

ANGELA WHITE

ALEXA'S TRAVELS



PORT CITY

BOOK SEVEN

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Port City
by
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I'd like to say thank you to ten amazing men and women who've become my eyes. I'm grateful to you, John, Terre, Jackie, Joe, Sue, Karen, Holly, Drew, Wendy, and Kristi. I hope you all have a wonderful summer.

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Prologue

Gainesville

1

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

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

“Down!”

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

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

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

“Good!”

“Tired!”

“Good!”

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

The wave crested and hit them all full on.

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

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

Alexa shivered. *Three more minutes.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edward broke the surface and shouted over the water. "Time!"

Alexa allowed it. They were all miserable.

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

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

Edward plowed forward. His body protested the cruel treatment.

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

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

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

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

Edward helped her, but he also popped buttons on her clothes while holding Jacob up. By the time

she got the Preacher undressed, half of her clothes were off, too.

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

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

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

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

David handed him fresh gear.

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

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

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

Five minutes after touching the shoreline, the entire team was dry, except for their hair, and warming nicely. Alexa had created the lesson and made them practice the recovery multiple times

before they'd stepped foot into the lake. Being vampires didn't make them invincible.

Edward waited for Alexa to speak, for any of them to talk, but the lake made the only noise as the waves increased in strength. Edward was glad to be out of the water. These lessons never got any easier.

“Check in.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A feather dropped into the sand in front of her.

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

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

Do I want to keep doing this?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fire blazed across her face.

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

Alexa relaxed. “Stay here tonight or go back? Vote.” Alexa waved at Edward to handle it.

“Stay.”

“Stay.”

“Go.”

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

provides that. And I'm forbidden the job I want most. This one will have to do.

Alexa put it from her mind. "There's time yet."

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

The team stopped, frozen as the eagle studied them.

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

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

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

The bird flew off into the western sun.

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

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

Alexa's heart settled back into that familiar, tiresome rhythm. She sat on the sand and squeezed

water from her long blonde braids. “We leave at midday on the morrow.”

That was as long as she could wait. If she stayed longer, she wouldn’t go at all. This team meant as much to her as her honor, as her father, and she’d almost picked them. Instead of shame, it brought awareness. *I have to find a way to save them.*

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

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

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

The men laughed.

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

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

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

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

“Do not close yourself off to relationships once we arrive. We need them to accept us before we tell them they don’t have a choice. If we do it backward, they may try to kill us and every hybrid they encounter. The last thing we want is to go to war against Safe Haven.”

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

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

Chapter One

A Warm Drink

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark handed Jacob the nunchucks they'd painstakingly carved.

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

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

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

The chuckles were genuine this time.

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

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

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

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

Edward and David frowned at the man.

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

“Twirling?”

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

“I don’t twirl.”

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

Daniel laughed. “The court accepts that answer. Nunchucks are definitely not your friend.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Two minutes."

The men moved faster at her call.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa lifted her hood and tied it tightly as they stepped out into the bright light of late January. “Don’t look back. It will only make this harder.”

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

Her lip curled. It was definitely time to go.

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

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

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

“We’re being watched.” David was sure of it.

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

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

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

Whoever was watching them sent out a wave of approval and then left to go spread the word that she was on the move again.

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

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

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

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

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

“Let it go.”

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

“Concentrate!”

Daniel’s bark drew all heads toward him.

Daniel smoothed out his face and tone. “We’re on the road now. Leave that shit here.”

Alexa nodded approval.

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

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

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

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

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

David ignored the legs that were already starting to protest the walk even though it had just begun.

“There are several groups around us. They’re traveling east, as well.”

“Going to the same place?”

“Hard to say, but I assume so.”

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

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

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

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

“Leave that shit here!”

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

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

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

They switched places, giving Alexa the lead.

Alexa resumed the practice. “Cover switch.”

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

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

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

Mark started to shove the Preacher to wake him up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob flushed. “That’s not true!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Movement from all directions.”

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

“Rifle squad.”

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

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

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

Edward started to shoot the dogs for him.

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

The dogs flew toward him, snarling.

Mark jerked on the rifle, heart pounding.

Edward didn’t like this. “Boss...”

Alexa didn’t repeat or repeal her order.

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

More dogs came from the tall weeds.

“Pitbull.” Edward fired.

Three large canines ran through the grass, growling.

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

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

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

Jacob and David covered the sides.

Mark charged to the front line.

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

“Incoming!”

Alexa’s warning sent fresh adrenaline into their bodies.

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

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

Daniel laughed harshly. “Showoff.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her gaze went to Billy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's not okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And are you?"

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

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

Mark snorted and swept a different direction.

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

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

Laughter flowed over the small battlefield, calming their nerves.

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

Chapter Two
Mitchels
A Mile from Alexa

1
Jersey group

“Her crew isn’t as well trained as we are. After all the stories we’ve heard, I expected better.”

