory gates.

Daniel drove the vehicle through.

Billy strode next to the new black SUV with his rifle up, providing protection. His hearing had snapped in, but his sight was the biggest advantage. He could narrow his vision over a mile and pick out the hair on an insect's legs. The scope was still better, but not by far.

Daniel opened the door and waved to their Driver as he got out.

Billy took the wheel with a huge grin that made Alexa love Daniel more than she already had. She took the front passenger seat.

Daniel shut the factory gate, hoping someone else was able to use the literal ton of junk they'd left behind. The gate clinked, flashing Daniel to the past. He'd been responsible for closing the park after the customers left. The last step had been to secure the road gate. The clink was identical. *I don't hate that life as much anymore.* Daniel was smiling as he got into the rear of the SUV they'd worked on under Billy's tutelage.

Billy waited for her decision as the others entered the car.

Alexa sighed. "Take us to the radio station."

Billy's fierce grin transformed his face into the brutal team member they'd missed. "With pleasure."

Alexa waited until the ranch was behind them to shift in the seat. "Reward now or later?"

All the men brightened.

"Now."

Alexa laughed at the unanimous choice. "Each of you may ask one question that I will answer, no matter the topic. Senior rank starts, descending."

Edward thought about it for a minute and chose not to ask a depressing question. "Would you have added Marshal to the crew?"

"Yes. He's one of us."

Daniel had also been considering that one. "Will he join us?"

Alexa shrugged. "Only fate can say for sure, but if he succeeds in his task, I will reward him."

Mark frowned a little. "How is Claudia special to Safe Haven?" The girl would have a special place in his heart forever now, even if he died before seeing her again.

Alexa chuckled. "Very nice catch. Before I answer, tell me how you knew."

"You let her train some of us."

"And?"

"And she was good at it." Mark didn't mind admitting that. "She felt like you, in ways."

“Claudia’s family came from the northeast. That branch bore more enforcers than any other.” Alexa didn’t give Mark’s secret away to the rest of their team. “Over time, she could have birthed the beginnings of a polite society.”

Billy shrugged when they stared at him expectantly. “She already answered my deepest need.”

Alexa smiled. “I’ll always come for you, for any of you.”

“Pick something else.” Edward didn’t want Billy to be cheated out of the reward.

Billy concentrated. “Okay. We’re all showing signs of our lineage now. Why?”

“Who can answer?” Alexa never missed a chance to teach her team.

“I can, I think.”

Alexa nodded at Jacob.

Jacob cleared his throat. “All humanity has the potential to be descendants. A demon has to choose to share the soul with them.”

“Close. Anyone else?” Alexa waited.

When no one spoke up, she shrugged. “Think about that while we have the two final questions.”

David asked one he’d been holding for a while. “Why didn’t you kill the Rabbit?”

“I feel sorry for him. Under the right guidance, Paul might have been more than he became. Potential matters to me.” Alexa sighed. “We’ll have another chance to see if he’s adaptable, I’m sure.”

David frowned. “Did you tell the Snakes and the Fanatics about the soldiers so the big bunker wouldn’t get the support forces they expect?”

Alexa’s expression turned icy at his second question. “It’s the same reason we’re going to the radio station instead of back to our little cabin. Slavery is wrong, no matter who holds the reins. Besides, we were getting bored. This solves all the problems at once.”

“What if we die?” Billy was feeling his mortality, even though it was no longer a true concern.

“That’s up to fate. Maybe Claudia’s group would take our place when they got the word. Maybe Safe Haven would be defeated. Maybe women really would rule the earth. I have no certain answer. All I know for sure is the men need help. I won’t ignore it any longer. We stand for the light. Now we’ll spread some.”

“I know the answer.”

Everyone glanced at Billy.

The Driver’s eyes glowed red. “Not all humans are descendants. The gifts are invisible until a demon agrees to share with a host. Demons are people who were sent to hell. They are judged and sometimes allowed to try again.”

“Keep going.”

“Suffering opens those doors.”

“Yes.” Alexa leaned against the cool window. “It’s the one thing all descendants have in common—

we've been hurt, badly enough to shake the very foundation of who we thought we were."

Billy felt another chunk of darkness break off his soul. *I'm not alone.*

Alexa grunted. "Not in any way. Final question?"

David frowned as he realized he'd forgotten that Jacob joined last, though only by hours. *I automatically assign myself the rookie position. That means it's me, not my team.*

Jacob cleared his throat, holding onto his other question for a different time. "It's not the suffering we survive that opens the doors, right? It's the pain we cause ourselves."

"Very good." Alexa was proud of her team. She sent out a wave of pleasure, subtly watching for Billy's reaction.

His hands tightened on the wheel, but he didn't put out a wave of matching adoration.

Alexa increased the pull, adding a spike of need.

The others shifted, bodies responding. She heard blood pound faster from everywhere in the SUV, except the front.

Billy drove faster, refusing to look at her.

Chapter Sixteen

They Were Wrong

1

“**T**hat’s a lot of troops.” Billy held the SUV on the ridge as they observed the line of soldiers on the broken interstate below. They’d driven straight through the sunset. It was now only a couple of hours from midnight. “I count 1000.”

Alexa waited, needing to know which direction the troops were going. If the soldiers were headed to the radio station, there would be no need for her to go, too. If the soldiers kept going over the interstate toward the bunker, the Fanatics would still need to be handled. Knowing where the Fanatics were meeting was valuable information. Hemi had signed those death warrants without knowing it.

“Which side are they on?” Mark didn’t like soldiers anyway, but the long line of armed, geared up men were a clear threat.

“Hard to say.” Alexa narrowed in with Billy’s favorite glasses. The team was taking turns with them, at his insistence. The soldiers were too far away for even their new sight. Most of those men were riding on flatbed trucks under the cold, clear sky, but a portion were on motorbikes. It was almost like an armed parade. There were rifles or handguns

on every hardbody. “No women, at all. I’d say they’re the good guys this time.” She handed the glasses back to Billy. “As long as you’re swinging a pole and not covering a hole, anyway.”

Her men sniggered at the old joke, but they understood the soldiers were still a threat to her. That had always been true on this quest.

“Get us under cover.” Alexa began digging in her cloak.

Billy drove the SUV deep into the nearby trees. They couldn’t see the soldiers from here, but the soldiers also couldn’t see them. The trees were molded black atrocities that towered over them with groans of disapproval. Clumps of snow dropped around the SUV in sporadic, impotent blows. Nature didn’t want them here.

Alexa waved at Edward. “Get their direction.”

Edward exited.

Alexa handed out clothing. “I claimed a few things from our last fight. Get changed.”

Billy took the bag she gave him and opened it. He pulled out a long red robe.

Alexa didn’t offer comfort when he paled, letting him deal with the mental trauma.

Billy jerked on the robe, anger rising. His hands settled on the wheel, knuckles white from his grip. “We’re doing this for me?”

Alexa tugged on her robe. “We all require justice for the peace and harmony that was stolen.”

Billy accepted that answer, forcing his mind to think of battle and not his time as a captive. “If you

turn me loose, I may need help getting it under control.”

Alexa settled back, eyes shutting. “Why would I tell you to stop? I want no survivors.”

Edward appeared back at Alexa’s window. “They kept going over the interstate. Looks like they’re making camp soon. The boss was hounding a cook.”

Alexa handed him a robe.

Edward pulled it on. “I love being undercover.”

Alexa chuckled. “It’s not your color.”

He smiled. “It is yours. You look good in red.”

Alexa let her eyes glow. “Do I match?”

The men broke out laughing at her playfulness. It was unexpected in a moment like this.

Alexa fluffed her braids, drawing more amusement.

When she lifted the hood, the humor vanished. She immediately mirrored their enemy.

Billy’s grip tightened on the wheel again, mind going blank.

“When we infiltrate their camp, your treatment will match what we see around us.”

None of them liked hearing that, but they were eager to surprise their opponents.

Alexa lowered the hood until it was time to use it. “Billy will give us information on their structure. Now.”

Billy had expected this yesterday. “They honestly don’t have one beyond a command position and a right hand. Everyone else was equal.

They fought over the spoils. Carrie was hated, but they were loyal to her, not like the Snakes.” Billy drew in a breath, knowing they needed more. “Males go to the leader first. She decides who gets them next and for how long. They pay her a fee. The favorites are mentally locked after being...broken. They aren’t full zombies, but it’s close. I couldn’t break through on Carrie’s driver. He’s the one who delivered me after I almost escaped the last time.”

“We found both scenes.” Edward flashed a grin. “You made sure they knew who they’d taken. We were proud.”

Billy didn’t loosen his grip on the wheel as he ran through the memories. “The drugs make it impossible to say no. Watch out for needles. Slaves alone were fair game.”

Unlike the kid gloves they’d been treating him to, the team now began asking brutal questions.

“Do the slaves handle all the chores?”

“Do they talk?”

“Do they think at all?”

Billy answered without showing any signs that it bothered him, but the team knew it did. How could it not? They were making him relive his nightmare.

Alexa let them fire questions, picking out the parts Billy wasn’t saying. Her hatred of the Fanatics had already been high. Watching his eyes change with each answer, feeling his mental fight to hide the pain inside, hurt her even more. She hadn’t considered that male brains handled sexual assault

differently. *What will it take to free him of that misery? I killed a lot of men before my hatred eased. I can arrange that for him, but it doesn't feel like it'll be enough.*

Jacob braced to take anger. "Did you enjoy any of it?"

The other men turned hostile scowls on Jacob.

Billy's stomach dropped. "Yes."

That's it! Alexa beamed at Jacob. "Thank you."

Mark frowned. "For what? It was mean."

"For having the strength to hurt a teammate so we can help him." Alexa put a hand on Billy's wrist. "It was wrong. Even if you enjoyed a single second, what they did to you was still wrong. Free will matters, in everything, for everyone."

Billy drew in a deep breath. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Absolutely. I can prove it."

Billy waited, praying she could ease his mental torment.

"If they'd taken me, and I enjoyed any of it, would you blame me?"

"Of course not!" Just the thought of her being hurt that way sent fresh fury into Billy's heart.

"Would you let me blame myself?"

Billy snorted, seeing her point. "You know I wouldn't."

"Hold your life to the same standard as mine, your body to the same standard. They were wrong. You were not willing."

"No." Billy felt it in his guts this time. "I didn't want any of them."

Alexa kept it going, needing a whole man returned to them. “Who did you want?”

“You, Boss. Always you.” Billy’s lips twitched. “I called your name once. Carrie didn’t like it.”

She squeezed his wrist in comfort. “You honor me and your team. Never doubt the truth you’ve just been told. You did nothing wrong.”

Billy quickly leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Alexa glanced back at Jacob. “Greif counselor?”

Jacob shrugged, not wanting any credit. “Part of the vows.”

“I’m glad. When I die, you’ll help the team adjust to Edward’s command.”

None of the men spoke.

Alexa sighed. “It’s years away, my pets. Put it from your mind. We’re two hours from the radio station.”

The men switched back to the coming act.

“We’re infiltrating the enemy.” Edward grinned. “This is cool!”

Even Billy agreed. *I can’t wait for payback, but more than that, I want to make sure none of you ever have the chance to do it again. I’ll heal with the help of my team, but those other men don’t have Alexa as a safety net. The threat has to be eliminated.*

Alexa waved Billy to get them rolling. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Headlights coming.” Billy squinted. “Three sets.” He’d been seeing flashes of light since the sun sank, but these vehicles were on the same road. “Catching up fast.”

“Maintain normal speed.” Alexa tugged her hood to one side, hoping they didn’t notice she was missing a star on her cheek.

A red convertible roared up on the passenger side.

Alexa rolled down her window, glaring. “What?!”

“She’s one of us.” The driver of the convertible nodded to her, then gunned the gas.

Two small trucks followed.

All the vehicles held multiple passengers and they were all wearing red robes. It was hard to view other features as more lights behind them produced a bright glare.

“That easy?” Edward had been prepared to fight.

Alexa shrugged, leaving the window down for a minute to cool her skin. “They probably hold the power in this region. They’re arrogant.” She relished the smell of the crisp evening air. After each weather event, they got a short period where it was nice again. It never lasted long.

“More lights behind and ahead.” Billy flipped the mirror to dim as the car behind them switched to high beams. “They’re merging into our line.”

“Good. It gives us perfect cover. The checkpoint guards won’t care about us. They’ll assume the group already checked us out.” Alexa rolled up the window.

“Two more in the rear.” Billy scanned the vehicles joining their convoy. “All robbed.”

“Any chance some of these are undercover, too?” Edward didn’t like the odds. Vehicle after vehicle was falling into the line now. There was a dozen around them. The BLM was mostly wiped out in this area, as were the Snakes. They were getting proof of who did indeed hold the power around here.

Alexa stared at bright red lights blinking in the near distance. “They got it working.” She’d been hoping the Fanatics didn’t have anyone who could operate the radio station. She sighed. “That means we have to follow through. We’ll be there in a few minutes. Stay together. I want the entire team in sight of each other at all times. When we leave, that tower will be down or disabled. Add it to your list.”

The radio tower rose 100 feet into the air. The bright lights could be viewed for miles. Several cold women with rifles were perched halfway up, sweeping the large crowd.

“Do we have enough ammunition?” Jacob didn’t like the numbers as they slowed to funnel into the already crammed parking lot.

Edward frowned. “Barely. Everyone has 50 rounds. Make them count.”

Alexa scanned, tensing.

Adrenaline production increased in her men.

“There is a descendant here—a powerful one. Watch your six.” Alexa lifted her mental shield, hoping her scan hadn’t been noticed.

Billy pulled in where a robed woman pointed with her rifle, not making eye contact. His stomach was in his throat.

“You can take us out of here right now.” Alexa didn’t put anything into her tone for him to read. “Plow through that gate and keep going. It’s up to you.”

Billy put the SUV in park and shut off the engine. “Not a chance, Boss.”

Alexa erased her final fear of having to remove him from the team. “Remember your lessons and we’ll clear this nest. If we die in the attempt, it’s a worthy cause, a good death.”

“Agreed.” David was getting a lot of thoughts from the women around them. “These are some of the ugliest people I’ve ever felt.”

“Same.” Alexa exited the vehicle. “Single file line. If someone touches you, scream. I’ll kill her.”

Red robed women turned toward her, glowering.

Alexa shrugged. “I took them, I broke them. I trained them to serve me. They’re mine.”

The women who heard her shook their heads in disapproval, but they didn’t argue.

Alexa didn’t wait for her men to be ready. She strode into the throng of Fanatics as if she was their leader.

Her men followed, trying to act like captives with killer's hands. The smells of fires from cooking and guard posts sent them to the feel of an amusement park. Daniel wasn't happy about it. He was coming to terms with his past, but moments like this made it harder.

Alexa and her group drew attention as they walked through the parking, camping crowd. Tents were all over the property, filled with slaves, but the owners in front of them all stole glances at Alexa's men. Even through the fading robes they were musclebound and vibrant compared to the males on ropes and chains around them. Those short-robed men didn't search for an escape. They kept their heads down and tried not to draw attention from anyone.

Alexa went straight toward the radio station and the small line forming there. Three women with double stars carved on their cheeks were processing people.

The main radio station had one floor. All the windows were gone or cracked. A pile of tree limbs had been collected by the front door. A large camper trailer had been parked under the tower. Gear, ammunition, and weapons were being stacked next to it. Nearby, two women were handing out flyers in front of a huge wedding tent that had been dyed red. Alexa assumed the tent was their church, meaning the leader would be in the trailer until it was time for a service.

Alexa marched to the front of the line, ignoring the scowls and sharp words from those already waiting. “I saw soldiers on the way here. I want to talk to security.”

“I’m officer Lisa Sharpton.” The narrow-nosed woman frowned at the sight of six healthy, unmarked men. “I’m covering security right now.”

The double stars carved into her frostbitten cheeks were fresh. Alexa didn’t think the woman had been a Fanatic long. The tied hood and gloved hands said she was out here for a full shift, though. Alexa assumed she was good at the job.

“I want the boss.” Alexa held up a hand before the angry woman could spew. “Don’t mistake me. It could cost your bloodline.” Alexa shoved into her mind. *Shall I light a fire under you?*

“You’re an enforcer...” The officer’s eyes narrowed. “Or a descendant who reads thoughts.”

Alexa parted her hair, showing the scar that was always hidden by her braids.

Lisa retreated. “You may pass.” She thought of apologizing and decided that would be a bigger mistake. “Enjoy your stay. VIPs camp by the trailer.”

Alexa marched around the security post, not glancing back at her men. She did listen for their footsteps, but it was impossible to distinguish all six of them through the din of 200 women and just as many slaves. It was a massive gathering.

“Welcome, sister.” A robed woman with a huge smile handed Alexa a flyer and kept going.

Conscription Terms of Compliance

Conscription Law I

All males must have an owner. Free and armed men are now forbidden. The two years of grace have ended. Round them up.

Conscription Law II

All males must be brought to the base for registration. Males without a registration mark are to be conscripted and sent to base.

Conscription Law III

No female may have more than 10 males in conscription. Hoarding is forbidden.

Conscription Law IV

All conscripted males will be branded with their owner's mark. This is to prevent theft and validate ownership claims.

Conscription Law V

Base receives a 20% tax on every rental of a conscripted male. Agents will collect these taxes.

Alexa shoved the flyer into her pocket.

Edward slid to the rear so he could keep track of their team. His sharp gaze swept from under the

hood, spotting numerous violations of the code he lived by every minute of his life. Men were being beaten, drugged, neutered with magic, chained, disrespected. Everywhere he looked was a fellow man wearing Billy's expression upon being rescued—terror and shame.

Lisa watched them walk toward the trailer, frowning when the crowd automatically parted for them. *She's familiar.*

“Do you know that group?”

Lisa jumped at having the top security guard, Pesa, suddenly at her elbow. “She has an enforcer's mark, but her men are armed. I saw outlines under those robes.”

Pesa walked away, leaving the lower ranked member to wonder if she'd even been heard.

Pesa studied the perfectly straight line, the perfectly timed scans that kept every angle covered. It looked like the training of an elder, but it should have been sister fighters, not men. Pesa eased through the crowd, staying out of their eyeline each time the group subtly rotated. She timed her feet to those around them, making sure they had no warning that she was coming.

Alexa held up a clenched hand.

Her men spun around, expressions angry.

Pesa froze, almost shocked.

The stiff, icy wind blew their robes to the side, allowing Alexa to detect the shape of a weapons belt around Pesa's narrow waist. It also revealed muscled arms and thick legs. The bald woman was

a fighter, and probably a good one, judging from the fear in the looks of those around them. Having weapons under the robes was a brilliant method of security, but Alexa wasn't worried over it. Neither was the woman trying to stare her down. Alexa assumed the bald fighter was using the same trick she'd recently taught to her team.

Pesa's bald scalp gleamed in the various lights around the Fanatic camp. Her hood had been lowered to tell people who she was upon first sight. The mark of a new enforcer stood out in ugly contrast to her tanned skin. Alexa noted her as one who had to be killed quickly when the fighting started. She didn't know the woman, but that didn't matter. *She has to go.*

Alexa was aware of the crowd retreating to avoid possible crossfire. She snapped her fingers, once.

Alexa's men stepped into the V, clearing a path for her to walk, talk, or fire.

Pesa advanced, shock now hidden behind a polite façade. "Welcome, elder. How may we serve you?"

Stop leaving your guard shift early. Alexa turned back toward the trailer. You should be punished for leaving your sisters unprotected.

Pesa hurried to catch up, no longer worried about the males who were obviously well trained. "I apologize!"

Alexa waited until the panicked feet caught up, then snapped her fingers once more.

Edward and the others took long, fast steps and fell in, surrounding the two women.

The crowd finally took a breath and resumed what they'd been doing. Word of having another elder here spread like fire.

Pesa stayed close to Alexa, smothered by the male guards. She waited to be spoken to.

There was a line at the trailer. Alexa stopped a few feet from the last person, studying everything. "How long since your lessons?"

Pesa flushed. "Only a year. I'm sorry I haven't practiced it more."

"Life gets in the way." Alexa knew it wasn't time to be a hardass.

Pesa flushed darker. "It did. Please, I'm sorry."

Alexa kept her arrogant tone. "The love for your daughter is not evil. You will never be punished for protecting family. Your time off is excused...but don't ever do it again."

Pesa smiled. "You honor me. Name it and it's done."

Alexa stopped before touching the doorknob to the trailer. The line had emptied when Pesa started apologizing. Anyone Pesa feared was a double threat to them. "Are you loyal to anyone here, other than yourself?"

Pesa groaned, understanding Alexa wanted support for handling a problem. "I can't do that. She unlocked my gifts. I owe her everything."

“So noted.” Alexa opened the trailer door without knocking and entered. She slid to the right and took one step forward as her men followed.

Pesa also entered, closing the door and locking it. She stayed right there, controlling her discomfort at being shut in with armed males.

Alexa studied the wide trailer, noting walls had been stripped and steel plates had been added. She assumed the Fanatic leader traveled in here, protected from sniper rounds. The trailer wasn’t luxurious, like Alexa had been hoping for. It was sparse, with only basic furniture and appliances, like the camp around it. The boss here clearly believed in the rules of sharing equally. *That makes things harder.*

Alexa scanned the rest of the trailer and found a lone female at a corner desk.

The boss swiveled her chair around, legs crossed. With hands also crossed on her knees, she was a neat, trim figure in red jeans and a faded red shirt that gaped in the front to show sagging breasts lined in scars. Someone had tried to cut them off. Recognition came. Her survival was a legend among their kind. Alexa strengthened her mental shield. *That’s her reason for hurting men. She’ll never forgive it. She can’t be swayed.*

The boss woman flashed bright red orbs. “Welcome to my zone, Alexa Mitchel.”

Alexa lit her own up in return. “It’s my honor to partake of your hospitality, Veronica Malin.” Alexa had known her before the injury. She hadn’t liked

her then, either. “I would have come with an invitation. The bounty wasn’t needed.”

Pesa gasped. “Mitchel!” She yanked a knife from her pocket.

Mark wrapped a big arm around the bald woman’s neck and jerked her up against his chest. He caught her downward thrust with his free hand and twisted her wrist.

The knife dropped to the floor.

“Let go of her!” Veronica’s shout held terrible madness.

Mark waited for orders.

Alexa nodded. “We didn’t come for her.”

Veronica’s eyes narrowed. “You think you’re here to handle me.” She laughed, hard.

Alexa’s men frowned.

Pesa took a step away from Mark but didn’t go further. She was furious that she’d let a male get the best of her. If there was a fight, Alexa was now her secondary target. The big man at her hip would die first. Pesa was already planning the moves.

Veronica stood. As her clothing straightened, her rounded belly drew attention. It was grotesquely underweight.

Veronica rubbed her bump. “Until I know the sex, I refuse to share my life’s blood any more than I have to. If it is a boy, I will sell it.”

Alexa gestured as if she didn’t care. “This is a large gathering. Was it sanctioned?”

“Of course. Marcella Pruett runs the government now. She decreed the slavery law. All

men have had two years to turn themselves into custody.” Veronica frowned. “Everyone here thinks I came to make the call.”

“You lied.” Alexa wasn’t surprised.

“Of course.” Veronica scanned her men and found the weakest. She leered. “Did you enjoy Carrie’s company?”

Billy’s rage filled the trailer as he realized this woman had arranged his kidnapping. He waited for kill orders, swearing to himself that she wouldn’t leave here alive.

Veronica frowned at Alexa. “Your men are armed. Explain yourself.”

Alexa snorted. “You have not fulfilled the requirements for such a discussion.”

Veronica chuckled. “You want to view my scar. You were there. We got them in the same ceremony.”

Alexa shrugged. “I obey our ways; prove you still do as well.”

Veronica dropped to one knee, parting her hair.

Alexa’s men expected her to cut off the Fanatic’s head. They subtly reached for weapons. Their pockets had been cut for quicker access.

Pesa saw the movements and understood they held the same advantage. *But they aren’t descendants.* Pesa smirked.

Veronica stood without help, despite the swollen stomach. “Now yours. Prove to your loyal men that you are really their enemy.”

Alexa knelt and parted her braids. While down there, she flashed a hand message to her team.

“Do you insist on the rest of that ridiculous ritual?” Veronica distracted Alexa as she tried to pry into her mind.

Alexa shook her head as she stood. “No, to both.”

Veronica frowned a bit. “Both?”

Alexa sighed. “I see you haven’t worked on intelligence since you escaped the lab.” She gestured toward the red light they could see through the window. “No, I won’t make your call. You’ve twisted your purpose. I’m still straight on mine.”

Veronica’s expression darkened. “I will torture your men. If that fails, I will torture the captive males. I’ll start with the youngest.”

“Why all the games?” Alexa ignored the emotional side for the moment. She needed her next guess confirmed before she took action.

