



HARD TIMES

ALEXA'S TRAVELS BOOK #8

ANGELA WHITE

Copyright
Hard Times
by
Angela White

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Table of Contents

[Direct Hit](#)

[I'm Jumping](#)

[Static Noise](#)

[You Were Rude](#)

[Look Sharp](#)

[Shift Change](#)

[Now We Do](#)

[Bartering](#)

[Have Faith](#)

[A Full Cup](#)

[He Made Kids](#)

[Let's Hear It](#)

[Team Meeting](#)

[Good To Know](#)

[You Can't Have Both](#)

[Just The Muscle](#)

[That Never Fails](#)

[He's Obsessed](#)

[Stay Or Go](#)

[I Am A Monster](#)

[I'm Your Girl](#)

[That Is Mine](#)

[Level Tests](#)

[Abraham's Curse](#)

[We Owe Her](#)

[To The Death](#)

[You Love Me](#)

[Close](#)

Chapter One
Direct Hit

1

Mark yawned as he entered the small cockpit. “How long until we get there?”

They’d been flying for four hours now. Mark assumed they should be arriving shortly. South America wasn’t that far away in his mind.

Wyatt checked the screen on the plane’s dusty console. “Another three hours.” Wyatt was enjoying the job. He loved flying.

Mark examined the map that showed their location. The icon was over South America now. On the edge of the screen, a blue patch indicating the Pacific Ocean drew his attention. “Where’s Pitcairn Island?”

Wyatt pushed a few buttons, changing the map; a dot lit up in bright red.

Mark frowned. “It’s tiny.”

“Yep.”

“Is there a place to land?” Mark might have wished for a negative answer another time. His adventurous side wanted to jump out of a plane; he never had, but with several injured people, and a pregnant woman along, it wasn’t a good idea.

“There’s a small runway. Or at least there was before the war.”

Mark heard the doubt in Wyatt’s tone. He chose not to ask for more details.

Wyatt’s dark, wild hair made him look like a mad hatter, just without the hat. Mark liked it, but he still preferred his bald scalp. Hair was a lot of work. “Do you need anything?”

Wyatt yawned.

Mark slid into the comfortable seat that he assumed was for a copilot. He didn’t touch anything else. The plane was a button and dial covered mystery to him. “What would you like to talk about?”

Wyatt was glad to have a distraction. Now that the adrenaline had worn off, he was getting sleepy. Most of his team had already crashed, trusting him to get them to the compound. It was a big honor. “You pick first.”

Mark had a question ready. “Is Damon still a threat to my boss?”

“Of course.” Wyatt scanned the thick white clouds and dark sky in contentment. Up here, everything made sense to him. “Mitchels can hold onto a grudge forever.”

“Then why didn’t he attack her when you three were alone?” All of their team was curious about the sudden peace between Alexa and Damon.

Wyatt shifted in the seat, relieving pressure on the leg that kept trying to go to sleep. “I assume because our mother and teammates were still in

danger. However, he seems mellower, so maybe he decided not to follow through.”

Mark’s tone sharpened. “With the plan you two made.”

“What plan?”

Mark’s eyes narrowed. “You shouldn’t play games with me. I’m a sore loser.”

Wyatt was certain that was the truth. He examined the ground below them for lights. He was hoping for signs of survivors in every area they flew over, but so far, there hadn’t been any. “I believe he’s trying to let it go. Things might be okay now.”

Mark could only hope that was true and watch the man in case it wasn’t. “Your turn.”

Wyatt glanced over. “Were you really a convict?” He’d heard the rumor weeks ago. Mark certainly looked the part. The fighter was still wearing the bloody cover from their last adventure.

Mark wasn’t ashamed of that anymore. “Yes. Problem?”

Wyatt chuckled. “A bonus, actually. Most of us have been in a slam at one time or another.”

Mark refused to relive his memories. “What were you in for?”

“Assault, a few times. I liked to get drunk and fight. It wasn’t a good idea when it was at a grocery store or a church picnic.”

Mark didn’t want to know what had triggered those moments. “How did you guys escape from Joel?”

Wyatt froze.

He thawed slowly, tone dropping into a dangerous register. “Pick a different topic.”

Mark assumed the man had been abused by his father before that escape. He moved on. “Why did you propose to Alexa when you knew your brother wanted her?”

“I asked her first. Damon didn’t know.” Wyatt increased the oxygen levels in the plane to adjust for the height they were at. “Why do you care?”

“Just trying to figure out the sibling dynamic. At times, you two seem very close. At others, not so much.”

Wyatt thought of the vicious fight to get out of Joel’s grip and swallowed a shudder of rage and pain. Port City had been a mild ride in comparison. “Damon and I would, and have, killed for each other. We’re as close as brothers can be.”

“Cool.” Mark kept pushing, trying to find out more about the family. He was still surprised that Alexa had allowed them to come along. “What about your sisters?”

“What about them?”

“Do you feel the same bonds with them?”

“No. We barely know Alice and Madelyn.” He delivered a warning glance. “That doesn’t mean we won’t protect them.”

“They’re family.”

“Yes. Damon and I grew up together, but alone, you understand. It was just us until we were in our teens.”

Mark continued to tug on that thread. “Do you think Alice will be a good mate?”

Wyatt realized why Mark was digging for information. “She’s a good kid, but she’s a lot younger than your religious man.”

Mark nodded. “That’s why I’m asking.”

Wyatt yawned again. “They’ll probably be perfectly happy together for the rest of their lives. Assholes.”

Mark laughed. He’d been determined to dislike Wyatt, but the man was winning him over. “Your turn.”

“The pony-tailed guy implied he would make Damon a hybrid if he left Alexa alone.”

Mark was surprised. “Billy doesn’t have that authority.”

“That’s what I told Damon when he asked if I thought the offer was legit.”

“So he’s all nice now because of that.” Mark grunted. “I knew he couldn’t be trusted.”

Wyatt took offense. “And you guys can? All you do is lie.”

Mark shrugged. “We do what the situation calls for. Alexa taught us well.”

“Whatever. Your turn.”

Mark understood Wyatt was disappointed. The man wanted to be like them, too.

Mark didn’t encourage that, though he was curious why his teammate had suggested it. He assumed Billy had been testing Damon’s true

character. “Why were all Mitchels required to spend time with the giants?”

Wyatt tensed again for an instant. Then he recovered. “So we would learn how to kill them.”

Mark couldn’t argue with that answer. He also didn’t ask Wyatt about the time he had obviously spent there. His reaction said it had been hell. “Your turn.”

Wyatt took a chance. “Is there room on your crew?”

Mark laughed.

Wyatt sighed. “Yeah, I guess I knew that. Your turn.”

“Hang on.” Mark went to the cockpit doorway for a sweep.

Emmie’s team was in first class. The new people were there, too, resting. Mark thought they’d gone to sleep so they didn’t have to be stressed during the flight. *Smart.*

The plane itself was dusty, but still in great shape. All it needed was a good wipe down and it would be ready for ungrateful, indifferent drones to fill it up. Mark shook off the old memories.

Most of Alexa’s team had moved into coach for rest and recovery, along with Alice, who had refused to be parted from Jacob. The Preacher hadn’t argued this time. They weren’t an official couple yet, but everyone knew it was coming.

Colton’s team was sprawled throughout the business class section. Snores were coming from there, telling Mark they were fine, though it

sounded like some of them were talking. Not everyone was asleep.

The only person still moving about the plane was Ria. She was running the food and drink compartment, keeping good smells flowing. Daniel was snoozing nearby, occasionally coming fully alert for a scan.

There was nothing wrong that he could see. Mark returned to the copilot seat and resumed their conversation. “Is there anything I need to know about this compound we’re stopping at?”

“Like what?”

“Is it a bunker?”

Wyatt fought another yawn. “Not exactly.”

“Who runs it?”

“No one.”

“I’m confused.”

“It’ll be easier to let you see it.”

“Do we have enemies there?”

“Not for long after we arrive. Alexa will sort them out like she does everywhere she goes.” Wyatt had great respect for her. He also had deep bitterness.

“Who are the nomads?”

“Families who escaped the government and managed to stay on the run. Also some of the founding lines who refused to participate in society in general.”

“Is there power? Food?”

“All of that and more. We’re covered.”

“Your turn.”

Wyatt finally asked what he really wanted to know. “Why did she let Levi’s team take the lead through that stadium?”

Now Mark tensed. He didn’t want to answer that question. “She didn’t give anyone the lead.”

Wyatt frowned at the evasion. “She slid aside. On our teams, that means the next crew takes the lead.”

Mark nodded. That was also how their team worked. “Addison’s crew was behind us.”

“And yet, Levi ended up in the lead.” Wyatt regarded him with a hard expression. “She showed us the doors hanging in those tunnels and she still let us get separated. So how did that happen?”

Mark stalled. “You’d have to ask her.”

“I’m asking you.” Wyatt glared. “I don’t believe she lost control of her anger and made a mistake. That’s Adrian Mitchel’s daughter! She doesn’t make mistakes that cost lives.” Wyatt’s voice deepened, drilling in his point. “I was your teammate for this run. You owe me an honest answer. Did she kill Levi?”

Mark slowly nodded. “Maybe. He was a terrible team leader, a bad person, and he was never going to change. This way, he died a hero.”

Wyatt rotated toward the huge windshield. “Thank you for your honesty.”

“Is this going to be a problem?”

“No. And yes.” Wyatt lowered his voice. “We all knew Levi wasn’t worthy to lead that team, but most Mitchels have flaws, so we’ve overlooked it.

His widow probably isn't going to see it our way. When Eva finds out, she might demand justice from the council."

Mark realized that could happen. Two of the council members were here. "What will come of it if they rule in her favor?"

"Death. We're not allowed to kill each other."

"Alexa killed Elliot, through Monica."

"True, but no one here is going to petition the council on his behalf. Levi's death is different. His team loved him even though they didn't respect him."

Mark thought fast. "How can I get ahead of it?"

"You can't. What's done is done."

Mark decided to discuss it with Alexa later. "Your turn."

Wyatt leaned over to whisper. "Do you think your boss would let me in on one of your physical moments? I've never had an eight-way."

Mark got up and left the cockpit. "Well, so much for liking you."

Daniel was in a front row seat between the cockpit and coach class, arms crossed over his chest. He opened one eye as Mark came through. "How are things in there?"

Mark took the stewardess chair. "Sleazy...and dangerous."

The plane hummed smoothly around them. Mark was still impressed by how quiet it was inside. He was sure that wasn't the case outside. Anyone alive down there was definitely hearing their

passage. He studied the sleeping passengers instead. “How are things back here?”

“Too quiet.”

Both men looked toward the next compartment, where a curtain was dividing their team from these others. Alexa had put them on guard duty out here, shut that curtain, and then all noise had stopped. That had been hours ago.

Daniel assumed they were sleeping off the fun time from Port City.

Mark was worried; something was wrong.

Daniel didn't want Mark to be upset. “Maybe she'd like an update.”

“Great idea.” Mark slid between the seats of sleeping fighters, being careful not to wake them. Guard duty was always easier when people were sleeping.

Mark pulled the curtain aside and swept the compartment.

Alexa shoved her arm over her face to wipe away the sweat.

Edward tossed restlessly under the thick airplane blanket.

Jacob curled onto his side, holding his cramping stomach.

David jerked on the rope around his wrist, trying to reach the itchy patch of scales on his hand.

Billy moaned lowly, cradling his bandaged fingers.

Alice struggled to measure out a dose of medication, hands shaking.

“Ah, hell.”

Alexa looked up at Mark with feverish, worried red eyes. “Get out.”

Mark closed the curtain and stumbled back to Daniel, bumping into seats, waking people.

Daniel jerked awake, coming fully alert in seconds. “What’s going on?”

“They’re sick—all of them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The boss, and the others, are sick.” Mark stared at Daniel in terror. “That’s why she sent us out here.”

“We’re in charge.”

“Yep.” Mark dropped into the seat next to him. “Hard times are here.”

Drawn by the worried vibes, Bradley and Colton hurried toward the curtain.

Emmie, Damon, and Madelyn came from their section, bumping aside the four refugees from Port City.

Daniel frowned at them, but he didn’t say anything about it.

The four new people moved over for Colton’s team to come through. They were fast learners.

Eva’s puffy lids said she’d been crying again. Everyone else still appeared tired and wired. Mark thought that might be from the tension of flying, but he wasn’t sure. Mitchels were hard to pigeonhole into a stereotype.

Alexa's rough voice echoed before anyone reached her. "I don't know if it's contagious yet. Keep your distance."

The men all stopped short, concern for their own lives replacing their concern for hers.

"Daniel and Mark have point, in that order." Alexa knew that declaration was needed.

Mark swallowed the acid in his throat and tried to look like he could handle it.

Daniel immediately became determined to make his boss proud. "We need better antibiotics. Can we get that at the compound?" He assumed their wounds were infected.

Emmie disobeyed Alexa. She peered into the coach section.

"It's hard to say. The compound had everything you could imagine before the war. Now, it hasn't been restocked in years." Damon fought the need to look through the curtain like his mother was doing. He was trying hard to obey Alexa's code and that meant following all of her orders.

Emmie ignored Alexa's weak glare to study the sick men. "What are their symptoms?"

Alexa forced herself to answer, but it stung her pride. She was used to being the boss. "Extreme energy drain. Sore throat, upset stomach." She swallowed the water Alice forced into her hand and then tried not to drop the cup. "A fever that comes and goes without a set pattern, though it gets higher each time. Nightmares...rough thoughts." Alexa didn't tell them about the voices in her mind right

now. Few of them belonged to her and all of them were evil.

“Show me their wounds.” Emmie didn’t go in and do it herself. She wanted to finish verifying the cause.

Alice opened the bandage over Jacob’s hand; he didn’t wake up.

Emmie frowned at the infected wounds. The splinter holes were bright pink.

Alexa pulled up her pant leg to reveal the vulture bite. It was also infected and instead of bright red, it was glowing pink, with pink pus leaking down to discolor her sock.

“It’s magical. It’s only effecting the injuries they got in Port City.” Emmie retreated and shut the curtain. “Alice isn’t sick and she’s been in there for hours.”

Most of their passengers breathed a sigh of relief. Even descendants feared outbreaks.

“Alice was shaking.” Mark wasn’t convinced, mostly because he didn’t respect Emmie enough to trust her word on it.

Emmie scowled. “She’s trying to keep Alexa happy and she’s worried about her new boyfriend. It’s nerves.”

“Do you agree with that, Boss?” Daniel also wasn’t going to take Emmie’s word for anything.

“Yes.”

Daniel winced. Alexa sounded like she was ready to fall over.

“So what works on magical issues?” Mark wanted a solution, fast.

“You have to use something from whatever caused the infection. Then you have to brew the cure with it.” Emmie shook her head when the men looked at her suspiciously. “I buy potions; the trolls like to chat while they work.”

“The compound has several brewing rooms.” Damon headed toward the cockpit to check on his brother and update him on their new situation.

Asher gestured. “They’re vampires. Why aren’t they safe?” He’d assumed Alexa was now immune to any type of illness.

Bradley filled them in. “It’s in their bloodstreams. Anything that affects the blood can affect a vampire.”

“Well, that sucks. I wanted it to protect me from exactly that issue.”

“Worried over STDs, are ya?”

People laughed at Bradley’s joke.

Mark and Daniel didn’t. The sense of time already running down was becoming clear.

“We didn’t bring anything with us from Port City.” Madelyn was one of those who’d wanted to loot. “She told us no souvenirs.”

Alexa tossed a pouch against the curtain that thumped lightly to the carpeted floor of the plane. She’d taken several items from that miserable place. “Who else ignored my order?”

Eva began digging in a pocket. So did Mark and Daniel.

The others stared in disapproval. They'd tried hard not to break that rule, but Alexa and her men hadn't.

Emmie held open the pouch Alexa had tossed, collecting the items. She saw bloody splinters and a gory cheetah claw in the bottom.

"Why isn't Damon ill?" Mark pointed at the man's scabbed hands as he went by. "He was hit with shrapnel from the door that he went crazy on while we were separated."

Emmie shrugged. "I assume the doors weren't infected with whatever was on the trees."

"Elliot did this." Bradley was furious. "And William."

Daniel nodded. "It has to be. They fired one last bullet our way and landed a direct hit."

"How could he infect trees and giants, but not doors?" Alice was keeping up with the conversation while working.

"He probably sent in infected refugees." Ria didn't look at anyone as she gathered a fresh pot of water for coffee. "A lot of groups went into his gauntlet. Few ever came out."

"And what about Eva?" Mark pointed again. "She was scratched by the cheetah that killed Levi. Why isn't she sick?"

"I don't have an answer for that except maybe Elliot wasn't able to make sure all of the cats were infected. He left that to fate."

Ria's answer made sense to Mark. He turned toward Daniel. "What's first?"

Daniel froze for an instant. Then his training took over. “We land, get to a brewing room, make the cure, fuel the plane, and fly out. Easy-peasy.”

No one laughed. The fear coming from the coach section was still growing. Alexa was afraid.

That meant everyone else should be terrified.

Chapter Two
I'm Jumping

1

“**W**e're here.”

Wyatt's happy call drew people to the windows or the cockpit to get a view of where they were about to land. Dawn's breaking light forced them to shield their eyes on one side of the plane.

Mark slid into the copilot seat and swept the unfamiliar terrain below. Wyatt had them flying about 1000 feet above the dense jungle. They had a clear view. *But nothing else is clear.*

The wilderness below them spread into the distance in every direction, covering the ground completely. The only landmark he saw was an old bridge that barely stood out in fading gray hues. “I don't see a runway.”

Wyatt chuckled. “That's because there isn't one.”

Daniel was standing in the cockpit doorway behind them, also viewing the inhospitable area they were about to be trekking through. He'd never seen so many trees in one place. He doubted that someone with a parachute would be able to thread that needle it was so dense. He had little doubt that the hard ground below those trees would be a knee-

high deep maze of debris, vines, foliage, and bugs.
I hate bugs!

Wyatt adjusted the oxygen level for their new altitude and then took the plane a little lower.

“If there’s no runway, where are we landing?” Mark didn’t detect anything that resembled civilization at all. There wasn’t even the edge of a roof or a chimney peeking out from among the huge trees.

Wyatt pointed. “That’s where. Easy-peasy.”

Mark and Daniel stared in horror at the long concrete bridge that ran between two deep gorges. The drop off on either side of that bridge had to be at least 100 feet, but that wasn’t the problem. The bridge itself was cracked and falling away in places. There were weeds, rocks, and tree limbs all over it. And it was only about 50 feet wide.

Wyatt laughed excitedly as he gently rotated the plane to circle back over the long bridge. “I love my job!”

Mark blew out a rude noise. “I always heard Mitchels were crazy.”

Daniel figured out what had to happen. He clapped Mark on the shoulder. “It looks like you’re going to get to jump out of a plane after all.”

“You’re crazy, too!”

Wyatt chuckled. “Damon will go down and get it cleared. He loves pretending he’s a bird.”

Daniel tried to estimate how long that would take.

Mark beat him to it. “The bridge is over two miles long. It will take him days to clear it.”

Wyatt shrugged. “Your boss did ask you if you were ready to learn something new.”

Mark groaned as he realized Daniel was right. “I’m jumping out of a plane.”

Alexa’s scratchy voice echoed through the plane, “Don’t say I never take you anywhere.”

Tense laughter filled the cockpit.

Daniel returned to the first class section, going to Damon. “How does it work?”

Damon was already zipping his jacket, storing his cloak, and making other preparations for the jump. “We’ll use a rope system so he doesn’t get lost. I jump first. It’ll be a rough landing, but he’s a tough guy. He can take it.”

Damon went to the rear of the plane where the parachutes were stored. “It won’t take as long as you’re thinking to clear it. Small rocks and weeds aren’t a problem. It’s the bigger tree limbs and vines that can get tangled around the front wheel and flip us that we have to worry about. We’ll have it cleared in a couple of hours.”

“Do we have enough fuel for that?”

Damon shrugged. “That’s my brother’s area. You’d have to ask him.”

“Why aren’t you worried?”

“Because I’ve done this before, and I’m a Mitchel. Duh.”

Daniel resisted the urge to smack the snot out of the grinning man. He motioned Mark to follow Damon.

Mark did, not asking questions yet. He was still trying to adjust to the fact that he was really going to do this. Despite his joking excitement a few hours ago, the thrill of it was already gone for him. All Mark cared about now was making the cure Alexa and his team needed.

Daniel went to the curtain and opened it. He needed to give Alexa an update.

Coach class was covered in trash and debris from Alexa's pouches and pockets as she tried all the medications and potions she'd brought. None of them were working.

Most of the ill men were sleeping, though not peacefully. Daniel saw she'd untied David's wrist; he hoped that meant the man was getting better, but he knew not to count on it. The entire area was full of thick fear. "It may draw a lot of attention if we're up here floating around like a butterfly for hours."

Alexa held a cup to Edward's cracked lips so he could get a drink. "Handle it like I would. Handle *everything* here like I would."

"I will. What can I do for you before we go?" Daniel wanted to use the hours they would be in the air productively.

"Just take the biggest threats with you so there's less for me to handle while you're gone."

Daniel's mind immediately went to Damon. He nodded. "I'll cover it."

Daniel took a minute to consider the situation and figure out what Alexa would do. He scanned the other people who were listening while looking out the windows to catch a glimpse of where they were going. Not everyone had been here before. “We’re going to assume there will be problems on the ground when we land. We’ll set guard stations at each end of the bridge to protect the plane. Half of us will go to the compound and the other half will remain here until we make contact. Those who are staying will be offloaded right before we leave.”

Daniel didn’t give anyone time to argue. “I don’t want guns used on this run. We have no idea how many people might be around here and we’re already making a lot of noise flying overhead. Use your knives and staffs. Save your bullets.”

He regarded the four new people, assuming they would need to be protected. They weren’t covered in scars and gore like everyone else. “You’ll all stay on the plane with Ria and Alice. Help with anything they need.”

The leader of the four-man group puffed out his chest. “We’re Mitchels, son. We’ll pull our weight. We’re going down now to stand guard.”

The other people in this section watched them and listened, but they didn’t volunteer to go along. Even most Mitchels had a line of sanity. Jumping out of a plane would be crossing that.

Daniel realized he liked that idea better. He gave a curt nod. “Remember what I said. No bullets.”

The arrogant, graying man sneered again. “You need to stop forgetting who we are.”

Daniel understood some of his instructions were repeats of things these teams already knew, but he didn’t care. He’d been told to handle it how Alexa would and that’s what he was doing. “Let Damon know you’re going; make sure there are enough parachutes.”

The four men strode into the rear with their noses in the air.

Daniel brooded. *I’m starting to understand why people don’t like Mitchels.*

Keeping track of his thoughts, nearly everyone laughed. They were used to that reaction.

A low groan from one of Alexa’s men ended the laughter. Emmie and Colton’s team were just as concerned as Mark and Daniel were. They had expected Alexa to walk into the compound with her cool, collected leadership to negotiate any terms that needed to be settled. They didn’t like it that her men were now going to handle that.

They also didn’t want to do it themselves. Mitchels always liked having someone else to blame if things went wrong.

2

Damon helped Mark put the harness on. “You’ve seen it in movies. It’s exactly like that. You pull the handle and the parachute goes up. You’ll get jerked around and then you’ll start falling. The

parachute will catch the air and then you'll be floating." Damon snapped the harness around Mark's narrow hips. "Or it won't open and you'll fall faster. If that happens, you pull this cord here for the backup chute."

Mark didn't need to ask what would happen if the secondary parachute failed to open.

This dusty rear section of the plane held rows of hooks that stored everything from parachutes to goggles. Mark grabbed a pair and slid them on top of his head. He wanted to be able to see where he was falling. "When do I pull it?"

"If we go up too far, it will be too hard to make an exact landing. We're only going to be about 500 feet above the bridge. Count to five and then pull it, just so we clear the plane. If you pull it sooner than that, the opening chutes could get sucked into one of the engines and then we all die. If you pull it later, the chute won't have time to fully open and you'll splatter on the ground like a big bug."

"Comforting." Mark held still while Damon attached the parachute bundle to his harness. He didn't trust the man for this, but there wasn't another choice. He assumed Damon wouldn't try anything until after the plane was on the ground because his family was up here too.

Damon quickly strapped his own harness on; he had already attached the parachute bundle.

The four new people were doing the same for each other. It was clear that they had done this before. It made Mark feel like the odd man out. He

didn't like that. "Is there anything else I should know?"

The new man stepped in front of Mark and tightened his harness a little more. "Don't stand pat when you hit the ground. Fold and roll. If you keep your legs tense, it will break both of them when you hit the ground."

The man returned to his team, also tightening all of their harnesses. "He's going to attach a rope to your ankle. It may pull you around a bit. Try not to let it pull your boot off or you'll turn into a balloon and we'll lose you somewhere down there in the jungles of Peru."

Damon tied the rope in place on his own leg and then did the same for Mark.

Mark made sure the rope on his leg was knotted correctly, then he replayed the words. "We're in Peru? That is so cool! I always wanted to come here."

The new man smiled. "You're about to get a view of it that most people never did even before the war."

Mark let the excited feeling rise in his throat to smother the fear. "All right. I'm good. Let's do this."

Damon went over to the emergency door and unlocked it. "Remember what I said. Count to five and then pull."

Wyatt's voice came over the speaker. "You're clear for jumping for the next thirty seconds."

Damon jerked the door open, letting in a horrible rush of air that blew things around and took Mark's breath away from the temperature difference.

He pulled his goggles on and watched Damon jump out of the plane like he was diving into a swimming pool. The rope between them quickly began to uncoil.

The new man shoved Mark forward. "Go!"

Mark didn't have time to settle his nerves or even take a deep breath. The rope went taut and jerked him out of the plane.

The new man laughed as he stepped to the windy doorway. "I'm not sure he can count that as jumping."

3

One. Two. Three. Four. Five! Mark jerked the cord to release the parachute with his heart pounding painfully, his lungs barely working, and his bladder protesting. Free falling through the sky wasn't fun.

The parachute immediately deployed in a long stream.

Mark held tightly to the harness, swallowing a scream as he was roughly jerked 20 feet into the air by the parachute and then dropped. He flinched to the side as another parachute deployed right next to him.

There was no time to enjoy the view or even to make sure he were on target for the bridge. The world spun crazily as Mark waited for the chute to decide his fate.

He moaned in terror as he continued to fall. *The chute didn't open!*

He was yanked into the air again and then hung there as the parachute fully opened and caught the wind. Mark sucked air into his lungs, remembering he needed to breathe.

The rope around his ankle tightened. Mark instinctively coiled the rope around his leg and then put his free leg over the top of his boot to make sure it didn't come off, remembering the warning he'd been given.

The rope jerked him down, putting pressure on his ankle until he thought it might snap. Then the pressure released and he was floating through the air like a bird.

More parachutes opened above him as the new people deployed. All of them put their hands together as if they were praying and leaned forward as much as they could, enjoying the ride. They enjoyed flying; it was the plane they didn't trust.

The ground rose up at a blurring speed. Mark barely had time to remember not to tense up and then he slammed into the ground next to a long molding tree limb.

Mark tucked and rolled, crying out at the harsh impact.

The four new people landed on their feet and walked off the force of the impact that carried them halfway down the bridge. They quickly detached their cords, letting their parachutes fly with the air over into the gorge.

Damon didn't land quite as well. He hit his knees and rolled, becoming tangled in his cords.

Mark flailed for purchase as he and Damon both slid toward the edge of the bridge. He caught part of the rocky frame and used his leg to pull Damon toward him with the rope around his ankle. They both slid to a stop with inches to spare.

The new people hurried over to help them, laughing.

Mark stayed still, heart thudding stiffly in his chest. "That was *not* a fun ride. I want a full refund."

Damon snickered as he recovered, unwinding himself from the cords so he could stand up. "I thought it was great."

"Well, you're crazy."

Damon shrugged. "That isn't even the first time I've heard that today."

The four new refugees split up as soon as they helped Mark to his feet and unhooked his cords. Two of them went to each end of the bridge and began a short patrol, scanning the jungle for problems.

Mark and Damon both took a minute to regain their breath and scan the bridge for a better view now that they were on it. Huge tree limbs and thick vines met their gazes.

“Damn. This may take a little longer than I estimated.”

Mark wasn't mad about it. The view from the plane hadn't revealed the extent of the debris. He got up and went over to the nearest pile while drawing the longest knife from his belt. “Let's start with chopping the vines loose and then we'll roll the logs off the side.”

Damon didn't argue. He got to work a few feet away, hacking at vines that were twined around and through the bridge.

Mark did the same, occasionally glancing up to verify that the plane was still circling above them even though he was able to hear it too clearly. He couldn't help it. His team was up there while he was down here. He wouldn't be able to relax until they were back together.

Trying to push away the nerves, Mark bobbed his head toward the refugees now standing guard. “Who are they?”

Damon didn't look up from the tangled vines he was chopping through. “Distant cousins. I believe the leader's name is Bronco.”

Mark swung his knife, making a face. “What kind of name is that?”

“He broke horses before the war. I never learned his real name.”

“Can he be trusted?”

“As much as any Mitchel can be.”

“So, no.”

Damon grinned. “Exactly.”

“You guys are a very resourceful family. If you developed some ethics, your reputation might not be so bad.”

Damon switched angles on the vines to get at them from the other side. “Who says we want a better rep?”

Mark didn’t know how to respond. He finished with the pile of vines near his boots and then moved a few feet away to work on the next set, while pondering the oddness of the Mitchel family. He still hadn’t figured out how Alexa had managed to turn out so well when the rest of her family hadn’t even come close.

“It’s because of her father.” Damon had a brief moment where he considered explaining to Mark how bad his own father had been and then decided not to. That was the past. It didn’t matter now.

Mark was looking forward to meeting Alexa’s father despite all the bad stories he’d heard. Anyone who had been able to turn out a leader like her had to be worthy of his respect.

Damon finished with the tangle of vines and then used his foot to roll the log to the side of the crumbling bridge. “This is going to make a lot more noise.”

Mark was already braced for it. “If someone comes and the guards need help, you take one end and I’ll take the other. We’ll meet back in the middle.”

“Agreed.”

Both men kept an eye on the ends of the bridge and their guards while they worked.

Above them, the plane circled continuously, waiting for them to finish.

“Incoming.” Bronco’s quiet call drew all of them. They turned and found a small group of undead trudging toward them.

Mark and Damon both got ready to help if it was needed.

Bronco drew his knife and ran forward, stabbing it into the eye of the nearest zombie. His partner did the same next to him. Both men spun around and kicked out in tandem, knocking down two more undead. They followed up with fast stabs that put the zombies down permanently. Very little noise was made.

Mark watched the fighting with a bit of longing and relief. It was obvious from just this quick moment that Bronco and his team knew what they were doing. The fact that they were older but not covered in scars said they were better at it than he’d given them credit for.

Bronco and his partner resumed guard duty while wiping their knives clean so they were ready for the next use.

Mark swept the plane above them and then got back to work.

Next to him, Damon scanned the gorge and moped. He resumed pushing the log toward the edge while trying to keep his mind clear of bad thoughts. Alexa wouldn’t be happy if he pushed

Mark over the side. *But my mother would. It's a good thing I don't care about her opinion.*

Mark felt the danger rise and pass just as quickly as it had come. He stayed ready to defend himself if Damon decided this was the time to show his true colors. Mark had already decided he would snap the man's neck so there wasn't even a chance that Damon would revive as one of the undead. If he turned on them, he was a goner in every way.

Around the bridge, the jungle rustled unhappily at the sight and sounds of humanity trying to reestablish itself. Angry animals fled deeper into the trees, alerting the residents that something was happening.

4

A few miles away, a family of nomads came out of their home. All tall, thin, and covered in traces of their environment, the three men and one woman were a tough clan of survivors.

"That was a 747!"

"Can we fly that?"

"Yes. I was trained on one."

"How do you want to handle this, Mom?"

Rosetta patted her empty holster. "We see if they can be taken quickly."

"Anyone flying a 747 now can't be an easy fight."

"Neither are we." Rosetta began checking her weapons and gear. "Remember who we are."

“Abbots don’t shy from any challenge.”

“Abbots are a founding family. We don’t need anyone to survive.”

“We hate Mitchels!”

Now that the family mantra had been recited, they all felt better. Being banned from the compound hadn’t killed them; it had made them stronger.

The boys headed toward the bridge, following their mother. That plane might be their ticket out of this jungle.

Chapter Three
Static Noise

1

“**Y**o, point man.”

Daniel went to the cockpit at Wyatt’s call. “What’s the problem?” He could already tell from the man’s tone that there was one.

Wyatt gestured toward the dashboard that was full of buttons, switches, and displays that Daniel knew absolutely nothing about.

“We’re getting low on fuel.”

Daniel peered out the window toward the bridge. There was still a large section that was covered in vines and logs. “They’re not finished yet.”

“It won’t matter if we run out of fuel.”

Daniel reached for his radio and then realized he hadn’t told Mark to keep his on. He tried anyway, hoping the convict had remembered. “We have a fuel problem up here. Can you guys work any faster?”

To Daniel’s relief, the radio lit right up with Mark’s tired voice. “Not a chance. You wouldn’t believe how thick these vines are. It’s keeping us from removing the tree limbs.”

Daniel scanned the dashboard of the plane, looking for the fuel gauge. “How long?”

Wyatt shrugged. “I’d say half an hour, but sometimes these things suck it down faster than they’re supposed to, especially when we’re doing circles. They prefer straight lines so the fuel tanks are always in balance. Sometimes it throws off the sensors and gives a bad reading.”

“So it’s possible that we have more fuel than what’s showing?”

Wyatt nodded. “But I wouldn’t wanna count on that, would you?”

“Absolutely not.” Daniel keyed the radio. “In 15 minutes, this bird is going to be on the ground. Remove the biggest obstacles. Tell the guards I said to help you now. We’ll try to keep an eye out for trouble coming your way.”

“Copy that.”

Daniel didn’t stick around to watch. He went to the business section and motioned to Colton. “Get your team on the windows. We’re the eyes in the sky.”

Colton quickly divided his crew between the two sides of the plane so they were able to see the bridge even while the plane was turning.

Daniel went to the curtains, but he didn’t open them this time. It hurt him to see how ill his team was and not be able to do anything about it. “Fifteen minutes until we land, Boss.”

Alexa didn’t answer.

“She’s...resting.”

Daniel snorted at Alice's rewording of the obvious. "Make sure they're all secured as much as you can. It might be a rough landing."

"She had me buckle all of them into a seat a little while ago."

"I don't suppose there's any change?"

Alice's voice dropped into a grim register. "Nothing you want to know about."

Daniel was already sure he had an idea. He'd heard the noises. His team had emptied their stomachs now. Without any fresh food coming in, their systems would weaken quickly. Vampires survived on blood, but they'd learned it wasn't enough to keep them active.

That was something he and the team had discussed at length during their winter break. It explained why so many vampire victims also had missing flesh. Their new bodies needed fuel from multiple sources. That made sense to Daniel, considering the enhanced strength, speed, and sight that had come with this changed form.

"Where do you want me?"

Daniel saw Ria was now wearing her fighting clothes, had her cloak tied to her leg bands, and a rusty gun was on each hip. Despite his order of no guns for this run, Daniel approved. If the plane crashed, making noise would be the least of their concerns. "Help Alice with the boss."

Ria immediately went into coach class, tugging the curtain closed behind her.

Daniel scanned, looking for anything he had missed. He wasn't sure exactly what to do during a landing, other than the things the stewardesses had told him on his flights before the war. "I think our trays are already in an upright position. Buckle yourselves into a seat and hold on."

Daniel thought about it and then grimaced. "I suppose a prayer or two wouldn't be a bad idea either."

"Already on it!"

Daniel was relieved to hear Jacob was alert enough to respond, but he was disheartened by the fear he heard in Jacob's voice. The Preacher was worried that he was going to die.

Daniel went back to the cockpit and sat in the copilot seat. "Tell me what to do."

Wyatt evened them out for the 32nd time. "I need some static noise."

Daniel stared at the man. "You're kidding, right?"

Wyatt grunted angrily. "No! I usually have my brother in my damn ear at this point, rattling off some insane shit about his latest adventure with a female or death. I can't take all this quiet!"

Daniel realized Wyatt was scared. He pulled up the most recent story Alexa had told them. "I guess you already know Alexa was only 13 when they sent her to live with the giants..."

Wyatt shifted in the seat to get a better placement for his feet and arms. "That's a good one. I wasn't even in school yet when it happened."

Daniel was caught off guard. “I thought you were older than that.”

Wyatt made an adjustment to the flaps, slowing them a little more for the turn in hopes that it would save on fuel. “I’m 19.”

Daniel made the connection. “If you’re that young, then you haven’t made this landing very many times.”

“No.”

Daniel suddenly didn’t want to know, but he forced himself to ask anyway. “How many times have you done it?”

Wyatt gently rotated the plane again, ignoring his sore arms. “Twice. I crashed the first time. I did manage to keep us on the bridge so we ended up in the jungle instead of the gorge. The plane was a total loss.”

Oh, shit. Daniel swallowed nervously. “What about the second time?”

Wyatt blew out a nervous sigh. “Ask me again in 15 minutes.”

2

“Clear the runway! Clear the runway!” Daniel let go of his radio and held onto the arms of the chair as Wyatt took the plane toward the farthest end of the bridge. It didn’t look like the hard-working clearers below had gotten enough done, but they were out of time. The fuel light was blinking and

alarms were going off, taking the choice out of their hands.

Daniel observed tensely as Wyatt hit buttons and adjusted settings.

“Keep talking!”

“While you’re landing?”

“Talk!”

Daniel tried not to think about how fast the ground was coming up to meet them as he struggled to remember where he had been in the story. “She stayed there in the mountains...”

“Talk, damn you!”

“She drove all of the giants out of the mountain! She hunted them with the female wolf at her side! She stayed there doing that for a year!”

Wyatt adjusted the nose of the plane. “Here we go.”

Daniel kept babbling about the wolves and giants while his stomach dropped into his boots and his balls shrunk up against his leg.

The plane tilted dangerously as it hit an updraft and then evened out again under Wyatt’s skillful hands. He took them lower, cutting the engines to slow them.

The six men on the bridge ran toward the end to get out of the way while hoping they had cleared it well enough for the plane to land. All of them were covered in dirt, sweat, and dread.

In the cockpit, Wyatt lined up the nose with the runway and took them to the ground.

3

Mark automatically ducked as the plane went over him. By the time he looked up, the front wheel was touching down. “They’re going too fast!”

Damon knew, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

They watched as the plane bounced and roared across the bridge, sending debris in every direction, and creating new noises that thundered through the jungle.

4

Wyatt activated all of the emergency controls, still trying to slow the plane. It skidded to the side, heading for the edge as he overcorrected. “Dammit! Why aren’t you talking to me?!”

Daniel resumed jabbering, trying to hold his bladder as the edge of the bridge zoomed toward them and their passengers were tossed around.

Wyatt held the wheel loosely as it vibrated roughly in his hand. The plane bounced over debris that hadn’t been cleared and then continued on, stealing his breath. It shuddered sideways on the makeshift runway, headed for the opposite side of the drop off.

“I only needed 5000 feet. I only needed 5000 feet!” Wyatt pulled back on the wheel as the plane shuddered again, throwing up large clouds of dirt and debris.

Daniel didn't know why Wyatt was saying that since the bridge was twice that long, easily. The problem was they'd come down too close to the middle, too fast.

Daniel drew in a shaky breath as the plane finally slowed. The end of the bridge was still coming too fast, however.

Wyatt spotted a large log in the middle of the runway and winced. "Roll right over it! Come on, you big bitch. Roll right over it!"

Daniel realized if they hit it the wrong way they would flip. He refused to shut his eyes.

The front wheel of the plane hit the log and bounced into the air instead of tripping over it. The log was knocked into the gorge, clearing a path for the rear wheels. The plane slammed down and slowly came to a rough stop, momentum broken by hitting the tree limb.

Wyatt brought them to a complete stop with sweat dripping down his neck and a huge grin on his face. "That's my baby!"

Daniel wasn't surprised when the man reached out and rubbed the plane like it was a woman. He had the urge to do the same. "I'll say one thing for your family. You're never boring."

Wyatt's laughter echoed through the dusty cockpit and sent good vibes over their shaken passengers.

“Can we go make contact now?”

Rosetta shook her head. “Not yet.”

The nomad family was sitting cross-legged under a huge Macua tree near the center of the drop off by the bridge, hidden by foliage and the brown clothes they were wearing. Even their hats were a deep brown that blended in perfectly. Bugs crawled over them unnoticed as they waited for their mother’s order to strike.

“We’ve been out here for three hours now, watching them clear.” Luis kept his voice down even though he was protesting. He knew better than to give them away without her call. “The plane’s on the ground now!”

“A bird that size needs a lot of fuel. Let them fill it for us. Then we’ll strike.”

Luis rotated toward his mother quietly, surprised. “We’re not trying to buy a ride?”

Rosetta’s face tightened under the dirt and wrinkles. “No. Those are Mitchels. We’re going to kill them all.”

6

Mark stared at the huge, humming plane as they unloaded the rolling stairs from the compartment in the belly of the bird. “I have a stupid question.”

Damon tugged the wheels onto the ground while Mark pulled the heavy metal upward. “I’m bored anyway. I didn’t get to enjoy that ride in. What’s up?”

Mark snapped the latches into place. “There’s not enough runway to take off from right here. How does that work?”

Damon lined up the steps with the plane door and then wiped debris from his arm. “We just turn it around.”

Mark doubted that was going to be as easy as it sounded. “Is there some sort of special gear for that?”

“Nope. We attach ropes and pull it.”

Mark scowled. “There isn’t enough space for that. It’s too big for a U-turn!”

“The wheels swivel, like an office chair. We do have to worry about getting too close to the edge, but it should be fine.” Damon trotted toward the end of the runway they hadn’t finished clearing. “We may need this room, however.” He motioned to the others. “Let’s get on it.”

Mark followed him, but the sense of being watched made him glare over his shoulder. He hadn’t felt it until now. *Anyone dumb enough to attack us won’t survive the attempt.*

7

In the plane, Daniel hurried to check on his team. He had a bad feeling.

He ignored the groaning, disheveled people who had been tossed around during their landing. He opened the curtain and immediately groaned. “Down boy!”

Daniel hurried over and began to pry David's hands off of Alice's neck. "That's not how we train our rookies!"

David's eyes glowed bright pink and then shut. His body relaxed, allowing Daniel to release Alice from his grip.

"He thought she was Alexa." Ria had also been trying to help, but one big shove from David's huge arm had knocked her across the plane.

"Are you okay?"

Alice and Ria both nodded, not sure who he was talking to.

Daniel took rope from his belt to tie David's wrists back to the arm of the plane seat so he couldn't do that again. "We're having fun now, huh, Boss?"

Alexa didn't respond. Her nightmare was holding her prisoner.

Daniel felt death turn his way and immediately rolled forward. He hit the seats next to his team and fell in an ungainly heap at Ria's feet.

Behind him, Edward lashed out with his knife, eyes still closed. "Get away from her! I'll slit you from end to end!" Only the buckled seatbelt kept him in place.

Daniel picked himself up, a bit embarrassed and a lot relieved that his fast reflexes had kicked in. "Tie them all down."

He went to handle Edward himself. The man's words implied he was protecting Alexa in her dreams. Daniel approved completely. He liked the

thought of her not having to go through the nightmares alone anymore.

“I didn’t know we could do that.” Ria took rope from her pocket and went over to restrain Billy, who hadn’t moved or made a sound in hours.

“I believe it has something to do with the soulmate connection. I heard her and Edward talking about it once.”

“I don’t believe in soulmates.”

Daniel wasn’t surprised. The life that Ria had led wouldn’t have allowed for such fanciful notions. “I didn’t think they existed either, but my time around Alexa has opened my mind to a lot of things I didn’t believe were possible before. Now I just seriously doubt it.”

Ria chuckled, tugging the rope tight but not so much as to cut off Billy’s circulation. He wasn’t a prisoner.

David liked how careful she was being with his teammates. He looked over at Alice, who was rubbing her throat. “Are you two going to be able to handle them while I’m gone?”

Alice snorted, voice coming out in a harsh rasp from being strangled. “Nobody can handle your team.”

Daniel laughed. “And that’s a fact.”

“We’ll be fine. Hurry up and bring back what she needs.” Ria didn’t like seeing Alexa this way. She much preferred the image of Alexa blazing guns through every town she reached. Ria hoped to be like her one day.

Daniel gestured toward David. “Stick by him and that just might happen.”

Ria frowned at the words. She didn’t care about having her mind read. “I’m not interested in a relationship.”

“I was thinking more of a mentorship. He seems to like you and you need a friend. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Ria nodded, but she didn’t promise to take his advice. She didn’t trust any of the men on Alexa’s team yet. That would only come with time.

David groaned, fingers reaching out around his restraints.

Ria quickly went over and rubbed his scarred hand comfortingly. “It’s okay. We’ve got you covered.”

The blacksmith immediately calmed, falling into a deeper sleep.

Daniel left the area, tugging the curtains closed. The lanky girl may not want a relationship, but she was already in one. At some point she and David would both figure it out and react accordingly.

Daniel went to Colton, who was standing with his team near the exit. “Pick two of your most dependable people to stay here, along with Eva.”

Daniel wasn’t willing to take a pregnant woman along for this run since he didn’t know what to expect from it. “I want you to lead us in. We’re also taking Wyatt and Damon. You can leave the new people and the other half of Emmie’s crew.”

“What about me?” Bradley didn’t like being ignored even though he wasn’t anxious to go hiking through the jungle.

“You’ll stay here and protect your fellow council member.” Daniel didn’t want to be responsible for keeping Bradley alive. The man had done all right at the end of the run through Port City, but before that, Alexa had had to protect him in every way. It was only fair that he now returned the favor.

“You got it.” Bradley moved to a chair closer to the coach class curtain.

“I’m going with you guys.”

Daniel nodded. He was glad to have Asher along. The man’s fighting skills would probably be needed. “Lock this plane as soon as we’re off of it and go dark. If you have problems, use the radio on Alexa’s belt, but be careful reaching for it. She doesn’t like being touched.”

Eva nodded, aware that the man was talking to her and not Emmie. It was clear that he didn’t trust any of Emmie’s team. “Just hurry.”

Eva was anxious to be in the safety of the compound. Sitting on an open runway in a plane four years after the war was a bad idea for anyone, no matter their family name.

Alexa jerked awake, eyes glowing. The bright pink light slowly faded.

“Boss?”

“Yes, dear?”

Daniel grimaced. “Can you call Jendon?”

Alexa swallowed thin saliva over her parched throat. “I already tried. We’re out of the country. I don’t think he can hear me now.”

Ria frowned. “Why do we need him? We’ll use a compound brewing room, and these items, and be good to go.”

Colton answered her. “Who’s going to brew it?”

Ria hadn’t thought of that. “Damn.”

Colton didn’t rub it in. “Exactly. This was made by a master brewer. Not just anyone can mix a cure.”

Ria went to Alexa. “Could you? We can carry you in.”

Alexa reluctantly denied it. “Not this one. Cures aren’t my strength.”

Daniel tried to be positive. “Maybe someone will be at the compound who can be paid to do it.”

Alexa shivered. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

Daniel wasn’t sure if the shiver was from her illness or a worry about what they would be facing, but it didn’t matter. They needed the cure and the fuel. They were going. Daniel began checking his gear. “Get ready. We leave in five minutes.” Daniel wanted to be here if someone made contact now that the plane was on the ground.

Wyatt came from the cockpit, also checking his gear. “Isn’t anyone going to tell me what a good job I did?”

“No!”

“Nope.”

“Absolutely not!”

Wyatt put his nose into the air and headed toward the exit. “So rude. I think Alexa is rubbing off on all of you.”

Daniel grinned. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

“Daniel? A word.”

Daniel hurried to the seat next to Edward, relieved that their XO was alert enough to talk. “How are you feeling?”

“Please don’t ask me to talk about my life.”

Daniel burst out laughing.

Edward struggled to focus. “You remember when she was taken from us, right after Mark joined our crew?”

Daniel went still and cold as those ugly memories flooded his mind. “Yes.”

People who were listening tensed at the dangerous anger now filling the plane.

Edward spoke through the pain in his throat. He’d never been so thirsty. “You were on the edge the entire time.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t let that happen now. Keep it cool and calm, like I would.”

Daniel realized Edward was giving him a talk about leadership. He frowned. “I don’t need this. I’m not that guy anymore.”

Edward looked over at Alexa in concern. “We’re all that guy over her.”

Daniel waited, not sure what to say.

Edward shut his eyes. “If you go rogue, we’re all going to die right here in these seats. Mind my words: cool and calm.”

Daniel grunted. “Cool and calm. Got it.”

Edward sighed. “I hate it when you blow me off.”

Daniel didn’t deny it. “I’ll be fine. Mark will keep me cool and calm.”

Edward chuckled dryly. “That’s not his job. It’s yours.”

“So what’s his job?”

“The boss said he’s going along to think.”

Now Daniel groaned. “We really are doomed.”

“Just be yourself. That’s always been enough for me.”

“But will it be enough for this run?”

Edward didn’t answer.

Chapter Four
You Were Rude

1

“It’s time to roll.”

Colton’s call put a stop to all the light chatter that had been happening. Everyone who was going to the compound moved toward the exit.

Those who were staying exchanged nervous glances. No one wanted to be away from their team. Dividing them had effectively killed most of the excitement of reaching their destination. The only one who seemed happy about it was Emmie. She stayed in her seat with her arms crossed over her chest and waited for them to leave.

Daniel caught the vibe. He glared at the woman. “If anything happens to them while we’re gone, you’ll be the one I hold responsible for it.”

Emmie rolled her eyes. “Get on out of here, big man. Save your threats for someone who gives a damn about them.”

Daniel stepped toward her.

Wyatt and Damon both slid between them, hands dropping to the weapons on their belts.

Mark took the spare bag of ammunition from his cloak and slid it under the curtain so Alexa would

have it if she needed it. “Come on. Even unconscious, the boss can handle her.”

Daniel delivered one last warning glare at Emmie over the shoulders of her sons and then headed to the exit.

Colton looked at Bradley. “Keep the peace, if you can.”

Bradley grinned. “It’s just another Mitchel family meeting. What could go wrong?”

Weak chuckles followed the team out of the plane.

Bradley quickly shut and locked the heavy door without staring at the jungle around the bridge. He was already sure he would get an up close view of it at some point.

For a moment, there was silence through the plane as they listened to the team leave. Crunching boots was the loudest noise. It was impossible to be quiet when walking over years of debris. Then the normal sounds of a jungle environment flooded in, preventing them from hearing anything else.

Bradley took a seat and leaned back. “Seems like a good time for a nap.”

Eva scowled at him. “How are you still alive?”

Bradley shrugged. “I depended upon the kindness of my team.”

Eva sneered. “Your team isn’t here this time; you need to pull your own weight.”

Bradley didn’t move from the chair. He already knew what she wanted. “If we set a guard post outside, it’s just going to endanger us and draw

more attention to the fact that we're here. I say we maintain a low profile.”

“Overruled. I want guards at both ends of the bridge. I also want barricades built.”

People looked at Eva, surprised that she was giving orders.

Eva tapped the knife on her belt. “Get up and organize it.”

No one was sure who was in charge since Alexa was ill. After a quick moment to think, Emmie and Bradley both decided they didn't want leadership right now.

“The grieving widow has spoken.” Bradley amiably rose from his chair. “I need four volunteers.”

Bronco and his team all looked over.

Bradley waved them off. “You guys already guarded the bridge for a shift and helped clear it so we could land. You're on the next rotation. Take a break.”

Bronco's team was glad to hear that even though they were hard workers. They were filthy and sore, scraped and bruised in places from the fight to get out of Port City. The work they had put in here had reminded them they'd only been out of that gauntlet for a day.

Madelyn stepped forward, ignoring the surprised look from her mother. Emmie's opinion actually meant very little to her. Being around Alexa had reminded Madelyn that not all Mitchels were needy and greedy. “I can do a shift.”

Bradley smiled at the timid girl. “Good. Who else?”

Three members from Colton’s team also stepped forward. They had no problem following Eva’s orders while their team leader and XO were gone.

Bradley motioned. “Get off your ass and come lock the door, but be quick to open it. Get someone watching the windows in here in case we need to make a quiet flight.”

Now that Bradley had stepped up, his voice rang with authority.

Emmie reluctantly stood from the chair. “Ria can take a shift on the windows. There isn’t anything she can do for Alexa and her men that Alice isn’t already covering.”

Ria immediately came out of the sick area and went to the cockpit so she had a clear view of one end.

Emmie gestured. “As soon as you’re all out, I’ll take a post over the rear.”

No one believed she would actually do it, but Bradley was encouraged anyway. He had doubted Emmie would follow anyone’s orders except for Alexa. Even if she only occasionally did a patrol, it was still better than nothing. With half of their teams going to make contact with the compound, they were now short on manpower.

Emmie locked the door as soon as they were out and then headed for the rear of the plane, surprising everyone who was left on board.

Bronco's team settled back in their chairs and hoped nothing went wrong. They were all eager to be in the compound. It was the only place where the four of them had ever felt like they belonged. As far as they were concerned, it was home.

Silence went through the plane. Then Alexa's tired voice broke it.

"Alice." Alexa reached out and put her hand on the girl's wrist. "I'm sorry."

Alice regarded her in surprise. "You haven't done anything wrong."

Alexa let go of the girl. "Do you believe the person who puts ugly things into motion is guilty even if they don't actually raise a hand toward that plan?"

Alice slowly nodded as a ball of acid began to form in her stomach. "Yes. In fact, I believe they're more responsible than the people who actually carry it out."

"So do I. That's why the apology."

Alice knew Alexa didn't say she was sorry very often. The woman also wasn't known for explaining herself. Alice stared, not sure if she should ask for more details. She'd always respected Alexa, but now that she was possibly paired with one of Alexa's men, it was even more important for her to do the right thing.

"Who are you loyal to, Alice?" Alexa reclined her chair and pulled her cloak over her body as chills ran down her length and then back up.

Alice considered the question carefully, but there was really only one answer. “My sister.”

“Is Madelyn worthy of that?”

Alice suddenly felt as if she were making a life and death decision for her family. “I believe so. I can tell you about her, if you like.”

Alexa nodded. “The static noise would be nice.”

The voices in Alexa’s mind had continued to multiply. She needed something to drown them out.

Alice got a blanket from one of the compartments and came over to Alexa. She covered the fighter from boots to chin. “Maddie stood up to Joel, for me.”

Alexa’s eyes opened in surprise. “Do tell.”

No one Alexa had ever known had gone against Joel and lived. Even Adrian had avoided that evil man.

“After Emmie left Joel, he took his anger out on her kids. As you know, he was more than obsessed with her.”

Alexa refused to be drawn into those memories. She’d spent a month with Joel during her family tour. “Yes. When Joel wanted something, he took it.”

“Old magic forced his hand, but it couldn’t stop that hand from turning into a fist.” Alice tried not to get sucked into those memories either. “Most of the scars my sister and I carry came from our father. He believed our pain would bring Emmie back to him.”

“And when it failed to work?”

“He decided one of our deaths would do it.” Alice’s voice dropped into anger for the first time since they’d met. “He put little straws into a hat and made us draw. The smallest straw would get his knife...”

Alexa waited for the girl to recover. Her mind was making her relive the moment anyway.

“As soon as I pulled the little one, Madelyn attacked him. She used magic and the fighting skills we’d been practicing. He swatted her down like she was a tiny spider on his wall. And then she got back up. Every time he hit her, she got back on her feet. By the time it was over, he was so impressed that he let her live.”

“And how did your life get spared?”

“A call came in. The government wanted Joel to handle Safe Haven. He decided to keep me for my fighting skills. He said it would make him feel human again to have a full team around him during a blood battle between clans.”

The evil voices in Alexa’s mind had been pushed out by the story the minute Alice had referenced Safe Haven. She waited impatiently for the girl to go on.

Alice’s voice was rough. “Joel had to agree to some terms from the UN. One of them was making deals with pirates. The other was Joel’s relocation. He was being sent to the International Detention Center to assume command there and take control of the battle.”

Alice shuddered. “We waited until moving day, when the top decks were filled with fighters. We teamed against them and fought our way through. When we escaped, Joel killed them all.”

Icy pain came over Alice’s expression. “We took an emergency pod to the nearest landmass and disappeared. We weren’t able to bring my little brother, Joey. What he must have gone through after we left haunts me every night.” Tears rolled down Alice’s cheeks.

Alexa felt bad for the girl. It was a reminder of her own guilt for the things she’d done to survive. “You only get one life.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s okay to sacrifice other people for it!”

“Nothing about survival can be divided into neat lines like right or wrong. Life is a precious, terribly amazing gift. It’s not wrong to want to preserve that, even at the cost of others. It’s also not right.” Alexa shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“I hate that saying!” Alice scrubbed the tears from her cheeks.

“Same, but there are no words I can offer that will erase your pain or soothe your soul. I can’t do that for any of us. We make our decisions and then go on from them as best we can. Sometimes those decisions are wrong; sometimes the decisions are right.” Alexa’s voice dropped to a mutter. “In the end, it probably doesn’t matter anyway.”

Alice understood what she meant and took immediate offense. “How can you have Jacob, a Preacher, on your team and believe that?”

Alexa didn’t see a reason to lie. “Because deep down, Jacob has the same questions that everyone else does, but there are no answers to be found in this life. At some point, we’ll die and then perhaps we’ll have those answers. It’s the only hope there actually is.”

“You see death as hope.” Alice snorted. “That certainly explains why you act like you’re crazy. You are.”

Alexa chuckled tiredly. “You’ll be good for him. I officially approve your match. The rest is up to him.”

Caught off guard, Alice smiled warmly. “Thank you, Alpha.”

“It’s my honor.” Alexa settled down to sleep. “And your death if you betray him. Be sure you can escape the legacy of your family branch, Alice. I won’t be merciful and neither will he.”

2

“There’s something going on with my mom.”

Bradley looked at Madelyn in surprise. That was the last thing he had expected to hear from her.

They’d been working for almost an hour in silence. He’d expected a complaint or a request to go back to the plane and rest.

Colton's laboring team was also surprised. They tried to make less noise while rolling tree limbs into a barricade so they could hear the conversation.

Bradley recovered. He resumed shoving the next thick tree limb toward the other workers. "What makes you think that?"

Madelyn gestured toward the plane. "Someone else was given the lead and she didn't offer a single protest. That's not right for her. She also took *your* orders, from a man. I believe Emmie just wanted everybody out so she could be alone with Alexa while she's sick."

Bradley glanced at the plane and then got back to work. "Alexa isn't so weak yet that she can't defend herself."

"It didn't feel like it was going to be a physical attack." Madelyn doubted her mom would try that without all of her team to help. When it came down to it, Emmie was a coward with excellent fighting skills. It was an odd mix.

Bradley didn't want to get involved, but he was part of the family authority structure; he didn't have a choice. "Is there something the council should know?"

Madelyn shrugged. "I'm almost sure there is, but she didn't let me in on it. I just wanted to give you a heads up."

"You wanted to make sure you weren't going to be blamed for whatever she has going on."

Madelyn nodded. "I am a Mitchel. Covering my ass seems like a good idea."

“Fair enough.”

“Alice isn’t in on it either. You’ve seen she’s been helping Alexa the whole time. I want that clear.”

“As long as that holds true, the council will not punish you or your sister for the actions of your mother.” Bradley met her eyes. “What about your brothers?”

Madelyn turned away.

Bradley grunted, shoving harder on the heavy log. “In our family, silence is not golden.”

3

“We’re being watched.”

Everyone nodded at Mark’s comment. The jungle around them was very quiet even though their steps were not. When the animals went silent, that was an obvious sign of a problem.

“We’ll handle it if we need to.” Colton kept them moving along the unmarked path through the trees. He knew the way from memory and from time. It was just under an hour’s walk from the bridge. Half of that if they were running. He’d made the trip both ways.

Daniel moved out of formation again and used his knife to carve a small ‘A’ in a nearby tree. Then he hurried back into the line.

He’d been doing that since the bridge fell out of sight, not caring if it offended their guide. He and Mark didn’t know where they were. If something

happened that split them up, it would be very easy to get lost. There was almost no daylight here under the tree cover and no distinctive landmarks. The thick canopy here made it perfect for vampires, however. There wasn't enough sun to burn them. "Tell me about this compound."

Asher dropped back next to Daniel to fill him in. "You'll love it. Food, strong people, and no undead."

Wyatt stepped next to Colton and tossed his arm around the man's shoulders. "I'd like to talk to you about something."

Colton coolly shrugged the arm off. He didn't like Wyatt enough to be touched by him. "I'm all ears."

Wyatt looked back at Mark and grinned cruelly. "Did you know Alexa killed your team leader in Port City?"

Colton stopped.

A cool breeze blew through the jungle, ruffling leaves and sweaty hair.

"Say that again."

"You son of a bitch!" Mark marched forward, fists clenching.

Asher shoved Mark back while facing Wyatt. "What did you say?"

"I said Alexa killed Levi. She gave him the lead by sliding aside. She knew it wasn't safe. She set him up. She killed your leader."

Colton's team stared in shock.

Mark went around Asher. “Why would you tell them that?!”

Wyatt shrugged. “If it was my team leader, I would wanna know.”

“Bullshit.” Mark thumped Wyatt’s chest with his hand. “You just can’t help starting trouble!”

Wyatt’s happy demeanor fell to the ground. An asshole took its place. “You were rude to me. There had to be a payment for that.”

“I’ll give you a payment!”

Colton held up a hand. “Stop.”

His team waited for his decision, hands slowly moving toward their weapons.

Mark also waited, but only because he wasn’t sure if Colton had spotted a problem they needed to handle before he beat Wyatt’s ass.

Colton resumed his walk with stiff shoulders and a furious facade.

“Aren’t you going to do anything about it?” Wyatt hurried to catch up.

“You gossip more than a woman. Shut up or go back to the plane and wait!” The fury in Colton’s voice was clear.

Wyatt got back into the line with a huge grin. That tone said Colton wasn’t going to let it go. That was all he’d wanted, for now.

“Hey!”

Wyatt turned around to gloat.

Mark punched him in the mouth as hard as he could, splitting his knuckles open on the man’s teeth.