Jordan automatically moved over to cover Austin’s flank as he avoided a large pothole in the middle of the broken road. “I remember what she did to the giants. Don’t underestimate her or her crew.”

“We look like them.”

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

The walkers reveled in knowing they looked like Alexa’s crew. Even the dark cloaks with pouches sewn in were the same. Their pointed staffs and sharpened stakes in place of guns were the only big difference.

None of them asked if Addison had copied Alexa’s setup. It was obvious that she had.

Addison didn’t want her team to believe it was an unauthorized copy; she broke her rule of not speaking while leading unless it was needed. “I

trained under Alexa for a few months. She taught me well.”

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

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

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

Wyatt snorted lowly. “Terrible is what the others will say when they find out she’s not really a Mitchel anymore.”

Jordan faced the front and did a fast check in with their leader. “She’s always Mitchel.”

Wyatt made a face. “Even as a hybrid?”

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

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

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

Isaac made a funny face at the baby strapped into the backpack Addison was wearing. The infant

was barely awake. Easy to care for, with a great attitude, the baby hadn't slowed their trip at all. "Are we joining her tonight?"

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

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

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

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

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

Isaac understood he was embarrassing her again and wisely kept his mouth shut this time. He enjoyed being with the Mitchels, but he had been military before the war and it was hard for him to follow anyone's orders except for his own. It had

little to do with the male/female dynamic. He simply wanted to be in charge of his own fate.

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

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

New Jersey had been a large agricultural exporter before the war; they’d done well on gathering food, but the entire group felt the most valuable thing they had found in that coastal state were the tree nuts. They were healthy and light to carry, but also had the extra benefit of being used for baked goods.

Fresh bread was incredibly hard to come by now. The fact that Isaac knew how to bake was one of the things that Addison had been drawn to about him. His love of dirt wasn’t. It was caked on his skin and clothes like a second skin, but she understood why he liked it. She just required him to wash before they had contact; it wasn’t a dealbreaker like his disrespect was.

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

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

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

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

Isaac laughed. “And for all their interference, that’s exactly what happened.”

Austin frowned. “That Jeanie bitch is in control. It’s not a Mitchel.”

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

Ahead of them, Addison stopped.

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

“When we stop for the night, I may call a leadership vote.” Addison held up a sharp hand to stop the protests of her crew. “You’re losing respect

for me because of the mate I've chosen. It might be time for someone else to lead us."

Addison started walking again.

Her subdued crew followed, regretting their disrespect.

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

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

2

Canadian Group

"I feel her. She's close."

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

Colton agreeably eased the van into a faster speed and continued to take them toward Port City. The overpass was surprisingly clear through here,

allowing them to make good time. “Why do you think she called us?”

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

Eva, Levi’s wife, smiled at him in the mirror. “We’ve all heard the radio calls. Maybe it’s the politics.”

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

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

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

The rest of the van was clean and empty. They kept it that way to make sleeping easier and to allow for ditching it without forgetting any of their things or letting people know who it had belonged to. They didn’t bother wiping prints like they’d done before

the war. The government wasn't hunting them now. That world was finally gone.

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

"Then we'll act like what we are."

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

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

Eva frowned. "What code?"

"Family first, always."

"Even when you're wrong?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, Aunt Eva.” Asher smiled at Levi’s wife for the food. His cloak was tied to his tank top; it was too hot in the van for full gear right now. “I

saw another group back there. Addison was leading them.”

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

Levi’s eyes turned bright red.

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

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

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

Eva frowned. “Who?”

“Elliot. He’s one of Alexa’s brothers.” Levi refused to claim Elliot as his nephew.

Asher nodded in understanding. He didn’t claim Elliot either despite the close relation.

“Why haven’t I ever heard of him?”

Levi scowled at Eva. “My nephew is the black sheep of the Mitchels.”

Eva chuckled. “I didn’t think Mitchels could do anything bad enough to get that status. What did he do?”

Levi stared at the mountain in the distance. “He helped the giants, *against* Alexa. He broke the family code and there is no coming back from that.”

3

Ohio Group

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

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

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

Madelyn also used her heel to lift the kickstand on her bike. Her wild black braids blew around in the wind. “Because you’re dreaming while you’re awake. That’s dangerous.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damon glared toward Alexa and her walking crew below the ridge where they'd stopped, then straddled his bike. Like Wyatt, he wanted to attack, but he also agreed with their leader. Alexa wasn't an easy target. None of their family was.

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

Damon flushed and didn't respond.

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

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

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

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

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

Emmie steered them into the center of the weedy, cracking road. "She's just as deadly, and though I haven't seen her in years, after listening to the radio calls, I'm inclined to believe she's just as intelligent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And that’s why the men hate him, right?”

“Yes. He’s slept with most of their wives and girlfriends. He can’t keep it in his pants.”

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

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

The others laughed.

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

Emmie looked over her shoulder at Wyatt and Damon. “I owe you both one favor. If you choose to insist on my helping you against Alexa, I will

honor it, but you're both off my crew after that. If we survive."