“The slavery law has come due. We want you to enforce it.” Veronica’s cruel smile widened. “That is what you were created for.”

Alexa turned to her team. They would have known the fight was about to start even without her hand message. Her angry face told them. “Kneel.”

All six men dropped at the same time.

“I give you full access. Welcome to my father’s army.” Magic flew over her men.

“No!” Veronica ducked behind the cabinets, gathering energy. “Kill them!”

Alexa punched Pesa just as the enforcer fired off a sleep spell.

Edward stopped Alexa from falling as she shrugged it off.

Jacob dropped, caught by the spell.

Mark tripped Pesa and let her fall.

David brought up a shield around his side of the team, covering their fallen man. "Closer!"

The other men slid hip-to-hip over Jacob to shrink the area David needed to cover.

Alexa lunged forward, punching Pesa again as she recovered enough to stand. Pesa kicked as she fell. Both women went down in a mix of arms and robes.

Billy snatched Pesa up by her arm and spun her around. He took her punch to the jaw as he rotated her again and snapped her neck.

Veronica fired at Billy as Alexa shoved him out of the way.

The bullet slammed into the trailer wall.

Edward ran out of the shield and blasted Veronica with his hatred.

She slid to her knees, blood running from her mouth. She fell over, dropping the gun.

Outside the trailer, people paused at the screams and gunshot. Similar noises echoed behind the property. The sky lit up with cannon fire. Grenades started dropping into the crowd.

Panic spread through the site.

Thud! Thud! “We need help!” Whoever had pounded on the door ran away. “Incoming! Incoming!”

Panic swelled outside the trailer. A crush of people ran to the church to evade the enemy.

Inside the trailer, Alexa signaled to her team. “Out the window.”

“Who is it?” Edward shoved the window up and punched out the screen. Cold wind rushed into the trailer, rifling robes. “More Snakes?”

“Worse.”

Balls tightened at her tone. Fangs descended.

“The soldiers we saw.” David scraped the edges of the glass out with his gun so Billy could shove Alexa through.

Alexa yanked Jacob down as David and Mark lowered him. She shoved him toward the woods, where the Fanatics were fleeing. He fell a few feet later, exhausted from the sleep spell.

A loud whistle filled the air.

Alexa grabbed David before he was through, yanking him to the ground.

David rolled out of the way as she pulled Mark down.

The whistle grew louder, sharper.

Edward pushed Billy through and followed, landing in a tangle on the frozen ground.

Alexa grabbed Billy’s arm while the others helped Edward with Jacob. The team fled, aware of a mental clock now at zero.

Boom!

The radio station exploded, taking the church tent and the trailer with it. Debris blew out in all directions.

The tower groaned as it tilted, bottom collapsing from the hit. It crashed onto the running Fanatics, sending up a huge swell of snowy dust that overwhelmed everyone else still running. Ashy snow rained over the entire site like an eruption.

Deadly shrapnel flew into the crowd, decapitating, impaling, and killing dozens of fleeing Fanatics and slaves. Body parts slapped the ground and trees, sliding down trunks like broken branches.

“Move in! All ahead!”

Smoke blanketed the area as front line soldiers ran in on foot to finish the job.

Chapter Seventeen

We Face It

1

“Robes off!” Edward ripped at his, ears ringing. “Strip down!”

Billy pushed the hot body off his hip and began ripping the flaming robe from Alexa.

Daniel stomped out the small fire on his cloak as blood trickled down his cheek. “Is she okay?”

Billy checked Alexa for injuries while Edward searched for the rest of their team. Screams and gunshots echoed as the soldiers charged in on horses, feet, and bikes.

Mark pushed his stinging weight off Jacob and shoved to his feet. He yanked the rookie up with him and stripped Jacob’s robe. He threw it into the fiery debris next to them.

Mark tugged Jacob along, glad the man was semiconscious. The rookie had taken a nasty hit when he’d dove on top of him.

Edward counted and came up one short. “Where’s David?”

Alexa coughed, but didn’t wake yet.

David’s hand came from the debris under her. She’d covered him and Billy as the missile hit.

Mark pulled the Blacksmith to his feet, putting him next to their rookie. The rest of the team formed a circle with their guns in hand, shielding their lone female. The men fought pains and blurring vision. They were all lucky to be alive. They scanned the battlefield, unable to run yet.

“They’re trying to fight back.” Edward watched the Fanatics get cut down by a .50 caliber gun that rattled through the tents and bodies as if they weren’t there. Huge slugs pounded into everything.

“Clearing crew! Advance!” The call echoed through the ranks, reaching the front line.

Soldiers formed a line and walked the camp, shooting those who didn’t immediately surrender, and those who were wounded. Like the Snakes, the soldiers saw no reason to spare anyone who would be executed later anyway.

Flames crackled as tents and debris burned. The cold weather would eventually put out those blazes. The soldiers weren’t worried over it. They were busy rounding up Fantic women who were trying to slip away in the chaos.

“All females must surrender or die!” The soldiers were being directed by a hulking Captain in all green carrying a bullhorn. He reminded the team of old army toys.

A Colonel was in the center of camp, supervising the front-line roundup personally. All over the smoldering camp, soldiers were making it into a base. Tents were going up, along with fencing that would create a circle.

“He’s trouble.” Daniel watched the green man stop to interrogate a dying Fanatic who had been impaled by a large chunk of fence. He recognized her. Lisa was the security guard who had checked them in upon arrival.

Lisa lifted a hand and pointed.

“Ah, hell.” Edward knelt by Alexa. “We need you, Boss.”

Alexa’s eyes opened. She stared at Edward in dawning recognition.

Edward grunted in relief as she waved him off. He took his place as the green man and half a dozen soldiers came their way. “Thank you!” Edward held out a hand. “You saved our asses!”

Green guy shook with him, sooty face lighting up. “Always happy to help fellow men resisting unfair laws.” He scanned their weapons, their injuries. “I see you’ve had problems before this.”

Billy snorted. “That is an understatement. They’re spread across this area like ants.”

“That they have. I’m Captain Green.” He spotted Alexa on the ground between their feet. Green glared at Alexa, daring her to show a sign of rebellion. He didn’t trust females at all. “She’ll have to be put with the other prisoners.”

Billy scowled. “She’s our sister. The Fanatics kidnapped her, too. She isn’t one of them.”

The Captain shrugged. “Our CO is strict about following the rules. He’ll sort it out.” The Captain pointed at two of his soldiers. “Stay here until the Colonel arrives.”

Both men saluted, then stared at Alexa with blank eyes that reminded Billy of the zombied driver.

Alexa took Mark's hand up, but she stayed in the center of her team. Danger was all around them as the soldiers found surviving Fanatics in the woods. Too injured to run, they'd hoped to be overlooked. Instead, they were killed. Alexa was glad there were no rapes, but the violent stabs were almost as bad. The soldiers had no mercy, even on the younger girls.

Lisa turned her head, locking eyes with Alexa. "We are sisters..." Blood ran over her chin.

Alexa sighed. "The bow."

Edward dropped it into her hand with a single arrow. Alexa wouldn't need a second shot.

Alexa notched the arrow and sighted on Lisa's relieved face. The woman had been left to die on her own.

Alexa let the arrow fly and immediately gave the weapon back to Edward.

Edward stepped in front of her. Most of the soldiers saw him with the bow, saw the arrow through Lisa's heart, and assumed he had fired it. Those who'd witnessed the moment scowled at him.

Edward asked her a question, using a hand behind his back.

"No." Alexa didn't think they could run far enough or fast enough this time. "We face it."

Nearby, Captain Green swiveled toward his boss, saluting.

All the soldiers around him did the same, turning to show respect.

“Hey!” Edward gaped.

Alexa smiled when the trader spotted her in the group’s center of protection. He detoured her way, returning the friendly gesture when she waved.

Soldiers observed in surprise as he approached Alexa and shook hands, grinning widely.

“Thank you for being our decoy.”

Alexa chuckled. “I think you had it covered either way.”

Ulysses shrugged. “Perhaps. Still, it’s good to know you were here if we needed help.”

Alexa nodded. “Same. We came to eliminate a common enemy.”

Ulysses grunted. “Could have used you a few months ago. Took half my men to clear the way this far. It’s why I now do scouting missions disguised as a trader.”

“Is the resistance gaining ground?” Billy hoped so.

Ulysses made a face. “While we’re there, yes. When we leave, they go right back to it. We have to get that slavery law rescinded.”

Edward waved at papery debris blowing by them. “I’ve read the flyers they’re handing out, declaring themselves in control. How can they do that without the public voting on it?”

“They conquered the bunkers. The United States isn’t a republic anymore. It’s a totalitarian government that has to be eliminated.” Ulysses

scanned the debris around the smoking trailer. “The leader was in there?”

Alexa indicated her team. “We had a short conversation. It didn’t end well.”

“Good.” Ulysses ignored Captain Green’s displeasure at the delay.

Captain Green gave Alexa a glare as he marched off to secure the rest of the site.

Ulysses waved off her two guards. “She’s not a Fanatic. She’s a medic.” He gave her a pointed look.

Alexa nodded. “I’d be happy to treat your men. Not the Fanatics.”

Ulysses laughed, slapping Edward on the shoulder. “Stick around for a while. We need her kind.”

“We might.” Edward knew not to refuse the Colonel.

Ulysses turned away. “If you run or fight, my men will kill her. Be careful.” He signaled. “This is the medical area. She’s a medic. Get it set up.”

The two soldiers rushed off, waving at people. “Get those tents over here! Bring the supply crates!”

Ulysses strode to the center of the battlefield, picking a spot for the command tent.

Alexa let out a sigh of relief, then she began issuing orders. “Get us a fire ring, so we’ll have a small area of our own. Keep them in lines. Base it on how bad off they are, not by rank or screams.” Alexa began gathering wood for a fire. “Two with me.”

Billy and Mark stayed by Alexa, also gathering wood while the others directed patients into a semblance of order that she could handle.

Screams and curses echoed as the soldiers found another nest of survivors hiding in the tree line.

Alexa surveyed everything, waiting for their chance to flee. Ulysses knew who she was. It was only a matter of time before he forced her into a situation she couldn't win. She didn't want to be here the next time he came by.

"Help here!" Two soldiers carried a man to Alexa's circle. "He's bleeding out!"

Alexa hurried over. She checked the neck wound and shook her head. "Too deep. Let him give final words."

The dying man grimaced. "Tell my son to keep fighting!"

Alexa felt bad for the soldier, able to sense his lack of corruption. She wanted to help.

David placed a hand on her arm. "Two more coming. Maybe you can save them."

Alexa nodded as the two soot covered soldiers carried the doomed man away. *This is what I was put on earth for, but I can't really help them or they'll kill me! Why is life so unfair! So painful?!*

Alexa moved to the next patient, waving over the troop medics. She checked the ugly chest wound, expression hardening. "Pull the knife out slow, catch the blood for transfusions." She moved onto the next man as the impaled soldier denied his

coming fate. “I can’t waste time on people who won’t survive.”

She lifted the next bandage. “Cauterize this—right now. Give him a transfusion.”

Alexa kept going around the circle, triaging the first person in each line. It was an ugly, bloody rotation.

“Send him into the minor injuries tent. David can sew him up.” She switched patients, scanning glassy eyes and waxy skin. She checked his pulse. He wasn’t bleeding. She found the Snakebite on his leg. “Cut that out and clean it with alcohol. Then let him rest.” The Snakes in this area were either deadly or dangerous. If it had been the first, he wouldn’t still be breathing.

Alexa’s team kept the lines moving, with little time to do more than scan her and each other to be certain they were still together. All the wounded were coming now, filling the area with bloody moans and cries of denial at her pronouncements. The Fanatics had been outnumbered, but the front lines had fought for all they were worth. They’d done more damage than the soldier’s big guns had. The thousand men had lost a quarter of their number. Half of that had been deaths. They would need time to recover before the bunker battle.

Edward hoped that meant there would be no more fighting until spring, but he refused to let himself hope for it as he went over to help Alexa hold down a man who needed a foot amputated. The soldier had been impaled in the ankle by a tree limb

that refused to come out. He was bleeding to death around it.

Alexa swung the hatchet as hard as she could.

Shrieks filled the air.

Alexa tossed the foot into the fire, then went to the next screaming, bleeding man.

Billy pushed the burning tree branch against the gushing, severed ankle. *I'm not sure, but this might be worse than being a slave.*

2

“There’s a truck coming.” David was on guard, under the guise of taking a break from the labor they were doing on the wounded.

Most of the soldiers were enjoying a meal while a few of them stood guard over the corral of Fanatic women who had finally stopped screaming insults or begging for their freedom. They also studied Alexa, but not as closely as they had at first. The longer she went without showing signs of a threat, the more relaxed the soldiers were becoming. They didn’t know they now held the most wanted woman in the country. David hoped it stayed that way, but he doubted it would. Some of the Fanatics in the pen were staring at them, glowering at Alexa for helping the wounded men. The odds of one of the survivors recognizing her were high.

The lines were almost empty now, with only a few minor injuries still untreated, but the medical area encompassed a quarter of the campsite. The

soldiers had taken a nasty hit. Despite winning, they weren't celebrating. They'd spent the early evening hours setting up a temporary camp with fence walls that encircled the command tent and the gallows. The team had recognized the shape going up long before it was completed.

Trials were being arranged. Soldier lawyers were visiting the captive females. They didn't torture them, but no one had been fed or released. The troops were assuming every female here, no matter the age, was guilty.

David's tone dropped. "It's Kelly. I guess she survived the Snakes."

Alexa kept her head down as she sewed a long gash on a tense soldier's arm. Her stitches were neat and small, but farther apart than normal to conserve thread. She was using the government supplies, but it wasn't limitless. The men would need whatever she could save for their remaining fights. "We only have one thing to hide. We've known it won't remain so since our escape path exploded. Nothing has changed except the odds of survival." Alexa tied off the thread and smeared ointment over the reddening wound.

The soldier receiving her care wouldn't betray her, though he didn't trust her. He'd figured out she wasn't like the Fanatics while listening to her care for the other soldiers who'd been in line in front of him.

"You get antibiotics." She wiped her hands on her tacky cloak as the BLM group climbed from

their rusty, muddy truck and approached the center circle of civility.

Alexa didn't recognize any of them. She looked at Billy, brow lifted.

He was frozen in place, staring. "The driver."

Alexa scanned their target, then turned to the next patient, glad the load had lightened. "They'll be by. She's injured." Alexa knelt, grunting at the pain in her knees. The next needle was ready. Jacob was feeding them to her for this shift. She began to sew the very clean wound on the man's arm, admiring the job Mark was doing on preparing them. She used practiced movements with tired hands, listening for footsteps.

"One injury was sent up." David went to flank Alexa, aware of how tired she and Daniel were. Neither of them had gotten a break yet. "The others are waiting by the fence. They weren't allowed in."

"They're female and the driver is loyal." Alexa's tone said he should have expected it.

Billy turned his back so the hatred he carried wouldn't be spotted by the woman now approaching them.

Kelly limped up the path between the large tents, frowning at Edward as he came forward to greet her. "I want your boss, you coward! Get out of my way." She hadn't forgotten the garage fight or the Snake battle Edward had refused to help with.

Edward stepped aside, but didn't leave his post three feet from Alexa. He smirked as she limped by.

Kelly looked different from the last time they'd met, but her makeup was still perfect and her attitude was still arrogant. It surprised him to see her here at all. With her hatred of men, he'd expected her to run and keep going until she reached a new state. As it was, she'd survived more battles to get here. The blue polish was chipped. Her clothes were torn, charred... Edward's eyes narrowed, detecting a red thread lingering on her jeans. *She took off a robe. Kelly's a traitor, too, like her stepdaughter!*

Kelly's glare melted into relief as she saw Alexa. "I need your services."

Alexa tied off the thread on a final stitch. "Keep it clean. Move out."

The soldier nodded his gratitude, but he refused to speak it as he left.

Alexa let it go, understanding his hatred of women. She turned to face Kelly, wiping her hands. "Problem?"

Kelly paused at the tired demand. "Uh, extraction. I took a bullet." Kelly lifted her pant leg to reveal a blood crusted wound in her calf. "It got stuck in the fat."

Alexa's lips twitched. She motioned to the bit of clear ground. "Face down."

Kelly lifted her pantleg and dropped.

Alexa gathered her tools and knelt, speaking to Jacob. "Be ready with the gauze. Hold it tight against her until I get the clotting agent on there."

Kelly tensed, scowling. "Just you."

Alexa cut into the wound so there would be room for her fingers.

Kelly hissed but didn't scream.

Alexa probed for the bullet, then slid the extractor in and grabbed it. The soldiers had much better medical equipment than she did. Alexa had already confiscated several items into her cloak pockets. "Now."

Jacob slid the gauze against the wound.

Kelly snatched the gauze from him as she rose to a sitting position. "I said no!" She slapped it over the gushing hole.

Jacob smirked. "I don't take orders from you."

Alexa motioned. "Stitches or fire?"

Kelly extended her leg. "Fire."

Jacob retrieved the smoldering log. He blew on it until it glowed red hot, then held it out, positive the woman wouldn't let him do it.

Kelly slammed it against the wound, groaning.

Alexa counted to three, then took the log back and tossed it to Jacob, who dropped it back into the fire to keep it hot. They'd gone through a dozen of those today while she worked.

Kelly held still as Alexa smeared on ointment, blinking away tears. "Do you think it would have hurt less if I'd let him do it?"

Alexa shrugged, once again wiping her hands. "Fire is fire. It doesn't pay attention to gender or vain hatreds."

"Fair enough." Kelly stood, putting the weight on her good leg. "What do I owe you?"

Alexa capped the tube of ointment. “You have to cover your own expenses?”

Kelly nodded, lips thinning. “I’m female.”

“Yes.” Alexa swept Kelly, then the waiting group staring at the soldiers like they had the plague. “Information.”

Kelly dropped down by the fire. “Make it quick.” She warmed her hands over the small, neat flames, wondering which man had arranged it. It held an odd design she couldn’t decipher.

Alexa examined Kelly’s expression, her attitude. She didn’t need to get into her head. “How did you become a Fanatic?”

Kelly froze.

Alexa waited, enjoying the moment.

“Please don’t tell them.”

Fury hit her, coming from all the men who heard her. Billy’s rage was the hottest. Kelly shuddered. “It’s why Tosha ran away. She was scared we were going to get caught.”

“Was it worth it?” Alexa kept an ear on the tents, listening for anyone to wake and overhear them.

“Yes!” Kelly was defiant. “Marcella is thrilled with the information and the supplies I’ve been able to send for the last two years.”

“You came from the bunker.” Alexa dug into Kelly’s mind. “You weren’t ranked high enough to get a place inside.” Alexa laughed at her.

Kelly’s anger smothered the embarrassment. “Don’t laugh at me! You don’t know what it was

like when they came to our town and killed our men, our kids. I was lucky they wanted my husband.” Her voice dropped. “At least I know where he is.”

Alexa caught a flash of a brawny man being dragged into the bunker while Kelly fought to reach him and failed.

“Hurry up. I want this done.” Kelly knew her small group was thinking about leaving her. If not for her loyal driver having the keys, the four terrified women standing with him would have fled the instant she was out of the truck. Loyalty was gone now. Fear of dying had replaced it.

Alexa knew the answer before she asked, but it had to be confirmed. “Can I trust you?”

“Maybe.” Kelly grunted. “It would require a promise of rescuing my husband.”

“No.”

Kelly stared in cool hatred. “I’m surprised no one has recognized you yet.”

Alexa sat next to the woman, body crying in relief from the better position. “A few of them do know. Some want to use me to their advantage.”

“Use you how?”

Alexa gestured to the sleeping, unconscious men she’d helped into the tents around them. “This, for now. Later, who knows? I’m their captive.”

Kelly paled. “They’re cursed if they keep you.”

“Yes. I’m bound by old magic to destroy them.”

Alexa’s voice lowered. “The slaves in the bunker will remain there forever if I don’t get permission to

leave. To do that, I need you to help me prove I'm on their side."

Kelly stared into the flames, calculating the odds. She finally shut her eyes, voice shaky. "What do you need me to do?"

Alexa lunged, wrapping her hands around the woman's neck. "Die, of course."

Billy and Edward guarded while Alexa strangled the traitor, aware of soldiers turning their way. No one interfered. It was just two females fighting. A few were happy to see it. Kelly's group certainly looked relieved as they watched from their vehicle, though the driver still didn't show any emotion.

"Why?" Jacob was confused.

Edward kept his voice down. "She would have sold us for her husband. As soon as she left our fire, she planned to go to the boss here and cut a better deal. She knew too much."

Jacob saw a tattooed star on Kelly's cheek as it turned purple. "She had makeup over it! That's why she was always perfectly made-up."

"What's going on over here?" Captain Green stopped nearby, seeing the new arrival was dead. "Did she get a trial?"

Billy nodded curtly. "It was seven votes for, one against."

Green paused. "Who voted against it?"

"The dead woman."

Green rolled his eyes and resumed rounds of the camp, but his mind stayed on the medic.

Alexa rolled the body toward the pile of dead that was slowly lowering as the soldiers buried them.

David doubted Kelly would get that respect. He was certain the corpse would stay right there until nature reclaimed it.

So was Alexa. It didn't bother her. *Kelly was a casualty of war.* The story of Kelly's husband did bother her, though. Alexa burned the man's image into her memory.

3

"Do you know the medic?" Captain Green strode through the fenced captives. "Does anyone know who the medic is or where she came from?"

When no one answered despite almost everyone looking at him, he raised his voice. "Mercy to anyone with valid information on the medic."

Silence fell over the begging, moaning women who knew better than to trust a man. One of them spit in his direction.

Green's face hardened. He put a hand on his sidearm, trying intimidation. If that didn't succeed, he would start forcing them to talk, one by one. "I'm not leaving until I get what I want."

The captives hadn't been given any supplies. They were huddled together for warmth, like their former slaves. Soldiers who had escaped their custody smirked in satisfaction. Captain Green

didn't. "I'm second in command here. I can let you go. I want information on the female medic."

"I know who she is." Mora stood up, ignoring the glowers from the other women. They didn't want her to draw attention. "What will you give me?"

Captain Green leaned on the fence. "I'll give you your life. A truck with a packed kit goes along."

Mora studied him, aware of women now begging her to take them out of here, too. "I want one of the men."

The captain scowled at her. "Never."

Mora pointed at the medical area. "It's one of hers. They all lied to you."

Captain Green stared at the circle of men who hadn't left the medic unprotected for even one minute.

Green unlocked the fence. He took her away from the others. "Who is she?"

"First, your word that I get the one she calls Billy." Mora hadn't taken the loyalty oath yet, so she hadn't gotten to enjoy him in Carrie's camp.

Mora's starred cheek glared at him. She couldn't be trusted. He believed her anyway. The hatred said it was personal against the medical woman. Captain Green assumed it was because the healer was helping soldiers, but he didn't care as long as it gained him what he wanted.

Green nodded, voice cold. "Deal. Who is she?!"

Mora looked at the medical area. “Alexa Mitchel. She’s on every wanted list across this country. She helped the Snakes destroy our camp.”

Green recognized the name. He pulled Mora toward the center gate by her arm, ignoring her attempts to pull away. He kept an iron grip as they went inside the command tent. “Sir! This woman has important information on the medic.”

“I already know Alexa Mitchel is here.” Ulysses looked up from the map of the bunker he’d been studying.

Captain Green gaped. “What?!”

Ulysses was eager to get the trials done, but even more eager not to lose any of his men to Alexa. He had no doubts they could kill her and her crew, but not without a lot of losses. “We’ll need the support of her people in the future. We can’t make enemies of everyone.”

Green glared at Ulysses. “Her people are Safe Haven!”

“I’m aware.” Ulysses pulled his gun and shot Mora in her starred cheek. Blood sprayed the side of the tent.

Captain Green flinched back as the body fell, ears ringing. “She was a witness!”

Ulysses turned the gun on his Captain. Then he holstered it. “Safe Haven almost eliminated the government when they were outnumbered 10 to one, with untrained rookies just learning to fight. Do you think we can stand against them now that they’ve had years to grow stronger?”

The Captain slowly shook his head. “No...sir.”

Ulysses stored the map. “I made a choice, one that puts power on our side.”

“Shouldn’t we keep her to help us fight?”

“No. Curses are nothing to sneer at, Captain. We need her willing. By giving her shelter here, we’re incurring a debt to be collected later.” The CO delivered a hard glare. “Don’t pick a fight that will cost us men. I won’t tolerate it.”

The Captain was forced to accept that as Ulysses left the tent to start the trials. He reluctantly followed, stewing on what he’d learned.

Ulysses marched up the small bleachers and took his place in the center. He picked up the bullhorn. “Trials are starting. Bring in the first defendants and their accusers.”