Wyatt dropped to the ground in a heavy thump, knocked out.

“Now I’ve been rude!”

Colton kept walking. “You hit him; you carry him.”

Mark started to refuse.

Daniel motioned. “Do it.”

Mark obediently scooped Wyatt’s limp body over his shoulder and resumed the trek through the jungle.

Heavy acid began to burn a hole through Mark’s stomach. He had little doubt that Wyatt had accomplished what he’d set out to. The mood had gone from tense to pissed. He was right. There would be a payment for this and Mark was suddenly terrified that Alexa would be the one to cover that bill.

“You were about to fill me in on the compound.” Daniel tried to break the tension with a different topic, but he was also worried about how this would play out.

Colton’s voice stayed perfectly calm, but the pulse in his jaw beat erratically. “You’ll see it for yourself in about five minutes.”

Daniel was surprised. “We’re that close?”

“Yes.” Colton didn’t look at any of them. “We’re actually over top of parts of it right now. The tunnels stretch for miles.”

Daniel groaned as he understood where they were going. “Underground. Wonderful.”

“It is, actually.” Damon went by Mark, not caring that the convict was carrying his brother. It wasn’t the first time Wyatt had angered someone that much. “It’s self-sustaining, for the most part, and there are so many tunnels that there’s always an escape route.”

Mark and Daniel weren’t impressed. Their adventures underground hadn’t been pleasant. They savored the dense trees, oily vines, and dim view while they could.

Colton marched steadily through the foliage, keeping his ears open for trouble, but his mind was a whirlwind of chaos with only one line repeating in the center. *Alexa killed your team leader.*

If that was true, an ugly choice was coming that would destroy the peace and put yet another clan of Mitchels at each other’s throats. *This is how blood feuds start.*

Colton didn’t want that, but he also had a duty to Levi. If Alexa had killed him without a great reason, they would go to war until one branch or the other was gone.

Chapter Five
Look Sharp

1

Mark and Daniel felt the danger before the rest of the group. Both men spun, drawing their knives.

Asher did a fast scan. “Six targets.”

Colton didn’t answer; he kept walking.

Asher and the rest of the team also continued on, letting Alexa’s men handle the undead coming through the thick trees around them.

Colton had already seen Alexa’s men fight. He knew Mark and Daniel could handle it. *Alexa killed your team leader...*

Even with Wyatt’s body over his shoulder, Mark’s fury allowed him to remove all three of the undead on his side without breaking a sweat. Quick stabs and punches dropped them to the ground and knocked them into each other. Forceful stomps broke their bony necks.

Next to him, Daniel used vicious swipes that allowed him to vent some of his own frustration about this situation. He was already tired of being around the Mitchel family and they had only been teamed since right before entering Port City. Alexa

was likely the only one in that family who he would ever trust.

Neither man took his time even though they enjoyed the release. Knowing that Alexa was on the plane with Emmie was now a serious source of concern. The fact that she was sick made it worse.

Ahead of them, Colton stopped in front of a large tree that rose into the sky like a tower with a wide lobby. It had hundreds of branches hanging off of it and then hundreds more coming off of those. It had been here for a very long time.

Colton flipped a rusty latch and pulled on the trunk, revealing a wooden door that swung open to a hollow center.

Daniel and Mark quickly caught up to the group, impressed when they viewed the entrance. It had latches on both sides that could be easily ripped free or kicked open by someone who knew where it was. The undead wouldn't have the mental capacity to open it from the outside and a stranger wouldn't know it was there.

Colton stepped into the darkness without fear, leading the team. "Last one in latches it."

Daniel dropped back to take the rear and make sure that happened.

Colton's lips thinned as he realized Daniel didn't trust any of them to cover it, but he didn't protest. He had other things on his mind.

Daniel and Mark followed the others down stairs that had been carefully chiseled into the dirt. They were wide enough for a footstep, but that was

about it. The edges were crumbling from time and use. If they didn't get maintenance soon, the stairs would turn into a dirt ramp, but it would still be a way to reach the exit.

Mark's mind went into overdrive trying to memorize the way out as they emerged into a tall, wide passageway with more than a dozen tunnels in sight. The floors and ceilings were hard packed dirt with wooden frames, but the rooms boasted rusted metal doors and gates, some with windows. It was a lot like looking into a slam. Mark didn't like it at all.

Thin light filtered through grates in the high ceilings, illuminating small cubbies next to the tunnels where people were now standing up as they realized they had visitors.

Customers, Mark corrected himself. Each one of the cubbies had a table set up in front of it with items for sale. "I thought you said this was a compound."

"We haven't reached the main compound yet." Colton strode down the center path. "These are living quarters."

A dozen men and women of middle age appraised the team as they went by, while pointing at items on their tables.

Daniel nodded politely to several of the vendors. He saw a magazine of ammunition that would fit his gun and gestured at the old woman standing next to it. *How much?*

The toothless female pointed at the goggles on Mark's head.

Mark quickly stripped them off and took them over to the woman who had a long gray braid that nearly reached her boots. He didn't need the goggles. He had no intention of jumping out of a plane again.

The woman handed him the mag with a wrinkled, dirty hand and slid the goggles over her own head, grinning. She was very happy with the trade.

“Are you able to brew potions?”

Fear ran over the old woman's face. She quickly shook her head and then pulled the goggles over her eyes.

“Thank you for the trade.” Mark saw a lot of items that he and his crew could use, but he couldn't spare the time to shop. The team was quickly disappearing down the tunnel.

Mark caught up to them, frowning as he tucked the mag into the extra pouch on Daniel's belt. “If this is such a safe place, why do you put your old people near the entrance where they can be attacked?”

Asher frowned at the combative tone. “They actually have the spots near the exit so they don't have to travel as far to get out of here. Stop looking at everything through your tainted view of our family.”

“The spots by the exits are the most valued.” Damon wasn't in the mood for fighting now that they were nearing the compound. He loved it here; his mood was good. “And they were all assigned a

long time ago. Mitchels had very little to do with the set up here. The Abbot family founded this compound.”

“Who?”

“The Abbots.” Asher remembered that Alexa’s men didn’t know much about their family or their origins. “There are five family lines of descendants, as far as we know. We’re all related to them, in one way or another. There are Mitchels, Livingstons, Abbots, Sinclairs, and Wells’.”

Mark and Daniel had only heard of two of those. Both men suddenly hoped they wouldn’t meet any of them down here.

Colton corrected that. “William was a Sinclair. He’s the last of his line, so we don’t have to worry about them anymore.”

Asher shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. There’s always been some speculation that Addison is part Sinclair.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.”

“Alexa told us the Livingstons were all dead.” Mark realized what he had said and then grunted. “Alice is a Livingston. That means all of you are as well.”

Damon shrugged. “We prefer to consider ourselves Mitchels. The Livingston side of the family has never been good to us.”

Mark considered a snotty response and then decided to save it for later. He shifted Wyatt to his other shoulder, hoping the man woke up soon. He was already tired of carrying him. Wyatt stank. “Is

there someplace around here where I can give him a quick bath?”

“No, and that reminds me, don’t touch the water when we reach the food section. It doesn’t like most people.”

Mark didn’t know if Colton was serious or not. Neither did Daniel.

They decided not to question it so they didn’t look foolish if it was a bad joke. If it was the truth, they would handle it when they needed to. As Alexa always said, there was no need to bring problems to their door when they were on their way out.

Daniel kept working on the family lines. “Emmie’s group is mixed with Livingstons. What about your group?”

Asher grimaced. “We’re related to the Reichers.”

Daniel had to ask. “I assume they’re bad?”

“Bad is an understatement.” Colton led them into the widest tunnel on the right after they passed the last of the vendors. “Reichers are some of the most evil people on the planet; anywhere there’s been a mass slaughter, Reichers were there to oversee it or to trigger it. We don’t have anything to do with that side of our family line. As far as I know, there are only a few of them left in Australia.”

Mark had been drawn into the conversation. “What family line is Alexa mixed with?”

Everyone snorted.

Wyatt's jealous voice echoed over Mark's shoulder. "She's all Mitchel. That side of the line only mixed with itself until her generation."

Trying not to be repulsed, Mark put Wyatt on his feet and gave the man a small push toward the line ahead of him. "I assume it's a distant cousin kind of thing."

Wyatt had been awake for a while, enjoying being carried. "Only the scientists or their records in the labs could tell you that for sure. It's entirely possible it was a much closer relationship than cousins."

Daniel frowned. "What about Bradley?"

Asher moved faster to keep up with Colton's determined stride. "Bradley is an Abbot mix. They're powerful and dependable, usually. Bradley was too, when he was younger. He got tired of burying wives when the government decided it was time for him to go back into the labs for more experiments. He's not a bad man. He's just bitter."

Mark considered. "Who does that leave?"

Damon filled him in. "The Wells family line. Also very powerful and rare. Because they're generally stronger than the rest of us and almost always give birth to alphas, the Wells family has been hunted to extinction. I wouldn't be surprised to find out they're all gone now."

Daniel caught a sense of danger that quickly faded. He assumed it was coming from ahead of them. "Did any of the Mitchels ever mix with them?"

Colton nodded. “Mitchels have been mixed with everyone.” He didn’t say more.

Daniel assumed any Mitchel/Wells offspring hadn’t survived. It felt wrong to ask just to verify that.

“You guys have unlimited power and yet you tolerated that government lab shit.” Mark sneered. “I’ll never understand why you didn’t just kill them all.”

Colton had already tired of Mark’s disrespect. He spun around, drawing his knife in a neat move. He put it against Daniel’s chest. “Leave your man and go back to the plane. He’s my hostage now.”

Mark’s hand slid toward his gun. “I’m not leaving a teammate behind.”

Colton sheathed his knife and retreated a step. “Now you get it.”

Mark was sorry he’d triggered that and very relieved that Colton had only been making a point. *I bet he could match the boss with that draw.*

Daniel slowly nodded, heart pounding painfully. If Colton had wanted him dead, he would be. The man was incredibly fast. “If someone threatened my life, I’d do whatever it took to stay alive.”

Colton snorted. “It’s not about our lives. It’s about the magic bonds that tie us together. It’s a rare, cold soul who can leave a baby behind, no matter who its parents are.”

“On that, we agree.” Daniel already knew his fighting days would be over when he became a father. He would never leave his kids unprotected.

Colton’s face went blank. “It’s not just the kids. You’ll feel the same way about your wife. Don’t get married until you’re really ready to settle down. Bringing your family along for a quest is a deadly decision.”

Daniel was suddenly certain that was how Colton had become a widower.

Colton stared at Daniel, mind still burning through the possibilities.

Daniel felt another of those tough moments arriving and faced it like he’d been taught to. “Go on and ask me.”

Colton regarded him angrily. “Did she do it?”

Daniel nodded. He’d known since it happened. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t feed me that shit!”

“I am, though. I like you enough to feel bad for you. I assume you and Levi were close.”

Colton’s voice rose. “He was a giant piece of shit who never should have been given team lead.”

Daniel was shocked. “Then why do you care if Alexa marked him for removal?”

Colton’s face was incredulous. “Because he was my team leader! That means something to us.”

“Misplaced loyalty is still misplaced.”

“You sound like Alexa.”

“Thank you!”

Colton snickered despite his anger. He didn't want to like Daniel, but he did anyway. His amusement fell. "When it goes down, stay out of it. I have no beef with you."

Daniel sighed. "There's no way I can do that. I *do* love my team leader."

Colton realized he'd overlooked something important. "You knew, even before Wyatt brought it up. How?"

Daniel told the truth. "Because someone died on her watch. The only way that would happen by accident was if she had died too."

"Do you know *why* she did it?"

Again, Daniel told the truth as he saw it. "Maybe because he wasn't respected by his team. You Mitchels have a bad rep. She's sick of paying for your mistakes, so she's cleaning them up before they can happen."

Colton sighed. "So *we* got him killed."

Daniel shrugged. "It's just a guess. I know pride matters a lot to her."

"As it does to all of us." Colton turned and headed down the tunnel. "Come on. We're almost there."

Wonderful smells floated through the air, reaching the team. It reminded Mark and Daniel of warm summer days before the war, when barbecues and picnics had been all the rage. Their stomachs growled loudly.

"I don't suppose whatever's making that smell will be offered to us for free?"

Asher shook his bald head at Mark. “Not the meat, but the plants in the garden are free.”

Wyatt carefully felt on his jaw. It was throbbing from Mark’s single hit. “Nothing’s really free in Afterworld. But to be fair, nothing was really free before that either. If someone gave you something for free it was because they wanted you to buy something else later on. That’s the way marketing works.”

Mark couldn’t argue with that. He took a long drink from his canteen and tried to remember the last time he’d had a satisfying meal.

Daniel was thinking the same thing. “Boss made chicken noodle soup for us about a month ago. It was so good I can still taste it on the back of my tongue.”

Mark groaned. “Stop it. I’m going to start drooling.”

Asher pointed. “This might be your lucky day.” He was also a bit jealous. Levi hadn’t ever cooked for them like Alexa did for her crew. *Colton is right. Levi was shit as a leader.*

Daniel and Mark stared as the tunnel widened into another set of cubbies and dark entrances. Each one of those cubbies had a stand in front of it that was covered in food. Most of it was chicken, cooked in different ways.

Despite wanting to hurry, Daniel couldn’t resist going over to browse. He pointed at one of the whole fryers that was big enough to feed his entire team. “How much?”

The wrinkly, hairy man behind the desk pointed at two empty 10 gallon buckets sitting next to the table. “Fill those and bring ‘em back. You can have three chickens.”

Daniel glanced around for a water source. “That’s it?”

The old man snickered and returned to his rickety rocker.

“Are you able to brew potions?”

The old man’s face became a mask of fear. He quickly resumed reading his comic book without answering.

Daniel glanced around at the other vendors. “Is anyone here able to brew magical potions?”

Most of the vendors turned away or ignored his question. A couple of them pointed ahead of the team.

Daniel shrugged. “Where’s the water?”

Colton gestured at the tunnel that was widening even more ahead of them. “You’ll see it shortly.”

He didn’t remind Daniel that he had told them to avoid the water here. He was curious about what would happen.

Daniel scooped the empty buckets over his arm using the handles. “I’ll drop it off on my way through.”

The old man didn’t look up this time. “If I see you again, we have a deal.”

Daniel was a little concerned with that response, but it was too late to back out now. He got into the line with the buckets clinking softly against his hip.

“Any chance they’ll trade for the water in my canteen?” Mark was hungry now and he had filled both of his canteens all the way before they left America.

Asher swept the tables of items in longing. He also wished there was time to shop. “The water here is special. The food cooked in it stays good for an almost indefinite amount of time. When you don’t have to worry about your stock spoiling, you stick with the best ingredients to prepare it.”

Daniel and Mark had never heard of that. They were intrigued, but there was no time to ask more questions as they emerged into a wider tunnel that was so brightly lit they both blinked repeatedly, trying to adjust.

Mark saw mirrors along the sides of the dirt walls that caught the sunlight from above and then reflected it onto the other mirrors all the way down the passageway. “Did you guys copy that from The Mummy?”

Asher grinned at the common joke by new visitors. “More like they copied it. This method of lighting has been used around the globe for centuries. It’s especially effective in cold weather when the wood and ground are frozen. You can still have light and grow food in protected areas.”

“I see lights and cords.”

Wyatt nodded. “Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“That means there’s power here.”

“Of course. I told you we have it all.”

Mark figured it out. “Water-powered. Nice. Where did you get the equipment?”

“We stole it.” Damon pointed at a small cavern they were passing; it was stuffed with crates. “We bring it down, put it together and use it when we need it.”

Daniel fell into information mode. “What about fuel? That plane isn’t going to make it to Pitcairn without a refill.”

“We have that covered too.” Wyatt stopped by a clump of bushes. He pulled them aside to reveal a thin pipe traveling the wall of the cave. “We steal it from the oil refinery. We patched in a thin pipe and drain it slowly so they don’t know there’s a leak. They think it’s normal usage.”

Colton scowled. “You keep saying we. *We* didn’t have anything to do with this. It was all built by those who came before us.”

Damon nodded. “The Abbot nomads.”

Daniel was drawn back into the conversation. “Yeah, we haven’t heard much about the nomads.”

Colton didn’t slow. “Well, you’re about to meet a few of them. Look sharp. They hate everyone, but especially Mitchels.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“Doubtful. It’s a long story with the same twist at the end.”

“You guys betrayed them.”

“Like I said, the same twist.”

Asher gave them more details. “Mitchels got half of the Abbot family banned from this compound.”

“How?”

“Our enforcer asked the water to deny them. In return, our power goes to the water when we die. Mitchels are water babies.”

“Does that mean you do well in water?”

Asher shivered. “It means we fear it above all else. For us, water means death.”

Three tall, thin men wearing hides under fur cloaks stepped from a nearby tunnel. Each of them held a dart gun and a short range radio.

“State your names and business and do it quickly. One call from us will send a horde to overwhelm your plane and these tunnels.”

All of the team stopped, glaring and tensing for a fight.

Except for Colton. He scowled. “You’re bluffing. You need the food and power here, and you won’t destroy our plane because you want it.”

Daniel tried to move them by the usual threats, hoping they could barter for what they needed. “There’s a contagion on our plane. We came here for medicine and fuel.”

One of the nomads, an ugly man with more scars on his face than should have been able to fit, glared. “And what will you trade for those?”

Asher scoffed. “We’re Mitchels. We take what we want.”

The nomad leader smiled coldly. “Welcome back to the SAC.”

Colton gave the expected answer. “May our stay be pleasant, and short.”

The leader nodded. “That’s exactly what I had in mind.”

“I believe introductions are in order.” Asher wanted to make sure Alexa’s men knew exactly who they were dealing with.

The scarred nomad leader bowed stiffly. “Tesco Abbot.”

The other men also introduced themselves. They were all Abbots.

Daniel frowned. “I thought you said Abbots were banned from this place.”

“Only half of us.” Tesco scanned Daniel, lips curling. “More Mitchels. Is there no end to your line?”

Daniel was so happy to have been identified as a Mitchel that he grinned happily. “Nope. We’ll be around longer than the cockroaches or the Twinkies.”

Tesco’s deep laughter bellowed out like a smooth cloud, coating all of them in good vibes.

He has mood control.

Tesco nodded, eyes settling into a disturbingly bright green. “That is just one of my many talents. What are you known for?”

Daniel rubbed his thumb over the butt of his well-used gun. “Killing.”

Tesco chuckled. “You wouldn’t be a Mitchel otherwise.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Colton hid a smile at Daniel’s copy of the nomad phrase. He didn’t understand what it meant yet, but he likely would. Colton had been hoping the Abbots had all moved on, but it appeared they weren’t in the business of roaming anymore. He took that as a bad sign. *Nothing we’re going to do here will go well.*

Tesco inclined his head again. “Just so long as you know it.”

Mark tried to get into Tesco’s mind, but the man was too alert to snoop. He withdrew before it caused the fight he already knew would come at some point on this run. *At least we know who we’re killing this time.*

Tesco laughed.

Daniel tried to accomplish one of their goals. “Are you able to brew potions?”

Tesco nodded. “The Abbot family brews the best alcohol in all of Peru.”

“We need a magical antidote.”

Tesco’s happiness fell off of his face and hit the dirt floor. “You need Abraham.”

“Who?”

“Our Seer.”

Daniel looked to Colton and Asher for more information.

Colton and Asher refused to answer, but it was obvious they knew who Tesco was talking about.

Tesco smiled again, gesturing. “We will take you to him.”

Daniel and the others followed Tesco’s group into the next tunnel with a bad feeling that even his mood charm couldn’t ease.

Chapter Six
Shift Change
The Plane

1

I feel like shit. Bradley rubbed his aching spine as he straightened from pushing another log over to those who were building the barricades. He and Ria were taking turns at both ends, gathering the mossy wood for the others to build with.

It was a short supply system, but it was working well. They now had a knee-high barrier across both ends of the bridge. Small and medium tree limbs were crisscrossed into jagged circles of defense that would give them a place to shoot from if it was needed.

Bradley hoped they didn't have to move it when they turned the plane around and took off. He was worn out from just these two hours of manual labor. He didn't want to do it again. Even the thick gloves Madelyn had given him couldn't prevent the bruises and aches that were making it hard for him to keep working. The others were younger and used to hard labor; they weren't even winded. It was annoying.

Ria felt bad for the older man. "In emergency situations, we often do two-hour rotations."

The other workers disapproved but didn't protest. Ria was right, though that was usually only used when the group members couldn't cut it or if they were rookies. At this point, Bradley was considered to be both.

Bradley knew she was saying it to spare him, but he was in too much physical misery to resist the offer. "Let's switch out with Bronco's team."

Ria motioned to the builders at the other end of the bridge and then waited for them to acknowledge the order before escorting Bradley toward the plane. He wasn't strong enough for all of this work. She didn't mock the man, though, and neither did anyone else. Bradley was a council member. They were treated with respect.

Bradley was embarrassed. He held his head up and marched toward the plane. "We need to check on Alexa."

That turned thoughts back to Alexa and her team, effectively taking the spotlight off of him.

Ria reevaluated her opinion of him a little, based on that. He might not be strong physically, but Bradley was a mental powerhouse. It wouldn't be a good idea to discount him.

All six workers reached the door of the plane as it opened.

Bronco had been waiting for the call. "We'll take over now."

Bradley nodded gratefully, stepping aside to allow the four men to come out. "Two hour rotation."

“You got it.” Bronco didn’t have a problem with a short shift. The rest had done wonders for his aches and pains, but it definitely hadn’t been enough. He had been starting to get very sleepy and that wasn’t good in this situation. He didn’t want to let slumber pull him down until after they were safely locked inside one of the visitor cubbies in the compound.

Ria waited for everyone to get back onboard and then locked the plane door. “How is she?”

Alice’s tired voice came through the curtain. “Not good. We need them to hurry up with that cure.”

Drawn despite not wanting to see their ill people again, Ria went to the curtain and peered inside.

Then she wished she hadn’t.

Alexa’s men were burning up with fever. It was so high that they weren’t sweating anymore and their cheeks were bright red.

Alexa moved between the seats, placing wet rags on their heads and trying to offer comfort now that she had exhausted the potions and medications she’d brought along. Alexa had spent the last two hours trying everything she could think of, including charms and spells, but all of it was useless. The bullet Elliot and William had fired was too powerful to be counteracted by anything except a magical antidote.

“Shift change!” Bradley headed for the nearest seat after making the call. He tried not to groan and grunt as he sat and his body began giving him a little

relief. He hadn't worked this hard in too many years.

Alice came out of the compartment with drooping shoulders and an aching throat. "Ria can spell me in there. Let one of Colton's people give Emmie a break. I'm going to take Madelyn's place for a shift." Alice was becoming depressed while caring for Alexa and her team. She needed the break.

"I got it." Ria slid into the compartment, forgetting to close the curtains.

Alexa motioned toward the bucket of water she had placed near the seats. "Keep switching out the rags. I'm trying to cool them down."

Ria got to work while trying not to dwell on how bad Alexa sounded. Sweat was dripping down her cheeks. Her braids were soaked, as was her cloak and clothes. It was obvious that she was miserable. Ria respected her for continuing to care for her men in her condition.

Alexa fingered the spare blade in her pocket. The voices in her mind had convinced her to put it there a little while ago, but it wasn't because of Emmie or the danger that was all around the plane now. The voices in her mind were telling her to use it on herself.

All of this is your fault.

All you do is get people killed.

You're nothing like your father!

"Are you okay?" Ria snorted at herself for the question.

Alexa slowly took her hand out of her pocket. “It’s getting worse. You’ll have to tie me down soon. After that, my team will be defenseless.”

“No, you won’t.” Ria didn’t hesitate to declare her loyalty. “I won’t sleep until the rest of your team are back here to protect you.”

Alexa tried not to listen to the ugly voices saying she didn’t deserve that devotion. “Tell me about yourself.”

Ria was used to her family wanting static noise when dealing with stressful situations. It was the same for her. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Just give me the good stuff. I don’t think I can take anyone else’s misery right now. I don’t have the energy left to comfort you.”

Ria knew Alice had already gone through this conversation. She disapproved of Alice taking up Alexa’s time with it. “She shouldn’t have dumped that load on you right now.”

“She’s matched with one of my men. I asked her for it.”

Ria wrung the rag out and took it over to Jacob. She replaced it with the almost dry one on his hot head and then returned to the bucket. “There really isn’t anything good from my life as Roger’s daughter. You already know what kind of man he was. I’ll tell you about my time in culinary school instead. That was fun.”

“You’re a chef.” Alexa chuckled dryly. “That explains why David gave you his support even though he didn’t know you.”

“He did seem excited when I told him that. I assume he wants to learn how to cook?”

“No.” Alexa glanced fondly at Jacob. “My rookie has been torturing us with malicious meals that produce noxious gases. You’re here to teach him everything you know so we don’t blow ourselves up after one of his efforts.”

Ria laughed. “That’s why Roger sent me to culinary school! He was tired of blowing a hole through his pants after I cooked.”

Alexa caught the images from Ria’s mind and was comforted that the girl had at least a few good memories of her father.

“Yeah, well, he beat my ass right after that for some minor infraction, so don’t go getting all warm and fuzzy.”

Alexa gawked in surprise at the rancor.

Ria realized she had gotten rude with Alexa and quickly dropped her head while bracing for pain. “I’m sorry!”

Alexa switched out Billy’s mostly dry rag and staggered over to the bucket. “I wasn’t sure if you had any fire left.”

Ria recovered from her fear of being punished, but her voice was shaky. “My father did the best he could to remove that side of me. He wanted complete obedience no matter the order.”

“How did you manage to retain any fight back?”

“I met a Mitchel family member I could tolerate while I was in culinary school. Brandon was very nice to me.”

Alexis smiled fondly. “Uncle Brandon is the only Mitchel from that branch that I truly tolerate.”

“Well, then I’m in good company.” Ria tried not to sound like a groveling idiot. “I mean that, by the way. It’s always been a great source of inspiration to me that there’s a female Mitchel who isn’t corrupt.”

Alexa frowned. “Well, then prepare to be disappointed.”

Ria understood Alexa believed she had gone bad. She didn’t rush to challenge that impression, but she hoped it was just being clouded by Alexa’s illness. Ria needed Alexa to stay good. This woman was the only role model she had.

“What happened after culinary school?”

Ria tensed. “My father collected me.”

Alexa could tell from the tone that Ria hadn’t wanted to leave and Roger had insisted. “Was that before or after my grandmother was murdered?”

“Right after.” Ria put the rag on Edward’s head and then retreated from the dangerous man. “He used to tell me I have his mother’s eyes. I think he came to get me that time because he was missing her.”

“You do look a bit like Grandma Mitchel.” Alexa didn’t tell the girl that it was a good thing and a bad thing. The warm memories were welcome; the old grief from the loss wasn’t.

“Was she like you?”

Alexa shook her head. “My grandmother was much like the rest of our family. She was a cold,

hard soul who was able to leave her babies behind as long as she was given the occasional year or two of freedom. All she really cared about was the end of the world that was coming. Everything she did was to that end.”

“Because she wanted the Mitchel family line to survive?”

“No. Because she wanted us to take over the world.”

Silence fell.

Madelyn, now on a break, settled near the curtain. She also liked and respected Alexa. She hoped they kept talking. She wanted to listen.

Emmie marched over to the curtain, drawn by their good vibes. She hated it that Alexa was bonding with her kids right under her nose when she’d never been able to do the same. “We need to talk!”

Alexa hawked up a gob of crap and spit it into the waste can. “About?”

Emmie ignored Alexa’s warning tone. “Why you’re still alive even though I told Damon to kill you in that stadium.”

Bradley looked over in shock.

Eva’s team came out of their section.

Madelyn shot up out of the seat. “I knew it! You useless bitch!”

Emmie rotated half of her body and punched the girl with her elbow.

Madelyn hit the dusty floor and lay there, groaning. She was tough, but Emmie had caught her off guard, like she'd meant to.

Alice's quick steps echoed through the plane as she hurried toward them.

Emmie pulled Madelyn up and shoved her into a seat. "You don't understand the real Mitchel code yet."

Alice drew her knife as she reached them. "But I do."

"Stay out of it and you two will be fine." Emmie saw Eva coming closer and turned back to Alexa. "Answer me!"

"I'm stronger than you are. I always have been." Alexa kept caring for her men. "Why do you want me dead?"

"Because you're not really one of us. You have ethics."

"And with me gone, your kids will fall into the cesspool in your mind and stop hating you for only saving yourself."

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Emmie barely got control of her emotions.

Bradley had heard enough. "Do you wish to press charges?" He glared at Emmie. "She confessed. There's no need for a trial."

Alexa swallowed thick saliva down a raw throat. "No. I'll handle it in-house."

Emmie smiled harshly. "Let me thank you for that kindness." She looked back at Eva, who was still inching closer. "Alexa killed your husband."

Eva froze.

The rest of her team also stopped, staring in confused pain.

Emmie finished it. “On behalf of Levi, I demand this matter be taken up by the council.”

Alice knelt by Madelyn to check on her while glaring at her mother. “Why are you doing this now?”

Emmie motioned toward Alexa. “Because she’s weak enough to kill if the vote goes against her.”

“She’s one of the council. She won’t vote against herself.”

“Yes, she will. Alexa Mitchel is known for her ethics and morals. That’s why you two traitors like her so much, remember? She’d rather be dead than to be like the rest of us.”

Alexa snorted. “You can’t blame me for that.”

“I don’t. I do loathe you for it, however. It’s time you were held accountable for your actions.”

Bradley nodded, voice cold. “The council will hear your words, after the rest of our groups returns. If you make a move before then, you will be put down if that’s what it takes.”

Emmie smiled sweetly, retreating. “That’s all I ask.”

Emmie resumed her post at the window to watch over Bronco’s team, who was working steadily without any idea of the drama in here as far as she knew.

Bradley took a seat where he could watch her. He also tried to come up with a way to save Alexa

if Emmie's accusation was true. There was no way he could stand to see her executed even if she was guilty.

Eva peered into the coach section, locking eyes with Alexa.

Alexa dropped her head.

Eva's face filled with pain. She took a seat near Bradley while her team went to the rear compartment to discuss what they'd just learned.

2

Edward swung out with his last knife, slashing wildly. "Get away from her! I'll slit you from end to end!"

The monster in the darkness inched closer. "Let her go. She doesn't love you. She'll get you killed."

Edward slashed out again while holding onto Alexa's broken, bleeding body. "You'll never turn me against her! Never!"

Alexa had been shot with magic right before the monster had crunched into her arm like a chicken leg. It was dangling now and releasing her life onto the dirt floor, but there was no time to stop and bandage it. The monster was at the gate and it was hungry.

Edward knew it was just the same nightmare he'd been having since they all fell ill, but he still couldn't shake himself out of it. The dirt was too hard, the pain was too sharp; the smoke burned his lungs too much.

The tunnel around him was full of flames and dead bodies; the stench hung in a thick cloud. The monster had killed most of the people here before coming for Alexa.

Blood dripped from the wounds Alexa had suffered while trying to hold the demon at bay. Edward's broken leg was keeping him from grabbing her body and fleeing even though he didn't know where the exits were. He'd never been here before.

The bloody bodies of their team lay strewn throughout the tunnel behind them. All of the men had put up a good fight, but the monster was too strong. None of their fighting skills or the magic they were learning to control had helped in this battle. It was as if the monster was unable to be injured. Even their bullets had deflected off and hit other fleeing refugees in the tunnel. There hadn't been a single injury to the enemy as far as Edward knew. *And I still don't know how it started!*

The demon had been walking among them like a friend and then it had attacked without a warning or a provocation. Edward didn't know what had triggered it. He did know they weren't strong enough to win. They'd tried different ways and weapons each time and none of it worked. It always ended in a dead team and hungry teeth.

“Give her to me!”

“Go to hell!”

“I’ll take you there with me!” The monster emerged from the shadows with long horns and greedy claws.

Edward had never seen such an awful apparition. Even Alexa’s inside form couldn’t compare to the monster stalking toward him with blood dripping from its face and eyes glowing bright red. *My death is in those eyes.*

The demon lunged forward with giant snapping teeth.

Edward jerked awake, gasping.

Alexa’s hot hand on his forehead was a relief and a torment. He was between the fever sets now. The next time it returned, he would be a danger to her.

Alexa rubbed his wrist where the rope was already cutting into his skin.

Edward saw all of them were tied up now except for her and the girl who was helping. He was too tired to remember the girl’s name.

All of the men around him were in the same boat. They were tossing and turning, running a high fever, and trying not to give in to the monster in the darkness. He could almost feel the exact same nightmare haunting each one of them.

Edward stared at Alexa in terror. “A monster’s coming for you.”

Alexa already knew. She swallowed a shiver. “Have faith in your team.”

Edward shut his eyes as exhaustion overwhelmed him. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold out.”

“Same.” Alexa tried to smile. “We both need to have faith in our team.”

The other people on the plane listened in concern while making plans for their own survival. They’d been in situations like this enough to know they had to look out for themselves.

Emmie was thrilled. Alexa might not survive to face what she had done and Emmie was fine with that. *As long as it ends in her death, I’m happy.*

Alexa rubbed Edward’s hand as he fell back into sleep that she hoped would be dreamless this time. In her mind, the voices split again, multiplying into a dozen evil demands that all insisted on taking her life.

Ria gently put a hand on Alexa’s arm and tugged her toward an empty chair. “We need to get you strapped in.”

Alexa barely resisted attacking the girl. Even in a moment like this, she still hated to be touched. She let the girl take her over to the chair. “Use your strongest rope.”

Ria did, aware that it wouldn’t matter. Alexa was a firewalker who could easily burn through her binds. If she went crazy, they were all in danger.

“Keep talking.”

Ria resumed babbling about the happier parts of her life while praying for Alexa’s men to come through for her. If they didn’t, she was doomed and

she would likely take everyone else down with her.
That was also something Mitchels were known for.

Chapter Seven
Now We Do
The Compound

1

“**T**his is amazing.” A narrow body of clear, steadily flowing water ran along one side of the tunnel, lined with hundreds of low-light plants that were vying for the space closest to the damp bank. It didn’t look like farmers were caring for it. Daniel assumed the plants were all self-seeding. Fruits and vegetables he recognized were mixed among ones he’d never heard of. Wyatt had been right. Food wasn’t an issue here as long as there wasn’t a large population.

There were beans, beets, kale, and even broccoli. People were picking them randomly, with some of those being eaten and others being put into small baskets. With a garden that was miles long, there was no reason to fully harvest it unless you were going somewhere. These people didn’t have to work the land. It was a great setup.

Having the water running through the tunnel was also great, but Daniel did wonder where they were dumping the waste.

As soon as he had the thought, he passed a smelly outhouse that had a garbage can and a stack

of empty bags next to it. That told him they bagged the waste and likely dumped it aboveground somewhere. *Smart.* “Who controls it all?”

Damon picked a small tomato and brushed it off on his sleeve. “No one. We live together peacefully and fight together when needed.”

“How is that possible?”

“We obey the code.” Damon bit through the raw vegetable and chewed happily.

“What code?”

Tesco answered this time. “The one your mistress has been teaching you.”

The nomads know Alexa is here.

Mark nodded at Daniel’s thought. *I don’t trust them either.*

They began to pass more vendors who quickly held up items or waved them over.

Some of the vendors were small families selling homemade goods with hands hardened by daily work. Their clothes were also sewn; their weapons were knives. Others were loners and outfitted in government gear with thick overalls and crossbows. It was an odd mix that told Daniel all of these people were foragers. He respected that.

The tables of gear drew Mark hard this time, making him wish they had more time. Besides the stacks of ammunition, he spotted candles and radio parts, both of which they always needed.

Daniel was more interested in the stocked medical kits, but nothing in them would help his

team right now. *Maybe on the way out.* “Do you brew potions?”

“Can anyone brew magical cures?”

Coldness went through the vendors at the questions. Most of them turned away, refusing to answer. The others pointed ahead, like those they’d already asked.

Daniel grunted. “How long until we reach the main compound?”

Colton waved. “We are in the compound now.”

“All I see is dirt walls.”

“The pyramid on top of us is magnificent in the setting sunlight.”

“This is a pyramid? That’s so cool.” Mark paused, brows furrowing. “Wait. It’s just dirt!”

Damon nodded. “What did you expect?”

“A pyramid! Where are the cut stones, the secret passages...the jewels?”

Colton snorted. “You watched too many movies.”

Mark groaned in disappointment. “Not even a mummy?”

Damon swallowed the bite of tomato. “Those who discovered this place cleared all of that out years ago. It’s just refugees and founding families down here now.”

A long gated cubby came up on their right. A shadowy form moved inside.

Mark frowned. “Who’s in there?”

Tesco’s voice lowered. “Our Seer.”

Mark scanned the series of locks on the outside of the cell. “Why is he locked in?”

“So he doesn’t kill us all, of course. He’s not exactly willing.”

The Seer was a handsome man with chocolate eyes, ebony hair, and tanned skin that glowed brightly with good health. Despite being a captive, he was obviously well-cared for.

The Seer came to the door. As he moved, long, pristine black and red robe touching the dirt floor, Mark was able to view into the cell behind him.

The Seer’s cage was immense. There was even a hand built fireplace in the far corner covered in pots and gently bubbling brews. Next to that was a bare wall with empty chains hanging from it. The wall next to that wasn’t empty. “He has captives in there. Those people are hanging from his wall!”

Tesco nodded. “Yes.”

“What is he doing with them?”

Tesco didn’t look at the Seer. “He runs through bodies quickly. When he needs a new host, he has it nearby.”

Daniel figured it out quickly. “He’s not really human anymore.”

“No. He is a demon who cannot be contained in a body for long. The stronger he gets, the faster he goes through them.”

“Why not kill him?”

“It’s been tried. The best we’ve managed is to use spells and charms to keep him caged.”

Mark didn't stare at the Seer either, not wanting to draw his ire or to be convinced to interfere. "Then where do his sacrifices come from?"

"From people who needed him to view the future..."

Daniel groaned. "Or to brew a special potion that no one else can?"

Tesco smiled cruelly. "Yes. You will have to do the same for the magic you need."

Mark stared. "What?!"

"If you wish to save Alexa, someone will have to be sacrificed."

Mark stomped forward, fists clenching. "We're not sacrificing anyone! And how did you know she was sick?"

"She isn't here leading you. That was obvious, my angry friend."

"I'm not your friend!"

Daniel remembered why he was carrying two buckets. He went toward the water.

Mark protested. "We need to figure out how to get that potion!"

"One deal at a time, *rookie*."

Mark was offended, but he also caught the warning that he was behaving like a new member of the team instead of someone who had been with Alexa for a year. He snapped his mouth shut and waited impatiently.

Wyatt smirked at Mark, but he didn't get in the convict's reach so he couldn't be knocked out again. He was already embarrassed that it had happened

once. Letting it happen twice would be a humiliation he couldn't handle.

The nomads and the rest of the team watched as Daniel approached the small creek that ran through the tunnel for miles and provided life to everyone here. They were eager to see what would happen.

Mark caught the bad vibes and followed his team member even though he was still stinging from Daniel's mild scold.

Daniel had forgotten about the warning he'd received. The small body of water was deeper than it had appeared from a distance. It was clear, but he still couldn't see the bottom. He knelt between the wild melon plants and dipped one of the buckets into it.

The water was icy cold and didn't have a noticeable smell. He assumed the water source hadn't been affected by the war. As he filled the bucket, several swimming forms darted away. That told him they also had seafood here. "This really is an amazing set up. Did it take a long time to build?"

Tesco kept his distance as he answered. "It took decades of digging. It became easier once the plants were in place. The water didn't always obey the boundaries of the bank before then."

Mark was confused. "What?"

Daniel filled the first bucket to the top and set it aside. As he dipped the second bucket in, he became aware of the silence around him and a cold feeling spreading up his arm. He looked down.

Thin blue liquid curled around his arm. Watery teeth brushed his skin.

Oh, shit. Daniel continued to fill the bucket as the water came up his arm, bracing to tuck and roll away from it.

The water around the bucket rose in a 4' wave that contained shadowy sapphire eyes and hungry teeth.

Daniel forced himself to continue filling the bucket. "Thank you for the water."

The hungry wave rippled closer. The water on his arm crawled up to his neck.

Daniel didn't feel animosity, only curiosity. He wasn't sure what the water was searching him for, but he was suddenly sure if he was found lacking, it wouldn't be an easy feat to escape.

Vendors behind him shut their doors and watched through small flaps.

Tesco and his crew got ready to run.

Colton was torn. He was point man for this mission; he was supposed to save all of the team. He was also furious about what they'd been told. He waited to see what the water decided.

Daniel finished filling the bucket and slowly sat it next to the other one. He stood up, hoping the water would return to the creek. "Is there something I can do for you?"

The voice that roared out of the water was unexpected. "Kill them all!"

Daniel wasn't sure who the target was. "I can't just slaughter people for two buckets of water. My

services come higher than that. If they're innocent, I won't do it at all." He waited.

The water slowly retreated down his arm and slid into the narrow creek. The tall wave began to settle.

Daniel assumed he had given the correct answer, but he still waited until the wave was completely gone before picking up the buckets and turning around.

Mark had drawn his gun, but he wasn't sure what he had planned to do with it. It wasn't like bullets could defeat water.

Daniel smiled. "It's always an adventure on Alexa's team."

Mark slowly holstered, nodding. "To be fair, this isn't even the oddest thing that's happened to us since we joined her."

"And that's a fact." Daniel headed down the tunnel with the two buckets of water.

Mark followed him.

Tesco hurried after the men. "Wait! We have to negotiate!"

Mark glared over his shoulder. "We'll catch up with you. Unless you'd like to collect the water next time?"

Tesco came to a halt, glaring. "Do not test my patience."

Daniel and Mark went down the tunnel without answering. They had already figured out Tesco was afraid of the water, like most of the people here were. They hadn't figured out why yet, but it didn't

matter. The water didn't have a problem with them. That was Tesco's problem to solve.

2

The old man was shocked to see them coming through the tunnel with two full buckets of water. The chicken vendor hurried up and hobbled over to the entrance of his cubby to open the metal door for them.

Daniel and Mark carried the water inside, scanning the man's home for more clues about the place they'd come to.

A small bed had been carved into the dirt wall in the rear of the cubby. The rest of it was full of bags, boxes, and appliances that had cords running along the walls. There was even a small lamp in the corner that glowed brightly. It reminded both men of home, before the war.

The old man's den was sweet smelling despite the clutter. It reeked of good meals, like the ones waiting on his table. It also said a lot that he'd left it all unattended and wasn't worried about thieves.

Daniel sat the buckets near the man's stove and then turned around. "I need information."

The old man shut the door and leaned against it. "You brought the water. Information is free."

"Tell me about Tesco Abbot and his merry group."

The old man made a face and spit on the dirt floor.

Mark chuckled. “Yeah, that’s what we think too.”

The old man kept his voice down, afraid of retribution. “They are thugs and thieves. They force us to pay to stay here. This compound was never supposed to be that way. It is a sanctuary for our kind!”

Baggy jeans and a ball cap hid a stubble-covered face lined by years of working outdoors. Mark believed that came from hunting the chickens, but he couldn’t be sure. It was possible the man was raising them down here somewhere. “What happens if you don’t pay?”

The old man looked wistfully at a faded picture sitting on his small wooden end table. “They hurt our kids. That’s always been the most effective way to control us.”

Daniel and Mark studied the picture angrily, seeing a large family from before the war. The many kids in the picture seemed happy.

“Where are they now?”

The old man struggled not to cry as he answered Mark. “I am the last.”

Daniel and Mark were certain the man was using their emotions to get something he wanted, but it still worked. They had no problem believing Tesco was as bad as this man was making him out to be.

Mark smiled at him. “We’ll take those chickens now.”

The old man opened his hand and held out a small golden triangle that exactly matched the ones Alexa had tossed onto the beach outside Port City, except this one was already completed. “Use it as you see fit, but be careful. It won’t like being used for good purposes.”

Daniel carefully put the object into one of the smallest, deepest pockets of his cloak so it wouldn’t be lost. “Thank you for your help.”

The man stepped aside and opened the door. “Thank you for your honor. Tell your mistress we miss her around here.”

“Will do.” Mark scooped up two of the wrapped chickens and slid them into his cloak pockets. He handed the third one to Daniel so he could do the same.

Daniel was hungry and he knew Mark was too. He quickly ripped off two drumsticks and stored the rest.

The two men walked down the tunnel while enjoying the chicken, spreading good vibes as they went.

Behind them, people came out of their cubbies and watched, remembering better days when fighters like those had lived among them and protected them from men like Tesco.

Halfway through the tunnel, Colton and his group were waiting.

Colton grunted at Daniel’s approving glance. “The water found you worthy. We decided to wait and see why Alexa made that choice.”

Daniel was relieved. He hadn't wanted to fight Colton and his team. He didn't necessarily enjoy being around them, but they were more tolerable than the other Mitchels he'd met.

Colton's team fell in around the two men and led them back through the tunnel.

Mark had thought of something. He looked at Damon, speaking between bites. "How did you know he wanted our plane?"

Damon kept his voice down as they neared the water area again. "Tesco and his group usually attack from the rear before their enemies know they're there. He came out to talk. He wants something from us, something he can't just take."

"And the only thing we have is a plane, but it has fighters on it and Tesco only has three men. He decided to negotiate to increase his odds of success."

Damon nodded at Daniel's guess. "Even though half of the Abbot family have been banned from living here, many of them are still able to come and go as long as they don't get in range of the water."

Daniel swallowed the bite of sweet meat. "Why doesn't the water attack them anyway?"

"It has to be triggered by an alpha. Even magical water has rules to follow."

Mark chuckled. He couldn't help it. "That sounds so odd."

Damon grinned. "Welcome to our life."

Daniel and Mark hadn't been descendants for long, so they didn't have any of this information.

Damon knew they would catch up quickly, though. Alexa had chosen a great team.

It still made Damon jealous that his own team wasn't as good, but that was being pushed out by respect. Instead of wanting them dead, he now wanted to be like them.

Wyatt scowled at his brother. "Stop sucking up. They're not going to let you join and they're not going to make you like them. It was all a lie to get what they needed."

Mark and Daniel didn't deny any of that. There was no way they were going to approve Damon for their crew and they seriously doubted Alexa was going to allow Billy to pass the gift of vampirism to the man either. Wyatt was almost certainly correct that it was all a lie.

Damon walked around a clump of vines growing through the dirt floor. "Unlike you, I have hope for the future."

Wyatt closed his mouth on a nasty reply. *I also have hope for the future, but it's completely different than what's in your brain, bro. My ambitions are a lot bigger.*

Tesco and his men were still waiting in the same place when the team returned. He immediately began complaining.

"It is disrespectful to keep me waiting! I am the boss here!"

Mark opened his mouth, ready to confront the man about hurting people and charging for sanctuary.

Daniel neatly stuck his chicken leg into Mark's mouth and then smiled at Tesco. "Men have to be fed, otherwise they do stupid shit."

Tesco was startled into a laugh. "That is very true."

Understanding they were just hungry, Tesco's anger was soothed. "Come with us now. We will eat and drink and discuss your needs. Then we shall negotiate a deal that makes all of us happy."

Daniel wasn't impressed by Tesco. The scarred man wasn't a threat as far as Daniel was concerned. "Why do we need to negotiate? We were told everything here is free."

"That is how it used to work. Now, we have no fresh stock coming in. If we just give away everything, we'll have nothing."

Colton scowled. "That's not the way it's supposed to be, even in Afterworld."

"It is now that we have taken over control of the SAC."

"And who gave you control?"

"As I said, we took it." Tesco smiled at Colton. "But do not worry. We make great deals that only cover our people. It won't be more than you can pay."

There was little choice but to agree unless they wanted to gun Tesco down and without knowing how many Abbots were still here, that was a bad idea. Colton gave in. "We'll listen, but we aren't agreeing to anything."

The team followed him while Mark chewed on the chicken leg and tried not to be angry with himself or Daniel. Daniel was only treating him the way Alexa would.

Daniel paused right before they got out of sight of the cage. He looked back and found the Seer watching them with two huge hands curled around the bars of his cage.

The Seer smiled at Daniel, revealing jagged, broken black teeth.

Daniel nodded politely and then turned around, but his stomach churned. The Seer knew a fresh body was coming soon. Daniel was afraid of who it would belong to. *Nothing about this place is good. We've been lied to yet again.*

“It took you long enough to figure that out.”

Daniel laughed at Mark, while the others stared in confusion. Now he understood why Mark was so angry. “Well, I am still in training.”

Mark grunted unhappily. “Same. We’ll get through it together.”

3

They reached the main hall where the nomads were living a few minutes later. The narrow, dirt-filled room was in the process of being widened. Buckets and shovels lay all over the mess. Other than that, there were only a few bedrolls, bags, and some trash.

Tesco didn't waste any time. "We want a ride out of here."

One of his other men spoke for the first time. "We will make a good deal. We're tired of being trapped here."

Colton took the lead in the negotiations while Mark and Daniel scanned the room again. "What happened to the private planes that were here?"

"Taken, damaged, no parts coming in to fix them."

That second man spoke again. "There are two that can be flown, but the undead are all over that area. We didn't have enough manpower to fight our way through."

Tesco smiled at the team again, sweeping their muscles and weapons. "And now we do."

Daniel didn't ask about the food and drink that had been offered. "In exchange? We're not just giving it away, you know."

"Spoken like a true Mitchel, even though you aren't one. We will help you get the refinery going and fuel your plane, in exchange for a ride. Or we will find a sacrifice for the Seer so you can save Alexa and then we'll take the plane."

Daniel realized calling him a Mitchel had been distracting flattery that had worked. Then he replayed the words. "Wait. Are you saying there's no fuel here?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. The refinery stopped producing years ago. All stored fuel was

used or spoiled. Without additives to revive it, the gas in our pipes is useless.”

“Son of a bitch!” This time, it was Colton who reacted rashly.

Mark turned. “What’s going on here?”

Tesco pushed a button on the dirt wall and retreated. A heavy door slammed down, blocking the exit. He grinned as they hurried over. “Now we will negotiate with Alexa. Your lives are mine to trade or end.”

The team tried to force the door up, but it wouldn’t budge.

“It’s the same set up as in Port City.” Damon prepared to blast his way out.

Tesco held up his radio. “I was not bluffing about overrunning your plane with undead. There are thousands of them in these jungles, all listening for the one thing that will bring them to any area.”

“Screams.” Colton held Damon back when he would have fired anyway. “Let’s listen. We’ll go from there.”

Damon controlled his anger by a hair. He glared at Tesco. “When he gives the call, your life will belong to me.”

Tesco shrugged. “Perhaps, but for now, you have ten minutes to decide which is more important to you: the sacrifice or the fuel. We will not give you both.”

Chapter Eight
Bartering

1

Daniel brought up his strongest shield, hoping it would block Tesco from hearing their conversation. He still didn't think the man was very strong despite this trick. "Hit me with ideas and information."

Colton added his shield and then his team did the same. It was something all of the crew were much stronger with now. Their short time around Alexa had already given them benefits. It was part of why everyone wanted to be on her team.

They were covered in layers quickly, bringing a deep frown to Tesco's bearded face as he observed through the barred window. Then everyone put their backs to him so he had no chance of reading their lips.

"We could still blast our way out and just take what we need."

Colton shook his head at Mark. "It's a huge risk if he leads the undead to the plane. If it gets damaged, you're stuck here."

Tesco and his men tried to listen, but they weren't able to break through the shields. Tesco slammed his hand against the door.

Daniel kept watch on Tesco from the corner of his eye. “What do we know about him?”

“Not much. Tesco was a rude 20-something when I was here last.” Colton shrugged. “I dealt with his father. I assume that man died, or was killed.”

“What does he really want?” Mark knew it wasn’t just a ride.

“I have a feeling revenge is more important than a ride.”

Mark swore.

Daniel nodded. “He wants Alexa.”

Asher grinned. “Who doesn’t?”

His levity brought the tension down a little, but none of them were fooled. Asher was furious.

“How do we get him banned from here?” Mark hated the scarred man now. Being tricked so easily was humiliating.

Colton sighed. “We’re missing a key ingredient. Only an alpha can do either of those.”

“What if we bring Alexa—”

“No.” Daniel interrupted before Mark could complete that suggestion. “I don’t want her anywhere near this place.”

“Then what are we doing about our newest...host?”

Daniel wasn’t worried about Tesco. That man could be killed. He wasn’t sure about the Seer. “We make the deal, kill them all, and continue on our way. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded. They weren't making a magical agreement, so it could be broken.

"He'll have a plan for that." Damon took a last bite of the tomato and tossed the rest into a far corner. "He probably already made a deal with the Seer."

Daniel hated it that Damon was right, but it didn't change anything. "Then we uphold our end of the deal, and kill them all afterward."

Damon laughed. "I think he's wrong. You'll be a true Mitchel in time."

Daniel chuckled.

Mark didn't. "What if we make a different deal? I mean, we don't really need him to help with the fuel. Once we get to the refinery, we can figure it out on our own."

"You mean we cut them out and do it all ourselves?" Asher grinned. "You already are a Mitchel."

"One problem." Colton gestured. "We don't know where the refinery is. This was all built by Abbots. The rest of us just enjoyed it."

Daniel kept working on the solution. "Okay, so we need him for that much. Anything else?"

"Not that I know of, but he's sly, like his father was. You can bet Tesco has something else up his sleeve." Colton didn't believe it would be more than they could handle, though. Tesco wasn't that tough.

Daniel lowered his shield. "If he betrays us, we'll feed him to the Seer."

A hungry growl sounded through the tunnels, making the residents grimace.

“The Seer’s onboard.” Daniel went to the door. “All right, shithead. Get in here and we’ll deal.”

Tesco appeared in the window. “I’m listening.”

Daniel glared. “We were promised food, drinks, and a conversation. Get in here and be a good host or I’ll deal with someone else. You’re not the only one who knows where that refinery is.”

Tesco stared at Daniel. “If I open the door, you will kill me.”

“Not until after our dealing is done.”

Tesco laughed and pushed the button. “That’s all I ask.”

It was hard for Daniel not to attack the man as soon as the door opened. *But I always keep my word.* He retreated. “I want a beer and another chicken leg.”

Tesco motioned to his men. “Handle it.”

“Are they going to steal it or hurt that old man?” Daniel hadn’t thought they would really go get those items.

“No. They will pay for it from my stock.” Tesco entered the cell and went to a far corner. He pushed a button the team hadn’t noticed.

The wall lifted to reveal another tunnel; this one had comfortable chairs, end tables, and a clean floor lined in gray stone walls and blue rugs.

Tesco dropped down into the center chair. “Sit. We will talk now.”

Mark gave him a dirty look. “You could have just asked for a ride, you know.”

“That is not how Abbots handle things.”

“Which explains why half of your family isn’t allowed in here.” Daniel ignored Tesco’s glare as he took the seat across from the man. “You want out of here. So do we. We’ll work together.”

“No. You will pay for my services.”

“What’s the going rate for traitors these days?”

Tesco bristled at Asher’s contempt. “More than a fighter. Who needs a hired gun when supplies are worth gold?”

Asher took the chair next to Tesco with a deep frown. “Yeah.”

“We only want a ride out of here. Your dangerous minds assume we want more, but it is not true.”

Daniel was already thinking ahead. “Where would you go?”

“Anywhere there used to be a society that will allow us to live better than we do now.”

Daniel heard the fear in Tesco’s voice, but he didn’t ask what was causing it. “We’ll give you, and how many others, a ride out?”

“I am only bartering for the four of us.”

“What about the rest of your family here?”

“They do not wish to leave.” Tesco leaned back in the dusty chair. “They like the jungle and the calm safety. We miss the world.”

Daniel knew the man was holding something back. He made the deal anyway. “Fine. Tell me about the refinery now and we’ll make a plan.”

“Not so fast my quick friend.” Tesco held out a hand. “Make a magic deal with me.”

Daniel shook his hand. “I agree to get you and your three men out of here in exchange for your help getting the fuel. Nothing more or less.”

“Perfect.”

“If you lie to me even once, our deal is off and I’ll feed you to the Seer!”

Tesco quickly let go. Daniel’s warm hand made his skin itch from where he’d been touching the water. “Bring in the food!”

Tesco’s men came in with bottles and plates.

“Where’s the refinery?”

Tesco bit into a chicken leg and talked with his mouth full. “It’s a mile to the north, but that area is covered in undead. There are hundreds of them. Maybe thousands.”

Mark took a drumstick, frowning. “We don’t have enough bullets to cover that.”

Colton took a beer, passing on the food. “Well, noise isn’t a good idea anyway. Everyone on my team carries knives. We can make sharpened stakes for longer reach.” He’d admired the weapons Addison’s team had used in Port city.

Asher took a beer and a chicken leg. “Remember to hit the heads.”

Tesco denied that. “It takes too long and will get us killed. Take off their legs with a sword and keep going.”

Daniel took a chicken leg. “They can still crawl.”

“But we can easily put them down then. Less work and it’s faster.”

“Take their legs out.” Daniel knew stakes wouldn’t be good for that. “You said swords?”

Tesco gestured. “We have a room full of knives and swords.”

Daniel tried not to get distracted as a cold breeze went through the cubby. “Is that also surrounded by undead?”

“Of course.”

Daniel sighed. “Then we go get the weapons first, using what we have on us. When we get the weapons, we go for the fuel.”

Colton opened his beer. “Potions take time to brew. We’ll have to deal with the Seer first.”

Wyatt offered a quick suggestion. “We should split up and do both at the same time.”

Mark glared. “Why, so you can kill us off easier?”

“Yes.”

Daniel grunted as Wyatt laughed. He didn’t find it funny. “We’ll get the weapons. Then Mark will take a group to the refinery. Wyatt and I will handle the Seer.”

Wyatt frowned. “Why me?”

Daniel smiled. “Because I need a sacrifice, of course.”

Now Wyatt didn’t think it was funny.

Footsteps came down the tunnel. A line of residents entered Tesco’s den.

“What’s going on?”

Tesco shrugged at Mark. “Did you think we were the only ones who want to leave this place?”

Daniel groaned as the cubby filled with desperate residents who wanted to make a deal. “This is going to take hours.”

“And while we’re here, the boss keeps getting sicker and people have time to surround our ride.”

Tesco grunted, grinning through the food. “Yes. It is a good time to be alive.”

“Can I just handle them all at once?” Daniel didn’t want to spend time talking to each of the people.

Colton wanted to agree, but he couldn’t. “Some of them might not be good. You’re supposed to check their minds and make sure it’s okay for them to go along. Safe Haven won’t like it if you show up with a plane full of corrupt souls.”

“Fine.” Daniel waved the first group over. “Make it short. Give me your name, what you want to trade, and why we should take you.” He settled in to hear their misery and not be swayed by it.

“So you’ll provide food. Your friend there will gather water.” Daniel checked his notes and then looked over at Colton, who was also dealing with a line of people. “Why do we have to make deals at all? Can’t we just drop them somewhere for free?”

The people around them shook their heads and held up more supplies.

“A few of them might, but our kind only feels safe if they make a deal.” Asher smiled at the older man who was holding a stack of thick gloves he’d sewn himself. “We like earning our own way.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Daniel had no idea how Alexa would feel about fifty passengers being added to the plane, but he also didn’t believe she would be that upset as long as they returned with the cure. All of the residents had had kind words and good attitudes so far, even as they scorned Tesco with ugly looks and thoughts. He was a hated man.

“Can you handle the rest of this while I go talk to the Seer? We need to give him time to brew the potion.” *If he even can.* Daniel was surrounded by desperation. He was having doubts that their Seer was strong enough to do it. If the magic was strong, why would all these people want to leave?

Heads shaking around them told Daniel these people didn’t want to deal with anyone else. “Why me?”

“Alexa put you in charge back on the plane. They can feel it.” Colton shrugged. “Her opinion matters, to all of us.”

Mark waved the next group in. “What are you trading for the ride?”

Daniel tried to ignore the awful feeling in his gut that said this was a waste of time. It wasn’t going to matter in the end.

“Because it is,” an evil voice whispered in his mind. *“These people don’t matter to you or to me. In the end, all of them shall burn.”*

Daniel glanced around to determine if anyone else had heard that.

No one had.

Daniel sighed. *Maybe I’ve got a small case of what the boss is suffering.*

“Or maybe you already know what the future holds.”

Daniel refused to answer the Seer. *One mess at a time.* He smiled at a large family coming over to him, all carrying strings of fish. “I’m not big on seafood, but my teammates are. We’ll take you.”

Trying to put an end to this, Daniel stood up. “We’ll take all of you in exchange for whatever you’ve brought or want to trade. Keep it on you until we leave for the plane. We’ll call you when it’s time. Be ready to go.”

A dozen more people came into the cubby, carrying pets and livestock.

Colton laughed. “You’re not getting away that easily.”

“We have to get that potion started!”

Colton's good humor vanished. "Alexa would be very unhappy if you shirked your duty here, even for her."

Daniel swallowed a nasty reply and sat back down. He focused on the family, ignoring the smells from their animals. "What would you like to trade for the ride?"

Mark watched, listened, and stewed on their host. Tesco wasn't upset that so many of his captives were making deals for their freedom. In fact, he seemed happy about it. *What is he getting out of this?*

Mark swept the room. Residents were carrying armloads of supplies....

Mark dropped his chin to hide his dismayed expression. *These people aren't buying freedom, but they don't know that. Tesco is using them to move his headquarters. If we're not careful, he'll have a fueled 747 loaded with supplies and slaves. That's why he's happy. And we're arranging it all. No matter where we drop him, Tesco will still have his sordid little empire and there's nothing we can do about it.*

Mark smiled at the next family who walked by. They had a cute little girl they kept fully surrounded as they stopped near Daniel.

Mark realized she was the only girl here. There weren't many children, but the boys outnumbered the girls by a large margin. Mark scanned the families. Most of them were men, too.

The girl had a long blonde ponytail and pretty brown eyes that went over him with startling intelligence.

Mark eyed the empty holsters on her tiny hips and smiled. It was like looking at Alexa as a seven-year-old child.

“Take it all with you. You carry it.” Daniel didn’t want to have to return and collect these supplies. He had a feeling they would be in a hurry when they left. “Take it with you.”

The next line of people hurried out to get packed for the trip.

Mark regarded Colton. “Did you know about all of this drama waiting for us?”