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three
We'll Do Dinner
A Week Later

1

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

Stone Mt 7-13

All survivors welcome

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

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

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

“Set us up. Jacob will cook.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s this night’s horror?”

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

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

"Beans and biscuits with dog meat skewers."

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

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

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

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

Alexa pushed aside her own morbid contemplations to draw them out of their mental slams. Her words were rough, coming from a throat that had seen smoke in all of its damaging forms. “How long do we have before the storm arrives?”

Her men hurried to answer.

“An hour.”

“Half that.”

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

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

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

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

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

sand would take a harsh toll. Nothing stood unchanged before time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniel felt it, too. “It’s annoying.”

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

“And no soreness!” Billy grinned as the wind blew his hair around. “I never considered vampires having sore muscles.”

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

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

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

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

Alexa had done that intentionally to keep their enemies from getting more information about her father or any of Safe Haven's citizens. "They were glad of it. None of that group wants my father to come home yet, including our new Pro Tem. Even she now wants time to shore up her plans."

"What will happen when Safe Haven returns?"

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

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

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

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

"Presidential address..."

"Try to surround her!"

"Have to find her first."

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

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

Daniel lowered the volume.

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

"Clear this channel for the President!"

“We’re on the way!”

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

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

“Get off this channel!”

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

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

The radio went quiet.

Mark sighed in relief. “Much better.”

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

Her men all laughed at the invitation; their stomachs growled.

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Masks up.”

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

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

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

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

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

Rip!

The tent shredded. Stinging dust tried to smother them.

“Go!”

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

“Soft landing, ten feet.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do a sweep.”

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

“Clear north.”

“South.”

“West.”

“East.”

“No exits.”

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

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

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

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

Adrian’s Journal

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

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

Alexa flipped to the last page.

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

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

Alexa's men were delighted in their finds, replenishing stocks with items they hadn't seen in years.

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

They'd been meant to find these things. Fate had taken Adrian's wishes into consideration.

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

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

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

"It's just the wind."

Edward stared in surprise at Alexa's comforting tone.

The others missed it in favor of resuming their explorations.

Alexa met Edward's eyes.

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

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

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

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

Safe Haven Logbook.

He began flipping through the pages, searching the names.

Edward knew Billy was hunting ghosts, he just didn't know why. "What's the date on that logbook?"

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

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

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

4

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

Her resting crew snapped awake.

Edward's hand went to his gun.

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

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

"There's absolutely no chance of that. Mitchels arrive when they say they will."

"Family thing?"

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

Edward quickly extinguished the lantern.

"It may be a while before our next meal, my pets. Take it all and make it last."

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

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

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

"No!"

"Help!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four
Happy Hunting

1
Bunker 09

“**W**ell, that was beautiful music.”

Marcella meant it. The intimidation techniques Alexa employed were impressive.

Nichole snickered as she switched the radio off. “We’re almost ready to try activating the other systems.”

Marcella glanced around the bloody command room of the bunker they had just conquered. Bodies and debris littered this stinking room and the main entrance. It had been a short, brutal fight once they’d gotten in here. The soldiers hiding in this bunker hadn’t been prepared to see magic-using females with Rage Walkers disease come through the door. “As soon as you get things running, I want an update on all the other bunkers. Find out which ones are operational and try to determine who’s in control of each of them.”

“It may take some time for that. The soldiers locked us out when we got in here. The codes we used to open the doors won’t work now.”

Marcella wiped drying blood from her face. “That will give us time to explore and gather gear.”

“I assume we aren’t staying here, either?”

“We’re clearing out bunkers, amassing supplies, and training for the next fights.” Marcella admired her new hairdo in a blood splattered mirror. “And giving me time to finish changing.”

“I think that color looks good on you.”

Marcella’s lips curled. “I don’t.” She sat in the bloody command chair and spun around to face the dark computers. “But it will work.”

Marcella didn’t want to face Alexa again at all after seeing what she’d been able to do to William.

Nichole nodded. “Alexa gave us the answer without realizing it.”

“I’m not sure it was an accident, but I will take advantage of it.” Marcella fluffed her shorter, thinner hair. “No one knows what Jeanie looks like. She took my place the first time around. It’s only fair that I should return the favor.”

Nichole began pushing buttons on the computer panel. “What do you want done with these bodies?”

Marcella arrogantly swept the unfortunate soldiers. “The hounds need to be fed. Strip them first. We’ll use the gear.”

Nichole gave orders to the line of bloody female fighters waiting contently nearby. Everyone was always happier after a battle.

Marcella stared at the monitors and equipment they couldn’t use yet. “You took everything from me. There will be a hefty price for that.”

Nichole knew she was talking about Alexa Mitchel. Jeanie was barely a blip in Marcella’s

anger these days. The Mitchel would receive her rage, and rightly so. “I’m surprised she went against you since you’re related.”

“That’s why she did it.”