Ulysses waited for the noise to settle as soldiers cheered. “While they’re being brought in, I will remind you all not to believe anything the Fanatics tell you. They cannot be trusted. Many myths are being whispered, but we’ve seen no evidence of any place called Safe Haven. There are no vampires or trolls, or forest protectors. Ghosts do not exist. There is only us and those who would make us captives. The women are the enemy! They must be defeated!”

Soldiers shouted in response, echoing into the darkness.

“Why would he lie?” David was trying to read the Colonel’s thoughts, but it was impossible through the noise and so many other minds.

“Misinformation in the apocalypse.” Alexa shrugged, finally having time to clean up while Daniel slept and Jacob scrubbed her cloak. All of her gear was now in his pockets. “Same as before the war, just different lines. The soldiers are hedging their bets while pretending the world hasn’t ended.”

David didn’t like it. “Not smart. If his men find out he’s lying, they’ll hang him.”

Alexa nodded at Edward as he held her arm for her to balance. Her knees were huge bruises. She’d landed on them during the explosion. Then she’d knelt on them all afternoon and evening to treat the wounded. “For whatever reason, he decided not to make an enemy of us. We will vanish into the dawn fog.” She could smell it coming.

Her men were relieved to know they would be leaving in five hours.

“Get set, sleep, eat, rest.” She stretched. “We’re back on the road soon.”

“Are we continuing or going back to the cabin?” Billy wasn’t sure he was ready to do either.

“That hasn’t been decided.” Alexa slid into the clean gear Edward dug from his kit, enjoying the extra comfort of clothes that were too large for her. It was an advantage here, where having a woman’s shape wasn’t good.

Edward handed her his hat, then helped her wrap her thick braids into a ponytail and tuck it into the shirt. When she drew on her damp cloak, their

sexy leader vanished, replaced by a bruised guy with a feminine face and frame.

Edward nodded at her lifted brow. “Good enough for tired or drunken guards.”

“Keep us away from the captives when you plan our escape route. I can’t take their begging.” Alexa settled into Edward’s bedroll and shut her eyes. She was sleeping lightly a few minutes later.

Edward stayed at her side while the others also rested or ate, all eager to be gone. The mood of the camp was getting ugly. The gallows were about to get a workout.

“That’s one of them.” Billy had frozen again. “She was the second ticket drawn for me.”

Alexa sat up to get a view. Hatred crossed her features. She concentrated.

Ulysses paused, looking toward Alexa. Her need was clear. He turned back to the rebellious Fanatic in front of him who hadn’t had a chance to beg yet. “Guilty. Sentence to be carried out immediately.”

Billy observed every second of it, letting her fear and then her death carry away some of the pain eating at his heart. “Three down, two to go.”

Alexa winced. She wanted it clear right now. “Are they here?”

“Just him.” Billy nodded at the driver. Kelly’s group hadn’t been allowed to leave yet, but they were getting ready to.

Alexa stood, body protesting. “Point him out to the Colonel.”

Ulysses was still watching Alexa, but he caught Billy's motion. He followed it to the BLM agents standing near the fence to enjoy the hangings. He leaned toward his Captain, whispering.

Captain Green trotted toward the fence, smiling at the group. "Boss said you can all come in. Big honor. Don't screw it up."

The women were forced to follow him to the bleachers. They perched on the hard benches, not sure why they'd been honored.

The driver sat in the front row, enjoying the better view of the hangings.

Ulysses motioned their security officer to continue the trials.

"Call me when he's ready." Alexa laid back down.

Billy surveyed the driver, heart pounding as he counted the time to his vengeance. He assumed Ulysses would call him after the other prisoners had been judged. There were a lot of them. It would take hours and he would love the feel of it the entire time.

Edward thought about calling Billy on his hatred, but the confusion also flowing through the man's mind wouldn't allow it. Billy had suffered. He still deserved justice.

Chapter Eighteen

Hunting

1

“Boss, it’s almost time.”

Alexa sat up at Billy’s eager call. The tension was thick. “You’ll go alone and face your abuser. Abide by the decision. If I deem it unjust, I will interfere.”

Billy nodded, not scared of going into a male base alone. It was the women who now frightened him. “Thank you for this.”

“It’s my honor.”

He marched down the hill as Ulysses summoned him.

Alexa stood by Mark and Daniel, watching in regretful pride. He had handled it well. She just wished it hadn’t happened at all.

Billy entered the gate and approached the bleachers, glaring at the driver.

The driver recognized him immediately. He scrambled up the rows of seats, hoping to be protected by Ulysses. “Help me!”

Billy stopped, waiting.

Ulysses shoved the terrified man off the bleachers. The driver hit the ground with a low

moan. He quickly rose, backing away from Billy. “I didn’t have a choice.”

Billy was almost disappointed. He’d been hoping for a fight. “I didn’t think you felt fear. I would have let you pass if you hadn’t spoken to me. I never would have known you were faking it. I thought you were a zombie.”

Foot soldiers flanked the driver and forced him back in front of Ulysses.

The soldiers lining the bleachers glowered at the driver as they passed Billy’s words through the crowd.

“Traitor!”

The Colonel didn’t need details. He was already tired of the trials. None of them were going to be released. “Do you admit to your crimes?”

“Y-yes.” The driver dropped to his knees. “I helped them enslave men. Please show mercy!”

Ulysses looked at Billy. “Does he deserve your mercy?”

Billy shook his head. “Nor yours. He’s good at mixing the drugs they use. He also enjoys hurting men in ugly ways.” Billy had witnessed all of that and more while in Carrie’s custody.

Ulysses turned anger on the driver. “No mercy!”

The driver was dragged to the gallows, crying and begging for mercy.

“Please don’t!” He pleaded as the rope was put around his neck. “I’m one of you!”

The security officer grunted. “No, you’re not.” He shoved the guilty man off the platform. The driver’s neck snapped as the rope went taut.

The soldiers cheered.

Fanatics in the corral cried out for help that wasn’t coming.

Billy memorized every second of life leaving the man. *I’m almost free.*

“Are you satisfied that we’ve given you justice?” Ulysses was tired. He wanted to be in his tent, with his boots off and someone suckling between his legs. Any of the captives would trade that for freedom, though he would never really release them to go back to their evil ways.

“I am. Thank you for your generosity.” Billy waited, showing respect.

Ulysses frowned, waving. “Tell the medic I want her gone by dawn. Females, even good ones, are not safe here.”

Billy left, relieved over their planned exit and yet disappointed that he hadn’t gotten to kill the driver himself. He rejoined his team without letting it show.

Alexa knew. She beckoned him over and rested against his tense frame. There was one more still out there. *Maybe we’ll go hunting come dawn.*

2

Dawn found a thick layer of fog covering the large camp. It hung three feet off the ground and

reduced noises to muffled moments of tension until the shadows solidified. Most of the soldiers were inside tents or vehicles to avoid the wet white mess. Others lingered around fenced areas or at guard posts, nervous. They all traveled in groups to avoid being mistaken for a threat. Single shadows were females trying to escape. Several had attempted it overnight. Only death had won that gamble.

Alexa led her crew to the closest end of the wide camp in their V formation. She didn't sneak. All of her men were tired of hiding who they were, what they were becoming. Now that they'd been told to leave, it was almost time to be themselves again. Alexa was eager for that, too.

From the fenced center base, Ulysses watched them leave. The Captain was at his side. Their cigar smoke mingled with the fog.

Captain Green radiated disapproval. "I think this is a bad decision. Even if we discount her name, she's a magic user! You believe in them. I know you do."

Ulysses noticed Captain Green hadn't changed from his bloody battle clothes yet. He also hadn't slept, judging from the deep bags under his eyes. *He's stewing. Not good.* Ulysses began making plans to replace the man when he went after Alexa. Ulysses didn't need a gift to know what was going to happen.

Captain Green didn't want females running loose after what he'd suffered, and he hated magic users for their support of the slavery law. Not all of

the descendants had chosen that side, but even a few was too many. Green was right to want Alexa and her crew for the bunker fight, but honor was stronger. “It’s better to have them neutral in the war, than to have them fight with our enemies.”

Ulysses felt one of the Captain’s rants coming and huffed. “Look at them! They send out dangerous vibes even while leaving. We cannot hold her and then convince her that we’re not the bigger threat. In the bunker battle, she’ll turn on us and we’ll lose. There is no advantage, except in what I’m doing right now.”

Captain Green felt disgust rise for his commander. Ulysses had too much fondness for females. *I can’t keep following him. He’s not worthy.*

“Let her go. Check on the chow.”

The Captain gave a sharp salute. “Yes, sir!” He stomped off to make sure breakfast would be ready on time. After a battle, the cook liked to sleep in. It always put them behind for leaving.

Ulysses studied Alexa’s team as they vanished into the fog, memorizing details before they were gone. Soon, he would ask a favor for all his kindness. That was a valuable debt to have in this world and it had been given willingly.

Alexa lifted a hand to Ulysses and faded into the fog.

Ulysses sighed, wishing he was strong enough to go with her. He knew a lot of the old ways and he could follow them, but he was too old to keep up.

The tired Colonel turned toward the chow tent, sealing it all up.

Alexa had missed using her feet. She liked how the earth connected to them, how the air clung, how the ground gave way to her boots. It pleased her to resume their walk, even if it was in fog.

The men stayed two feet behind her and strained to catch any sounds that shouldn't be there.

Alexa took rope from her pocket and held it out to the man behind her.

Jacob secured the rope to his belt and then handed it back.

"Everyone." Alexa waited to see who had listened and knew what she wanted them to do.

Men chuckled, tying off rope they'd had in their hand since approaching the edge of the sleepy camp.

Alexa counted the time it should have taken, gave three more seconds, then resumed walking.

She didn't speak or slow for a long time. She walked. And thought.

With each step, Alexa became more certain that fate had brought them into play here. She'd tried to avoid getting involved in other fights during this quest, but she hadn't been successful. She and her team had already influenced multiple battles and that wasn't likely to change. They needed to den somewhere for the winter, but it didn't have to be an out of the way town in a small cabin where they could pretend that they were anything other than

what they were—killers searching for redemption and absolution.

Alexa subtly switched direction, mind clicking into tracking mode. She refused to sacrifice her team in the bunker fight, but there was no reason they couldn't continue to influence that outcome while waiting for winter to pass. "Inventory list."

Edward ran through it mentally first, to be sure when he spoke it would be correct. "Light?"

"Full up."

They all answered the same on that one.

Edward patted his canteen. "Water?"

"Low."

"Low."

"Full." Billy handed his canteen to Edward so the precious liquid could be redistributed.

"Almost full." Alexa also handed hers to the Horseman. Her light feet scraped over debris and crunched on ice that was sullenly refusing to melt under the dampness of the fog. It was impossible to be silent when she could barely see where to place her feet.

Edward stored the canteens on his belt and kept going with the list. "Food rations, how many days?"

"Five." Alexa paid attention to see who, if anyone, was light.

"Five."

"Five."

"Six." Billy felt their frowns, but he couldn't force his stomach to take more yet.

“Seven.” Jacob handed his food pouch to Edward. “Two of the soldiers in the tent died overnight. They didn’t need what they were carrying.”

Decrepit buildings and shadows of vehicles began to emerge as they reached the next town. Alexa kept going, sensing it was empty of anything they needed.

“Seven also.” David waited until Edward was ready, then gave him a bag. “One of them insisted on paying.”

“Ten.” Alexa dumped her stash into Edward’s juggling arms, giving him another workout. “I demanded payment from several of them, as you know. Daniel, take over the list.”

Daniel ran through it mentally first so he knew what had already been covered. “Ammunition?”

“Low,” came from every mouth.

Daniel was sorry he hadn’t spotted an opportunity to gain what they needed. “Medication?”

“Out.”

“Out.”

“Low.”

“Out.”

“Out.”

“Low.”

“Full.” Billy handed Daniel his kit. So did David and Mark, who were low. Treating the resistance fighters while escorting them to Claudia

had wiped them out of almost everything they'd prepared.

Daniel kept going, storing the pouches on his belt. "Communication?"

The calls were all the same, except one.

"Overfull." Billy handed over the pack of colored chalk, Alexa's phone, and several other items that Daniel had given him back in Hemi's camp. He was glad to get rid of it. The cell phone gave him ugly flashes of listening to Carrie laugh at Alexa. She'd hurt him right after that—a lot.

"Weapons?"

"Full up."

Daniel wasn't surprised when all of them were full except one.

"Out, but for my babies." Alexa patted her Colts. She'd given everything else to Claudia and Marshal.

Men began handing Daniel spare weapons and anything else they had two of that could be used for killing or defense.

"Mark, the list." Alexa kept them thinking and sorting, scanning the ground through the fog. She couldn't see much yet. She was following instinct. Sounds were odd, even for those with advanced hearing. Trees dropping snow echoed like small bombs hitting in the distance. Creatures scurrying through the weeds sounded like a stampede. It was eerie and kept them alert.

Mark took over the list. "Cover?"

Everyone had their cloaks and hats. For Mark, he had another problem. “Boot hole, right.”

“Noted.” Alexa paused, kneeling. “Finish.”

Mark ran through the list in his head now, slowing the lesson. “Uh... Transportation!”

Billy tensed. “I haven’t been looking since we left.”

Alexa didn’t turn. “Why not?”

Billy sucked in a breath, preparing for a scold. “I assumed you wanted to walk. I hoped you wanted to walk.”

“Don’t do it again.”

Billy sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Good.” Alexa smiled. “I’ve decided we’ll walk.”

They chuckled, realizing she’d been joking.

Alexa resumed her pace, listening to them sort the supplies so everyone was evenly outfitted. They hadn’t noticed yet that she was tracking prey. She was betting on Billy to be the first this time, instead of Edward, who usually took that prize. Billy was more alert, more aware right now than the others. It was a perfect time to take him into battle and let him prove himself to his team.

3

Edward handed Alexa a fully packed kit an hour later. “Ammunition is to the right.”

Alexa nodded. They always gave her the extra to carry. “We’re coming up on a large intersection

in the highway. Scavenge from the vehicles. By two.”

Edward tapped Billy, who had the best nose for stashes after himself.

Billy tied his rope to Edward, while Edward tied his own tether to Alexa with a longer rope so the group was still connected.

Edward and Billy wrapped their ropes over their shoulders to avoid getting tangled on the cars they were approaching.

Alexa and the others slowed and listened as the first door was pried open, sending a loud squeak of familiarity into the foggy area. It was impossible to see what waited beyond the fog bank, but it was bright there.

Jacob stretched his legs in the pause allowed by the slower pace, proud of himself for how he was keeping up. His feet were sore, reminding him that car travel could quickly make them weak. Alexa was making sure they stayed strong by keeping them on their feet. Jacob also worried about Billy. His attitude wasn't the same. If Billy didn't recover that cool shield, he would be a weakness.

“Two-minute pause.” Edward called it as he and Billy dug out a steamer trunk. Shoved under the rear of a crushed truck, it was obvious someone had tried to hide it.

Billy flipped the latch.

Edward lifted the lid.

“Well...maybe we can use it?”

Edward grunted, lips curving. “You want to give it to her?”

Billy snickered. “We’ll get the rookie to do it.”

Edward dug out a plastic bag and held it open while Billy picked through the loot.

Billy chose to take most of it and let Alexa keep what she wanted. “I’ll carry it.”

Edward gave him the bag. Billy had lost muscle mass. He would be overfed and worked out until he caught up. “Let’s roll.”

Alexa lifted her tether. She wasn’t tall enough to wrap it around her shoulder, so she had to adjust. “To the right.”

Edward shifted three paces to the right. A large truck came up through the fog. It had too much debris on one side to pass. Edward wondered if she could see through the fog. If so, he hoped it was related to the bite and not the bloodline. If it was a descendant thing, there was no guarantee he would develop that skill. Most of their team was the same. They were all hoping for big gifts, but they hadn’t found much beyond David’s shield and sometimes hearing each other mentally.

“Two-minute pause.” Billy knelt to dig under the bumper of an old Plymouth. He came away with a plastic box. Billy handed it off to Edward and did the same under the front. He came out empty, frowning. He rose, hand going for the hood latch.

Billy yanked his hand back and shoved Edward out of the way as the snake lunged. It flew by them and hit the side of the road.

Edward drew his gun, but the snake slithered into the brush.

Edward holstered, sharing grins with Billy.

The two men resumed the hunt, hearts thumping.

Alexa appeared between them, making both men jump. She had felt the tension in the rope and heard the fast movements. She scanned, nodded, and returned to her position. They would get used to her being paranoid. It would continue until she no longer felt like her men were in danger. *And only one thing will accomplish that.* “How long?”

Billy dug through the trunk. “Two more minutes.” He began shoving items at Edward.

Alexa stayed between the two groups of men, studying the mood, the strength of the wind, the smell of the fog. Each time, she used a new sense or tested a different direction to be certain they were still alone.

Billy shut the trunk and helped Edward shove it all into their empty pockets. They would sort when they camped unless Alexa wanted to keep them busy while they traveled.

Edward understood she wanted them to act like nothing had changed to distract them from the guilt of not helping the soldiers in their freedom fight.

Alexa resumed her place in the lead, uncrossing the ropes. She led them out as it hit the two-minute mark by her mental count.

Billy and Edward had been ready for half that time and spent it divvying some of what they’d

gathered so Billy was carrying the heaviest load as an extra workout meant to catch him up.

“In half a mile, the overpass meets this stretch. We’re going under. Clear the edges. Do not scuff the center.” Alexa increased the pace to keep them from dwelling.

The men realized Alexa was looking for tracks and they hadn’t noticed. All of them were ashamed.

Alexa wasn’t worried about it. “Cover change.”

They were doing it before her words faded.

Alexa tugged the ropes for left or right, using the silent approach they’d practiced at the cabin before reality had come knocking. Being in the dark, underground, had given them challenges and provided new training.

The half mile flew by under their determined boots. All of them were counting it, like they’d been taught. It would help them keep track of their location in any situation where they couldn’t rely on sight. They eased their landings and added more spring to keep from echoing as much.

Alexa felt the ground shift and followed it. The concrete became dirt beneath her boots. Shadows appeared through the fog. “Pause for direction. Daniel.”

Daniel rolled out his long tether and followed the incline to his left. The fog hadn’t sunk this far. He picked out the shape of the underpass and several human shadows. He yanked the rope, once.

The team eased down the hill, surrounding him. They stayed at the edge of the fog, each picking a target.

Alexa flipped on her belt light. "Over here."

"She has men!"

"Kill her!"

Five Fanatics rushed toward her.

"Capture!" Alexa cut her rope and ran forward, swinging.

So did her team.

Billy grabbed a woman by the throat and shoved her into Jacob's waiting arms. The Preacher held her as Billy ducked a wooden club and tackled the woman who swung it. She smacked into the ground, dazed.

Billy lunged at the feet of a woman wrestling with Alexa. He punched her knee, then kicked the first woman in the face as she tried to stand.

Edward and David gawked as Billy almost singlehandedly subdued the group.

"I think he has something to prove."

David nodded. "Don't we all?"

"Absolutely." Edward went to guard the women as Billy lined them up in front of Alexa.

Alexa swept the females, seeing charred robes and injuries that hadn't been tended. She chose the youngest. "Where is the new meeting place?"

The girl flipped her the finger.

Alexa chuckled. "Will you still have that fire after all of my men have used you?"

The men all leered. Alexa bluffed, often, in moments like this.

The girl fell to her knees, shaking at the threat. “Radio station, 15 miles southeast. They don’t give us names, only directions.”

Alexa looked at Billy. “Is she here?”

The women shuddered or flinched as Billy scanned them.

Billy shook his head. “I’ve never seen these.”

The young girl didn’t have a star carved into her cheek yet. She was new. Alexa hoped that meant she wasn’t firmly entrenched. “I suggest changing your loyalties. If you take the mark, you’ll be dead in a year. The soldiers are going to win the bunker fight. When that happens, Fanatics will be wiped from existence. Don’t let that be your fate because they offer food or protection. It’s a false promise.”

The girl nodded, grateful to be spared. “I’ll think about it. My word.”

“Good. It would pain me to kill you.” Alexa didn’t say her men wouldn’t mind. She didn’t need to. It was in their expressions.

Alexa waved toward the fog. “If I see you again, you’d better be fighting for the right side. Get lost.”

The five females ran into the fog, not staying together.

Alexa swept the site, nose wrinkling. The tiny camp consisted of a sad fire and a few blankets. There were also a few bags, but none of them looked promising. “Clean it or move on?”

Edward looked at the team. “Move on.”

Alexa held out the end of the tether she'd cut when the fight started.

Jacob hurried over so she could reattach it to his. The fog was still thick and there were enemies in the area.

Alexa made a quick choice. They needed to rest and eat before the next fight. After Billy's ordeal, she refused to take any more risks than necessary. *This is how a quest ends. Not with a death, but with fear of repeating a failure.*

Alexa led her team back into the fog. She'd studied this area on her map, though that had been left at the cabin. Anyone who went through there would find a small stash of supplies, but she was still glad to be gone. She and her fighters needed more than that or they'd never survive a winter cooped up. She had an awful idea, but she was almost certain the men would love it. She just needed to make sure they could all handle it.

Alexa tugged once, pausing by the tall, wide shadow of a bus. It was a bit surprising to find it so far from a large population center, but it also made sense. Someone from a city had made it this far before running out of gas or food. Alexa untied her tether and pried open the door. It squeaked lowly, bringing the team closer. The bus was fine except for dust on the inside and dents on the outside.

Alexa used her light to verify it was empty. "Clear it, all sides, top and bottom. Silent, by four."

Billy went with Mark and Edward, waving Jacob along as they cleared the bus.

Daniel and David stayed with Alexa.

The bus had long benches in the rear and storage compartments overtop the rest of the rows. Some of the compartments still held luggage. She was eager to explore them, hoping to find things they hadn't seen in a long time.

Alexa removed her thin disguise. As she became the leader they all knew, moods improved.

The others joined them after they cleared the bus. None of them spoke as they lit candles and stuck them on the windows.

Alexa felt their curiosity. "The elder thing, right?"

Her men chuckled, nodding.

Alexa didn't mind this time. She was growing into a different style of leadership than what she'd been taught. Her father held information close, but she'd found sharing to be better for the health of her team. "I was created to be an enforcer for the government. Our bloodlines were picked for that reason. The scientists had little luck before they chose to use the oldest family lines. All the big ones were represented—Mitchel, Pruett, Malin, Shalet, Dormer, Abbot, Sinclair. Thirty female children were born. Twenty-two of those were Invisibles who never unlocked, no matter the pain the scientists inflicted. Eight developed the gift they hoped for, along with a few others. Half of those eight could control nature and create fire upon command. Two also had mind control."

Alexa's voice dropped into the raspy draw they always heard right before a battle. "And one rare child could copy all those gifts. The winning mix was a Mitchel father and a Pruett mother. Until we escaped, or were rescued, we worked for the government."

Her men didn't ask exactly what enforcers did in their jobs. None of them wanted that information.

Alexa was glad. She didn't want to relive her years under government control. They'd forced her to agree to a lot of things she had no intention of ever doing again. Enforcing unconstitutional rules from any government, like slavery, was one of them.

Edward sat on a nearby bench, unable to cover a small hiss. His injury was hurting, but he didn't want to take another pain pill.

"Let's see it."

Edward lifted his shirt at Alexa's order.

Alexa sighed. "At least you're alive."

Edward chuckled as David came over to apply more ointment. "It's a badge of honor."

Alexa chortled, shaking her head. "I definitely picked the right crew." Alexa sank down onto a long bench seat. "Wake me for food. We leave two hours after sunset."

"Are you doing this for me?" Billy hated the extra attention he was getting.

"Yes, and for me, and for the quest. If we let even one of them live, it weakens us." She shut her eyes. "My name will be honored."

Billy fell silent, forced to accept that.

Alexa yawned. “Would you like to plan the attack?”

Billy shook his head. “You’re too good at it. I would be happy to learn how, though.”

“Agreed. During the meal.”

Daniel dug through his pockets. “Beef and noodles or noodles with beef?”

The team got settled as Daniel kept digging out packages. “For a snack, we have Jello of a flavor I can’t read or a pack of pig crap with food coloring.”

Alexa snorted at his wordplay. “The pig crap.”

“Perfect. We’ll have cups of pig crap, followed by noodles with a beef product. For dessert...” He peered at a package. “Chocolate mouse.” He frowned as laughter echoed. “That can’t be right. It’s chocolate hair gel!” He tossed the package onto the small counter where passengers used to place bus cards. “So, pig crap, barf in a can, and a mouse sautéed in hair gel. Doesn’t that sound yummy?”

Alexa drifted off with their laughter ringing in her ears. *It doesn’t get much better than this.*

Chapter Nineteen

Liar

1

“**S**he’s not here.” Billy scanned the five dozen Fanatic females and slaves. It looked like they’d each grabbed a captive and ran when the soldiers attacked. He’d been observing them for an hour. It was almost midnight.