“Some of it.”

“And you didn’t tell us?”

Colton chuckled. “You’re a rookie. This is how we train them.”

Daniel grunted. “Figures. How am I doing so far?”

“Well, we’ve been here for hours and don’t have anything that we came for. All in all, I’d say you’re doing great.”

Mark swept Tesco and his men again, seeing something else he’d missed. *They don’t have guns.*

Mark thought about buying the mag earlier. There were stacks of them. *They have ammunition but no guns.*

“How do you still have power but no fuel?” Mark pointed at the lights and cords that had been hung along the walls and between the ceiling grates.

Tesco talked with a full mouth again, dropping pieces down his shirt. “Machines are unpredictable. The water has always remained consistent. The fuel refinery takes people to run, but the workers fled after the war. As you’ll understand when we go there, it is not an easy job.”

“What about the water?” Mark had just thought of that. “Will it feel...upset or something?”

“The water has always been here. It will continue either way.”

“That wasn’t what he asked.”

Tesco snorted at Daniel in annoyance. “There has never been a time when people weren’t here. I have no idea how the water will react to being alone.”

Mark kept digging for information while Daniel bartered. “What happens when someone who was banished enters the compound? Does the water attack them even if they don’t get close to it?”

Tesco shuddered. “I don’t know and I don’t want to find out.”

Mark was sure that was a lie, but he went on with his next question. “Why was your family banished from this place?”

Tesco scowled. “That is old business.”

Daniel paused in bartering with a family. “Not for me. Fill us in or I’m calling off the whole deal right now.”

“You can’t do that!” Tesco fought to recover. “Fuel! You need the fuel!”

“I’m a resourceful guy. I’ll find it somewhere else.” Daniel smiled coldly. “Answer his question.”

Tesco didn’t know if Daniel was bluffing; he couldn’t take that chance. He glared. “They killed a Mitchel. Adrian asked for their banishment as the punishment.”

Mark was confused. “I thought the water had to be called by an alpha.”

“Adrian is an alpha, but in that case, the water wasn’t needed. We follow all rules set down.”

“Don’t give me that. You tried to bring them back in the instant Adrian left. Right?”

Tesco glowered. “Yes! And the water attacked! Adrian set it up to guard this place like a vicious dog that cannot be bargained with. My family was split apart. Many of my sons were killed!”

Tesco shut his mouth, wiping away the spittle from his anger.

Mark dropped his head again. *And now we know what Tesco wants. Being reunited with his family, while keeping his empire in a new place, and getting revenge, are his goals.*

Daniel nodded. He had been keeping track of Mark’s thoughts. The convict was often brilliant. *He isn’t going to be satisfied with just a ride. He needs our plane, without us on it.*

3

Daniel waved off the platter of meat, now full. “Tell me about the Seer.”

Tesco frowned. “What do you want to know?”

“How long has he been imprisoned here?”

Tesco considered that. “About twenty years, I think.”

Daniel was surprised. He’d assumed it had only been since the war. “What does he want?”

“Power.”

“And after that?”

“*Only* that. Each lifeforce he consumes drives him to greater levels.”

“And if he were ever released?”

Terror went across Tesco’s face. “The entire world would be in danger. He won’t stop with conquering this compound or even this country. He’ll burn it all.”

Mark wanted to be clear. “We’re really going to give him a sacrifice?”

“Yes.” Daniel frowned at Tesco again. “Where do we find one?”

Tesco motioned with his chicken leg, sending more crumbs across the floor. “You pick one of the people who were just here to make a deal for a ride.”

“I won’t sacrifice anyone who’s innocent.”

Mark tried to find a middle ground. “We could shove them into the water to find out.”

Daniel had already thought of that. “The water wouldn’t give them back if they’re bad.”

“So we don’t have a sacrifice.”

Tesco waved. “And that has been our dilemma for many years.”

Colton nodded to Daniel. “You’ll just have to use your best judgement.”

The walls around them began shaking, dropping dirt onto them and throughout the tunnel.

Daniel and Mark stood up, eyes going to the exits.

Tesco blew it off. “That happens often, as the earth settles. Do not concern yourselves.”

Daniel hated it down here as much as he’d hated all of their underground adventures. “I’m ready to talk to the Seer now. Then we’ll get the weapons and head for the refinery. Get ready to go.”

“I already am, upon your call.” Tesco stood up. “I will escort you.”

Mark glared. “Stay here. We’ve had enough of your help.”

Colton and the others followed Daniel out of Tesco’s cubby.

“Wait out here.” Daniel didn’t want their help either. “Make sure he doesn’t do anything crazy.”

Daniel turned to Mark before Colton’s group could argue. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s odd that no one you interviewed failed.”

Daniel nodded at Mark. He’d realized that too about halfway through. “I’d bet that’s why the water leaves them alone. They’re all good souls.”

“We can’t leave them here.”

“I don’t plan to.”

“But we can’t take them to the island...can we?”

Daniel shrugged. “Safe Haven is supposed to be a refuge for survivors and these people are that.”

“I agree. But we’ll need to talk to the boss about it.”

“I don’t believe we’ll have time for that. It’s our call.”

Mark nodded. “Then I vote yes, as long as none of them turn out to be great liars.”

“Same.” Daniel’s voice lowered. “We’re not taking Tesco and his men.”

Colton’s group frowned.

Mark was relieved. “How are we going to get out of that?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Daniel looked toward the Seer’s cage. “But I have a very dangerous idea.”

Mark brightened. “Awesome! I’m with you all the way. What is it?”

Before Daniel could go talk to the Seer, a new line of residents, arms loaded, came through the tunnel with smiles and hope.

Daniel groaned. “We’re never going to get out of here.”

Mark felt the same way. “That’s the real trap. The longer we’re here, the more the odds go down on us leaving.”

“Oh, we’re leaving. Count on it.” Daniel went back into Tesco’s cubby and resumed bartering with the SAC citizens.

Chapter Nine
Have Faith
The Plane

1

“**I**t’s been four hours. They should have been back by now.” Alice bathed Jacob’s head, but she no longer had faith that it would bring his fever down. All of the men were burning again and this time it wasn’t easing off. They couldn’t take much more.

Alice had come back in to help a little while ago, unable to stay away. She was terrified for Jacob and for herself. “Maybe we should send someone to check on them.”

“No.” Alexa fought the voices in her mind and the misery of her body to do her duty. “Mark and Daniel will cover it.”

Alice stopped an ugly response. She peered through the curtain and saw Emmie smiling as she rested in a seat near the cockpit.

Fresh anger went through her mind, but Alice didn’t pick a fight even though she wanted an outlet. She made a final call on her future. She already knew she couldn’t go to the island with Alexa’s group when they left here. *But that doesn’t mean I have to stay here with her!*

Alexa pried her lids open. “We have another problem coming.”

“Great.”

Alexa pulled on the rope holding her arm in place. “Bradley will handle it. You’ll help him.”

Bradley had been listening; he hurried to the window. “I don’t see anything...” *But I feel it. The plane drew dangerous people.* “How do you want me to handle it?”

“Send them away.” Alexa’s voice hardened. “If they won’t go, *make* them.”

Bradley headed for the door. “Come on, Alice.”

“I’m not leaving him.” Alice was scared that every breath would be Jacob’s last.

Bradley glared at her across the plane. “Do as you’re told!”

Alice bared her fangs.

“Exactly. You’ll make sure I get back on this plane alive. That’s why she picked you.”

Alice didn’t want to leave Jacob; she didn’t care about duty. “Maybe they aren’t a problem.”

Alexa shut her eyes. “We need that path clear for our people to come through with the cure. If you don’t handle it, they’ll have to fight their way through.”

That couldn’t be argued with. Alice forced herself to stand and pull up the hood of her cloak. “We’ll make it quick.”

Bradley opened the door and stepped out into the afternoon wind with Alice on his heels.

Ria entered coach class and resumed helping Alexa's men. She didn't speak, not sure if Alexa wanted silence or not.

"You don't have to be so timid."

"It's my nature now."

"David would help you with that if we had more time."

Ria heard the tone. "But we won't, will we?"

Alexa shivered. "No. Our time together is short."

Ria sighed miserably. "I've been alone my whole life. I'll adjust."

"Alice feels the same way. Perhaps you girls should stay together until after the final battle." Alice had untied Madelyn and put her on guard duty while she recovered from Emmie's unexpected hit.

Ria tried to face it. "What happens after that final battle?"

"David will come get you if he still feels the same."

"Will he?"

"That has not been revealed."

Both women stilled as ugly vibes surrounded the plane.

2

"Here they come."

Alice and Bradley lifted their shields as a wave of danger swarmed the bridge.

Alice suffered the sunlight without revealing how much it hurt. She'd learned to adjust, just like Alexa and her men had.

Bronco and his men met them at the front of the plane. They didn't speak, but they were glad the council member had come out. The bad feeling was growing stronger and the threat wasn't even in sight yet.

The jungle around them wasn't still and calm anymore. The wind had picked up and the undead were still staggering in. Bronco and his team had already handled a dozen of them.

Five more wandered out of the trees as they waited. Hungry snarls filled the air as they staggered forward.

Alice rushed out in a blur, long knives taking heads off.

Bradley looked away, stomach turning. He knew the undead had to be handled, but he still felt bad for them. It wasn't their fault they'd been cursed in such an awful way.

Alice wiped her blades clean on leaves, waiting. She heard more of them coming.

At the other end of the bridge, a team of hunters stepped from the jungle.

Bradley and Bronco rotated toward the danger in tandem.

More undead came out of the jungle toward Alice, keeping her distracted.

Bradley whistled.

Alice realized he was unprotected now. She ran to his side, adding her shield to his. The undead followed her.

Alice stiffened as she spotted the new people. “Nomads.”

Bradley muttered, “Powerful, too. Be careful. We may not be able to handle them all alone.”

Alice knew he was right. The man in the front of the steadily approaching group was tall, thin, and mean. The thick shield over his team crackled with unused energy.

“Don’t hit the plane.” Bradley began drawing his energy for the fight.

Bronco stepped in front of the council member. “When it starts, you go get on the plane.”

Bradley wanted to protest, but the group was too close now. He put on a smile instead, ignoring the undead clawing at their layered shields. “Hello.”

The front man stopped a few feet from them, also ignoring the undead who snarled and beat on his shield. “Good day, travelers. Welcome to the SAC.”

“Are you the greeting party?” Bradley shook his head at Alice when she would have spoken.

Point man grinned. “That’s a beautiful plane.” He pushed around the undead for a better view. “I’m Raymond. These are my brothers. We live here.”

“I’m Bradley. We don’t.”

“Funny.” Raymond scanned the plane again, smile widening. “You have a lot of room.”

“Actually, we’re full up.” Bradley scanned the man and felt weak gifts waiting to be used.

Raymond continued to eye the 747. “We won’t take up a lot of room. How much for a ride?”

“To where?”

“Anywhere but here.”

Bradley frowned at their filthy condition. They blended perfectly with the jungle behind them. Even their wrinkled, sun-scarred skin fit right in. “You don’t live in the compound.”

Raymond kept smiling. “No.”

“Why not?”

“The water doesn’t like us.”

“Then neither do we.” Bradley got ready to fight for all of their lives. “No ride. Please leave.”

“Or what?” Raymond stepped closer. “You cannot defeat all of us and you have no crew on that plane who can. We’ve been watching. You are alone.”

“I said no to your request. If you don’t leave, I’ll tell Alice to drain you dry.”

Alice realized he wanted her to use her vampire skills. She nodded eagerly, thirsty. “At your call.”

Raymond scoffed. “One girl against all of us? Even a descendant could not accomplish that.”

Alice bared her fangs. “Leave. Now!”

Raymond twitched, not expecting that. “Interesting.”

The others in his group retreated, paling and crossing themselves.

Bradley pushed the moment. “We’re all very hungry. Perhaps we should have you in for dinner...”

Raymond held up a hand, retreating. “We are leaving. There is no reason to be rude.”

“Says the man who wants to steal our ride.”

“I only wish to share it.” Raymond turned around and walked toward the jungle. “You should reconsider my reasonable request. When we come back, even your blood drinker will not be enough to stand against all of us.”

Bradley didn’t ask for details or gloat. He watched as the men vanished into the jungle, followed by most of the undead that were still being ignored. “He’s a big problem.”

Bronco nodded. “Agreed. Get back on the plane.”

“You, too. We’re done standing watch out here.”

No one argued. It clearly wasn’t safe.

“Did you see they weren’t packing?”

“Yes.” Bradley was impressed that Alice had noticed it too. “This might be the quietest fight we’ve ever had.”

Alice laughed. “On their side. We’re armed.”

“They weren’t happy to find a vampire, but they weren’t shocked by it either.”

Alice heard the frown in Bradley’s tone. “What are you thinking?”

“They’re part of a founding family line.”

“Which one?”

“Abbots. We’d feel it if they were Mitchels or Livingstons and the other two are so rare they might as well not exist.”

“Shouldn’t you feel it now since you’re an Abbot?”

“I’m not an Abbot. I have no idea where that rumor started.”

“My mistake.” Alice didn’t know much about that nomad family. “Are they as dangerous as we are?”

Bradley knew she meant both Livingstons and Mitchels. He reluctantly nodded. “Abbots thrive anywhere and they aren’t scared of much.”

“Great.”

He didn’t want her to be stressed. “They don’t have one like you on their side however or they would have reacted differently.”

“How so?”

“If they knew more about your kind they would have pushed you into the sun and taken me as a hostage. It’s really not very hard to kill a vampire, you know.”

Alice thought about Jacob and sighed. “Yeah. I know.”

Bradley went straight to Alexa as soon as they were back onboard. “They’re gone, but they won’t stay that way.”

Alexa forced words out though her burning throat. “Have faith in my men. I do.”

In the seat next to her, Jacob strained, arms breaking the ropes. He rolled over and wrapped his hands around her throat.

“Help her!”

“Jacob, stop!”

Alexa brought up her fire shield. Flames popped out across her hot, scarred skin and spread down to Jacob’s hands.

Bradley and Alice flinched away from the heat.

Jacob let go and dropped to the ground at their feet. He began shaking uncontrollably.

“What did you do to him?!”

“She didn’t do anything. He’s having a seizure.”
Bradley rolled Jacob onto his side so he would be able to breathe easier.

Alice watched in horror as Jacob’s entire body flopped around. Only Bradley’s big hand under Jacob’s head kept him from a concussion on the hard floor.

Alexa withdrew her flames and jerked her arms free of the burned ropes. She used what little energy she had left to send a calming spell over Jacob.

Jacob’s body slowly stilled. The occasional twitch ran through his lean frame and then he settled back into unconsciousness.

Watching from her seat, Emmie was disappointed that Jacob had survived, but she didn’t try to help his demise come sooner. It was in fate’s hands. She was confident that would be enough.

Alice didn’t know what to do now. “Should we put him back in the seat?”

“Leave him here in case he has another one. Keep an eye on him.” Bradley turned around to check on Alexa.

Alexa staggered toward the rear of the plane.

Bradley followed, hoping she had a solution. “How can I help?”

“I need something I can brew in.”

Bradley didn’t question why even though he had heard her say she wasn’t good at it. They had no choice but to try on their own. It was obvious that the team had run into problems at the compound. “I’ll find something.”

Alexa opened the small storage compartment near the bathrooms and reached in with a withering hand. She pulled Jerry out. He hit the floor next to her, too weak to even groan.

Jerry had been drained repeatedly on the flight here, but she had insisted on him surviving. “And this is why.”

Alexa dragged the dying man to coach class, leaving a gory trail of blood and human waste.

Emmie and the others watched as she began to cut the man’s ragged clothes off, curious and revolted. None of them had ever seen what was about to happen.

Alexa didn’t care about the witnesses. This was part of the dark magic that existed inside all of them. She had refused to embrace it before now.

“So much for your moral line.” Emmie couldn’t resist gloating.

Madelyn glared at her mother from the cockpit doorway. “What good are morals if your team dies?”

“Exactly. Alexa’s always put her ethics above everything else. It’s a good dose of reality for her.”

“Oh, shut up, mother!”

Emmie did, smirking.

Alexa drew her knife and began to hack off body parts while Jerry was still alive.

Pitifully weak screams filled the plane.

Bradley hurried over to the cooking area and grabbed the large steel pot that Ria had used for soup last night. He dumped the leftovers into the trash can and quickly wiped it out.

Ria turned on the burner to have it ready.

Bronco brought over his canteen and dumped it into the pot as soon as Bradley set it on the burner.

Alexa pushed by them to put the first few dripping body parts into the pot. “Put it on high. Keep it there until it boils and then turn it down to simmer.”

All of them were repulsed by the order. She sounded like she was delivering a recipe.

Alexa ignored their upset stomachs and her own. “We need eyes on the windows again.”

Bronco’s men hurried to do that so they didn’t have to watch what would happen next.

Alexa dropped to her knees next to Jerry. “Thank you for your sacrifice, Jerry. Your debt to me is almost paid in full.” She stabbed her knife into his guts and ripped upward.

Dark magic filled the plane.
Jacob started shaking again.
Panic filled Alice. “We have to bring his fever down!”

“Use venom to push it out.”

“Will that work?”

“I don’t know.”

Alice decided it was worth a try. She bit into Jacob’s neck and began transferring venom.

Emmie and the others watched in fascination, fast minds figuring out secrets that Alexa hadn’t wanted them to know.

3

“They have a vampire!” Raymond came to a stop in front of Rosetta.

Rosetta slowly uncurled from the ground, yawning. The information was useful, but she still glared. “I didn’t tell you to make contact with them yet.”

“Dad told us to do a recon and push a few buttons.”

“Your father spends all of his time in the compound. He has no idea what’s really going on out here.”

“Everything he does is to bring us back together.”

“Everything he does is to keep his empire together.” Rosetta turned away before Raymond could continue arguing. “Go give him the update he

asked for and remind him that we are not dealing with easy-to-frighten residents. Those are Mitchels. Making contact was a mistake. He needs to change his plan now.”

“Fine!” Raymond stalked through the jungle.

The undead who had followed him from the plane continued to dodge his heels like unwanted pets.

The rest of the group stayed with Rosetta. There were two dozen identically dressed men waiting in the small thicket now, with more on the way. Theirs was a large family that had continued to grow even in this harsh environment. Rosetta Abbot understood the need to outbreed her enemies.

The men around her were all brothers. She had given birth to each of them over the last two decades. Even now she might be carrying another precious life or two. *And I'll have them born somewhere other than here.*

“Delaying their team was a good idea, but Tesco is underestimating who we are facing. When everyone else arrives, remind them of how deadly these encounters can be. If they follow Tesco’s orders this time, it’s going to get all of us killed.”

Luis smiled at her. “We’ll be fine as long as he gets into that weapons room. Even a vampire can’t stand up to a bullet. We know that for sure.”

Rosetta patted her empty holster wistfully. “I miss the sound of gunfire.”

All of them did. Over the years, most of the guns that had been here had rusted out or they’d been

traded away. They had bullets to spare and almost no guns to put them in.

Luis started to follow his twin brother and then stopped, turning back toward his mother. “What if he doesn’t get into that room?”

“Then we’ll still attack and probably all die. One way or the other, our imprisonment here is almost over.”

4

“It’s working. His fever is coming down.”

“Do the same for the others while I work.”

Alice was relieved. “Remember to put something of yourself into the potion. My dad always did that and it made them stronger.”

Alexa had already added drops of her blood and her venom. “Tell me about your escape from Joel. I know you held something back.”

Alice tensed. “Save Jacob’s life and then we’ll talk.”

“That’s not a fair trade. I’m going to do that anyway.”

“You don’t care about that tale. But I do know something you need.” Alice saw Emmie had gone to the bathroom. “I’ll help you defeat my mom when she asks for your death.”

“And in return?”

Alice stared at Jacob in love and fear. “Don’t let him forget me while we’re apart!”

“You have a deal.”

In the next compartment, Eva listened while rubbing her stomach.

5

Jacob felt like he was on fire. He'd never been this hot, not even during the summer when he had worked with his uncle putting tar onto new roads.

"I can end your suffering. All you have to do is say yes."

Jacob kept his eyes shut, using their battles in the Killing Fields to guide him through this mental hell. He knew he was physically sick as well, but he only had time for the hulking demon that had trapped him in this dirty cubby.

Flames ran over his hands.

Jacob groaned at the torture, but he refused to open his eyes. He was certain as soon as he did that he would lose this battle. He wasn't sure exactly what was happening, but it seemed to be a combination of a vision and a nightmare.

In the past, he had fallen back on his faith to get him through the nights. Now, he was a true killer on Alexa's team and his faith was nowhere to be found. It wasn't like when they had saved Mark. He'd had all of his team around him then. Now, their bodies were littering the tunnel outside this cubby where they had fallen.

"Let her go!"

"Never!" Jacob held tighter to Alexa's body, not sure if she was alive. She had taken blow after blow

as they came through the tunnel, protecting her men while they ran from the monster in the darkness.

He was out of weapons and ammunition now. His energy banks were drained from trying to heal her and from keeping a shield up while they ran. Edward had fallen right outside the door, commanding him to keep Alexa away from the demon. Jacob was trying his hardest to do that.

“Why do you hold onto someone who only uses you? All she deals is death. Your end will be no different.”

Jacob moaned as the pain increased. He could feel the flames running over his arms and legs. Even his hair was on fire. “I’ll kill you for this!”

“Let me show you how death will feel!”

Jacob’s hands clenched into fists that dug his nails into his skin and drew blood. His screams drowned out the sounds of the flames burning everything around him. He still refused to open his eyes. “Alexa!”

Jacob jerked awake, gasping.

The heat receded from his body slowly as he opened his eyes.

“Jacob?”

Jacob refused to close his eyes this time, even to blink. He stared at Alice’s pretty face in relieved terror. “It’s coming for her.”

Hearing that twice in a row was starting to creep Alice out. She put a cool rag on Jacob’s head. “Try to stay awake now. I can’t take it when you’re asleep.”

Jacob blinked in a blur and then opened his eyes as wide as they would go. “Neither can I.”

Jacob rotated his head and saw Alexa laboring at the stove. The pot in front of her was steaming, putting off a smell that turned his stomach and made his fangs distend.

Alice nodded in sympathy. She understood. It was gross and making her hungry at the same time.

Jacob regarded his team. Their conditions weren't encouraging, but he was relieved to find them alive. His nightmare hadn't come true yet. *But it will. They're going to release the monster and then we're all fucked.*

Chapter Ten
A Full Cup
The Compound

1

“You guys have been here for years.” Mark was tired of walking in silence. They’d finally cleared the residents who wanted a ride. Now they were on the way to get the weapons. “Why don’t you have all of these tunnels cleared?”

Tesco grunted. “This section has been cleared many times, but the undead keep getting in from an entrance we cannot close.”

Daniel scanned to be sure they were all still together. This dim tunnel was narrow but not quiet. The shifting earth made more noise than he had expected. “Too hard to reach?”

“You could say that.” Tesco grimaced. “It’s on the other side of the river.”

Daniel realized he’d been smelling water since they entered this section. He realized what that meant. “We have to go through the water to reach the weapons.”

Tesco chuckled. “Why do you think we couldn’t reach it ourselves?”

“You’re a sneaky little bastard.”

Tesco's three men glared at Daniel. They were right behind Tesco, providing a small barrier of protection.

Tesco straightened in pride. "Of course. I'm an Abbot."

Daniel put aside his anger for the moment. "Give me the layout so I know what I'm walking into."

Tesco stopped in front of a thick metal door. "There is a large area split by the river bank. Directly on the other side is our destination. It sits on a platform so it doesn't flood, but the creek is too wide to be jumped over."

"Is there a bridge we can put across it? A long board or something?" Daniel didn't want to be tested by the water again. His shirt still hadn't dried out from the first time.

"There is a bridge you can lower, but only after you reach the other side."

"Yeah, that figures."

Colton and the others waited for Daniel's decision.

Daniel started to tell Mark to wait here in the tunnel.

Mark felt it coming. "I go where you go."

Daniel suddenly wished Alexa was with them at that comment. He swallowed his emotions and gestured. "Bring up your shields. We can push them all the way through to the water. Then you'll have to keep them busy while I go across to lower the

bridge.” Daniel lifted his shield. The rest of his team did as well.

Tesco slid aside to let them go first.

“Let me guess; you’re not a fighter.”

Tesco pulled the door open. “I have other skills.”

“Yeah, that figures too.” Daniel glared at the man as he went by and muddy undead by the dozens turned toward them. “Tesco and his men don’t have shields. Someone needs to keep them covered.”

There wasn’t time for anyone to protest as the undead reached them and began beating on their shields.

It was an ugly ten minutes just to push halfway to the river. Daniel and Mark were reminded of Bradley’s tale about how Alexa had saved him in Port City. Neither of them were sure how she had held up so long against a dirty undead mob with two men to protect. Keeping their shields solid while being attacked was the hardest thing either of them had done with their gifts so far. They were grateful for Alexa’s training.

“This is taking too long!” Colton dropped his shield, stabbed out with his knife, then quickly brought it back around his body. “I can’t keep this up.”

Colton knew his team was running out of energy, too. They hadn’t been drilling with shields the way Alexa had done with her men.

“Just hold your shields. Mark and I will switch off and give you a break in two minutes.”

“I have a better idea.” Colton dropped the shield and whistled. “Clear them out!”

Mark and Daniel watched in pleasant surprise as Colton and his team hurried forward while drawing their longest knives. They engaged the undead, cutting through the front wave in seconds.

“They’ve been holding back!” Mark and Daniel both dropped their shields and joined in.

Daniel hadn’t wanted to fight this way because the risk was so much greater. He never wanted to tell Alexa he had gotten a teammate killed, even if it was someone else’s team. Knowing Colton’s men preferred to fight this way was a relief and also made him a nervous wreck.

Now in the rear of the group where there was no protection, Tesco and his men were forced to defend themselves. Their movements weren’t as smooth, but they were effective.

They all made it to the water a few minutes later, with most of the undead down and only a dozen left in sight. Those few were still coming this way, but slowly.

The river stretched 20 feet in front of them and ran in clear rippling liquid that made everyone thirsty. It was pristine.

Colton piked the muddy undead man closest to him. “Resume clearing.”

Tesco and his men stayed behind their protectors, letting them do the rest of the work.

Daniel headed for the water.

Mark fell in on his heels, nervous and excited at the same time. This test would tell him if Alexa's influence had been enough to alter him from the murderer he'd been when he went to the dark side and had to be caged like an animal. He stepped into the knee-deep water with tense shoulders and legs that were ready to jump and run.

The water embraced both men in a cool wave and then quickly receded. There was no hesitation this time.

Daniel was soaked, cold, and relieved. He quickly strode through the water that reached his waist in the middle and then lowered as he walked straight across. Less than a minute after entering the water, he was standing on the other shore waiting for Mark.

The weapons cubby was dug into the side of the tunnel and looked like a small hut with a narrow steel door set into a wooden frame.

Mark hurried to the cubby and pushed the button on the pad next to the lock.

A long bridge swung down from the ceiling, dropping dirt, cobwebs, and spiders. The end of it swung wildly across the river.

Tesco was there to catch the rope as it reached the other side. He gave a sharp pull and the rest of the bridge dropped, making awful noises.

Daniel saw where their side was supposed to be attached to poles that had been beaten into the ground near the bank. He and Mark placed their

ropes over those poles, straining to get them in place. The wooden planks pulled tight, creating a bridge.

The bridge dropping triggered a new wave of undead toward them.

“We’ll handle this.” Colton and his team stepped forward while drawing the shorter knives they used for close combat. Colton got them into a line at the end of the bridge to keep the undead from coming across.

Another small horde of zombies came through a side tunnel, making him rethink that choice.

“Get on the bridge.” Colton ran forward, shoving a zombie ahead of him.

The zombie fell off and hit the water.

The water immediately surged over the filthy undead man and pulled him under.

“That’s helpful!”

Colton nodded at Asher’s excited call. The men brought up their shields and used them to bump the undead into the water where they were quickly washed away by the current that seemed to strengthen with each addition.

Across the river, Daniel entered the weapons room and stopped. Dusty shelves and empty crates lined the walls. The only weapons in sight were disassembled firearms laying out on the cluttered counter. The cubby was only six feet wide and half that deep. There were cobwebs, piles of fallen dirt, but no swords or knives.

Tesco and his men hurried by and grabbed the guns.

“You lied to me.” Fury filled Daniel, opening a mental door to a new gift.

Tesco quickly assembled a gun and slapped in the mag that he pulled from his pocket. “I told you I’m an Abbot. We do that, too.”

Daniel’s fury blasted out in a sonic wave that hit all four men and slammed them into the empty shelves. The gun fell from Tesco’s hand.

Daniel ran forward with Mark.

Fists and kicks rained down on Tesco, subduing him.

Tesco’s men put their hands in the air, hoping for mercy.

“Don’t kill him yet.” Daniel glared at Tesco. “Because you lied, all of our deals are off. The magic is broken.”

“No! You have to take us out of here!” Tesco began screaming.

Mark decided the man hadn’t been hit enough. He unleashed his anger in half a dozen ugly punches that silenced the noise and took Tesco to the ground.

Daniel nodded his approval. “Get used to that feeling.”

Colton and Asher came in, drawn by the noise. The rest of their team was guarding the bridge.

Colton stared. “Where are the weapons?”

“Exactly.” Mark had expected a magic fight with Tesco. “Why isn’t he using his gifts?”

Daniel tore into Tesco's mind. "Because he doesn't have anything except basic mind skills and mood charms. He's almost a normal!"

Colton stopped short of smacking his own forehead. "That explains it! He's powerless. His bits of magic have been from his wife."

"Power rubs off." Daniel had noticed that pattern with Alexa long before his gifts had popped. He grabbed Tesco's shirt, pulling him toward the exit.

Mark followed. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"To the only place where I can get a straight answer. And then I have a promise to keep." Daniel dragged the struggling, bleeding man across the bridge, making him scream again as the water reached out and tried to pull him in.

"That's mine!" Daniel yanked Tesco free and dragged him across the bridge and then into the tunnel.

Tesco's pathetic screams and cries echoed, pausing the happy chatter and packing of the compound residents. They came to the doorways of their cubbies to find out what was going on.

Tiring of the noise, Daniel delivered a healthy punch that dazed Tesco. He pulled the man by the curious people without an explanation.

Many of them smiled at Daniel and then resumed packing.

Daniel went straight to the Seer.

The Seer came to the door of his cage, smiling. "I love that sound."

Daniel saw wrinkles and scars all over the Seer this time and remembered Tesco's words of how fast the demon went through human bodies. He pushed that observation aside and stepped toward the cage. "Is this a good time for you?"

The Seer chuckled. "It is always a good time for a feeding."

Daniel chuckled without humor.

Tesco groaned, trying to wake fully. He knew he was in danger, but he'd taken a hard beating.

The Seer stepped closer to the door. He stared in recognition. "You smell like a Mitchel. You act like a Mitchel." He sniffed the air. "But you are not one."

Daniel still wished he could give a different answer. "Only by association."

The Seer peered down at Tesco, who was barely conscious. "I warned you about lying, did I not?"

Tesco couldn't answer. He was in too much pain.

"I need some information and then I need an antidote for a magical curse. Let's make a deal."

Colton's team all frowned as they realized Daniel was about to trade Tesco's life, but they didn't interfere even though it would restart the fighting between their families.

The Seer studied Daniel as he spoke. "His soul is too corrupt to fuel me for very long."

"One step at a time then. How much for the information?"

The Seer leered at Tesco, pupils dilating at the smell of the man's blood. "He will cover that. Ask

the questions you want, with mild cooperation if I so desire.”

“And for the cure I need? It has to cover a dozen people.” Daniel thought it was a good idea to overestimate the size of their group, but he also wasn’t sure if some of the others might be infected and the curse was just taking longer to activate.

“Ten more bodies like him.” The Seer stared slyly. “Half that number if the souls are good.”

Daniel already knew he couldn’t do that. He regarded Tesco’s men, who had been bound and brought along by Colton and Asher. “Where do I find seven more bad guys around here?”

The Seer answered immediately. “That number and many more will come to you. All it will take is the right noise.”

Daniel wasn’t satisfied with that. He needed the Seer to get started on the potion. “Will you take these three lives as a down payment and get the brew rolling now?”

“Yes.”

Tesco’s men began begging for mercy. They didn’t have power of their own either.

Daniel ignored them. “Do I just hold him up here so you can reach him?” There was no way Daniel was going to open the door, not even to shove Tesco inside.

The Seer leered. “You must keep them alive. All sacrifices must be delivered at the same time. If you fail to meet that obligation, your life will be forfeit in their place.”

Daniel grunted. “Well, that certainly makes things harder.”

The Seer waited patiently. Time was all he had now.

Daniel held out his hand as Mark started protesting. There really wasn’t another choice. “I agree to your terms.”

The Seer reached through the flap in the door and clasped Daniel’s hand.

Pain ran up his arm in tiny flames and faded slowly. *I just made a deal with a devil.*

The Seer chuckled. “You are not the first to think that and you will not be the last.”

“Perhaps.” Daniel felt like Alexa at that moment. He was following her training and his own instincts.

“I believe I was promised a lifeforce in exchange for information...”

“Yeah, I did promise to feed you.” Daniel hefted Tesco’s mostly limp body up to the flap so the Seer could reach him. “He’s all yours. Happy munching.”

The Seer consumed Tesco in one huge gulp. Daniel actually saw Tesco’s lifeforce get sucked out of him like a straw, leaving a withered husk groaning at his feet.

Daniel used his boot to crunch through Tesco’s neck. “Now, the information.”

The Seer belched out a spell that swarmed Tesco’s screaming, struggling men.

Daniel felt chills run over his arms as the men went still and quiet all at once. “What did you do to them?”

“They must tell the truth now.”

Daniel stared at the men, a little horrified at what he’d done.

“I have a question for you.”

The Seer bowed his head slightly to Mark.

“Do you see the future?”

The Seer stared at him in annoyance. “Is this a trick question?”

Daniel snorted. “He means *your* future.”

The Seer hesitated.

Daniel glared at the spooky man. “We have a deal in place. If you withhold information, that’s the same as lying. I won’t tolerate that.”

The Seer glared back. “I am not allowed to view my own future unless it is specifically requested by someone purchasing my services.”

“Interesting.”

The Seer studied Mark suspiciously. “You will try to find a way out of our deal because time will run out before you can collect the other seven lives that you need. I have seen your future, *Convict*. In it, you lose.”

“Can that future be changed?”

“Any future can be changed.”

Mark started to ask another question, but Daniel stopped him. “That’s enough. We’re not betraying our deal.”

Mark reluctantly backed down. Daniel was the team leader right now. His seniority on their crew demanded respect and even now, Mark gave it.

“You are very well-trained.” The Seer sniffed the air again curiously. “Who were you trained by?”

Mark opened his mouth to answer proudly.

Daniel put a fast stop to that. “Our deal was for information from your side and lives from my side. If you want that information, you’ll have to make another deal for it.”

Mark snapped his mouth shut, realizing he had almost given away valuable knowledge.

The Seer chuckled. “I have no need of such information. Our deal stands.”

Daniel stepped in front of the nearest nomad. “Where is the fuel?”

“In the tankers.” The charmed man waited for the next instruction.

“What?”

“I thought we had to go restart the refinery.”

“He lied again!”

The charmed man didn’t react to the anger of Colton’s men. “The tankers have to be driven to the bridge. We got the fuel ready months ago, but we have no one to fly the planes.”

“Tesco lied about everything.” Daniel wasn’t surprised, but he was furious.

“Yes.”

Mark took over the questioning. “Why did you want us to clear the weapons room?”

“To get the guns.”

“What was supposed to happen after you got the guns?”

“With the guns, we will take captives and force the pilot of your plane to take us wherever we want to go.”

“Why do you want to leave at all?”

“We cannot conquer the world from here.”

Daniel kept it going when Mark’s anger locked his jaw. “How many more are there? How big is your group?”

“There are almost 100 of us now.”

“Damn.”

“Not good.”

None of them had expected so many.

Daniel mentally talked to the Seer. *What do you want more than anything?*

Freedom!

Help me get my full crew on that plane, with the fuel and the potion we need, and I’ll break the charms that hold you here.

Deal! The Seer belched again and covered all of the nomads with another obedience spell. “They will do whatever you want, tell you anything, take you anywhere.”

Mark flinched, spooked this time. “He just made them undead.”

Daniel didn’t feel sympathy for the men. “What do you need for the potion?”

The Seer opened the flap. “Pass your items and a cup of blood.”

“A full cup?” Daniel eyed the nomads.

The Seer denied that. “It must be from those who are purchasing the brew.”

Daniel passed Alexa’s pouch through the flap, then drew his knife and got ready to cause himself pain. “Who has a cup?”

“Do you really believe that’s a good idea?”

Asher added his support to Colton’s protest. “That’s not just any blood you’re giving him.”

Daniel was forced to reveal a detail he wasn’t sure that Alexa wanted anyone to know. “That’s not how you become like us.”

Everyone who heard that stored the information to dwell over later.

Daniel instinctively ran his tongue over his pointed fangs to taste the venom. “Does it matter where we take it from?”

The Seer shook his head. His eyes dilated again in anticipation.

“Upper arm.” Daniel slid his cloak aside and lifted the sleeve of his shirt.

Mark did the same. “Of all the times I’ve been injured, most of them didn’t come from my own blade. Is it just me or does this feel odd?”

Daniel chuckled. “Remember when she had us do this for Jendon?”

Mark grinned. “Those were the days.”

“This was caused by a death potion.” The Seer sniffed the bag deeply. “A powerful one. A troll brewed this.”

“What happens if we don’t get the cure?”

“The victim will take their own life at the peak, though there will be attempts before that. It all depends on the victim’s will to live.”

“I’ll go first since we only have one cup.” Daniel didn’t give Colton time to pull more cups out of his cloak. He dug the tip of his blade into his arm, steeling himself against the pain and then sliced downward.

Colton quickly put the cup against Daniel’s arm to catch the blood.

Daniel clenched and unclenched his fist to get it pumping out faster.

When it was halfway full, Colton handed the cup to Asher, neatly taking the rag that Asher had gotten out. He wiped Daniel’s arm off and then gave the man a sympathetic look. “Sorry.”

Daniel hissed in pain as Colton put his big hand over the dripping wound and sealed it shut with his fire hand gift.

Mark made a face. “Can I just have a Band-Aid?”

“No.” Daniel forced out an even tone as Colton let go. “We have to have matching scars or Edward will never believe we did this.”

Mark laughed as he dug his blade into his own arm, proving he was just as crazy as everyone else. Blood gushed out.

The Seer’s nose twitched. “I love that odor more than any other on this earth.”

Colton used his fire hand to cauterize Mark’s wound as soon as the cup was full.

Mark refused to scream no matter how much it burned.

Daniel put the cup through the flap.

The Seer drank it down greedily instead of putting it into one of his pots.

As they watched, his wrinkles and scars vanished to show them a handsome man in his prime with twinkling eyes and full lips that curved into a satisfied smile.

“You taste good.”

Before they could form an answer, the Seer went to his caldron and threw up into it.

Mark turned away. “Okay, then.” *I hope we don't have to drink that.*

Daniel scanned the den again, attention caught by one of the skeletons hanging from rusted chains on the dirt wall. It still wore a faded ball cap. *That bothers me more than the hanging bodies.* “How long before it's ready?”

The Seer didn't turn from the cauldron where he was now adding items from jars. “Sunset.”

“We'll be back.” Daniel rotated toward their zombied captives. He picked one, ignoring the rest. “Take us to the fuel tankers.”

The team followed the charmed man into the main tunnel of the compound, leaving Tesco's other men there.

None of the team looked back at the Seer this time, but they all felt that dangerous man watching as they left.

The Seer's eyes glowed red. *Once our deal is done, I will hunt them both. I need those bodies.*

The Seer smiled. "Or maybe I'll go along for their trip to Pitcairn. Yes, let's do that. It's perfect considering that Adrian helped to imprison me here all those years ago. A visit is long overdue."

Chapter Eleven
He Made Kids

1

“**H**ow long until sunset?” Daniel’s watch had stopped working during their winter break. He hadn’t replaced it because time usually didn’t matter anymore.

Mark checked his. “Six hours.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. I’m sure things like he’s brewing take time.”

Colton wanted to be clear on what they were doing now. “Do we go get the fuel while we’re waiting?”

Daniel had already made that choice. “I want to verify it’s there, but we’re not moving the tankers yet. That’ll make noise and draw more problems to the plane. We’ll do it all at the same time.”

The team was satisfied with that choice. Many of them looked around, trying to figure out how they would spend the free time.

“We should keep vetting people.” Colton frowned at Daniel. “You didn’t really check most of them.”

“They’re only giving people a ride out of here. Why do they have vet them at all?” Wyatt didn’t want to spend the time working.

Colton frowned. “They’ll be around Alexa, and your mother.”

Wyatt stared back. “So?”

Even Damon disapproved this time. “They could overwhelm us and take the plane.”

Wyatt snorted. “We’re staying here, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Damon shrugged. “Still, it’s not right to send problems with them. We’ll help vet their passengers.”

Wyatt realized Damon had just made a team choice. “Who made you leader?”

“I have a better idea.” Daniel wasn’t in the mood for a leadership fight when he didn’t want either of Emmie’s boys in charge. “Let’s shut that other entrance so you guys aren’t overrun like these people have been.”

“Great idea.” Colton shook his head at Asher when the man would have protested.

Daniel thumbed toward the zombied man standing nearby. “Ask him where it is.”

Colton did that immediately, hoping Asher would follow his lead like usual.

Asher knew there was a reason Colton had agreed even though he hadn’t figured it out yet. He supported his team leader by shutting his mouth.

Daniel knew those two were conspiring about something, but he was going to keep them busy for

the next six hours so they wouldn't have time to implement any plans.

Colton glared at Tesco's man. "Where are the other doors?"

"A mile behind the weapons room there are two doors."

"Are they latch setups like here?"

"Yes."

"Why are they still open?" Colton didn't believe Tesco's word on that either.

"Tesco blew the doors open after the war and refused to rebuild them."

"Why did he blow the doors?"

"It kept people dependent on his skills."

"What skills?"

"Abbots gather the undead."

Colton sighed. "That explains why there are so many of them right over top of this compound."

Mark scoffed. "Dirt walls are not a compound."

The zombied man blinked. "The compound is inside the pyramid."

Daniel was instantly curious. "Take us there."

The zombied man turned eerily and walked into a dark tunnel that the team hadn't been in yet.

Daniel followed with his hand on his holster.

They only walked for a couple of minutes and then the zombied man stopped and pulled open a dirt panel that was actually a sheet of rusty metal that blended in perfectly.

They entered Tesco's home carefully, stepping over a lot of stock that was packed and ready to go. There were also full crates of ammo but no guns.

"Now this is more like it!" Mark did a fast scan to clear the dirty corners and then he hurried to the ammunition and began loading up. "This is what I've seen in the movies."

The inside of the pyramid held everything Mark had been expecting. The smooth, neatly chiseled stones even had hieroglyphics. "I wish I had studied that in school."

"I'm glad you didn't. It's probably a curse of some sort and I just don't need to know." Daniel grinned to show he was joking.

The team spread out, exploring a few feet into some of the tunnels that were coming off of this one. All of them had the same smooth cut stones and hard packed dirt floor as the first room.

"How big is this place?" Daniel had been wondering that since they arrived.

Colton considered. "As far as I know, it takes up the entire pyramid underneath it, plus another 10 miles in various directions."

"Where do all these tunnels go?" Mark wasn't eager to follow any of them, but he couldn't help being curious.

"Some of them go to empty burial chambers and preparation rooms." Colton studied the many exits. "I'm sure one of them will take us to the very top of the pyramid, but I don't know which one."

Mark glared at Colton now. “You don’t seem surprised by this.”

Colton shrugged. “I was in here once as a child. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if I had dreamed it. That’s why I didn’t say anything when Tesco was feeding us his bull.”

Daniel let it go, accepting that all of the Mitchels around them had more information about this place than they did. Going into unfamiliar locations was something he had gotten used to while traveling with Alexa.

Mark entered a tunnel and came right back out. “That one dead ends.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re not on an archaeology expedition.” Daniel was becoming a little annoyed with Mark.

Everyone else heard it. They eyed Mark, waiting for his reaction.

Mark missed it in favor of studying a small sheet of paper laying on top of a molding box. “I think this is a map.”

Daniel came over.

Neither of the men touched it. The parchment was fading and brittle. They were afraid it would fall into pieces.

“It looks like he was mapping out the pyramid. Those aren’t any of the tunnels we’ve come through.”

Mark wanted to take it. “Maybe we can put it between some towels?”

Daniel didn't see any use for it. "We don't have time for this."

"If we get trapped in here, we'll be sorry we didn't take it."

Daniel stared at Mark. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Mark shrugged. "That's the same look Alexa gives me when I surprise her. You're doing a good job. Lead on."

Daniel chuckled. He couldn't help it. Mark's attitude was part of what made being on Alexa's team so much fun. *I'm just not usually the one who has to deal with him.*

Daniel carefully collected the paper, wrapping it between layers of towels before putting it into his cloak.

Mark had been curious about the family living spaces since going into the old man's den to deliver the water. "Where is the Mitchel family section?"

Colton's face tightened. "We don't have one. We use visitor spaces just like anyone else."

Mark heard the tone. "Then you have a base somewhere near here, right?"

Colton grunted. "Good guess. We used to. When the Abbot family split happened, the topside group killed the Mitchels who were living up there and then burned the cabin to the ground. Now we use the visitor quarters and avoid topside."

"I'm surprised you didn't seek revenge."

"Some of our family did. It didn't go well. Abbots are great fighters and they know the lay of

the land. It's best not to challenge them unless you have an army ready to comb them out of the trees."

"But Tesco wasn't strong."

"Only the topside Abbots are. Living under the ground isn't good for them."

"What about the other people here?"

"Did you see a lot of kids?"

Mark frowned. "No."

"Exactly. Being underground isn't good for people at all, just like being in a lab under the ground wasn't good. We need the sunlight as much as the plants do."

"One of these tunnels has a huge bed and nothing else." Asher rejoined the team and faced the zombied man. "What did Tesco do in here?"

"He made kids."

"Excuse me?"

Mark came over to them. "What did he say?"

Colton waved him off, still speaking to the zombied man. "How many kids?"

"Tesco has fathered more than 40 children during his time here."

"Where are they?"

"He sent most of them with their mother when she was banished. The others are among the residents."

"So he cheated on his wife." Asher was against that, strongly. It was why he wasn't married. He hadn't found a woman he could be faithful to. Eva might fit that bill, but he wasn't sure yet.

Mark waved angrily. "He bred an army."

Daniel grunted. “One we’ll have to face. I’d say right as we’re leaving.”

Mark had caught something else. “Why wouldn’t they want to stay here? It has everything.”

Wyatt snorted. “There’s no action. We’re already bored and it’s only been a few hours.”

Colton had another question for the charmed man. “Was Tesco really planning to take over the world or did he go crazy while he was split from his wife?”

“Yes, to both. Tesco’s wife was not at his side to keep him sane. He wanted to take over the world, one birth at a time.”

“Even 40 kids isn’t enough to do that.”

Asher groaned. “It is if they’re magnets or alphas.”

Daniel joined them. “What are magnets again?”

“They can draw people over thousands of miles and inspire extreme loyalty.” Colton didn’t give more details because he didn’t have them. Magnets were rare.

“Even when the person is bad?”

“Yes.”

Mark shrugged. “What about their kids? If Tesco was almost normal, will his offspring have gifts?”

Colton shrugged. “Hard to say for sure if his wife is powerful, but after breeding so many kids, she can’t be strong anymore. I’d bet half of his army doesn’t have power at all.”

Damon thought about Alexa. “Should we send someone to the plane and let them know it’s going to be a while?”

Daniel had already thought of that. “No. I don’t want to lead people to our ride.”

Wyatt pointed out the obvious. “Tesco’s army knows where it is.”

“Yes, but they’re not going to attack without his order.”

Mark kept adding in new information. “He’s been meeting with the banished side of his family. If he misses their next meeting, it might tip them off.”

Daniel nodded. “But I think we need to be more worried that he already activated that plan.”

Colton asked the charmed man. “What was Tesco’s plan for our ride?”

“His boys are to surround the plane and demand a ride. They are not to attack without him. One of his children will come here at sunset to verify they are all in place and then he will give the order.”

Mark kept thinking it through, like he’d been told to do. “Why not use their radios?”

“No batteries. All forms of fuel here have been used.”

Daniel wasn’t surprised that everything was coming down to one time period; he was glad. “Sunset it is. Until then, we still have two exits to close and people to vet.”

Mark didn't believe they had enough manpower to get it all done by then. "Let's have the residents help."

Colton nodded. "They'll have to go through the water. That will clear them or not." He liked that idea.

Daniel sighed. "It's the *not* I'm concerned with."

Colton understood. He didn't like the pain of others either.

Wyatt didn't get it. "What's the problem?"

"I don't want to see them reclaimed. I have enough nightmares already. I don't need more."

Most of them agreed with Daniel.

Mark shrugged. "We'll resume interviews after we handle the open exits."

"Let's do some more looting now in case we don't get back up here." Daniel caught Colton's unhappiness and shrugged, but he didn't out the man in front of Wyatt and Damon. He'd figured out what Colton was planning; he didn't have a big problem with that team taking over this gritty compound, but Wyatt and Damon likely would. "Bust up a few of these crates. We'll use the wood to close the holes."

Daniel shoved the zombied man ahead of him. "You can come along in case I have more questions."

Colton fished out more information that he needed for the future. "What are you going to do

with Tesco's kids after we defeat them? Assuming any survive."

Daniel's eyes lit up. "If they attack, they'll be consumed or killed. The Abbot family might still be reunited, in hell."

Colton smiled. "Now we have a Mitchel plan."

2

Daniel was glad they had left the bridge in place so he didn't have to go through the water again. Because it was so close to the water, the few remaining undead who tried to cross were still being pulled in and washed away.

The team quickly crossed the creek and went around the weapons cubby. Behind it, the tunnel widened so much that Daniel was positive vehicles had been driven through here at one time. Not recently, though. Huge cobwebs stretched across the tunnel in multiple places. "Light."

Mark quickly lit a torch and took the lead, using the flames to burn through the webs.

Small and large spiders fell or scurried away angrily.

"Covers on."

The entire team put their hats on so they would be protected from the bugs that were crawling all over the ceiling above them. Because this tunnel had been empty for so long, nature had taken over it.

Daniel didn't like the feel of the ground in this tunnel. It wasn't hard packed and dry like the others. He remembered Tesco had mentioned flooding, but Daniel kept going. It hadn't rained since they'd landed. As long as that held out, they should be okay.

There didn't seem to be any other tunnels or rooms in this section, though Daniel spotted deep ruts on the sides that confirmed his suspicion about vehicles. He assumed this was how they had gotten some of the larger equipment into the compound.

As they walked, Daniel realized there was a breeze coming through here. *It smells like afternoon sunlight.*

Daniel frowned at himself. He wasn't sure where that description had come from, but he was positive that when they emerged the environment would be exactly like that—bright and warm.

As far as he was concerned, that was the best thing about coming to this country so far. Winter had settled into America; it was freezing there. Here, it was a balmy 65° and rising. The warmth felt good.

Zombie man stopped and turned to the left.

All of them realized there was another tunnel. It was so dark that they would have walked right by it if the charmed man hadn't stopped.

Mark again took the lead, burning away cobwebs from the empty tunnel. There were a few rocks on the ground, but that was it.

The tunnel went for half a mile and then seemed to dead end.

Zombie man walked into the wall. Except it wasn't a wall; it was another passage that blended in perfectly.

The team followed him up circular, dirt-cut steps. As they traveled, light began to trickle in from above them.

Mark hadn't realized how far underground they were until now. The steps wound up for almost a full minute, telling him they were probably 50 feet below the surface. Knowing that made him even more relieved when bright sunlight streamed in above them. He no longer feared it, though he did tighten his hood.

Mark put the torch out and stored it.

Daniel went to the doorway, seeing rough bark all the way around the frame. He couldn't see the roots of the tree, but he assumed this entrance had that same set up. He peered out quietly, hoping there was no one around.

"It's clear." Daniel led the others out into a mostly cleared area around the base of a giant Iquitos tree that was petrified. Ancient logs hung over their heads, ready to fall at the least provocation.

The rest of the area around the wide tree was covered in thick vines, except for one narrow path that went back toward the bridge. It was lined in the center with gravel that hadn't been disturbed in a

long time. Vines and leaves were all over the road, disguising most of it.

“I think we can do a fast patch job here.” Asher was already examining the tree to determine where they could attach the boards. “I need some long nails.”

Colton began digging in his cloak. Nails were something he had been collecting for years as they traveled. They always came in handy.

“Three on guard duty. Everyone else helps.” Daniel wanted to get this done as soon as possible and move on to the next entrance. Since this one had been abandoned, he was assuming the second one would be covered in undead that would have to be cleared, but the sun above them was already marching across the sky. He wanted to be back in the compound by sunset to collect the potion.

Two of Colton’s teammates that Daniel hadn’t been introduced to took up guard positions.

Mark covered the third spot, patrolling between the two stationary men like Alexa had trained them to do for a three-man guard crew.

The sound of nails being hammered into wood began to echo through the jungle.

Everyone stayed alert, watching for problems.

3

Half an hour later, Asher and Colton stepped away from the tree. “It’ll be hard to get supplies in

and out of here, but there are other entrances for that.”

Daniel approved of the barrier that went all the way over the entrance. The two men had even created a workable hinge that would allow the door to swing open, though only by a couple of feet.

“I just need to put a latch on the inside and then we’re all set.” Asher retreated into the darkness to do that.

Colton followed, standing on the stairs to protect Asher from that direction.

Daniel switched places with Mark on guard patrol so the man would get a small break before they moved on.

Standing by himself in the bright sunlight, the zombie man blinked. The fresh air had been clearing his mind.

Mark felt danger sweep through the group, but there was no time to avoid it.

The zombie man pulled his gun and put it against Mark’s side. “Throw your guns on the ground.”

“Damn it!” Daniel realized his mistake. “I didn’t ask how long that charm would last.”

Mark stayed still. “Don’t know why we didn’t disarm them either.” It was a huge error.

Colton hated it that they’d all overlooked those two issues. “Yeah, the others probably ran off to tell Tesco’s sons that he’s dead.”

The unzombied man was furious at the news of Tesco's demise. "Listen to me! Drop your weapons!"

Asher kept working on the latch. "Somebody handle that."

The annoyance in his voice made Daniel chuckle.

Tesco's man glared at all of them. "I said drop your guns!"

"How about we have a drink first?" Before the man could reply, Mark spun around, knocking the gun into the air.

Daniel was there to catch it.

Mark crunched into the man's neck with a groan of delight. He began to suck, stomach growling.

"Don't be greedy. Pass the bottle."

Mark wiped his mouth on his sleeve and shoved the trembling man toward Daniel.

Daniel drove his fangs into the other side of the screaming man's neck and gulped down that sweet red treat.

The rest of the team watched in fascination as Alexa's men passed the bottle until he had to be held up for them to continue drinking.

"Full?"

Mark wiped his sleeve across his mouth again. "No, but he doesn't taste that good anyway. I'm done."

Daniel quickly slit the man's throat. He left the body where it fell and headed for the stairs. "We'll have to search out the other open door on our own

or call it good enough; whoever stays here can handle it themselves. Vote.”

Wyatt was dirty and getting tired. He was also bored. “Let’s go back. I’m tired of doing their work for them.”

Damon was still trying to be part of the team. “I say we find the other exit. We still have a couple of hours to kill until sunset anyway.”

Daniel listened to all of the opinions, counting while Asher finished the latch. When they were all done, he motioned to Mark. “Get the torch lit up. We’re going to search for an hour. If we don’t find it, we’ll go back to the compound and resume interviews.”

Asher latched the door and tugged on it. When it held, he stored his tools and then jogged down the steps. “Once this place is secure, it’ll be a great den.”

Colton didn’t say anything, but he definitely agreed. *It’s almost good enough for a Mitchel.*

Chapter Twelve
Let's Hear It

1

“That is not a doorway.” Mark gawked at the dirt exit that was easily 20 feet high and twice as wide. It was surrounded by dented cars, rusty trucks, moldy crates, and heavy equipment. “We can’t close that.”

Asher did a quick scan. “I think this was a hub.”

Daniel nodded. There was big machinery here, along with three dozen personal vehicles ranging from small to heavy duty. There were winches and pulleys and even a generator that was covered in leaves and debris. All of the vehicles had flat or missing tires and several of them had hoods up.

“Maybe they were reduced to using them for parts.” Mark suddenly wished Billy was with them. “How is it possible that all of this was going on here before the war and no one knew about it?”

Colton looked over. “What makes you believe they didn’t know about it?”

Mark had assumed only compound residents would have been going in and out, but it was entirely possible that the nearest towns had also done business here. “Why didn’t the government shut it down?”

“I don’t have an answer for that.” Colton really didn’t, though he had theories.

Mark insisted. “What do you think?”

Colton gave the one he felt was the most likely. “I think everyone here was being studied. It was common for the scientists to leave nests of founding families alone for decades while they studied natural evolutions in the power of their offspring. Then they just had to round them up when they were ready to put them into a lab.”

Daniel was still examining the huge entrance. “Either way, we can’t shut that with some nails and molding boards.”

“Maybe we can get a few of these old cars started and use them to block the tunnel.” Mark sighed. “Billy could do it.”

Asher stiffened. “I hear voices.”

Daniel motioned the man to track it. If there was another threat around here, they needed to know what it was. There were also 100 loose Abbots to account for at some point.

Asher walked into the sunlight and headed for the trees behind the abandoned vehicles.

Mark and Daniel neatly pulled their hoods tighter. It was their only reaction to the light. Drilling with Alexa in the lake had toughened them up.

The team followed Asher through the muddy jungle while trying to ignore the bugs that wanted to eat them. The warm weather also had a downside. They hadn’t noticed the insects on the way in. Mark

was sure they were close to a bigger water source now because of that.

Asher went across a series of downed trees instead of going through the shallow creek when they came to it.

The water under the team still rose up and tried to reach some of them.

Wyatt hurried across.

Mark and Daniel smirked.

Asher pointed through the trees. The team lined up around him, blending into the foliage.

The one-story farmhouse in front of them was three times the size of a normal house, extending from both sides of the wooden front door. It was wide, tall, and well-built. Pastures and barns surrounded it on all sides and then the jungle was there to meet the property and keep it hidden.

In the large front yard, kids were playing and working while being watched by bored teenagers on a sloppy patrol.

Daniel motioned the team back to the tunnel so they wouldn't be heard. He didn't speak until they were back inside the cool dimness.

"Who are they?" Daniel thought he knew, but he wanted to be sure.

"Abbots." Colton was sure of it. "They're all tall, thin, and brown on brown."

Mark was curious about the other founding families. *Are they all color-coded, too?*

"We should attack now, while it's just the young ones." Wyatt wanted to wipe them out. Being

around Tesco had reminded him that he hated Abbots. “I say no survivors.”

Daniel was horrified. “They’re just kids!”

Wyatt shrugged. “Yeah, Tesco’s kids. They’ll just have to be killed later.”

“No.” Colton wouldn’t do that either. “Mitchels don’t kill kids. I know your Livingston side has no problem with it, but we’re better than that!”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

Colton bristled. “Do you really want to do this now?”

“No.” Daniel led them through the tunnel. “We’ll talk about it later. Come on.”

The others made sure Wyatt also followed, not trusting him.

Daniel gestured. “Tell me what you saw.”

Mark liked it that Daniel was handling things the way Alexa would have. “A huge house. There are a lot of people living there.”

Asher nodded. “There was a tower on top of the house, but it was empty.”

“Keep going.”

Damon ignored Wyatt’s embarrassed anger to give an answer. “I saw a well. Their homestead is self-sustaining, except maybe for the power.”

Mark agreed. “I’d bet they use the same water generated power that goes through the compound.”

Colton pointed out something more important. “None of them were armed. They had empty holsters. And there were no adult guards; it was all kids.”

Mark wiped dirt from his shoulder, ignoring the burning wound on his arm from where Colton had cauterized it. The fire hurt worse than his knife had. “There were two corrals, but no horses. I didn’t see any animals at all.”

Daniel participated even though he’d asked the question. “There was a large shed behind the barn. I could see the roof. It had a watchtower, too.”

Colton scanned behind them while subtly making sure Wyatt hadn’t run off. “There were power lines coming from the trees. It was a complete set up. They put a lot of time into that place. I wouldn’t be surprised to find out they also have plumbing.”

“A family that size better have plumbing!”

People snickered at Damon’s comment.

Wyatt pointed out a sudden realization. “Mark was right. There’s no reason for the Abbots to want to leave.”

“That’s all good, but you’re missing the most obvious issue.” Daniel gestured. “Mark?”

Mark had gotten it first. He’d been waiting for Daniel to ask, to complete the lesson. “Where are the adults right now? What are they doing while their kids are alone?”

Daniel smiled. “Very good.”

Mark enjoyed the praise, but it wasn’t as good as when it came from Alexa.

Asher slapped the dirt wall. “He’s right! Tesco’s man said 100 in total, but we only saw about 15. Where are the others?”

Daniel grunted. “There’s been one big noise here in the last day. They went to find it.”

Mark groaned. “So we have an army to handle before we can fuel the plane and get out of here.”

“Yes.”

“I assume you’re working on a plan for that?”

“I’m working on several.”

“And?”

“And in the end, it will come down to lead, like it always does. Don’t miss when it starts. We’re not sparing them just because they have a herd of kids.”

Mark’s frown grew. “Alexa might.”

Wyatt ignored Damon’s signal to shut up. “Not in this case. Abbots are seriously unstable as parents. If she saw this, she might order us to destroy it all.”

“I’m not hurting the kids and neither are you!” Mark was ready to end the man now. If Daniel called it, he would make it happen.

“Fine. No adult survivors. Got it.”

All of them knew they would have to keep an eye on Wyatt when that fight started.

“I saw something else back there.” Asher kept his voice down. “Actually, it was something that I didn’t see.”

Daniel waved at him. “Let’s hear it.”

“Where were all of the undead that have been getting into these tunnels?”

Daniel stopped.

So did everyone else; they exchanged looks that said they should have noticed that already.