“Doesn’t the Mitchel code say you have to support each other, even when you’re wrong?”

“It does, but there’s an exception. We’re not allowed to hurt the normals and I’ve been doing that for decades even without my gifts. She stuck to the family code. I’ll make her pay for that even if it costs me everything.”

“And William, I assume?”

Marcella controlled a shiver of fear. “Yes.”

“Because he killed Selma?”

“No. Alexa was scared of William. I saw it, and anyone a Mitchel fears is someone who needs to die.”

2

Bunker 11

“I’m going to make her pay.” Jeanie slammed the door to the radio room. “I’m sick of her stealing my thunder. Alexa has to go!”

Donna chuckled as Jeanie fell in for their nightly round of the bunker. Jeanie said it was good exercise and it made the people inside feel safer to know their leader was on patrol.

“Any word from our hunters?”

Donna shook her head. “It will take time for them to reach Nevada. Those borderlands are

getting wild. The storms don't obey any known weather patterns."

"I want Reno Rodney dead!"

"He will be. The hunters have orders not to spare him even after he publicly withdraws from the race."

"It was terrible to have a man announce a run against me. Damn Alexa Mitchel and her moratorium!"

Donna tried to calm Jeanie before it drew attention from the sleeping residents in the rooms they were passing. "There is good news. Two scientists who used to work in this lab showed up yesterday. They were on family leave to visit people in the west. They don't care who's in charge here as long as they can continue their work."

Jeanie paused in her angry ranting. "That is great news. I assume you've already put them on my new project?"

"Yes. They're used to working with the hounds, so it should go well."

"It was fortunate that some of the hounds also returned. I thought they would all go with Marcella."

"Many of them did, I'm sure, but your kindness is hard to resist!" Donna grinned.

Jeanie laughed as she resumed their rounds. "What would I do without you?"

"Rampage through the halls like your predecessor, I assume."

“Yeah.” Jeanie sighed. The anger hadn’t gone away with getting the official title. She was just as furious as she’d been for the last fifteen years. *But Safe Haven will return this year and then I’ll have my vengeance. I just have to be ready for it.*

“How far east do you think she’s made it now?”

“Don’t think of it in terms of miles.” Jeanie flipped off the light in the lab and went back out into the sparkling hallway. “It’s time, not distance.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“She told Adrian she would arrive by the Resurrection. That’s Easter, in Mitchel speak. Come Easter, Safe Haven will be headed back to this soil.”

Donna frowned. “That’s only 3 months!”

“Exactly. All we have to do is leave Alexa alone, and keep eliminating rivals as they pop up, and my rule will be certain.”

Donna hoped that was true. “What do you want to do about the two groups of soldiers? I’m sure they’ll try to appeal to Safe Haven to fight the slavery law, and your leadership.”

Jeanie gazed through a tinted window into a bunkroom that housed two hundred female fighters. Most of them were descendants. “Leave them alone. They have plenty of enemies. There’s no need for us to interfere with their deaths.”

Donna didn’t like that plan. “What if they get lucky and survive?”

Jeanie had already made that choice. “If they’re still alive when we get word that Safe Haven’s ship has been spotted, we’ll send out the enhanced

hounds and my new army. The soldiers will not be allowed to turn Safe Haven against us. I simply won't allow it."

3

Fanatic Camp

"We should attack them now, while Alexa's on the move! She won't come back to help them."

"But the other soldiers in Safe Haven Mountain will. We don't have the manpower to fight both groups!"

The fanatic meeting dissolved into shouting that echoed across the graveyard where they were taking shelter. A hundred red-robed women loitered among the graves, arguing and shivering. Their slaves were gone. Few of the women knew how to repair the rips in their clothes.

Delilah marched away from the meeting in disgust. "Come on."

Crystal followed her mother and kept an eye out for threats. Not all of the women here were friends. "We have a common enemy, though."

"Men." Delilah spat into the weeds and slapped a headstone as she went by. "Once the men are enslaved, Soldier Town will be taken and all those slaves will go to the new President to dole out as she sees fit. We need those men!"

"It's too bad we can't trick the Mitchel into fighting for us."

“That’s been tried.” Delilah ducked into their ragged tent and went to the pot of hot tea. She poured two mugs and handed one to her daughter. “What we need is for someone else to eliminate one of the soldier groups. Then we can handle the other.”

“But that’s dangerous. We may end up fighting our own kind for them.”

“Not if it’s a group that doesn’t want slavery.”

“You mean the Gate Hunters.”

“Yes. They’ll keep attacking the Mitchel because they believe she has the items they need to shut the gates, but they won’t enslave the men.”

Crystal frowned. “We don’t want them all killed, either.”

“No. There has to be a happy medium.” Delilah gestured at the sleeping bag. “Get some rest. I’ll be awake for a while.”

“What happens now?”

Delilah’s lids narrowed. “At some point, the females out there will realize we have to pick a leader or we’ll never get anywhere with our goals. I’ll tell them you’re the best candidate to face off against Jeanie.”