“There are 50 of her companions who share the same values.” Alexa, on his right, also surveyed the women in the parking lot below. They were camped in a large strip mall that appeared to have been burnt and looted more than once. Alexa doubted they’d chosen it for the supplies.

Billy scowled. “Do we have to destroy them all to keep these vile people from gathering?”

“Wouldn’t do any good.” David didn’t say there were other ways to make the call. He assumed they all knew, but Billy wasn’t in the mood for logic right now. He wanted vengeance.

This station had a small, dark tower and a tiny main building. Fanatics were camped over the grounds, but no one was in the station and there was no trailer. The two large tents in the center of the parking lot were heavily guarded, telling Alexa the

boss was in there, safe from a first wave attack. *Then I'll have to convince her to come out.*

David and Edward watched the rear as the team laid on the hillside, taking turns scanning the camp. The fog was gone, but the afternoon sun was covered by thick clouds that warned of more bad weather coming.

Alexa narrowed in on the corral. The slaves were in bad shape, but they didn't look as broken as those they'd rescued. *These men are new.* She saw more signs of it in their questionings and the numerous slaps they received. They were being trained. *Is this a temporary site or have they been here for a while?* Alexa studied harder, adjusting his glasses. "How will I know her?"

Billy's fists clenched in his pockets. "Dark hair. She has a silver ring in her lip and another in her ear. A lot of tattoos." He sighed. "And she's hot."

Someone screamed.

Her glasses swung that way, mind bracing. A dead male was sprawled in the dirt near the wooden corral. He'd tried to escape.

Drastic training. This is a nursery. Alexa slid down the hill and stood.

The team followed. Alexa didn't spend much time teaching them to infiltrate. This was good practice.

Everyone tensed at the sound of engines.

Billy resumed his spot on the hillside, peering down at the Fanatic camp. He narrowed in on the

truck that slid to a halt. Three women got out. “That’s her.”

The woman was exactly as Billy remembered—rings, tattoos, and sultry beauty. “I want her dead.”

“Shortly, my pet. Come along. We have plans to make.”

The team vanished into the tree line a quarter mile from the Fanatics who had no idea they’d been cased.

“Infiltrate or head on?” Alexa let her team make the choices, guiding when it was needed. They’d discussed it on the bus and chose to wait until they were here, seeing it, to make firm plans.

“We’re low on ammunition. I say we infiltrate.” Edward wished he’d been able to spend more time on reloads.

“We have a loathing now for being split up. It may interfere.” Alexa led them into a stinking grocery store that was flooded in the basement. Built alongside the river, the building was giving way as the water rose. The shelves had been looted, leaving nothing they could use. The rear of the store might have held a few supplies, but Alexa didn’t tell them to loot it. There was too much nasty liquid to wade through.

“Infiltration, with a straight attack as we meet up?” Billy liked to combo plans. “And a refill. Three of us are thirsty.”

The rest of the team nodded. It was obvious by her gaunt profile that Alexa was low on blood. They needed to feed her other side, soon.

“Who would you send in?” Alexa knelt to avoid being spotted through the dirty store windows.

Billy considered. “Someone who can take abuse if it all goes wrong.”

Everyone looked at Edward.

Edward snorted, but his eyes lit up at the respect. They were saying they thought he was the toughest among them. “Can we send me in with a slave or is it overplayed?”

“What about a trained slave begging for protection?” Jacob stared at Billy. “He and I could go in. They’d buy it.”

Billy slowly nodded, tortured. “We’d play it perfect, then kill them all.”

They waited for Alexa’s choice.

Alexa didn’t like those options. “We’re going in together, to buy a new teammate.”

Silence fell, followed by tension. Confused mirth was next.

Alexa didn’t smile. She drew in the mud. “Two snipers here, on either side of their gate. The rest go in with me, as rookies. Be sloppy. When I make the call, we’ll do a reverse shoulder circle and empty our mags. Then we’ll use knives and hands. No survivors.” Alexa marked the captive pen. “We move to the males as we fight, open the corral, and provide protective fire as they run. Questions?”

There were none.

Alexa began checking her weapons. “Pick your places. We go in 60 seconds.”

Edward and Jacob slipped into the patch of weeds outside the parking lot gate. They dropped to their knees, controlling their breathing as they waited to see if they'd been spotted. When no noises came, they aimed their rifles and got ready for Alexa's arrival.

Alexa came down the road behind them with four robed men in an uneven line. They looked nervous and abused. Edward saw she had ripped their clothes and had them pack their cloaks. The kits they had on were bulky, though he noticed they were turned backward so they didn't interfere with reaching guns.

Jacob stayed still as Alexa marched by, but he could feel her pinpoint his location without even glancing in his direction.

"Someone's coming!" The shout echoed through the Fanatic camp, bringing tension and running feet. Heads turned, evaluating.

"She just recognized me." Billy dropped his head. "This isn't going to work."

Alexa knew it, too. Fanatics were coming their way even without Billy's tormentor shouting.

"It's a Mitchel! Look out!"

Well, at least they know which side I'm on. "Open fire." She ducked behind her four men and beckoned at the other two. "Shoulder line!"

Edward and Jacob flew to her as she shot an armed Fanatic near them, providing cover.

The team made a shoulder-to-shoulder circle, with Alexa in the center.

Alexa brought her shield up around them as a large group of Fanatics came from the biggest tent. “Keep your eye on her, William!”

Billy’s rage grew hot as he centered on his target. He stepped out of the shield and shot her bodyguard driver, hating the zombied men.

Alexa shrank the shield as close to their bodies as she could, straining to hold it against the return fire. She waited until the shots lessened and let go. “Advance.”

Billy shifted them toward the slave pen, but his attention stayed on his target. She was hiding under the truck she’d arrived in, along with two other women he recognized from Carrie’s camp. He didn’t know any of their names.

Alexa pulled herself up onto Edward’s back and fired a ball of flame as half of her team paused to reload. It slammed into the side of the corral that was empty. Wood flew into the air. Flames crackled.

“Run!” Alexa dropped back into the center to recharge.

Frightened males fled toward the trees and mall stores.

The team aimed in six directions and opened fire, getting the few Fanatics still trying to rush them.

Billy edged toward the truck. “She’s trying to leave.”

Alexa brought her shield back up. “Main target! V formation, Billy leads.”

Billy took off running, expecting his team to keep up. He zeroed in on the driver of the truck. He lunged over the hood and tackled the second man.

Alexa flew to the passenger door, where a tattooed woman was sliding over to take the wheel. She grabbed the woman’s arm and yanked her out, shoving her toward Daniel.

“Get off me!” The woman kicked and bit.

Daniel spun her around and wrapped a big arm around her throat. He used his free hand to draw his knife and put it against her chest.

She stilled, whimpering.

The rest of the team fired at the remaining guards. Everyone else was fleeing.

“Rifles!”

Daniel held onto the now crying woman as his team lifted rifles and took aim on the Fanatics who were farthest away. Rapid gunshots filled the air.

Alexa fired again, hitting a leg. She tugged the trigger and got a head.

Billy double tapped two women by the gate, then spun to aim behind them. He got another woman as she entered the mall, shooting through the glass.

Alexa moved 10 feet away from Daniel, still picking off runners. They’d spent a lot of time practicing for these moments.

Billy reloaded as he returned to protect Daniel.

The woman in Daniel's deadly grip paled. "Not by your hand. Anyone but you."

Billy's lips curved into an ugly smile.

"Clear." Edward reloaded while he waited for Alexa to take a last shot. He was surprised when blood splattered inside a mall window. "I didn't see that one go in." He'd been covering that corner.

Alexa loaded their last rounds into her gun. "She never came out. I saw her earlier, in a chair."

"Do we need to clear the mall?" Edward was eager.

Alexa shook her head, going back to Daniel and Billy. "We have who we came for." She waved at Billy. "It's too fast. I'm sorry."

Billy stepped in front of the sultry woman, hatred flashing. "It is, but she won't feel that way."

"I'm sorry. Please!"

Daniel let go of her as Billy lunged forward.

Alexa scanned their surroundings while Billy drained his last tormentor. His grunts and slurps were music to her ears.

Billy belched as he let go.

The doomed woman swayed, eyes glazing.

"You told me it would only hurt a little." Billy drew his knife and plunged it into her stomach.

"Ahh!" Blood sprayed his face as she screamed.

He ripped upward, leaning in. "Liar."

She fell to the pavement, moaning.

Billy left her there to die. He took a post a few feet away to watch it happen. *I'll be okay now. I have full justice.*

Alexa felt the change.

Billy nodded at her. "It's better now. Thank you."

The Fanatic stopped breathing.

Billy wiped his blade on her robe, then sheathed it as he looked to Alexa for her next orders.

"Loot within 10 feet. We roll out in two minutes." Alexa took a step forward.

Something slapped her in the neck.

She fell onto her hands and knees, forcing out words. "Into mall... Go down."

Billy grabbed Alexa's arm and pulled her over his shoulder.

Edward waved toward the bloody mall window. "In there!"

More darts sailed through the air, followed by bullets.

Edward kicked the door in and held it open for the team.

The old store was empty of everything. It was impossible to tell what the store had been with no evidence to give a clue. There was only a small table and chair near a shag carpet on the rotting floor.

Billy ran toward the dead woman in the chair, searching for whatever Alexa had spotted. *We only had a narrow view.* Billy stared at the carpet. "Clear that."

Jacob and David moved the body while Edward ripped up the carpet. A heavy hatch came up half a foot before clanking back down.

"That's it!"

Edward pried the hatch open. David held it.

Billy took Alexa into the darkness, not hesitating.

The team followed, using the ripped carpet to pull the hatch shut. It echoed through the basement tunnel.

Voices came to them as a few soldiers entered the shop above them while the others finished off the rest of the Fanatics. They didn't bother to capture women who would be hanged later. They shot them down faster than Alexa had.

"She was in here! I saw them come in!"

Edward whispered orders. "Move out. Get those ropes on."

The team moved through the darkness with slow steps until the ropes were attached. When they were connected, Billy set a faster pace with one arm around Alexa and the other out in front to guard her from hitting anything his new eyes might miss.

The tunnel lights weren't working or they hadn't been switched on. The team felt light bulbs as they banged into them and things shattered. The hard walls implied this was a tunnel between businesses that connected basements for easier transfer of cargo and employees.

Light appeared ahead of them. The tunnel widened into an unused basement covered in dust. A swaying lantern told them someone had been through here recently.

Edward went to the ground level windows to see where they were.

Billy lowered Alexa, checking her for other injuries while Jacob yanked the dart from her neck.

David guarded them from the tunnel while Daniel counted to be sure they were all here.

“We’re four buildings down. We need to keep moving.” Edward swept the choices outside, then those inside. He saw another door ajar in the far corner. “Looks like the leader took her escape route. We might meet her at the end.”

The men understood the warning and the choice.

Billy lifted Alexa back into his arms and followed Edward into the dark, narrow cellar.

3

Alexa jerked awake in the darkness.

“Easy...” Billy took his hand from her mouth. “Let the drugs wear off.” She woke hard at moments like this. They’d been through it before.

Alexa managed a nod, fighting not to cough or gasp. She tried not to move either. She’d been stuffed onto a ledge.

She heard a door open.

A light flared.

“Now!” Edward opened fire.

A red robed body dropped. Footsteps faded into the distance.

Edward and David scouted the musty, empty basement, spotting another cellar door with their flashlights. This one was chained.

“Think one of them had a key?”

Edward shrugged, glad the soldiers hadn't found the hatch. “Probably. We'll leave it for someone else. Not enough time.”

David nodded. “Agreed.”

They joined their team, listening for threats. “That was the boss. She had a guard who was too overloaded with supplies to fight. She took off.”

Billy helped Alexa from the ledge and kept an arm around her, sympathizing. Drugs robbed the mind and body of free will. He hoped Safe Haven no longer had them except for medical purposes.

“It's nearing dawn.” Edward tapped Mark's big arm. “Watch your six.”

Mark knelt in front of Alexa.

Billy helped her onto Mark's back and then tied her to his big chest. Billy slid behind them in the line, aware of Daniel taking the rear. Alexa and the rookies were in the center.

“Direction, Boss?” Edward wasn't certain if she had recovered enough to answer, but it felt wrong to pick without asking now that she'd woken. They'd followed the escaped Fanatic's trail for hours. He doubted it was coincidence that she'd woken right as they were about to use their guns.

“East.” Alexa wrapped shaking arms around Mark's neck and buried her head against his shoulder as the team took off. She settled in for a rough ride, fighting to recover.

Edward led them out of the bakery basement and into the thin woods, hoping the row of

businesses would provide cover. He ran fast, listening for pursuit.

A narrow creek of rushing water came up in front of them a minute later. "Through or over?" Edward didn't slow.

"Over." Alexa held tight as they all picked up speed. She couldn't view the water or the jump they were about to make. She'd inferred from the context, his tone, and the sound of water.

Mark's body tensed. They sailed through the air and landed lightly. Mark took off running again, clearing room for the next jumper.

Edward wound around the curve in the creek, glad she'd chosen over. It was too cold to get wet unless there was no other choice. He took a fast look back to verify they were still together.

Daniel gave him a thumbs up from the rear.

Edward increased speed again, boots flying over the thawing ground. He picked dry spots and edges of rocks to keep from leaving a clear trail.

Behind them, voices echoed, telling the team the fresh corpse had been found. The gunshot hadn't been quiet.

Edward changed direction again, heading for a row of thick trees on the edge of the creek. "Up!"

Alexa's grip tightened on Mark as he leapt up to grab a tree branch. Her legs swung free as he caught a grip. She let the momentum smack her back against his body, legs open to wrap around him.

Mark pulled up, climbing onto the branch. He laid flat with her on his back, arms and legs wrapped around the rough, cold wood.

The rest of the team joined them. Their dark clothes and cloaks blended in.

Alexa watched the small convoy of jeeps roll toward the creek. The trees were barren, though the empty branches were thick. It was possible one of the soldiers would notice them.

The team froze as the convoy paused a few feet from the icy water and soldiers got out, looking around. They waited, hoping no one found their trail. The jeeps could bounce over the rough, frozen terrain, but they couldn't cross water unless they found a shallow spot. The men hunting them would have to want them really bad to risk losing wheels in this weather.

Captain Green stared at the trees across the creek, tired, cold, and angry. "I can smell her." He ignored the stinging wind as it hit his frosty face, gaze narrowing. *She's here.*

"We need fuel, sir. We only have enough to catch up to the platoon." The Private First Class waited for Green's choice, but he was prepared to leave the higher ranked man here. He didn't like being separated from their main group for any reason. He'd only come because of a promotion promise. If they were gone much longer, they would be considered AWOL.

Captain Green stared for another long moment, then headed for the jeep. He glowered at the row of trees as the PFC got them rolling, sure that's where she was. *We'll meet again, Miss Mitchel. It won't be as disappointing.*

Alexa let out a breath as the convoy rolled out of sight. She clutched Mark's shoulders when he dropped from the tree, landing lightly. She slid to the ground and stood still to get her balance.

Edward watched for the soldiers to come back while the others surrounded Alexa.

"East is the radio station. South is another peaceful cabin. Vote." Alexa drank from her canteen and rubbed some of the cool water on her face. The drugs had her gifts locked, but they were fading. In a few hours, she would be back to normal, other than being tired.

"East." Edward didn't need to hear the other choices to know that's what they were. "Let someone peaceful have the cabin."

"Yes."

"Exactly."

Alexa chuckled, heart easing. "I adore you all."

"Same, Boss." Billy kissed the top of her head and took his place in the line.

Each of them repeated his loving gesture and then lined up, except Edward, who kissed her cheek, then knelt in front of her.

Alexa climbed on his back, tears burning her eyes. "My thanks."

“It’s our honor.” Edward took off running, heading east.

Chapter Twenty
Cold Bonds
Bridgeport, Alabama
December 1st

1

The dark radio tower led Alexa and her crew the last mile to the station. They'd spotted it through the skyline of a dim moon and tall trees that had given the town protection for a century. Small and out of the way, the team had been delighted to discover only a few signs of looting here. The town would be a treasure trove when they came back to scavenge.

Alexa led them up the final incline, weary body ready for a break. She'd refused to be carried any longer. The drugs had worked out of her system while they trudged. She was herself again—tired but capable. “If it appears empty, we’ll go straight down and clear on my call. If it’s occupied, we’ll go straight down and clear on my call.”

The men snickered, checking weapons. They'd only found a small bit of ammunition. If the odds were bad, they would be reduced to knives and fists.

Alexa paused at the top of the rise, letting them all catch a fast breath while she evaluated possible threats.

The station appeared deserted. Debris covered the parking lot. The tall gate was missing in places. A thick forest hid the property on one side. A row of weather-beaten shops lined the opposite end of the sidewalk in a wide circle that led back to the main station. Two sheds, three small outbuildings. “Rifles to the right and left! Jacob, Mark.”

Both males were already lifting those weapons to take aim on the wild dogs they’d all spotted at the same time.

Alexa kept walking.

Two shots rang out together. A third followed.

Alexa marched by the two corpses, admiring the two head shots, but disapproving of them being in the same animal. “Whose mistake?”

Jacob grunted. “Mine, Boss. I’m right, not left.”

“Your follow up?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Rifles on the right and left. Daniel and David.”

Alexa also drew her weapon and aimed at the center of the three undead lumbering toward them.

Edward scanned for other trouble as three shots echoed, almost at the same time. He heard three bodies fall and no fourth shot. David was catching on quicker than Jacob.

“Noon, high. Team drop. Billy, Edward.”

The team stopped, all dropping to one knee while Edward and Billy aimed high, straight ahead.

Two lumbering shadows in the top windows of the station dropped at the two shots.

Alexa rose and resumed the walk. She reached the gate and paused, head swiveling. “Jacob.”

Jacob followed her line of sight, rifle coming up. He got the vulture in its big chest. The heavy bird slammed to the ground outside the gate.

“Rear. Edward.”

Edward dropped to a knee as he rotated, rifle coming up. He hit the first Fanatic, but only trimmed the second robed woman flying at them with a knife in each hand. He pulled the trigger a third time.

She dropped a few feet from the gate.

Alexa kept going, listening for the next attack.

Edward resumed his place, disappointed in his aim. None of them were perfect, but she expected him to be. He hated it when he disappointed her.

Jacob knew exactly how the Horseman felt. The two men watched for a chance to redeem themselves.

“Three to a side. Clear and call.”

They all ran away from her, rifles up as they cleared opposite ends of the site. They didn’t get out of view of her, though. She hadn’t said to clear the rear or inside of the buildings yet.

Edward, leading on the right, refused to rush the clearing chore just because Alexa was alone. He swept every inch of the lot before rejoining her.

Edward was pleased to see Daniel, leader of the left side, also just returning. He hadn’t skipped anything, either.

Alexa entered the radio station, keeping her team together for inside clearing.

Alexa motioned Billy to take the lead as she headed for the stairs.

Billy took them upward, using hand signals to put Alexa in the center and Mark behind him. The Convict was the best fighter on the team. It would take a lot to get by him to reach the boss.

Billy pushed the door open with his right hand and immediately brought it back to support the rifle, scanning the dim hall that was lined by cubicles. He led them forward, taking the center aisle so they could see down both sides of each row.

Alexa followed, listening to things her crew couldn't hear yet. There were voices on the wind, giggles in the echo of their boots on the dusty wooden floor. She tapped Mark, on her right, then Daniel, on her left.

Both men saw her point at the windows, and nodded.

Alexa held up a hand, positive the rest of the team was now watching her reflection in the glass. Two fingers. One finger. Circle!

Mark and Daniel rushed toward the windows, scanning for whatever had caught her attention.

Shadows vanished just as they got there.

Mark blinked, mind spinning. "I saw something."

"Same." Daniel rejoined his team at Alexa's wave. "It wasn't human."

"Good." Billy made a face.

Alexa motioned Billy to get them moving.

Billy led them through all the rooms, nerves gone for this moment. He was with his team, possibly in danger. *This is all I need.*

David tried to scan outside, hoping to discover whatever Alexa suspected. It was how the others managed to be ready for her tests. He wanted to be able to keep up in every way. It would be a small payment for leaving the family he'd sworn to care for. David didn't know if they were still alive. He'd slipped into the darkness an hour after getting Alexa's mental call. It had taken him a month to reach the town where he'd seen her in his dreams. Guilt had followed him the entire time. He cared for that family. The only way he could honor them was to complete this quest and help create a better world for them to live in.

Alexa took over as they went back outside. She stared at the dark, tall tower. "Later, I'll want it to appear undamaged. Make sure it can never be repaired. Clear it now. By three, Edward leads. Pick it."

Edward pointed at Mark and Billy, then moved out in a fast jog.

Alexa and the other three men watched the team hurry into the tower building. They kept an eye on their surroundings while they waited.

Alexa veered to the last outbuilding as the team returned. "Clear and gather."

Alexa saw a shadow from the corner of her eye.

So did David and Jacob. They kept walking because she did.

Alexa judged by the feel. It wasn't hostile. It was curious and desperate. She could work with both of those.

"You want a two-day supply?" Mark scanned fallen trees in the nearby wooded area, not looking at her as he pushed for details on how long they were staying. "I can do a lot better if you'd like more."

"This zone will get steady traffic for the next few months, despite the season." She gestured. "Set a working winter camp. We'll be in the red and white house next door when people come through here."

Mark and the others exchanged grins and nods.

Alexa enjoyed their pleasure, also looking forward to the time they would stay here and pick off enemies who had no right to enforce slavery. "We'll clear the house, get things set, then ice fish for a while." She'd already swept the home. It was empty, but it still had to be cleared.

Billy grinned. "Awesome!"

Alexa followed her men, grateful. She looked upward. *Thank you for giving him back.*

A star winked at her.

Alexa joined her team to clear the house.

“I think Captain Green will follow us.” Edward took wire cutters from his pouch.

“I certainly hope so.” Alexa narrowed the light she was holding for him. “There might be another deal to be made. If not, Ulysses is better off without him.”

Edward glanced up from the wiring. “You were using your gifts around the soldiers.”

“Yes.” Alexa sighed. “I made a big mistake that allowed one of our team to be hurt. I couldn’t take the chance on it happening again with the soldiers.”

Edward considered it. “Not letting us use our power?”

Alexa winced. “Yes. If Billy had known how to scan for trouble, he wouldn’t have been caught off guard by friendly expressions. He would have known what Cedrick was planning before that bastard ever knocked on our door.” She handed him the tool kit and went to the exit. “I won’t make that mistake ever again. From now on, we’ll also be training in magic.”

Edward respected her for admitting the mistake. He hadn’t considered that, but it made sense. “Does Billy know?”

“Of course. That’s why I asked for forgiveness.”

“And he gave it.” Edward frowned. “But...?”

“I will never forgive myself.” Alexa went outside to get a better view of the rest of the team.

Mark caught her attention for the check in, then continued chopping firewood. He already had a nice

pile by the porch of the house. It would be hidden later.

Daniel and Jacob were in the nearby tree line, setting traps for intruders. They both waved at her.

Alexa nodded.

David was on the first floor of the house, where Mark could see him, getting their den set up. He also waved and went back to work.

Billy appeared at her elbow, rifle in hand. “Things okay, Boss?”

Alexa’s heartache eased a little. “Better now.”

Billy moved off for another round of the property, staying in view of at least one teammate. They were all following that order.

“That’ll do it.” Edward pushed a button on the console.

The tower above them lit up, dim in the dawn light. They all had hoods up and were enjoying the sweaty labor.

Alexa returned to his side, sending a pleased wave.

Edward enjoyed it as he pointed. “The wiring is hooked to a battery now. I stripped the rest of it, welded connections shut, and took all the key pieces. Unless they have an engineer and spare parts, no one is getting this station back online.”

“Excellent.” She helped Edward put the tools into his pouch. She felt him wanting to ask more questions, but she left the station before he could. She’d been lax on this run because of the hardship they’d suffered. Now, it was time to return to the

ways that had gotten them this far. *With a few exceptions.* Alexa yawned, tightening her hood against the light.

Edward did the same as he followed her out. His skin still couldn't take the bright rays. It was the only thing he hated about this new body.

"I want to fish now. Can we find bait?" They'd slept on the soldier's schedule. None of them were ready for bed yet despite the sun's mental pull.

Edward pointed at high weeds near the creek. "Should find worms there. If not, I'll think of something."

Alexa pulled a hand shovel from her cloak.

Edward grabbed a cracked bowl from the pile of debris David was clearing from the house.

Alexa summoned the rest of her team with a sharp whistle. She drew a Fanatic robe from her cloak and donned it, doing an experiment.