Asher went on even though the others understood. “We’ve been fighting undead since we landed. If they’re coming in through this tunnel, then why didn’t we see any of them? They only had teenagers guarding that farm and none of them were armed. We’ve already confirmed that. If there were undead out there, shouldn’t they have already broken through those small guard posts around that homestead?”

“Yes.” Daniel began to evaluate the tunnel around them. “That means there’s another exit.”

Mark scowled. “This tunnel isn’t the door Tesco’s man was talking about.”

Daniel was upset with himself. This wasn’t the first big mistake he’d made today. “I only asked about a door, not an entrance for supplies.”

Groans went through the group as they realized they still had more work to do.

“Now that Tesco isn’t here to keep gathering them, will the undead go away?” Mark was hoping for that. He hated giving mercy to former people.

Colton nodded. “Probably, as long as we don’t make a lot of noise.”

“Well, so much for that idea.” Mark was even more worried about their ill team now. “I say we go back to the plane. All those missing Abbots have to be at the bridge by now.”

“I still think we should grab a few hostages. The people at the bridge will surrender when they realize we have their kids.”

“What is it with you and hurting kids?!” Damon shocked everyone by yelling at his brother. “Something is seriously wrong with you!”

“You’ve met our father, right?”

Damon let out a frustrated sound. “That doesn’t mean we have to be like him!”

“Can we do this brotherly therapy session another time?”

Wyatt spun toward Asher. “Why?! You got some place better to be?!”

“No, but it’s drawing attention.” Asher pointed.

Daniel and Mark pulled their knives as they turned. They automatically assumed the company wasn’t friendly.

“Undead are coming out of the walls!” Damon backed up, freaking out.

“It’s a tunnel, you idiot.” Colton and his men slid by to deal with the undead.

Mark and Daniel kept an eye on the brothers. All of them had experience fighting the undead. Unless they were in a herd, they were relatively easy to deal with. Wyatt and Damon were bigger threats.

Colton was in his element now that he didn’t have to keep a shield up. He led the way, not giving his men time to fight as he sliced at the same time with both arms and took the heads off of the two zombies reaching for him. He ducked under the swipe of the third one, bringing his knives around together to slice through its waist. The zombie fell into pieces at his feet.

“And that’s why I love that man!” Asher was also in his element. He already liked it here.

“Fire up that torch up. Let’s see where this one goes.”

Half of the group wanted to protest Daniel’s call, but none of them did. Being caught off guard had embarrassed all of them.

The new tunnel didn’t have any cobwebs or stones; it was muddy and covered in small tree limbs and other debris that had obviously washed in.

“This is where the water is coming from.” Mark motioned toward the small prick of light he was already able to see.

He extinguished the torch for a second time, giving it a few seconds to cool off before he stored it in his fireproof bag. All of the team carried one for moments when they needed to quickly extinguish a light.

Wyatt made a connection. “That would explain why all of the undead in the compound have been so dirty. They slide down.”

Asher sneered. “They’re not very smart. A lot of them probably fell in.”

Wyatt gave him a dirty look, but didn’t fire an insult back.

The team gathered around the large entrance that was 15 feet above them. The muddy, sloped hill to get up there was covered in new and old tracks. It was impossible to tell how many people, or undead, had come through here.

Daniel tried to figure out what had happened. “It looks like part of the tunnel collapsed.”

Mark pointed toward the ceiling. “Tesco really did blow it open.”

Everyone spotted the charred marks on the tree that lined the right side of the entrance.

Shadows passed by, staggering slowly.

Daniel put his fingers to his lips and then pointed toward the base of that charred tree, where half of a set of steps remained.

Daniel eased up those stairs, being careful not to slip in the mud. They didn’t go all the way up, but it was far enough for him to get a clear glimpse outside.

Daniel scanned and then slid to the side so Mark could also come up and see. Then they both went to the bottom of the stairs to keep from drawing attention from the hundreds of undead who were roaming the property outside the entrance.

“Tell me what you saw.”

Mark frowned, but it wasn’t because of Daniel’s order. “A small water plant with chained doors; someone tried to make a stand in there. Those locks are so rusty I doubt those people are still alive.”

“I saw what used to be the refinery. I think there was an explosion. It’s all gone.” Daniel’s gut was a ball of acid. “No idea what caused it. I doubt Tesco would have destroyed their only fuel source.”

The rest of the team returned from getting a look and stood around Mark and Daniel while they discussed it. They also added their own views

automatically, like any Mitchel team did. They had recognized the method of making sure a leader got all the information.

Colton kept an eye on the opening. “I saw water trucks behind the plant.”

Asher watched the tunnel they’d come through. “There were a lot of roads leading away.”

Mark scanned the high ceiling. “There was only jungle to the left. To the right was a clear area.”

Daniel scanned the ground. “The clear area had water. I saw blue against white against blue.”

Damon tried to keep up by sweeping all of those areas as he spoke. “There were several other buildings behind the refinery. Most of them were intact. It wasn’t a fuel explosion or all of the buildings and the water plant would have been taken out.”

Wyatt knew he was supposed to do a sweep to restart the circle, but he didn’t. “You think that fire was intentional.”

Daniel frowned at the man. “Yes. The other buildings probably would have burned too if it had been an accident. Why?”

“I’m just wondering if it was a trap to keep everyone here.”

“If so, it worked.” Daniel motioned at his teammate. “Tell me what that all means and I’ll make sure the boss knows your brain was still working even though your mouth was flapping on this run.”

Mark scowled at Daniel. “You’re not the boss of me!”

Daniel smiled. “Yes, I am. Tell me what this means.”

Mark stomped through the tunnel. “It means that the fuel in those two tankers is all we have. We have to get them secured right now before we do anything else.”

“Very, very good.” Daniel followed his teammate with a churning gut. “If we lose that fuel, we’re stuck here.”

“What about this entrance?” Colton still wanted it closed.

So did Daniel. “Bring it down.”

Colton stopped, confused. “What?”

Daniel kept walking. “We’re shutting it from here. Collapse this part of the tunnel.”

“How?”

Daniel motioned to the grenades on Wyatt’s belt as he went by the sullen man.

Wyatt began to grin, mood lifting. “Whatever you say.” He loved explosions.

The others hurried out of the tunnel and toward the main compound.

Wyatt only waited a few seconds before tossing a grenade and then running to join them.

Boom!

Wyatt laughed as the others broke into a run to avoid the falling dirt. “I could get used to this place!”

Colton gave Asher a pointed look.

Asher acted like he hadn't received the message loud and clear. After Alexa left, Wyatt and Damon would be dealt with, Mitchel style.

2

As they neared the main compound, Daniel spoke to Colton. "How do I keep my deal with the Seer?"

Colton grimaced. "You can't let him loose!"

"Just answer my question."

Colton did it reluctantly. "Someone has to take his place, *willingly*."

"Shit."

Mark glowered. "That's what Tesco meant when he said he had the same dilemma."

Half of the plans Daniel had been working on collapsed. "Even bad guys have to be willing."

Colton was angry that Daniel was considering freeing the Seer. "Even if you could convince someone to do it, it's wrong!"

"Why was he imprisoned instead of being removed?"

"I don't know."

"Who put him in there?"

"Alexa's father, I think."

Mark thought of the trees back in Nebraska. "It was for those who came after him."

Daniel nodded. "Which means he expected it to be Alexa and she would never let such evil free to roam the earth, not even to save herself."

Mark had to ask. “What about to save one of us?”

Daniel slowly nodded. “Then she might agree to it, but she’d trick him somehow. I’m not as skilled as she is.”

“You shouldn’t let him out.” Mark agreed with Colton on that.

Daniel shrugged. “I only said I’d free him. I didn’t say I’d let him live.”

“We can’t kill a Seer.” Mark didn’t know much about that type of descendant, but he did know that. “We’re not strong enough.”

“I know.”

“So what’s your plan for that?”

“I’m still working on it.”

“Well, do it faster.” Colton took them up the steps to where the fuel trucks were located.

He gently opened the latch and peered out.

“Go back!” Colton pushed them down the stairs, pulling the door shut. “There’s fifty undead around this exit, at least.” It was one thing to be prepared for that many. Rushing out into the middle of a herd without a plan wasn’t recommended.

“Are the trucks there?”

Colton nodded, automatically giving Daniel the information this time. “I saw two fuel tankers to the left, about 30 feet from where we are right now, but that’s also where most of the undead are. It’s also harder to see. The sun’s going down.”

Asher frowned. He didn’t like Colton following anyone’s lead but his own. “What now?”

Daniel also frowned. He hadn't realized it was so late. "We use a decoy."

Asher tried not to get snotty with Daniel. "Do you have something in mind?"

"I have *someone* in mind." Daniel looked at Wyatt.

Wyatt retreated. "Not me."

"Come on. It's time you and your brother showed those mad bike skills."

Damon was getting excited. "We've never gathered a herd of undead before."

Wyatt started smiling. "We haven't, have we?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "They're just as crazy as we are. Great."

The others chuckled.

Daniel gave instructions. "Ride right through them and lead them away from the road. I don't want them following the trucks to the plane."

Wyatt still tried to find a way out of it. "They'll hear the noise of you starting the trucks."

Daniel had it covered. "Not if you make a bigger noise. Toss a few pineapples and get your asses back to the plane."

"What about the cure?" That still mattered more to Mark than the fuel.

"I'm staying here until I get it. The rest of you will take the trucks to the plane and guard them. I'll join you."

Colton lifted a brow. "And if you don't?"

"Then come back guns blazing and get that cure any way you have to."

Mark stared. “You’re not thinking about doing something stupid are you?”

Daniel sighed. “Already thought about it. Now I’m doing it.”

Daniel waved the bikers up to the door. He waited until they assembled their bikes before motioning Colton’s team to take the lead. “Clear a path and get to those trucks.”

Colton started to wish Daniel well. Then another thought went through his mind. *Alexa killed your team leader.*

Colton stiffened. He went out the door without another word to any of them.

Mark grunted. “Same to you, buddy.”

As soon as everyone was out, Daniel shut the door and latched it. They had the easier job as far as he was concerned. *Please God, don’t let me die down here in this mess. I want to go out with my team by my side and Alexa leading the way. Nothing else is worth everything I’ve been through and done.*

Reading his thoughts, Mark nodded. “Amen.”

Both men went quiet as voices echoed up from below. A long line of residents were moving by the stairs with their arms loaded and their minds full of excitement that was coming out in happy chatter. It was obvious that they were thrilled to be leaving.

“Tesco’s dead. Why are they still fleeing?” Mark had assumed that was the reason everybody wanted to go.

Daniel considered that. “His family, maybe?”

Mark gave Daniel a knowing look. “Maybe. Or maybe Tesco was never the real threat.”

“The Seer.”

Mark nodded. “Deep down, these people know he’s about to be free.”

Daniel winced, but he didn’t deny it. “She told me something before we left.”

Mark had wondered if Alexa gave Daniel any special instructions. “What was it?”

“She said to handle everything here like she would.”

That explained why Daniel had been treating him so roughly. Mark didn’t believe his behavior had been different than normal, however. “Well, make her proud and it’ll all work out in the end.”

“You think?”

Mark snorted. “Of course not, but it’s what we all signed up for, so do it and I’ll be there when you need me.”

“Stop it. I’ll cry.”

The men shared a quiet chuckle, but the feeling of bad things to come only grew stronger.

“We’re on a new side quest, again.”

Daniel nodded. He’d known that since meeting Tesco. “What do you think our goal is here, our real goal?”

Mark had already come up with a short list, but none of them felt exactly right. “Ask me again as we fly off.”

“Will do.”

Both men listened to the fighting start outside the tree door with only a little longing to be part of it. The excitement of this place had worn off. All they wanted now was to leave with the cure and the fuel. The others could fight over control of the compound. Mark and Daniel wanted no part of it.

Chapter Thirteen
Team Meeting

1

The sound of the tree door opening immediately drew the undead.

Colton and Asher hurried out without their shields up, but they knew they weren't going to be able to fight their way through this time. There were dozens of undead now turning toward them with angry snarls and crunching steps drew even more. They began to stagger through the trees.

Damon and Wyatt quickly pedaled forward, zigzagging around the undead that reached out for them. Neither man fought as they rolled, just trying to get by the herd.

Wyatt pedaled hard, ducking swipes and plowing into bodies that his bike bounced over top of. He was thrown into the air and came down roughly, never letting go of the handlebars. His feet quickly found purchase and resumed pedaling as a grin stretched across his face.

Damon took a path to the right, shouting to draw the undead their way. He hopped his bike over a fallen log and then leaned over the handlebars, pedaling hard to catch up with his brother.

The undead around the two fuel tankers slowly began to move away from them, but most stumbled toward Colton's team.

Damon pulled the pin and tossed the grenade to the left. He steered to the right, now counting in his head.

Colton's team began fighting toward the fuel tankers.

Kaboom!

The explosion lit the jungle around them in a fiery display that got attention from people in every direction, undead and live.

Colton ran faster, dipping and diving underneath outstretched arms. He made it to the first fuel tanker and yanked the door open.

Asher went over the top of the front of the first truck, trying to reach the second tanker.

Behind them, half of the undead were pulled toward the explosion while the others followed the team.

Kaboom!

Colton held the door for two of his team and then quickly climbed in, slamming it against another herd coming out of the jungle.

Asher held the passenger door of the second truck until the rest of their team was inside, and then he slid back over it to go in the window between the trucks. There wasn't enough room for the undead to get between them; the trucks were parked that closely together.

Colton reached for the keys to start the engine.

His hand found empty space.

“Son of a bitch.”

In the truck next to them, Asher came to the same realization. “We didn’t get the keys!”

Both men began to search the truck as more undead came from the jungle around them.

Behind the trucks, Wyatt and Damon circled around, hoping to catch a ride.

A new horde of undead emerged from the jungle, blocking their path.

“We’re surrounded!”

Wyatt made a fast choice and picked the nearest thick tree that would hold their weight. “Up!”

Damon saw Wyatt jump off of his bike, bringing it along with a neat move. The bike was slung over his shoulder, leaving his arm free. Wyatt scaled the tree as undead reached the front of it.

Damon skidded around to the rear of the tree. He copied his brother’s move to bring his bike with him and quickly climbed the rough, mossy branches to get out of reach.

Dozens of undead tried to climb the tree, but they didn’t know how to do that anymore. They swiped at each other and scratched at the tree, snarling and grunting.

“Now we’re trapped.”

Wyatt held onto the tree, trying to catch his breath. “But I’m not bored anymore.”

Damon’s laughter floated through the air and enraged the undead below them. Their angry noises

drew more zombies, clearing a path for the fuel tankers to leave.

2

Still standing on the stairs of the dim tunnel, Daniel turned to Mark. “Do you trust them?”

Mark snorted.

Daniel nodded. “Alexa and the rest of our team are down right now. It would be a perfect time for someone to take charge of our plane and fly off without us.”

“You want to split up.”

“I don’t think we have a choice. You make sure the plane stays under our control and I’ll bring the cure.”

Mark didn’t want to leave Daniel alone with the Seer. “He’s dangerous, man.”

Daniel knew. “Is there another option?”

Mark slowly shook his head. “I guess this is why we make the big bucks.”

Daniel gave the expected chuckle, but he didn’t feel it. “Watch your six.”

“Always.” Mark opened the door a crack and watched for a clear moment. “You have an hour and then I’m coming back for you.”

“You’d better. I’ll make a terrible zombie vampire.”

Mark slipped out, snickering.

Daniel latched the door while hoping splitting them up was the right thing to do. He went down the

stairs, also hoping there wasn't another line of residents wanting to barter passage. He still had no idea how he was going to get everyone to the plane alive.

3

“What now?” Asher looked across their teammates, through the open windows of the tankers.

“We make our own keys.”

Asher reached into his pocket.

Colton also pulled out his kit and handed it to the man next to him until he was ready for it. This wasn't the first hot wire they'd done, though it hadn't been under such stressful conditions. All of their team carried the equipment to do it. “We have a few things to discuss before we go any further as a team.”

Colton's men had no problem with a meeting; they'd been expecting it since leaving Port City. All of them settled in to listen while keeping an eye on the undead through the rear window and side mirrors. They didn't care about Damon and Wyatt. Those men weren't on their team.

Undead slapped the truck and growled, unable to think clearly enough to reach them.

“Our first topic of business is the accusation that was made. Before we get into that, however, I have a question for our new XO.”

Asher tensed as everyone rotated toward him. He already knew what the question was. “I had nothing to do with it. I had no idea that Alexa was going to remove Levi. If I had, I would have warned him. I didn’t like him, but I was always loyal.”

“That wasn’t my question, but thank you for your honesty.” Colton busted the steering column. “Did you know Eva had feelings for you before Levi’s death?”

Asher didn’t act like he was ignorant, but inside he was scared of how this would appear to Eva. He didn’t want to lose her before they’d even gotten a chance at a future together. “No, and I’m not sure that she does. What did you catch that I missed?”

Colton knew it was a sensitive subject, but this had to be handled. “Eva has never endorsed any of us. She didn’t even give Levi her support when he took over this team in his father’s place. As soon as Levi died, she supported you completely, in front of witnesses. I didn’t even get to think about who I wanted as my right hand.”

Asher made a face. “Is that what this is about? Because I only accepted when everybody else threw in their support. If you don’t want me as your XO, there’s no need for a vote. I’ll step aside and you can pick whoever you want.”

Colton kept working on wiring the truck as he shrugged. “I didn’t say I don’t want you in that slot. I just need to be clear on how it happened.”

One of the undead hefted itself onto the front bumper of their truck, clawing for balance.

“As Levi’s widow, wasn’t it Eva’s responsibility to support someone so there was no in-fighting?” Jed rarely spoke, but he felt it was important for all of the information to come out. “Fights for control have destroyed a lot of Mitchel teams in the past. Perhaps that was her reasoning.”

Asher wanted to latch onto that, but he knew it wouldn’t look good. He remained silent as the rest of the team discussed it, fingers now stripping the plastic cover from the wires.

“That’s usually only for team leader.” Toby also spoke up reluctantly. He didn’t want a public face, but in this case it was necessary to keep the past from repeating. “New team leaders usually take a few weeks to evaluate everyone before the XO slot is handed out. This was a very fast handoff.”

“Exactly. Before we go further together with this setup, I need to clear my mind. Right now, it feels like we were all tricked and I don’t care for that.” No Mitchel did. Being fooled had caused more than one Mitchel to seek revenge on another. It was a major downfall of their family that not only could outsiders not trust them, but they also couldn’t trust each other.

Colton didn’t want that to tank his team. He wanted decades of success, love, and respect that would follow him into retirement where he hoped to be put on the family council. Nora, who had been killed by Elliot’s enforcers in Port City, would be replaced before then, but Bradley’s spot would open up next and Colton wanted it.

The undead man climbing on the front bumper of the truck lunged upward and made it onto the hood.

Jed scanned the mirrors, seeing Wyatt and Damon had made it to a tall, wide tree a quarter mile behind them. Most of the undead were clustering at the base of that tree. “I say we do a full restart. We get through this run and then we hold a team trial for those slots, including leader.”

Colton tried not to stiffen. “I will not protest that choice.”

Toby immediately did. “I like Colton as team leader. He’s always done a solid job for us. I wouldn’t be able to put my support behind anyone else, including myself.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed!”

The rest of the team that was there voiced the same opinion.

Jed shrugged. “I’m fine with that.”

Colton tried not to feel overly prideful, but he was relieved. He’d known there was a chance he would lose this slot when he brought it up. “We’ll still talk to the others about it after this run is over. I want a full consensus on my leadership. It feels wrong to start out any other way.”

Asher reluctantly spoke up. “I’m withdrawing myself as the XO until our team leader has had a chance to evaluate everyone for this position.”

“But not until after this run is done.” Colton didn’t want to be without a right hand right now.

“Agreed.” Asher was already mourning the loss of the slot, but he accepted it because it was the right thing to do. Unlike many in his family, Asher didn’t thrive on drama and internal strife. He only wanted what was best for his team. He always benefitted from that. He wasn’t as corrupt yet as the rest of his branch.

The undead man on the hood clawed noisily toward the windshield, staring at them with hungry sockets. He didn’t have eyes anymore.

“The next order of business is Alexa. I want opinions now; we’ll hold a full team vote later based on our general consensus.”

As the XO, Asher stepped up. “I think the biggest thing we have to decide is what we do about it if it is true. That will make it easier for us to decide the rest.”

“Agreed.” Jed handed Colton the next tool he needed to finish hotwiring the fuel truck. “This is an honest moment among teammates. There will be no holding back. There will also be no grudges held against disrespectful words.”

Colton went first. “I hadn’t been happy with Levi’s leadership in a long time. Being around Alexa reminded me of that, strongly. It’s entirely possible that she picked up some of my thoughts during one of our fireside coffee chats. If we find out it is true, I’m going to feel partially responsible. Because of that, I’m biased in this situation. I want that known.”

Respect went up for Colton. Honesty was often a hard for a Mitchel.

“My choice has nothing to do with Alexa. I got tired of the way Levi was always treating Eva.” Asher followed his team leader’s lead. “I’m also biased in this choice because over that time I developed feelings for her. Deep down, part of me wanted Levi gone. Now that it’s happened, I still feel that way, but I’m also carrying guilt for it.”

The zombie on the hood reached the windshield.

Colton drew his knife and kept it in his left hand while continuing to work on twisting the wires together with his right.

“I respected Levi as a fighter, but as a team leader he wasn’t worth a shit. How many years did we spend clearing out icy shit holes after the war when we could have been establishing a base somewhere? I’m not sorry that he’s gone. I don’t really care how it happened. I vote that we don’t do anything about it at all. I don’t even think we should tell the rest of the team.”

Asher shook his head at Jed. “I agree with everything you said except for that. Every person on this team deserves the truth so they can make up their own mind.”

Colton nodded. “All team members will be told of this conversation and the outcome.”

Colton reached out quickly and stabbed the undead man through the ear as it leaned around the window. He jerked his blade free, pulling the zombie off the truck and back to the ground.

Sitting quietly in the truck next to them, their other team member, Nolan, finally spoke. “I believe she did us a favor. She accomplished a lot of things by removing Levi. I’d rather thank her for doing what we couldn’t.”

Colton kept them moving. “So the general consensus is that we let it go. Even if she did do it, it worked out best for everyone, except for Levi. We’ve often made team choices that were best for the majority instead of the individual. Does everyone agree with that summary?”

Everyone did.

Colton got them onto the final piece of business. “Are we staying here when this run is done or do we want to go somewhere else? Now that Tesco is gone, it would be the perfect time for a Mitchel clan to move in here and take over.”

All of the team perked up, including Asher. They hadn’t agreed with Franklin and Alexa that it was time to stop conquering. “That’s why you were keen to help them clear the undead and plug the holes!”

“Yes. If we do it carefully, it won’t even be seen as taking over. We can assume control without a slaughter. That will get Alexa in our corner, I think.” Colton scanned the darkening path ahead of them and then the mirrors. “I’m starting this truck in one minute.”

Asher gave a quick nod and worked faster. “I’ll be ready when you are.”

Jed shut the tool case. “If we take control here, how long are we staying?”

Colton considered it as he put the toolkit into his cloak. “That would go to a team vote, but I’d say at least long enough to establish a Mitchel family base, so probably a decade, though we may go back in small groups to assist Safe Haven. That will depend on the council’s decision.”

The others considered that option and found it tolerable. They had spent a lot of time in cold areas, hungry and low on supplies. This compound had almost everything they needed. Once they got the refinery rebuilt, they would also have fuel. They could find a big city and scavenge for the parts they needed. It was a good setup.

Colton was happy with his team. He reluctantly brought up an issue that he’d been stewing on. “I don’t want to start another clan war, but it’s not a good idea to let Emmie and her sons stay.”

Asher realized they were about to make their first decision as the new masters of this compound. He weighed the options carefully. “I agree about Emmie and her boys. I think the girls are okay, mostly because Alexa has approved one of them as a match for her rookie. She’s an excellent judge of character.”

“That’s not official yet.”

“But it will be and we all know it. Alice’s devotion to Alexa’s man didn’t go unnoticed. And as you all know, Madelyn follows Alice in everything. I think we should let them both stay.”

Colton frowned. “If we do, that means Alice is off-limits until Alexa’s man makes his choice. I don’t want another family feud over pussy.”

“Agreed!”

“What about Bronco’s team and Roger’s girl?” Asher didn’t know the men very well and he didn’t know Ria at all.

“We need the manpower, and I believe Roger’s girl is in good with Alexa, like Alice is. I vote we let all of them stay.”

The team also agreed with Colton on that.

Colton tapped the dashboard. “We’ve made our official choice.”

He glanced in the mirror again, where more than 50 undead were snarling at the tree where Wyatt and Damon were. “Now all we have to do is figure out how to get rid of them without it looking like an assassination.”

Knock-knock!

Everyone in both trucks jumped as Mark knocked on the side of Colton’s rusty vehicle.

Mark grinned, stepping onto the railing next to Colton’s door. “I’m riding back with you.”

Colton’s lips thinned. He already knew why Mark had been sent with them. “I’m just about tired of you.”

“Aww. I bet you say that to everybody who gets one over on you.”

Colton was embarrassed that he had let Alexa’s man sneak up to the truck. He sparked the wires and

brought the truck to life. “Hang on. I doubt this will be a smooth ride.”

4

“Those were explosions!”

“It was close to us.”

“I hear an engine! They might have the fuel trucks!”

Rosetta’s boys made plans around her, but they didn’t do anything yet. She hadn’t spoken.

Rosetta had been waiting in the center of her sons. All of them were still following their father’s orders to stay with her even though that command had come years ago. Their family had been split up for a long time.

“Dad said he wasn’t going to take them to the trucks. That means he’s in trouble!”

Rosetta’s face was stiff with grief. “If they have those trucks it means your father is dead.” She was already sure of it; she’d felt it.

Everyone fell silent, waiting for her decision. She was now the head of their family.

“We need captives to trade for that plane. Half of us will go verify they have the tankers. The rest will go to the plane. Do whatever it takes to keep them on the ground.” Rosetta pulled a loaded gun out of her kit that she had been saving for a year now.

Around her, her sons did the same. Almost all of them had secured a firearm, though most had been

rebuilt. There was no guarantee of how long they would last or if they would even work at all.

“Remember what I said about the fuel. We need that. Use your darts and be careful. If they do have the trucks, don’t hit the drivers.”

The men around her nodded impatiently, eager for the action but also dreading it. Many of them had had ugly moments against Mitchels. Their reputation was well-earned.

“Save your magic. You’ll need all of that when we face the one waiting on that plane.”

Luis stayed next to his mother. “Who is it?”

“The daughter of the man who divided our family. It will be a hard fight and I promise you she won’t be taken alive.” Rosetta slid the gun into her holster with a feeling of completeness she had missed. “Who are we?”

“Abbots.”

“Who do we serve?”

“We serve ourselves!”

Rosetta nodded, stalking into the jungle. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

Chapter Fourteen
Good To Know

1

“**D**oes that look like a team meeting to you?”

Damon shifted around for a more comfortable position on the tree branch. “Yes, it does.” He had just been thinking the same thing. “Colton and his men should have already pulled away with the tankers.”

Wyatt waved off an annoying bug. “What do you think they’re meeting about?”

Damon pulled his hood up. “Alexa and her men, probably.”

“Perhaps we should do the same.”

“Now?”

Wyatt grinned. “Why? You got a better place to be?”

Damon chuckled. “Now that you mention it, no. Where would you like to start?”

Wyatt also yanked his hood up. The insects had come out in force with the setting sun. “Are you really trying to earn a place on her team or are you just trying to steal some gifts?”

Damon grimaced. “A little of both, I guess. Even though Billy said he would make me like

them, I don't really believe he will. I think you were right that he was testing my character."

"And you failed that test."

"I assume so, but they're ill, so it's not like I can verify it right now." Damon held onto the tree with his legs, giving his arms a break.

"What happens when they officially rule against you?"

Damon had been trying hard not to think about that. "I'm not sure."

Wyatt was surprised. He'd expected a different answer. "You've changed a little."

Damon was aware. "She has a strange effect on men, you know?"

"I thought we were stronger than that."

"So did I."

Wyatt saw shadows moving from the corner of his eye and realized the sun was almost below the horizon. It was about to get very dark out here. "Emmie isn't going to let it go even if you do."

"Do we really care?"

Wyatt shrugged. "Even if we discount the family ties, she is still our team leader and we agreed with her plan."

"It's not like she hasn't made deals and then backed out of them."

The brothers exchanged bitter looks. When Emmie left Joel's captivity, all of her children were supposed to go with her.

Wyatt scanned the dense jungle. "Are we really staying here?"

“I believe so, yeah. As soon as Emmie gets an update on this place, she won’t want to leave. It’s ripe for the taking.”

Wyatt revealed his biggest concern. “I think that’s part of what Colton’s team was meeting about. They want this place, too.”

“I don’t suppose we could share.”

Wyatt stared in concern. “You’ve done more than change.”

Damon shrugged. “Maybe I’m tired of being known as a bad guy. And there’s plenty of room here for all of us.”

“Emmie isn’t going to go for that.”

“I know.” Damon peered down at the angry undead who were starting to get restless now that they weren’t making any noise. “This place has everything we need, including a little excitement. We could have a great set up here and be left alone no matter what Safe Haven decides. They won’t care about Peru.”

Wyatt sighed. “We really should be on her team. We’re family.”

“I agree with that.”

Wyatt rubbed his sore jaw. He wasn’t sure if he might have a small fracture in there somewhere from Mark’s hit. He’d never been punched that hard. “Maybe we should take out a few of them and then some spots will open up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about eliminating some of her men while they’re all weak, bro. She can’t make it to that

island on low manpower and there's no way she'd accept Abbots on her crew. Abbots and Mitchels have been enemies for a long time. She'd have to take us in order to complete her quest."

Damon shook his head. "I can't go along with that. You're on your own."

"But you're my brother!"

"And I always will be, but you're wrong on this one. I won't be a part of that."

"You've gone good."

Damon smiled. "You think?"

Wyatt nodded miserably. "You seem happier, too. Asshole."

The brothers shared a laugh.

"You know, if we stay here, we'll all have to test ourselves in the water. I hope you'll be right there with me for that."

Wyatt shrugged. "That's all you."

Damon frowned. "But you won't be able to access the water."

Wyatt shrugged. "Like you said, you're on your own." Wyatt already knew he wouldn't be approved. The ugliness in his heart had only continued to grow upon being reunited with Alexa.

The sound of engines coming to life drew their attention. They watched the fuel tankers pull out, leaving them behind.

"Throw another grenade so the undead stay here." Damon didn't have any of them left on his belt.

Wyatt quickly pulled a pin and tossed, then held tightly to the tree trunk. It was hard to throw far with so many limbs and branches in the way.

The loud explosion drew some of the undead away from their tree and over toward the one that was now smoldering.

“Are you ready to get out of here?”

Damon waved off a small swarm of determined gnats. “Nope. Gonna sit here and think about the future for a little bit longer.”

“And then we’ll fight our way out, together?”

Damon grinned. “Of course. We are Mitchels.”

A new voice echoed, “That is good to know. It means your team will return for you.”

Damon and Wyatt looked over to find the huge tree next to them full of people. All of them were men except for one red-eyed smirking female.

“How did we miss that?”

Damon sighed. “I don’t know, but that explains why we’re not on her team.”

Rosetta already didn’t like them. “Get comfortable. We’re going to sit here and see who comes back.”

The brothers eyed the ground, where the undead were still moving toward the newest explosion. Both of them considered jumping and trying to make a run for the plane.

Rosetta shook her head. “My sons and I are very good with our darts and we will absolutely make enough noise to bring all of the undead to your

location. It's very unlikely that you would survive the attempt."

Both men considered it anyway, but they decided the risk was too great. Both of them began studying their new captors instead.

Rosetta motioned at her sons. "Keep your guns trained on them. Mitchels are tricky and not to be trusted."

Wyatt scowled. "She knows our family."

Rosetta snorted. "As you should know mine."

Damon stared unhappily. "You're Tesco's wife."

Rosetta inclined her head. "While we wait, let's talk about what happened to my husband."

2

"I think Alexa's rubbing off on me, in bad ways."

Colton's men snorted and grinned at his comment.

Jed had been expecting it. "I assume you're feeling bad for leaving men behind."

Colton didn't slow the truck. They were bouncing along the debris-covered jungle path that was barely visible through the setting sun. "We'll come back and get them after we fuel the plane. They're Mitchels. They can hang for that long."

Toby frowned. "That means leaving Emmie alone with Alexa while she's ill, with a fueled method of transportation."

“Yeah, I get your point. We’ll make sure the rest of our team knows of our concerns.” Colton scanned the mirrors, glad to find Asher staying close to his bumper. There wasn’t room for them to drive side-by-side. The path was overgrown and narrow. If not for being able to see the lines of gray gravel in the middle, Colton wouldn’t have known there was even a road here.

Toby gestured. “We’ll need to let the fuel settle before we can transfer it into the plane.”

Colton was distracted. “What?”

“The fumes will build from being rocked around. If we don’t let them settle, it could cause a fire. Same way with fueling the plane. It has to sit before they can take off.”

“I didn’t know that.” Colton could fly, but the fueling had always been done by someone else. “How long?”

“An hour. Each.”

“Damn.” Jed hadn’t known that either. “We’ll be covered in bodies before that time’s up.”

Colton nodded toward the undead ahead of them. More were being drawn out of the jungle by the noise of the trucks. “How much damage will they do if they follow us?”

Toby shrugged. “Probably not much.”

Colton made a fast choice. “Let’s come up with a plan to draw them back out here.”

“Alexa will be very proud of you for that decision.”

Colton tried to act like Mark's comment didn't mean anything to him. "Well, you know that is what we live for."

Mark nodded seriously, still hanging off the side of the truck. "Yes."

Colton paused in making another joke, grip tightened on the wheel. "There are people ahead of us."

Mark spotted them next and narrowed in with his vampire sight. *Trouble!*

Toby snorted. "I wouldn't call the dead people."

Colton frowned, slowing them. "Undead don't use hand codes."

Mark didn't like the six men on the path in front of the truck. "Keep going."

Colton couldn't just run them down. He slowed the truck further. "Do any of you recognize them?"

Heads shook as the familiar sense of danger began to fall over the vehicle.

Toby quickly translated the hand code. "They want to talk."

Jed scowled. "Maybe there's something wrong with the plane."

Toby tried to keep a better thought. "Maybe Alexa or Bradley sent them."

"Maybe it's a trap." Colton eased back on the gas. "I'm not stopping."

Mark nodded his approval while shrinking his body against the truck door in case there was gunfire. "Just keep rolling. They'll follow us like the undead will. We'll deal with it all on the bridge."

Colton checked the rearview mirror.

Something flew in the open window and sunk into the seat next to his arm. “What the hell?”

“They’re firing on us!” Mark yanked his cloak up; a dart bounced off of it.

Men in the truck ducked as a barrage of darts hit them from three sides. Another dart made it through the window.

Colton hit the gas again. “Take the wheel!”

Mark reached through the window as he realized Colton had been hit. He steered the truck with one arm as the man next to Colton put his foot on the gas pedal.

More darts flew around them, but this time they were aimed for the next truck.

Also rolling with his window down, Asher felt something hit his shoulder and then the world began to go gray.

Mark and the others watched in horror as Asher’s truck turned sharply to the left and bounced over a fallen tree. The front wheels locked, jerking sharply to the side and then the whole truck rolled over, spilling debris into the jungle.

Colton struggled to remain conscious. “Go back for them!”

Mark was already letting go of the wheel. “Get this fuel to the plane. Do not stop!”

Mark jumped off the side of the truck and landed in a crouch.

Undead rushed toward him, snarling as the overturned tanker behind them began to gush fuel onto the ground.

3

Rosetta's sons ran through the jungle, jumping over puddles and tree limbs to reach the scene. They had been on their way to the bridge when the action started; none of them wanted to miss it.

"We need them alive!" Rosetta ran in the center of her older sons, who never left her side. The six of them didn't put full energy into it, however. The feeling of something ugly coming was keeping them in the rear of the group where they would survive whatever it was.

The sound of the wreck had forced Rosetta to change her plans. She didn't have time to sit in a tree and wait for someone to rescue her captives.

The line of Abbots on the gravel path lunged to the side and rolled out of the way as Colton's truck flew by.

"You ass!" An Abbot man slapped the dart gun out of his brother's hand before he could fire again. "We needed that fuel!"

The other tanker was quickly out of sight, now trailing only half as many undead as they rotated toward the shouting men.

"We need more captives!"

"The fuel is more important!"

The Abbot family hurried toward the wrecked truck, drawing their knives. All of them knew not to use their guns as the pungent smell of fuel filled their noses. It was strong enough to make their eyes water as they neared the accident.

“One of them jumped off. I saw him!”

“Where did he go?”

Inside the cab of the overturned tanker, Asher groaned as the force of the accident and the drugs in the dart took control of his body. “Get away! No sparks!”

Asher’s eyes shut.

The other men in the cab forced the door open and pulled Asher along as they climbed on top of the truck. “Here they come!”

“Get down!”

Undead were all around the accident now, soaking up the gas with their ragged clothes.

“Get down from there!”

Jed lifted Asher over his shoulder and then crouched, preparing to jump over the undead. “We run for the bridge.”

The man next to him grunted agreement, also preparing to jump.

More undead came out of the trees.

“There’s too many of them over here!”

“Come down from there!”

Toby took a calming breath, still ignoring the shouted orders from their ambushers. “This just isn’t our day.”

The Abbot team used their knives to cut down zombies to make it through to the truck. They were determined not to let their prey escape.

Jed didn't know what to do. He was afraid he would lose Asher as he jumped.

"Go off the rear!" Mark stepped out from behind a nearby tree, where he had run to after landing. He had used the shadows of sunset and the distraction of the wreck to get away.

Jed immediately headed to the rear of the tanker, jogging over the part that held the fuel. It was like watching a fire hydrant be emptied below him. The ground was completely soaked on one side with small rivers of gas running into the jungle in a dozen different directions.

"They're running!"

"Shoot them!"

"Do not fire those guns!"

Mark's harsh shout caused an instant freeze from both the living and the dead. Then the chaos resumed as Jed jumped, the undead came toward Mark, and the hunters rotated his way with their guns lifting.

Mark ran back into the trees, heading for the end of the truck. He reached it right as Jed landed with Asher awkwardly over his shoulder. "This is going to happen quick. Get away from the gas."

Both men realized what Mark meant to do and quickly fled toward the nearest tree with one of them leading the way to clear a path through the undead.

The Abbots splashed through the gas, firing darts.

Mark drew his gun from his holster for the first time during this run. A feeling of happiness swarmed him. “God, I love my job.” Mark fired right as the hunters saw his intent and tried to retreat.

Mark’s bullet hit the metal bumper that was covered in gasoline. It immediately sparked and caught fire.

The Abbot family took off running while the undead rotated toward the newest distraction.

Mark lifted a shield, turning to cover Colton’s fleeing men. He managed to get it over their backs and then the world exploded, tossing all of them into the air.

Mark saw the ground coming toward him in a blur. *I miss that parachute.* He slapped into the earth an instant later, blacking out.

The Abbots hadn’t thought to bring up their shields; most of them didn’t have gifts to use at all. The explosion hit them full force and burned half of them alive. The others caught fire and ran into the jungle as screaming torches.

Body parts and dead limbs slapped into the trees and the ground in every direction.

The rivers of gasoline caught fire and began spreading through the jungle.

Rosetta stopped, grabbing the arm of her oldest son. “Wait.”

The other boys ran around them, eager to reach the crash site and share in the spoils. They didn’t care about the explosions or the fire.

“Call them back.”

Luis regarded his mother in confusion. “We have them surrounded.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want me to call them back?”

“Because there’s something else here that we didn’t account for.” Rosetta wasn’t sure what that was, but the sense of menace now coming through the jungle was too strong for her to ignore. Her children couldn’t feel it, but she did.

“Mother?”

“We’re going to secure our other captives and then we’ll check on the plane. I want to know exactly who’s on it.” Wyatt and Damon had been darted and left in the trees where they’d been found.

“But we can grab more hostages here.”

“No, we can’t. This is about to go bad. Now call them back!”

Luis sent out a mental command for everyone to retreat. It was the only gift he had.

Those closest to them immediately turned in his direction, obeying.

The boys who were already at the crash site ignored the call.

Mark slowly opened his eyes, immediately becoming aware of the pain. His entire body hurt, from his skull to his toes, but his ankle was giving off the loudest signal of distress.

Mark didn't groan as he rolled over. The sense of danger was all around him.

"Help me get him up!"

Mark listened to Asher's men trying to get him on his feet. Mark attempted to do the same, but he didn't have enough control over his body yet. He slipped back to his knees while the heat from the fire pushed toward him on the wind.

"Over here!" One of Rosetta's reckless sons rushed over to Mark and jerked him up by his arm. "I got one!"

A shadowy blur rushed out of the trees and grabbed the man.

Mark fell back to the ground as screams sounded above him. He recoiled from a spray of warm liquid that he immediately recognized as blood.

Mark blinked, trying to see what was going on.

"It's another blood drinker!"

"Run!"

Mark struggled to stand again as screams filled the air. *Only my team can make people sound like that.*

Mark wiped his hand over his face to clear the blood, still trying to focus his rattled brain.

Asher's body was put on the ground next to Mark. The rest of Colton's team stayed right there, instinctively knowing not to move with a vampire on the hunt in the darkness around them. They hoped staying with Mark would protect them.

Daniel flew toward another group of Abbots with his claws fully extended in his vampire form. He'd never felt so free.

Sliced off hands and fingers hit the ground as he went by without giving them a chance to shoot.

Gunfire and screams filled the air as the terrified hunters began to unload their few precious bullets on everything that moved.

"You should get down." Mark knew what was going on now.

Colton's men dropped to their knees as bullets flew through the jungle, plunging into some of the trees and ricocheting off of others.

Daniel made another pass, running right through the center of five hunters.

Three of them dropped to the ground with mortal wounds.

Daniel immediately turned around and went back for the other two. He slaughtered them without a second thought.

Mark stayed where he was, waiting until Daniel was finished. "In case you've wondered what happens when you piss off a member of Alexa's team, you're now seeing it firsthand. Tell your friends."

All of the movement kept the undead in the area, where they hungrily fell upon the screaming men who hadn't been killed outright. Crunching competed with the sound of the growing fire to make the most noise.

An Abbot man to the right lifted his gun.

Daniel instinctively pulled hard, using his magic.

Something locked. He felt it.

"What did you do to me?!" The man ran off without firing his gun. "What did you do to do me?!"

Daniel knew he hadn't taken the man's lifeforce.

"I can't use my magic!"

Daniel paused, stunned. *I locked his gifts.*

Alexa had told them about the different types of descendants over their winter break. Daniel remembered her words clearly. *Only one type can take away someone's power... I'm an enforcer!*

Daniel's delight sent him back to the task at hand; he chased the fleeing man.

Mark waited until the last scream stopped and then got to his feet. "We can go now."

"To the plane?" Colton's man was in a hurry to get there.

Mark nodded, limping forward. "We stick to the plan."

He was no longer worried about leaving Daniel alone. In fact, Daniel was now his biggest concern.

Mark knew rage like that wasn't easy to put back in the bottle once the top had been taken off. Daniel was now a danger to everything living.

Chapter Fifteen

You Can't Have Both

The Plane

1

The explosion brought Alexa up out of her nightmare. Her eyes opened in relief.

“That’s our people.” Alice got up to check on Jacob again.

Bradley yawned, stretching his long legs. “They’re on the way back.”

“Yeah, we do tend to wake people up when we come through.” Madelyn hoped they hurried. Alexa was worse now.

They’d been listening to the jungle noises for a while, but that last explosion had been a lot closer. Instead of being concerned about the sounds, they were all relieved.

Bronco was on duty at the window. A faint glow caught his attention. “There’s a fire.”

That stopped the relief.

Emmie hurried to a window. Like most descendants, she was scared of fire. “Can it reach us here?”

“No. We’re far enough from the trees.” Bradley yawned again. He’d taken a short nap, but it hadn’t been enough.

“What about sparks? There’s a breeze.”

“Yes, that can.” Eva frowned at Bronco. “Don’t call down bad luck, huh?”

Bronco shrugged. “That’s the only luck Mitchels have these days.”

Eva scanned the plane. It stank. Now that the air system wasn’t running, it wasn’t pulling out the smells of body odor and decay. Jerry’s gruesome corpse had been tossed out of the plane when Alexa was finished with it, but they hadn’t cleaned up the mess yet. It was turning her stomach. “And yet, we’re all alive while our enemies are rotting.”

Eva’s hard tone snapped heads in her direction.

“I made a mistake that has to be fixed now. Those barriers will stop the team from getting to us.” Eva began pointing at people. “Remove them, let the trucks through, then guard those trucks until we can fuel up.”

“Oh, shit! The barriers!” Bronco hurried out of his seat.

People rushed to the door while checking their gear.

Bradley nodded at Eva. He had no problem with her directing things, for now.

Eva frowned at the council member. “Get out there and help.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Get off your ass and work for a living.”

Alexa’s weak chuckle floated out of coach class.

Bradley frowned, but got up. “I’m starting to regret taking this flight.”

Eva followed him to the door so she could shut it after they were all out. “Not me. This is the vacation I needed.”

Alexa laughed, standing. She shook all over as she went to the stove to check on the potion.

She was thirsty, but she didn’t drink. None of them were able to keep anything down now. They were no longer accepting the water that the girls kept pushing. As soon as they swallowed something, it just came right back up.

All of them had been alert for a few minutes at least once, except for Billy. He still hadn’t fully recovered from the pneumonia that had hit after his captivity. Alexa was worried about him the most.

Edward watched her through bleary eyes. He was surprised to be alive. “I feel like I died, again.”

Alexa chuckled, but the worry in her heart was huge. *This is the calm before the storm.*

Kaboom!

Okay, not so calm, but it’s going to get worse. “I need energy.”

Ria stood up, knees shaking. “I’ll help.”

David was also awake. Alexa’s laughter had brought him out of the worst nightmare he’d ever had. “She won’t hurt you.”

Ria was too scared to move. Offering had been as much as she could do.

“You’re not willing.”

“I am.” Ria clenched her fists. “I’m just...”

“Terrified?”

“Yeah. When my dad did this, it hurt. A lot.”

Alexa kept working on the potion. “You aren’t really willing. It won’t work.”

Ria let out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand. Courage is a hard thing to find.”

David met Alexa’s eyes. “Is that a dealbreaker?”

Alexa shrugged. “We all have a past and her father was one of the meanest bastards in our family. He’s the reason Abraham turned out so bad. Some leeway is warranted.”

Ria stared. “What are you guys deciding?”

“He’s asking if you just marked yourself off my list.”

“Did I?” Ria struggled not to cry. “I’ll work harder on it!”

Alexa fought the evil in her mind to embrace the good in her heart. “You’ll still train my rookie to cook, just not on this quest.”

David smiled at Ria. “Hold onto your honor and we’ll find you when it’s over.”

Ria knew she’d just lost something she couldn’t replace. “No, you won’t. I’m too timid.”

“A cook doesn’t have to have courage.”

Ria wiped away miserable tears. “They do to travel with you guys. You’ll forget about me like everyone else has.”

Ria went to the bathroom to have a minute alone.

David stared after her in concern. She was right. A coward couldn’t travel with them.

Alexa saw his dismay. She wanted to discuss it, but she was too weak. She sank into her sweaty chair. “Dawn will come. You can make it that long.”

David and Edward weren’t sure if she was talking to them or herself, but it didn’t matter. She’d called it; they would obey.

2

Bronco scanned the darkness around the bridge. “We need light.”

Bradley dug out two flashlights and held them while the others began pulling apart the barrier at the end of the bridge. He’d been saving the lights for months.

Bronco scowled. “Put them down and help.”

Bradley didn’t want to, but the fiery glare in the distance said time was running short. He put the flashlights on the dirty ground, anchoring them with rocks on each side. Then he joined the crew, mentally moaning at the discomfort. He really was out of shape.

The barriers were well constructed. They didn’t want to come apart as the team pulled on them and then tried to kick them down. It made a lot of noise, without a lot of progress.

Boom!

Everyone twitched at the new explosion. A stiff breeze blew through the area, carrying the smells of gasoline and death.

Bronco’s head tilted. “I hear a truck.”

The crew worked faster as they realized their fuel was almost here, with no clear path in.

Bradley scanned the barrier. “Blow it out of the way.”

Bronco liked that idea. He motioned their people back and drew energy for it.

“Here comes the truck!” Emmie retreated and brought up a shield.

Alice and Madelyn did the same.

Bronco and Bradley fired at the barrier together.

Logs and debris shot across the end of the bridge and flew into the jungle. Limbs and vines scattered and fell into the drop-off on both sides.

“They’re not alone!” Emmie stepped behind her daughters.

Alice and Madelyn stood still. They were used to that reaction when a threat found them, though Emmie usually had her sons to hide behind.

Bradley moved in front of the girls with a huge frown on his face. “You should challenge her for leadership.”

Both girls shook their heads.

Emmie glared at him. “I’m a great team leader!”

“You’re a coward with great fighting skills.” He waved before she could argue. “Get up here next to me so you can use them.”

Emmie realized trouble was coming with the trucks. She stomped to his side and crossed her arms over her chest.

Bradley met Bronco’s eyes. “Shield duty when it starts.”

The crew didn't know what was coming, but the worry in Bradley's voice was enough to get their agreement. Bronco and his men stepped behind Emmie and Bradley, taking the assigned places for shielders.

The sound of a truck flying over gravel grew louder. Undead emerged from the dark jungle and staggered toward the narrow road.

Bradley shook his head when Emmie would have removed them. "Wait for the threat."

Emmie snorted. "Undead aren't a threat?"

Even Bronco's men shook their heads.

Emmie scanned the jungle harder, starting to get worried. Her lip curled as she caught a familiar and hated sense of power. "Abbots."

Bradley put a smile on his face as shadowy forms strode out of the jungle. "We don't let them get on the plane, no matter what it takes."

Another dozen Abbot family fighters came through the trees with dart guns and glares.

Bradley gestured. "Watch our six."

Alice turned around to make sure no one was sneaking up on them from behind, but she listened hard so she didn't miss the start of the fight.

Rosetta came out of the jungle, locking onto Bradley. A large smile lit up her face. "Jackpot."

The men in the truck saw what was happening. Jed steered toward the Abbots, trying to lower their numbers.

Bodies flew into the air as he hit them at full speed.

The other Abbots stepped aside as the fuel tanker barreled down the path and reached the bridge.

Bradley's crew did the same, letting the truck go by without taking their eyes off of the fighters who were now picking targets.

A small herd of undead stumbled down the road toward them, following the truck.

The smell of gas was nearly overpowering, telling Bradley the tanker probably had a leak, but there wasn't time to worry about it.

Rosetta stepped onto the bridge while her sons formed a body barrier behind her. They didn't kill the undead, though. A few of the men used their shields to push the zombies away while Rosetta handled business.

Bradley understood what they were doing. If this talk went badly, the undead would be released and they would have to fight both the living and the dead. *We're in trouble.*

"Yes, you are."

Rosetta looked exactly as he remembered, though she was much rounder now. Giving birth to so many babies hadn't weakened her like it usually did to the female body. It seemed to have made her stronger.

Rosetta scanned Bradley's gray beard and receding hairline with sympathy. She had managed to avoid that due to her deal with the Seer. As long as she got pregnant once a year, she stayed in good health. If she broke that pattern, the magic would no

longer protect her from old age. That same magic also protected her from death, though it wasn't absolute anymore because the charm was so old. "Bradley Mitchel Junior."

"Rosetta Abbot. It's been a while."

"Twenty years." Her eyes narrowed. "My family told you to never return here or they'd kill you like they did your dad."

People on both sides gawked as they realized the couple had a past.

Bradley ignored the surprise of his companions and the reminder of his father's death in battle. He'd gotten over that a long time ago. "Mitchels go where they want to."

Rosetta chuckled dryly. "Yes, they do. And what is it you want here?"

Bradley instinctively covered for Alexa. "We needed the fuel that just arrived. We're good now."

Rosetta snorted. "Mitchels are never good."

Behind them, the truck slid to a stop, scattering debris.

Emmie glared at Bradley. "How do you know her?"

Bradley sighed at the memories of cool nights underground. "She's a toy I used to play with."

Rosetta's anger lit up her eyes with dangerous glints. "We were much more than that!"

"The engagement was never official."

"It would have been if you'd had the courage to fight for me!"

Bradley's anger came through now. "You broke the peace between our families!"

"I was charmed!"

"You're a liar!" Bradley got control of his emotions. He stared coolly at the woman he'd once cared for. "What did Abraham promise you for killing Adrian's mother?"

Silence went through both groups. Only the noises of the fire and the undead echoed as both teams waited for that answer.

Rosetta stared in longing. "Leadership, strength, power...and a Mitchel mate."

Bradley shrugged. "You got three of the four."

Behind the tense scene, Jed parked the long tanker across the bridge. He made sure the truck was close enough for the hoses to reach the plane, then he hurried out, bringing Colton's limp body along.

Watching from the plane window, Eva saw them and ran to the door. She went out, leaving the door open so they could get Colton inside. "Where are the others?" She scanned, panic growing. "Where's Asher?"

"Mark went back for the others." Jed carried Colton into the plane and came right back out to help with the fight.

Rosetta controlled her emotions and the boys who were eager for the fighting to start. "We came to barter a ride out of here."

Bradley shook his head. "We don't have room."

"That fuel does not belong to you!"

Bradley had no problem believing the team who'd gone to the compound had stolen it. "Mitchels resupply their needs from whatever source is available."

Rosetta was used to adjusting her plans on the go. "Then we will do the same. Secure that fuel!"

Rosetta's sons immediately opened fire with darts.

Bradley and his team brought up their shields in defense, but it was too late for him to avoid Rosetta's fast draw.

Rosetta fired a second dart, hitting him in the leg and the chest. She marched forward as chaos ruled around her and undead pushed between the fighters. "Now, we're having fun!"

Bradley sank to his knees, stunned by how fast it had all gone wrong. He hadn't expected a direct attack. Part of him had been sure that Rosetta wouldn't fire on him. *I hate being wrong.*

Emmie retreated toward the plane, struggling to keep her shield up as darts pinged off of it in a constant bombardment.

Alice and Madelyn did the same in front of her, barely able to keep their shields up as the Abbot boys fired at the bottom, where it was weakest. None of them had been expecting that.

There was only one vulnerable spot in most magical shields, but very few fighters knew where it was. It was obvious that Rosetta had trained her army to find it.

Bronco tried to reach Bradley, but Rosetta and her boys ran forward with the undead. It forced Bronco and his men to retreat.

More shadows moved through the jungle toward the bridge.

The Mitchels didn't wait to see if it was more undead or Abbots. They hurried back to the plane.

Rosetta stopped in front of Bradley, bringing up a shield to protect them both from the undead that were now swarming. She stared at him fondly, not caring when several of her sons were hit and went down. "It's ironic that I would find you here on the same day that my husband died."

Bradley wasn't unconscious despite the double hit. It wasn't the first time he'd been dartsed, but it was the first time he'd been taken off guard this way. He swallowed the humiliation to form words. "Let's make a deal."

Rosetta laughed as she knelt down. "It's too late for that." She put an arm around his waist and got him on his feet.

Rosetta moved Bradley toward the jungle, leaving her sons to fight it out. She now had something she wanted more than the plane.

"She has the council member!" Eva fired magic to the left and a bullet to the right, being careful not to hit the fuel tanker sitting sideways across the bridge.

Jed, fighting beside her, saw the next horde coming out of the jungle. "Get on the plane!"

He pushed Eva that way as the rest of the fighters also retreated. There were 50 undead coming toward them and there were still two dozen Abbot boys with shields up mixed in with that group. There was no way they were going to be able to handle it all on their own.

Ria slammed the plane door shut as the last of the team made it back on board. Hands pulled on it as she hit the lock. “That’s not going to hold them for long.”

In coach class, Alexa pushed her cloak aside and rested her hand on her holster.

An awful scream sounded outside.

Almost everyone in the plane turned toward the opposite side, drawn by the agony in that shriek. They listened worriedly, not sure what other threat had been drawn by all the noise.

Gunshots rang out like a large, loud drill, punctuated by horrific screams and panic.

“Run!”

“Help me!”

“No!”

Stomps and thuds stopped hitting the plane door as the undead were drawn back to the other side of the bridge.

Alexa let go of her holster. She returned to the stove to stir the brew.

Everyone else stared through the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of what had terrified the Abbot family. All of those survivors were now fleeing across both ends of the bridge.

Edward had been brought out of another nightmare by Alexa's reaction. He stared at her now, keeping a white-knuckled grip on the seat. "They'll make it into the plane next time."

Alexa took a pouch of cornstarch from her torn cloak and began sprinkling it into the gently bubbling pot. "When this is all over, we will not hold grudges against our team."

Edward assumed she was talking about whatever was happening outside the plane. "Agreed."

Next to him, Billy snapped his ropes and rolled neatly out of the seat. He lunged upward and wrapped his big hands around Edward's neck.

People hurried over to help, understanding Billy was under the effects of the curse.

Alexa stirred the potion again. "I never liked this place. That feeling hasn't changed at all."

Emmie was furious. "They took Bradley! You have to go save him!"

Bronco frowned at her. "You only care about the council vote on Alexa. Bradley's life doesn't mean anything to you."

"What about Asher?!" Panic pushed up Eva's throat and burst out of her mouth. "I'm not leaving without him!"

"Neither are we." Jed began checking his weapons. "It sounds like the fighting is over out there. We're going to go get him."

"It's too dangerous!" Ria was shocked by how fast their family had been driven back onto the

plane. She had never dealt with Abbots before and now she never wanted to again.

“She was trained by some of the strongest people in both families.” Alexa put the lid back on the pot. “She won’t kill him.”

“No, she’ll use him as a hostage.” Bronco liked Bradley despite the man’s physical weakness. They were roughly the same age and had gone through many of the same trials as a part of this family.

“Of course. Losing so many sons won’t matter to her at all.”

People stared in surprise at Alexa’s words.

Bronco didn’t know if he should be impressed or disgusted. “All of those fighters were her boys?”

“Didn’t she ever have any girls?” Madelyn shrugged as people glanced at her in disapproval. “Just curious.”

“I believe she uses chemicals to prevent that.” Alexa helped them get Billy back into his seat, using the airplane buckles this time and the last of her rope. Billy was unconscious again. “For the right price, a potion can be brewed for that as well.”

“But why would she want only boys?” Madelyn knew there was a mystery there.

Emmie shrugged. “Maybe she hates women.”

Eva came up with a more likely answer. “Males are better as fighters, especially if you’re trying to conquer something.”

That made sense to the others.

“What is she trying to conquer?” Alice snorted bitterly. “It’s the apocalypse.”

“She wants the only thing that’s left.” Alexa sat in the seat next to Billy as the voices in her mind amplified. “When the world has fallen, those who are left have an opportunity to claim it and rebuild it in their own image. That’s what she wants. She’ll never be satisfied with one battle or one conquest. Rosetta wants to rule it all.”

“Where would she take him?” Bronco was ready to go.

“The Abbots had a family farm five miles north of here.” Alexa shivered as her fever began to return. “I want the plane fueled up before you go.”

Eva and Bronco both protested.

“We have to go get our people!”

“Asher is still out there!”

Alexa’s voice hardened into the tone she was known for. “We’re not leaving anyone behind. Get the plane fueled first. There are other things here that need to finish playing out.”

Jed spoke to Alexa, ignoring the others. “It’s not safe to fuel the plane until after the gas has had a chance to settle.”

“As long as you use the vent on the truck to release the fumes, it can be offloaded right away.”

“Are you sure?” Jed had always allowed ample time for the fuel to settle.

“I know it for sure.” Alexa didn’t tell them about the time she had spent in Alaska, flipping eggs and helping Brandon fuel planes that came in during her time there. She wasn’t willing to share those memories with these people. They weren’t her team.

Bronco took her word for it. “Let’s get this bird fed and then go rescue our people. I’m absolutely sick of this place.”

Alexa shivered. “On that, we agree completely.”
Knock-knock!

Everyone jumped or tensed, even the men who weren’t awake.

The knock sounded again in a familiar pattern.

Alexa’s lips curved. “Open the door.”

Jed did it with his gun in his hand.

Mark scowled at him. “Move!”

Jed holstered and helped the men get Asher’s body inside.

All of the team was filthy, and smelled like gas, and half of them were bloody. Asher’s face was covered in a dried line of blood from his temple down to his chin.

Eva hurried over. “What happened to him?!”

“Darts, after a nasty wreck.” Nolan retreated once Asher was in a seat, leaving the bald man to Eva’s care. “There was a hell of a fight outside.”

Bronco shrugged. “We had some unknown help.”

Mark snorted, going to Alexa. “Daniel’s still out there, Boss. He’s pretty pissed.”

Alexa was aware of Daniel’s fury being loose, but she didn’t have sympathy for those he might run into during his rampage. “Bradley was taken.”

Mark already knew she wanted him rescued.

Emmie grabbed Mark’s arm and pulled him around. “Where are my boys?!”

Mark jerked free, glowering at the woman. “In danger.”

“Go get them!”

Mark studied Emmie, certain she’d caused trouble while they were gone. He already knew what it was. “What will you give me?”

Emmie hesitated. “What?”

Mark sneered. “Your sons or your revenge? You can’t have both. I’ll see to that.”

Emmie was torn. She wanted vengeance, but with Alice and Madelyn mad at her, the boys were all she had left. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine! Bring my sons back alive and I’ll drop the charges against Alexa for killing Levi.”

Mark limped through the plane, wishing he had time for a nap. He’d covered a lot of miles today using his normal human strength. He was almost exhausted.

Mark went to Alexa and kissed her cheek. “The Seer is brewing as we speak.” He didn’t ask what she was working on at the stove. “When I return, we’ll have the cure.”

Alexa’s head rolled to the side as she passed out.

Mark headed for the exit. “Guard her with your lives. If she dies, so do all of you.”

He left the stinking plane before anyone could respond.

Bronco also went out. “Let’s get this plane fueled for Alexa. Her time here is almost up.”

Chapter Sixteen
Just The Muscle
The Jungle

1

“**T**hey’ll come for me.” Bradley leaned heavily against Rosetta’s strong shoulder, unable to stay upright on his own yet.