Crystal made a face. “I don’t want to be President.”

“Of course, you do. The President can rescind slavery laws or strengthen them. You’ll get to decide who enjoys the spoils of any wars, and you’ll be able to make sure our group is finally well-cared for.”

Crystal sipped her tea while scanning her mother's muscles and scars. "I don't understand why you won't do it."

"I'm getting too old to fight the challengers Jeanie will send as soon as we announce we're running against her. If anyone can face that and come out on top, it's you, my beautiful hybrid."

Crystal bared her fangs and hissed.

"Your father would be proud of you...if he was still alive."

Crystal giggled and went to the sleeping bag.

Delilah remembered finding the vampire alone and seducing him. "Nothing ever tasted as sweet and I mean that literally."

4

Soldier Town

"Thank you for cooperating." Yani smiled, showing long fangs.

Gerald held in a shudder. "Yeah."

Yani walked away without rubbing it in further. The troll guardians had surrounded Soldier Town, not giving the men a choice but to let the vampires inside their gates.

"No sign of hybrids here." Trenton joined his father, ignoring Gerald and the line of tense soldiers waiting for an attack. "But their criminals will keep us fed for a few days."

Yani glanced toward the stocks, where half a dozen soldiers were being freed from their bonds

and led away. Gerald didn't like thievery. "It worked out in our favor."

The trolls began fading into the woods, leery as the sun continued to make its appearance. Yani had called them back into service right after his mother's murder.

Yani and the vampires pulled their hoods tighter and thanked Alexa for the training even as they cursed her.

"No signs that Vera and Heather were here." Trevor headed toward the gate to make sure the criminals weren't eaten in front of the rest of the soldiers. It would be hard to keep a herd here if they scared them too much.

Yani controlled his rage. "They'll pay for killing you, mother. My word on it!"

Yani and his group had been hunting for the twin girls all winter, but they hadn't found a single clue. "And I know why. The Mitchel hid them!"

Yani left Soldier Town without looking back. He wasn't worried about the timid men attacking him. He was only concerned with vengeance. "Where would she hide them that I wouldn't go?"

Yani glanced toward the west, where it was still dark as the sun rose in the east. "I've never been to that side of this ugly country. Would she know that about me?"

As far as he knew, Alexa hadn't been able to read his mind, but there was always a chance that he was wrong and she had covered it well. "Maybe we'll take a trip west once Alexa is gone."

He walked faster as the sunlight began to burn through his clothes. “It will be a vacation. We’ll get exercise and good meals as we travel.”

Trevor led the criminals over and handed some of their tethers to Yani. “Come along now.”

The criminals were happy to be out of the stocks. None of them resisted despite being led away by vampires. They were sure their future would be better once they were out of this town. A few of them even hoped to become a vampire and then return here to express their displeasure.

Trevor also glanced toward the west, but his mind went in a different direction. “What if the Mitchel is still making hybrids?”

Yani stopped.

Trevor kept walking. “We know she turned her team. What if she’s doing the same as we are and building an army?”

Yani hadn’t considered that possibility. “Why would she need an army?”

Trevor shrugged. “She knows we’re not trustworthy. Maybe she’s worried we’ll attack Safe Haven when they land.”

Yani chuckled coldly. “And that’s exactly what we’re going to do.” His amusement stopped. Concern took its place. “Would she do that?”

“She’ll see it as protecting the normals. She knows they can’t defeat us in battle.”

Yani abruptly changed directions. “Let’s do some sniffing on her backtrail and make sure that isn’t the case.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“Gainesville. If she left hybrids behind, they’ll stay in her den. We’ll track her from there.”

“I might be wrong.”

“Yes. You might also be right and we can’t take that chance.”

“What about Vera and Heather?”

Yani pointed at the trolls. “Find them!”

The rest of the trolls vanished to hunt for the twin girls.

Satisfied, Trevor smiled warmly at the tethered criminals. “The big bad trolls are gone. It’s okay to relax. Come warm up by walking close to us.”

As soon as they were out of sight of the town, the clan of vampires grabbed the grateful soldiers and drank.

Their screams echoed back to Soldier Town.

Gerald stared into the distance. He couldn’t see the vampires anymore, but he was certain about what was happening to the men he’d doomed.

“It was the right thing to do.”

Gerald frowned at his XO, Carlos. “Was it?”

“Yes. We can’t have men stealing from us and now the vampires think we’re just livestock.”

“Aren’t we?”

Carlos shrugged. “Just until Safe Haven lands. Then we’ll be protected.”

Gerald marched toward his warm office. “If we survive until then.”

“I know you’re unhappy the men voted to stay here instead of going south, but if you insist, many of them will go anyway.”

Gerald grunted. “We don’t know what’s down there. It might be worse. They were right about that.”

Fresh screams echoed through the stiff morning breeze.

Gerald’s face tightened. “Shut the gate and get the men working on the wires again. The next time they come, we might not be so cooperative.”