Alexa felt a spark as the robe slid into place. She stored the feeling as she chose a spot on the creek, aware of Jacob stopping Daniel from drawing his gun. All he saw as he joined them was the red robe and assumed she was a threat.

Billy paused as he came around the corner and spotted Alexa. He knew who it was by her shape, by her attitude. He smothered his secret. He looked back, realizing Edward was frozen, staring at her. Billy recognized the look. He felt relief in his heart. "You, too?"

Edward nodded stiffly. “As soon as you admitted you liked some of it, my brain went nuts. That’s the image I see at the end now.”

Billy grunted. “It will never happen. She’s not like them.”

Alexa looked at Billy. She scowled.

Billy shuddered.

Edward forced himself to move, to breathe. *I’ve never felt lust like this. I don’t know what to do with it.*

Billy slowly brought up the rear, taking the extra time to memorize Alexa in the robe, frowning at him.

Alexa lowered the hood as she reached the protection of thicker trees.

Men relaxed. Edward took another breath.

Alexa pointed. “A weekly downtime session right here. Come sunset, we fade into the background and see who comes to our light. For now, we’ll collect worms and dig holes for our poles.”

The men snickered at her joke, moods better as they saw the winter months in a new light. Going back to the cabin had been hard to think about since Billy’s rescue, but this was shaping up to be fun.

Alexa met Edward’s eye as the others started gathering items. She lifted a brow.

Edward blushed. “Sorry, Boss. I’m still a man.”

Alexa laughed, sending love into the hearts of her team. It was the second-best sound she could make.

3

Early evening found the crew sitting at the pond with two fire cans burning, giving off a light glow.

Alexa tossed a limb into the can on her left, wondering how far the soft glow was reaching into the darkness.

“You made a lot of contacts this time.” Daniel had been stewing on it. Alexa usually avoided people, with good reason. “Even an enemy.”

“I created cold bonds with the possible winners that Safe Haven will have to handle when they return.” Alexa stretched, enjoying the ambiance. The smoke kept the few bugs away. It was nice. “Perhaps we will fight together against the bigger threat, instead of them all siding against us.”

“The bigger threat is Nature?” Jacob wasn’t certain. He had another option.

Alexa shrugged. “By herself? Unlikely. With corrupt descendants, evil humans, and bloodthirsty creatures helping? That sounds closer, but it’s still missing something that I haven’t identified yet.” Alexa reeled in her line, bait gone. “I dream about it. There are voices I don’t understand, which is odd considering that I speak the eight most common languages.”

The men were impressed.

Alexa frowned. “And not all of nature is against us. Some animals are in our camp. Some weather

gives us advantages.” She set the pole into the hole she’d dug. “I’m working on it.”

They didn’t like her frustration, but the men didn’t know how to help. They all fished in silence for a bit.

Jacob replayed her words a few times, attention snagged by a term she’d used. He tried to figure it out by the context, but he wasn’t clear. “Does cold bonds mean something?”

Alexa tensed.

The men weren’t sure if she would answer. Without meaning to, Jacob had flipped her mood.

Alexa chose to give them honesty. “Cold bonds are what we share as a team. We are connected through hard deeds that turn the soul cold. Over time, those bonds can shatter into deadly shards that penetrate any light for a brief time. Once broken from the team, they melt and dry into the ground that created them, forgotten. But sometimes, a light thaw can melt a top branch and allow the drip to seal the crack of a branch below.”

“Perfect.” Billy shut his lids, lying on a rug next to his pole.

Alexa stared at him, finally able to see the tiny fracture in their bond. *I think I know what to do now. I’m going to melt over his wounds and heal them. It will only hurt me a little to thaw that way. It’s more than worth it.*

Alexa lifted the hood.

Tension flew through the group, followed by a thick flare she now recognized. Alexa looked at

Billy. His expression was a mixture of hate, fear and need. “Do you trust me?”

Billy nodded. “It’s me, not you.”

“Do you want me to try?”

“Yes! Please.” Billy observed her, rigid with control.

“Walk with me.”

Billy was at her side seconds later.

Alexa led him away from the others. “Don’t feel bad about it afterward, or it will *never, ever* happen again.”

“I understand.”

Alexa twisted around and slapped him.

Billy’s eyes lit up. His body immediately began to harden.

“Come.” Alexa marched to the house with Billy on her heels.

Edward waited for the other men to protest, or at least ask questions. When they all nodded and resumed what they were doing, he was proud of them. He’d known what Billy needed for a couple days, but it hadn’t felt right to suggest it, let alone to ask Alexa to follow through. Billy’s time being forced to serve the Fanatics had scarred him, maybe for life.

4

Alexa went to the tiny bedroom in the attic of the large house.

Billy shut the door, heart thumping. “You don’t have to do this. I’ll adjust.”

Alexa went to the small bed and began attaching her tether to the bedrail.

Billy swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be. Name your mistake.”

Billy’s mouth went dry as he rattled off what the Fanatics wanted to hear. “I’m a man.”

“No!” Alexa came to him, lowering the hood. “Assuming I wouldn’t want to treat you this way, believing I’m too good to hurt you.”

His face twisted. “You are!”

Alexa grunted. “No, William, I’m not.” She mashed her mouth against his, moaning with him at the heat.

Billy kept his hands at his hips, fists clenched. “More!”

Alexa let that side of her take control, pointing to the bed.

Billy went, holding out his wrists so she could tie him up.

Alexa’s chest hardened. She pulled up the hood and went to deliver his punishment.

5

“It’s been an hour since she took him upstairs. Should we check on them?”

Edward gave Jacob a curt nod. They were all thinking it. There had been a lot of rough noise for the first half hour, but silence had fallen from there.

The team had made camp below the bedroom, making a lot of noise themselves, but they hadn't heard more than a vague whimper from Billy in 30 minutes.

Edward waved.

Jacob flushed, understanding he had to go first because he'd broken and spoken it. He went without sneaking, not about to act like this was anything other than what it was. Alexa wasn't stupid. She would know why they were checking in. Billy's rage was dangerous.

Jacob tapped on the door and pushed it open.

Billy lifted a finger to his lips. "Shh..."

Jacob stepped in, then slid to the side so the team could also enter. He stared at the couple on the narrow bed, heart warming.

Billy was lying between her long, scarred legs, head resting on her flat stomach. She was snoring softly, clearly knocked out.

Edward noted proof of Billy's pleasure on her thigh and nodded. "Welcome back."

Billy's face eased into the hard, amusing man they all knew. "I never left. I just didn't know it was okay to like it rough."

The chuckles woke Alexa. She smiled. "A good team is always willing to learn new tricks."

Edward turned toward the door.

"I didn't tell you to leave!"

Billy drew in a sharp breath at her cold voice.

Edward slowly turned, heart skipping a beat. He was a blank façade as he faced her.

“Do you think I don’t know?” Alexa dug a nail into Billy’s shoulder as she pulled him upward.

He began to harden against her leg.

“Deep down, you want to be punished. You know there’s pleasure in the pain.” Alexa pulled Billy’s hair, forcing him to look at her. “Say it!”

Billy kissed her. “I like it!” He rolled them over, sliding deep.

Alexa looked at the shocked man in the doorway, then to those lining the wall. “I can be that for you.” She pinched Billy, making him cry out.

He grabbed her hips, thrusting wildly.

Lust flooded the room.

“We’ll be down.” Alexa looked at Edward. “You stay.” She lifted herself off Billy’s hard body and locked her legs together.

“No!” Billy thrust against her thighs, frantic to get back in.

“If you’re good...” Alexa frowned over at Edward. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Edward lurched forward, already so hard he was throbbing.

6

Alexa came down the wooden steps, expression impassive.

Daniel didn’t meet Edward’s eye as he gestured. “We put it in the middle room.”

Alexa lifted a brow.

Edward stopped smiling. “We found a trunk of clothes.”

Alexa assumed it was female items. “Okay. Why the faces?”

Jacob couldn’t stop the snicker. “You’ll see.”

Alexa understood they were looking forward to her reaction. She walked to the row of small bedrooms, curious. *Did they find dresses? Or nighties?* They’d been almost bashful about it. That was unusual for them. Her men were a lot of things, but shy was not on that list.

Edward settled into the chair by the fire as the others found places on the couch or at the kitchen table in the next open doorway.

Billy stood by the dusty hall, not comfortable with her being out of sight. He was sure that would ease after they set the normal alarms on the outside of the house over the next few days. The perimeter traps were already finished.

Alexa came back out, shaking her head. “No more double portions. They think I’m fat enough to need maternity clothes!”

The men snickered as she joined them.

Alexa held up a jean jumper that would have been too big on Mark. “Maybe if I was carrying Jendon’s baby...”

Chuckles filled the downstairs.

Alexa grew serious, mind working. “We can use them as scarecrows or a decoy.” She looked around to find the men nodding. They knew what she was thinking.

Alexa draped the big jumper over an empty kitchen chair. “We’ll set it as a copy of the last camp.”

Billy’s mind pulled up that image. “I’ve got every detail we’ll need.”

Alexa was thrilled by his normal tone. She went to the table and joined Jacob for the meal that David was handling.

Jacob slid his cup toward her. “We lost a few items. The house was clean of a lot. We’ll cover it tomorrow.”

Alexa shrugged, lifting the cup. “If you have cooties, it’s already too late for me.”

Jacob laughed.

A new tension wafted through the house.

Edward slid a hand to his gun.

Alexa sighed, slamming the cup on the table. Coffee sloshed over the sides. “I am almost at my limit.”

Her men frowned.

A tall, ominous shadow appeared in the far corner, where the dark curtains met the wall.

Alexa’s team drew their guns.

Chapter Twenty-One

Connections

1

“**H**ow did we miss him?” David was stunned.

Alexa stayed at the table. “Very old vampires have stealth.”

The tall, thin man didn’t move in any way, but they felt his amusement. The vampire’s dark skin belied the myth about all blood suckers being pale. His skin was covered in scars and dirt. It was obvious he didn’t like cleanliness. The vampire’s clothes were all black. He didn’t wear a tool belt or carry any weapons they could spot. His cloak hung lightly, unlike theirs. He wasn’t loaded down by pockets of supplies and gear.

“What do you want?” Alexa was tired of asking that question.

“May I enter?” His deep voice was eerie.

Alexa snorted. “You break the rules, then ask for permission.” She snapped her fingers once.

Her men scowled at the order, but they obeyed. Both sides slid over to clear a path.

The vampire walked like a normal person, though not with the steps of the old man he appeared

to be. His long black cloak dragged the ground as he glided forward, creating a nerve rubbing noise.

He left no prints on the dusty wood even though they could see his black shoes touching the floor. It was menacing. *He could have been here the entire time that we have!* Edward was furious at the intrusion.

Noses wrinkled as the vampire passed. *He smells like the dead.* Jacob kept his face blank, but his stomach churned.

Edward almost grabbed the man anyway. He'd never felt such power, except in Alexa. "Be careful or you won't leave here."

The vampire's eyes darkened to a deep gold. "Fear does not become you."

Edward's scowl grew, but he held his tongue.

Billy slid in front of the vampire, breaking ranks. "You can talk from here."

The vampire froze without touching him. "If you keep me next to them, I will enjoy a meal."

Billy's eyes narrowed. He stepped backward, but still didn't let the man reach Alexa.

Edward changed positions so he and Billy had the threat surrounded.

The vampire waited, frozen in place again.

Alexa smacked her lips together. "Move, William."

Billy did it because she'd used his full name. It got through his fear.

The vampire walked by Alexa, to the wall across from her. He didn't sit. He didn't lean. He stared at her in frozen animation.

Alexa studied him right back, not trying to read his mind like her men were doing. "Never without permission."

The team stopped, caught.

Alexa shook her head. "I meant *him*, not you."

The vampire's eyes darkened. "We will speak. Call off your new pups."

"Or?"

The vampire wasn't used to having to negotiate in this manner. He sent waves of obedience.

Alexa blew out a breath, head shaking again. "Any other day, I might have tolerated this to make a deal." She sent out her own wave of power, trapping the man in her alpha pull.

The vampire groaned, sinking to his knees.

Alexa let go of him. "I repeat, what do you want?"

The vampire rose in a fluid movement, face a mask of hatred.

Alexa's nostrils flared. "I will burn this place and hold you in it until you're nothing but ash."

The vampire slowly reached into his cloak. He drew out a small black book. It was on the table before any of them could blink.

Alexa opened it, ignoring the odor of death that wafted up. She scanned. "This is a contract."

"Between your family and mine."

Alexa turned the pages in a blur as she used her new sight and speed together. She was at the end a minute later, but she only understood half of the languages that were used in the book.

She looked up at the vampire. “There are no signatures.”

His demanding eyes glared back. “There is blood. It binds everything.”

Alexa ran a light finger over the two blood prints on the final page. “How do I know it’s really one of my family?”

“Taste, of course.” His tone said she should know that. “Your son has done much better at learning our ways.”

Alexa couldn’t resist. “You’ll tell me about him?”

The vampire’s attitude became smug. “If you honor the contract.”

Alexa’s tone sharpened. “I could pull it from you.”

“But you won’t.”

“No.” Alexa touched her tongue to the old blood.

Edward watched her eyes dilate. She sniffed, moaning.

“Mitchel.” Her voice matched the heavy timbre of the old vampire. Alexa didn’t like it. She took a drink of the cooling coffee and cleared her throat. “How does it work?”

Her team was glad to hear her normal rasp.

The vampire waved at the chair.

Alexa shook her head. “You’ll get no invitation from me.”

“As you wish.” He froze again, waiting. He wasn’t going to give anything for free.

Alexa took her knife out and sliced her thumb before anyone could react. She licked the blood.

Her eyes dilated again. “Mitchel.”

It was creepy to her men, but the old vampire actually smiled. “A fast learner.”

Alexa’s lips curved. “You remind me of my father. It’s funny how all *old* people do that now.”

The vampire’s mouth opened, fangs dropping.

Alexa chuckled. “Insults go both ways, *pops*.” Her mirth fell to the floor. “So does cooperation. What’s in it for me, up front?”

“I am the elder, Zaro. As such, I also enforce all deals made with my people.” The vampire raked her with contempt he didn’t try to hide. “We have a contract.”

“So?”

He frowned. “Blood contracts do not expire. You are honor bound to represent us.”

Alexa shut the book, being gentle. “Why would I do that? You hunt humans. You’re evil. It oozes off you in waves.” She didn’t ask about the baby who had bitten her, or his family. That clan was in hiding. These vampires would probably hunt them down.

Zaro’s expression darkened. “I am what I was created to be. Humans are the same.”

Alexa shrugged. “Doesn’t change things for me. I’m sworn to defend them first, my family second.”

“I know your job!” The vampire roared without moving anything but his mouth. “Your family were the shepherds in the garden! Of creatures! The other one had dominion over humanity, not you!”

Alexa stored the details for later contemplation. She showed no sign his anger intimidated her. “I am a descendant. I will always protect humanity first.”

The vampire’s face went from anger to rage. He looked over the shoulders of her tense team. “She will not listen!”

Two more shadows appeared by the curtains.

“Do not react.” Alexa kept her men in place and her eyes on the elder vampire. “They are not the same as him.”

“They are family.” The vampire glared at her. “They will be killed when the final war comes. You must help them! Honor the contract!”

The swarthy girls had straight white teeth and stunning green eyes. Their dainty bodies implied weakness, but none of the men assumed that was true. The girls held menace, too, just not as much as their elder.

Alexa stared at the two young female vampires who came to the old man and stood in front of him. They gazed at her with curious, glowing red orbs.

“Hybrids...like us.” Alexa was stunned.

So were her men.

The smallest girl held out a hand. “Please honor the contract your family made in good faith.”

Alexa shook her head, refusing to touch the girl. “Not without more information.”

The two girls took seats at the table.

The old vampire glowered. “It should not take the pity of children to bring out your honor!”

“I will not be tricked in such ways!” Alexa sent out a new blast of alpha pull, sending him against the wall with the anger behind it.

He cowered from her rage, understanding he couldn’t defeat her. “How is this possible?”

“I have total power over evil like yours. It’s a family legacy.” Alexa chose his fate. “And I will honor that.”

The old vampire had come here to succeed or die. He hoped her guilt would force her to help his family.

“Please, don’t.”

“We love elder Zaro!”

Alexa drew her rage back in. “I will ask questions. *All* of you will answer.”

The girls nodded.

Alexa waited for the old man to agree.

The vampire slowly dropped his head. “Yes.”

“Prove you can be trusted.” Alexa glared. “Give me your last name!”

The old vampire froze again. He glowered for a long time.

“I am Zaro Abbot.” Zaro stood. He no longer seemed as evil to her team, only desperate.

Alexa knew that was a false impression. “Why me?”

Zaro resumed his place along the wall. “You are the only female Mitchel.”

The young girls kept taking peeks at the human men. Alexa shook her head, eyes glowing at them.

The girls dropped their chins in tandem.

Zaro lifted a finger. “You protect those who need it. We will not interfere with your quest.”

Alexa understood she wasn’t going to get a straight answer from him. She turned her attention to the children who were in identical blue dresses. Ringed curls hung over their thin shoulders. It was pathetic, like intended. “Why now?”

“You are here, at a station. If you make the call, Safe Haven will return.” The youngest girl continued, lower lip quivering. “We will die. They will not allow such abominations to live.”

Alexa kept going, trying to avoid the pity they were hoping to draw from her. “Consequences of saying no?”

Zaro scowled again. “Your family line will be cursed!”

“Like we haven’t heard that before.” She kept studying the children, digging into their descendant minds. “Where did you come from?”

“Magic users!” Zaro spit on the floor.

Alexa frowned. “Taken or willing?”

“Willing,” the girls answered together. “Our mother loved our father.”

“That must be why the combination worked.” Alexa glanced at her men, at the hybrids she was already worried over. “What do I get, personally?”

Zaro opened his mouth, fangs dropping. Saliva dripped onto his robe.

“Grandfather!” The older girl tried to smile at Alexa through her fear. “He’s scared you’ll kill us. Please don’t be mad.”

Alexa was already mad, but she used a calm tone. “I will consider this contract. I will not agree without being paid. I’m not a charity. You get what you earn.”

“What do you want?” The younger girl was wary of magic users, like she’d been taught. “We can help you train them and yourself.” The girls were eager to make any deal that spared their lives.

Alexa caught their desperation. “It’s not just these two.” She glowered at Zaro. “How many?”

Zaro refused to meet her eyes. “Dozens. We welcomed the magic users when they came, begging for sanctuary from human hunters. They mixed with us! Against the rules!”

Alexa was suddenly exhausted. “I’ll think on it. Go away now.”

The girls rose immediately, obeying an alpha.

Zaro tensed, ready to protest.

Billy had had enough. He blasted out rage, sending flames up the man’s body.

The girls screamed, running to him.

Zaro grabbed the girls and vanished, leaving a trail of thin smoke.

Alexa beckoned at David. “Food.” She stayed at the table, thinking as she ate.

The men went about their nightly rituals, but their minds stayed on her, worrying about her choice. None of them wanted her to obey whatever was in the contract, even though it would help other hybrids. Zaro couldn't be trusted.

Alexa knew, but she'd been drawn in against her will. She was already concerned about what would happen to her team once Safe Haven realized they were hybrids. Now that concern was becoming a desire to see both sides saved.

She stayed at the table after the bowl of stew was empty and her coffee was gone, mind spinning through all the options.

2

“Let's plan an invasion.” Alexa finally stood from the table. It had been hours.

Her men gathered around her on the floor as she took a seat in front of the empty fireplace. Lantern light gave soft illumination, but there were a lot of shadows to keep things tense.

Alexa gave them the only piece of information she had. “Of the big bunker.”

They relaxed. They'd thought she meant the vampire nest.

Alexa gestured absently. “Edward will get it rolling. Bring out your stashes of paper.”

The men got settled, eager to work on the plan. A few of them wondered if she'd changed her mind about helping the soldiers, but they didn't ask.

Edward knew better, though he wasn't sure why she wanted to plan it if they weren't going.

Outside, thunder cracked, bringing the first rain they'd gotten in weeks. It pattered against the windows, soothing ragged nerves.

"All bunkers have the same basic design, though this one will be bigger." Edward drew an outline on the paper. "It should have three entrances. All of those will be heavily protected. I recommend a different approach."

Alexa listened, but her mind wasn't on the topic. She had faith that her men would work it out.

"Infiltration?"

Edward shrugged at Jacob's question. "The soldiers could pretend that they're surrendering, but the women inside will never believe it."

David offered a suggestion, already sure it wouldn't succeed. "What about a decoy attack?"

Edward shrugged. "The big guns will handle it for them, from a distance."

Daniel had another idea. He liked surprise approaches. "Can we dig in? Find a weak spot and blow a hole?"

"Maybe." Edward hated that answer, but the bunkers were well built. He was certain they were still in great condition. "There has to be something that would get them to open the doors."

Mark cleared his throat. "What about more women joining them?"

All the men looked at Alexa or toward the upstairs bedroom, where the robe was still wadded up on the bed.

Alexa's hand twitched. "Yes, they're loyal enough to their own for that to work."

"So we send in a group of Fanatics with someone who knows how to open the bunker?" Billy liked it.

Edward nodded. "That could work."

"Draft it out in full detail." Alexa stretched out on the floor, eyes shutting. She listened to them make plans and to the sound of Edward's pencil scratching across the paper. *I could do it. Edward could give me enough information on how to open those doors.*

Alexa kept stewing on it even after the men were finished.

3

"Should we leave her on the floor?" Jacob wanted her to use the beds and be comfortable. The huge home had six bedrooms, two dens, four bathrooms and a large, finished basement.

Edward knew Alexa had considered camping down there, but she'd said they shouldn't fully embrace the vampire side. The future had to be a mix of both.

Billy snickered. "She's not asleep, and we all chose the floor over beds. Why would she be different?"

Jacob flushed, glancing at Alexa. A small smile curved her red lips. He sighed, realizing he'd misjudged again. "How did you know?"

Billy shrugged, not wanting to embarrass the rookie further. "Felt it."

Jacob let it go, hoping his time on the team would see him with the same skills.

Billy refused to think about the real reason.

Edward nodded to him in approval. The others weren't hybrids. They couldn't hear her small huffs and mutters yet. Her noises were so low even they could barely hear them.

Alexa gave up the fight to rest. Her mind was too full.

The men were on downtime now, but even in that, they were special. Billy was working out, trying to regain all of his physical strength. His body rose and fell in even pushes.

Daniel was hooking their phones to the solar panel he'd rigged earlier so dawn's light would charge them.

Mark was lacing the new boots he'd scavenged from a closet.

Edward was sorting through the junk he'd collected. He planned to work on reloads tomorrow.

David was sketching out a final draft of the bunker invasion plan.

Even Jacob had shunned reading his bible for scrubbing blood from his cloak. All of them were preparing for whatever came next before they

enjoyed the downtime. *Like I taught them. I'm proud.*

Alexa rolled over and joined Billy, dropping into the hard, fast pushups he was knocking out. She matched his speed and kept pace, not letting her mind think about anything but the exercise.

Billy felt her unease. He thought of offering her a service, but didn't. She never used sex for anything but bonds. He didn't want to change the way she handled them. *Too much has already changed because of me.*

Alexa kept pumping even when her body cried for relief. She did believe in no pain, no gain. She just wished the pain moments had come to her, not her men. *And I missed something. I don't know what, but I know I did.*

Alexa rolled again, ending on her bedroll by the fire. She laid there, hands above her head while she got her breath back. *Maybe I can sleep now.*

Dawn's tug on her and two of their team was strong.

They'd all placed bedrolls on the floor around her, bringing an end to that part of the tension.

Alexa rolled over as David settled next to her. She spooned his hard form, sighing.

David smiled, eyes shutting.

The soft popping of the fire and the cold draft from a cracked window made for a pleasant temperature for all of them. They'd stripped cloaks once they were alone, hanging them on a coatrack. They had access to more old world conveniences

here, but Alexa doubted they would use many of them. She wondered if mankind would ever restore the splendor of life during prewar times. She had her doubts, but there was room for hope. Her men gave that to her daily. Surely the world held more like them.

Jacob decided to be braver than he usually was. He took the other side and cuddled up to Alexa's warm back.

Alexa smiled and drifted off to sleep.

Edward nodded in approval. Their rookies were learning that Alexa preferred men who could think for themselves and still follow orders. *She chose right.*

She always will. Billy took watch at the front window, not tired enough to sleep yet. *We're the problem, not her.*

Edward let Billy have the first shift, settling into his bedroll across from Alexa. Their team had been reunited and they were stronger than they'd been before. It was more than he had hoped for when he'd first found Billy gone. He had been sure their quest was about to end. Now, they were on the next leg of it.

Destiny. Edward was comforted by that. He allowed the sun's pull to drag him into slumber.

Billy waited for the awful loneliness to strike.