“Good. My boys need this practice.”

Bradley was offended on their behalf. “Five of them died back there!”

“All of those were powerless and not very smart. I don’t need eaters; I need fighters.”

“For what?” Bradley winced at the pain now beating in his head as he fought to stay alert.

“You’ll figure it out.” Rosetta took him over the dark jungle path without slowing. This shortcut would put them at the farm in half the time of the main road. It also skipped the flames.

Bradley tried to head off the negotiation stage. “Alexa will never trade that plane for me.”

Rosetta knew better. “You’re underestimating your value.”

“You’re underestimating her anger.”

“Not at all. I’m taking advantage of her weakness. She never leaves a man behind.”

An awful scream rang out behind them.

Rosetta's oldest sons, Luis and Raymond, moved closer to protect her.

"Not all of those dying men are eaters." Bradley scanned her kids. "It might be you guys out there dying next time."

Raymond snorted and Luis shrugged, but they were unhappy. They just didn't express it openly.

The others muttered and grumbled as they walked behind their mother, devastated by the loss of family members.

Rosetta didn't care about their disgruntlement. She ignored them in favor of making new plans. It wasn't every day that she had a Mitchel council member in her grip.

Another scream echoed through the night.

"That's Alexa's man out there."

Rosetta paused. "She created a hybrid?"

Bradley winced again as the pain in his head increased. "She's full of surprises..."

Even under the cloud of drugs, Bradley noticed that the undead avoided Rosetta and her sons. He didn't have the mental capacity to figure out why, however. It had been a long time since he'd been hit with the government's knockout chemicals.

"I've missed you."

"I wish I could say the same."

Not offended, Rosetta draped him over her shoulder as the drugs took full effect. He wasn't completely out, but his body was under her control now. "Keep your hands above the water. If it grabs you, none of us will save you."

Bradley curled his hands up. “You want control over the water!”

Rosetta carried him over the fallen trees behind her farm.

The water rose up, hissing angrily.

Bradley’s mind cleared a little as he continued to fight the effects. “You don’t have an alpha to control it. That’s why you’re breeding an army.”

“I might get one now.” She patted his ass.

Bradley chuckled sleepily. “You always were a smart one.”

“And you always were a lusty one. Let’s make that deal now.”

Bradley let the drugs claim him so he didn’t have to answer.

Rosetta took him into the farmhouse, ignoring the upset, scared kids waiting for her. She took Bradley straight to the basement and chained him to the wall next to Wyatt and Damon, who were both still unconscious.

Luis and Raymond checked on the chains like they’d been taught to do during each sweep when they had prisoners. Both men then waited for instructions. They were fighters, not thinkers.

Rosetta heard another distant scream and grunted. “Call the others again. They’ll listen this time.”

Luis tried not to show his fear and failed. “What if the blood drinker comes with them?”

“Then keep your mouth shut and your shield over me until I can cut a deal. If you let him reach me, we’re probably all dead.”

2

Jed walked out with Mark and the others to start fueling the plane. “As soon as this bird is full, Emmie may try to take control and negotiate for the release of her sons. When you bring them back, don’t just hand them over to her.”

Mark hoped he was wrong. “What about the other people on this plane?”

Jed shrugged. “Now that our team is back together, I doubt anyone would interfere.”

“Then you and Toby should come with me.”

Jed grinned. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

Everyone did a scan and was relieved to discover the undead had followed the family into the jungle. Half a dozen Abbot bodies were spread across the bridge. Their condition was indescribable.

Toby hated vampires. He only tolerated Alexa’s men because he trusted her. “Your teammate has a short fuse.”

“Daniel is usually laid back and quiet. There’s only one thing that ever twists him up this way.”

“Alexa.”

Mark nodded tiredly. “There isn’t anything Daniel won’t do to make sure she gets what she

needs. The Abbot family doesn't know us, so I suppose their ignorance of that can be excused."

Jed helped Bronco start pulling hoses off the hooks on the long, rusty truck. "They do know the Mitchels, however. It's not a good excuse."

"What do you know about the woman who took Bradley?" Mark needed the recon information.

Jed swept both sides of the bridge. "I don't know anything about her at all. I've never met her."

"Fair enough." Mark waited to be directed. He'd never done this before.

Bronco took over. "Sparks are the biggest threat. Don't smack the metal hose ends against anything or we'll all go up together."

It wasn't difficult to fuel the plane, but it did take muscles to get the hoses into the right location, as well as moving the plane steps so they could reach the fuel tanks. It was dangerous work. All of them were very careful not to create a spark.

"What did Colton tell you about this place?" Mark was positive the team had had a conversation about it.

Jed held the hose in place while Mark attached the end. "He said to stay out of the water and not to make deals with anyone."

"Well, it's too late for both of those. What else?"

"He didn't give us any other details. He said Alexa would cover it. That was before we found out she was sick."

Toby reluctantly spoke up. "She was Tesco's wife."

Mark and the others turned toward him in surprise.

Toby filled them in. “At one time, Mitchels and Abbots lived here, peacefully. There was a truce in place.”

“I assume a Mitchel broke that truce.” Mark was very familiar with the moral line of that family; it was thin.

Toby nodded. “Rosetta is her name. She was supposed to marry a Mitchel. That man fell in love with someone else. When Rosetta found out, she broke the truce.”

“Wait, I thought she and Bradley were dating.” Mark had already scanned their thoughts and gotten the entire capture.

Bronco reluctantly added his information. “They grew up here together. Rosetta was willing to take him at one point. There was talk of switching matches so everyone would be happy. Then Bradley refused to marry Rosetta.”

“Let me guess, Rosetta killed the Mitchel woman who took her place.”

“Rosetta couldn’t reach Shannon, so she helped murder Adrian’s mother instead.”

Shock rippled through Mark’s mind. “She was engaged to Adrian? Adrian caused this?”

Toby grunted. “The council decided against killing her for it. There was a slaughter after that. Abbots against Mitchels until only a handful of each remained on either side.”

“How did she end up with Tesco?”

“The council arranged it.”

Jed hadn't known any of this. “Weren't the Abbots pissed at her for breaking the truce?”

Toby shrugged. “They were, but Abraham wanted her to be safe while she was banned from the compound. He charmed Tesco and the others; they're under her control.”

Mark groaned. “That's why Tesco's men didn't stay charmed earlier. They were already under one!”

Toby nodded. “In exchange, she delivers sacrifices to him from the cities and towns here in Peru. All of them are female.”

“That explains why there aren't many women.” Mark thought about the deal they'd made. “Abraham is the Seer, right?”

“Yes, though it's mostly his demon in control now.” Bronco hoped they didn't have to face it on this run.

“And I assume he was a Mitchel?”

“Of course. There are no known Seers in the Abbot bloodline.” Bronco didn't know why. “None of the many government attempts were able to overcome that.”

“Why would a Mitchel turn against his own family?” Mark had seen their loyalty to each other even when they didn't get along.

Toby grunted. “Abraham was always jealous of his brother. He hated Adrian for a long time before the murder happened.”

All of them kept an eye on the flames in the distance, hoping the fire didn't come their way.

Jed now wanted the rest of the story. “What did Adrian do?”

“Nothing. He wasn’t allowed. The family enforcer handled it. Rosetta was banned from the compound. She was told if she returned she would be consumed by the water. Tesco tried to bring her back in a few days later and the water chased her out. Her children are still able to go down there, however. They hadn’t been born yet.”

“What else?” Mark was already sure that wouldn’t have been enough revenge for Adrian. It wouldn’t have been enough for Mark either.

Bronco waved toward the flaming forest. “She can’t leave this country. If she tries, she’ll die.”

Mark frowned. “Then why does she want our plane?”

“She didn’t ask for the plane. She tried to barter a ride out of here.”

“That wouldn’t have done any good. She still couldn’t leave.”

“She knows Alexa is on the plane. I believe Rosetta was going to threaten the lives of your teammates to force Alexa to break the magic that’s holding her here.”

“Alexa never would have done that.”

Bronco found it ironic that Mark didn’t recognize Alexa’s devotion to her team. The radio calls over the last year had made that clear to everyone else. “I assume Abraham found a loophole. He and Rosetta became very close while

she was waiting for Adrian to return and honor their match.”

“It sounds like she was close to a lot of men.”

Bronco frowned at the memories. “She was the only female Abbot left here and she was cute. All the guys wanted her. She tolerated some of them, but she wanted Adrian for his status.”

Jed went over and held the next hose while Mark attached it to the tanker. “I don’t think she needed to find a loophole. I’m also not sure it’s possible.”

Mark swept the bridge for problems. “What do you mean?”

“I mean once the water bans you, there really is no way to get out of it.” Jed fought the urge to scratch his neck as mosquitoes darted around them. “Some magic bonds can’t be broken. That’s one of them.”

“Keep going.” Mark was suddenly sure Jed had figured it out.

“An alpha can control the water. That’s why she had so many kids. She’s trying to breed one.”

Toby nodded. “It was probably for both purposes. Once she’s free, she’ll still have that army to use.”

Mark pointed out the obvious. “She’s still here, so it hasn’t worked.”

“You’re all overlooking something.” Bronco finished tightening the hose onto the thread and then faced them. “She has Bradley now.”

Mark snorted. “Bradley isn’t going to turn on Alexa.” Mark had already been worrying that the council member was trying to kindle something with Alexa.

Jed had been worrying over that as well. “That’s not my point. Bradley is a strong descendant. All of his children have been alphas so far. I’d be willing to bet the boy he had with Alexa is the same.”

Mark understood the point. Brian was young right now, but he was already strong. “You’re saying that’s why she took Bradley.”

“Yes. And she won’t give him a chance to refuse.”

Mark had heard the stories. “He’s a Mitchel. They don’t turn down sex.”

“Not usually, no.”

Mark did a sweep of the jungle, sighing. “She won’t be able to do anything right away, right? The baby would have to be born first.”

Bronco shrugged. “Our children are special. She would only need a month and then she might be able to control the water through the unborn baby.”

Mark went over to help them with the next hose. “Then we’ll have to make sure she doesn’t get that month. As soon as we get the cure, we’ll hunt her down and put an end to this family feud once and for all.”

Bronco nodded happily. “Mitchels should have control over this compound anyway. We’re more trustworthy than the Abbots.”

Mark rolled his eyes and worked faster.

Rosetta rocked harder, moaning as she reached that peak.

Bradley fought his needs and the drugs she'd poured into his mouth, but the lust was stronger. He shoved forward, unloading with a moan that was both pain and pleasure. His heart thudded, reminding him that he was out of shape, even for this.

Rosetta pushed him in deeper, trying to catch everything he had to give.

The chains clinked harshly as he bucked against her, sending her stumbling forward.

Rosetta clenched her body to hold in his seed. She pulled up her pants and went over to her small kitchenette to mix a new batch.

Bradley drew in a ragged breath. "Time. Need time!"

Rosetta clucked. "I expected an ex of mine to be stronger."

"Twice in ten minutes!"

She chuckled. "My brews are unbeatable. Before the war, women would line up outside to purchase them."

Bradley sucked in air, willing his body to recover before she could force another drink into him. He enjoyed sex, but she was milking him with no regard for his health. One or two more times might see him dead from a heart attack.

Rosetta didn't care. Alexa's fighters would come for Bradley soon and despite her bravado, Rosetta knew she was going to lose that particular battle. "I have to get it now, while I can."

Rosetta had ordered everyone to go upstairs after Bradley was secured. Wyatt and Damon were in chains on the opposite wall, still unconscious.

"You're widowed now. You can remarry."

"Are you offering?"

Bradley considered it and slowly shook his head. "No. I'd still rather be dead than to be mated to someone cruel enough to kill Adrian's mother."

"Remember you said that."

Anger lent him strength to yell. "She was good!" Adrian's mother was the only woman who'd ever been kind to Bradley while he was growing up. "That's why I couldn't take you when Adrian ran out on your match. Even back then, you weren't good."

Rosetta stirred the small glass of clear liquid. "None of us are good, let alone that hard soul. Did you know she sent her kids and grandkids to the lab in trade for her freedom? That's why she was living at the compound."

"Yes."

"Then how can you say she was good?"

"She had bigger goals. She knew she had to make sacrifices."

Rosetta snorted bitterly. "Yes, the end of the world. The end of all governments and all labs."

Peace for the normals.” She made another rude noise. “Shortsighted.”

“I’m not ready.” Bradley watched her come closer with nuts tightening and lungs burning. “At least let my breathing even out!”

“Fine.” She set the glass on the shelf near him. “Who cursed Alexa?”

“William.”

Rosetta lifted a brow. “Sinclair? I thought he really was good.”

“So did I. He developed an obsession, much like yours with Adrian.”

“He was supposed to be mine!” Rosetta drew in a deep breath. “Save your strength. In one minute, we go again.”

Bradley shut his eyes. “I’d like to broker a new truce between our families.”

“No.”

“You haven’t heard what I’m offering.”

“It doesn’t matter. I will no longer be caged here! In a month, when your child wakes, he will control the water and I will be freed. Nothing you can offer will match that.”

“Not even Alexa’s death?”

Rosetta hesitated. Then she shook her head, picking up the glass. “It’s not enough after all these years and you’d never do it anyway.” She grabbed his nose and waited.

Bradley held out as long as he could, trying to suck in tiny gasps through clenched teeth, but in the

end, the need for oxygen won. He opened his mouth.

Rosetta let him draw a breath and then she poured the brew between his lips and held her mouth over his to keep him from spitting it out.

The powerful concoction hit them both hard, lighting up nerve endings. Desire coursed through them even before they swallowed it.

Bradley gulped it down and rested his head against hers. "At least go slower this time."

"Say the charm; give me your son willingly and I will protect your life with my own."

Bradley couldn't fight so many drugs and the lust at the same time. "Unchain me and bend over. I don't want to look at you while we do this."

Rosetta chuckled, sliding her pants down. "You will stare into my eyes and know you are my captive." She sank down over his hardening flesh, drawing a gasp from him. "Say it now!"

Bradley thrust into her hot heat and started muttering the birth charm he'd learned as a teenager.

Rosetta held on for the ride, climbing with him. The brew was too strong for her to fight either. She wrapped a leg around his waist to let him in deeper. "Say it!"

Bradley claimed her mouth, finishing the futile charm in his head.

Rosetta stayed locked against him, breathing hard. She didn't usually do a repeat, but her time was limited. *Soon I'll have all the time in the world.*

“What deal...did you make with Abraham for your good health?” Bradley shuddered against her, willing his heart to hold out.

“None of your business.”

“Why didn’t...Adrian kill you?”

“He couldn’t hurt a woman back then. I hear he’s changed.”

Bradley snickered weakly. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? You’re still trying to draw him back here.” He met her eyes. “And you’re scared of Alexa.”

“Everyone should be. Alexa was created with the seed from more than one donor, from what I’ve uncovered. She is part enforcer, part firewalker, and part magnet.” Rosetta snorted angrily. “I wouldn’t be surprised to find out that she’s a mix of all types.”

Bradley frowned. “That’s not possible.”

“They were cloning animals publicly. Do you believe they would have gotten that far or that bold and then stopped before playing with human genes?”

He grunted. “No.”

“She’s always been sharper, stronger...”

“She’s a Mitchel.”

“Slam you.” But there wasn’t any heat to her words. Mitchels were known for those things. Abbots were known for fighting skills and the ability to breed like rabbits. Rosetta began grinding against him.

Bradley struggled to breathe, to think. “You said you’d protect my life!”

Rosetta tightened her body around his. “I lied. It’s something you should be familiar with since your family is known for it, too.”

Bradley slapped his head against the wall, trying to knock himself out.

Rosetta laughed. “Do it again!”

Bradly began to understand he wasn’t supposed to come out of this alive. His sharp mind made the connection. “More revenge.”

Rosetta grunted, now dripping sweat as she worked his body against him. “You are a council member. It will hurt each and every person in your awful family when you die.”

4

Daniel paused outside the farmhouse. Lanterns were shining in every window as if to ward him off.

Daniel’s rage was still burning just as brightly. The urge to finish the slaughter was strong.

Alexa’s voice in his mind was clear. *Blood or your team? You can’t have both.*

Daniel immediately turned back into the jungle toward the compound.

The sun was below the horizon now. *The potion should be ready.*

Daniel paused, again feeling Alexa’s discontent. *What would she want me to do here?*

Daniel had spotted Rosetta and her captives through the basement window. *She’d want me to rescue our people. They’re family.*

Daniel didn't want to. Bradley was a burden and Emmie's boys were threats just waiting to be killed.

He also wasn't sure that he could control his anger long enough to get all three of them out. While he was going crazy, it was likely that at least one of the men would be killed. "I miss my team."

"So do I." Mark came from the path with Jed and Toby right behind him.

Those two men eyed the gore and kept their distance from Daniel, not sure if he was under control yet. They also admired him. He was proving why he was a member of Alexa's team, but he was also doing the Mitchel name justice. After this, more stories would spread about how lethal they were.

Mark grinned. "Blood looks so good on you."

Daniel laughed. His rage eased off, allowing him to think clearly for the first time in hours. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Mark clasped Daniel's bloody shoulder and then let go. He scanned the farmhouse through the trees. "They're all in there?"

Daniel nodded. "Bottom level. Fifty targets in the rooms and areas above that."

"Is that all?" Mark chuckled as Toby and Jed frowned.

Daniel started to wipe off on his cloak.

"Don't. Leave it."

"Why?"

"Because you look like something even a Mitchel would be scared of."

Daniel smiled as he understood. “Good cop, bad cop?”

“More like pissed off fighters and the thing that even scares us.”

“Sounds good.” Daniel took Mark’s right. “You’re the thinker on this run. I’m just the muscle.”

Chapter Seventeen
That Never Fails

1

Anger surrounded the farmhouse. It rushed out in thick waves that filled every space. Conversations stopped. Hands slid to weapons. All movement ceased.

Bradley sighed in relief. “Time’s up.” He sagged against the chains as Rosetta paused with the cup near his lips.

Rosetta scanned mentally, judging the threat.

“In Afterworld, kidnapping is a death sentence.” Mark glared at the woman.

Rosetta turned around to find two blood-coated Mitchel fighters standing in the doorway of the basement. Voices above them confirmed the men had run by her sons so fast that they hadn’t had time to react. It was a horrible disappointment to see both of them were vampires. *She changed her entire team!*

Rosetta’s basement was a dirt-floored, wooden-walled dungeon that immediately reminded Mark of the Seer’s cage. She even had a brewing set up along one side like that dangerous man did. “We could have asked her to brew it and skipped the Seer all together.”

“Yep.” But once again, it was too late now. Daniel was sick of that feeling. This entire run had been a failure so far.

Mark stepped into the basement.

Rosetta sat the cup on the shelf. “I thought vampires couldn’t enter a home uninvited.”

“I’m not the only one who watched too many movies.” Mark didn’t tell her Bradley had given him permission silently. Bradley’s relationship with Rosetta had screwed her twice.

“This can only go one of three ways.” Daniel’s eyes lit up bright red. “Give them back, we take them, or we make a deal.” He leered. “And I’m not in the mood to make any more deals.”

Daniel’s coating of blood wasn’t even dry yet. It only bothered Rosetta a little that it had come from her children. After the first few births, she’d stopped creating bonds with them at all, expecting most of them to die at some point during her bid for freedom from this place.

Rosetta began buttoning her shirt. “You can take the rookies. Bradley owes me a debt that he hasn’t finish paying yet.”

“Lady, you’re not listening.” Mark could tell Bradley was in trouble, though the method of his demise was amusing. “In one minute, my partner is going to go crazy. He’ll level this farm, taking all your kids, and you, with it.”

Rosetta glared. “You can’t bluff me. Your boss won’t let you kill children...” She stopped talking as Daniel turned toward the steps.

Mark put a hand on Daniel's gory shoulder. "Make it fast. They're just kids."

"Wait!" Rosetta pointed at the cuff keys on the shelf.

Mark came over to unlock the men. "Alexa gave me a message for you."

Rosetta waited while keeping an eye on the vampire by the stairs who still had his back to them. Shudders of rage were running along his arms, intimidating her. Even her more reckless sons weren't confronting him.

Raymond and Luis, her most loyal, dependable, and powerful children had remained at the top of the stairs, hoping they weren't needed. They didn't make eye contact with the vampires, though they glared at Jed and Toby.

Mark unlocked one of Bradley's cuffs and then gave the half-clothed man the key. He faced Rosetta. "Alexa said Abraham isn't the only one who can be locked in a room. If you push us again, even a little, you'll be stripped of your gifts and put into a cage next to him." Mark finished it as hazardous glints appeared in Rosetta's brown eyes. "Then she'll call in the water and have it drown you every day, only stopping right before you die."

Rosetta tried to sound unafraid and failed. "You have what you came for. Get out and don't come back."

"Not until you give me your word that this quest for control is over. We won't tolerate it."

Rosetta's lips clamped shut.

Mark shook his head. “Even if you’re pregnant with an alpha brat from this...rape, you cannot leave here. You cannot use that child to escape the punishment you deserve. This is your only chance to live here, free, in peace.”

“I’m not free! I hate you and your father! Slam you!” Rosetta began knocking jars off her shelf, shattering them against the walls.

Mark knew she was really screaming at Alexa. “I’ll pass your regards.”

“I agree, now get out!” Rosetta broke another row of jars. “Get out!”

Daniel turned toward her.

Rosetta threw a jar into the wall next to his head. “Get out of my house!”

Daniel walked by her, sneering at her flinch. He held his arm out so Mark could put Wyatt over his shoulder.

Mark loaded up Damon and then went to Bradley, who was fixing his clothes. “Hold onto me.”

Bradley was grateful. “Thank you for the lift.”

Mark chuckled. “You do look like this ride was too rough.”

Bradley was too tired to laugh. “It was a pointless hump down memory lane.”

Rosetta stiffened.

Bradley waited until they were at the door. Then he glanced over Mark’s shoulder. “The scientists snipped me right before the war. It’s why I became

so lazy.” He leered at her. “You won’t get anything out of this, but thanks for the pussy. Bye.”

Mark and Daniel hurried their cargo up the steps as Rosetta’s rage burst free. Jars and canisters hit the wall and fractured open on the stairs. Screams followed it.

Mark wasn’t happy that Bradley had stolen their thunder. “Did you have to do that?”

Bradley winced at the pain as they went up the steps. “Yes.”

Daniel saw scratch marks on the councilman’s arms and neck. He was exhausted and he stank. “Just another Mitchel family night out.”

Bradley did laugh this time. Then he groaned and stumbled.

Both vampires stopped, suddenly furious that Rosetta was getting away with abusing a male. It sent them back to Billy’s treatment by the fanatics.

“She might as well be wearing a red robe.”

Mark was aware that Rosetta had gone quiet at their fresh anger. “I doubt the boss would be too upset if we broke the deal.”

Daniel was still on the edge. He had no problem killing women now. “It’s your call, thinker.”

Bradley rested his head on Mark’s shoulder, showing weakness because there was no other choice. “Spare her, unless she attacks.”

“She hurt you.” Mark scanned the man again. “She would have killed you.”

Bradley drew air into his aching lungs. “I hurt her, a long time ago, by not claiming her. Now we’re even.”

Mark got them moving. “The thinker agrees, as long as she keeps her end of the deal.”

Rosetta had stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Her tiny heart throbbed with emotion at Bradley’s words. A small measure of peace filled her mind. He didn’t love her. He never had, but he’d spoken up for her this time. She could let go of her hatred for him now.

Rosetta’s heart clenched as her stomach cramped. *But I’ll never forgive Adrian and his damn daughter!*

Rosetta resumed destroying her brewing room.

Mark and Daniel walked out of the house with their three men, glaring at the Abbot boys who were now considering attacking them.

Jed and Toby hurried out of the shadowy trees to help carry the unconscious men.

Luis and Raymond rushed into the basement to see what their mother wanted them to do.

“Get out!”

Both boys ran from her aim as she continued to throw whatever her hands grabbed.

Bradley sighed as they walked into the jungle. “The crazier they are, the tighter they are. That never fails.”

“You should go back and do it anyway. She can’t be trusted.” Jed had waited until they were away from the farmhouse to give his opinion. He wanted Daniel to have the element of surprise if he agreed.

Heat and smoke rolled over the men as they went through the trees, creating their own path. The fire was spreading parallel to the compound. There was no quick or easy way to reach it anymore.

Mark snorted. “Colton and Asher will need something to do after we leave.”

Jed laughed. Then he sobered. “What about Emmie and her boys?”

Mark shrugged. “That isn’t up to us.”

The jungle was dark. Vines made it hard to walk quietly. Undead began to leave the fire and come toward them.

Daniel wasn’t sure. “Alexa is too ill to pick it.”

Mark redirected the man’s anger. “Did you notice the undead stayed away from the Abbot farm?”

Daniel nodded. “I don’t believe the water lets them through. There’s a creek almost all the way around the property.”

Jed didn’t let go of Damon as he and Toby carried the unconscious man between them. “How do we make it back to the plane?”

“We aren’t going there.” Mark moved faster, hoping they wouldn’t have to fight yet. “Get to the tree door we latched earlier.”

The men marched through the trees at a quick clip, shifting to avoid the undead where needed.

Mark got the door open and waited for the others to go first. He kept Bradley next to him, aware that the older man was putting on a brave face. Mark recognized it from Billy's abuse. Bradley didn't want anyone to know he was traumatized.

"I'm not, really." Bradley yawned, jaws clicking shut.

"I would be."

"You aren't a Mitchel. We can't be traumatized with sex."

Mark thought of Alexa. "Not even the females?"

Bradley sighed. "It would take a lot for anyone to match the abuse we've all suffered in the labs."

Mark blanched. He hadn't considered that type of torture, but it made sense now that it had been pointed out. The government kidnapped them, shot them up with chemicals, and forced them to use their gifts on each other. Why would they draw a line at rape?

Two zombies hurried from the trees, moving faster than the others Mark had seen here so far.

Bradley fell to his knees as Mark let go.

Mark gave him a shove. "Tuck and roll!"

Bradley tumbled down the stairs and smacked into the wall. "...this is some rescue."

Mark tried to latch the door.

Bony hands shot inside and grabbed his cloak.

Mark yanked free, pulling too hard on the wood. It cracked near the latch.

Mark opened it and kicked the zombies back. Then he did it again, clearing enough room for him to yank the door shut. He had to force the latch into the ring, making the wood groan.

Mark hurried down the steps, where Jed was helping Bradley to his feet.

Bradley rubbed his throbbing shoulder. “You didn’t have to be so rough.”

Mark snickered at the man’s childish tone.

Daniel headed for the Seer’s cage, leaving the others in the main entrance.

Toby and Jed dragged Wyatt and Damon over to the dirt wall away from the water. They stayed there, listening.

“They’re back!”

“Come on! It’s time to go!”

“We need to make a deal, too!”

Mark sighed as a line of residents hurried toward him, preventing him from joining Daniel. He already knew he had to handle this. Daniel didn’t have enough patience left for it. “Okay, line up and we’ll leave shortly. If you need to talk to me, come do it now.”

Mark was quickly surrounded.

Bradley sat down near Wyatt and Damon. Then he rolled onto his side and dropped into an uncomfortable doze. Mark was right, but Bradley would never show signs that it bothered him. He’d learned that too well in the lab, where every emotion

had been removed until almost nothing bothered him. *A few years more of that and I wouldn't even be human now.*

3

Now that it was dark, the lights through the tunnel activated, giving it a much more welcoming atmosphere than it had held earlier.

People pushed food into his hands.

Mark assumed he looked rough, covered in blood spray. They wanted to make sure he wasn't hungry. It was clear that they knew what he was. Many of them were now wearing crosses and garlic.

Mark thought of his own misconceptions and grinned. "Nice jewelry."

More food was pushed into his hands.

Mark gave some of it to his teammates and stored some. The rest, he ate while they talked. He felt like he was starving.

The cute little girl he had seen earlier came running through the tunnel. She wrapped Mark up in a leg hug that almost brought tears to his eyes.

Her guards rushed through the tunnel behind her, trying to catch up. They stopped short when they saw Mark.

The man in front drew his knife and stepped forward. "Come on, Alicia."

The girl held tighter to Mark's leg.

Mark reached down and put a hand on the girl's shoulder. He felt good health and power as he

touched her. “Go back to your family now. I don’t want to kill them.”

The man with the knife stopped, fear crossing over his face.

“Kill them all!”

The girl’s scream took everyone off guard. They stared at her.

Mark felt a chill. “Who and why?”

The girl hugged his leg again. “They’re not good. The water doesn’t like them.”

Mark studied the man he had assumed was her father. *He’s too old to have made this kid.* “Where are her parents?”

“She’s my granddaughter.” The man motioned. “Come on, Alicia. You’ll see him again on the plane.”

The blonde, brown-eyed girl smiled at her grandfather. “Can I swim now?”

Grandfather held out a wrinkled hand. “One more time before we leave.”

“I don’t want to go!” She went to her family and let them nudge her back down the tunnel.

The girl glanced over her shoulder at Mark.

Mark nodded to her. If she was being held against her will, he would do something about it.

Jed caught Mark’s eye. “I bet the Seer would know, and he did promise to answer your questions.”

“Good idea.” Mark resumed eating and handling the line of residents wanting to barter a ride while inside he made plans to rescue the child.

“I trust you had a satisfying tour of the compound.”

Daniel snickered at the Seer’s comment. He settled onto a stool. “It’s been educational.”

“Time here always is.” The Seer stirred the pot with a wooden spoon.

The man didn’t have wrinkles or gray in his hair anymore. He was in prime health; even his brown beard was curling sweetly along his chin. *And I know why.* Daniel saw the hanging bodies were gone, but he didn’t ask what Abraham had done with them; he didn’t want to know.

The Seer’s cage had been cleaned. There was only a pallet on the floor now and his brewing station. Daniel assumed everything the man was taking was now stored in his impressive cloak. He was ready to go. “I assume the brew isn’t ready?”

“It’s close.”

Daniel watched the man as he added items with the same graceful sweeps and movements that Jendon had used. It reminded him of that troll. He tested a theory. “Why can’t Jendon hear us here?”

Abraham only knew of Jendon from old stories. He wasn’t surprised that Alexa’s men knew him personally. “Trolls are bound to the land that spawned them. If he came here, he would die.” The Seer asked a question of his own. “Who are you?”

Daniel frowned. “I’m a gunfighter on a quest.”

“What family line?”

“I don’t know.” Daniel didn’t, but he’d wondered about it since Alexa started teaching them their history.

“I could tell you.”

“How much?”

The Seer chuckled. “It’s on the house.”

Daniel bobbed his head. “Tell me.”

“Touch my hand.”

Daniel did it without fear.

Their skin made contact with no effect on Daniel.

The Seer flinched. He pulled back, tone deepening. “Reicher.”

Daniel grimaced. He’d been hoping for any name but that one.

“Do not be unhappy with your line. It may rule us all someday.”

Daniel didn’t know what to say to that. He changed the subject. “How did you learn to brew these things?”

“All Mitchels spent time learning skills when they weren’t in the labs. Some of them stuck with us and we pursued them.”

“And you had nothing but time in there anyway, so you enhanced those skills.”

“Yes.” He met Daniel’s eye. “Who do you love?”

“My leader.”

The Seer scoffed. “There is no need to avoid saying her name. I’ve known Alexa was here since before the plane flew over.”

Daniel hated it that the Seer had so much information. “Why were you imprisoned in here?”

“Do not waste our time together on questions you already have the answer to!”

Daniel felt that scold. It brought his dangerous anger back to the front. “I want to hear it from you. How could you kill an old lady like that?”

“I have killed many, of all ages. Why is one murder worse than another?”

“She was your mother!”

“And?”

Daniel was speechless again.

The Seer wasn’t. He eyed Daniel’s coating of gore. “Why do you fight for the light?”

Daniel acted like he didn’t understand.

The Seer dug into Daniel’s mind this time and pulled out his memories of being marked by a descendant as a child.

Daniel wasn’t able to resist. The Seer, even caged, was too strong.

The Seer lit up in hunger. *I will have her! Then no one will ever be able to imprison me again.* He sent a powerful charm over Daniel.

Daniel laughed. “You can’t charm someone who’s already charmed.”

“By Alexa?”

“By the girl in my memories. She claimed me years ago. Nothing you can do will break that because I was willing. I still am.”

“But you love someone else.”

Daniel yawned. “Lorey, yes. She’ll be a good mate for me when the girl of my dreams tells me to go away.”

“You expect misery and plan around it. Perhaps I’m wrong and you are a Mitchel.”

Daniel laughed. “I am in every way that counts.”

“Which means I can’t trust you.”

“No. Nor can I trust you, and none of that matters.” Daniel was tired of being here. “How much longer?”

“Half an hour.”

“Instructions?”

“Half a cup, drink by drink, until it is gone. Then sleep.”

Daniel frowned again. He’d been hoping for an instant cure. “For how long?”

“Until the magic works. I cannot say. Each human is different.” The Seer sneered. “And yet you are all the same.”

“Tell me the truth. Why were you put in here?”

“Why should I be honest?”

“Because you like me. You want to travel with me to the island. Build trust with me and that future may be possible.”

“Why would you ever consider that?”

Daniel told the truth without hesitating. “We’re changed now. Vampires won’t be welcome in Safe Haven. I want to save my team.”

“Even at the cost of the future?”

“There is no future without my team.”

Oddly touched, the Seer told him the truth. “Adrian knew, even as a child, that I would grow up to consume the world. As I became more evil, he became more ruthless. When I killed our mother, he locked me in here, never to be free again. He did it to save the world that you are now endangering with our deal.”

“You killed your own mother.” Daniel couldn’t get over that.

“Adrian was her favorite. She tasted sweeter than any I have consumed since.”

“Adrian doesn’t have that type of gift, from what I’ve heard. How did he lock you up?”

“He made my niece do it!”

Daniel had already worked out the family lineage. “Alexa is a fire type.”

“She’s an enforcer! Anyone can have a fire gift.”

“So only an enforcer can bind you?”

“Yes, but she’s too weak to do it again.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she’s not here and you are!”

Mark came through the tunnel, finally finished with the line of residents. He joined Daniel at the cage.

“Did you hear all of that?”

“Yep. Makes me glad we’re not on his bad side.”
Mark smiled at the Seer and sat down nearby to wait.

Abraham laughed. “Alexa picked a good crew. I will help you achieve all your dreams and desires in exchange for taking me to the true alpha.”

Mark only cared about one thing at the moment. “Are you going to punish Alexa for following her father’s orders?”

“No. She let me live. Adrian wanted me dead.”

“Why did Alexa spare you?” Daniel had been curious about that, too.

“That, you would have to ask her.”

“You never did?”

“No. I didn’t care then and I don’t care now.”

Daniel sensed the man had just lied to him for the first time. He let it go, but he knew it mattered.

Daniel swept the small team waiting by the stairs. He counted twice and scowled. “We’re one light.”

Mark looked around. “Who?”

“Wyatt’s gone.”

Chapter Eighteen
He's Obsessed
The Compound

1

“Did someone grab him?” Mark started checking for prints and intruders.

The Seer scoffed. “He woke while you were listening to me instead of paying attention to your duty. He is on his way to the farmhouse to finish what you started.”

Mark was embarrassed that he’d missed it. “I’ll go after him.”

Daniel shook his head. “We have two of the hostages back and the potion is almost done. We’re heading to the plane. If Wyatt doesn’t make it back here, that’s his problem.”

Mark didn’t argue, but it bothered him.

“You should leave Damon here.” Bradley didn’t move from his fetal position yet. He was still trying to recover his energy. “His family is staying. Why make an extra trip carrying his weight?”

The men exchanged looks.

Mark shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Daniel stared at Bradley. “What about you?”

Bradley slowly sat up, shivering from the cooler temperatures down here, his torn clothes, and the

lack of care. “I don’t want to, but I’m staying so I can’t come between Edward and Alexa.”

Daniel frowned. “That’s not possible. She has no interest in a corrupt Mitchel.”

Bradley forced himself to his feet at the insult.

Daniel smirked. “I’ll end up hurting you, councilman. Sit down.”

Bradley turned around and went toward the water.

Damn. Daniel’s concern increased.

Mark frowned. “Should we help him?”

“Yes.” Daniel followed Mark, but he had a sudden deep concern that it wouldn’t be needed.

Bradley entered the water without hesitating.

A wave rose up to greet him.

Bradley smiled at the ghost in the water. “You, I have missed.”

Bradley lifted his arms so the water could reach all of his body.

The water closed over him, drawing a groan from his lips.

His hair brightened back into brown and then grew, revealing the curls Mark had seen in Brian’s hair.

Bradley’s skin smoothed out, wrinkles and blemishes vanishing.

Daniel stared in longing. His own body was covered in scars from his many adventures.

“It’s healing him!” Mark was stunned. “Why didn’t it do that for us?”

The Seer answered his question when Daniel couldn't. "Only residents of this compound can bathe in the water and be healed."

Daniel was worried. If Bradley changed his mind and went with them, he would be welcome in Safe Haven. He was good.

"That won't matter to the boss..." Mark thought about Brian. Bradley was his father. He and Alexa were more than compatible. Their mix had created a powerful child.

"We're worrying over nothing." Daniel headed back to the Seer's cage as Bradley sat down in the water and let it soak away his pain.

"Yeah..." Mark stayed there to watch over the man; the scowl didn't leave his face.

Daniel resumed his questions while the Seer was willing to talk. "Are all those kids really hers?"

"Yes."

"Are they all by Tesco?"

"Unlikely. Rosetta wouldn't have limited her options that way."

"And Tesco didn't mind?"

"His marriage to her gave him control of this compound. He made sure she was happy and followed her every order."

"He loved her."

"Probably. He was always weak."

"Why only boys?"

"It was the only gender from an Abbot that was ever born an alpha, and even then, it only happened

once. Abbot bloodlines are subservient to the others. They've always hated their place because of that."

Daniel chose a more delicate subject. "What was Adrian's mother doing here?"

Abraham tensed for an instant. "Angel traded her relatives to the lab for months of freedom each year."

Daniel assumed that meant she betrayed their locations. "So she was visiting?"

"She was planning the apocalypse."

Daniel stiffened. "Wait. Planning?"

"She gave her husband, the former president, the idea to end it all so our kind would never have to rule as normals. In the end, she got what she wanted. All over the world, pockets of magic users are emerging, merging, growing. Humanity may truly go extinct now, because of my mother."

"Does that give you comfort?"

"No. I didn't kill her to stop her plan. I believe it's the future that should exist. I killed her because she didn't love me enough to save me."

Daniel thought he understood. "From this future?"

Abraham snorted bitterly. "From turning evil. If she'd loved me, I would have carried out her vision with honor, like my brother has."

"Why didn't she? Do you know?"

Abraham's voice deepened. "She hated my father."

"And he is?"

“Somchai Abbot. That’s where the brown comes from in the Mitchel line.”

“They had an affair?”

“Somchai worked in the lab. One of the conditions for her release was mating with him to produce more Seers for the government. Fifty years ago, there weren’t nearly as many as there are now.”

Daniel was horrified, and sick of hearing about the misery his kind had gone through. “And Adrian’s father?”

“She loved him, so their child was good. That made all the difference.”

2

Wyatt shut the tree door behind him softly so it didn’t draw attention from the fighters below. Mark and Daniel didn’t need to know what he was doing until after it was done.

He moved toward the brightly burning fire that was now between the compound and the bridge, while watching for undead and stray Abbots. Wyatt had listened to Daniel’s conversation long enough to discover that Rosetta had survived his rescue.

Wyatt was furious about that. Mitchels didn’t tolerate; they sought revenge.

Wyatt didn’t have most of his gifts back yet. He knelt down next to one of the bodies that were left from the battle at the crash site and liberated a dart gun and a handful of darts. *I don’t need my gifts for this. Mitchels are masters at infiltration.*

The tanker still had small trickles of gas leaking from it that hadn't burned up yet or evaporated from the heat. Parts of the truck were red hot. Wyatt was careful not to touch it as he found a clear spot in the flames and moved toward the Abbot family farm.

The fire was still spreading in multiple directions. One of those twisted orange paths kept pace with him as he approached the creek. He wasn't sure if that small body of water would be enough to save the farmhouse. He hoped so. It would make a good aboveground base later.

Wyatt avoided the undead who were still heading for the fire. It was bright and hot, pulling them from all over the jungle. Many of them had also caught fire by going too close, but they didn't feel it. They walked at their normal pace, spreading sparks.

Wyatt quickly jogged over the logs as the water rose up to claw at his boots. "Yeah, yeah. I'm corrupt. Get over it!"

Wyatt stopped at the tree line around the farm to evaluate the situation.

He saw a dozen kids waiting outside on the porch and around it. All of them had arms full of bags and supplies. Shadows moved frantically inside the house. Wyatt assumed they were fleeing because of the fire, but even knowing they were being driven out of their home wasn't enough to cool his anger.

Wyatt expertly loaded a dart into the liberated gun. He was familiar with this model; it exactly

matched the type that he and his team used. Rosetta had disarmed him and his brother upon their capture. *But I'm a resourceful guy.*

Wyatt had already judged her sons as non-threats. Rosetta was the power here, but she'd been put in her place by the vampire fighters. She was scared; now was the perfect time to strike.

Wyatt stepped out of the trees. He leered at the younger kids, but he didn't target them. Once he had Rosetta in his grip, screaming in pain for their help, it would be easy to capture her family.

"There's someone over there!"

"They came back!"

"Run for the new tunnel!"

All of the Abbots outside the farmhouse took off running, going around the sides to disappear into the trees behind it.

Wyatt grinned. "That makes things easier."

He stepped up onto the porch with the cold shield of battle falling into place over his mind.

Rosetta and her two eldest sons fled as soon as they saw him. Like the rest of their family, they assumed the vampires had come back for revenge.

Wyatt only aimed for one target. He fired two darts, hitting Rosetta in the back with both of them.

"Mom!" Raymond spun around and ran to her.

Luis lifted his gun.

Wyatt pulled his knife and threw it in a quick blur.

Luis swerved to the side, turning the kill shot into a knife sticking out of his shoulder instead. He staggered, dripping blood.

Wyatt fired his dart gun again, hitting Luis in the leg.

Raymond scooped up his mother's body. He turned toward his brother now, torn.

Wyatt fired a fourth time, missing.

Raymond ran out onto the rear porch.

Wyatt gave chase, throwing another knife.

It stuck in the railing by Raymond's head, making him change directions. Raymond flew toward the front of the house with Rosetta over his shoulder and Wyatt on his heels.

The rest of the family kept going to the new location Rosetta had ordered them to move to. She hadn't wanted the vampires to know about her safe house. None of the Abbots came back to help even though Luis was screaming.

Wyatt fumbled for his last dart and dropped it. He angrily threw the gun, hitting Raymond in the shoulder.

Raymond flinched to the side and recovered, jogging onto the fallen trees to cross the creek.

Wyatt brought up his shield and lunged forward, using it to knock the man off.

Wyatt quickly dropped onto the logs and snatched Rosetta off of Raymond's shoulder as the water attacked Raymond.

Occupied with its new meal, the water didn't hurt Wyatt. He was able to heft Rosetta's sturdy

body over his arm and push himself up onto the log. He casually walked across it and then disappeared into the jungle with his prize while Raymond and Luis were still screaming.

Behind him, Luis jerked the long blade out of his shoulder and took off running after them. Blood left a thick trail down his chest and leg, hitting the ground in large splatters.

Luis saw the water tearing Raymond apart with huge teeth. He mourned the loss of his twin, but he kept going across the creek. He loved his mother more.

The Abbot family knew this terrain better than anyone. The light from the fire made it easy for him to pick out the heavier steps of someone carrying a body. Luis followed as quickly as he could, shoving undead and branches out of his way while his shoulder poured blood and his body fought the drugs in the dart. If not for Rosetta training them to function even while injured, he would already be out for the count.

Wyatt heard someone catching up to him and assumed it was one of Rosetta's sons. He moved faster, keeping his shield up like Alexa had been teaching them.

Luis flew forward, hitting the bottom of Wyatt's shield from behind.

Wyatt bounced off of a thick tree trunk, dropping both Rosetta and his shield.

Luis rose to his knees and lunged again, tackling Wyatt.

Wyatt tried to roll over so he could fight, but Luis's heavy body kept him pinned face down on the ground. He grunted as Luis pounded his kidneys with sharp punches meant to disable him.

Wyatt tried to use his gifts, but all of them failed. He hadn't given himself enough time to recover.

Luis hit Wyatt in the temple with a right and then drew back to hit him with a left.

Wyatt twisted around and threw the man off of him. He grasped out for his toolbelt and found it empty. He had used his last knife on the porch throw.

Luis didn't have that problem. He jerked his knife from his sheath and brought it straight down into Wyatt's arm.

Wyatt screamed.

Undead turned toward them.

Luis yanked the blade free and brought it down again.

Wyatt twisted away at the same time as he brought his good arm up, punching Luis in the jaw with his elbow.

Luis didn't feel it. He stabbed down again, hitting the dirt next to Wyatt's ear.

Wyatt jerked forward, headbutting Luis in the chin. Blood splattered both of them.

Luis stabbed Wyatt in the chest, aiming for his heart.

Wyatt headbutted him again, mind going fuzzy.

Undead from the trees reached them. All of the zombies left Rosetta's body alone in favor of the ones that were moving and making noise.

Wyatt jerked his knee up, catching Luis in the stomach. He butted the man a third time, knocking out two of his teeth and jarring both of their brains.

Luis felt hands on his arm. Rational thought returned, but it was too late to avoid the teeth that bit into him and crunched all the way down to the bone.

Wyatt quickly scrambled out from underneath the squealing man.

Luis's screams kept the undead around him, giving Wyatt time to slip behind a wide tree.

Wyatt eyed Rosetta's body, ignoring his injuries. She was lying a few feet away from where Luis was now being eaten by a dozen zombies.

It's too late to back out now. Wyatt sucked in a deep breath and then took off running toward the small herd.

The undead turned toward him, reaching out.

Wyatt slid to a stop and neatly put Rosetta up over his shoulder like he'd done with his bike earlier. He pushed off hard with his legs and broke through the middle of the herd, avoiding the teeth but not their hands. Bony fingers ripped his cloak away and then he was free, running away from them while Luis continued to scream.

Luis's noise brought the other undead back to him, letting Wyatt escape with two serious injuries, Rosetta's body, and his life.

3

"It's past sunset. We need to get to the boss." Mark hated to push when Daniel was still on the edge, but he couldn't help it. "How much longer?"

The Seer's tone was calm. "You can't rush perfection."

"Wanna bet? Stop delaying and honor our deal!"

The Seer laughed at Mark's anger. He couldn't be hurt by it.

Both men realized they would just have to wait until it was done, no matter how long it took.

Mark did a short patrol of the area to cool off.

Daniel satisfied his curiosity while he waited. "What really happened to the refinery?"

Abraham smiled. "Rosetta drained what she needed and then burned it down."

"Why? It makes no sense to live without power if it's easily available."

"She wanted to make sure that anyone who came here would have to deal with her in order to get the fuel they'd come for. Before the war, this place had been mostly forgotten and abandoned due to bad leadership. After the war, it became a prime location because of the resources."

“That’s brilliant.” Daniel gave Abraham a nod of respect. “She isn’t smart enough to figure that out. It came from you.”

“Yes. I often used Tesco to pass advice.”

Daniel realized Rosetta was important to Abraham. He assumed it was because she kept the sacrifices coming. “Were there many others before us?”

“A few.” Abraham answered the next question as it formed in Daniel’s mind. “Some, she kept to play with, as they held mild power. Others were sent to me to be disposed of and to replenish my stocks. Without that, she wouldn’t have been able to stay young enough to breed.”

Daniel kept digging for details. “How do you feel about the residents here?”

The Seer ladled the softly bubbling potion into a glass canning jar, being careful not to spill any. It glowed bright pink. “I have no feelings for them. Some have provided me with bodies; others have delivered scorn. They matter not to me.”

“So you don’t have friends here?”

“I had one acquaintance who could be considered friendly, but that ended long before your arrival.”

Daniel was curious if that was Rosetta, but not enough to be sidetracked from his topic. “How are they going to react when I let you out?”

“Most will flee. They will not follow you onto your plane after that. You will have broken their trust.”

Daniel thought of the little girl. “Will they be okay here?”

“I do not know and I do not care.”

Daniel grunted. “I’m trying to figure out if they’re going to attack us. Work with me!”

The Seer glanced over at Daniel’s sharp tone. “You carry bullets and Reicher blood. You were trained with Mitchel steel. Why do you care?”

Daniel realized he didn’t. Letting his inner self out had removed another chunk of his conscience. He moved on, verifying a suspicion. “Did our blood do anything for you?”

The Seer twisted the lid tightly onto the jar. “It has strengthened this body and given me more time before I need to possess another.”

Daniel wasn’t happy to hear that. He’d realized the Seer hadn’t needed to drink their blood; he’d wanted to. “Any extra power?”

The Seer sighed sadly. “No. Your strengths are so far below mine that it was unable to increase my gifts in any way.”

Daniel could only hope that was the truth. “What would it take for you to go good?”

The Seer froze for an instant, remembering another moment when someone had tried to convince him to do that. Then he laughed.

Daniel waited for the man’s amusement to fade and then pushed again. “You’re just trying to stay alive.” He knew enough about how the power worked to know that all demons had to have a

human host. “All of the lives that were traded to you were done in deals.”

“Some were still murder.”

Daniel heard Mark come back. “Half the men on my team committed murder in their past and yet they changed and became good souls who now fight for the light. Why can’t you do the same?”

The Seer came over to the door, leaving the potion next to the bubbling pots. He met Daniel’s eyes with complete honesty. “Because I don’t want to. I enjoy being evil.”

“You can’t mean that!” Mark was unable to remain silent. “All souls inherently want to be good.”

Abraham shined through for the first time since they had been introduced. They were able to see the real man inside.

“After everything I suffered for the first 30 years of my life, there is no going back for me. Ever. If you release me, I will lay waste to everything I touch because it pleases me when nothing else does. I will never conform to the morals and values that Alexa has instilled in you. I am evil. That will *never* change.”

Mark was beyond horrified. “We can’t let him out of there!”

Daniel knew that. He also knew they were going to lose Alexa and their team if they didn’t. “You’re the thinker. Let me know when you come up with something.”

The Seer smiled coolly. “The time for that is past. The potion is done. Now you will honor your end of the deal or you will die and all of your teammates with you.”

Daniel stood up. “I’ll honor it. Instructions for the brew?”

“It must be fully consumed within two hours or the magic in it will die. Now let me out.”

“How do I do that? There’s no key.”

“The key is magic. Someone must take my place, willingly.”

“Give me the potion and I’ll find someone.”

Abraham chuckled. “Not on your life or mine. You can’t be trusted.”

Daniel was trapped. There was only one thing he could do here. He wasn’t willing, but he did want Alexa to live. He didn’t know if his sacrifice would be enough to break the magic.

“I’ll do it.” Damon got to his feet. He’d been awake for a little while now, recovering from the drugs in the darts and listening. “If it saves Alexa, I’m willing.”

The Seer stared, eyes dilating in anticipation.

Daniel frowned. “Why would you do this?”

Damon put a hand on the knob. “I love her. I always have.”

He turned the handle; locks fell to the dirt. A burst of magic went through the cage.

The door swung open.

Abraham stared, remembering the last time he had been free. *Alexa was here then, too.*

Daniel and the others retreated, not sure what to expect.

The Seer approached the door carefully. He stepped into the threshold.

Nothing happened.

The others exchanged nervous glances.

Abraham walked out of his cage for the first time in 20 years. "I am free."

Another group of residents took off toward their cubby.

Abraham laughed. "I'm free!"

Mark stared, stomach tightening. "I was wrong before."

Daniel nodded. "*Now* the hard times have arrived."

Chapter Nineteen
Stay Or Go
The Plane

1

“That’s it. We’re full enough.”

Bronco’s team began shutting off the fuel at his call.

It was quiet right now, even with so many undead crawling through the trees, but Bronco knew it wouldn’t last. The fire was closer. Thick waves of smoke floated over the bridge, making his throat burn. He swallowed a cough that would echo. “Don’t disconnect those hoses from the truck yet.”

Bronco went to the rear of the tanker and removed the huge gas cans that were on a welded frame. He took them back to the other side.

None of his team needed to be told what he wanted. This wasn’t their first rodeo.

Bronco filled the gas cans while his team spread out and looted the gory bodies around them.

The men stank like gasoline, but the smoke in the air was still stronger. It looked, and smelled, like the entire jungle was burning. It was providing enough light to work by while keeping them worried about spreading sparks.

Bronco took darts, knives, and guns, even the empty ones meant for bullets from the corpses closest to him. Then he looted whatever else they had on them. He found a first aid kit and a can of soup with a faded label. It didn't matter what it was. When they were hungry, they would eat it.

“The undead are coming back.”

Bronco nodded at his teammate's quiet alert. They were following the flames.

Howie scanned the fire. “There's no clear path for the team to take through it.”

Bronco grunted as he stood, knees popping. “They're Mitchels. They'll make a path.”

Bronco eyed the dark sky above them, unable to see the dim moon for the smoke and the trees. He judged it to be late evening.

Howie fastened the caps onto the cans. “Where do you want these?”

Bronco pointed at a small thicket near the end of the bridge. “Cover it well. The undead won't bother it, but people will.”

Howie frowned. “What if the fire reaches it?”

Bronco shrugged. “Then it's fate.”

“There's not much.”

Bronco gestured. “It's enough to get us out of here in a small hopper, though we won't get far.” He hadn't decided if they would stay yet. “Just covering our ass, like I always do.”

“Fair enough.” Howie liked that. It was why he'd never challenged Bronco for team leader.

Bronco's men hid the gas while Bronco finished disconnecting the hoses. The tanker still had fuel in it. He considered hiding the truck, too, but it would draw a lot of attention if they moved it now.

Bronco scanned the plane. He saw moving people on board, but no lights. They'd decided to use lanterns to keep from being a target for any other people around here.

A deep sense of foreboding filled the air.

Bronco stiffened, recognizing the vibe.

Thick waves of unrest hit the bridge and brought his team to his side.

Howie stared toward the compound. "They let the Seer out."

Bronco was suddenly glad he'd thought to gather the gas. "Yep. Get on the plane." *Not that it will protect us from that one.*

"Maybe we should just take the fuel and go find a den. We'll drive this truck as far from here as it will go."

Bronco had to consider Howie's suggestion. He looked at the others. "Vote on it."

Bronco wouldn't be upset if his team voted to go. He would still be their leader and that was enough for him. "We're Mitchels. We should stay."

Howie shrugged. "We usually avoid moments like this. It's how we've survived without being as scarred."

One of their other teammates denied that. "It's also kept us from earning any glory. I want to finish what we started here."

“I want to take over the compound.” Bronco smiled at their immediate interest. “I can’t be the only one who thought about it.”

Heads shook and grins appeared.

Bronco chuckled. “So we’re in agreement?”

Everyone nodded, even the man who’d wanted to flee. Taking over the compound and removing the Abbots from power was a worthy goal.

“She’s changing us.” Bronco didn’t know if he should be happy about that or not.

Howie wiped his hands on his cloak. “Then we’ll honor that by staying close and helping her in her time of need. And after she leaves, we’ll go back to conquering, like Mitchels were meant to do.”

“Agreed!”

A faint shout penetrated the hull of the plane, getting their attention.

Bronco led the way. “Keep your minds clear. I don’t want the others to know what we’re planning.”

Howie frowned. “Because they might be thinking the same thing?”

“Exactly.” Bronco opened the door and found chaos.

“Imposter!” Edward squeezed Alexa’s neck harder. “I’ll kill you!”

Eva and the others were trying to make Edward stop without hurting him or getting hurt, but even ill, the man was strong.

Bronco sighed as his men hurried in to help pry Edward off of Alexa. “We probably should have just taken the truck and left.”

2

Edward jerked awake.

Everyone braced to hear another warning about the monster stalking Alexa.

“Time binds all matter in a triangle!”

In the seat next to him, Alexa was too weak to open her eyes. “Mark and Daniel will handle it.”

“We have to warn him!”

Alexa’s throat felt like sandpaper. She swallowed, trying to ease the discomfort from being strangled.

Alice gave her a sympathetic glance and rubbed her own bruises.

Edward’s feverish gaze went over the purple bruises on her throat. “Boss...”

“I sent a thinker with him. Have faith in your team.”

Everyone braced for another attack.

Alexa chuckled tiredly.

A few seats away from them, Asher pushed through the haze of the drugs.

Next to him, Colton did the same.

Alexa’s laughter had reached both men.

Emmie jumped from her chair and marched over to them. “Go get my sons!”

Eva scowled. “Give them time to recover!”

Emmie waved angrily. “There is no time! We all felt it. The monster is loose!”

“Calm down!”

“Don’t tell me that. You have your team!”

“Not all of them.” Eva was fond of Jed and Toby. “Control yourself!”

“But they’re awake!” Emmie pointed. “Alice and Madelyn will go with them.”

Madelyn snorted. “We’re not leaving you alone with Alexa so you can kill her.”

“Slam you!”

In coach class, Alexa forced her lids open to look at Ria as the argument out there continued. “It’s time for you to act like your father.”

Ria stiffened. “What?”

“Get her story, in any way you have to.”

Ria wanted to refuse, but there was also a part of her that wanted to do it. She’d seen Roger grill people until they didn’t have a spine left. She knew his methods well.

Ria slowly walked into the next compartment with her mind settling down from the heavy fear it usually ran in. She faced Emmie. “Why do you want Alexa dead?”

“That’s none of your business!”

“It’s everyone’s business since you keep trying to get us involved in your conspiracy.” Bronco helped his team get Edward tied back to the seat even though he was awake.

Edward didn't resist. "Crisscross and then double knot them this time."

Everyone listened to Ria and Emmie as they worked.

Ria lifted a brow. "The easy way or the hard way, Emmie?"

Emmie stiffened in fury. "Don't you do that to me, you little bitch!"

Ria stepped closer. "One more time. Easy or hard? I won't ask again."

Emmie crossed her arms over her chest and brought up her shield. "Slam you!"

Ria reached out and put her hand right through Emmie's shield. She grabbed the stunned woman's shoulder and sent a strong current.

Emmie folded up, going to the floor in seconds. "Stop!"

Ria didn't want to have to do this again. She sent a second blast that drained most of Emmie's energy and sent awful pain over her skin.

Colton was thrilled that someone was finally putting Emmie in her place. Her kids were never going to do it.

"Stop! Don't!"

Ria let go.

Emmie rolled away, shield coming back up. She gained her feet and drew her gun.

Ria grinned. "Fire it. I dare you."

Emmie slowly lowered the weapon. Ria could get through her shield. She'd only known one other

person who could do that and even though he was dead, that still terrified her. Ria was half Mitchel, half Livingston, like her team.

“Answer my question.”

Emmie didn't have a choice. “Her father arranged my match to Joel.”

“Ah. So you're taking revenge on Adrian's daughter.”

Emmie glared. “She has to pay!”

“Why not go after Adrian?”

“I can't reach him! He's safe on that damn island. The ocean wouldn't let me cross!” Emmie turned to Eva. “You have to press charges against Alexa!”

Eva didn't answer.

Emmie's anger broke free again. “Levi was murdered! Doesn't that mean anything to you?!”

Eva stared back impassively while her team scowled.

“You bitch!” Emmie faced Ria. “We're done here.”

“No, we're not.”

Behind them, Jacob began seizing again.

Alice hurried over to help.

“Keep stirring!” Alexa slid out of her chair and held Jacob while he jerked and the fever burned him up from the inside.

Alice made herself resume stirring the potion. It was at a stage where it couldn't be left alone at all. Tears rolled over her cheeks as she watched Jacob suffer.

Alexa held her man loosely, trying to keep him from hurting himself.

Jacob's torment wasn't just physical. "Please forgive me!"

Alexa's anger filled the space. "Don't fall for that bullshit! You aren't evil."

Jacob shuddered, waking. He held onto her. "At least we're going together. I don't want to die alone."

Alexa's fury lit up the cabin and bathed all of them in a deep blue glow that faded slowly.

Jacob's body stilled; his breathing evened out.

Alice wept.

Howie stared. "What was that?"

Alice wiped her tears and kept stirring. "Her love. But it won't hold them for long. If the team doesn't get here soon with the cure, we'll lose them all."

"Good!"

Everyone scowled at Emmie except for Ria. She resumed the task she'd been given. "Why do you only love your sons?"

Emmie wanted to resist, to fight, to run. Instead, she told the truth to avoid being hurt again. "He used the girls against me for years! He abused them and made me watch. I'll never be able to get that out of their heads or mine. I hate them because it gave him control over me!"

Bronco glared at Emmie. "And you just let that happen? How could you do that to your own kids?!"

Ria ignored him. "How did you get away?"

Emmie refused to answer.

Alice did it for her. “She traded our freedom for hers.”

Madelyn glared at her mother. “We were all supposed to go with her when she left.”

Ria was shocked. “And you still joined her when you got free?”

Madelyn nodded. “Of course. She’s our mother, love us or not. Children need their mothers and fathers like the air or the water. Without them we are desolate and doomed to wander the earth alone.”

Eva stared. “So you learned to love her in spite of her flaws?”

Madelyn laughed harshly. “We hate her guts! We’re on her team to be there when she dies!”

Emmie’s shield dropped as she began to sob, but only one person on the plane felt bad for her.

Eva hugged Emmie. “We only get one life. Why should we waste it on someone else, even if it is a child or a parent?”

“What did you just say?!” Asher was shocked and hurt.

“We all have a right to be happy.” Eva stared at him without regret. “I traded Levi for you. Tell me you wouldn’t have done the same in time?”

Asher went silent.

Bronco frowned. “Levi was killed by a cheetah.”

Eva snorted. “Levi was killed by his pride. I suggested he take the lead through that stadium. Alexa didn’t remove him. I did.”

Colton froze as he realized Wyatt had blamed Alexa and they'd accepted it without proof. *I owe her for that.*

Asher felt ice enter his heart. He tried to fight it until he had all the information, but it was hard. Mitchel families had killed each other over less than this. *I may have just lost the woman I love.*

3

"We should leave now." Asher didn't look at Eva as he said it. They'd all been quiet, stewing on her confession while Alice worked on the potion and Alexa's men slipped closer to death.