“I wish William was back. And Jerry.”

Gerald didn’t. “I don’t think we’ll hear from them again.”

“Probably not. Their vendettas against Alexa are driving their choices, but it was great to have fresh meat through the winter.”

“I agree. That Jerry sure is one hell of a hunter. There isn’t anything he can’t find.”

5

Binkley Cave System, Indiana

“I know you’re down here. Come out. I just want to talk.” Jerry reached the bottom of the rickety wooden steps and paused on the rocky ground.

His lantern light and belt light bounced off a deep pool of water a few feet away. The smooth path that had once run alongside the underground

river was covered in layers of debris and rocks, but he didn't care. "I wore my hiking boots."

Jerry traveled next to the water, occasionally stopping to study prints in the dirt. He knew he was on the right trail, but it didn't hurt to verify it. "Come on out and talk, Elder. I mean you no harm. We are not enemies."

Jerry didn't expect an answer. He honestly wasn't sure if the person he was hunting was here. He'd been following her trail for weeks. She might still be ahead of him.

"But I smell her." Jerry's nose was spot on most of the time. It allowed him to track both animals and people. He'd never failed to find a target. "And I'm not going to give up now. Come out and talk. I'm unarmed."

He'd left most of his gear topside, but it wasn't so the woman he was hunting would feel less threatened. He didn't want to lose it all if he had a close call down here. Going into the earth had been dangerous before the war. Now, it was almost suicide.

Jerry eyed the long, wide blue and white boats that were still lined up for tourists to ride in while exploring these caves. It was the longest system in Indiana. It was dark and damp, and while not really a good place for a snake, it was perfect for one that was hiding from the rest of the world. "I have a job for you, Elder, and you'll want it, I promise. It leads to revenge against Alexa Mitchel."

"Why didn't you say sso?"

Jerry jumped, turning.

The snake Elder stood right behind him. Tall, dark, and furious, her faded scales caught the lantern light and blinded him for a second.

Jerry didn't make any sudden moves. "Talk first. If you don't like what I have to say, then you can try to eat me."

Her stomach growled loudly.

The Elder slid over to an outcropping and perched, ready to strike. "Talk, mortal man, and do it fassst."

"Alexa sent a group west. I want you to track them and eat them, one by one."

The Elder grunted scornfully. "You make it seem sssso easy."

Jerry saw she was thin and shaking. He slowly took off the backpack he'd worn. "There are warm clothes, wood, and some rabbits in here. Sorry there isn't more. The cold weather makes hunting take a lot longer and I needed to get this done."

The Elder didn't touch the bag when he slid it over with his boot. "Why would I do thiss for you?"

"Because you want revenge more than anything else. Believe me, I know that feeling. Alexa Mitchel took something dear to me, as well."

"What do you get out of this?"

"The same as you—revenge. Hurting Alexa is all I care about. I don't have to see it to enjoy it." Jerry carefully opened the pouch hanging from his belt.

He knelt, using the wood he'd brought, and got a small fire going.

The Elder had been afraid to make a fire and draw attention. She'd known someone was tracking her. Now, she slithered toward the welcome flames, hissing lowly.

Jerry smiled as she got closer. "I can give you a slam, too, if you need it."

The Elder reached out cold, wrinkled hands toward the flames. "The days of mates and children are behind me."

"It might warm you up."

The Elder heard his tone and shrugged. "If *you* need a slam, I can be convinced."

"I've never done it with a snake."

The Elder laughed. "I have."

Jerry chuckled with her as he knelt to retrieve the rabbits from the backpack. "Rare or raw?"

"Well done."

"Really?"

"I will use less energy to absorb it if it is fully cooked."

"You sound ill and weak." He impaled the first rabbit with a branch, then set it in the flames. "What can I do to help you regain your strength?"

"I need venom."

Jerry pulled a small vial from the bag. "Bottoms up."

The Elder grabbed it, eyes glittering. "Climb on, mortal man. You just earned a ride."

Jerry didn't hesitate to get behind her and lower his pants. He'd been hard since first scenting her back in Bridgeport, Alabama. "Anything I should or shouldn't do?"

The Elder took him in hand and slid him into the right place. "Hold on."

Jerry was already in the throes of ecstasy. He gripped her waist tightly and grunted in her ear as she began to shimmy and shake. "Thank you!"

The Elder made it good; she stared at the vial of venom the entire time.

Jerry finished quickly, emptying himself into her aged body with grunts and breathy gratitude. He even kissed her scaled neck as he slid out of her. "I'm Jerry."

"No one cares." The Elder straightened her scales and clenched her muscles to hold in his seed. "Older than me have conceived. It's not impossible."

"Neither is killing Alexa Mitchel." Jerry zipped up and went to the water to wash his hands. "Give me a minute and I'll prep that meal for you."

The Elder drained the vial, hissing and moaning.

Jerry chuckled. "Just as good as sex?"

The Elder nodded, pupils dilating. "Only blood is better."