The team fell out quickly, snoring and muttering.

Billy's mind spun, braced for misery.

He was still waiting for it when Edward woke for shift change four hours later.

I've recovered. My scar hurts, but I survived with my sanity and my place on her team intact.

Billy watched the sunlight glint through wet trees. *Thank you, God. I owe you big time.*

Chapter Twenty-Two
Made to be Broken

1

“**O**ur first audience is arriving.” David sniggered with the team as they all looked toward the road in front of the parking lot. It was almost sunset. They’d been up for an hour. Enjoying a slow wakeup on the porch had been Alexa’s idea. David assumed she’d already known there was danger nearby.

“Two vehicles.” David concentrated, aware of Alexa’s lifted brow. “Fanatics.” They had a distinctive feel of feverish loyalty that made him uncomfortable.

Alexa stopped blowing on her hot tea. “I have my robe on. We’re ready.” She’d chosen to wear it whenever she was outside.

The men settled in to play the role, swallowing smirks.

Edward braced his boot on the stained porch rail and scrubbed on the spare robe they’d scavenged from a body that was Alexa’s size. The rest had been too damaged.

Billy sat at her feet, replacing her worn bootlaces.

David stirred the pot of breakfast soup on the grill, then gathered dishes for the meal.

Jacob stoked up the fire for David, then stayed at his elbow, learning how to make a new meal.

Daniel continued patching the hole in Alexa's pants. He was enjoying having her shapely legs draped across his lap.

Mark stood, marching to the gate with a rifle in his big arms as two blue trucks came into view. The trucks were splattered in mud and dents that said the people had traveled hard to get here.

The setting sun glinted off red robes.

The trucks slowed in front of the gate. A window rolled down. "Are we welcome here?" The women in the cab flashed hostility while those in the bed pleaded with shivering bodies and sad eyes.

Mark shifted so they got a clear view of Alexa in her robe.

"She's one of us!"

"Maybe she'll rent her slaves!"

The relieved women climbed from the vehicles, lust lighting faces at the sight of so many male captives.

"As soon as Mark's behind them, he'll go." Alexa resumed blowing on her tea. "Watch the crossfire."

Her men gazed shyly at the hungry, horny Fanatics who'd been cut off from their supply line for days, encouraging them to come closer.

Mark let the women go by, not responding to any of their touches or leers.

“A zombie!” The last woman through the gate squeezed Mark’s arm. “I love zombies.” She flounced toward the front of the line to talk to Alexa.

Mark grabbed her from behind and snapped her neck.

David ducked as Jacob threw the two kitchen knives from their workspace.

Billy lunged as those in front recoiled. He wrapped the new bootlace around the nearest neck and yanked. He banged her head into the station sidewalk.

Edward leapt the rail and tackled a female.

David grabbed the gun from behind the grill and fired two shots. Both hit their targets and nothing else.

Alexa sipped her tea as Edward pushed a bleeding, frantic Fanatic onto her knees by the steps. “Why did you come here?”

The Fanatic knew not to lie. “This station. We didn’t know anyone was here yet!”

“That’s a mistake you won’t make again.” Alexa chortled at Daniel as he patted her leg. She admired his handiwork. “Thank you. It was getting chilly.”

He frowned at her. “Next time just tell me. I’ll do any of your clothes.”

Alexa waved to Edward. “Let her go. Leave the bodies by the gate. Make me another pretty design.”

Men snickered.

The surviving Fanatic took off running, heading northwest.

“Let’s have a pool. How long before she comes back with friends?” Alexa stood. “Study her. Betting opens in one minute.”

The crew watched the Fanatic run up the ramp to the overpass. She finally vanished between the rusted vehicles.

Alexa drew out her notebook and tiny pencil. “Rookie.”

Jacob liked getting to go first. “Six hours.”

“Ten hours.” David had accounted for the dead traffic any supporters would have to get through.

Billy shrugged. “A full day. They won’t come light against armed men.”

Mark nodded. “Agreed, but I think they’ll want us enough to come quicker. Mine is 18 hours.”

Alexa wrote their picks, then looked at Daniel.

Daniel shrugged. “All the good ones are gone.” He laughed with them and made a choice. “Let’s do 12 hours.”

Edward smirked. “Thirty minutes, Boss.”

Alexa frowned at his confident tone. “What did you catch?”

“I pulled it from Horny’s thoughts while she was drooling over Mark. This was a scouting party. The main group has 15 members.”

Alexa laughed with them, then waved. “Get rid of the rear truck. Leave the front vehicle. It will block their view of us and draw them in. Edward will greet this time as his reward for winning the pool.”

“If we stay all winter, we may need a car graveyard too.” Billy went to drive the truck off the property.

Alexa waved Edward to go along.

Edward held onto the passenger side as Billy flew out of the lot, spinning dirt and gravel over the bodies. *Yeah, he’s holding a grudge.*

Alexa motioned the others back to their places around the porch of the house. “Once more, gentlemen, then we’ll enjoy our breakfast well earned.”

2

Thud! Alexa swung the axe again. *Thud!*

She enjoyed chopping firewood, but it had the double benefit of being a great workout. She was in good shape, but she wouldn’t stay that way if she didn’t keep encouraging it.

Flies buzzed around the bodies and bloodstains. Alexa hoped it rained again soon. The rotting corpses would break down faster if they were wet. Still, it was an intimidation to view them sitting along the fence as if taking a rest. It wasn’t until travelers got closer that they would see it was a line of corpses killed in a variety of ways. They’d stripped the robes and damaged starred cheeks to avoid giving away their trap. There were 12 so far. Alexa expected a lot more before they left here in the spring.

Thud! Her back and shoulders protested lightly.
Thud!

“Something’s eating her.” Billy paused by Edward. “It took me a while to get her there this morning.”

Edward frowned, pausing on the wood carving he’d chosen to do. They all knew she preferred Billy’s mouth to the rest of them. “Any idea what it is?”

Billy shook his head and kept walking. He was on a patrol of the grounds while the others worked. That was another reason Billy thought something was bothering Alexa. She had them running guard posts while outside even though they were the scariest things in the darkness now.

Billy dropped another load of logs near the pile that Alexa had mostly gone through. He waited, not sure if he should ask her.

“It has little to do with you.” Alexa’s hearing was better than it had ever been. “Half my crew is different now. I’m torn between finishing it and refusing it. I don’t like either choice.”

Billy was glad it wasn’t a problem they couldn’t fix. “Maybe there’s a third option.”

She snorted. “I’m already using that. When it’s earned, it will be given.”

“We like that one. It’s a new reward.” He leered. “Not that we don’t enjoy the ones you give.”

She snorted. “This isn’t new for you. You already have it.”

Billy glanced at his team. “Not really. I can’t fully enjoy it until we’ve all earned it. They know we’re holding back. They’ll try hard to impress you and I’ll root them on the entire time.”

Alexa ran a hand along his cheek. “I won’t take it away from you, even if Brian finds a cure.”

He smiled. “And the worrying?”

“I’ll try.” Alexa made a face. “It doesn’t feel right if I’m not worrying over something.”

Billy laughed, taking the axe from her. “My turn.”

Alexa took his rifle and went to do the next patrol of the perimeter. She scanned the small winter garden that Daniel and Jacob were laboring on, approving their hobby choice. It would only provide a few meals, but it also told travelers they were here to stay, to approach with caution.

Near them, David and Mark were assembling a boxed hot tub they’d found in the garage. They were discussing a rain collection system while they assembled it. Everyone had enjoyed their water moments at the cabin.

Near the porch, Billy’s project waited for him to finish his shift. Alexa was looking forward to flying kites.

“I did that once, with my father.” She strolled the perimeter, ears and eyes alert, mind torn between then and now. In good moments like this one, she missed her family. Her kind had been born and lived with magic for decades while the world turned. She missed being around people who

understood how exciting it was that they could be themselves now as long as they stayed free. It was amazing. She needed to celebrate it. Other than that, she was happy. It was nice to feel this way.

Alexa's feet turned her toward a new sound while her mind kept stewing on what else she needed to be satisfied here for the winter.

She paused by the gate, looking into the distant skyline of buildings and trees. Smoke began to rise.

Alexa veered toward their den. She whistled.

Men ran her way, falling in on each side.

"Company will be here tomorrow. We have things to accomplish before the sun rises." She led them inside, going to the far counter where she was drying newly scavenged maps.

"Boss, shadows again."

Alexa stopped, also catching the movement. She snapped her fingers once.

The team fell into the V, her in the front and rookies in the middle.

Two shadows on the porch took the shape of tall men in dark clothes and cloaks that almost mirrored their own.

They recognized the vampire on the right with scowls.

Alexa waited, sensing this wasn't an attack.

"I am Yani." The younger vampire held up a hand. "May I speak?"

Alexa nodded, hand resting on her gun. "It's about time someone asked."

Zaro shrugged without moving. It was still eerie. He sneered. “We’ve been near you for weeks, protecting you where we could.”

Alexa didn’t doubt that. She and David had picked up strange noises and thoughts the entire time they’d been searching for Billy. “Speak. I will listen with open ears.”

Zaro frowned at her. “Jendon received much better hospitality.”

Alexa shrugged this time, duplicating his lack of movement to do it. “I like him more.”

Yani bowed low. “Please forgive us for not revealing ourselves sooner, and for Zaro’s rudeness.”

“That, I can accept. What do you want?”

“A truce, a deal.” The younger vampire splayed hands. “A friend.”

Alexa let the negotiation proceed. “What do you offer?”

“We will all fight with Safe Haven in the final battle.” Yani smiled. “And I do mean *all* of us.”

Alexa studied Yani for a long minute, aware of more shadows appearing outside. It wasn’t just vampire hybrids. The shadows were bigger, smaller, wider, shaped differently. Alexa froze as she realized what was happening. *They know Safe Haven will close the portals. The fantasy creatures don’t want to die!*

Yani gazed at her in sadness. “Like you, we have no choice in what we are. Does that mean we

should cease to live to clear the way for the humans? Again?"

Alexa opened her mouth... She turned toward her crew, needing another opinion.

All the men held sympathy, especially Jacob and Edward. Their eyes said they, too, wanted a truce, a deal, a friend. She grunted. "We have guests. Get it set."

The men grinned, relieved as they hurried to get drinks rolling. Billy stayed by Alexa, attention on Zaro. He didn't trust the old vampire.

David leaned toward Edward as they dug in their kits. "What do I make for them?"

Edward thought of his own diet. "Something red?"

David snorted. "Thanks."

Edward chuckled, observing their guests. He'd wondered about other vampires since they'd rescued the baby. The longing had grown since his own change. Edward placed Yani as the son of Zaro. Edward hoped he was more trustworthy than his father.

Yani ignored Edward's disapproval of their methods, but he was aware of it as he spoke with Alexa. "I wish you to state our case. Honor the contract."

Alexa shook her head at a troll who was eyeing their kits. "No ban on creatures? Because I can't give you that."

"I wouldn't ask it." Yani watched the troll go outside so he wouldn't be tempted to steal. "Some

of us are ruthless and need to fade from existence. The rest of us only hunt killers or animals. We are not a danger to the human herd.”

“We need them.” Alexa meant that with all her heart.

“Exactly.” Yani glanced toward the woods. “We recognize the need for conservation of an endangered species.”

Alexa wasn’t sure how it would work, but he wasn’t asking for more than what any form of life wanted. She’d made her final choice upon waking. “I will give your words to the leader of Safe Haven.”

“But will *you* support it?” Zaro knew they needed that edge.

“Probably.” Alexa scanned and found her men happily involved with their guests.

Billy was chatting with the green haired troll through the window, offering him a drink. David and Jacob were pouring something red into their few cups. Daniel was at a window, staring at all the creatures appearing around the house.

He turned toward her, feeling her attention land on him. He smiled, eyes lit up like when he was taking a foolish risk and staying on top of it. The vampire next to him didn’t appear nervous at talking with the sexy Biker hybrid. Another piece snapped into place.

She turned back to Yani and Zaro. Alexa’s fast mind went to work, slamming clues together. “You’ve always been allowed to exist. You were

also created in a lab. Why are you helping the imaginary creatures become real?”

“We have not always been allowed.” Yani’s tone was pointed. “That happened because of a moment like this one.”

She realized it had been done before, and successfully since the vampires hadn’t taken over the world. The contract was valid. “What else was given permission to stay in that amazing moment?”

Zaro huffed. “A rare few. Maybe another night we will discuss those blessed, cursed creatures.” He refused to trust a magic user.

“Fair enough. Tonight, we’ll discuss you and me.” Alexa gestured at the two chairs by the fire. “May I offer you...?”

Yani went to the chair in a fast blur, sitting slowly. “Thank you, no.”

Zaro went to the chair at a normal pace, spreading menace.

The house was filling with furry creatures that squeaked, whiskers twitching in alarm every time a voice rose.

Alexa studied Yani. “You’re not a hybrid. You don’t eat or drink.”

Yani leered.

Alexa chuckled. “Human food and drink.”

“We can, but there is no need.” Zaro’s nose lifted. “After 50 years, our bodies harden. We no longer consume unless we desire it.”

Alexa asked the most important question to her. “Are hybrids covered in the contract?”

Her crew tensed, waiting for his answer.

Yani shook his head. “They are forbidden. Before the human war, we did not allow the accidents to survive. Now, we recognize their value. Hybrids can cross worlds. Pure parents cannot. Without crossbreeds, vampires will die out.”

“Tell me about the contract.” Alexa took the fragile book from a special cloak pocket and placed it on the small table between them.

“The fabric of reality was cracked in an experiment. It happened on an island that lost its entire population to radiation poisoning. There were two governments involved, and one local civilian family who played the role of mediator.” Yani waved at her.

Alexa nodded, acknowledging her family’s participation. She’d tasted the blood. It was definitely from her family tree.

“The creatures were strong. The government men saw how useful it could be to cross us. They allowed 10 species to stay so they could build a perfect fighter.”

“That’s where the Snakes came from.” Billy shuddered, eyes glazing. “Hemi told me they escaped from a lab. Half went west. The rest came east.” He tried to recover the good mood. “She also said the soldiers are winning that war in the west.”

Yani stared at Billy, eyes dilating,

Alexa placed a hand on his cold arm. “We do not remove bad memories. Humanity is not allowed that luxury.”

Yani shrugged, eyes returning to normal as she let go. “As you wish.”

“I wish for more of your story.” Alexa sipped her red Kool-Aid. “It’s very interesting.”

Yani smiled, eager to please. “The gate was closed, and the island was quarantined for a long time. They did their experiments right there.” Yani’s voice dropped. “They put the rest on a boat and let them loose.” Yani looked at his father. “He was the first vampire child born in the real world.”

Alexa had caught the tone. “You’re not sure if the contract is valid.”

Yanni sighed, not lying to her. “No. It was long ago. Much has happened. My kind have not always followed the rule about not hunting humans. The agreement might have ended with the war. We need Safe Haven to validate it when they take control.”

Zaro scowled. “Deny the Snakes in this contract. They hunt all of us. It must end.”

“All lifeforms have a natural predator.” Alexa didn’t want to play God.

Zaro needed her to do exactly that. “Yes, humans! Adding another will disrupt the balance.”

“We will pay.” Yani tried to buy her loyalty. “In blood.”

Alexa’s eyes darkened. “What are the cons?”

Yani stared. “We will be bonded, forever, to the Mitchel clan. If you are in need, we will answer the call.”

Alexa wanted that. Securing connections for the family was part of her underlying mission. “Pros?”

“None for you. You are already as changed as is possible.” He swept her men. “But you will be able to pass on great strength to your pets. The amazing team you have will become even more so.”

Alexa’s tone sharpened. “And the pros for you?”

Yani smirked like a wolf. “I will discover if the transfer works both ways to create a hybrid of a pureblood.”

Alexa considered the possibilities. “The night will go quickly with all this magic in one place. Finish.”

Yani frowned. “One of your kind has become a problem. He hunts the coastlines.”

Alexa flashed to the mental visit from her uncle Brandon. “We’ve been warned. I expect we may meet him before this quest ends.”

Zaro studied her eagerly. “And if you do?”

Her face hardened. “He will be eliminated. There is no deal to be made there. His fate was chosen by an elder—me.”

Yani was pleased. “Thank you for hearing us.”

“It is my honor to be the ambassador for the future.” Alexa had never spoken those words before. It made her smile to have an official title. “And what of my son?”

Yani’s smile widened. “It is a longer story. Would you hear it all or a short version?”

“Short.” Alexa didn’t want Brian to become a bigger target because of gossip. There were a lot of ears listening to them.

Yani ignored Zaro's denying gestures. "He and his lover stole old books from a host family, slaughtering them in the process. He was last seen entering an underground bunker." Yani's expression turned sly. "You will be a grandmother in the summer, of the first natural born vampire/magic/succubus hybrid."

Alexa chuckled. "Good for him."

Zaro scowled. "You are happy he has taken a hybrid mate and joined the soldiers?"

"I'm happy he is on the quest he was given." Alexa knew bunkers had labs. "He was told to find a cure, for hybrids."

Zaro snorted. "That cannot be done."

Alexa shrugged. "Perhaps, but we'll know it for sure at some point. Brian is very resourceful."

"Noted." Yani rose. "There is one more thing you must decide. Then I will leave, though many of those here will remain to ensure the soldiers do not interfere with your rest."

Alexa also stood, waving her men off as they responded to her sudden tension. "I accept your gift with the same respect it was offered."

Yani lunged forward and drove his fangs into her neck, sucking down blood in huge gulps.

Alexa groaned as Yani's teeth began to force in venom. It stung and it stank like old corpses.

Yani let go, staggering back. His yellow eyes glinted at her as a drop of her blood rolled over his chin. "You are strong."

“Let’s see how you take it.” Alexa leapt, shoving him against the wall with her surprise attack. She crunched into his hard neck, arms wrapping him up tight.

“Ah! Ah!”

Edward snorted. “Dude. Take it like a man. She did.”

Yani snapped his mouth shut, face twisted in agony.

Alexa drew back, licking her lips. “Yummy.”

Zaro held up a hand as she approached him. “That was enough.”

“Once more, for cold bonds.” Her eyes glowed. “I will leave your pure blood intact.”

Zaro nodded stiffly, revealing his desperation. He loved his people. He would do anything to save them all.

Alexa snapped her fingers.

Edward and Billy attacked the vampire elder, driving in their new fangs on each side of his neck.

Zaro’s shrieks brought everything to a tense stop.

Alexa snapped her fingers again.

Edward and Billy retreated, both groaning, licking away the mess.

Zaro sagged against the wall, panting. “So cold.”

Alexa nodded. “Death bonds always are. They melt in the heat of rage. Do not betray me. My fury will sever all agreements.”

Zaro limped toward the exit. He swayed into the darkness, followed by his scowling son who hadn't realized she would feed her men on their blood.

Alexa checked on her team.

Billy was already back at the window with the troll. David was nearby, working on drinks. He had the spirit stove ready to go. Alexa zoomed in with her new hearing to listen.

"It is a potion everyone enjoys. It gives sweet dreams as a side effect." The troll held out a pouch, still refusing to come in and be tempted. "Boil it just like human tea."

David followed the instructions while Billy handed him items from the pouch. Both men looked over at her.

Alexa nodded. *They're on a 60 second check-in count.*

She scanned the doorway again and found Daniel and the vampire child kneeling on the porch. She used her better hearing again.

"Faster than the fastest bike."

Daniel chuckled. "Hard to believe people can do that."

"Shall I demonstrate?"

Daniel hesitated. "Is it okay?"

The vampire juvenile sniggered. He vanished, but returned seconds later.

"I saw you on the ramp!" Daniel was delighted. He turned to look at Alexa, then went right back to his discovery. "Can you do it again, slower?"

Alexa chuckled. Her gaze found Mark next. He was in the dining room, at the table with a dwarf and a fairy. She didn't need the new hearing to listen to them.

"You're so big!" The fairy fluttered her wings. "Ever do it with a winger?"

Mark blushed. "A what?"

The dwarf tapped him on the arm. "What do you eat to grow so big?"

A brownie pulled the hair on Mark's wrist. "Hey!"

Mark rubbed his arm, frowning. "What?"

"*Have* you ever done it with a winger?"

Alexa snickered and moved on as Mark turned for a look at her. She landed on Jacob. He and the banshee were on the floor near the couch, where three Valkyries were telling stories of life and of course, death. Jacob looked at Alexa, brow lifted.

Alexa sighed. He'd felt her attention, but he wasn't doing regular checks. *We'll need to work Jacob a little harder from here on.*

I agree.

Alexa turned to find Edward in the chair next to her. He'd moved so fast she hadn't noticed him.

Three dogs immediately padded forward and curled up around the Horseman's boots. The black dog looked normal, but the two and three headed monsters would have frightened them into firing any other time. Here, they looked like perfect protectors.

Alexa went to her chair. She saw no problem with what they wanted. Here, at least, both sides were mixing well. *Our minds invented them. Surely we can tame them this time instead of forgetting they ever existed. That's too cruel, even for humanity.* “Be gone by dawn.”

Alexa settled back in the chair, eyes shutting. She was tired. *Too much socialization.* A small smile curved her lips as exhaustion let her doze while she felt safe.

The happy creatures around them gradually left the house over the next hours, but not the grounds. They gathered in the icy trees and on wet roofs, watching over Alexa and her crew as if their very existence depended on it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Close

1

“**T**he soldiers are coming now.” David kept working on his boots.

Daniel tied off thread and stuck the needle back into the pincushion. “Looks like Ulysses is in the front jeep, alone.”

“The bunker must be close.” Edward stood for a better view, foot bracing on the rail.

Billy handed his lens to Edward. “Hemi said it’s along a coast.”

“Must be why they’re traveling due east again.” David shook his head at Jacob, who was practicing his cooking skills. “Too much salt. Start over.”

Jacob flushed, shoulders drooping. “Wrong damn spoon!”

Alexa studied the line of soldiers, searching for Captain Green. She didn’t see him. *Good. I’ve planned correctly.*

“Ulysses is driving this way.” Edward stored the lens and went back to scrubbing the hem of the faded robe, not hating it as much anymore.

Alexa sipped her tea, wearing her normal clothes. Looking like a Fanatic right now wasn’t a

good idea. The soldiers wouldn't understand it was just a prop.

Daniel sewed the corner of a patch onto her other pantleg this time. He was giving her small glares about it. He'd dug them from her cloak while she was sleeping.

Billy had point. He walked toward the gate with the rifle in his arms while Mark and Jacob cooked lunch and David replaced worn bootlaces. They'd been listening to the soldier convoy near them. The team was tense despite appearing settled in. Seven hundred and fifty soldiers were marching and riding by their location. If the enemy attacked, they would lose.

Ulysses entered the parking lot, scanning the team and the front yard that looked well used. He also swept the rotting bodies, not smirking like he wanted to. There would be time for that shortly. *No need to rush it.*

Ulysses stopped at the gate, scanning Mark. He took in the thick arms, the tattoos, and marked him as the best fighter. "I'd like a few words with your boss."

Billy stepped aside as the Colonel exited the jeep.

Ulysses stopped in front of Alexa, gaze narrowing on the punctures on her neck. He rotated, counting how many of her men were now hybrids. He was surprised to only find two. "You'd be much stronger with all of them changed." He swept the

bodies again, not fooled by the work they'd done to hide the stars. "I only see Fanatics."

Alexa shrugged. "I expect a few looters and Snakes will also find their way along my gate. What do you want?"

The Colonel sighed happily. "I have it, mostly."

"Then why are you here?" Alexa didn't like his smug attitude. It said he was what she'd overlooked.

Ulysses met her eye. "To apologize, and to beg a favor."

He had shocked her. Alexa knew he was reading it on her face, but it had been a long time since she'd felt this emotion. "You directed this ugly play."

Betrayal flew through the team as they also added up his pieces.

"Not entirely. Marcella Pruett gave the order and offered the reward. I just spread the story during my scouting runs." The Colonel kept his head bowed as the angry team surrounded him. "Please, forgive me. I did it for freedom."

Alexa's rage was hot. "My man didn't have freedom!"

"That was your mistake, not my arranging." Ulysses called it as he saw it. "I never thought it would happen."

Alexa grunted. "Nor did I, frankly. I thought we'd proven ourselves enough to be left alone."

"You did, to me. I let you go." He didn't say she owed him for that. He was sure he didn't need to.

Alexa wasn't going to accept so little. "It's not enough."

Ulysses glanced at her wounds again. “You have new connections, new strength. You’ve benefitted since his rescue.”

Alexa didn’t deny that. She battled her pride and her honor, hating him for getting one over on her. Because he really spent time as a trader during his scouting missions, he had honest memories. He hadn’t lied. She just hadn’t caught the truth. “What call do you wish me to make?”

“Bring the other descendants to help us. Men should not be slaves!”