Emmie nodded. "Go get my sons!"

Asher frowned at her. "I mean we're not going to the island. We need to get off this plane before we don't have a choice."

"You just want to avoid the fighting!"

"We need to have energy left to make it to the compound." Asher didn't feel bad about it. He really did have faith that Alexa's men would make it back with what she needed. "I'm sure the undead need to be cleared out."

"We'll be alone with Emmie!"

Colton began checking his gear and making sure everything was tied down. "Ria will handle it since you and your sister are spineless."

Before Madelyn could reply, Colton lifted a brow toward Alexa. "Unless you want us to stay?"

Alexa belched, letting out a green cloud.

Colton's face tightened.

"Get out, while you can." Alexa didn't want any of them here now. She wasn't strong enough to keep them all alive.

Colton gestured. "The Seer is free. We all felt it. The team will be moving fast when they get here. We need to go now."

The other team members gave their opinions.

"I don't want to stay here."

"Safe Haven won't let us in. We'll be killed."

"She can drop us off somewhere on the way."

"Yeah, here." Asher stood. "Let's go now, while the undead are still distracted."

Emmie glared at all of them. "I'm not leaving until they bring the cure!"

While the others argued about it, Colton gathered his team. "I'm calling an official vote."

Everyone else quieted to listen.

"Jed and Toby both said they're okay staying here, but none of us are banned from the island." Colton regarded Eva. "Yet. Stay or go?"

Colton's team gave quick answers.

"Go."

"Stay."

"Stay."

"Go."

"It's a tie." Colton broke it. "I say we stay."

Everyone looked at Eva, who could tie it up again.

"I'm not really myself anymore. I want to try to come back from that, but Safe Haven isn't going to

give me the chance.” Eva put a hand over her stomach. “When his son is of age, he’ll be told the truth and I’ll go before the council.”

“Agreed!” Alexa smiled weakly as they turned her way. “Farewell, Mitchels. May we meet again in a time when we are our own masters.”

They all delivered the expected response, “From your lips to fate’s ear.”

“Well, I’m not going!” Emmie wasn’t giving up her revenge so easily.

Alice nodded. “I’m not leaving until they bring the cure.”

“Same.” Madelyn glared at Emmie. “Don’t make us kill you.”

Emmie was taken aback at the hostility from the timid daughter who rarely argued with her, let alone made threats.

Eva went to Alexa, but she stared at Edward. “I know why Addison’s baby wanted to spend time with him. My child feels the same and he isn’t even born yet. Edward is a magnet.”

Alexa sighed in relief at the explanation. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Eva leaned down and kissed Alexa’s cheek. “Thank you for keeping my secret and taking the blame.”

Alexa’s eyes shut. “I share half of it; I knew what you were doing. When you go before the council, I won’t forget that.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Alexa grimaced. “Speaking of lying, leave the survivors alone. Make a new truce between the families, one that will last this time.”

All of the people thinking about taking over the compound paused, stiffened, or frowned.

Alexa didn’t chuckle. “I know my family. I know what’s in your hearts. Hear me well. If you kill them, Safe Haven will come here and take this sanctuary from all of us. Make a truce and then make everyone stick to it.”

Eva nodded stiffly. “We’ll handle it.”

Colton was disappointed. “As long as they leave us alone, we’ll make it work.”

“No.” Eva’s voice hardened again. “We will do as the council has instructed or there will be hell to pay for it.”

Alexa gestured. “Now you’re where you belong.”

Eva bowed her head. “Councilwoman, Alexa.”
“Aunt Eva.”

Eva led her team off the plane, not caring that Asher was staring at her in a way that said they might not have a relationship now. “I made my choice years ago. You’ll all deal with it until Levi’s son is old enough to be without his mother.”

Colton followed her out into the darkness around the plane. “And until then?”

Eva scanned the jungle and the fire, lingering on the flames. “Until then, we’ll work together to make this compound the safe place for our kind that it was meant to be. We’ll do it with honor.”

“Agreed!”

“Good. Now get ready to fight. Those undead aren’t going to kill themselves.”

Colton’s laughter led them into the jungle.

4

“I can’t believe they just left you here with her.” Alice shut off the timer as it reached zero and then pulled the spoon out of the pot. She put the lid on tightly.

Madelyn agreed. “They should have waited until we knew you were safe.”

Alexa was touched by their loyalty, but she still felt uncomfortable receiving it after everything she’d done. “The cornerstone of our family is doing what’s best for us. That’s how we’ve managed to survive when so many others haven’t.”

“It’s still not right.” Alice leaned against the wall where she could give her spine a break and still see into the next compartment where her mother was now staring out the window, watching the teams leave.

“Daniel made a dangerous decision. All of them felt it. Death now walks free to claim whomever he chooses. I will not hold a grudge against them.”

“Well, I will.” Ria put a fresh rag on David’s hot head, dismayed to see his cheeks turning red again. The fever was returning. If he followed the same pattern Jacob had, David would have a seizure next.

Emmie was thrilled. She tried to keep her mind blank while also preparing to use everything she had when the time came. Alexa and her men had already had problems. It was just a matter of time until the next one hit and then even her daughters would be distracted.

“She’s planning your death again.” Ria was keeping track of Emmie’s mind.

“There’s always someone planning my death, but I’m still here.” Alexa began gathering energy from her reserve. She didn’t have much, but she was hoping it would be enough to see them through the next stage of chaos. *And then we’ll be out of here. I really do hate this place.*

The only good memories Alexa had of the compound were from her grandmother and her uncle. One of those people was dead and the other was soon to follow. Alexa had complete faith in her team. The one she wasn’t sure about was herself.

Alexa fingered the knife in her pocket. “It won’t be much longer now.”

Emmie grinned. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

Chapter Twenty
I Am A Monster
The Compound

1

Damon waited for the magic to confine him to the cubby. He was still standing by the door.

Once again, nothing happened.

Damon stared. "I don't understand."

The Seer handed Damon the jar of glowing pink liquid. "The spell said you had to be willing to trade your life for another. It didn't say you had to."

Mark was impressed with Damon even though he didn't like the man. That had to be respected. "Alexa will probably let you come along if you want to. You showed her great loyalty."

The Seer scoffed, walking toward the open door. "It isn't loyalty. He's obsessed. He can't stand the thought of her dying before he's had her."

Damon scowled at Abraham. "That's not true."

Daniel took the potion from Damon without picking a side on that topic. He had bigger things to worry about. "Let's go." He pointed at Abraham. "You lead the way."

"It's my honor." Abraham left the cage for the first time since his imprisonment.

Residents in the tunnel took off toward the exits.

Daniel sighed. "I'm sorry."

Abraham nodded. "You have unleashed their terror."

Some of the people stayed still, watching him nervously. Others smiled in welcome, relieved that he was now free.

The water nearby sloshed angrily onto the bank and soaked the plants.

"This was a bad idea." Bradley fell in behind the twitchy team.

Daniel knew that, too. "Tell me something I don't know."

The team followed Abraham with hands on useless weapons. Abraham's power surrounded him like a shield that nothing would be able to get through.

Damon stayed next to Bradley, going with them even though his family was staying here. He didn't care about Wyatt being missing or about his mother's displeasure when she found out what he'd done. He only cared about Alexa. They had the cure now, but a monster was headed toward her. There was no way Damon would stay behind until he knew she would be safe.

The Seer laughed darkly. "Your dreams are even bigger than mine."

Mark used hand code. *What's the plan?*

Abraham laughed before Daniel could answer. "There is no plan. He means it. You're taking me to the alpha. I will drop this host and share with her."

Mark scowled. "What if she doesn't want to?"

Abraham's chin lifted arrogantly. "She will. I am more powerful than any demon left on this planet. She will want me."

Daniel ignored the displeasure of the few residents who were just now finding out the Seer wasn't caged anymore. "How many times have you...shed your host?"

"Dozens. None of them satisfied me."

Daniel tried to verify a suspicion. "You're not really Adrian's brother anymore."

"He's still in here somewhere. He isn't strong enough to be in the lead." Abraham slowed as they reached the main tunnel. It looked exactly the same as it had during his final walk with Alexa. There were even teachers and students here.

The little girl Mark had silently promised to help was strolling through the tunnel with a tall woman wearing a holster on each lean hip. "Good evening, Alicia."

"Good evening, Aunt Maya."

Maya glared at the girl's guards; they were too far away to help if something happened. Then she regarded Alicia. "Are you ready to start your lessons?"

The girl shook her wet head. "I'd rather keep swimming if it's all the same to you."

Abraham stopped as the girl and her chuckling teacher went by. He listened to their words while his mind tried to show him something that he'd missed.

Maya's tone was firm. "It's not all the same. You need these lessons."

Alicia glared at Abraham as they approached his location. "I'd rather swim. The water doesn't try to trick me."

Abraham regarded the softly flowing water against the tunnel wall. His eyes narrowed.

The student and teacher continued on, still talking.

"You need to know these things. Someday you'll also be a teacher." Maya was glad to have someone to pass this job to.

The girl smirked. "In some ways, I already am."

Maya slowed, catching the tone. "Do you see the future, Alicia?"

"Yes."

"Who's?"

"Everyone, including my own."

Abraham's mind split. "She lied."

Daniel didn't know what was happening. "Are you okay?"

Fury rose from Abraham's skin. "She told me she looked ahead, but I blew her off. That's why she kept asking if I'd seen my future. She was making sure I hadn't, while covering it with distractions."

Mark and Daniel exchanged worried glances.

Behind them, the conversation finished.

“This is your level test, Alicia Mitchel. You will not fail.” The teacher held open the door to the cubby where the shooting lessons were held.

The little girl slung her blonde ponytail, spraying drops of magic water over the fighters and Abraham. “As you say.”

They went into the shooting area and locked the door.

“Show me what I missed!” Abraham was jerked into the past with no time to brace.

Chapter Twenty-One
I'm Your Girl
Twenty Years Ago

1

“**G**ood morning, Alexa.”

“Good morning, Uncle Abraham.”

Abraham slid over so the girl could join him.

Alexa's five-woman entourage surrounded them in thick muscled protection.

Abraham tugged his cloak shut against the chill.

“Are you ready to start today's lessons?”

“So much that I may throw up in my own mouth.”

Abraham chuckled. “That's a good one.”

Alexa marched through the center of the tunnel, chin up. She didn't respond to any of the hard stares or people who quickly got out of their way.

Abraham smiled at the people they were passing, as he did every day at this time.

Those people nodded back, but not with the calm politeness that he projected. They were all leery of him because of his job as the family Seer and potion master.

Abraham scanned the little girl from the corner of his eye, seeing her hair was wet. Alexa started

every day with a swim. Abraham was jealous. The water had never embraced him.

“It would, if you go good.”

“That will never happen.” He didn’t scold her for getting into his thoughts. He’d told her it was required in their first lesson together.

The girl’s protectors moved closer at the reminder that Alexa wasn’t safe here, not even from her family.

Abraham continued the usual routine of meaningless chatter as they walked. “Are you enjoying the time here with your father?”

Alexa’s lip curled. “I’m not with my father. I’m with you.”

People who heard her snarky reply stared in concern.

Abraham laughed. “I see you are ready to start today’s lessons.”

Alexa nodded. “I have questions.”

“Don’t we all?” Abraham slowed so it would take them longer to reach his cubby. “We’ll do it the Mitchel way, as usual, question for question. I get to go first.”

“Agreed.”

Abraham stopped and glared at the girl, becoming menacing in an instant. “What mistake did you just make?”

Alexa glared up at him. “It wasn’t a mistake.”

“You didn’t negotiate at all.”

“It’s not always necessary to negotiate.”

Abraham stared, feeling like she was leading him into a trap. “Explain.”

Alexa resumed their walk toward his cubby without replying.

It was galling to have a nine year old child treat him this way, but Abraham only had himself to blame since he’d fallen for it. He caught up to her, moving by the guards who instinctively got out of his way. “Ask your question.”

Alexa smirked. “And that’s why it’s not always necessary to negotiate. If you can throw your opponent off guard, they’ll give you what you want most of the time.”

Abraham’s good mood returned. “It pleases me that you have absorbed my lessons so completely that you’re able to use them against me and be successful. Your father is right. You have a remarkable mind.”

The little girl glanced over at him. “Did he really say that?”

Abraham nodded. He didn’t add to it, however. The goal wasn’t for Alexa to be happy. She was here to learn.

Alexa turned toward the tunnel, keeping her chin in the air. She was acutely aware of how different life was for her versus the other people around them. No one else walked through these tunnels with a security detail. No one else here spent time with Abraham. She was different. “Why do you hate my father?”

Abraham's face went blank. "Hate is a mild word for what I feel, child."

Alexa was impatient for the information, but she had learned her lessons well. She walked in silence, waiting.

"Have you spent time around your father with other people, family, who were also competing for his attention?"

Alexa frowned. "Yes."

"How did it make you feel when those others were put ahead of you?"

"That has never happened."

Abraham swallowed more bitterness. "View at it from the other side, then."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because the easiest way to defeat an enemy is to get inside their head. If you understand what motivates them, you can use it against them to achieve your goals."

"They were angry." Alexa's voice held a slight tremor she wasn't able to control yet. "I heard their thoughts. Some of them wish I had died during my last lab session."

Abraham had heard about her choice to remove the Livingston twins rather than to pick one to kill. He admired her mind. "I'm not going to ask you how that made you feel. I don't care. The only side of it you need to examine is what that feeling led to. Start with the people who hated you because of it. What happened to them?"

Alexa slowed, recalling. “They were never around me again.”

“And who did that?”

“My father.”

Abraham nodded to the family enforcer as she went by in a hooded cloak and a long robe. “And the ones who wanted you dead?”

Alexa hid her pain. “They were sent away that same night. One of them was removed.”

“Did your father do that as a punishment to them or to protect you?”

“Mitchels rarely do anything for singular reasons. It had to be both.”

“Very good.” Abraham smiled down at the girl, resuming their normal pace.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“If you think about it, you’ll see that I have.”

Alexa walked the rest of the way to his cubby in silence, considering every word they’d spoken. She had already learned to replay both sides of any conversation.

Abraham opened the door to his cubby with a small wave of his hand that unlocked the magical security he used when he wasn’t here.

Alexa’s guards entered the cubby with stiff steps for a sweep. They exited quickly, being sure not to touch Abraham or the girl, even by accident. Abraham’s den was disturbing.

Alexa went in and perched on the stool next to his brewing station. She didn’t look at the hanging

bodies on his wall. She'd gotten used to it after two weeks of daily lessons.

Abraham left the door open and joined her, taking his place in front of the bubbling kettles and pots. His brewing station was wide, deep, and covered in shelving that held every type of jar imaginable.

Alexa made the connection. "You're one of the haters. You wanted someone's attention and my father took it away from you."

"That's too shallow. Go deeper."

Alexa fell silent again.

Abraham held up a small glass jar. "This one is to help people remember things, even if they don't want to. It is a mixture of rosemary, nightshade, and honey. It is boiled for three days and then strained. Never add water to it. If you do, it activates the nightshade and causes instant death. It can be stored at any temperature, in any location, for any length of time."

Alexa's little mind absorbed the instructions and recorded them in exact detail even as she continued to work on the other puzzle.

"Would you like a hint?"

Alexa shook her head. "They always come with a penalty. I hate it when you cut my lessons short. I'll figure it out for myself."

"Very good."

Alexa's security supervisor entered the cubby and did another fast sweep to verify the girl's safety. Then she immediately stepped back outside to wait.

Alexa wasn't allowed to go anywhere in the compound without guards and Rosetta had only recently gotten this position. She took her job seriously.

Abraham swallowed another lump of sourness at Alexa's treatment. She seemed to be one of the few things on the planet that Adrian loved so much.

"It's only because I remind him of grandmother." Alexa's eyes widened. "That's it. It wasn't just anybody. It was your mom."

Abraham allowed a wave of real pleasure out to reward the girl.

Alexa's eyes dilated. Then she regained control. "I don't like it when you do that!"

"It's the way Mitchels handle incentives."

"I don't like how it feels to have my emotions overwhelmed. If you continue to do that against my wishes, you're going to force me to react."

Abraham felt a small measure of concern at her icy tone. Once again, he smiled at her. "Very good."

"It's not necessary for you to praise me at all." It really wasn't. It made Alexa uncomfortable unless it came from her father. From anyone else, she couldn't be sure it was true.

"How will you know when you're doing it right if I don't praise you?"

"I watch your expressions. When I please you, your mood improves, you smile more."

Abraham locked down on those tells, learning even as he was teaching. "Giving praise makes people feel good."

“Even when it isn’t true?”

“Of course. Flattering someone makes them happy, *usually*.” He eyed the girl and went on. “It also avoids the ugly situations that arise from telling the truth.”

“I always tell the truth.”

He nodded. “And you’ve gained enemies for it. Telling a lie would have avoided it.”

Alexa was offended. “But that is their lack of character, not mine.”

“True; it doesn’t change the point. If you’d lied, they wouldn’t have hated you. Why didn’t you avoid that?”

Alexa shrugged indifferently. “I don’t care about their hatred.”

“And that is why I reward you as I see fit. I don’t care about your discomfort.”

Alexa smiled. “Thank you for explaining it in a way I’ll never forget.”

“It’s my honor.” Abraham held up another glass jar. “This one makes people forget, but only for a day or two, depending on the strength. It is made up of even mixtures of finely ground Zizania, magic water, and hemlock leaves from a dying plant. It is stirred for ten minutes immediately upon adding it all to a cold pot. Chill and add to drinks or cold meals. If it gets above room temperature it spoils and only causes gas.”

Alexa took an extra minute to replay the instructions twice to be sure she had them correct. Then she resumed their conversation. “Why didn’t

those people speak to my father and tell him he was being unfair?”

“Would he have cared?”

“I don’t know.” Alexa stored that for a homework session.

Abraham sprang the trap. “Imagine going to your father and telling him he doesn’t spend enough time with you, that he’s out of your life too much, that it tears you apart when he sends you somewhere without him.”

Alexa had stiffened. “I won’t ever do that!”

“Because?”

“I have my pride. He should already know those things! I’m not a pet groveling for his affection...”
Alexa’s face went blank. “Damn you.”

Abraham gave her a mock scowl. “Such language.”

He stirred the front pot again, eyeing the small watch on the shelf to time it. “Next?”

“Was he right to send those people away?”

“Absolutely. Jealousy is a violent, dangerous emotion. It has to be controlled or it will bring down a civilization.” He picked up another jar. “It already has, in fact.”

Alexa didn’t try to pull up the history classes she was taking. “Why did you agree to teach me if you hate my father?”

“All Mitchels attend these lessons. All Mitchels give these lessons, if they’re good enough at the subject. There is no agreement or refusal.”

“I’ll have to do this for someone when I’m old?”

Abraham chuckled. “You believe 44 is old. That’s so cute.”

Alexa frowned. She hated being reminded of her youth and inexperience. She fought the need to strike out and won. She was young. That wasn’t his fault. “You don’t look that old.”

“Neither will you once you master these potions.”

Alexa didn’t respond.

Abraham was curious which career she’d chosen for herself. “Of all the lessons you’ve had so far, which did you do the best at?”

“All of them.” She said it without pride. “I’ve passed them all with top marks.”

Abraham wasn’t surprised. “Which did you enjoy?”

“Shooting.” Alexa sighed in longing. “I love the way the gun becomes part of my hand.”

“As do I.” Abraham was bonded with the girl through that and in other ways. These two weeks together had been nice for him, mostly. “Why did you agree to these lessons even though you know I hate your father?”

Alexa saw no reason to lie. “I told Grandmother it was to learn this skill from the best, and you are that, but I also wanted to see if you’re a threat to him.”

“What is your conclusion on that?”

“You’re not. You would never kill Adrian because then he wouldn’t be alive for you to hurt.

You want to watch him suffer. He's not in danger from you. Everyone he loves is."

Abraham stiffened. Then he smiled. "You are beyond brilliant. You are a perfect Mitchel."

Alexa beamed. That was a compliment she could tolerate.

Abraham soaked in her happiness like everyone did in those rare moments when they managed to please the child.

Alexa's guards were drawn; all of them entered the cubby with blank expressions.

Alexa sighed. "Go back to your posts. I didn't mean to call you."

The guards blinked, waking.

Alexa's shoulders drooped. "He'll replace them now because I'm stronger than they are."

"Why does that matter?"

"I got used to them. I don't like breaking in new people."

"Rosetta will be sorry to lose the assignment over you."

Alexa stared at him knowingly. "My father suspects you're sleeping with her."

Abraham shook his head. "Rosetta and I play chess and watch movies. We trade potion secrets. We are not lovers."

"She wants to be."

"She is engaged to your father, to increase the family ties with the Abbots. I would never interfere with that." Abraham realized what was happening.

“That’s really why he sent you to me now, when you are years too young for this.”

Alexa blasted him with her emotions. “Very good.”

Abraham winced. He didn’t like it either. “Point taken.”

Alexa eyed the jar in his hand.

Abraham stored it on the shelf. “We’ll cover how to use that one when you’re older.”

Alexa’s face squished up. “Why would I only want boy children? Boys are harder to handle.”

Abraham laughed. “Some people believe it’s better to have them because they can do more work.”

“What do *you* think?”

“Females carry more power. Boys carry more strength.” He waved it off. “Both lifeforces are equal.”

“I meant personally.”

Abraham shrugged. “Tell your father I will not discuss my sexuality with you.”

“He said to remind you that it’s long past time you picked a mate, be it male or female.”

“The one I want is not free. I’m content with occasional company.” Abraham held up a smaller, oddly shaped jar. “This is a counteragent. Do you know that word?”

“Counter. Go against. It goes against something.” Alexa worked it out while he opened the jar and added a drop to the front pot. “It counters some other potion.”

“It reverses the effects of the potions I have taught you today, as well as hundreds of others. It works for almost any poison.”

Alexa waited for the instructions.

Abraham gestured to the wall, where a bare skeleton was hanging. “It requires the liver of a human, a *live* human.”

Alexa made a face. “Why is something good made from something bad?”

“It isn’t good against bad when you’re brewing, child. You use the part required. The liver detoxifies. Why would that only work when it’s attached to a host?”

Alexa shrugged. “It still seems wrong.”

“Those who come here are dying. They give their final breath to me to further our causes and our line. It is a great honor to have such a place in our history.”

Alexa glared at him. “If my father catches you taking unwilling sacrifices, he’ll shut you down.”

“Yes, he’s made that clear.” Abraham held the jar up for her to view it. “Add two fingers, a liver, and an ear. Boil it with a quart of water, any kind. Use a tight lid. Turn down to simmer for six hours. Add a starch at hour seven, a sugar at hour eight, and simmer for another hour. Add something personal. Keep simmering for another hour. Strain and drink at any temperature. One drop will have an effect. One ounce will start the process. One cup will cause deadly cramps that explode the liver. Meet in the middle.”

Alexa shifted on the stool. “Why don’t you use things like bugs and bat legs, like in the storybooks?”

“Because I’m creating real potions, not vampire soup.”

Alexa laughed. “There are no such things as vampires.”

“As you say.” Abraham pointed at the large pot he was working on. “Pop quiz. Tell me what I’m brewing.”

Alexa loved these end of session tests. She quickly went over the things she’d seen him add while she was here, comparing it to her previous lessons. “It’s not a love potion. It doesn’t smell like cinnamon or chocolate. It’s not a health potion. You used normal water.” She kept working on it while Abraham wiped his hands clean and then resumed stirring.

“It’s not an anger brew because you’re stirring it... You used three drops of spider venom... It’s a death potion!”

“Very good.” Abraham shut off the flame and covered the pot. “We use it on the snakes that try to come inside the compound.”

“Will it hurt people?”

He nodded. “It will kill any lifeform, even the plants.”

“Will the counteragent work on it?”

“No. This brew has no antidote, no cure.”

“What happens?” She didn’t really want to know, but it was required information if he decided to test her on this.

“It paralyzes the muscles, suffocating the target because it can’t breathe.”

“How long does it stay good?”

“Only a day or so. It can be warmed three times. Once it goes below room temperature for an hour, it only causes the shits.”

“Such language!”

Abraham laughed.

Rosetta reluctantly entered the cubby. She knew Abraham enjoyed his time teaching the girl. “Three minutes left.”

She quickly stepped back out. Alexa’s family wanted to limit her exposure to Abraham.

Abraham retrieved a clean ladle from his sink. “Homework.”

Alexa brightened. She enjoyed his rare homework assignments. She was usually forced to create her own.

“Tell me the worst way to hurt someone, without harming them physically.”

“You harm someone they love.” She knew that from her time in the labs.

“Without *any* physical harm.”

Alexa concentrated. “Make them hate your target?”

“There is another way that is far worse. When we meet tomorrow, I expect you to tell me the answer, in detail.”

“I will.”

Abraham was sure she would. Despite being too young for these lessons, she had excelled at them. “What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I have a lesson with Grandmother Mitchel.”

Abraham smiled. “She is a powerful soul.”

“She’s very different from my other grandmother, though I enjoy those shooting lessons.”

“What is Grandmother Mitchel teaching you today?”

“I have a test on bone dust charms.”

“A useful skill for anyone.” Abraham inclined his head. “Thank you for your attention, Alexa.”

Alexa hopped off the stool. “Thank you for your knowledge, Uncle Abraham.”

Alexa joined her security team, shutting the cubby door as she left.

Abraham ladled the death potion into a coffee cup. “Mother always enjoys coffee after playing with her dust charms. She gulps it down like she’s dying for it.”

His loud laughter echoed down the tunnel.

2

Four hours later, Rosetta returned to Abraham’s cubby and made it to the door without alerting him. “Why are you teaching Alexa death potions? She’s only nine. And she’s good.”

Abraham kept stirring the kettle even though Rosetta had caught him off guard. “Why do you care?”

Rosetta stepped into the cubby and leaned against the open door. It was evening now. There were people all through the compound, settling in for the night. It wouldn’t look good on either of them if she shut the door. “I’ll be her stepmother next year.”

“He’s going to back out. I’ve seen it.”

“So you’ve told me.” Rosetta’s engagement to Adrian was the high point of her life so far. It had been her idea for a marriage between their families; she’d talked her father into it. Rosetta was treated with reverence and tolerance now. It allowed her a lot more freedom than most of the other people here. “It’s his mother. *Your* mother. She doesn’t think I’m good enough for a Mitchel.”

“My mother has always doted on Adrian. No woman would be good enough.”

Rosetta didn’t like Abraham’s pain or her own. Adrian didn’t spend much time around her. He had a lot of things going on in other places. While he was gone, she spent time with Bradley and Abraham. She was willing to settle for either one of them in his place if she had to.

“Your mother delayed our engagement party last month.” Rosetta had considered getting pregnant by Bradley or Abraham, who were both Mitchels, but she’d decided to volunteer as one of the guards over the descendent children who came

to the compound for lessons instead. She was trying to walk the good line because she knew that was part of why Adrian and his mother were hesitant. They knew she was on the edge of going bad. She was positive of that because Adrian had slept with all the other women in this compound, but not her. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. My brother is a whore. Even if he married you, he wouldn’t be faithful.”

“I’d give him a lot of sons.”

“While you carried them he would be giving other females his seed. He’s been that way since puberty.”

“You could brew something for me, to keep him from doing that.”

Abraham glanced over.

Rosetta smiled. “I’d still spend time with you.”

Abraham wanted that. The few kisses they’d stolen were burned into his brain. “You have to remove the bad influence in his life. Without that, no potion would work.”

Rosetta’s lips curved. “Now you’re telling me what I want to hear.”

Abraham scoffed. “You won’t do it. And you’d be punished for it. We both would.”

“If he betrays me, it would be worth whatever punishment the council picked.”

“I feel the same way.” Abraham glanced upward, where small thuds revealed someone entering the compound. “That’s a messenger. You won’t like the message.”

Rosetta tensed. “He made the choice.”

“Adrian was given a week to return and face the council over his choice. He’s not with them.”

“He’s supposed to come here so we can spend a year getting to know each other before our marriage!”

Abraham was still scanning the new arrivals. His lips thinned. “Mother let him break the engagement. She wants you to marry Tesco, to unite the two sides of your family line.”

“Tell me you’re lying.” Rosetta knew Tesco. He was weak, lazy, and without ambition.

“I cannot.”

He’s right. I’m never going to get what I want, what I’ve been waiting years for. But I can still make him pay for it. I just need to figure out how. Rosetta’s mind went to Alexa and then flinched away. She wasn’t corrupt enough to hurt Adrian’s child.

Abraham stared at her. “What about his mother?”

Rosetta’s eyes filled with tears, the kind women shed when they’re too furious to control those emotions. “I want her dead.”

Abraham celebrated silently. “That can be easily arranged. A distraught future daughter-in-law who just wants to make peace delivers a cup of coffee and then forgets to lock the door when she leaves.”

Rosetta stepped all the way inside his cubby. “I’m your girl.”

“They might remove both of us for this.” Abraham wanted her to be clear on the

consequences. He didn't care about the other people who might get in trouble for unknowingly helping them. He had feelings for Rosetta. Deep down, he was still hoping his mother might approve of her for him instead of Adrian.

“I believe we're smart enough to find a way around that.”

Abraham gestured. “Shut the door while I finish this brew.”

Rosetta did.

Chapter Twenty-Two
That Is Mine

1

“**G**ood morning, Alexa.”

Alexa slid into her place as he strolled through the tunnel. “Good morning, Uncle Abraham.”

Abraham’s body shined with renewed health as they walked. It was hard for people not to stare. He was almost glowing.

Alexa’s security team fell in around them to provide protection.

Abraham noticed all of them were different than the guards she’d had yesterday. Alexa had been right about them being switched out. “Are you ready to start today’s lessons?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Abraham chuckled. She gave a different, sarcastic answer every morning. He’d found himself looking forward to it. “No.”

“I have questions.”

“Did you do your homework?”

Alexa nodded. “I came up with two answers. I believe they’re both right.”

“Very well.”

Alexa scanned the vendors they were passing. “You say the sacrifices are willing, but most of these people are scared of you. Why?”

“I’m a Mitchel. They know what I may become in time.”

“They don’t react to me that way and I’m a Mitchel.”

He gestured. “This compound has a history of producing passive females without power. The people here have grown complacent.”

“What does complacent mean?”

“Complacent means always expecting the same thing every time and not preparing for the possibility of a different outcome.”

“They don’t think I’m dangerous.” Alexa didn’t like that.

“On the contrary, as Adrian’s daughter, they know you’re dangerous. They just don’t understand to what extent.”

She eyed him thoughtfully. “Do you?”

“Doubtful. I’m much too arrogant to consider you a threat.”

“Have you seen my future?”

“No. I have never felt the need to look.”

“Have you seen your own future?”

Abraham frowned. “I am not allowed to look.”

Alexa pushed, carefully. “Mitchels break the rules when it suits them.”

“Mitchels break the rules when they *need* to. I have never felt that I *need* to view my future.” Abraham glanced over at her, guessing what was on

her mind. “Many people ask me to look ahead for them. I charge a high price.”

“I get a discount, right? I am family.”

“No.” He smiled. “I charge them double.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Is it fair that your father loves you above everyone else? Life isn’t fair.”

Alexa knew that too well. “Are we friends?”

Abraham shook his head. “We are acquaintances with common skills.” He was suddenly curious. “Have you made any friends here?”

Alexa stiffened. “I haven’t tried. I’m not going to be here long enough for that.”

“Then why does it matter if you and I are friends?”

“Friends do favors for each other. I’m simply determining whether or not that may be an issue with you in the future.”

Abraham chuckled. Despite what he had just said, he did feel fondness for the girl. It was a surprise, considering how much he loathed her father. “Do you have other questions?”

“So many that my brain can’t keep up with them all.”

“Pick the two that are most important. We won’t have time for more.” Abraham unlocked his cubby and waited for her security to go inside and do their scan.

Alexa waited for an elderly couple wearing ball caps to go by. Their sons, sickly with limps, trailed

behind them without awareness of those around them. “If you had to pick between love and revenge, which would it be?”

“Interesting question. May I ask why you want to know?”

Alexa glared at him with her father’s cool blue eyes. “I can feel you planning something awful. I’m wondering if that future can be changed, if you get what you want.”

Very aware of the ears listening to them, Abraham went to his place in front of the brewing station without answering.

Alexa took her spot on the uncomfortable wooden stool and waited.

Abraham considered lying. Then he remembered he had already carried out his plan. He was free to tell the truth. “No. Not even love would be able to conquer the darkness in my heart now.”

“That’s very sad.”

“Agreed.”

“Do you believe in fate? That everything is meant to happen?”

Abraham snorted scornfully. “That question is second most important to you right now?”

Alexa nodded. “But I won’t tell you why, at least not yet.”

Abraham scowled as alarm bells went off in his mind. “Do you see the future, little girl?”

“Sometimes, but I don’t understand most of it yet.”

Abraham relaxed. “Yes, I do believe in fate. I’ve seen too many moments that were absolutely perfect for me to believe they were coincidence.”

“Thank you for your honesty.” Alexa favored him with a sad smile. “I wish we could have spent time together when we were both the masters of our own destiny.”

Abraham grunted. “Same, child.” Abraham turned the flame off on the front pot. “Use those amazing powers of discernment and tell me what potion this is.”

“Rules?”

“Sight only.”

Alexa scanned his brewing station. At the same time, she became aware that his cubby had been scrubbed clean. All of the hanging bodies were gone. His cabinets were empty and his bed was stripped. The only thing still in use was the brewing station. “Your sugar canister has granules around it. You always wipe your station down at night, so that’s from today.”

“And?”

“There’s a drop of something blue next to your jar of potato leaves.” Alexa’s mind made the connection. “You’re brewing a counter agent.”

“Very good.” He gestured at the canteen hanging from her mostly empty toolbelt. “Is that magic water?”

“Of course.”

Abraham didn’t hide his bitterness this time that she was able to collect the water and he wasn’t. “I

have never been able to swim here. Will you tell me what it's like?"

"No." Alexa didn't want to share that with anyone who was unable to be embraced by it.

"Dump exactly half a cup into the pot. Stir it for two minutes, slowly, counter clockwise."

Abraham moved them on as time shortened. "What answers did you come up with for your homework?"

Alexa used one of his clean glass measuring cups to dump in the water from her canteen. "You turn them crazy. It's mental, not physical, and it hurts your target because there's nothing they can do about it."

"And what is the most effective emotion to accomplish that?"

"Guilt."

"That is the correct answer."

"I believe there's another way that is just as effective."

"And that would be?"

Alexa looked over her shoulder as she stirred the pot. "You give them what they want and then take it away from them before they get to enjoy it."

A shiver went up Abraham's spine.

Above them, loud voices penetrated the layers of dirt. Silent alarms turned the lights red outside his cubby.

Alexa continued to stir, occasionally checking his watch to be sure she timed it correctly. "Are you capable of feeling guilt?"

Abraham frowned. “No.”

“That was also the answer I came up with when I asked myself that question.”

Abraham realized the girl knew more than he had assumed. He remained silent, waiting.

Alexa ignored the arm that began to ache from the repetitive motion. She was already used to putting duty above comfort. “You’re going to get what you want the most and then it will be ripped away from you. That is the punishment you have sentenced yourself to by your actions, Uncle. There will be other punishments from other people; that is mine.”

Steps sounded outside, along with angry voices.

Abraham forced himself to finish her final lesson. “When the potion is done, one half cup must be drunk. Then they’ll sleep. During that time, no harm can come to them in any form.”

“How long does that last?”

“It depends on the strength of the person brewing the potion. Something of themselves must be added to it.” Abraham reached around her and dropped a lock of his hair into the pot. “If normal water is used, the effects will last for a few weeks. If magic water is used, it can last for decades, though it will weaken, slowly, over time.”

“Then you drink another one.”

“No. This potion can only be used once per life.”

Alexa scanned his small workstation, where gold dust was scattered around a wooden frame. “That’s for making artifacts.”

“Yes. A master brewer and Seer can also craft artifacts from gold and sacrifices.”

“Those destroy our demons.”

“They are evil objects with a life of their own. They do not like being used for good. They will sometimes destroy the user.”

Alexa didn’t hide her disgusted tone. “When will you teach me to do that?”

“When you pass this class, it will be in the next level of your training.” He brought her focus back, like any good teacher. “This cure potion costs more than all the gold in your father’s lockboxes.”

“You said *can*. What interferes with it?”

“The approval of the water, of course.”

Alexa stopped stirring. She picked up the ladle and began to dip exactly one half of a cup into a glass jar.

Outside, Alexa’s security met the rush of people coming their way in confusion.

Alexa and Abraham both ignored the chaos.

Abraham took the hot cup from her. He allowed his genuine affection to show for one instant. “Thank you for the time we’ve spent together. I shall remember it fondly.”

Alexa shook her head. “No, you won’t. At some point you’re going to look back on this and understand you were never really the teacher.”

Abraham chose not to answer; he began to drink the scalding liquid.

Alexa hopped off the stool and walked calmly to the door as her security hurried in. “Goodbye, Uncle Abraham.”

Abraham finished swallowing the liquid, mouth on fire. “Get out of here. I never want to see you again.”

“From your mouth to fate’s ear.”

2

“This council officially approves the match between Eva, a distant Mitchel cousin, and Levi, who was divorced last year.” Nora smacked her hand lightly on the table.

“I’ll make sure he knows.” Colton wrote it in his book. He was copying all of the council’s choices for a report to his boss. He was the only member of Levi’s team who’d come to this emergency meeting. They avoided this compound because they didn’t like not being in charge of it.

Nora smiled at the man who had his new bride sitting in the seat next to him. Colton and his wife were headed to the Australian lab for a check in there after they left this compound. Nora hoped it went well. “Next?”

“I demand justice for the murder of my mother!” Adrian walked up to the desk where the council members were sitting. He nodded to Brad, who had his 19-year-old son, Bradley Junior, at his

side. Like Alexa, Bradley was also in training. His hair was wet, too, revealing where he'd been this morning. All of the students enjoyed the water here, if they were good.

On the other side of Bradley was an empty chair where Franklin should have been sitting. He was in Alaska with Brandon, snowed in. Neither of those Mitchels had been able to make it.

Nora was in the middle as the leader of the council. On the other side of her was an empty seat that Adrian was supposed to be sitting in. He'd only recently inherited that position, but breaking his engagement had jeopardized it. The council would eventually decide if he kept that spot. Until then, he wasn't allowed to take the seat.

In the corner of the room, Abraham was sitting in chains under a triple layer shield from the security guards. He smirked at Adrian through his black eyes, swollen face, and broken arm. The compound guards hadn't been happy to find out he was guilty of matricide.

Sitting in the opposite corner, also covered by security shields, Rosetta glared insanely. Seeing the object of her obsession was making it worse.

Now close enough to make sure it landed, Adrian nodded to those guards.

Well-paid and sympathetic, the guards lowered their shields even though they knew they would be reprimanded.

Adrian fired a death spell, using the strongest one he knew.

Abraham showed no reaction.

Chaos broke out in the small council chamber as the magic rebounded and hit the wall, breaking apart.

Adrian's new lover, Shannon, cringed against the seat at more proof of what he'd been telling her. "It's not normal!"

"No, but you are!" Rosetta understood in a blinding flash. Adrian didn't want a woman with power. "I would have locked it up for you!"

Rosetta's brother put a hand on her arm to calm her down. He was the only family member here for her; he didn't know where the others were or if they'd even been notified of Rosetta's arrest. If she was killed, it was his duty to avenge her, on the spot. With so many Mitchels here, that would mean his death as well.

Most of the main Mitchel family had skipped this meeting. The room was full of branches further down the tree, however, and all of them agreed with Adrian. They wanted a death sentence.

Adrian threw another deadly spell, unwilling to give up.

Abraham laughed. He'd never seen Adrian lose control of himself. "Again!"

Adrian had time for one more spell, combining hatred and a curse. It hit Abraham and bounced into the wall, vanishing.

Adrian screamed in rage.

Nora stepped in front of Adrian while Brad went over to handle the lax security guards. Nora's eyes narrowed. "Control yourself."

Adrian almost couldn't. The pain he was feeling was indescribable. "He killed my mother!"

Nora placed a cool hand on Adrian's brow, helping him with a mood charm.

Adrian didn't fight it. He'd been in pain for a week now. His heart needed the break.

Nora returned to her seat and stared coldly. "You may proceed."

Adrian's voice was loud and full of pain. "I'm begging for death as his punishment!"

Nora shook her head. "The council has already deliberated. That decision cannot be made by any of us because we are biased. Every person on this council loved Angel. It will not be a fair trial if we make the choice."

"You can't be serious!"

Nora frowned at Adrian for bitching. "The council has deemed his life too valuable to take. Our family does not have another Seer. None of our other potion makers are as good."

Adrian took that to heart. No matter what he did, if he was valuable to the people around him, he wouldn't be removed.

Nora smacked the table again to make it official. "The family enforcer will be brought in."

Adrian had to accept that, but it was hard. "For both of them?"

“Yes.” Food had been handed out and this compound had everything else they needed, for free. If not for it being run by Abbots, Nora would have spent more time here. *It’s too bad our family can’t find a peaceful way to claim it.* “Next?”

Adrian swallowed his anger to do his duty. “I beg forgiveness from the council for breaking my engagement. I followed my heart.”

Nora showed sympathy. “Mitchel matches are always better when the heart is willing. Rosetta’s father has agreed to a new match with Bradley Junior.”

“Wait.” Bradley Senior gestured at his son. “Tell the council what you told me this morning.”

Bradley Junior stood. He glowered at Rosetta. “Our friendship is over. Our relationship is over. You are not worthy of being matched to *any* Mitchel after what you’ve done.”

Rosetta’s eyes glowed bright red with fury. “You traitor!” She’d thought she could count on him to support her.

Her guards smothered her in a new layer of shielding so she couldn’t attack him.

“You have no room to bitch.” Bradley Junior sat down. “You’re a monster.”

Nora frowned at her fellow council member. “That would have been good to know before this moment.”

Bradley Senior shrugged. “Matches between Mitchels are always better when the heart is willing.”

Nora grunted. “If I want my own words thrown back at me, I’ll spend time with the family enforcer!”

Bradley Senior bowed his head. “My apologies.”

Nora smacked her hand on the table. “There will be no match between those branches.”

“I have a suggestion.” Adrian knew it was dangerous for his relationship to spend more time here than he had to, but his need for revenge kept him in front of the council even when he knew he should escort Shannon out. She was seeing too much, too quickly. Normals needed time to adjust and she wasn’t getting enough of it.

It hadn’t been safe for him to leave her behind, however. Shannon hadn’t even wanted to wait out in the hallway with his new security team.

Bronco and his men were quiet and dependable, and soaking up his training. Adrian would miss the four men when they were rotated to the next family branch to continue their training.

Nora sighed deeply, hating all of this drama. “The council will listen.”

Adrian tried to keep a respectful tone. “There is a distant Abbot cousin named Tesco. He is unmarried and the last of his branch. He would make a good mate for her.”

“No!”

Nora ignored Rosetta’s shout. She recognized the revenge request. Tesco was lazy and a thief. He was also kind and passive. Rosetta would not be

abused, but she wouldn't be happy either. Nora gave in because it was a small payback for her as well. "I agree with your suggestion. Is there anything else?"

"I beg the council to bind Rosetta to this country. My branch will leave as soon as this meeting is over and we will not return except under special circumstances. It would be better for everyone if our paths never crossed again, if she doesn't receive a removal judgement." Adrian already knew she wouldn't. There were too many Abbots here for that. If she was executed, their families would go to war.

Nora eyed Adrian, seeing dirt on him from the graveyard. She took pity. "I assume your next request will be to beg for the same for your brother?"

Adrian glared. "If the council chooses not to take his life, yes."

"I've already stated it's not up to the council, but I agree."

"Agreed." Bradley Senior was sympathetic, too. He had spent many nights with Adrian's mother, playing chess and discussing the future. This had not been part of it.

Adrian returned to his seat next to Shannon. It was easy to feel her nervousness, but he didn't have the ability to comfort her when he couldn't even do it for himself. He loved Shannon, but he had adored his mother. It was a pain that would never fade.

"Is there any new business before we proceed with the trial?"

No one spoke at Nora's call.

Nora had a bit of business. "No matter what the enforcer decides, Abraham will not be let loose. Therefore, it falls to us to settle his estate. He has a ward, a cousin from his father's branch, who he is responsible for."

Bradley Senior looked over in interest. Now that his son had refused Rosetta, a new match needed to be made. "How old is she?"

Nora shrugged. "I believe she is 16."

Adrian spoke up. "Her name is Emmie. She turned 18 last month. I attended that birthday party."

Nora regarded the book in front of her that held every branch and match in their family. "Where are we weakest at?"

Bradley Senior motioned. "I put a list in there after our last meeting."

Before they could get into debating the benefits of each branch that needed new blood, Adrian steered them in the direction he wanted this to go. "We've been trying to settle Joel down for years now. I'm not the only one who is past the normal age for marriage."

Nora hadn't been looking forward to digging through all of the branches. The book was huge. There were hundreds of Mitchels. "Agreed."

Bradley Sr. understood Adrian held no kindness for the Livingston line or for Abraham's cousin. This was another revenge request disguised as a council choice.

He slowly nodded. “Agreed.” Bradley Senior understood the need for payback.

Adrian hadn’t been sure if the other council member would support him in that decision. He made a mental note to reward the man for it later.

He was also impressed with Bradley Junior for refusing to marry someone who had murdered a Mitchel. When it came time for Alexa to be matched up, that boy would be considered.

“That’s the last of the beggars, bitches, and snitches.” Nora leaned back in her chair. “We will now proceed with the trial. Bring in the enforcer.”

The room went silent; fear filled minds that were quickly locked against prying.

Everyone had secrets. It was an enforcer’s job to expose them and their family had the strongest one in existence.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Level Tests

1

“**G**ood evening, Alexa.”

Alexa fell in next to the imposing woman. “Good evening, Enforcer Amanda.”

The two females were dressed identically, from black boots and jeans under long black robes, to the blonde ponytails that reached their hips. The only difference was that Amanda’s hair was dry. She never entered the water.

Amanda slowed her pace as they went by empty vendor tables. The compound wasn’t busy now. Vendors and residents were in their dens, waiting for the trial and punishments to be over. They were also in mourning. Adrian’s mother had lived here with them for a year now, sharing her hope for the future and her strength. The compound was decked in black cloths. It was all closed today out of respect. Everyone had loved Angel. “How are you?”

Alexa never held back emotions or answers from Amanda. Like the others, she both respected and feared the family enforcer. She clenched her fists. “Very angry.”

“As you should be.” Amanda maintained her stern tone. “Did you finish your homework?”

“Of course.”

“You will repeat the question now and provide the answer.”

Alexa’s security hung back from the pair. They were terrified of the enforcer, too.

People watched them go by in nervousness and relief. As long as they had enforcers here, there would be peace.

Those people thought of the murder that had taken place and revised their thoughts. As long as they had enforcers here there would be fair and balanced justice, which would keep the peace most of the time. Outliers like Abraham couldn’t be controlled with the threat of pain.

“Why should an enforcer remain fair even when the loss is personal? The answer is that they shouldn’t.”

Amanda stopped, looking down with a deep frown. “Explain.”

“The job of an enforcer isn’t just to hand out punishments. It’s to enforce the laws. To do that efficiently, people need to be scared. If an enforcer only handles things fairly, they’re not feared. They’re just another cop with limited power.”

Amanda smiled. “Very good.”

Alexa scanned around them, trying to evaluate the area for threats.

“You’re with me. You’re safe.”

Alexa’s tone lowered to a mutter. “I’m not worried about myself.”

Amanda frowned. “You should be. It could have been you instead of your grandmother.”

“It almost was.”

Amanda stared in concern. “Explain!”

“When I first arrived here, Uncle Abraham considered planning my death.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“He enjoyed my company. We were almost friends.”

“That worries me.”

Alexa shrugged. “My father is angry with all of my guards, as well as grandmother’s. He wants me to become more aware of my surroundings so I can save myself.”

“That is a very good lesson.” Amanda was curious. “Who is your teacher for that?”

“Everyone. My homework is to find the possible dangers everywhere I go.” Alexa completed her scan, not looking at Abraham’s empty cubby as they went by it.

“But you’re safe right now.”

“As I said, it isn’t for myself.”

Amanda paused again. “It’s for me.”

Alexa nodded. “You do not have friends here. People fear you. Some are jealous. You’re in danger.”

Amanda brought up her enforcer shield. Crackling flames surrounded her in thick protection.

“Much better.” Alexa resumed their walk.

Amanda felt like she was the student as she caught up to the girl. Alexa had an uncanny way of becoming the adult in any situation. “Thank you for caring.”

“I like you.”

Amanda felt honored. “Do you have others here you like?”

“There were three. Abraham’s actions removed two of those.”

Amanda was surprised again. “You liked him?”

Alexa didn’t think *like* was the right term. “He has suffered terribly his entire life. His mother didn’t want him. The woman he loves doesn’t want him. His brothers scorn him. His neighbors fear him. There was never any chance for him to become anything but what he has.”

“It’s often dangerous and disappointing to root for the underdog, Alexa.”

“Yes.” Alexa eyed the dark banners. “It’s also amazing when you’re able to help them, change them.”

Amanda took a guess. “Like you have been through your lessons?”

“Yes. I’m learning how to be a leader.” Alexa shared some of that knowledge. “I’m also figuring out the right people to lead. Some are worth the effort even when they’re bad.”

“That is an interesting observation.” Amanda resumed their walk. “Your answer is unacceptable. You have failed your homework assignment.”

Alexa sighed. “Finally!”

Amanda chuckled. “You’ve figured out it’s okay to be wrong.”

“I’m not wrong. I’m happy because I’ve finally met someone who won’t change my lessons because I’m Adrian’s daughter and they want to suck up to him.” Alexa motioned. “Even Uncle Abraham wanted my father’s love, while he mocked it.”

“Well, he’ll never get that now.” Amanda continued with the lesson. “An enforcer who deals random justice will soon become corrupt. Then their judgement can’t be trusted. No matter how hard it is personally, you must always be fair.”

“May I set it up to benefit from it at the same time?”

“You’re a Mitchel. That’s expected, but it must still be fair to everyone else.”

“You’ve taught me about balance.” Alexa hadn’t understood enough of that, though, or she hadn’t learned it correctly because her mind had refused to accept it.

“Yes. The punishment must fit the offense. Heavy handed justice isn’t fair.”

“But it is a strong deterrent.”

Amanda grunted. “You’re stuck on that.”

“Because I’m right. You know I am, but the rules of an enforcer hold you back.” Alexa went ahead with the rest of her thoughts on it this time instead of remaining silent out of respect. “You wish to fix the problems of the world; you have the power to do so. You loathe your job because you aren’t allowed. In the end, that will corrupt you.”

Amanda had stiffened with each sentence. She met Alexa's eyes in fear. "You've seen it."

"I now know the future of everyone living here. There are very few survivors."

Amanda ignored the girl's listening guards and the team of rookie guards standing outside the council chamber as they reached it. "Have you told anyone?"

"I've told you." Alexa put a hand on the knob. "Leave after this meeting is done. As soon as it's done. Go somewhere colder, harsher, and go quiet. When the war comes, no one will remember you're alive."

Chills went over Amanda's arms. "Why?"

"Because enforcers are about to be rounded up and I don't want you to be captured."

Amanda was oddly touched and completely spooked. "What happens if I don't leave?"

"This conversation haunts you. Fear makes you fate's target. When they start collecting all the enforcers, you're captured in the first wave." Alexa finished the premonition. "You die in a lab, alone and terrified."

"Stop." Amanda drew in a calming breath while their listeners gawked. "Why must I go tonight?"

"If you wait until morning, you'll convince yourself that I made it all up and stay." Alexa waited, not wanting to embarrass the enforcer by opening the chamber door before she was ready.

Amanda held her hand out. “We are bonded through your generosity, Alexa Mitchel. If you ever have need of me, call out and I’ll find you.”

Alexa touched Amanda’s wrist.

Deep green magic floated over their hands and then vanished.

Alexa smiled. “I just gathered my first favor.”

Amanda smiled back. “Few people have gotten one from me. Make sure that is also your boast someday.”

“I will. Thank you for these lessons.”

“It’s my honor.” Amanda straightened and assumed her icy demeanor. “And my humiliation if you fail this final test.”

“I won’t.” Alexa didn’t mention the hours she’d spent on this moment in her head. It had been a long week of waiting for the council to gather.

“Have you mastered the crackle?”

“No.” Alexa had been trying hard, but her fire shield refused to give her that next layer of protection.

“Our emotions fuel our gifts in many ways.”

“I’ve tried several, including the rage I feel at Uncle Abraham. It’s not strong enough.”

“The worst emotion we’ve been cursed with is grief. Always use that for evolutions of your gifts.” Amanda lifted her chin. “Open the door and take your place as my student. I’ll expect that crackle by the time this is over. Fail to produce it and you fail this class.”

Alexa was thrilled. She lived for challenges.
“As you say.”

The pair entered the council chamber without looking at anyone. They kept their noses in the air, scenting the mood.

Nora scowled at them both. “Why is she here?”

Amanda used a firm tone. “My student will pass sentence, under my supervision. If she passes this level test, the family will have another enforcer.”

Nora didn’t like it even as she respected Amanda for making this a teaching moment. “And if she fails?”

“I have not considered that option. She will not fail.”

“Fine.” Nora turned her focus to Alexa as Amanda moved to an empty wall and tried not to stew on the girl’s warning.

Alexa bowed her head. “Councilwoman, Nora.”

Nora already knew better than to use a patronizing tone. She kept her voice even. “Tell me why you’re here, Alexa.”

“This is my level test.”

“Why you, specifically?”

“There are no other enforcer students and Amanda has refused to mate and breed. I will take her place when she passes or retires.”

“It will be your responsibility to do the same so this family is never without an enforcer.” Nora wanted to mention the breeding issue, but she was forbidden to give the girl a hint about what was coming.

Alexa's face hardened. "I will never have children. I will not sentence my kids to lost years and labs."

Nora sighed. "They don't always give us a choice, child, but your decision is so noted. You will pick a student, should you pass this test."

"No. I will not continue this legacy in any form."

Nora started to argue with the child.

"That can wait for another time." Bradley Senior studied the girl, pleased by her wet ponytail. Even Amanda couldn't enter the water. Alexa hadn't been corrupted yet. "Have you enjoyed your lessons here?"

"I'm glad it's almost over. I've hated nearly every minute of it. I can't stand this place and most of the people suck."

Bradley Senior was taken aback. "But you've passed all the tests and your teachers are impressed with you."

"That's their problem, not mine."

Abraham laughed quietly. *She gave me one last sarcastic response.*

Bradley Senior was frowning now. "You talk as though you're leaving."

Alexa's eyes narrowed. "Don't play games with me. I'm a sore loser."

The adult words coming from a child locked the councilman's lips. He leaned back, arms crossing over his chest.

Bradley Junior dropped his head into his cloak and snickered. He didn't want to anger his father, but Alexa had just done something that Bradley Junior had wanted to for years now. His father's arrogance was intolerable some days.

Alexa turned toward the empty seat, where Adrian belonged.

"You may face your father in his location."

Alexa's voice went cold. "I am not here as the daughter of Adrian Mitchel. Do not refer to me that way again."

Nora's lips twitched. *She has brains and balls.* "As you say."

Alexa turned to face her father, but she didn't meet his sorrowful gaze. She didn't want to feel his pain. She knew it was much greater than her own. "Councilman Mitchel."

Next to Adrian, Shannon stiffened. "You're one of them."

"In every way." Adrian stared at his only daughter. "Good evening, Alexa. This is your yearly level test. You will not fail it."

"I will not fail any of these tests. I will leave here today, but it will be with pride and the respect of my family."

"You could run."

Alexa stiffened. "I don't run from anything!"

"Very good. You may proceed."

Alexa inclined her head. "Accept my sympathy, councilman, and control your anger. I do not wish to punish you."

Adrian stiffened, a bit embarrassed. “As you say.”

Now that she had spoken with each of the council members, Alexa scanned the defendants.

Rosetta was glaring, but there was fear under the anger. She knew she’d gone too far.

Abraham smiled warmly at her. “Good evening, Alexa.”

“No, it is not.” Alexa focused on Rosetta. “Have you confessed?”

Rosetta grunted. “Yes.”

“The guards saw you give Angel the poisoned coffee.”

“Yes.”

“Did you charm Abraham into helping you?”

“It was his idea!”

“The charges against you are true and accurate?”

“Yes.”

“You may have one minute to state your reason or final wishes.”

Rosetta paled. “You can’t kill me. I’m the last female in my family.”

Alexa pointed. “Something you considered when you agreed. You were sure you would be spared because of it.”

Rosetta knew not to lie to an enforcer, no matter how young. “Yes.”

“You have one minute.”

Rosetta swallowed nervously, using her own youth to garner sympathy. “Abraham tricked me

into giving her the coffee. He used my anger at Adrian's betrayal."

Alexa's shield came to life. Tiny flames ran over it in angry bursts of emotion. "Thirty seconds."

Rosetta's panic emerged. "I would have been your stepmother! I would have loved you! Have mercy!"

Alexa stared impassively. "Fifteen seconds."

Rosetta broke. "I'm sorry! I was so hurt and angry! I had to release that on someone. I had to!"

"Time." Alexa glanced over her shoulder. "Why is her entire family not here?" Alexa only saw one scared Abbot male.

Nora frowned. "We are trying not to start a war between our families. They haven't been informed of this trial yet, though they were told of her arrest."

Alexa knew that was standard Mitchel procedure—do it first and tell people about it later. "Have they threatened war?"

"Yes." Bradley Senior hoped Alexa took the hint. "Her future husband is also a master at stealing what we need to keep this compound running."

"So noted." Alexa faced Abraham, seeing his good health and happy attitude. Killing his mother had soothed his inner demons. "Have you confessed?"

"Yes."

"You were found next to the body."

"Yes."

"Did you charm Rosetta into helping you?"

"No."

“The charges against you are true and accurate?”

“You know they are.”

Alexa eyed Nora. “Does the council wish to question him further?”

“No.”

“No.”

“No!” Adrian’s voice broke.

“I will ask questions, then proceed to the sentencing.” Alexa scanned Abraham thoughtfully. “You could have talked Rosetta into doing this at any point. Why now?”

Abraham didn’t hold back. “I spent two weeks with you. It stirred up my jealousy. I told you it’s a very dangerous, violent emotion.”

Alexa frowned. “You owe me for the cost of the magic water.”

Abraham shook his head. “You didn’t negotiate. That was your mistake, not mine.”

“That is an evasion and it will not be tolerated!”

Abraham tensed at her anger, but he wasn’t scared of it. He couldn’t be hurt. He just wasn’t used to the show of emotion from her.

Before Alexa could go on, Bradley Senior cleared his throat. “My son has a question.”

Bradley Junior stood up. “Why didn’t Adrian’s death spell affect you?”

The other council members realized they should have asked that.

Bradley Senior smothered his pride as the boy sat down. “Very good.”

Alexa lifted a brow at Abraham, trying very hard to act like Amanda. She always lifted a brow during interrogations. “Would you like to tell them?”

Abraham leered. “I’d rather hear it from your lips, child.”

Alexa swallowed her stinging pride this time. “He is under the effects of a counteragent.”

Nora scowled. “For how long?”

“Unknown. It wasn’t an average potion.”

Abraham assumed the role of teacher once more. “Tell me why even the family enforcer wouldn’t be able to get through it.”

“Because I helped you brew it. The strength of the potion depends on the strength of the brewer. In this case, it represents both of us.”

“And?”

“And you tricked me into using magic water to finish it. You do owe me for that. My price is a final question to be answered in complete truth.”

“Ask.”

“You have no problem breaking rules. Why didn’t you ever view your own future?”

Abraham wasn’t able to lie because he did really owe her a debt. What’d he’d done to the family was terrible and her personal pain would last a lifetime, but he had tricked her. That required honesty. “I have seen the deaths of hundreds. I have no wish to view my own. I refuse to live in fear.”

Amanda was stunned by that answer. It connected to what Alexa had just told her in the tunnel, strongly. *I'm leaving as soon as this is done.*

“Thank you for your answer, Uncle Abraham. You may now speak your last words as my teacher.”

“None of my other students had a chance at becoming good at potions. You are above them in every way. Seeing the future is where you're weak.”

“I chose to be.”

“Because the pain of the future is something you fear.”

“Because I can't change all the deaths and misery. It pisses me off.”

Abraham chuckled.

Alexa didn't. “Thirty seconds.”

Abraham looked at Adrian, beaming. “Mother screamed for you the entire time I was draining her.”

Adrian lunged to his feet.

Alexa's lips thinned. “Fifteen seconds.”

Abraham focused on Alexa, driving in another emotional nail. “You could have stopped me before I did it, if you'd used your gift and looked ahead. You'll never be able to escape your guilt or your father's anguish that you failed to save the person he loved the most.”

“Time.” Alexa's insides had clenched. She could feel Adrian staring at her in horror. “I will now hand down the sentences.”

Abraham smiled happily at the damage he'd just done to Adrian's relationship with his daughter.

Alexa fought to remember that she had to be fair and balanced. *I want him dead!* “The council’s concerns have been considered and found to be valid. Mitchels do not go to war lightly. To prevent that, Rosetta is banished from this compound. Forever.”

Rosetta gasped. “I live here! My family built this place!”

“My decision stands. The water here will expel you upon a single step inside.” Alexa pointed at the clock on the wall above Nora. “You have one hour to get out, starting right now.”

Rosetta’s brother quickly set the alarm on his watch.

Rosetta’s anger was kept under control by the power in the room, but her mind immediately began stewing on a way to get out of her sentence. *Abraham will help me, if he gets to live.*

“Abraham will be forbidden from leaving and you are banned from entering. He has no friends here to trade places.”

“No! You can’t do that!” Rosetta stood to fight, no longer caring about the pain.

Amanda hit her with a control spell, forcing her to sit down.

Alexa’s decision released powerful magic that sank through Abraham’s shield. It wasn’t physical harm, so the potion didn’t protect him from it. “You little witch!”

Alexa didn’t react, but inside, she gloated through her pain. “You will spend your remaining

days in that cubby, brewing and seeing for the family you betrayed. You may never charge a Mitchel for anything. Your service will be given to them for free, no matter the request.”

“That’s not good enough!”

“He should die!”