"Mitchel blood."

The Elder shivered at the feel of the snake venom hitting her empty stomach. "Where iss this group?"

“They headed straight west over Interstate 74. They think they have enough protection now; they aren’t being careful. They stay in open dens and use nature to hide themselves.”

The Elder’s forked tongue came out, scenting the air.

Jerry smiled again. “Exactly. You’ll track them, listen, and decide what will do the most damage to Alexa.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’ll return to the Presidential bunker and continue to make nice with our Pro Tem.”

“She’ll enslave you or kill you when the moratorium is up.” The Elder had chosen to avoid that bunker and its leader.

“I’m safe for a bit longer. They think I’m hunting game for them.”

“You’re really pursuing your own goals and using their gear. Smart.” The Elder was already feeling stronger.

Jerry stared coldly. “I’m gathering Alexa’s enemies. Once you do this job, you should join the bunker and find a way to assassinate the Pro Tem. If you take over, the snakes in the west can come home; you’ll have a tribe to lead again.”

“I don’t care about anything but revenge.”

“I understand, believe me, but stay away from the vampires. You can’t handle them alone.”

The Elder felt like she should give him more information in exchange for the venom. “When they find rage victims, they turn them and add them to

their army. They don't attack Alexa in hopes that she will still speak for them at the power meeting when Safe Haven comes back. If that vote goes against them, they plan to unleash their vampire rage walkers and take control. If the vote does go their way, they plan to do the same."

He stared in surprise. "How do you know all that?"

The Elder shivered again. "You're not the only one spying for your own goals. I spent many cold nights lying outside tents and camps on my way here."

Jerry pointed at the bag by her feet. "There are two more vials of venom in there to keep you going. Happy hunting."

The Elder finally smiled back at him. "It's what a snake does best."

"I know. That's why I'm here." Jerry flipped the searing rabbit, mood good.

One of his many stops was now finished and his plans were in progress. "Alexa will be sorry that she didn't protect my wife. I'll break her even if it takes every breath left in my body."

Chapter Five
Like A Bell

1

Alexa led her crew into the parking garage in relief. The late January sun was glaring off the environment and hurting them even through their clothes. After feeling it all day, she was ready to be in the shade for a while. “We’ll walk each level, cover each slot and any elevators.”

Edward swallowed a sigh of relief as they reached the cool shadows. “What are we looking for?”

“I’m not sure.” Alexa didn’t let out the moan of relief that the others were releasing, but she wanted to. “Something is calling me. It might be unimportant, but I’d find it just the same.”

Her men brightened at the treasure hunt. They were good on gear and supplies now, but finding another stash might help them later.

They’d come through a small town today and then reached this edge of a city. Business buildings and wide roads with dead streetlights had greeted them at every block. Thick weeds and vines growing over mailboxes and up the electric poles appeared to be the only things alive. They hadn’t seen any rodents here and they hadn’t heard or

smelled anything that resembled human life. They'd all held quiet hopes of more people as they traveled east, but they were becoming rarer instead. They had a temporary President now, but society still wasn't recovering.

"Clear your minds. Reach out to the dark corners. Hear it calling out to be found." Alexa slid her dusty cloak behind her holster to be ready.

Her team did the same, absently. The men were all trying to hear whatever it was that had drawn their leader.

The three-story parking garage had multiple exits and was full of cars and trucks that hadn't seen sunlight in years. The layers of dust were so thick that the colors of the vehicles were barely discernable. Faded signs told them to drive slowly and ask the attendant for a ticket.

Alexa walked the center lane, boots tapping lightly with each step. It was impossible to be silent in a place like this.

Odd echoes came from the top level. The fighters identified the noises as windblown debris, but that didn't stop their hands from inching toward holsters.

Edward concentrated, head swiveling, but he didn't hear anything.

"Like a bell..." Jacob moved to the right, following the vibration.

Alexa motioned the crew to go with him. She faced the entrance and tried not to consider how many lives were represented here. There were

hundreds of automobiles whose owners hadn't returned for them. As much as Americans loved their cars, it almost certainly meant those people hadn't survived the war.

Jacob tracked the feeling to a dark corner with a green Bronco in the third lane. The bed of the truck was covered in a thick dusty tarp.

Alexa used her neck light so the men could see what was in there.

Edward put his back to hers, guarding them while enjoying the contact.

Jacob went around the truck, still tracking the feeling.

Billy went with him, scanning the shadows for threats even though he was certain the garage was empty. They'd gone by or through hundreds of places like this on their quest; it never failed to sadden him.

Jacob paused in the middle of the two clear lanes. The truck provided a wall that left only one open side. The corner of the garage beckoned.

Jacob used his vampire sight to narrow in on the concrete wall. "Boss."

Alexa joined him, leaving Edward to defend the men in the truck who would use their own lights.

Jacob pointed.

Alexa went to the wall and knelt.