“It’s time for you to leave. Your men are stopping.”

“No! You’re turning your back on those who need you! Where is your honor?!”

Alexa glared. “I’m very tired of defending my honor to those who have none.”

Her men braced for ugliness.

Ulysses slowly pulled a small stack of papers from his pocket. He held them out to Edward, not attempting to get closer to Alexa.

Alexa took them, skimming the arrest warrants for her and all of her men, for encouraging male freedom. She studied the close likenesses and the correct names. *The Rabbit bit me again.*

“Are you able to send a communication back?” She kept looking for clues, ignoring the angry accusations on the page. Only half of them were true.

“No, but I can tell you what channel the bunker uses for private communications.”

“But you want something in return for your generosity.”

He nodded. “May I present the rest of my offer?”

Alexa sighed. “Yes, by all means, delay your death.”

Ulysses winced. He scanned the furious men, swallowing fear. “Captain Green went AWOL with two dozen men. He’s hunting you.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “What else?”

“There’s a full ammo can in my jeep. A gift.”

Alexa wanted that, but she sensed he had something else she needed even more. “And?”

“I’ll tell the big bunker you died in the last battle. I haven’t gloated over our victory yet.” He grunted. “And my life. That’s all I have left to give to this cause.” A tear slid over the man’s frostbitten cheek. “I’ll agree to whatever you want.”

Alexa didn’t hesitate. “I want three lives.”

“Name them.”

“Brian Mitchel. If he dies, we have no deal. The woman with him is carrying my grandchild.”

“I’ll go find them personally, if you’ll do what I need.”

“I will. Come spring, I will call my father. A few months later, Safe Haven will return.”

Ulysses let more tears fall. “Safe Haven will help us defeat the bunker.”

“Very likely.” Alexa shrugged. “But our business stands, no matter what.”

Ulysses nodded. "I'll bring them to the cabin where we met."

"Deal. Come spring, your only goal is those three lives. If you fail, I will tell my father your men deserve death. He'll start with you."

"We'll be in the swamps until spring. If you can't hold this station, destroy it on your way to us. We have equipment to make the call."

Alexa nodded. "Enjoy clearing the Snakes from that nest."

"We plan to." Ulysses turned away. "I wish you well on your quest."

"I wish the same for you." Alexa watched him go, aware of questions forming in the minds of her men. Only one of them didn't wear a puzzled expression. Alexa turned to him. "Speak in full so that your team may understand."

Daniel kept his voice down as Ulysses set the heavy ammo can on the ground by the jeep, then got in and rejoined his men. "You weren't tricked. You just let him think that. You secured another connection."

"And pleased her team." Billy beamed at her. "Thank you for getting involved."

Alexa huffed, leaning back in her seat. "I'm not involved. We're simple questers taking a break while keeping what we've claimed."

Her men chuckled at the evasion, returning to their roles. They would continue the act until the soldiers were gone.

“She protected all of us, including her son. Other than enemies to freedom, we’ll be left alone here.”

“Not exactly.” Alexa denied Daniel’s assumption. “We still have one issue and I expect it to fall soon. Are we ready?”

The men realized they hadn’t finished the preparations last night because of their company. They shook heads.

“In an hour, we’ll all get busy. For now, take pride in who you are and what you’re doing. It is a great honor to be good enough for two simultaneous quests.” Alexa ignored the shadows around their den, but she was glad of them. If the soldiers had attacked, the creatures would have defended her. Alexa picked up her cup and sipped. “Let’s have a pool on how long before the green man arrives. Winner gets a service of his choice.”

2

Captain Green signaled his soldiers forward, keeping watch on the front of the big house. Alexa and her men had gone in as the sun rose. He had waited two more hours, hoping they would be asleep and caught off guard.

Two dozen soldiers went to the exits of the house, but none of them were eager. Every soldier there was certain they were breathing their final moments. Unlike the Captain, who had gotten their cooperation through threats and bribery, they didn’t

think it was possible to catch Alexa off guard. The bodies outside, all in gruesome positions mocking life, said a lot of people had already tried and failed.

Rain fell softly on the nervous soldiers as they prepared to enter.

Captain Green took the front position, not scared of the moments to come. His obsession with Alexa Mitchel had developed over four years of listening to the scientists in the bunker talk about the things she could do. *Well, I need something done. It's time for her to pay for our generosity.*

Captain Green kicked in the door.

It flew open and banged against the wall. He caught a fast glimpse of seven angry faces and lifted his gun.

Other doors were kicked in. Windows shattered as the support team entered the house.

Alexa and her men didn't budge from the dining room table. They had already shifted chairs to be facing the threat.

The soldiers rushed into the main two rooms, guns pointing at the team.

Captain Green stared at Alexa, confused that she and her team weren't attacking. They didn't even have their guns in hand.

Alexa waited, trying not to trigger a bloodbath. She'd told their hidden protectors not to get involved this time. She didn't want the man killed, though he certainly deserved it. She met his eye, letting him view her amusement.

Captain Green slowly lowered his gun. “You knew we were coming.”

Alexa didn’t speak yet, busy digging into his mind without him knowing. It was a skill she’d already had, and he should have known that, but he didn’t appear to notice as she discovered his secrets.

The Captain slowly approached the table, but he stayed out of reach of her men. “You’re under arrest. Surrender your weapons.”

Alexa lifted her brow. “Why would I?”

Green scowled. “We have you surrounded. You’ve lost this time.”

Alexa shrugged. “That may be your perspective. It isn’t mine.”

Green scanned her men, then the room, looking for what he had missed.

The PFC he had chosen as his second in command marched arrogantly over to the table and leaned on it, getting in Alexa’s face. “Give me your guns!”

Alexa and Edward kicked at the same time, both hitting the side of his knee.

The PFC fell, shouting.

Fingers tightened on triggers.

Captain Green held up a hand. “He knew better than to get that close.” He glared at the whimpering man. “Drag your ass out of here and keep going.”

The PFC did, in too much pain to protest the order. All he wanted now was to get away from Alexa before she and her team began to really fight.

There was silence except for the rain as the PFC limped from the house.

Alexa glanced at the nervous soldiers, then back to the Captain. “What do you want?”

“You! The bunker will open up for you!” He gestured toward the bodies in front of the station. “When the Colonel comes through, he’ll see proof. There’s no way you could kill that many people in this short of time unless you’re a magic user.”

Alexa gave him a cool smile. “Ulysses already came by. You’re a day too late.”

Captain Green’s face fell. “That’s a lie.”

“He gave me a message. He said you have been listed as AWOL. The next time he sees you, he’s going to shoot you in the head for desertion.”

Soldiers around Captain Green tensed, exchanging glances.

Alexa nodded toward the door. “He said the men with you can rejoin the group, but it had better be soon.”

Green stared in shock as half of his soldiers fled. Engines echoed a few seconds later.

“I guess the odds are even now.” Green tried not to look like it bothered him.

“You could have brought 10 times this number. You’re slow, sloppy, noisy, and I’m surprised you’ve survived this long.” Alexa looked at the other soldiers before Green could protest. “I’ll count to three. If you’re all still here, I’m going to kill you.”

No one moved.

Alexa's voice deepened into the new vampire timbre she was learning to control for moments of intimidation. "One...two..."

The rest of the soldiers fled, leaving Green by himself.

Alexa smirked. "I suggest you holster and sit."

Green was forced to comply. He shoved his gun into the holster and dropped into the only empty chair. It put him directly across from Alexa and in reach of all of her team. He stayed tense, waiting for a deathblow.

"I'm reaching into my pocket. Don't wet yourself." Alexa took out the paper her team had labored on. She placed it in the middle of the table. "That is an almost foolproof plan to infiltrate the big bunker. Take that to Ulysses and he'll probably let you back in."

Green immediately wanted it. Beyond his obsession with Alexa, he did truly want male freedom and Alexa was known for always telling the truth. If she said it was foolproof, he believed her. "What do you want for it?"

Alexa's orbs glowed red, letting him have confirmation of her status. "Your loyalty."

Green opened his mouth to deny it. He snapped it shut an instant later. The deal she was offering was too good to refuse, and yet, he had to. Torn, he stared.

Alexa crossed her arms over her chest. "You have to decide if your hatred of magic users outweighs your need for the slavery law to be

abolished. If you ever hope to have men free again, you should take the deal.”

Green hated her in that moment for the trap. “What do you mean by loyalty?”

Edward unfolded the paper in the middle of the table and pointed to a short list at the bottom of it. “Read this.”

Green read the list, aware that Edward was keeping his hand over the plan so there couldn’t be any cheating.

You’ll stop pursuing me.

You will protect all members of the Mitchel family for the rest of your life.

You will donate to my cause.

The Captain frowned. “Donate?”

“I want to know how you taste.”

Green scrambled from the table, knocking the chair over. He tried to run.

Alexa’s men wrestled him back to the chair and shoved him down. Mark and Edward kept a hand on each of his shoulders.

“It has to be willing.” She looked at the hands on his shoulders. “That doesn’t mean you can leave this meeting before I give you permission.”

They let go of him and waited.

Alexa hadn’t given an oral order. It didn’t escape Green’s attention that her men were obeying commands she hadn’t given. Green swallowed, mind protesting the truth he’d always suspected. “I loathe your kind.”

“Tell me why. Maybe I’ll have sympathy.”
Alexa motioned to David. “We have a guest.”

Mark and Edward sat down, one on each side of the tense soldier.

David went to the counter to pour cups of the hot coffee Jacob had made. It slowly rolled from the pot like thick mud.

“I lost everything!” Green slammed a hand on the table. “They destroyed the world!”

Alexa wasn’t surprised, only sad. “You fought against my father. Not wise.”

“Without magic, he would have lost!” Spittle formed on Green’s lip.

Alexa grunted. “Keep telling yourself that magic is his advantage. Someday, you might even believe it.”

“Don’t tell me what I believe!” Green’s face turned red in his rage. “Just kill me!”

“Why would I do that?” Alexa picked up her cup and chewed a drink.

The team chuckled at the faces she made.

Jacob flushed. “I did what you told me to.”

Alexa sat the cup down and nudged it toward the confused, angry Captain. “You used a tablespoon instead of a teaspoon, again.”

“Well, I don’t know what those abbreviations mean!” Jacob went to the coffee pot and began remaking it.

Green stared at the cup.

Alexa shrugged. “It’s strong, not poison.”

Because she didn't lie, he picked up the cup and sniffed it. A tiny smile came to his lips. "We like it like this." He took a healthy drink, also chewing.

Alexa chuckled.

Green stared, mood darkening at her mirth. He hated himself for enjoying it. "Without magic, you're nothing!"

"Believe what you will. That is not our purpose here today." Alexa stood, taking the second cup David had poured. "You want something from me, something you hate yourself for. Speak it now and end this wall of lies between us." She hit him with a truth charm.

Green stiffened, mouth opening to spew hatred. "I want my family restored."

Alexa grew sadder. "Even I cannot bring the dead back to life."

Green's eyes dropped to the table. "I know."

"And yet, you pursue me, knowing I cannot give you what you seek."

Faced with the truth, Green broke. Fat tears ran onto the table.

Alexa refused to absorb more of his sadness. "Agree to the deal. Take your anger out on the people who would have chained those missing sons."

"Are my boys alive somewhere?! Tell me, witch!" Captain Green didn't care if she killed him. "I have to know!"

Alexa could not refuse. She opened a mental door to the past and searched for his children.

Green waited, not breathing, not blinking.
Please. Please.

“The oldest son drops from my grid in December, the year after the war.”

Please, God. Please!

Alexa slowly shook her head. “Your wife sold the younger boys to Snakes. Their signatures vanish after that.”

Green fell onto the floor, sobbing. “No! No!”

The team’s dislike of the man eased, but their hatred of the Snakes and Fanatics went up another notch.

Billy felt the most compassion. He helped the crying soldier back into the chair and handed him a towel to dry his face. “Do what she says—turn your anger to those who deserve it. Your hatred of magic users is unjust. They didn’t do this.”

Green nodded, heart aching. “I’m sorry.”

Tension faded from the team. She’d been right to spare the Captain. He wasn’t as bad as he’d seemed. The real threat was the Snakes and Fanatics. Men like Green needed to be alive. Their righteous anger would keep them fighting that evil.

Green slowly recovered, feeling deep sadness and shame. “I should have escaped the bunker and saved my family.”

Alexa sighed. “Perhaps, but the time for that is long gone. All you can do now is make sure it never happens to anyone else’s children.”

“And I will!”

“I believe you.” Alexa motioned at the paper.
“Agree?”

“Yes.”

Alexa lunged over the table and wrapped him up in her dark embrace. “Take this gift in the manner it was meant.”

Green stiffened as she neared his neck, but he didn’t pull away.

Alexa kissed his cheek and drew energy from him. She quickly let go and stepped back.

The bloom of magic spread over his body, coating him in pale blue.

Green stared at her in adoration.

Alexa put the paper in his hand. “Leave here. Do not ever come back.”

Green walked toward the door, able to feel her spell lingering. “What did you do to me?” He didn’t have the overwhelming sadness now. He felt...at peace.

“I gave you my love. Hold tight to it. Safe Haven will accept you now.”

Green shoved the plan into his pocket, realizing she’d discovered his deepest desire and regret. If he’d been with Safe Haven from the beginning, his children would be alive now. She’d freed him of a useless anger that would have killed him, and replaced it with hope. He paused on the damp porch, not turning. “...thank you.”

Alexa sent a wave of pleasure. It knocked him off the porch and face down into the mud. “It’s my honor.”

She waved a hand and slammed the door as her men snickered. “Not everyone can handle that emotion from a Mitchel.”

Edward hit the button on the box in his pocket.

Above them, the radio tower lit up in the darkness, beckoning to everyone who saw the glow.

Edward gestured. “I can start hunting for parts. Should have it going again by spring.”

“I don’t need a station to make a call.” Alexa tugged her cloak open, running hot again. “A Mitchel can make that call at any time, from any location.”

“Then why does everyone think that?” Billy didn’t understand. “All the Fanatics are going to radio stations.”

“They don’t know much about magic except that they fear it or want it. Leaders aren’t sharing the information they find. Ulysses certainly isn’t. Panic controls, too.” Alexa rattled off more possible reasons. “Magic is forbidden across this country. Marcella gets all her followers together that way. They’ll make connections at the gatherings and spread faster. The soldiers are still refusing to admit magic exists.”

David snickered. “Boy, do they have a shock coming.”

Alexa and her team settled around the main rooms of the house to wait for the next threat to find them.

Shadows did the same around the property. Like the Captain and the Colonel, the creatures also believed a Mitchel could be trusted.

Watching from a distance, fate laughed again.

3

“...for the rental of each conscripted male... These laws went into effect on December 1st. The two-year moratorium has ended. Anyone found hiding males will be imprisoned. See your local agent for directions to our base.”

As soon as the announcement ended, Daniel keyed the mike on the two-way radio Edward had rigged up. “Please stand by for a very important message concerning the whereabouts of Alexa Mitchel.”

All around the planet, heads whipped toward radios. Hearts pounded, people were shushed, and minds spun with new plots.

“Whenever you’re ready, Boss.”

Alexa climbed on, snorting. “You know what I want.”

Daniel chuckled, holding the mike in so no one could interrupt the broadcast. “My pleasure, and don’t be easy up there. I like it hard, too.”

Alexa chuckled this time, leaning into it. “How’s that?”

Daniel grunted like a pig. “That is very, very good. Right there.”

Alexa moved lower, drawing another groan.

“She’s so good at this!” Daniel moaned again. “Okay, here’s the message. We’re in Bridgeport, Alabama. Alexa is currently giving me the best backrub I’ve ever had. You want her, come get her.”

Daniel let go of the mike as Alexa paused, both of them waiting for a response.

The rest of the team was around the couch, enjoying the show Daniel was putting on to anger the females in the bunker. Nothing upset a Fanatic like a woman serving a man.

The radio crackled. “Will you be there long?” The voice was older, female, and very angry.

Daniel keyed the mike and held it up.

“I’ve already been here for a week. What’s a few more?” Alexa dug in an elbow to draw another male moan. “You should stop by. I’ll show you my garden. And my graveyard.”

Awful shouts came through the radio when Daniel let off the mike.

Alexa didn’t answer again, but she did keep listening until the angry voice finally signed off. While she listened, she delivered the reward for Daniel winning the pool. He’d begged for a backrub. Now, all her men wanted one, but they were afraid to ask.

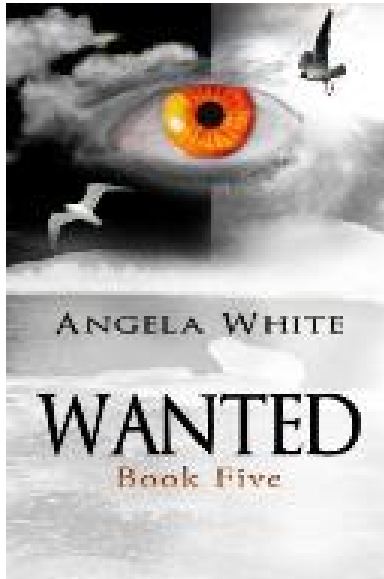
I get to run my hands all over their willing bodies for hours. It’s funny that they think I wouldn’t want to do that. “Line up, gentlemen. I feel like delivering a service.”

Men wrestled each other to be the next one
under her rough hands.

Billy got there first.

The End of Book 4

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“Trouble’s here.” David stayed by the barn window as Claudia’s refugees let out cries and rushed to hide what little they had. Breakfast was forgotten.

Bruce went to the barn door with a pouch in his hand. “Greetings, agent.” He stood firm in the doorway, refusing anyone entry.

Kelly snatched the pouch from him. She peered inside. “This isn’t enough. You’ve hunted, cut trees. This only covers use of the shelter.”

“That’s 10 gold coins!” Bruce pointed at the woods. “And we haven’t caught anything here in days.”

“Not my problem.” Kelly stored the pouch, then wrote on a small chalkboard. “Your balance will be due in a week. Make sure you have it.”

Embolden by Alexa’s presence, the older man tried to stand tall. “You’ve been paid. Leave.”

Claudia’s group stayed away from the possible fight, gathering their bags in case she gave the call to run.

Kelly glowered at Bruce. “I want a payment on your debt.”

“You’ve got one in your pocket!” Bruce tried to stay calm, but he was tired of being robbed.

Kelly smirked cruelly. “Can I see your receipt?”

“This is absurd! I handed you 10 gold coins!”

“I don’t see gold. I see an old man who can’t pay his debts.” Kelly pointed. “We want the girl. She belongs with us.”

Inside the barn, Claudia inched toward the rear exit, key in her shaking hand.

Mark caught her eye. “Wait.”

Claudia trembled. The people with her were frantic, gathering valuables. They didn’t offer protection.

It hurt Mark to know they would leave this child on her own. When Alexa called it, they would go. And like the other men, he knew he wouldn’t hesitate. *I might even be the first man out the door. I feel bad for that.*

Mark pulled the carving from his pocket and held it up. He tossed it at her feet, then turned his attention back to the door, where the voices were growing louder.

“We want the girl! Now!”

The barn door opened. “I’m right here.”

Kelly grew angrier at the sight of Alexa. “You’re not supposed to be here! You should have been arrested!”

The BLM agents looked like they’d had a rough night. Except for Kelly, all of them had red hands and cheeks, telling Alexa they’d gotten stuck somewhere and had to dig their way out. The trucks supported her hypothesis with fresh dents and muddy snow caked under the front wheel wells. In contrast, Kelly was neat, ready to face the day. She’d probably sat while her minions labored.

Alexa sighed, not in the mood for this. “Arrested for what?”

“The loss of an entire town!” Kelly indicated the smoky sky. “It’s still burning.”

Alexa shrugged. “Self-defense.”

Kelly scoffed. “Anything to get out of paying what you owe.”

“I’m going to kill the Fanatics who took my man. That’s your payment, and your grave if you push me.” Alexa hated waking a man down. “I haven’t even had coffee yet. Push me. I dare you.”

Kelly paused at the threat. “You’ll eliminate the Fanatics?”

“I told you I would.”

Kelly couldn’t decide if she should believe Alexa. “We’re coming along to make sure you do the job.”

Alexa snorted. “Fine.”

Her team was surprised. They all braced for traveling with the BLM.

Kelly stood taller. “Good. Let’s get going.”

“Tomorrow.” Alexa waited for the protests.

“What?” Kelly’s face clouded over. “We can’t wait a full day to go after them!”

Alexa pointed at the darkening morning sky. “Storm coming. We go at dawn.”

“It’s dawn now!”

Alexa’s lips pursed. “I should kill you right here.”

Hands went to guns on both sides of the fight.

Kelly knew she couldn't win with just the women she'd chosen for an escort. "Fine! But we're going on. If you don't catch up—"

"What?!" Alexa stepped forward, tired of being threatened. "Are you ready to die today, agent? I haven't fed, either. Bet you taste good."

Kelly flushed, retreating.

Alexa's men laughed.

"Load up!" Kelly got out of Alexa's reach as fast as she could without appearing terrified, though inside, she was shaking. When a Mitchel made a threat, they followed through.

Alexa's men escorted Bruce back inside, leaving Alexa alone. When she woke in the mood to kill, she needed space.

Alexa stared into the snowy distance, searching for her missing man.

There was no answer.

Alexa waited for the agents to drive away, then strode into the trees.

Edward shut the barn door. "She'll be gone a bit. No worries."

The group was willing to take his word for it. They continued their cooling breakfast.

Edward and his teammates exchanged quick glances, wondering if Alexa had just left them here to care for this group while she went to rescue Billy, alone.

Alexa wanted to. She thought about it as she walked through the drifts in the woods, but she was afraid the others would be taken or forced to fight

while she was gone. The BLM agents would return as soon as dawn passed again without sight of her.

Alexa trudged through the woods, mind spinning, heart hurting. *If I lose even one, the quest might really be over. I've come to love them as much as I love my father. If I ever have to pick, there's no clear winner now.*

Alexa circled back to the barn while watching for prey of either variety. She needed blood. The group in the barn needed meat, and they all needed something to do during the storm she could see coming their way. Claudia had been right. Billy's kidnappers were going to gain a full day on them.

Odd noises came to Alexa's new ears. The woods weren't empty, but Alexa could understand why Claudia's group wasn't successful in their hunting. Most of these weren't normal creatures. They knew mankind was a threat. Some also hunted the prey humans needed, spooking the animals doubly. Alexa made a mental note to tell Claudia to hunt at dawn, when creatures were sleeping and normal animals came out, like right now.

Alexa scented, catching a whiff of terror. She swung after the deer in a flash, dropping it with her bodyweight as she sank long fangs into its neck. "Mmm..."

When the deer was drained, she hefted the animal over both shoulders and staggered toward the barn. She was warmed by the fresh blood, but the ache in her heart didn't ease. The cold bonds she had with her men were like cement that would drag

her down, too, but she refused to sever those ties.
They're mine. I'll keep them until I die.

Deleted Scene #2

Mark felt someone enter the barn. He didn't see or hear them, but he knew he wasn't alone. He kept splitting wood for their fire. Alexa had decided they would stay overnight. They were all doing chores to help Claudia's group, but also to stay busy.

Mark heard the latch click softly on the door. He knew who it was suddenly. His body responded, but his mind refused. "Go back to the house."

Claudia stepped from the shadows, but only enough to let him see her. She was terrified of being close to him, of the choice she'd made while staring at his gift.

"It's not going to happen." Mark willed his body to obey him. He wanted the girl. The fact that she was old enough to make up her own mind, and she was desperate, didn't matter. "I'm no rapist!"

Claudia drew in a ragged breath and took another step forward. She studied his huge arms and tall body, heart racing.

Mark tired of the game. He spun around and advanced, hoping to scare her off.

Claudia surprised them both by holding still. Her eyes shut to keep him from seeing what she knew he could feel.

Mark stopped inches from her. He leaned in. "Go away!"

A single tear rolled over her cheek.

Mark heard someone come to the door, but he was trapped by Claudia's misery. He stayed still, waiting to see if she would damn them both.

"Please."

Her soft plea broke him. Mark used his last ounce of willpower to do the right thing. "Ask me."

Claudia's lashes fluttered. She looked at him with fear and the hint of something else. "Will you love me?"

Mark's chest rumbled as he fought the need. "Forever if we do this. When I come home, you'll be mine."

Claudia gave a short nod.

Mark swept her tense form into his arms and headed for the loft.