“He killed Angel!”

Nora glared at the shouting men.

Those men quieted, but each of them began planning a way to remove Abraham.

Abraham tried to refuse the sentence. “I’m a Mitchel! You can’t cage family!”

Alexa coated him with another layer of her magic.

It wasn’t pain that made him stop fighting; it was the emotions she was shoving into it. Her disappointment hurt him mentally. It wasn’t harming him physically, so he wasn’t shielded from that either. “Stop now!”

Alexa let go, but only because she wanted to walk out of here with at least one good thing from it. “I will punish you as I see fit. I don’t care about your discomfort.”

Abraham stared. Those were his words being thrown back in his face. “You really are the perfect student.”

“And you were a great teacher. It shames us both that you’ve done this.”

“As you say.” But Abraham didn’t care about that emotion. He was basking in the pain of those around him.

“Your imprisonment will take effect immediately. You may only be released under magical terms of the most severe level. Someone has to be willing to take your place. You’ve made no friends here, as you told me yourself.” Alexa waved at Rosetta. “The one acquaintance who might have been convinced will not be able to enter this compound to help you. You will live, and die, in that cage for your crimes.”

Nora slapped the table. “Agreed!”

“Agreed!”

Adrian’s pain rushed out. “Disagree! I want him dead!”

Alexa finally looked at her father. His grief welled up in her throat and pushed out through her skin, bringing her crackle shield to life for the first time. “You are outvoted. Do you wish to demand personal justice?”

“Yes!” Adrian wasn’t seeing his daughter at that moment. He was seeing his mother’s withered body as they laid her to rest this morning. “Make him pay! Make them both pay!”

“As you say.” Alexa’s voice hardened. “You will not be told, so the punishment remains fair and balanced. Know in your heart that it will match the crime and move on without bitterness. Some things cannot be changed.”

Adrian’s tears rolled down his face. “As you say.”

The other Mitchels made plans for revenge, not caring if she caught them. They weren't going to accept the sentence.

Shannon flinched as the girl scanned her. *She's a monster!*

Alexa didn't care about the latest whore her father had chosen. She only cared about his love and his pain. She couldn't stop one of those and she might have lost the other. *He'll pay, father. My word on it!*

Alexa turned to the council. "Once he goes into the cage, the magic will not let him out. Supplies and such can be exchanged, but no one can enter unless they are fully willing to take his place."

Nora was satisfied. "What happens if he does get out?"

Alexa shuddered at the images in her mind. "There will be few survivors."

Bradley Senior nodded. "We'll monitor it. Your work is done here."

"Thank you for your attention, Mitchel Council. May we never need to see each other again."

"From your lips to fate's ear."

Alexa glanced at Amanda.

"You have passed this level test, Alexa Mitchel. You may now take your place as my official understudy."

"No."

"What?" Amanda was embarrassed and offended. She'd never had a student refuse her training.

“I don’t want your job. I didn’t want the Seer job. I don’t want the potion master job. I’m going to lead a team of badass gunfighters into a future where none of this will be needed anymore.” She regarded Abraham. “And it will be successful because you were too arrogant to believe I’m a threat. Thank you.”

Alexa put her chin in the air and marched toward the exit. “Good day, Mitchel family.”

Alexa stepped out without looking at her father.

She didn’t resist as the white clad scientist jabbed a needle into her arm and hit the plunger. *Being in the lab is easier than being with my family now.*

She surrendered to the drugs so she didn’t have to feel her father’s grief anymore, or her own fury. He wasn’t just in pain because of his mother’s murder. He’d arranged for her to go back to the lab now. *He did this to me. I will never feel guilt over not stopping the murder now. Thank you, father.*

Adrian watched them carry her out. “It’s my horror.”

Chapter Twenty-Four
Abraham's Curse

1

“What’s wrong with him?” Damon stared at the Seer who had frozen in place.

Daniel and Mark had gotten every detail of the flashback. They also stared in concern.

“She couldn’t use guilt. She gave me what I wanted the most and now she’ll rip it away from me before I get to enjoy it.” Abraham’s insanity clouded his mind. As the last of it filled his brain with hot rage, he had a clear realization. “She meant for all of this to happen. She used me. She tricked me!”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He just figured out what Alexa did to him all those years ago.” Daniel brought up a shield, hands dropping to the guns he already knew were useless. “He can’t go in the water. Remember that.”

Abraham vanished. In his place, a demon stared at Daniel in horrible anger. “Alexa sent you to finish my punishment.”

Daniel nodded. “She wished for me to tell you she did not fail your class.”

Abraham’s mind clicked it into place. “The only way she could have passed was if she broke the rules and looked ahead at her own future.”

Daniel shrugged. “She wasn’t the only one who knew she was lying. The entire council was aware. You were the only one who forgot that Mitchels can’t be trusted no matter their age.”

Mark didn’t know when Alexa had talked to Daniel about this; it didn’t matter right now. An ominous wind was blowing through the tunnel. People were still fleeing around them. Mark got ready to fight for their lives.

So did Jed and Toby.

Bradley Junior and Damon waited nearby, not completely sure what was happening.

Bradley had been here for the trial, but he had been too wrapped up in teenage angst to pay attention to much else. He’d loved Rosetta as deeply as he’d been capable of back then. Her lack of honor had crushed him.

“You’re going to get what you want the most and then it will be ripped away from you. That is the punishment you have sentenced yourself to by your actions, Uncle. There will be other punishments from other people; that is mine.”

Abraham heard her voice in his mind as clear as a bell even though it had been 20 years. His fear broke the fragile control that had been holding his sanity together. He charged toward Daniel.

Daniel drew his gun. “We have a deal in place.”

“A deal you never intended to honor!”

Daniel smiled. “I told you I’m as much a Mitchel as anyone can be.”

Abraham snapped and fired the first shot.

Chaos exploded as Daniel fired back.

Always observing for an opportunity to hurt the hated humans, Nature sent out a tremor that triggered a massive earthquake along several faults. It ripped and crunched, tearing its way through the earth toward the compound.

Daniel brought up a thick shield over himself and Bradley while Jed and Toby covered themselves.

Mark slid next to Damon and brought his shield up around both of them. Damon was still under the effects of the drugs Rosetta had darted him with.

Abraham fired a pain spell that bounced off their barriers and flew through the tunnel.

The ground around them began to shake, throwing dirt over everyone.

Abraham let out another blast of his hatred. It slammed into the shields around all six men and rattled them.

Daniel knew they weren't going to be able to hold against that type of power. He began retreating toward the nearest exit.

Abraham's next blast slammed into Mark's shield and took it down.

Mark and Damon both hit their knees, groaning.

"Cover them!" Bradley ran over to help the men as Daniel fired his gun.

The first tremor reached the compound. It shook through the weaker tunnels and began collapsing them. Power went out in those areas.

Daniel fired four bullets, one right after the other.

Abraham waved them off like they were rocks.

The slugs flew down the tunnel and embedded into the dirt walls.

Daniel fired again, emptying his gun. He aimed at the base of the shield, like he had recently learned to do.

Abraham was jarred by the impacts, but his shield stayed up. He fired a wave of acid-like hatred that burned through the shield Daniel hastily erected.

Daniel drew his knife.

The door of a nearby cubby opened. Alicia and her teacher came out to see what was happening.

Alicia spotted him and stopped, pointing angrily. "Get back in your cage!"

Abraham spun around, firing.

The little girl's teacher stepped in front of her to take the hit.

The spell overwhelmed Maya and ripped screams from her throat.

The little girl's security fired guns and magic at Abraham, rushing forward to defend her.

Abraham lifted his hand and sent flames that engulfed all four of the rookie guards.

The little girl took off running toward the water.

Daniel and his team did the same, going around Abraham as he lifted his hands to fire again.

Mark held his shield tighter this time and slid behind the girl to protect her.

Mark staggered forward as the hit landed. It knocked him onto his stomach. His chin slapped into the dirt.

Alicia dove into the creek, going all the way to the bottom.

Daniel reloaded on the move. With a knife in one hand and a gun in the other, he faced the red-eyed monster now chasing them.

The water rose up angrily as the team neared the bank.

Damon slid to a stop. He knew what that meant.

Toby went around him, jumping into the water.

Another tremor rocked the compound, collapsing a main tunnel wall. All of the lights flickered this time.

Abraham fired again, laughing maniacally at the fear and pain of the people around him.

Daniel got his knife up in time and deflected the hit.

Caught off guard, Abraham was hit with his own spell. He staggered backward and then recovered. He came forward furiously.

Alicia's grandfather came running down the tunnel, shouting to get Abraham's attention. The family threw knives and fired guns as they charged forward.

Abraham turned to face them.

Daniel fired another full magazine of bullets into the rear of Abraham's shield, trying to find the weak spot.

Abraham sent out flames.

The little girl's family lifted shields, but it wasn't enough to hold against his strength. Their shields melted; their skin burst into flames.

Now paddling on the surface of the water, Alicia's face contorted. "That's what you get for not keeping my sisters!"

Rattled, Mark rolled over onto his back while drawing his guns. A fast scan showed him Daniel facing the Seer, who was turning his way and Damon standing near the bank in fear. *He can't go in the water. Dammit!*

Mark rolled onto his feet and rushed over to join his teammate in the futile battle.

"I'm almost out!" Daniel held his shield as another wave of pain swarmed over him.

A larger tremor reached their location, shaking the ground right as Abraham fired.

The blast of fire torched a row of plants on the bank instead of the fighters.

Damon fired a dart, threw a knife, and managed to send out a weak sleep spell.

Abraham laughed as it all rebounded, making the fighters duck.

Daniel took the mag Mark thrust toward him, backing up. "Tesco's den!"

Mark followed as Daniel took off running.

Damon was spared another blast he couldn't handle when Abraham chased the two fighters, tossing magic and taunts.

"You cannot escape! She sent you in here to die!"

Bradley climbed out of the water with the others, furious. He began gathering energy as he ran by the Seer, who was now firing on a fleeing resident who got in his way.

"Get out of here!" Mark didn't want to lose the council member.

Bradley fell in next to Jed and Toby, who were also following them down the tunnel. "We don't leave men behind!"

Damon caught up to them, taking Bradley's right side. "It's just another Mitchel family meeting!"

There was no time to laugh as the ceiling in front of them collapsed.

Daniel pushed against a door in the wall and got it open so the others could run inside. He held his shield against the flames Abraham sent.

"We're trapped!" Toby remembered this path from earlier.

There was no choice but to keep going up the stairs as Abraham fired again and blew the door open.

Daniel followed them, firing his gun at the same time as he threw his knife.

Both of them ricocheted off Abraham's shield and rebounded, hitting the wall.

“Hey!”

Abraham spun around.

The old man in the ball cap drove his knife into Abraham’s shield.

Abraham blasted him with a force spell, knocking him across the tunnel and into the water.

The water immediately rose up. Ghosts in the waves began to tear the old man apart.

Daniel caught a quick glimpse of five shadowy boys who looked like the old man and an older woman who was still wearing a ball cap.

Daniel realized that was the old man’s family and understood he’d been tricked into giving him magic water.

Mark dropped back to let the others go first as he joined Daniel halfway up the stairs. “We’re in deep shit!”

2

In the main tunnel, Wyatt pushed the door open and hurried inside the compound with Rosetta’s body over his shoulder.

He kicked the door shut and went down the steps, glad that he had finally gotten here. It had been a rough fight between the undead and an earthquake, while injured.

Wyatt dripped blood onto the wet floor. “What happened down here?”

He knew it couldn’t all be from the tremor. There were bodies in the water that had been

shredded and shiny bullet casings winked at him in the light of the lanterns.

Alicia's teacher eyed Wyatt's beaten face and injuries in concern.

Alicia eyed his captive and stiffened. "No! Don't bring her in here!"

The water began to rise up out of the creek and spill over the banks. It rushed toward Wyatt in a loud roar.

"What the hell?!" Wyatt immediately headed back up the steps, heart thumping.

All through the compound, the water rose and began flooding the passages.

Abraham had always been fascinated by the water. He'd watched other people swimming in jealousy and bitterness. He lifted his arms now, holding his shield tight. "You can't hurt me! I'm stronger than you are!"

A ghost with sapphire eyes and ivory teeth rushed toward him. The wave grew until it completely filled the tunnel. It swamped Abraham in one huge gulp.

"Yes!"

"Perfect!"

Daniel and Mark both cried out, delighted.

The wave shifted toward them.

"Not good! Not good!"

"Up!"

The fighters brought their shields back up, jerking the door shut behind them as the water gave chase.

3

Wyatt ran up the stairs as the water rose after him. He didn't know what he'd done wrong, but it was clear that he wasn't welcome anymore. Chaos was echoing from all of the tunnels. He went faster at a loud volley of gunshots.

Wyatt shoved against the broken top door while trying to balance Rosetta's limp body.

The water roared up the steps; gleaming teeth lunged for him.

Wyatt kicked the door open and hurried out into the fiery night.

Luis grabbed Wyatt's arm.

"Ahh!" Wyatt jerked away from the zombied Abbot boy.

Rosetta's body thumped heavily to the ground outside the tree.

Other zombies came toward them from the flaming woods, snarling.

Luis's bite marks glared at Wyatt. He saw the awareness in Luis's clouding eyes. *He still knows who I am!*

Luis charged Wyatt again.

The furious water came from the doorway.

Wyatt took off running, leaving his precious prize behind.

Luis stumbled toward Rosetta's body as the water did the same.

“Run faster!” Mark was on Daniel’s heels.

Daniel increased his pace even though he was now running through the darkness almost blindly. If not for his vampire vision, he wouldn’t have been able to keep going at all. The tunnel was pitch black, with the water roaring behind them.

Toby and Jed kept their shields over Damon as they ran.

Bradley was bringing up the rear. The water was at his back, dripping cold sprays and rage.

Everyone on the team knew what the water wanted. Mark, Daniel, and Bradley had been cleared. Toby and Jed had been vindicated years ago and they were confident in their moral lines now. The water wanted Damon.

None of them considered giving him up. That was part of why they had been approved. They recognized that people could change.

Daniel smacked into the side of another door and grabbed ahold of it as he went by, jerking it open.

The rest of the team flew in without a scan. They went up the stairs while listening for Daniel to join them.

Daniel recovered his balance and lunged around the door right as the water hit. It slapped him into the dirt wall and quickly took him up the stairs with less energy required.

The water didn’t harm him.

Daniel was tempted to let the water push him along so he could catch up to the team, but that would mean leaving Mark to lead them and Alexa had been very specific about who was in charge of this run.

He did try to negotiate, however. “He’s not corrupt anymore! Give him a second chance!”

The water shrieked around him, pushing faster.

Daniel gathered energy and then lunged forward, breaking free of the water. His feet immediately began to pedal, trying to find purchase for a fast speed.

Mark burst through the door at the top of the stairs. He fell awkwardly on the stone floor as the rest of the team jumped over him to enter the new space.

Daniel kept going, reaching out with his vampire strength to jerk Mark along. He quickly got in front of the fleeing team and then let go of Mark.

Mark let out a shaky laugh as he gained his feet and kept running. “Good thing we’re changed!”

The men running behind him didn’t have that advantage. They were getting tired.

Daniel knew. That was one of the biggest lessons he had learned from Alexa while observing her leadership. Alexa never failed to remember the weaknesses of her team. In fact, she often used it to their advantage.

That’s it! Daniel swerved to the side, pulling Mark with him. As soon as the others went by, he

brought up a shield and stepped in front of the oncoming water.

Behind him, Bradley realized they were making a stand. He slid to a stop along the dirt wall and turned back to help.

Daniel and Mark's shields created a barrier in the tunnel. Water was still able to get through around the sides and bottom, but at a much slower rate, giving the others time to get away.

The water shrieked again.

Bradley added his shield while gasping for air. He had an idea to try, but he didn't have the energy for it yet.

Daniel reached out behind him and grabbed Bradley's wrist. "Take what you need! I give it willingly."

Bradley inhaled an extraordinary amount of energy from the vampire fighter. He shoved it through a mental door he had rarely used.

"I command you to stop!" Bradley released the wave of power.

Bradley's command hit the water and paused it.

"I am an alpha! You will obey me!"

The front layer of the water rippled. A face pushed through.

Daniel and Mark both flinched, reaching for weapons.

Bradley lifted his arms, now pulling energy from the vibrating dirt and stones around them. "Go back to where you belong! Do it now!"

To the shock of everyone, the water began to recede.

Toby and Jed had also stopped, but they maintained their distance. The other three men were going to sacrifice themselves so Damon wasn't taken. At this point, Toby and Jed didn't agree with that decision, but Daniel was the team leader, so the order had really come from Alexa.

Bradley lowered his arms, tone becoming warm. "Thank you for honoring your deal with the enforcer."

The face in the water glared and then slowly retreated. The wall of water moved toward the stairs as if drawn by a string.

Mark turned toward Bradley, grinning. "Very nice!"

Bradley chuckled. "I never use that side of me because my family abused it so much. Sorry I didn't think of that sooner."

Daniel started to tease the man as he would have any other teammate. Then he stiffened. "I think we're going to want the water back."

A shadowy female form came through the water without any resistance.

"It's the boss!" Mark was thrilled even though the battle was over. "She's well again!"

Bradley retreated. "Look at the feet!"

"That's not the Boss!" Daniel was furious that someone was impersonating Alexa from his memories. The image was absolutely identical to the way she had been the last time he'd seen her,

even down to the sweaty hair sticking to her face. It appeared that she was soaked from the water, but her clothes were dry down to her boots. Those were on fire.

The water roared again.

Daniel stepped forward, throwing his hands up. “Imposter!”

Magic that he didn’t know how to use flew out of him and slammed into Alexa.

Alexa fell and was quickly overwhelmed by the water that tore apart her body in seconds, throwing gore into the waves.

“What did you do?!” Mark didn’t know what was happening.

“Look out!”

Another face pushed through the water. Familiar and furious, it leered at the team.

“He has a shield!”

“Run!”

“I’m done running!” Daniel stayed where he was as Abraham came forward in full demon form. Long horns and flaming orbs lit up the tunnel in terrifying glares.

Daniel began to fire, opening mental doors in rapid succession. Blast after blast flew out of his hands and chest, slamming into Abraham’s shield.

Abraham staggered at each hit, but his shield didn’t lower and the leer on his face never faltered. He knew they were powerless against him.

Bradley pushed in front of Mark, who was still confused. He fired an alpha command.

Toby and Jed hurried forward, also firing sleep and pain spells.

All of the hits rebounded through the tunnel, trimming some of the fighters and knocking stones out of the walls.

Damon hurried to join the fight as his gifts returned, bringing an evolution; a powerful new gift appeared. Damon fired, using all of the energy he had.

The force lifted Abraham and slammed him into the stone ceiling. “He still has a shield!”

Bradley’s rage burst out this time, covering Abraham’s shield in acid that began to melt through it.

“He has another one under there!” Daniel was familiar with layering. What he didn’t know was how to get through it.

“Think!” Mark tuned out the grunts and growls, the screams, and the violent power flying all around him. *She sent me along because I’m a thinker!*

Abraham fired back at the men.

The blast hit all of them, knocking them into each other, the walls, and into Mark.

Daniel’s cloak tangled around Mark’s hand. A flash of heat sank into his skin. “Gold!”

Daniel realized it at the same time. Both men began searching Daniel’s twisted cloak for the artifact.

Flames raced through the tunnel.

Damon didn’t get his shield up in time. The heat seared his hair and face, but he was too soaked from

the water to catch fire. He brought his shield up and tried to gather energy from his reserves to keep fighting.

Daniel ripped the cloak pocket off, fingers fumbling for the hot piece of gold that was now humming against his hand.

Mark brought up a shield around just Daniel, using all of his energy to hold it as Abraham fired again.

The acid hate began to eat through his shield.

Daniel rolled over, drawing the gold triangle from the torn piece of cloth. He threw it at Abraham. "Die!"

Power burst out of the triangle as soon as it touched Abraham's shield. It cracked through every layer and brought it down.

Daniel remembered the old man's warning too late.

The power from the artifact rebounded, sending out a blast of force that hit Abraham and everyone else.

Daniel managed to raise his head as blood trickled from his nose and his ears. "I bind you to this body!"

Old magic surrounded Abraham and prevented him from bringing up a new shield. Mark lifted his gun and fired his last bullet.

The slug hit Abraham in the chest and went straight to his heart.

Abraham dropped to his knees as the water began to swarm over his unprotected form. Blood

rolled out of his mouth as the demon disappeared, leaving an old Mitchel kneeling before them.

Abraham met Daniel's eyes as pain ran through his body. "Even ten minutes of freedom was worth it. Thank you."

Daniel grunted. "It was *not* my honor. You can die now."

The artifact let out a final burst of power that hit Abraham and sucked all of the energy and power out of him.

Abraham screamed as his body shrank into itself, becoming thin and leathery in seconds. His dark hair fell out and turned gray by the time it hit the wet floor. His teeth rotted, falling out; his legs bowed and his back hunched over.

The rest of the team had taken shelter behind Jed and Toby's shields this time. The two men continued to hold the barriers, waiting to be sure the fight was really over.

The water finished receding down the steps and then continued all the way to the creek. As it went, it pulled in the bodies of the people it had claimed. Those corpses would sink to the bottom and nourish the waters that formed all life.

The water didn't tear Abraham's human body apart like it had with the other victims. It left the withered form laying on the floor in front of the team.

Daniel and the others were horrified to realize Abraham still wasn't dead.

Mark nudged Daniel. "Level test."

Daniel got to his feet, head pounding and stomach rolling. He was exhausted from the hits he had taken and from using so much magic. He staggered over to the corpse. “You are guilty of heinous crimes against the living and the dead. As your punishment, you will now stay in this form. You are never allowed to recover your health. You will wander as one of the undead, protecting everyone you betrayed, including the water. You are so sentenced for all of eternity. Nothing will break this punishment. Your second chance is gone!”

Abraham was too weak to even cry out as more pain flowed over him. His body sat up. It stood, creaking and popping.

Abraham screamed mentally as he walked toward the stairs with the sad limp of the other undead. His eyes began to cloud over.

Bradley was satisfied with the sentence. “Alexa promised he would pay.”

Daniel nodded. “And now he will. It just took time for justice to kick in.”

“Was it fair and balanced?”

Daniel watched Abraham trip and fall down the stairs. “Yes. And no.”

“Yes, because he’s a monster.” Mark was clear on that much. Now, he even looked the part.

Daniel grunted as his injuries began reminding him of how many hits he’d taken. “And no, because she took it personally. Not the death of her grandmother, but the loss of her father’s love. It was never the same between them after that, I’d guess.”

Daniel was sure he had a broken rib, along with several cuts that needed stitches. He was soaked, and yet burnt in places. *And I'm tired. I feel totally drained.*

Mark was in the same boat. He wasn't sure if he'd broken his ankle in the tanker explosion. *Never doing that again.* He'd been lucky enough to live and learn from it.

The rest of the team also took stock of their injuries and found themselves with minor wounds and a lot of pain left over from Abraham's spells.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Damon still kept his distance from the wet floor and stairs.

"Alexa wouldn't like it. He's family." Daniel holstered his empty gun. He was out of mags for it.

Damon snorted. "You're higher in the hierarchy than she is now."

"No one is higher than Alexa!" Daniel gave the man a cold look. "All of your life, you've assumed Alexa is your equal, but you ignored her status. She is the family enforcer. I am her student. Don't ever try to interfere with that or both of us will punish you harshly."

Damon bowed his head in respect. "As you say."

"So, you're an enforcer." Bradley chuckled as he stood up and began to wipe himself off. "She swore she'd never have a student for those lessons. It's nice to know she found someone who was worthy of her breaking her vow."

“I agree.” Daniel slung his arm around Mark’s shoulders. “If she hadn’t been teaching Mark to think, we’d all be dead.”

Damon frowned. “You would have remembered the artifact at some point.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Daniel held his cloak open to show them the map Mark had insisted they take from Tesco’s den. It was wrapped in a towel and that towel was wrapped around the jar with the potion. It was unbroken and glowing bright pink. “Because of Mark’s nagging, we still have the cure.”

Chapter Twenty-Five
We Owe Her

1

Rosetta woke up in pain.

Her head throbbed; her stomach was sore. Her back felt like she'd taken several punches and her arm had sharp flares running through her elbow.

She opened her eyes.

Luis growled.

Rosetta recoiled from the undead form.

Then she recognized him. "Oh, Luis!"

She assumed Raymond was also gone. They were never away from each other. Only death could have separated them.

Luis hunkered over his mother, staring sadly. A thick, bloody tear rolled down his cheek. Bite marks covered his arms and neck. Blood was still running from several of them.

Rosetta sobbed softly. "My boys!"

Luis cried with her, mourning his life with the last sparks of his humanity.

Rosetta rose to her knees and opened her arms.

She held him while she cried and he died.

The fire around them had engulfed most of the jungle now. The trees were bright torches that revealed dozens of undead staring up at the flames.

When Rosetta stood up, they all turned toward her.

Rosetta helped Luis stand all the way. His body was stiffening. She smiled at her favorite child. “It’s okay. We’re still together.”

Luis gazed back blankly.

Rosetta’s eyes turned bright blue as the undead approached her. “Come. We have work to do.”

Rosetta walked toward the bridge, lifting her arms through the pain. She pushed out all of her grief in a powerful blast of her magnet power. “Surround the plane!”

Every undead within miles shifted toward the bridge.

The living also responded. All through the compound, survivors fell into the migrating mob with that order ringing through their minds.

2

“Where are they all coming from?!” Asher shoved forward with his shield, groaning.

“There’s too many of them for us to keep fighting through!” Eva grunted, arms aching as she pushed forward against the mob.

Colton made a team decision. “Shields up! Layer each other!”

The team retreated toward each other while bringing up shields and lowering their bloody knives. Blood was strewn across their hands, faces, and clothes. They’d only made it half a mile from

the bridge; there were hundreds of undead coming through the jungle now.

“Keep the rest of us covered. First three in order by rank will drop their shields. On my count.” Colton couldn’t let the weakest members go last because he wasn’t sure they would be able to hold their shields at all. He had to test it while he still had the energy to protect everyone. Thanks to the dart, he only had his shield gift right now. “Go!”

All of the training with Alexa and her men had served them well. Four layers of shielding remained around the entire team.

Colton saw a partially clear path through the zombies and pointed that way. “Walk right through them!”

The ones holding the shields recognized the new challenge. They began walking forward, taking even steps to make sure the rest of the team stayed inside their protection.

Undead followed them, beating and scratching on their barriers. Their gory conditions were gruesome. The team tried not to stare as they pushed through the growing herd.

It was just as hard for Colton’s team to shove their way through the undead as it had been for him and Asher earlier. Colton decided they would do this regularly to build up more tolerance.

Nolan, who’d been with them earlier, grunted in disappointment. “I can’t hold it!”

“Eva will take your place.”

Eva immediately lifted her shield over the entire team and then added two layers to it. It glowed brightly, drawing the undead, but it also kept all of them out.

Curious about how strong she was, Colton gestured for the other people to lower their shields.

Eva proudly walked ahead of her team, shielding all of them as she pushed through the dead. It wasn't easy, but it was a great workout and it felt wonderful to finally be getting attention for the skills she had been using all along. Levi had never given her any recognition.

Eva stopped suddenly.

Colton and Asher brought their shields back up around the team.

Colton stepped closer to her. "You did great. There's no shame in already needing a break."

Eva's eyes were dazed. "The monster is near."

Colton immediately thought of Abraham and winced. If he was loose in the jungle, that meant Alexa's men had failed and their two team members were likely dead. Colton pointed at a section of the jungle that wasn't in flames yet. "Get us to those trees. Asher and I will hold the shields while everyone else goes up."

The team pushed over to the trees, making sure no one was out of the shields. There were more undead around them now than they could count.

Colton got the rest of the team climbing the trees and then held a shield for Asher so he could do the same.

Asher went up quickly and sat on a thick branch. He projected his shield down to cover his team leader, thrilled that he could do it. “Up you go!”

Colton scaled the tree and then did a scan to make sure all of them were out of reach of the zombies that were piling around the base of the tree.

Eva kept her voice low. “Throw a knife or two away from here or we’ll be trapped.”

Several of the other team members pitched throwaway knives.

The undead followed the noise, though not all of them. It was just enough so it didn’t seem like they had something cornered here.

“Go dark and silent. Do it right now!”

The entire team obeyed Eva’s call, blinking off the radar of anyone who might be tracking them. This was something all of them were good at. Going off grid wasn’t easy, but that skill was drilled into Mitchel kids from birth. It was like going to sleep, but not so deeply that they didn’t know what was happening. Not having bright thoughts or emotions was the key to making it work.

They stayed that way for long minutes where they scanned in every direction, trying to see the threat that had caused Eva to order them locked down even though she wasn’t their team leader.

Eva caught sight of the problem and held tighter to her mental shield.

The team observed as Rosetta walked out of the jungle, surrounded by dozens of undead that weren’t attacking. They staggered along with her.

Rosetta was bloody, bruised, and very angry. It showed in her steady march toward the bridge. She didn't hesitate to go through the knee-high flames that were still spreading and she didn't seem to notice the sweat dripping down the sides of her dirty neck. She was focused on a target.

The team hoped it wasn't them as she got closer.

Rosetta knew someone was nearby. She'd caught them on her mental grid before they went dark, but it didn't matter. She needed to reach the plane to stop Alexa from taking off. Survivors on the ground could be hunted later. Rosetta knew every inch of this jungle. There was no place anyone would be able to hide when she started clearing it.

The treed team felt it when she sent out a fresh blast, but their time with Alexa had given them some resistance to Rosetta's magnet power. They remained in the trees as even more undead came through the jungle, following their new master.

The team observed until Rosetta was out of sight and a few minutes beyond, trying to make sure they were out of her range.

Colton picked a clear moment and gestured.

The team quickly dropped out of the trees and brought shields back up, using the same formation he had put them in earlier. The three weakest members of the team, plus Eva, led them toward the compound.

When they got tired, Colton and Asher took over, demonstrating how much they had learned during their time with the family enforcer.

“There’s one of the doors!” Nolan was relieved to see it. Even now that he was on a break and Colton and Asher had taken over, Nolan was tired; he was eager to get belowground where they would be safe for a while.

Colton stopped them at the entrance. “Doubled shields up!”

The team responded immediately.

“I want a vote on whether or not we go back and help Alexa. That’s a lot of threats to handle, even for her.” Colton didn’t like Alexa as much anymore, but he still respected her position in their family.

“We don’t need to vote on it. She set all of this up so we can claim this compound for our family. Don’t dishonor her sacrifice by failing.” Eva opened the door and stepped into the darkness.

Frowning, Colton followed her. The rest of the team behind him did the same.

“Light!” Eva squinted, unable to see much even with her descendant sight.

The lights were off in the compound. She could see part of a collapsed wall; the voices of survivors echoed faintly.

Asher brought out his torches and passed them around, lighting them with his fire hand. “Be ready to fight. If they let the Seer out, there’s no way they defeated him.”

Now able to see, they stayed where they were for the moment, calculating how to reach the bottom of the tunnel. The stairs had collapsed. They could

hear the growls and snarls of undead who were bunched up in that location.

“We can drop down and fight, or go find a different entrance.” Colton scanned the team.

All of them were eager to fight again, like he and Asher had been after pushing through to the weapons cubby that hadn’t had any weapons in it.

“Keep your shield up. If you let go of it as you land, we’ll give you mercy later.” Colton jumped into the darkness with his hand wrapped around comforting steel.

3

“There’s another one coming out of the cage!”

Colton’s team heard Daniel’s voice as they finished off the few undead at the bottom of the collapsed stairs. They stomped through the mud and tried not to trip over debris as they finished clearing this section.

“I see torches!” Toby hurried forward. “They’re in the wall!”

Jed followed him, grinning in relief. “We’re the only team who does that while we fight.”

Jed and Toby joined their team, embracing some of them.

It made Mark and Daniel homesick. The urge to get back to the plane was stronger now and growing.

Colton’s team eyed the men in relief, glad they’d missed most of that action. Alexa’s men looked a lot rougher than they had earlier.

Mark and Daniel saw the sweaty team. Both of them sneered a little about doing all of the hard work on this run.

“Are we ready to roll?”

Daniel shook his head at Mark even though he knew they needed to get back to the plane. “This compound is now under Mitchel control. We have to make sure they’re worthy of it.”

Colton and his team took offense at the tone, hands sliding to gory weapons.

Bronco’s team came down another hallway, also bloody and happy with their skills. They had taken off on their own and easily made it here.

Daniel scanned the groups, ignoring Damon for the moment. “Who’s in charge?”

Colton saw Bradley behind the fighters. His lips thinned.

Mark did a count. “There will be four groups fighting for control.” Mark was already sure that Emmie’s girls, and Ria, would stay with Bradley because he was a council member. “Who gets the lead?”

No one spoke.

Daniel glared at all of them. “We’re not going to leave you guys here to start another war. This is part of the reason Alexa put me in charge instead of you, even though it’s your turf. She’s tired of Mitchels killing each other. Save that shit for our enemies!”

All of them were humbled by Daniel's words. It was as if Alexa was speaking to them through his mouth.

Bronco gestured toward Bradley. "As long as there's a council member here, don't they rank over the rest of us?"

Colton slowly nodded. Sharing was possible as long as Emmie's crew wasn't in the lead with them. "The rank should be council members, pure family lines, and then so on down to the rookies and outsiders."

Daniel did a quick calculation. "That means Bradley is in charge. Under him will be Eva and her group and then Bronco's team."

"Agreed." Bronco had no problem with being ranked third. He and his team still preferred not to be in the limelight. He didn't want to be ranked on the bottom anymore, though. He'd gained some Mitchel pride on this run and it had come from their short time with Alexa's men.

Colton decided that second in command was a respectable position for him. He sometimes missed it now that Levi was gone and he was in charge of their team. It was a stressful job.

"Not that I want my mother in control, but isn't she a closer relation on the tree than Bronco?"

Colton nodded at Damon. "She is, but you guys are also half Livingston and Bronco's line is pure Mitchel. Because of that, he ranks higher."

Daniel pointed toward the sloppy creek bank. "All team leaders need to step in there."

Half of the people stiffened or shook their heads, telling Daniel they weren't going to be cleared by the water.

Others shrugged or regarded the council member to see if they had to follow that order.

On Bronco's team, all of them stepped toward the water.

Daniel didn't watch them enter the creek. He already knew those four men were trustworthy. He watched Colton's team to see how this would play out. Not everyone on that team was.

Asher stared at Colton when he didn't move. "You don't have faith in yourself."

Colton shrugged. "I've made mistakes, like anyone else in our family."

Eva went around the men, untying her cloak. She dropped it and headed into the water before anyone could stop her.

Daniel was glad he'd insisted on this. The almost all male team needed her strong female voice and not because of equality. Daniel preferred the right person to have the job. It would also serve them well in the future when they ran into slavers during their future travels. After watching Colton's men in action, Daniel was positive they would come and go from this compound. The need for adventure would conquer the need to control this place. That would leave Bradley in charge with the three females, and Bronco and his men as their security. Alexa would be pleased.

The water swarmed over Eva, swallowing her.

Her team ran forward to help.

“Stay where you are!” Her voice came through the water.

The water swelled around Eva’s stomach and then nuzzled her.

Eva lifted her hands and directed the water into tiny ripples that began clearing debris from the edges of the bank.

“I didn’t know she was an alpha.” Colton was thrilled.

Eva smiled, dripping water. “It’s not me. Levi’s son is going to be powerful.”

She’d thought that was the case, but this confirmation was wonderful. Things were finally going her way. *All I had to do was find the courage to remove my husband.*

Mark frowned. “Shouldn’t it be attacking her for killing Levi?”

Bradley shook his head. “Not if Levi was corrupt. She was doing the water’s work.”

Eva let them work it out while enjoying the healing embrace of the waves. *I’m home.*

“He’ll need strong teachers.” Bradley was delighted to find out there would be another alpha here. “The council will restart lessons in this compound as soon as we can find and train more teachers.”

“Agreed.”

The few residents who’d stayed and survived came over to offer congratulations to Eva and her team. Her son would be able to control the water

and the people here would be safer. She and her group were welcome.

Colton and the others realized Eva was now the new leader of their team.

Colton started to walk away. He refused to fight her for control.

“Get back here, XO! We have a lot of work to do.” Eva left the water and joined her surprised men.

They’d all assumed she would pick Asher. The team waited to see what would happen next.

Eva wiped water from her face. “Levi chose you as our XO. It was the only thing he ever did right.”

Colton wanted to accept that deal. “What about Asher?”

“He’ll share my bed and my heart, and get over the rest.”

Asher rubbed his bald head, removing the dirt. “I can do that.”

“When I’m on leave for the birth, Colton will pick his right hand. That person will become 3rd in charge of our team.”

Daniel knew they didn’t need to stick around and observe the rest of the team moment, but there were other things left to be handled. He pointed toward the muddy tunnel. “There’s an artifact outside Tesco’s den that needs to be disposed of. If you can’t find a way to do that safely then pour concrete over it.”

“We’ll take care of it.” Colton didn’t ask what the artifact had been used for. It didn’t matter. He was suddenly eager for Alexa’s men to be gone.

They had been a huge help, but they were still outsiders and this was now a Mitchel den that needed to be rebuilt, stocked, and then refilled with life. “What happened to Abraham?”

Mark shrugged. “He was...enforced. He’ll spend the rest of his days serving this compound and the Mitchels.”

Asher groaned. “He’s not dead? He should be dead!”

Mark sighed. “Even we couldn’t accomplish that.”

Eva squeezed water from her hair. “We’ll try to finish him off.”

“No.” Daniel’s voice was firm. “He’s suffering right now. Leave him to his fate.”

Colton frowned, but he didn’t argue. They could do what they wanted once Alexa’s men were gone.

“How do Mitchels usually say goodbye?” Mark wanted to know so he could use it later, if he ever found an adult Mitchel he truly liked.

“We have several sayings.” Bronco held out his hand. “May we all be the masters of our own fate the next time we meet.”

Mark shook hands, frowning. “Aren’t we the masters of our fates right now?”

Eva snorted.

“I’ll think about that later. In the meantime, behave. Alexa doesn’t want to come back here.” After seeing Abraham’s memories, Mark knew that for sure.

“We’ll behave like Mitchels.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.” Mark pointed at Damon, grinning.

Damon chuckled. “I’m good now. I’ll stay that way.”

Mark didn’t remind the man that the water hadn’t agreed. He hoped Damon would live up to the second chance they’d fought for.

Bradley shook hands with both fighters, sorry that their adventure together was over. “I hope to see you all again in the future.”

Daniel didn’t. “Is that another Mitchel goodbye?”

“Just my personal wish.” Bradley sent out a small wave of longing. “I’ve enjoyed observing your team.”

Daniel’s lids narrowed. “And our leader?”

Bradley shrugged, voice growing cold. “I’m staying here. I’m doing the right thing. Why don’t you like me?”

“Because you were part of the chaos here.” Daniel didn’t hold back. “You were sleeping with the woman Adrian was engaged to. That’s why he didn’t want her. It had nothing to do with power and everything to do with being faithful.”

“There were other reasons, too, but yes.” Bradley had regretted it for two decades now. “But you’re wrong about that causing all of this. Ask your mistress. She’ll tell you some things are meant to be and there’s no changing them, no matter how hard you try.”

Mark shook with Toby and Jed, but he skipped the rest of that team. He didn't trust them. "Thanks for the help."

Toby gestured. "Thanks for the crib!"

Mark laughed. "Keep it clean and I won't charge you rent."

Jed chuckled. He trusted both of Alexa's fighters, but like his team, he was ready for them to be gone.

Mark turned toward the exit.

Abraham's withered corpse came through the tunnel, making people wince, flinch, and recoil.

Eva reached for her knife. "What the fuck is that?!"

"Your new undead servant. Bye." Daniel led the way to the exit.

Damon fell in the rear behind Mark. He was going to the plane with them to escort his family back. On the way, Damon planned to talk to his mother and make it clear that she had to change her ways. Fighting with family would no longer be tolerated.

Colton and the others watched until the men were gone. Then Colton sighed. "I wish one of them was staying with us."

Asher understood why. "We know how to become like them now."

Eva frowned. "We don't have any venom."

Asher entered the Seer's muddy cage and picked up Colton's special cup. "It has some blood

left in the bottom.” He regarded Eva, respecting their new leader by letting her make the choice.

Eva shrugged. “Drink it and we’ll see what happens.”

Asher hesitated. “It may not work.”

Eva didn’t. “True, but if it does, we’ll share it carefully. Such a gift will help keep us all alive.”

Colton assumed his previous role of making sure their leader was picking wisely. “Until?”

Eva sighed. “Until Alexa calls in the favor she earned here. None of this was by accident. We owe her a huge debt now and when the time comes, we will honor it.”

Chapter Twenty-Six
To The Death

1

“**T**hey failed to mention this.” Mark tied the rope to Daniel’s belt while ignoring the undead faces trying to bite him through Daniel’s shield.

The three men were backed up against the tree door, completely surrounded by zombies.

Daniel held his shield tighter over all of them while Mark prepped for the run. “I think deep down, they didn’t really want us to make it back.”

Mark scowled. “Why are Mitchels like that? She did a lot for them and set them up here like kings, and yet they still want her gone.”

Damon scanned the burning trees. “Our line is bred to conquer and come out on top of each other. It’s just who we are.”

“Well, who you are sucks.” Mark finished tying the rope that was now connecting all three of them. He tugged on the ends to make sure they were secured well. “I’m ready.”

Daniel wasn’t sure if he was. He had used a lot of energy during the fight with Abraham and the water. He drew on his reserve and then motioned. “As soon as I lower my shield, start running. I don’t

care if you have to drag our bodies along. Get to the plane as fast as you can.”

Mark nodded. “We’ll get there in time to save her.”

Damon was familiar with roping, but he was also exhausted. The one mental hit he’d delivered had drained most of his energy and then helping Bradley had finished it off. He wasn’t sure how fast he would be able to run right now.

A new herd of undead came through the trees, moving in ragged lines toward the path that was still on fire. There were live humans mixed in, but the zombies weren’t attacking them. It was more than odd.

Mark tugged the rope one more time. “We’re going on two and one and go!”

Daniel held onto the rope with one hand, using the other to balance as Mark took off running toward the plane using his vampire speed.

Damon tried hard to keep up, loving the time with Alexa’s men. He was learning more from them than he ever had from his evil parents.

The trio ran around and through hundreds of zombies who barely turned toward them before they were out of sight.

Mark zigzagged in and out of the flaming trees, aware of the light flickering like dying candles. The jungle was on fire in every direction, but it was starting to fade here. The vines were too thick for even a fire to completely remove them.

Mark pushed himself faster while Damon tried to stay on his feet and Daniel protected the cure in his cloak.

2

“The monster!” Alexa jerked awake, burning with fever.

The men around her strained against their bonds, eyes shut and minds full of terror.

The plane vibrated violently. The undead had been gathering here for the last half hour. Madelyn had never seen so many, not even in a big city.

“Alexa’s awake!” Alice hurried over. “Undead are all over the bridge and the steps. They’re attacking the plane!”

Alexa inhaled deeply, lungs hurting. The harsh odor of smoke was thick through the plane.

“We still have some incendiary devices that we could use as a distraction.”

Alice quickly shook her head at Madelyn. “Emmie put those together during our last training set. She’s terrible with explosives. They can’t be counted on to go off at the right time.”

Emmie scowled at Alice but didn’t argue because the girl was right.

Madelyn stared through the window. “There’s a woman at the end of the bridge.”

Alexa gathered what energy she had left. “It’s time.”

Ria retreated, fear crossing over her tired face. “Time for what?”

“To make yourselves proud.” Alexa tugged on her ropes. “You learned the fighting forms when you were children. Tonight, you’ll use those skills to save yourselves and my men.”

None of the younger females replied. They were busy remembering those classes.

Emmie scoffed. “I’m not going out there!”

Alice glared at Emmie. “We’re not leaving you alone here with her men. You *are* getting off, one way or the other.”

Menace filled the plane, thick and ugly.

Ria cut the ropes from Alexa’s wrists.

“Call them back or I’m staying right here.”

Alexa waited. She was positive that Rosetta was listening to everything they said. The woman was more powerful than Alexa had expected her to be. After twenty years here, Rosetta was dangerous.

Power floated around the plane. It stopped rocking as the undead went still.

The urge to go out to her was strong, but not enough to conquer the desires and fears of the people on the plane. Alexa and her men were unreachable right now by spells and charms because they were already cursed, and Alice wasn’t leaving Jacob unless it was to defend him. Madelyn always stayed near her sister, and Emmie wanted her revenge. All of them stayed where they were as the magnetic waves filled the plane.

“You have one minute to surrender.”

Alexa snorted. She didn't bother to send an answer. Rosetta wasn't going to let her live if she lost this fight. *And I don't just give up anyway. She has me confused with the Abbots.*

Alexa fought her upset stomach as she tied her cloak to her pantleg straps. The state of the plane was worse than many of the battle sites her team had left behind. Even the smoke wasn't covering it now. The stench of decay made her gut roll.

Emmie watched and waited, fingering the PIDs in her cloak pocket. She was aware that this might be her last chance to use them, but the woman at the end of the bridge was a huge threat. Emmie might need the personal incendiary devices for survival. Torn, she listened and tried to make the best choice to meet her goals.

Bright fear beat in Ria's brain as she watched Alexa get set to fight. "You can't go out there! You're sick!"

Alexa forced her body to stand up straight. "Would you like to take my place?"

Ria's lips clamped shut.

Alexa made sure her guns were loaded. "This is going to be a quick, hard fight. Concentrate on your timing. If you bring up the shields too late, you'll be hit by our spells. If you lower them too soon, we'll be overrun."

"What if we negotiate?" Madelyn wasn't as scared as Ria was, but she doubted the four of them would be strong enough to do this. Rosetta's power was terrifying. It was surrounding the plane in an

impenetrable wave that wasn't allowing Madelyn to concentrate on survival. She wanted to run.

"Rosetta is not going to negotiate. She came here for my death."

"I don't think I can do this!"

Alice went over to comfort her sister.

Ria stared at Alexa. "I'll get you killed! You can't count on me!"

Alexa met the girl's eyes. "Those are your father's words, not mine. I have every faith in you, Ria Mitchel. Now stand strong."

Ria's nerves settled a little. She'd never been gifted with anyone's confidence. She reluctantly began to check her own gear, praying that Alexa was right. She didn't care about failing their family. She didn't want to disappoint her new teacher.

Alice had been studying Alexa's methods. She used one now on her sister. "What would it take for you to do this?"

Madelyn stared in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm fighting for Jacob. Ria is fighting for David. Who are you fighting for?"

There was only one answer for Madelyn. "You."

Alice let her fear show. "If you don't help us, the monster out there will kill me."

Madelyn's face filled with determination. "I won't let that happen!"

Alice hugged her sister and then stepped back. "Check your gear and remember the formation rules."

Madelyn began going over them in her head.

Alice turned to Alexa with pure terror on her face. She didn't want to lose her sister either.

Alexa didn't spare comforting words for Alice because they weren't needed.

Anger came over Alice's face.

Alexa was satisfied they were as ready as they were going to be. "Last one out shuts the door. Make sure it's secure or the undead will get into this plane while we're fighting."

Alice dropped back to take the rear.

Emmie reluctantly lined up in the middle. "This isn't my fight."

"If you betray us during this battle, mother, you won't survive it either!"

Emmie looked over in surprise at Madelyn's threat.

Madelyn rubbed her bruised jaw angrily. "You won't see it coming, just like I didn't."

Alexa took the lead. *I will defeat the monster from my past. It's time for her to finish paying for her crime. Then I may die.* The curse was reaching its peak. She was running on hatred and will power now.

Alice took one last look at Jacob. "I'll be right back. Sleep well."

Alexa was fascinated by how fast that relationship had kicked into high gear for the girl. She was also worried about it, but that would be handled later.

Madelyn helped Alexa open the door.

Rosetta watched the shadows through the plane windows, still sending out those magnetic waves. She wanted as many undead for this fight as she could get. Enforcers were a tough battle anyway, but Alexa was an alpha and she hated Rosetta. *That is nothing compared to how I feel for you!*

Half a dozen undead were on the plane steps. Their heads turned as the plane opened, but they didn't attack.

"It'll be an obstacle course to get through this when it's all over. As soon as you get back on the plane, use a distraction to lure them away." Alexa lifted a weak shield and began knocking the undead off of the stairs so they could get down to the ground.

"Why are there so many?!" Madelyn unknowingly echoed the complaint Colton's team had expressed upon leaving the plane.

Alexa didn't waste her time answering. She assumed her normal untouchable air and strolled through the undead like they weren't there.

The girls quickly caught up to her, bringing up their shields.

The undead all turned to observe them. Some of them were burning. Some reeked of gasoline. All of them were hungry.

Alexa cleared the side of the plane and stopped.

There had to be a thousand undead crowded around the edges of the gorge, on the bridge, and in

the jungle. They were every place she looked. Even Alexa was stunned by the sheer numbers.

Rosetta spotted her target. loathing lit up her face and brought an icy shield over her muscled form.

Alexa responded with her crackle flame shield, glowering in contempt. She walked straight through the mob to the only clear spot in the center of the bridge. She knew Rosetta had arranged it this way so they would be surrounded during the fight.

Rosetta spread her arms out.

The undead all shifted toward her.

Alexa held up a hand and circled her finger.

Her fighters hurried into place in a triangle around her.

Emmie stayed between Alexa and Alice, who she considered to be the strongest of the group. She had learned these formations, but she refused to take a section by herself.

Alexa wasn't worried about it. Triangles were more powerful anyway.

"Mitchels and Livingstons fighting together again." Rosetta chuckled coldly. "That's quite a mixed team you have there."

"My rookies are more than enough for you." Alexa didn't give the woman a chance to back out. She also didn't attempt to negotiate. She drew first blood. "As an Abbot, you were never good enough for my father. That's why he broke the engagement. Your family is weak."

Humiliation brought red patches to Rosetta's cheeks. She returned fire. "Your grandmother was a cruel, bitter old lady who was locked away here because she was crazy!"

Alexa snorted. "You two have a lot in common."

"Your death will break that hold over me!"

"You will never be freed, Rosetta Abbot!"

"You killed my sons!"

"That's your pain, not mine."

"I'll show you pain, little girl!" Alexa wasn't a child now. Rosetta had nothing left to hold her back.

"To the death, for our families!"

"Agreed!" Rosetta dropped her hands and fired magic; her undead army rushed toward Alexa.

All around them, the flames burned hotter.

Rosetta's hit landed while the girls were still trying to expand their shields over the entire team. It was too strong for them to handle. All of them cried out or groaned at the impact.

"Absorb it, you idiots!" Emmie didn't want to participate, but she wanted to die even less.

Emmie's harsh order broke through the panic, bringing comfort to Alice and Madelyn, who were used to being trained that way. They absorbed as much of the hit as they could and managed to keep their shields up even through the pain of unmatched power.

"Lower!"

All of them dropped the shields so Alexa could return fire.

Alexa didn't use fire even though it was her strongest gift. Rosetta had walked through the fire to get here; she obviously wasn't afraid of it. Alexa sent out an alpha death spell.

Rosetta's shield deflected the hit into the group around her.

Undead, living, and some of her sons dropped, strangling on their knees around her.

Rosetta didn't care. She fired her own death spell, though it wasn't as strong as what Alexa had sent. Rosetta wasn't an alpha.

Madelyn got her shield back up first. She took the brunt of the hit and staggered, breaking the formation.

Alice pushed her shield over her sister to protect her from the undead lunging around them.

Ria kept her shield firmly over Alexa, furious that the others had already broken their fighting formation. "My dad would have fried you on the spot for that! Get back in place!"

Emmie waited to see what would happen next, still unwilling to join the battle unless there was no other choice. She was saving her energy for a different fight.

The next spells were harder to absorb. Madelyn and Alice both hissed in pain, trying to keep the shields up as they cracked.

Alexa tried a different tactic. She sent out an ice blast.

Rosetta absorbed it through her shield, grinning widely. She and her sons, the ones with power, had

practiced this daily for years. Alexa and her rookies didn't know what they were doing.

Alexa realized she wasn't going to be able to win this battle with magic. She hadn't used these skills often enough. *The best I can do is to defend while she uses up her energy.*

Alexa set out to do just that. She brought up her strongest shield and marched forward, hoping to trigger Rosetta into firing without thinking.

Rosetta hadn't expected a direct attack. She fired an ice wave and then quickly followed it up with another death spell. If Alexa's shield went down even for an instant, she would be hit by it.

Ria stayed on Alexa's heels, keeping her shield layered over both of them as tightly as she could.

Now completely out of the formation and unprotected, Emmie ran over to her daughters.

Alice and Madelyn followed Alexa, forcing Emmie to come along if she didn't want to battle a mob of undead by herself. The zombies were snarling, grunting, beating, and clawing on the shields; the reek of their decaying bodies was stronger than the smoke in the air.

Rosetta fired another powerful blast of ice. It was her strongest gift.

Alice and Madelyn held their layered shields against it, deflecting the hit into the jungle where it slammed into a thicket of burning trees. The trees exploded, sending flaming shrapnel in every direction.

Harsh wind flew around the fighters, blowing debris and leaves into their line of sight.

Ria assumed Alexa was going to attack physically when she kept marching forward. She saw Alexa's hands drop to her holsters.

Rosetta fired again, trying a blast of force. She wasn't as good with mental spells.

Alexa and Ria both inhaled, refilling their energy banks from the weaker hit that wasn't as hard to manage.

Rosetta's rage reached a new level. She grabbed the sons on either side of her, draining their energy to fuel her own as she prepared to fire again.

Alice and Madelyn finally caught up with Alexa and added their shields to the layers as Rosetta fired.

The hatred spell, which turned into acid as it traveled, coated the layers and ate through them like they weren't even there.

Emmie angrily brought up a shield around all of them. It was clear that Rosetta had to be handled first.

Rosetta's next spell swarmed over the shield and froze it in place around the team.

Alexa and the others quickly lifted shields inside of that one as Rosetta's next hit cracked the ice shield.

A blast of hatred followed right behind it, once again coating the team shields in acid that ate right through them.

"We can't defeat her!" Emmie was ready to run.

Alexa kept pushing forward.

“Up, you idiots!” Alice double layered her shield over the team.

Madelyn and Emmie automatically followed her lead at the familiar words.

Ria put her hand on Alexa’s shoulder to feed her energy.

Alexa drew both of her guns. She was too tired to be able to count on her normally lightning-fast draw.

Ria pushed more energy into Alexa’s shield. It was a lot stronger than her own.

Rosetta fired a blast from each hand and then followed it up with two more, draining her energy as fury controlled her.

Alexa and her team flinched and paused at the first two hits. All of the women struggled to absorb them to lessen the impact.

The next two hits brought down Madelyn’s shield. She couldn’t hold it up against the agony.

Alexa stopped 15 feet away from Rosetta, preventing her from using any more of the acid spells. The hate needed time in the air to transform into something deadly.

Rosetta fired again, and then again, releasing 20 years of built-up aggression.

So many direct hits at once brought down all of the shields again, drawing screams and zombies.

Undead all around the battle site lunged toward them, not caring about the target. They shifted back-and-forth between both sides, trying to reach anything alive.

Alice jerked Madelyn to her feet and pushed her toward Alexa's back. Then she retreated, forcing her sister into the center as she struggled to bring up a new shield.

Emmie joined them, putting her back to Alexa while also using her draining strength to defend the team. There was a huge horde of undead behind them now, blocking the path to the plane. She wanted to see Alexa's death, not join her in it. The only option they had now was to win this fight.

Rosetta's next two hits took the shields down again. Unprotected, an ice spell swarmed over Alexa's skin and froze her in place. Ice ran down her arms, coating her body in a thick barrier.

The rest of the team got a shield up and then layered them. More hits bounced off, but they didn't bring down the shields this time because of fear. Strong emotions fueled their gifts.

Flames burst through the ice covering Alexa, sending tiny shards through the air that bounced off the shield and hit the filthy ground at their feet.

Alexa shivered as the flames quickly went out. She couldn't take another hit like that and come back from it. "Now, my pet! Now!"

Shocking everyone but Alexa, Ria ran forward, drawing both of her guns. "Why can't you just die?!"

Ria fired alternating shots as she ran forward through the maze of undead. Every one of her shots hit Rosetta's shield.

Rosetta had been trapped here for a long time and the guns had run out years ago. She wasn't prepared for the impact of the slugs. Her shield flickered.

Alexa ran forward and joined Ria, emptying her Colts into the bottom of Rosetta's shield.

It went down.

Rosetta cringed, terror filling her mind. *I don't want to die!*

Alexa smiled cruelly. "Do it anyway."

Alice and Madelyn fired their guns at the same time, filling Rosetta's body with bullets.

Abraham's magic blasted out as Rosetta died, striking everything in a wide radius, including the fighters on the bridge.

Alexa fell. She was too weak to withstand the rebound hit.

The other fighters were knocked backward, slamming into the bridge and the undead.

The undead also fell; many of them were blown apart. Those that weren't destroyed didn't get back up. They lay on the ground with debilitating injuries. The others further away were stunned, but not gone.

The live people who had been drawn were awake now, but still surrounded by undead. None of them moved.

"What happened?" Alice tried to clear her mind as she picked herself up off the ground.

Alexa grabbed her squeezing chest. "Counteragent. She was protected here!"

Alexa fell over on the bridge.

Emmie clapped in delight from her place on the ground where she'd landed. "I knew this day would come!"

Madelyn realized what was happening and crawled on her hands and knees as fast as she could to reach Alexa.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Emmie reached for her dart gun.

Alice flew over with her vampire speed and kicked her mother in the face as hard as she could.

Emmie flailed backward and slammed into the pavement, knocked out. She never saw it coming.

Madelyn performed CPR on Alexa while sending magic into her body at the same time.

The undead who had been stunned by the rebound hit began to wake up. Their bodies twitched as they shifted toward the fighters.

In the tree line, a dozen shadows ran for the bridge.

"Incoming!" Alice spotted Damon. "It's the team!"

Ria quickly slammed a new mag into one of her guns. "There are Abbots mixed in!"

"Hold your fire!" Alice refused to accidentally hit their team and or Alexa's men.

Madelyn breathed slowly and steadily into Alexa's mouth, then resumed chest compressions.

Mark and Daniel made it to the bridge, mostly dragging Damon along by the rope.

The Abbot boys fired guns and screams as they chased the fleeing team, leaping over flaming logs and zombies. Every one of them had felt Rosetta's death.

Some of those males stopped at Rosetta's bloody body, crowding around her.

The undead attacked them, no longer under the magnet charm.

The other Abbots kept running toward the plane with the returning team.

The live people who'd been caught up in the magnet trap now tried to flee. Most of them were killed by undead. The rest fled into the jungle, away from the battle that was still happening.

Alexa coughed, rolling over as her heart restarted and her lungs expanded.

"Get to the plane!" Alice shoved her sister that way when she didn't move.

Mark and Daniel never slowed. They leaned forward as they ran, jerking Alexa up between them.

Ria used the last bullets she had to clear a path as everyone rushed to the stairs. "I'm out!" She slid aside so the others could go up the steps first.

Damon held out his gun as they went by. It hadn't been fired since he reloaded after dealing with Abraham. He and Alexa's men had run all the way here without stopping.

Ria grabbed it and opened fire on the zombies that were closest to the stairs.

Abbots grabbed cloaks and hair, trying to stop the team from boarding.

Alice stabbed a man in the eye and then spun around, throwing that knife at an Abbot who was reaching for Madelyn's arm.

Damon kicked the man in the side, knocking him into a cluster of undead.

Fresh screams split the smoky air.

Damon was jerked along as Mark and Daniel kept going.

His sisters followed, thrilled to see him but scared of why he was alone.

Mark and Daniel got the door open and took Alexa straight to the other men so they could check on her and their team at the same time.

Some of the hooded men made it up the steps and shoved their way through the opening before the door could be shut.

"They're on the plane!" Alice and Madelyn were already battling.

Ria hurried up the stairs and shut and locked the door. Then she joined the fray, firing magic.

Alexa found enough air for a single command. "Dinner!"

Mark sliced through the ropes connecting them and then grabbed the nearest Abbot.

Mark dragged the screaming man back to Alexa while Daniel once again unleashed his vampire rage. Then Mark rejoined his teammate. He was very thirsty.

Alexa held onto the dying Abbot greedily. She continued to drink even as cold steel pressed against her neck.

Alice and the others cringed away from Daniel's violent defeat of the remaining Abbots. He impaled, sliced off body parts, and bit into necks, all of it so fast that the enemy had no time to defend. Screams rang through the compartments.

As the noise faded to whimpers for mercy that wouldn't be given, Damon scanned for Alexa. He frowned. "Wyatt? What are you doing with that knife?"

Mark and the others turned away from the mess to find Wyatt standing next to Alexa's seat. He was beaten and swelling, leaking blood from holes in his arm and chest, but he was also grinning under his hood.

"My mother was never the one you had to worry about!" Wyatt bent over, drawing his knife across Alexa's throat.

Edward's eyes opened; his orbs were bright red. He lunged against the ropes and sank his teeth into Wyatt's arm.

On the other side, Billy did the same to Wyatt's leg.

Alexa shoved his other arm, making the knife twist. It slammed into the underside of his chin, plunging through his jaw.

Damon watched in grief and resignation.

Alice and Madelyn screamed, but they didn't try to save him.

Alexa and her men drank deeply. Her throat healed as she fed, but the pink glow of the curse still lit up the vulture wound on her ankle.

Mark grabbed another surviving Abbot. “You should all go now. It’s not safe.” He bit into the man’s hand when he tried to punch.

“He means us.” Damon tried to smile at his sisters.

None of them had gear to gather. On runs, gear stayed on their person unless there was no other choice. That meant there was no reason to linger.

Alice started to go to Jacob and stopped. He wasn’t awake, but he was surrounded by feeding vampires. Even though she was like them, she wasn’t one of them. It wasn’t safe.

Alice got her sister and joined Ria near the door instead.

Damon joined them even though he didn’t want to be away from Alexa. “May the rest of your journey be uneventful.”

Alexa belched loudly.

Damon winced.

“Take the truck.”

Damon brightened at Mark’s order. That would protect them until they could decide where they were going. “Thanks. It’s been fun.”