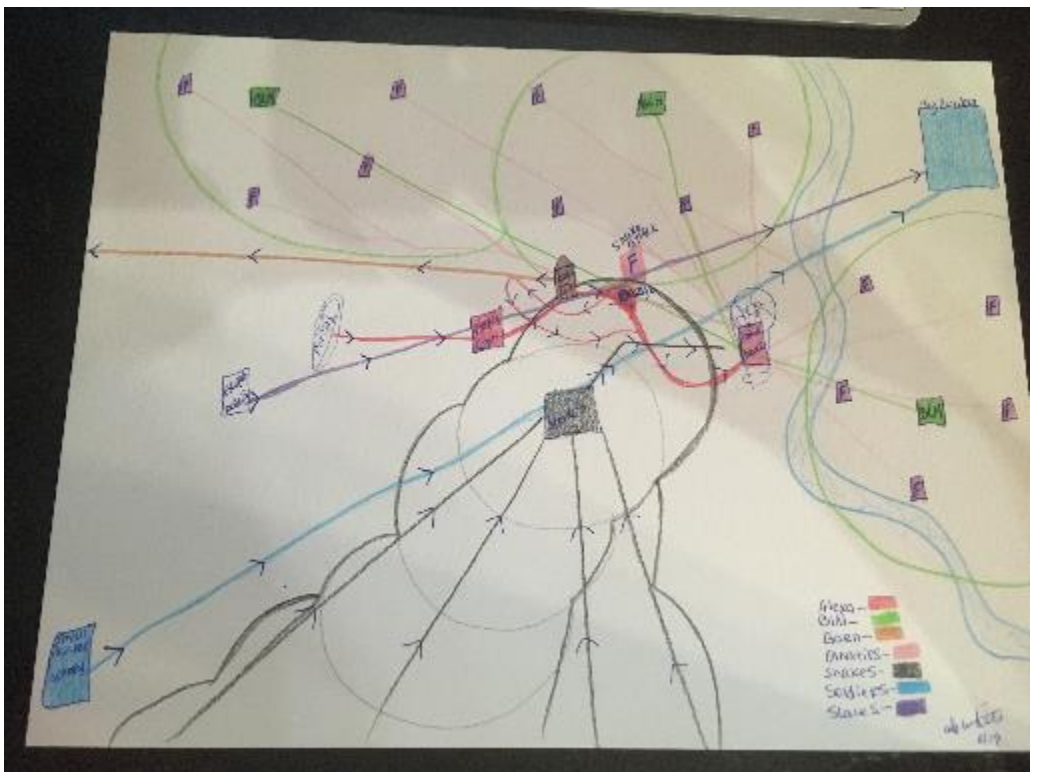
Alexa smiled, moving away from the door. When she'd told Marshal that Claudia was important to the team, she'd meant because of this. Mark and his woman would be part of her future crew if they survived. Alexa held no jealousy, only pride that he'd gifted the girl with his heart.

Her rough Convict would be a devoted husband and father. Claudia's line would carry on and Mark would have the loving family he deserved. The butterfly carving he'd made for the girl was the first of many gifts. The baby he was putting in her now would change her future and show her that not all men were monsters. Alexa was confident in Mark's skills. When they were finished, Claudia would

know the pleasurable side of sex and Mark would be devoted to her for the rest of his life.

Alexa stopped near the front porch and stared into the distance as her heart squeezed. Billy's future wouldn't be so pleasant. Someone already had his heart. *And it's not me.*

Author's Hand Scratched Map



Note from the Author

Poor Billy! I felt bad while writing this. I don't like any of my characters to suffer, but it is needed for the story to be fully told. People in an apocalypse are not living happy lives and I don't write that kind of tale. My work has romance, often, because it's a part of life that will always continue, but happy endings are someone else's domain.

Billy's suffering gave us a closer view of what men will go through daily under the new slavery law. If the soldiers lose the big bunker fight, Safe Haven might come home to find a superpower already governing their homeland. The next Alexa's Travels book will clear up more of that, and possibly reintroduce parts that were originally included in the 'Prologue' that was published some years ago. It was removed, so if you have a copy of The Mountaineers, hang onto it until I get famous so you can auction it off! Lol. Those 85 pages will be in the next few books.

I hope you enjoyed this part of Alexa's adventures. Until next time,

Watch your six!

Angie

Print Copies

Would you like to have this series in paperback or hardcover? Both are available. I created a page on my website that lists all of the books in order, with links to the stores where you can purchase them. Between you and me, the paperbacks are more affordable, and the content is exactly the same in all the formats. The hardcovers are prettier on a bookshelf, though.

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What Did You Think?

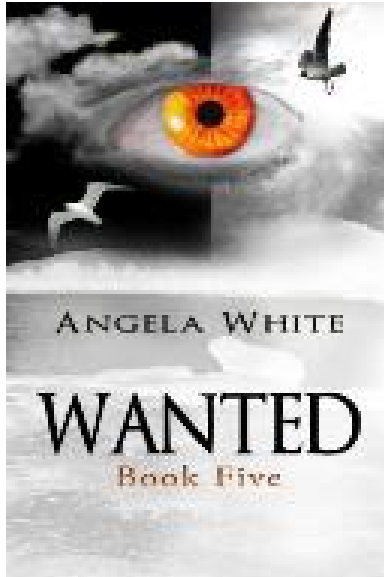
I'd love to hear how you feel about this book!

You'll see this request at the end of every title I write because it matters so much to me and to the other readers out there. Please [take this link to the book's page on my website](#), so you can pick the store of your choice for a review. It doesn't have to be long, though it certainly can be if you like. Just tell me, and the world, how you feel about it.

Feedback helps me in many ways, but the biggest is that it drives me to keep producing. I have self-doubt moments just like everyone else. Your review might be what pops me out of a bad place and allows me to keep rolling! And if you ever need some kind words, I'd be happy to do the same for you. The world is often an ugly place, but we can help each other through those hard times with small acts of kindness.

“I have found that it is the small everyday deed of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” -Peter Jackson

Book 5



Wanted

1

“Green just rolled in, sir. Swears he has a plan for getting us into the bunker. It came from Alexa Mitchel.” Lloyd, the new XO, waited in the tent flap for a reply. He was expecting orders to hang Captain Green for desertion.

Ulysses frowned, but motioned. “Bring him to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Lloyd hurried out. The entire brigade was camped for the night and trials were about to start for some of their remaining prisoners. Nothing moved around them. The frozen, apocalyptic landscape was littered with years old wrecks and debris from another war, another time. The few homes in the distance were dark and appeared abandoned, but this area wasn’t empty. Lloyd would be glad when the brigade moved on. Seven hundred men, and the cries for mercy from their prisoners, made a lot of noise.

The smell of campfires and body odor swirled through the air as men stripped their sweaty winter gear for more comfortable clothing and the cooks got busy turning out another disappointing meal. It was comforting to most of them.

Ulysses leaned back in the chair and wiped crumbs from his army jacket. It was one of the few things he had left from before the war. It was always on him, under his other gear. He didn’t wear it for his men. He wore it for the feeling it gave him, and for the memories of better days.

Captain Green ducked into the command tent. He held out the paper Alexa had given him, but he didn’t speak. He’d gone AWOL. He had no excuse.

Ulysses studied the notes, sharp mind seeing how it could work. “She told you to bring this to me?”

“Yes, sir.” Green didn’t say Alexa had hinted it might get him cleared of the desertion charges. He could only hope that she was right. If he brought it

up, Ulysses was sure to go the other way out of spite.

Ulysses glared at his former officer. “The rest of your group have been stripped of rank and given hard chores for the next month.”

“Yes, sir.” Green had seen them working as he arrived. “I am sorry, sir.”

Ulysses liked it that Green wasn’t making excuses, but he almost wished the man wasn’t being so subservient. He wanted to hang him. “Join your team in digging the latrine. Then help with security during the trials. Then you have guard duty until dawn.”

“Yes, sir!” Green hesitated. “Sir?”

“What is it now?”

Green blew out a sigh. Ulysses would never agree to go help Alexa. Asking would only get him in more trouble. “Never mind.”

“Get lost.” Ulysses wanted to make an example of Green, but the man was a prime fighter, a prime shooter, an officer, and the plan he’d brought back was solid. Ulysses also heard Alexa’s unspoken demand that Green be spared in exchange. Ulysses wasn’t going to damage their deal by taking out his anger on a man who would probably die during the bunker fight anyway. For now, Green was a valuable asset that deserved to be used.

Ulysses stored Alexa’s plan in his folder. “If you liked being AWOL, you’ll love the next job I assign.”

“The next one I give you will be worse! Drive faster!”

Donna glared into the rearview mirror, fighting the pain spell. “It’s not safe in this snow! We’ll wreck.”

“Do it!”

Donna cried out as pain slashed over her back and neck. She slammed on the brakes, making the wagon skid across the slick road. Kids shouted in surprise and fear.

She turned around in the seat and faced her tormentor. “I don’t care if you’re an alpha. Do it again. I dare you!”

The little blond boy slapped the seat between them. “Drive! You’ll miss her!”

“Not until you promise to stop hurting us!”

The child threw himself back against the worn seat, arms crossing over his small chest.

The other three kids in the wagon held their breath and waited for his explosion.

“Fine! Just drive!”

Donna eased on the gas. “If we wreck, you won’t get there at all.”

“Drive! Drive! Drive!”

Donna increased speed, hating the choices that were coming. Little Andrew had been with her for almost a year now and she wasn’t sure she could take much more. His gifts had unlocked upon being sold, betrayed, by his mother. When Donna bought

him, she hadn't known he was a descendant. She'd just been trying to rescue a male child from slavery or being eaten at a Snake party. For some reason, the reptile women loved the flesh of men.

Icy wind blew against the wagon, coming through the cracks.

Donna wanted to increase the heat, but it was a bad time to take her hands or eyes from the wheel. She hoped the kids were warm enough with their thick coats and the blankets over their laps. She couldn't check on them right now. This narrow road was winding and littered with debris that had been here for years. It was no longer recognizable. Running over it would likely mean a flat tire and half an hour of freezing while listening to Andrew scream as she changed it. This area was without homes, businesses, or buildings. If they got stuck here, they would probably die.

The other kids stared at her in the mirror and wished Andrew wasn't with them.

Donna knew. He bullied them constantly, causing tension and fights that ended in her shielding them and threatening Andrew with being alone. She didn't have any other leverage, but she was almost sure the boy knew she was bluffing. *Except...* Donna sighed as the pain shudders finally receded from her spine. *I'm not bluffing anymore.*

She steered around the next curve, tensing as the tires slipped. She let off the gas, bracing to hear the child scream again.

She took a fast glance in the mirror and found his eyes shut. She let out a sound of relief. He didn't have much energy yet for his magic. When that changed, she would never be able to control him. He would end up killing her or the other kids to get what he wanted. Right now, that was to be taken to Alexa Mitchel.

Donna didn't know why he wanted to reach the Mitchel woman, but it scared her. Going to Bridgeport was a bad idea. After Alexa's open radio taunt, hunters would flood that town in hopes of securing the prize. It was a bad place to be with a battered wagon of orphans and a male magic user who hadn't been registered with the bunker.

Donna eased back on the gas and hoped Alexa would be able to find a minute to help her with the unruly boy. She didn't want to leave him on his own. He was too young for that, but her strength was running out. At some point in the near future, she would have to pick between his life and all the others, including her own. *Please make her help me, Lord. I can't abandon a child, even if he is a monster.*

3

“Help!”

“Someone help us!”

“Where are they?!” William blasted the group with another wave of icy wind.

The weak group of descendants and refugees tried to break free of his mental hold as ice formed on their hands and faces.

The long riverboat where they were cowering had once been white, but it was rotting away now and covered in the same mold that was on most of the trees in Afterworld. The dozen people on the boat were sickly. They stood no chance against one of their own kind, let alone the highest level. They'd barely been surviving before.

William had no mercy for their starving frames or the love for their children that was costing their lives. He didn't care about the groups all around them, or the winter weather that had come in with a bang. William blasted them again, rage in control. He longed to slaughter them all until the ground was coated in blood. "Where did you hide the kids?! Tell me!"

The women surrendered to the cold darkness first as they froze solid. The bulkier men lasted a minute longer and then they, too, froze to death.

William searched their minds as they passed, but all he saw in each last thought was a bright sun and an island. Even in their last moments, they were thinking of Safe Haven.

William let out his full anger. Ice coated the riverboat in a layer that sealed the scene as a warning. Normal refugees wouldn't understand, but descendants would know one of their kind had done this. They would feel the dead magic in these

victims and shudder at the idea of facing the one who was responsible for it.

William marched toward the road to continue his hunt for those rare few with time gifts. He could sense them occasionally on his mental grid. They always vanished before he could track them to exact locations, but he knew there were three in this side of the country right now. “I will find you!”

An unhealthy shadow rose from the weeds along the shore as William left. Carolyn didn't know why the magic user hadn't killed her, too. She'd come to the frozen shore to vomit and stayed down as he attacked. *Maybe my illness hid me.*

Carolyn stared at the frozen river boat for a long moment. The group had let her travel with them for protection. She hadn't been close to any of the low level descendants, but it was still awful.

Carolyn tugged her headscarf down and replaced her woolen cap. The weather was frigid, with nasty wind and flakes of snow that gave off a feel of the holidays, of Christmas. It was depressing. Holidays reminded her of what she'd lost.

Carolyn rebuttoned her long coat, listening to snaps, thuds, creaks, and eerie moans as she limped northeast. She hoped the powerful man didn't come back for her, and at the same time, she almost hoped that he did. Cancer was painful for a long time. If he froze her, the pain would end in minutes. *Waiting to die is hard.*

Jason stilled as a sense of menace filled the thick woods around him. He gripped the shovel tighter, waiting for the threat to reveal itself before he reacted.

William kept going. His fast scan of Jason revealed average power and no knowledge of time gifts at all, let alone contact with anyone who had them. William wasn't wasting energy on people unless they challenged him or they had something he needed.

Jason felt the danger pass and let out the breath he'd taken in. After another minute, he went back to digging the hole. A body lay next to it, ready to be buried. He'd already taken an image on his phone for proof so his employer would know for certain the job was done. Come dawn, he would head east and report his success. *Unless an adventure presents itself. I don't mind being delayed for new job prospects.*

Jason stilled again as a twig snapped behind him. He listened hard and heard the ragged breathing of a normal trying to sneak by him in the dark woods. Jason let her go. He only killed for defense or a job, and he hadn't been interested in women since his wife sold him out and took over a bunker in the west. Jason had been on the run for years. "But I go where I want, and I do what I can to screw with her plans."

Jason used his foot to roll the body into the grave. He began to fill in the hole with quick shovelfuls of icy earth. The woods moaned and swayed around him; wildlife prowled. Jason didn't worry over it. He had the skills to survive out here. His targets usually didn't. This one had come from a group of riverboat people who were headed for the same bunker that he was.

Rumor says my wife is there now to establish her hold over the east. Maybe I'll get a contract for her. This job had come from a woman who didn't want her sister catching up with her. His current employer had authority in the bunker. It was a good contact for a renegade male killer-for-hire who was supposed to be a slave.

Jason tensed, feeling something coming.

A female scream echoed.

Jason didn't hesitate to go toward the noise, despite his profession. He ran through the trees, drawing his bow. Low growls covered his steps.

Two dogs lunged at him from the weeds.

Jason fired his arrow and reloaded in a blur. He kicked the second dog in the jaw, then fired an arrow into its chest and moved on. The screams had stopped, but the grunts of a female in trouble were still echoing.

Jeanie swung her fist against the dog's mouth, crunching its teeth and opening wounds on her fingers.

The yelping animal tried to scoot away. Jeanie stomped on its head and then did it again.

She spun around to meet the lunge of the next dog, knife ready.

An arrow went through its neck.

The last two wild dogs fled.

Jeanie gasped in air, searching for her rescuer. Trees waved at her, swaying in the breeze. She saw nothing else. "Hello?!"

Jason studied the cute blonde from the shadows. She was stocky and had sturdy winter gear. She had sharp brown eyes and callouses on her hands from years of working. Despite the trouble here, she didn't need his continued help.

Jason sheathed his next readied arrow and walked back toward the gravesite. He wanted to finish filling it in before he headed east.

Jeanie watched and listened for another minute, then shrugged. "Thank you!"

No answer came.

Jeanie put it from her mind. She had work to do. Dog meat was good protein and she still had a week or so to go on her journey. She knelt in the bloody dirt, not worrying about her minor hand injuries. "I've survived worse."

Jeanie ripped into the warm body and cut upward. She quickly disemboweled the carcass and then began removing the skin. The bright moon overhead provided light. She would make a fire next and enjoy a hot meal before getting a great night's sleep.

Jeanie didn't mind the blood and guts, the smell, or the chance that the blood would draw other predators. She'd been on the road for a month. She had been attacked multiple times and survived. Something always happened to save her or help her. "I'm protected. I didn't know it until I left home, but I was marked 20 years ago. And now I'm going to claim my destiny with Safe Haven and it's infamous leader." *I just need to group with someone stronger than the normals and wait for their return.*

Jeanie looked up, catching movement from the corner of her eye.

Carolyn nodded at her and kept going.

Jeanie didn't return the gesture. She watched the thin woman until she was out of sight.

Carolyn kept trailing the man who was covered up to his elbows in dirt. She ducked into the weeds as he knelt near a grave. There was something special about him, beyond him helping a woman and she wanted to know what it was.

Carolyn popped a tummy drop into her mouth and tried to stay downwind so her smell didn't alert the man to her presence. She stared at his big arms and fit body in longing. Carolyn had been sick for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to be healthy. She had expected the cancer to take her life long before now. *Living through this hell is my punishment. I earned this.*

Jason felt eyes on him, but the mood wasn't threatening. He finished the burial and then cleaned

up next to the grave. He didn't feel bad for killing. It was just a job.

Jason headed to the next hilltop over and began digging things from his kit to make a fire. He also retrieved his small radio and turned it on. He'd gotten into the habit of listening to the nightly bunker address that had started a month ago. He occasionally heard a voice in the background that was very familiar.

A woman's calm voice echoed across the country through every radio that was turned on. "Good evening, New America. These are the updates for December 5th. First, the rules for rage sickness have been expanded. Please follow them carefully."

Jason placed the wood he'd gathered earlier in the day, listening to clinks, doors closing, and chatter in the background of the radio address.

"Registering as a rage walker is mandatory. That law passed in August, after the slaughter of an entire government complex. Wild, infected children are still rampaging through some parts of Utah. Avoid that zone if possible. Rule two has not changed—all females of puberty and above are ordered to rent a male at one of the bunkers at least once a year. Letting the rage disease have control is not an option. Rent a male, register, and receive an allotment of food.

"The former government has been gone in the Midwest and in the east for more than two years. As such, their rein has expired. A new government is

being formed and documents of constitutional law are being written. Those who resist this progress should be reported to a bunker for investigation. The old system abandoned us. They went underground and they died there. Only in western zones do they still exist and even that hold is almost gone. Do your duty to New America and report the troublemakers, the rebel males, and those on our wanted lists, like Alexa Mitchel. Her last known location is Bridgeport, just hours ago. Rewards for Mitchel and her six-man crew are high. Please deliver them, or their bodies, to the eastern bunker. That is all.”

All over the country, people paused to consider if they were strong enough to challenge a Mitchel. Most decided against it. Surviving in Afterworld was hard enough without going head-to-head with the strongest crew left in the country.

A few braver groups loaded up and headed south, eager for the possible rewards if they were successful.

Others also made plans to go that way. These scavengers didn't care if death was waiting on the other side. They just hoped to get there before the fight was over and all the loot had been stripped.

Jason shut off the radio, then struck his flint. The spark caught on the tinder and flared up between the logs. He blew gently, making sure it caught fully. Around him, the night was peaceful again. It made him think of his dead sons. If not for that tragedy, he wouldn't be out here killing for a

living. On a night like this, they would have been sitting around the firepit, roasting marshmallows.

Jason settled next to the fire, not ready to eat yet. He listened to the windy night and debated going south to see if Alexa was still in Bridgeport.

5

“Pack up. I want us on the road in five minutes.” Rachel smoothed the dirt and wrinkles from her long red robe as she rose from the dying campfire. “We will capture the Mitchel, or one of the magic trackers who come for her.”

The gate hunters around Rachel immediately rose and began packing up their camp. They’d taken over this convent not long after the war, but they still preferred to camp outside in the courtyard until the heavier snows arrived.

Rachel stayed sitting, sipping her cooling coffee while she finished her plans. Her small group of two dozen couldn’t challenge a Mitchel, but they could linger around the edges of the fight and wait for an opportunity to slip in and dart her or one of her crew. After their last adventure, everyone now knew Alexa would come for her teammates. She’d left a trail of bodies across two states.

The burnt frame of a city skyline backdropped the highway they’d cleared a while back to make travel easier. The homes and businesses here had been stripped long ago, but it was still a prime location. They had easy access to the entire northern

half of Georgia from here, making it possible to monitor nearly everyone in the area. A lot of groups were surviving in this zone despite the lack of resources, and each one of them had their own goals.

But none are as important as mine. Rachel finished her drink, staring into the flames. *We have to capture a magic user. Without that, our lives can never return to prewar conditions.*

Rachel would give her life for that goal. She had no problem dying if it meant her family would live. Their graves were nearby. Rachel wanted that version of this future to be reversed. *I'll do whatever I have to. They deserve another chance to live and I'm going to see that they get it.* "Mommy has you covered. You won't be in the cold ground much longer."

6

Radka jumped onto her horse and kicked it into motion. "Revenge will be ours!"

Radka and her group of Snakes had been hunting for Alexa's trail since finding Hemi's destroyed camp, but not the missing leadership token. The reptile women had left their main tribe when the elder refused to go after the Mitchel for Hemi's murder. Now, they were outcasts.

Radka mourned the loss of that bond, but it wouldn't stop her from seeking vengeance for her sister's death. She'd told Hemi to be careful who

she attacked. It wasn't just Mitchels who were dangerous, but Hemi had taken one of Alexa's men. It had been foolish to think she could get away with that.

“But it shouldn't have cost her life! The Mitchel has no mercy. I shall show her the same treatment as I slit her throat!”

Bright scales glinted in the moonlight as the horses ran. Two-sided cloaks flew out in the wind. The snowy ground was no problem for their mounts. The resilient horses had been bred for this harsh terrain. The cold didn't seem to affect them either. Radka didn't care. If their mounts gave out, she had another small herd stashed nearby. Catching and breaking wild horses was one of their favorite pastimes. And when there were no males to roast, the horses served that purpose, too.

Radka's Snakes galloped into the darkness west of them, leaving their fire burning and their male slaves still staked to the ground. Only revenge mattered to them.

7

“We're going!” Mimi punched the protestor again, making sure her opponent was down. “She killed Veronica! Our beloved leader!” *Thud!* “You'll go with us or you'll die right here!”

“I'll go! Please!”

Mimi kept swinging, unable to stop. The rage was in control. Blood splattered the grass.

A battered truck pulled up next to her. “Let’s go!”

Mimi kicked the now unconscious woman in the ribs. She stepped back and wiped her hands down her robe. “You’re not one of us. We have faith!” Mimi rushed forward and kicked her again.

One of the men in the truck reached out and grabbed Mimi around the waist. He tolerated her pummeling fists, holding onto her as their driver spun gravel and slush to get them rolling.

Mimi slammed her hand into the man’s big nose, grunting in satisfaction when his blood hit her face.

The man dumped her onto the seat between him and the driver, then clutched his bleeding nose, but he didn’t protest or retaliate. Mimi was unstable. Unless he wanted to kill her, he still had to sleep at night.

Their four-truck convoy was rusted, beaten, and dented, but the engines were solid and they had plenty of fuel. Gas wasn’t easy to collect and prepare, but it was still abundant in some areas. You just had to be willing to risk your life for it. Mimi sent members of her group out to gather fuel weekly. She needed the gas more than their warm bodies. They couldn’t scavenge if they couldn’t travel.

“Faster!” Mimi punched the dashboard, leaving bloody smears. “Don’t miss her!”

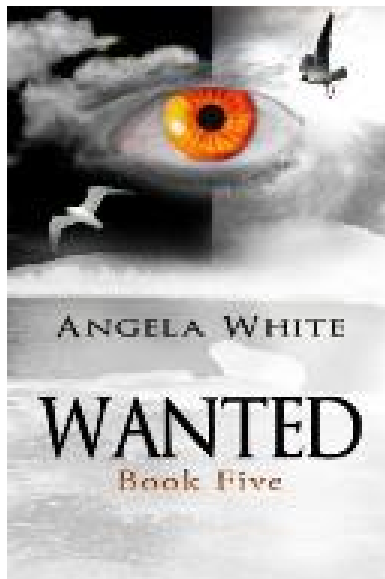
The nervous driver increased speed. “I won’t.”

“You’d better not or you’ll be the next one gone!” Mimi didn’t worry about them fleeing or disobeying. Her group was exactly that—hers.

8

William paused as his grid lit up with magic users who had cloaked their presence. He didn’t know what had happened to make so many of them come out of hiding, but they were all headed in one direction.

William immediately turned southeast.



[Wanted](#) Book Five