Mark swallowed, grunting. “No, it hasn’t.”

Damon eyed his brother, who was still being drained and struggling to scream for his help. “No.”

Alice took the extra mags Daniel brought over, wiping blood from them.

Daniel smiled through the gore. “He’ll come for you.”

Alice opened the door and led the team out without responding. She'd made a deal with Alexa. It was good enough.

“Ria. Stay?”

Ria froze in surprise at Alexa's bloody call. “Really?”

Alice and her family were bitter, but they also understood. Alexa would teach Ria that she didn't have to be scared all the time, but she would also use Ria's natural skills. Ria was a gunfighter. She fit in; they didn't.

Daniel shut the door behind them. He didn't watch their fast run through the undead who were now distracted again by falling, burning trees. He regarded Ria.

Ria pointed at an empty pot next to the one that was still simmering on the stove. “Heat it up, just to steaming, then drink it.”

“You do it.” Daniel hadn't forgotten the story. He was suddenly sure that Ria was stronger than she looked. He wanted her to be represented, too. “Add this and finish stirring.” He handed her his canteen.

Ria felt the power in it. “Magic water?”

Daniel nodded. “I want her protected for the rest of our lives together.”

Ria smiled. “So do I.” Then she got to work.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
You Love Me

1

“You wanted to be one of us!” Edward ripped his arm free of the rope around the plane seat and grabbed Wyatt, pulling him closer. “Stop whining!”

He jerked the knife out of Wyatt’s chin and plunged his fangs into the wound.

Gargled screams echoed.

Next to them, William’s poison reached the last stage. It took over Alexa’s mind.

Alexa grabbed the knife out of Edward’s hand and plunged it toward her chest.

Daniel was there to grab her wrist. He had remembered Abraham’s warning about suicide.

Alexa screeched, flames bursting out across her skin.

Daniel buried his face against her neck and held her against the chair while they burned together.

“I love you, Boss.”

The flames slowly vanished as she ran out of energy.

Alexa kept struggling, however. Her hands clenched and unclenched, looking for any weapon in reach.

Mark saw Edward's eyes turn pink and realized the rest of the team was about to go through the same thing.

Ria watched her watch, cursing under her breath as the potion started to warm. "Come on!"

Mark threw himself on top of Edward, hoping the ropes the others were still bound with held up until the cure was ready.

The timer on Ria's watch beeped loudly. She didn't waste time shutting it off. She grabbed a coffee mug and filled it halfway.

"How do we get them to drink it?!" Mark was barely able to keep Edward in his seat. He wouldn't be able to for much longer. He was bigger than Edward in body size, but Edward was stronger in nearly every way.

Daniel used his enforcer gift instinctively. He sent it over everyone in the section, locking them in place.

His enforcer snare was strong. They could see and hear, but they couldn't move.

Unlock me. Ria frowned mentally at him.

Daniel concentrated. *Let Ria and Mark go.*

Ria came over with the cup while Mark and Daniel tried to get Alexa's mouth open. "You're mastering it quickly. Nice work."

Alexa shivered, groaning. She swallowed a gulp and began to settle down. A bright pink flash went over her skin and vanished.

Alexa swallowed again and then again, taking the last drink from the cup. Her head fell to the side as sleep immediately claimed her.

Mark panicked. “What’s happening now?!”

“They’re supposed to go to sleep.” Daniel had tried hard to memorize every step he had pulled from Abraham’s thoughts and memories. He was also sure that Ria could have brewed this potion for them if she’d had the ingredients. He planned to ask her later why she hadn’t offered to do that.

Ria was monitoring everything right now. “My father abused me while he was teaching me. Some traumas are harder to let go of than others.”

“That’s not a good excuse.” Mark scowled at her.

Ria allowed them one quick image of that abuse.

Mark flinched. *That explains her scars, inside and out. How did she survive?!*

Daniel’s eyes turned red. “He’s dead, right?”

Ria shut down the memories. “Yes.”

“Good. I won’t have to spend time hunting him down.”

Ria smiled at the feeling of protection Daniel’s words caused.

The next ten minutes were a struggle as the snared men still refused to drink. Mark and Daniel were forced to pinch noses shut and hold heads back while Ria carefully spooned in the steaming liquid. They were careful not to spill any of it. This version couldn’t be replaced now that Abraham had been stripped of his gifts.

Each of the men had the same reaction to the cure as Alexa, even down to the pink glint that ran over their scarred skin and disappeared.

“I’m still missing a family line.” Mark forced Edward’s head back for the next spoonful. Now that the fight was over, Mark wanted pillow talk. “Livingstons are cruel. Abbots are insane. Mitchels are ruthless. Who did I miss?”

“The Wells family is unshakable. They are the most relentless among us.” Ria returned to the pot for another dose. “Then you have the Reichers.”

Daniel winced.

Mark had heard several mentions of that family now, but after spending time around Abbots, Livingstons, and Mitchels, he wasn’t clear on why Reichers were considered worse than all the others.

Ria brought the cup over so they could give Billy his dose. “Imagine all of the family lines in the same person and then you’ll understand.”

Mark snorted. “I’d like to skip that.”

Daniel nodded. “Same.”

Ria shook her head. “You guys can’t run from your family. You can kill them, however.” Ria was very glad that her father was dead. Her only regret was that she hadn’t been the one to do it.

Daniel stared. “Wait, are you saying another one of us is a Reicher?”

Ria’s attention went to Billy. “He’s almost pure, from his hair to his eyes. I don’t know what he’s been like on your team, but I’d bet there have been signs of it all along.”

“What signs?” Mark wanted to know for the future. After all, a thinker had to have information.

“Just as I already said. They have all the traits of the other founding family lines.”

Mark wiped blood from his hands to get a better grip. It was a little disturbing how often he had to do that now. “Even the relentlessness from the Wells line?”

“Yes. It’s the only way they aren’t the worst. Reichers were the first family line created. They’ll be the last to die out.”

Daniel stared at the sly girl while Mark spooned in Billy’s portion of the potion. “You’re a Seer and a potion master. That’s why your dad sent you to culinary school. He wanted you to have the modern version of your gifts.”

“That was my idea.”

“Are you good with the other skills?”

Ria’s eyes grew dazed as she immediately looked ahead. “Your death should have already happened, Daniel. Because you escaped fate, a shroud surrounds you, waiting to wrap you in its cold embrace. There is also a chance for the future you have secretly longed for since you were a child. Remember your honor in all that you do and that future is possible. Forget it, even for an instant, and you will not survive in Safe Haven. You will not survive anywhere. Death waits gleefully to claim you.”

Mark was completely freaked out. He continued spooning the rest of the potion into Billy’s mouth,

but he didn't speak. He had no idea what to say after that.

Daniel did. "Thank you for the first glimpse of real hope I've ever had. When you need it, I'll pay for this."

Ria's eyes returned to normal. She blushed under his approving gaze. "It's on the house. I don't charge my team."

2

"We could bury him." Damon didn't want the girls to remember their brother this way.

All three of them were bloody, dirty, stinking, and scarred from this run. They didn't know what would happen to their family now, but they knew they were done following Emmie. They'd stayed on the bridge as soon as they made it inside the fuel truck, letting some of the threats clear out while they talked.

Madelyn refused. "We all knew Wyatt was bad. Acting like he was good won't help us move on."

Alice was proud of the progress Madelyn had made on this run. "We'll remember the good times, not the ending. As far as I'm concerned, that's an Abbot corpse."

Damon finally fired up the fuel tanker and headed for the end of the bridge. He didn't look at Emmie's body as they went by.

Undead followed them, clearing another section of the bridge.

“Are we going to the compound?”

Damon shook his head. “We’ll stay in the Abbot farmhouse. It’s big and well-set up. You’ll like it.”

Damon wasn’t sure if his sisters would be accepted by the water, and he also didn’t believe they would come out on top if Colton decided to remove them all. He felt it was best to leave the other Mitchels alone for a while. Later, he would see if there was still a truce between them.

Everyone winced as they passed Wyatt’s body. He’d been tossed out of the plane a minute ago, like trash. The family all felt his loss, but there was more relief than grief.

“We’ll have a home together, something we’ve never had before. At least until your mate comes for you.”

Alice thought about Jacob and tried not to cry anymore. Her face was already sore and puffy. “But will he?”

Damon smiled. “Mitchels never forget.”

“They aren’t Mitchels.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong.” Damon yawned, slowing a little to keep from wrecking as his vision blurred. He needed to rest soon. “Someone else will have to take first watch.”

“I’ve got it.” Alice wouldn’t be able to sleep yet, despite the rising sun. Her heart was too heavy at being split from Jacob.

Alice brought up her hood as a rare glint of sunlight broke through the trees.

Madelyn tugged Alice's hood tighter over her sister's face to protect her. "What happens when Emmie wakes up? We didn't kill her."

Damon heard the new strength in Madelyn's tone. It matched the story they'd told of battling Rosetta. "I'm not sure. Let's take a vote. Our new team leader can go first." Damon regarded Alice.

Madelyn smiled. "Agreed."

Alice was shocked. "Why me?"

"You stood up to her." Damon's shoulders drooped. "The rest of us never did that, not even Wyatt. You earned it."

Alice accepted the job nervously. "Let's go see our new home and get cleaned up while we talk about the future."

"Just about Emmie, right?" Madelyn wanted that settled before their mother showed up.

"No. I have an amazing gift and I'm going to share it with you both." Alice had refused for so long that the others had stopped asking and turned to other sources. "Even vampires need a clan for support."

Damon beamed as the truck bounced over bare dirt, leaving deep marks in the ashes. "Alexa gave me what I wanted the most. All I had to do was go good."

3

Mark shivered. A faint pink glow ran over his skin and then it was gone.

Daniel didn't shiver and there wasn't a pink light. He did grimace at the taste. "Is that all of it?"

Ria checked the pot. "There's about half a cup left."

"You drink it."

Ria frowned at Daniel. "I wasn't injured in Port City."

"You've been caring for them this entire time and we don't know if it rubs off."

Mark didn't think that was the case, but he didn't protest Daniel's choice. He liked Ria. There was no harm in making sure she was covered.

Ria shivered like the others had, but there wasn't a pink flash. "I wasn't infected."

"What's in the other pot?" Daniel had been smelling it for a while now.

"Something the boss was brewing." Mark settled into a seat near their sleeping team. He leaned it back and shut his eyes, but he didn't let himself fall out. Until the team recovered, he and Daniel were still on duty.

As it always did after a run, Mark's mind was replaying everything. "Why didn't Abraham just leave? We were honoring the deal. We wouldn't have stopped him."

"I think he was too angry at Alexa to wait, so he settled for her mouthpieces." Daniel didn't have another answer for it. "Why did the old guy give us the artifact if he was trading his kids for a longer life?"

Mark had covered that one. “He didn’t have any more lives to sacrifice, so his real age was starting to return. He was going to die alone. I think he felt guilty.”

“That makes sense.”

Mark asked the next thing that came to mind. “Should we have left Emmie’s group here? The water didn’t like Damon.”

“It won’t matter after Eva’s son is born.”

“It’ll be a baby.”

Ria shook her head at Mark. “Don’t discount the power of our children. The government didn’t. They bred us oddly for that reason.”

Daniel began wiping off his hands on his cloak. He had layers of blood on them now. “Oddly?”

“Some types weren’t supposed to mix because of the insanity factor.”

Mark pushed again. “About Emmie…”

Daniel frowned. “They’ll be safe here. The water is special and they’ll have an alpha soon who can control it. Now spit it out. I’m getting annoyed.”

“The boss lied.”

“Yes.” Daniel settled into the seat, stretching out his weary body. “If you remember, she wasn’t just telling that story to us. There were a lot of witnesses.”

Mark realized Daniel was correct. Alexa had told them the story of meeting her father for the first time while they were in the Killing Fields, surrounded by threats and enemies. Not the least of

which had been the old woman who was really the master of the house in the corn.

Daniel already knew Mark wouldn't let it go without a more detailed explanation. His brain wouldn't let him. "She also didn't want to remember this place. She lost her grandmother. She condemned an uncle she liked to an awful fate. She also lost some of her father's love. Abraham did accomplish that. She didn't see Adrian again for years."

Ria stayed quiet as the men talked, just happy to still be with them.

"That accounts for the sadness between them during the other stories."

Daniel nodded. "She also ended up back in a lab, and if I'm counting it correctly, they stole a son from her not long after."

Mark didn't want to get into a conversation of females having eggs at such a young age. "He told her that grief is the strongest emotion descendants can use to fuel our gifts."

"No, the family enforcer told her that. Even as arrogant as he was about her youth, Abraham knew not to give her that information."

"Is that how she gets us through these big challenges? She uses her grief?"

"Of course. She's a Mitchel."

Mark scanned the team. "How long will they be out?"

Both men looked to Ria for the answer.

Ria swept the destroyed inside of the plane and used a hard tone. “Long enough for us to get some of this mess cleaned up.”

Both men groaned but rose from their seats to help.

Ria stared at the feeling. *I’m part of a team now!*

Mark lifted a leg and started dragging the body toward the exit. “You’re part of the best team left on the planet. Don’t screw it up.”

“I won’t. This is all I ever wanted. The people on it don’t even matter.”

Daniel laughed. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Mark wanted to know why Alexa had chosen Ria. He didn’t doubt she was worthy, but he still needed that information.

“It was my fighting skills. She was very happy with me.” That had been the best part of all of this so far for Ria. For one moment, she had earned Alexa’s approval. Nothing would ever be able to compare now.

Mark nodded. “That’ll do it. She respects that as much as honor. Maybe that’s why she didn’t invite Alice and Madelyn to come along, too.”

Daniel frowned. “I didn’t know she was evaluating them for a spot.”

Mark dropped the body near the door and went to collect another one. “I think the boss evaluates everyone we meet for a spot.”

Daniel collected a stinking arm. “Mitchels are known for making personal connections.”

“Jacob will be disappointed that Alice didn’t do well.”

Ria spoke up. “She actually did really good, but her loyalty was to her sister. She protected Madelyn first.”

“And you didn’t?”

Ria shook her head, voice dropping into the gravelly tone they were used to hearing from Alexa. “I stayed by the boss the entire time. That’s where I belonged at that moment.”

Both men were sold. Ria was now a member of their team. They dug into her thoughts to see that battle for themselves.

Ria allowed it, unafraid of them at this moment. She wanted their approval.

“When she gave the final order, how did you know she meant you?”

Ria’s eyes darkened at Mark’s question. “*My pet* was one of my father’s favorite sayings. He used it when he was in a good mood. Where do you think Alexa learned it from?”

4

“They’re all resting better now.” Ria began pulling the window shades on the side of the plane where the sunlight would soon stream in and disturb the vampire clan. “Don’t you guys need to go to sleep now or something?”

She hadn’t observed a normal sleeping pattern with them during this run or in Port City, but she

assumed that was because they'd needed to be awake.

"Sleep would be good."

"Sleep? What's that?"

Ria laughed. She was impressed with their stamina. She was also worried about their health. Both men had injuries, were limping, and looked like they'd bathed in blood. Clearing the bodies from the plane had added more.

Ria frowned at Daniel's coating of gore, but she didn't comment on it. "Alexa said she'd go to trial with Eva over Levi's death."

Mark had been thinking about how to get Alexa cleared. "We can plant doubt. Remember when you busted me out of that slam? She was reckless with the explosives that day. It rattled all of your brains."

Daniel now felt better about that situation. "I think it was a training moment, teaching us people won't always react in the way we expect."

"Same. We won't tell the council that."

Ria clucked. "If they bring in an enforcer, you'll tell them whatever they want to know."

Daniel didn't like the sound of that. "Don't I have a defense to it now?"

Ria shivered. "Not when they're working for the council. It strengthens them to use those gifts officially."

Daniel stored that information for later. "I didn't tell Colton there are Abbots still alive."

Mark snorted. "Like I said earlier, that team will need something to do later." Mark got up and began

digging a bedroll out of his kit. “Rookie has first shift.”

“I second that.” Daniel also began retrieving his bed gear.

“Really?” Ria couldn’t seem to stop saying that. It was the only way she could express her joy.

“Was I so eager as a rookie on this team?”

Daniel shook his head at Mark. “You were a lot more sullen. Don’t worry; we’ll train her to act like an asshat.”

Ria almost cried. She hurried out of their sight while lowering the rest of the shades. “I’m doing a round of the plane.”

It was a little surprising to both men that they trusted her. They’d had a chance to add almost anyone from this run to their team. Ria was a pleasant surprise.

Mark and Daniel assembled the bed quickly. They automatically made it big enough for their entire team.

“I’m still disappointed with the pyramid.”

Daniel chuckled. He’d picked Tesco’s den to run to because the stone walls would have been a good place to make their stand, but they hadn’t made it there. The map in his cloak would never be finished.

Daniel had another question for Ria. He’d saved it for last because it didn’t matter. “What’s the marrying age and why do you have one?”

Daniel knew there was a good reason or the families wouldn’t have cared about Abraham passing that time.

Ria tried to scrub the hotplate clean so she could get a meal going when they were ready. “It’s 25. After a quarter century of life without a bonded mate, a Mitchel mind begins to crack.”

Mark peeled off stiff socks. “Bonded?”

“Committed, mated, married. The longer they go past 25, the more the odds increase on insanity, and not just for them. Their future offspring will inherit it at a higher rate. Our kind needs a mate to keep them sane.”

Daniel thought of his own age and winced. He was in his 30s.

Mark changed the subject. He hadn’t run out of random questions yet. “When did she tell you about Abraham and her lessons here?”

“A little after I first joined this team. Edward was out hunting and she could feel my pain as the bones knitted themselves back together. I just thought it was a distraction.” Daniel smiled ruefully. “I had no idea it was for a future run.”

“She’s good.” Mark shed his cloak and then made sure his gun was loaded with one of the spare mags he’d taken from the compound. After handling Abraham, Daniel had walked them through the main areas, taking what he wanted. The rule of not looting hadn’t applied here. Mark didn’t think Alexa would mind since they’d also found bullets for her Colts.

Daniel stripped his boots and cloak, and put his loaded gun next to the bed. Then he joined Mark in bringing their team over.

“They’re healing.” Mark examined the wounds on Jacob’s hands that had already faded to a dull pink; all of the splinter holes were closing normally now.

“Her leg’s better.” Daniel lowered Alexa’s pant leg and then gently lifted her damp body against his chest. Peace filled his heart as she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

It took them a few minutes to get the entire team brought over and put into comfortable positions. Cloaks were draped over bodies and boots were removed to allow comfort. Even though they were exhausted, Mark and Daniel took good care of their team.

Ria finished her patrol of the plane and then returned to the section. She started to ask if they needed anything and then remembered they’d been doing this for a long time without her.

The old feeling of being an outsider hit her harder this time.

Daniel gestured. “Lightly shake one of us in four hours and we’ll switch out. The boss always wakes up easier, and in a better mood, with the bodies of her team surrounding her.”

Ria’s happiness lit up the compartment, nearly blinding the two men.

Mark settled down next to Alexa’s body. “Our team just got stronger.”

Daniel knew. “Do you think she planned that, too?”

The rookie answered. “Mitchels never do anything for a single benefit. She meant for all of this to happen.”

“Then that means she trusts you with our lives.” Daniel took his spot among his teammates. “Remember how you’re feeling right now to carry you through the harder times. It won’t always be this good.”

Ria wiped away her tears. “For me it will. This is the best moment of my life.”

“That’s very sad. Now shut up; we need to sleep.”

Ria’s laughter filled their ears as they drifted off.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Close

The Compound

1

“**G**ood morning, Uncle Abraham.”

“Good morning, Alexa.” The shriveled corpse continued on its path toward the next body that needed to be removed from the compound.

Alexa fell in next to Abraham as he performed his new duties. She loved dream walking, though she didn’t do it often. It was dangerous to leave her body behind, but in this case, she hadn’t been able to stay away.

“Is she dead?” Abraham wasn’t able to look at Alexa. He hadn’t been given that much free will over his body, but he could tell she was healthy and happy.

“Yes.” Alexa didn’t feel pain coming from him at the knowledge of Rosetta’s death or from his withered state. She assumed the counteragent he had drunk after killing her grandmother was still protecting him in ways.

“The tissue died and the nerves went with them. I feel nothing physically now.”

Alexa shrugged. “That is a kindness I hadn’t intended.”

“I didn’t think so. You often overlooked minor details in a rush to the conclusion.”

“And yet I’m the one body piled with my team and you’re disposing of reeking corpses.”

“As you say.” Abraham didn’t feel anything physically, but emotionally was different. His dead heart was now throbbing with the worst agony he had ever felt, but it wasn’t because Rosetta was gone. It was caused by failure.

Alexa walked slowly next to him in contemplation. The compound had almost been destroyed. There were tall piles of dirt that Abraham was forced to crawl over because his dying body refused to support him correctly.

Abraham rose and resumed dragging the partial corpse. “Why didn’t you kill me back then? No one would have protested.”

Now that it was over, Alexa was able to tell him the truth. She blasted him with her emotions. “Next to my father, you were the best teacher I had out of the entire family and you disappointed me. It was personal. You had to pay for that.”

“That isn’t fair and balanced.”

“No, but it was effective and that’s what matters to me. No longer will enforcers be bound by rules that don’t make sense. We will clear this world of evil like yours, one at a time. And we’ll have you to thank for it.”

“Did you know all of this would happen?”

“Yes. The only way it could be successful was if I stayed out of it because I wasn’t going to be able

to control my emotions. I would have sprung the trap too soon. You and Rosetta would have still been caught in it, but all of the lives here wouldn't have been changed. I didn't wait for you; it was for my family."

Abraham wasn't able to chuckle anymore but his mind filled with brief amusement. "You took over."

"Yes. This really is a perfect den and Mitchels are now in charge of it." Alexa allowed herself an instant of pride. "This stop on my quest had more than one goal."

Memories slapped both of them.

Abraham tightened his grip on the slipping, rotting corpse. "Nora wanted control of this place, even back then."

Alexa nodded. "What the council wants, they get."

"As your uncle, I hate you for that and for everything you stand for. As your teacher, I couldn't be more proud. You've honored this family. I wish I could spend the rest of your life teaching you everything I know."

"You still think you were my teacher. That's so cute." Alexa laughed at her own twist of his words to her back then.

This time, she felt his mental pain and wallowed in it.

The wave of bitter enjoyment floated down the tunnel and reached all of the people laboring in the

main center of the compound. They were trying to make sure the plants didn't die from all of the abuse they'd suffered.

Colton's team paused, recognizing the feel of Alexa being among them.

Bronco's team kept working even though the others went on alert. They also knew who it was.

"Why haven't the others joined us yet?" Asher wanted to get it clear about who was in charge down here.

"They're Livingstons. They won't come into a Mitchel den." Colton wasn't completely sure of that, however. Emmie hadn't always made the best choices.

"Here comes Uncle Abraham." Asher pointed.

Colton and Eva exchanged glances while the others made faces.

"He's dragging a body." Jed was revolted by the sight.

Asher was too. "He's removing the undead. Daniel said he'll do that forever."

Toby shrugged. "Unless we take his head off and burn him."

"Leave him alone. He's paying for his crimes. Do not interfere." Alicia kept clearing debris, expecting her order to be followed.

No one argued with the girl.

Alicia smiled at Eva. "Will you swim with me later?"

Eva pushed sweaty hair from her cheeks. “That sounds great.” It really did. She was hot and dirty again, and her back was aching.

All of them were glad when Abraham got out of sight. Having a withered corpse roaming this compound would take some getting used to.

Mitchels don't always make the best choices either.

Eva nodded at Colton's thought. “Let's do what Alexa wants. This might be the first place on the planet that has three founding family lines coexisting peacefully.”

“Four of them, if any of these people are related to Tesco.” Colton motioned toward the residents who were helping them clean the debris from around the plants.

Some of them were mourning people who had been lost, but all of them were relieved that leadership here had changed. Life would be better with Alexa's family running the compound.

Bradley stood up, rubbing his sore hip. “The council agrees with that.” He looked around. “We need to pick someone to fill Nora's chair. For now, we'll assume Alexa and Adrian still have their seats. Would anyone like to make a nomination?”

None of them were surprised by the abrupt switch in conversation. It was a hard rule among their family that the council had to be replaced as quickly as possible when someone died or resigned. It was the only authority they had in their family. It needed to be active.

“I nominate Bronco.” Asher smiled at the man. “His team has always been around. They have honor and they work hard. I think they would do well providing security for him and Bradley.”

“Agreed!”

“Agreed!”

“I have a nomination.”

Everyone went still and quiet as little Alicia gestured to her shooting teacher, Maya. All of them knew Alicia was an enforcer. She was already well-versed enough in that skill to take her place in the family hierarchy.

Alicia motioned again. “Get it over with.”

Maya tensed as she neared the creek. Then she forced herself to enter the water and learn her fate.

Alicia giggled as the water rose up and swiped Maya down one side of her face. “It likes you.”

Maya relaxed. “I’ve tried hard to go good since being exiled here.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Maya tried not to cry at the girl’s praise. “Stop it now.”

“As you say.” Alicia turned to Bradley.

“The council will listen to your suggestion.” Bradley handled her like he would any other adult. He remembered his own days of being around the council. He had felt left out and too young to be there most of the time. He didn’t want the next generation to feel that way or it would be much harder to fill seats in the future.

“I want to nominate my mother.”

Bradley regarded Maya in disapproval. “Teacher and mother?” That wasn’t normally allowed.

Maya quickly shook her head. “I’m her aunt. Alicia’s mother sent her here a year ago for training.”

“Where is her mother?”

“Somewhere safe.” Maya left the water and kicked a piece of wooden debris free so she could pry it up with her muddy hands.

Bradley returned his attention to Alicia. “Do I know your mother?”

Alicia smiled at him with familiar eyes. “My mother trained Alexa.”

Fresh laughter went through the tunnel, carrying familiar vibes.

Most of the laborers groaned, realizing they should have recognized it. Alicia’s mother was Amanda. She’d ended up having a child and teaching her to enforce, despite her vow not to do that.

Bradley didn’t make any promises. “Her name will be added to the list. We will gather as many of the family as we can and hold a vote.”

“Thank you councilman, Bradley.” Alicia rejoined her teacher to keep working.

“It sucks that the power generation was damaged in that quake.”

Bronco shrugged at Asher. “We know where some fuel is hidden. We’ll get a generator running and repair the water power in a few days.”

“Agreed.”

Almost at the end of the main tunnel now, Alexa paused and looked back. “That’s the real definition of family. It’s people that you adore, but it’s also people you don’t like very much or that you even hate, but you love them anyway. It makes no sense at all and yet it’s perfect.”

Abraham continued to drag the body toward the exit while his mind continued to fade. He wasn’t feeling any emotion now. He was almost gone. “That’s really why you let me live. You love me.”

“Yes. And in another minute, you’ll forget that. You’ll keep just enough of your humanity to know that you were cursed to this existence, but you won’t be able to remember why or even come close to finding enough intelligence to get out of it. That’s the tough love I’ve sentenced you to.”

Abraham tried to form words as letters and numbers flew out of his mind like they’d been blown out. “Goodbye, Al...”

He quit communicating, lost.

Alexa stopped, letting him go on by himself now. “Goodbye, Uncle Abraham. Please enjoy your retirement. I will, every time I think about you.”

2

Alexa woke in the center of her men, body piled and warm. Snores and deep breathing told her they were all here and everyone had been cured. There

was no longer a cloud of death hanging over them like there had been each time she'd woken before this.

Alexa stayed still for another minute, enjoying the peaceful feeling that only came once a day, or less, for them. She refused to think about everything they'd accomplished during this run. She would reward her men for it later. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy being together and safe.

“The brew’s ready. I’ve kept it warm.”

Alexa opened her eyes.

Ria smiled sleepily at her. “Good morning, Enforcer.”

“Good morning, Rookie.”

Ria chuckled at the term and went over to stir the brew one more time.

“Did you stay on the off chance that you would become like us?”

Ria had been expecting that question from Mark and Daniel. “Yes, but not the vampire part. That would be great and all, but I need to be part of a team who loves me. That’s why I’m still alone. I’ve refused to settle for less.”

Alexa believed her. “Have you slept yet?”

“No.” Ria didn’t say she’d stayed awake all morning, making sure her new team was safe.

“Were you told to wake someone?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t do this again.”

“I won’t.” Ria smothered a yawn.

Alexa stood up on sturdy legs, with a calm stomach. She motioned. “Get over here.”

Ria braced for a punishment for disobeying her first order, but it had been worth it to watch them resting and know that she now had a family who was worthy of her love.

Alexa held her cloak up. “Take my spot. Get six hours, or better.”

Ria eyed the men who were starting to stir now that they’d heard Alexa’s voice. “Are you sure?”

“Do what she tells you, every time, without question!” Edward got up. “Now.”

Ria hurried into Alexa’s warm spot, thrilled. “Emmie’s still alive out there. She’s crawling to the end of the bridge. Lot of undead still around her.”

Edward was glad for the update. “We’ll handle it.”

“No other movement.” Ria yawned as she got comfortable against Billy’s hot back. “Fire’s almost out.”

Alexa pulled the cloak up to Ria’s neck. “Sleep now.”

“Thank you, Aunt Alexa.”

Ria’s eyes snapped open as she realized she had been very familiar.

Alexa ran a calloused hand over the girl’s tense head. “You have permission to call me such.”

Ria settled in, nose full of smoke, sweat, and blood. It was perfect.

Edward took the cup Alexa dipped for him as he joined her near the stove. “Are we keeping her?”

“That depends on this team.” Alexa sipped her own cup. The taste was rough, but it was necessary. “If she continues to perform well and my men embrace her, we’ll have another extremely loyal teammate to see us into the future. If she gets shut out, we’ll leave her in Safe Haven where she’ll be protected.”

Edward swallowed the bitter brew. “I thought Brian and Marshal would be our new additions.”

“If Marshal has managed to hold onto his honor and abide by our deals, he may join us. Brian will never be welcome on my team.”

“Because you love him too much.”

Alexa nodded.

“Ria’s family, too.”

“Yes, but I don’t love her as much as I do my son. Children have a special place in the hearts of their parents. Even the end of the world can’t change that.”

There wasn’t a flash of light as they drank Alexa’s brew. Ria noticed that, but she was too tired for questions. In time, Alexa would teach her all the secrets of brewing.

“We’ll both need another teacher. I have limited knowledge on this subject.” Alexa checked on her men by sight. “I will pass all that I know to you, however, as I do for them.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It will still be painful. Lessons well-learned almost always are.”

The men in the body pile listened to the conversation without letting Alexa know they were awake. All of them were curious about those topics, but they also wanted Alexa to have any private time they could give to her and Edward. The couple were rarely alone.

Alexa snorted. “Save your poor faking skills for another day and come drink a cup of my brew.”

Men chuckled as they rose.

“Why do we need another one?” Daniel was now worried the Seer’s cure hadn’t been correct.

“Because my uncle was a brilliant man who might have added something to it. I made my own counteragent, with help.” She smiled at Ria.

Alexa’s men began rising and taking the cups she dipped, leaving Ria in their warm spot.

Ria didn’t protest, but she immediately felt alone.

Mark sipped and tried to clear the gaps in his information that only Alexa could fill in. “Why did you try to get Emmie a place on the council? Was it guilt because Emmie’s match to Joel was made out of revenge?”

Alexa shook her head. “I was giving her a chance to go good, like I did with all of her children.”

Mark grunted. “She didn’t even consider it.”

“No. She suffered more with Joel than we can imagine. There was never really a chance that it would work.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“To save her team.” Alexa shrugged. “Three out of four isn’t bad considering what they’ve all gone through.”

“Damon showed you extreme loyalty.”

Alexa snorted. “He showed extreme obsession. My uncle was correct about that. It’s why the water still chased him.” She had pulled their memories of this run from their dreams.

Mark tried to be positive. “Maybe being around his sisters will help.”

“Or maybe he’ll influence them and Jacob will suffer for it through Alice. It’s impossible to guess which way that will go.”

Jacob yawned as he joined them to collect a cup. “Alice is stronger than she seemed. She’ll hold out.”

“But?”

Jacob shrugged at Mark. “I felt pressured. That may factor in while I’m away from her.”

“You mean while we’re in Safe Haven.”

Jacob grinned. “I do plan to browse the stock. We know those people are good.”

The team laughed. That was a big comfort about where they were going. Safe Haven was full of others who were fighting for the light. They would be safe there; they could relax.

Alexa sighed.

Edward finished his cup and focused on Daniel. “Did you come to bed like that?”

Daniel laughed. He was still coated in dried innards and other fun items.

Edward scanned Mark next. “What triggered it?” He had to know. The nightmare had repeated every time he went to sleep, but he never got to see what started it.

Mark didn’t want to go through it all again.

Daniel gave him the answer. “There’s a little girl here. She reminded Abraham of his past and he flipped out.”

Jacob grimaced at the taste of the stinky brew. “So it was all in his head?”

Alexa nodded. “Being caged is hard on our kind anyway, but he was in there for 20 years. You could compare it to two decades of solitary confinement. He only had contact with people for food and services.”

The fighters drank the potion while making faces and pretending they weren’t relieved to be alive. The best part was the silence in their minds.

Daniel frowned at Alexa. “Boss, why are there still so many cruel voices in your head?”

Alexa sighed again. “Because some of them have been there since childhood. They didn’t come with the curse and no cure will remove them.”

Alexa smiled at Mark as he finished the cup. “You’ve done very well. Go to sleep now and take Daniel with you. In a bit, I’ll fly us out of here. The last leg of our journey is about to begin.”

Billy tried not to show how frustrated he was with how long it was taking them to reach their destination. “Will we make it this time?”

“Yes. We won’t accept anything else. Death holds very little power over us now.”

Daniel smiled at her. “Was that also planned?”

“No. It’s wonderful when a good plan produces perfect results.” Alexa poured another cup. “Get the rookie to drink this.”

Daniel took it over, without limping. The brews and a great day’s sleep had healed his injuries, even the broken rib. Mark was also looking better. It was amazing what magic, and sleep, could do for them now.

Ria sat up quickly, not asking why. She took the hot cup and downed it without stopping. Then she covered up and shut her eyes. She couldn’t stay awake much longer.

Edward kissed Alexa’s cheek and then headed back to their bed. He knelt down and lifted the blanket.

Ria’s eyes shot open as Edward crawled in behind her. A gory arm slid around her warm body.

Daniel took the spot in front of her, sliding back until she was forced to put her arm over his bloody shoulder.

Jacob and Billy joined them, laughing and elbowing for room.

Now in the center of five powerful men, Ria’s eyes shut; a smile curved her lips. “Someone in this pile is getting a bath tomorrow.”

Alexa chuckled with David, the last man still up.

David finished his cup, shuddering at the rough taste. “I never want to know what was in that.”

Ria snuggled closer to Daniel’s shoulder. “Cornstarch, sugar, blood, hair...”

Men groaned.

“A liver, two fingers...”

“Stop!” Edward laughed with the others, heart easing as he accepted a new teammate. “Welcome, Ria Mitchel. May your time with us be productive and full of honor.”

Ria opened her lips to answer.

Edward bit into her shoulder.

Daniel drove his fangs into her arm.

Ria shrieked as all of the men gave her their special welcome.

David went to join them at Alexa’s motion.

Alexa let them all go first, enjoying the screams and the blood more than she could say. “It’s just who I am now.”

Alexa walked over to the pile, sending an adoring scan over her small army.

Ria shivered, meeting her eyes as venom was pushed in from six different vampires. “Take what you want. I give it willingly.”

This time, Alexa did.

3

“It’s time to go.”

Alexa's men had been ready for the call for an hour. Most of them sat up and began checking their gear.

Everyone had gotten a sink bath now. The smells in the plane were still awful, but it wasn't coming from them.

Alexa waved. "David will finish this shift with the rookie."

Ria held onto David's arm gratefully, shivering. They were still in the bed. She was going through the transformation now.

Ria refused to cry or scream again as the venom pushed through her body, making changes, transforming, killing her.

She was almost dead now, but she was also alive and breathing. It was too much for her mind to accept. If not for David holding her, Ria didn't think she would have been able to suffer through this part.

Ria winced at a flash of sunlight that made it under the shades. She didn't ask how the others were able to stand it; she didn't want to know what training they'd gone through for that. "I d-didn't know it would h-hurt so much!"

David held her tighter. "There are always prices for deals like these."

"Slam you!"

David chuckled, thrilled with the way things had turned out.

"Billy will be my copilot. Everyone else, get outside and turn this big bird around so we can shake the jungle from our boots."

As the others headed off to do their duty, David took the opportunity to ask a question that had been nagging him. “What’s the real reason you didn’t make contact with your brother and sister? Was it because I was with them and you were afraid?”

Ria tried not to vomit again as her stomach twisted. “I was scared. I knew what you were. I’m still scared of you.”

She felt him tense against her and pushed on anyway, finding the courage Alexa had known was there. “I left them alone because they’re good and I’m not. I have dark spots in my heart that are never going to get better. I didn’t want to rub that off on them. They deserve a chance at a life where they never feel this way.”

David felt his heart swell and recognized the moment. He didn’t rush into any promises or questions that would make her uncomfortable. But in his mind, it was a done deal. Ria was just like him. There couldn’t be a more perfect match anywhere.

Alexa glanced over her shoulder as she reached the cockpit. The curtains were open, providing a clear view of David holding Ria. A tiny thread of jealousy went through Alexa that was quickly smothered. She felt that way about all of her men, but she wanted them to be happy. The new women in their lives would give her fighters what she couldn’t. A home and a family were not in her future. Edward was wise enough to know that and he still wanted to take the risk. He was different than

the others. *He's like me. There couldn't be a more perfect match anywhere.*

4

Mark shut the plane door and followed his team, automatically taking the rear. His good spirits had been returned. He couldn't wait to fly out of here.

Daniel was in the front of the group, waved there by Edward. He led his team proudly through the debris path around the plane that included trees, rocks, burnt patches, bodies, and blood. It felt like home to him. They always left a scene like this now.

Edward observed Daniel. *He'll lead his own team at some point.* The thought made Edward proud.

Undead that had been critically injured growled and reached out for them, unable to chase but still unwilling to give up the fight. It made Jacob sad.

Zombies that had gone into the gorge were still active down there. Their grunts and groans echoed oddly, giving the team chills.

As they went by Emmie's body, Edward glared. Her attempt at faking wasn't fooling any of them. "Don't move a muscle. If you do, your death will be the ugliest thing that happened on this bridge."

Emmie froze. They'd been right. She was really a coward at heart. Her fighting skills were an extreme survival reaction.

The team marched by her to attach the ropes to the wing.

Mark and Daniel had gotten details about how to do this from Wyatt and then verified it with Alexa, but all of them were still nervous as they slowly began to use their vampire strength to pull the plane around. This was normally done by a machine or a whole crew of people, not five inexperienced blood drinkers.

In the cockpit, Alexa flipped switches and adjusted settings, bringing the plane to life and getting it ready to take off.

Billy sat in the seat next to her and watched, but it was without his usual fascination when it came to a new method of transportation; he had other things on his mind.

Alexa didn't tense as the plane began to turn. She was confident her team could handle it. They'd done most of the heavy lifting this time. It was a validation of her training.

The cockpit was the only fairly clean place in the plane now, other than the cargo area. Billy was glad of it as he swiveled the chair around. "Boss?"

Alexa heard his tone. It said something important was on his mind and he wasn't going to be swayed from it. Alexa turned to face him. "Yes, dear?"

Billy stared at her in reproach. "I didn't get to spend a lot of time with you on this run."

Alexa chuckled. "You're with me now. Speak your mind."

"Me and the boys were talking about it and—"

Alexa laughed. “Me and the boys?”

Billy managed to keep a straight face as he continued. “Me and the boys were talking about it and we’d like to throw you and Edward a wedding party after things settle down.”

“Is that all?”

“A *Mitchel* wedding party.”

Alexa stiffened, eyebrows coming together. “Where the hell did you hear about that?”

“Eva spent most of her time on this plane thinking about her life with Levi. I know a lot more about Mitchel rituals now than I did before.”

Alexa braced. “Spit it out or your mouth will freeze like that.”

Billy looked out the window to keep her from seeing his amusement. “Apparently, the team has to demand a chore and then approve that work before they will support any marriage between founding family lines. They call it a wedding service.”

“Who said we’re getting married?” Alexa tried to get out of this conversation, but she already knew it wasn’t going to work. Billy had talked to the rest of the team. This wasn’t something they were going to let pass without enjoying it.

Billy opened his hand.

Alexa stared at the beautiful golden band that had clearly been hand fashioned. It had both of their names on it.

“Edward said you weren’t the type for a traditional proposal. He also implied this was safer for him and his ego in case you refused.”

Alexa gently picked up the ring. It was so new that the gold would be easily damaged. It gleamed with David's metalworking skill.

"He also said to tell you it's not a claim of ownership. It's a symbol of his commitment to you, to the quest, and to his team. He loves you, Boss. We all do." Billy fought the emotions to deliver the final part. "Will you marry him?"

Alexa slid the ring onto her finger and tried not to cry. She hated to cry. "Tell him I said no."

Billy stared. "What?" A lump formed in his throat.

"That's exactly the feeling we're going for when he realizes I'm wearing his ring and we flipped his joke around on him."

Billy burst out laughing. "And that's why you're the leader."

5

Mark showed the other men how to get the steps to fold up and then stored back in the compartment in the belly. The stairs had to be lifted over the larger debris and they weren't light. It took them longer to break it down than it had for him and Damon to set it up, but they were all happy when they didn't damage their ride while doing it.

Daniel led them back around the side of the plane, where they had left a long rope hanging down from the door. The sore men tried not to show it as they climbed up.

Daniel stayed at the bottom, waiting for each one of them to scale the rope and make it inside before he joined them. As he started to close the door, Daniel saw Emmie get to her feet. She took off running toward the farthest end of the bridge, getting out of the way as Alexa started moving the plane forward.

Daniel locked the door and then went to join the team who were standing in the cockpit hallway, observing.

Alexa handled the plane smoothly, once again grateful for the time she had spent in Alaska with her Uncle Brandon. Her excitement ran through the small space, hitting Billy.

Billy laughed. “Up, up, and away!”

Everyone else held onto the wall straps that were only supposed to be used in an emergency. Normal flying rules no longer applied.

Alexa increased their speed quickly, very aware of how short this runway was compared to what was usually used for a plane this size.

Billy scanned the bridge they were headed over, glad that this side had remained clear of the debris they had removed upon arriving here. He narrowed in on a shadowy figure running across the bridge. “Emmie!”

Alexa had her hands full with the plane. She didn’t look.

“She’s firing on us!”

6

Emmie lifted her gun, aiming for the engine on the right side with every bullet. She retreated as she fired; the plane was approaching fast.

Emmie tripped over Jerry's rotting body on the bridge, ruining her aim. The last of her bullets hit the side of the 747 instead of the engine.

Alexa pulled back on the steering wheel. "Thank you, Jerry. Your debt to me is now paid in full."

Emmie screamed in frustration as the plane rose. She started to fire magic.

A fuel truck roared out of the jungle behind her. Its noise was covered by the sound of the plane as it lifted off of the bridge.

The truck slammed into Emmie from behind, knocking her into the air.

The plane hit Emmie as she fell, knocking her body into the jungle. She landed on a burnt tree and was impaled.

Blood splattered across the front window as the plane cleared the trees and rose into the sky.

The tanker truck kept going across the bridge without stopping. The woman inside it didn't celebrate, but she also didn't cry.

"Goodbye, Mother." Alice drove toward the farmhouse where Madelyn and Damon were cleaning and setting up their new home. "Safe travels, Alexa. Don't forget our deal."

In the plane, Edward got Billy's attention.

Billy sadly shook his head. "I'm sorry, man. She said she never intended to marry you. It was just a quick suck in the night."

Edward's stomach dropped. He turned toward Alexa...and caught the glint of his ring on her finger.

Relief flooded his face. "Payback?"

Billy nodded while the other men laughed. "With her, you'll always get as good as you give."

Edward smiled. "Then I'll be a happy man."

Alexa carefully steered the plane toward the ocean in the distance. "Yes, you will."

Alexa felt more like herself now, but the sadness was still there. She'd removed a lot of people over her lifetime, thousands, but every time it was a family member, she felt the loss. *Amanda was right. Grief is the worst emotion humans feel. Fear is right behind it.* "We're soon to be over troubled waters; the compound adventure is quickly fading away. There are no more dangerous deals for us to make, no more enemies to defeat. It's all down to survival now."

Billy tried to sound calm even though he was angrier than he'd ever been in his life. "What about our arrival?"

Alexa had looked ahead upon waking. "Watch your six and we'll enter Safe Haven in honor. Forget who you are and we'll all die together within sight of our goal."

Billy clenched his fists. “We fight for the light. *I* fight for the light.”

“That’s why you’re on my team. No one deserves a second chance more than you. Don’t let the anger rob you of it.”

Billy’s rage flew out. “I’m going to kill him and lose everything!”

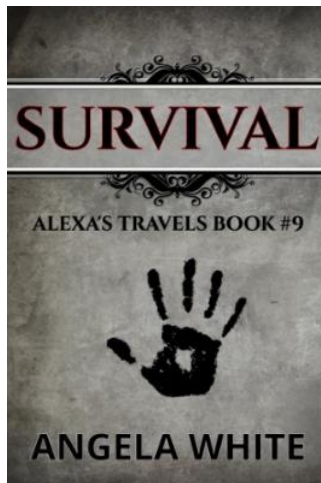
“No! Your team is going to handle that. You’re going to be reunited with the girl you love and live happily ever after.”

Billy liked the sound of that. “What about the rest of you?”

Alexa steered the plane higher into the sky. “We’ll survive.”

The End

What would you like to do now?



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[Deleted Scenes](#)

[Audio](#)

[Book #9](#)

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Deleted Scenes

1

“Thank you, my dear. That may have been your best effort ever.”

Rosetta chuckled, laying her head on Tesco’s sweaty chest. “It was my honor.”

Tesco coughed to clear his lungs, arm curling around his wife’s bare shoulder. “I wish it could always be this way.”

Rosetta nodded her agreement.

Tesco felt her mind drift away from the moment and tried to pull her back. “Have you seen anything new?”

He felt her tense under his arm before she relaxed and knew that she had.

Rosetta had been hoping he wouldn’t ask. “Yes.”

Tesco understood she wasn’t ready to talk about it yet. He kissed her on the head.

Rosetta delivered some good news. “I’m almost ready to breed again.”

Tesco hugged her. “That is wonderful news!”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never understood why you stayed. Or why you continue to give me children year after year, but I’ve always been grateful for it.”

Her arm tightened around his lean stomach. “We are mates. I could never leave you behind.”

Unlike in past moments when he had accepted that answer, Tesco pushed. “You could have taken our eldest sons who aren’t without magic and established a new den anywhere in this country.”

Rosetta nodded.

“Why didn’t you?”

Rosetta slowly sat up in his huge bed, not bothering to cover herself with the sheet. He’d seen her naked body more times than she could count now. “I had to wait for the end of the world. None of our enemies were gone before then. Any base I established would have been infiltrated and conquered.”

Tesco realized she was willing to share real information with him this time. He immediately asked another question. “The end of the world has come and gone. What are you waiting for?”

Rosetta looked upward at the dark tunnel above them.

A loud rumbling noise echoed overhead. It shook the dirt loose, covering the sweaty couple in fresh grit.

Tesco’s eyes widened. “That’s a plane!”

“I’ve been waiting for that.” Rosetta got out of the bed and began to dress.

Tesco quickly sat up. “Who is it?”

“An enemy.” She fastened her pants. “The enemy we’ve both been longing to see again.”

Hatred transformed Tesco’s face. “Mitchels!”

“Adrian’s daughter is about to land here. It’s almost time for our revenge.”

“And for us to be reunited!”

“Yes.” But Rosetta didn’t care as much about that as her husband did. She’d gotten very good at leading their sons without him by her side.

Rosetta had tried to leave this land many times, but magic had prevented it. She had to capture Alexa and force her to lift the spell. *Or I’ll kill her and consume her lifeforce. Then I might be happy staying here and building my army. I can still send them out to conquer.*

More of the blood returned to Tesco’s brain. “Why would a Mitchel come here?”

“We’ve heard some of the transmissions. Alexa is on her way to Pitcairn Island.”

“So?”

“So that plane sounds huge. They can’t make the trip without refueling.”

“The tankers!”

“Exactly. When they come in, remember to act like what you are.”

Tesco lifted his head proudly. “I am an Abbot, the head of our family, and a devoted husband.”

“You’re also the leader of this compound. If you don’t want to give that up, delay them as long as you can. If you rush in blindly, we’re all doomed.”

Deleted Scene 2

Residents began turning toward the exits, faces going blank.

Bradley recognized the magic. “She’s a magnet. She’s calling them.”

“Who?”

Daniel groaned. “Rosetta. We should have killed her when we had the chance.”

“Yes.” Bradley grabbed Damon’s arm. “Sorry.”

Damon held still while Bradley used his energy to send out an alpha command.

The powerful demand broke through the weaker underground magnetic waves. People stopped, blinking as they regained control of their minds.

“Others will answer it.”

“I can’t save them all.” Bradley sank down near a muddy wall and tried to recover.

Audio



Did you know the The Alexa's Travels series is now available in audiobook format?

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From the Author

Those Mitchels sure have a lot of drama, don't they? Lol. If they didn't, I guess the story wouldn't be nearly as entertaining. I wouldn't want to spend a lot of time around them, though Alexa would be fun to meet in real life as long as I hadn't pissed her off.

The next Alexa's Travels book will be the final one before this series merges with Life After War. We're almost there! I hope you'll stay with me to the end. It should be just as extreme as all of the other adventures Alexa and her men have had.

There were a lot of developments in this story. As I gave it my final readthrough, I realized it's a conclusion book. We now know how Adrian's mother died, her name, and who was responsible for it. Once again, I don't think it would be a fun time to be around that family. It makes me grateful for my own.

We found out that Daniel in this series is indeed Daniel from the Mark and Angie backstory and he's been in love with her since they were kids. It should be very interesting to see how that plays out. I wonder if Daniel's time on Alexa's team and the new skills he evolved in this book will matter in Angela's vision of the future for their kind.

Alexa and Edward are now officially engaged. I'm very happy for them! I hope they get to enjoy a

future together that is satisfying. Neither of them will be able to tolerate boredom for very long.

Several of the founding family lines who have long been enemies now have a chance at peace. Ultimately, it will be up to every single one of them, not just the family council, as to whether or not it's successful.

In this book, we also got a closer look at some of the nonviolent lessons descendant children were forced to take. It was a nice change of pace and in the end, it was still what I've come to expect from the Mitchels. Though, I am curious about the lessons in the other family lines. It didn't seem like the Abbots or the Livingstons had exactly the same classes. Perhaps I will explore that later.

The team now has a new member. In all of the past books, Alexa's men have shown an extreme reluctance to admit anyone else to their crew, be it male or female, but they allowed Ria to join them without a single protest. It's interesting. I guess some things really are just meant to be.

I hope you enjoyed reading this adventure in Alexa's life. I think it's clear from all the time spent exploring her past that she is the main character. The series is named after her, of course, but it's been very interesting to see how the dynamic played out between her and everyone she encountered. Of all the characters I've brought to life, she is probably my favorite. She has a moral line that dips and rises so much like real people that it's easier for me to

envision her while I'm writing than it is for some of the others. She has a very distinct voice.

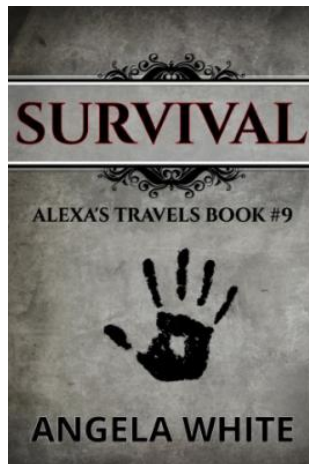
I personally think Edward's idea of having her in charge of the country is a good way to go, but it's impossible for me to predict how that will end up. When I start a new book in any series, I draft an outline first. I fill it in with key details that I want to be revealed in each chapter and then I summarize each part to make sure it has everything in it that's important. Then I write the damn thing and absolutely none of it matters!

That's the life of a writer. We don't create a story so much as we translate it from our brains onto paper. Sometimes they roll out smoothly, with all the details in the right order. Sometimes it's like taking a machete to the floor instead of a broom.

It's also incredibly rewarding and that's because of every one of you. Knowing that people enjoy the stories I write makes every minute of the labor worth it. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your attention. Thank you for your love.

Until book nine,
Angie.

Book 9



Survival Book #9

“Here’s your cup, Boss.”

Alexa took the warm mug cautiously. The plane was on autopilot, but she was still right here watching everything.

A great smell hit her nose. She sniffed. “Mmm. Who made it?”

“Jacob.”

Alexa’s stomach flipped.

Billy laughed. “The rookie directed him with shivers, threats, and solid instructions.”

Alexa took a small sip of the broth over the noodles. “Wow.”

Billy resumed eating his own portion as he sat down in the copilot seat.

Alexa tried not to wolf it down like a pig, but it was hard. “This is the best thing I’ve tasted since the war.”

“Same. That chick has serious skills.”

Alexa nodded. “You should have seen her during the fight. She doesn’t do well with people, but she’s magic with a gun.”

Billy wasn’t surprised. Alexa knew a gunfighter when she met them. “Who gets to train her?”

“Mark will do that honor.”

Billy knew she usually passed it down to the next senior man. He tried to figure out why Mark had been chosen. “David can’t because of their relationship.”

Alexa nodded, then let him work it out while she ate. The gumbo-like meal really was amazing.

“And Jacob is still a rookie who forgets things.”

“Bite me!”

They both chuckled at Jacob’s response. The rest of the team, minus David and Ria, were in the section right behind the cockpit, eating and relaxing.

“Edward and Daniel have done their share of training new people.” Billy controlled his tone so he didn’t sound whiny. “Why not me?”

“Different skill set. Think about what *she* needs, not about what you want.”

Billy wasn’t offended. He dug into it while finishing his food.

Alexa scanned the gauges and screens, then took another bite.

“She needs balls.” Billy grinned as he got it. “Mark will give her that.”

“Yes. She’ll have nerves of steel when he’s finished with her. In the meantime, we must always account for her weakness there.”

Billy lowered his voice in a futile attempt at privacy. “Is it because we’re so close?”

“Partially.” Alexa didn’t lie or hold back. She didn’t need to. “Safe Haven will feel better with us having a mixed team. We’ll get less questions about slavery and charms. But don’t be misled. I picked Ria because we need her. She’ll be a valuable asset, even before she’s been retrained.” Alexa held up her cup.

Billy grinned, tapping his mug against hers. “Here’s to no more torpedo nights!”

Alexa laughed. Then she resumed eating. The food was too good to let it get cold.

The other men began joining them in the crowded space, eager to spend time around Alexa even while she was busy.

Billy tried to control his impatience. “How long will it take us to get there?” They’d been in the air for two hours.

“About four more hours.” Alexa pointed at the map on the screen. “It’s almost 4000 miles from the compound.”

Jacob leaned against the wall. “Wow. I had no idea it was so far. It’s amazing that a plane can cover it so fast.”

“Do we have enough fuel?”

A cold wind went through the cockpit at Billy’s question.

Alexa shook it off. “Yes, but barely. We won’t be able to circle the runway.”

“If they have one.” Mark remembered Wyatt’s doubt about that.

Alexa shrugged. “If not, we’ll jump. One more plane in the ocean won’t matter.” She directed their attention to the sandbar below them.

A rusting plane was sitting awkwardly on the sand, covered in barnacles from when the tide rose. There were no signs of anyone being alive down there.

“That’s comforting.”

Alexa grinned at Mark, still ignoring the bad vibes. “I try.”

“I have a suggestion.” Edward knew no one wanted to hear it, but he’d expanded his role as their XO to include things Colton had covered. Looking out for their future was one of those. “We should take a break and heal up.”

Alexa swallowed the last bite that she’d been savoring. “No.”

“Are you sure? We’re beaten up and tired. We haven’t had enough time to recover.”

“Did you imagine we would stroll into Safe Haven in pristine condition, blinding them with our strength?”

Edward blinked. “Well, yeah.”

Alexa chuckled. “As did I, when this quest began.”

“And now?”

“Now I think they need to see us as fellow survivors. If we’re unruffled upon arrival, it may doom us.”

Billy let out a grateful noise. He couldn’t stand to wait another month for them to all heal up, or even two more weeks.

Mark counted. “You told Adrian we’d be there by Easter. That’s months away.”

Alexa didn’t answer.

The men didn’t know if she’d lied to throw off the trackers who’d been listening, or if there was something coming that would delay them by two months. Anything that could do that wasn’t the normal adventure they’d faced during this quest. Two months meant an injury that had almost caused death.

Alexa still didn’t answer.

“We’ll have to toughen her up against light.” Jacob had covered the windows with plane blankets to help protect Ria.

“We will. For now, she’ll get double hoodies and a cloak that’s too big so she can hide under it.”

Jacob nodded, scanning the ocean through the windows and the blood spray from Emmie’s body.

“I’ll get up there and clean that off if we keep the plane.”

Everyone thought about Alice’s final declaration of loyalty. She’d killed her mother. It was an odd thing to be happy about, but all of them were.

“I like Alice.” Edward grinned at Jacob. “You should ask her out.”

Jacob snickered. “I have already seen inside her cloak. She’s well-packed!”

Alexa’s mind went into hyperdrive as it always had in the past. Flying was dangerous. *But I missed something. What?!*

Billy looked at Mark. “You’re the thinker.”

They were all monitoring Alexa’s thoughts right now. The fighters turned to the convict.

Mark got it all at once, face crumbling in dismay. “Emmie was on the plane for a long time.”

Daniel understood. “Check the plane! Don’t touch anything that looks out of place.”

The fighters spread out, searching through the rows of seats and overhead compartments.

“She failed at something...” Alexa’s eyes widened. “They didn’t want to use her PIDs because they weren’t reliable. The devices went off too early or too late.”

Billy got up and joined the team. “Look for Personal Incendiary Devices!”

Alexa adjusted their altitude, groaning in frustration. “You can’t stop me from getting there!”

Slowing me down is the best you can do now! Slam you!”

Her fighters listened to her rant against fate while searching. The sight of five devices under the seat where Emmie had spent most of her time wasn't a comfort.

“It's flashing.”

“That means it could be a minute or an hour, but it's been triggered.”

“We have to get these off the plane.”

“Uh-uh. She wasn't good at it. Move them and they might go off.”

“What do we do?”

“How many parachutes were back there?”

“Dozens.”

Edward made the choice. “We're getting off this plane.”

“Now?”

“Do you want to wait until these explode and we get sucked out through the hole?”

“I see your point.” Billy headed for the cockpit. “Edward wants us to get out right now.”

Alexa nodded. “Gather the parachutes and the life raft cases. Then lighten your cloaks by as much weight as we were using back in the lake.”

Billy understood what she was going to do. “I hate the water!”

“I hope the feeling is not mutual.” Alexa hoped their luck held out. “Hurry up!”

Billy rushed into the rear compartment, waving the team along. “Gear down by half. Help me with

the chutes and some raft cases. You'll have to find those."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Oh, shit! The devices are beeping!"

Billy tossed parachutes into a pile, heart pounding in that familiar sense of danger.

Edward ran to the devices, judging the distance to the door.

Jacob had followed. He went to the door, feet bracing. "Go!"

Edward ripped the taped devices free as Jacob opened the door.

Edward flung the PIDs through as hard as he could to clear the rush of incoming air.

Jacob slammed the door shut.

Everyone waited for the explosion that would rock the plane off course and cause them to crash.

When there wasn't an explosion, Edward breathed a sigh of relief. "She really wasn't good at that."

Jacob chuckled.

Boom!

More blasts went off behind and under the plane, sending out a stiff wave of force that made the plane shudder. Then it settled back into normal flight under Alexa's skilled hands.

"She was good enough."

"We need an emergency plan for shit like this."

Jacob nodded. "Agreed."

Both men headed for the cockpit.

They noticed Alexa's tension hadn't settled.

“What’s the problem?”

Alexa pointed at a gauge with a needle slowly dipping toward a red line. “We’re losing fuel. One of her shots got a gas tank.”

“Damn. How long?”

Alexa had already done the count in her head. “An hour, maybe, and then we will be down, be it on land or water.”

Billy slid into the empty seat. “I say we keep going and use the life rafts from there.”

Edward joined them. “Are you saying we stay on this plane even though we know it’s going to crash into the ocean?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Even Edward wasn’t that brave. “Are you nuts?”

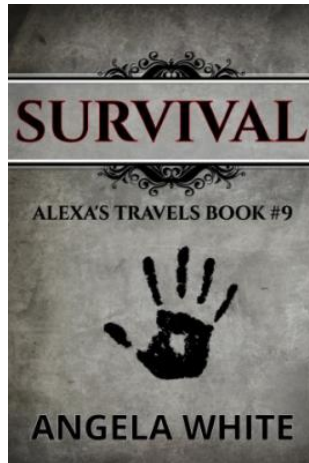
“A little, yeah. We always get hit by these chaos moments and have to handle them on the fly. For once, let’s cause the chaos moment and use it to our advantage.”

Edward scowled. “You mean we’ll be a thousand miles closer to the island. If we land here, we have to find another method of transportation and risk another adventure pulling us away from our quest.”

“That’s a perfect translation.”

Alexa shrugged. “I go where my team goes. If that means intentionally crashing a 747, I’m game.” She grinned. “I’ve never done that before.”

“You’re all crazy.” Ria grinned through the pain as David helped her onto her feet. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

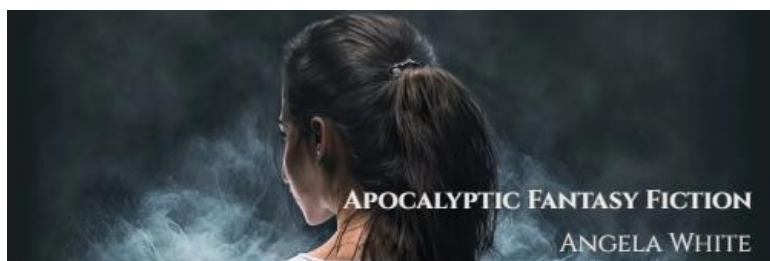


[Survival](#)
Book #9

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