*Safe Haven welcomes all good survivors.
Come to Stone Mountain for an evaluation.*

Alexa ran a hand over the painted message. It was in pristine shape. The feel of Adrian settled over her. “My father wrote this.”

Jacob didn’t doubt it.

Alexa decided to enjoy that feeling. “We’ll camp here.”

“Excellent.” Daniel came out from under the tarp and began tugging it off the truck. “All kinds of gear in here, Boss. Could take hours to sort through it.”

Alexa went to the bed of the truck and quickly understood. It was loaded with dozens of boxes that were labeled with a list of what they held. Other boxes were open and stuffed with mismatched items that would have to be stripped for what they could use. “Jacob will cook.”

Jacob twitched.

Edward and Billy exchanged a glance behind Alexa’s back.

Alexa climbed into the bed of the truck and began sorting the farthest boxes.

Daniel and David began with the boxes by the tailgate.

Jacob started making camp near the wall with the Safe Haven message while Billy and Edward stood watch.

Mark went to the front of the truck and tried the door. “Keys, please.”

Billy determined the truck’s make and model and pulled a set of locksmith master keys from his fully loaded cloak. They were rolled in a thin towel

between each key to prevent noise. “It’s one of the first few.”

Mark used the keys quietly, unlocking the driver door in only a few seconds. He rerolled the keys he’d uncovered and gave them back to Billy. Having the driver along made it a lot easier to get into locked places.

Mark sat in the dusty truck and dug through a duffle bag on the passenger seat.

Outside the garage, the sun sank faster, bringing deeper shadows and a sense of horror that the fighters were immune to. They didn’t fear nighttime in Afterworld anymore.

Billy did a round of the level they were on. It bothered him that they weren’t clearing the entire garage before making camp.

Alexa knew. She waved him on. “Edward will go with you.”

“Thank you, Boss.” Billy led Edward toward the ramp to the next level. He was grateful that Alexa was still being patient while he recovered from his ordeal.

Daniel took over the watch on their camp automatically.

Satisfied that her men could handle whatever might find them, Alexa allowed herself to sink into sorting, something she enjoyed. In a different world, she might have been a very good CEO of a large business. In this one, she was a manager of chaos.

“Are you okay?”

Billy wasn't surprised that Edward knew there was a problem. “Not really.”

Billy swept the garage as they walked. He didn't find any prints in the dust that had blown down from the top level. “I don't know if Leann made it out of that mountain.”

Edward's stomach dropped. “You think we'll find her body.”

“Yes. I know the path Alexa has us on. We're going to Safe Haven Mountain now.”

Edward had already figured that out, too. “It doesn't mean we'll find a body. It's been a long time. I doubt we'll even get in there after all this time.”

“The soldiers did.”

Edward shrugged. “We assume, but we didn't hear them bragging on the radio, so that may not be the case.”

“We did hear them talking with the guys in Soldier Town, though. They were camped a day away from Safe Haven's den.”

“True.” Edward paused while Billy went to the empty parking slots on this side so he could view the opposite lanes between the cars. He tried hard to find something to say to his teammate that would be a comfort and not a platitude.

Billy fought the need to keep spilling his guts. It was awful to have this fear back in his mind so soon

after his abuse, but he didn't know how to get rid of it. *I may have left her to her death.*

Edward caught that as Billy returned. He frowned. "I know you don't want to hear this, but we all make mistakes. If that happened, it was a long time ago. You've been punished enough."

Billy went up the cracked top ramp without answering.

Edward studied the sky around the garage in all directions. He spotted rain clouds in the west and a small dust cloud caused by travelers to the north. "We may have company tonight."

Billy nodded. "I hope they taste better this time. Our last guests gave me gas."

Edward laughed.

Billy walked the top ramp, attention snagged by an odd glint at the end.

Edward stayed behind him and listened for any sounds that didn't fit.

"It's another Bronco." Billy peered in the front. "Hot damn."

"What is it?"

"Two cases of toilet paper."

"No shit?"

"Exactly."

3

Full dark found Alexa and her crew in the corner of the garage, still sorting new supplies while enjoying the quiet. Rain was falling softly; food was

cooking. It was serene, but all of them were tense. Finding out someone was coming their way had kept the team ready for trouble.

“Break.” Alexa stood up in the truck bed, stretching her spine.

Jacob went to the stove and stirred the pot. Then he sat on a box and opened his Bible.

The other men also settled onto a box or the truck bed.

Edward joined Jacob. “What part are you studying now?” The Preacher had switched to research instead of reading for enjoyment while they were in Gainesville.

“Test and bets.”

“Like where Abraham had to sacrifice his son?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Jacob frowned thoughtfully. “It seems to me that life is a series of tests and bets. We’re not supposed to get comfortable because then we stop pushing forward and making progress. That’s why it’s so hard.”

Edward didn’t want to insult the Preacher, but he refused to let that go. “You’re saying without drunk drivers killing people, moms wouldn’t have created programs that helped get drunk drivers off the roads.”

Jacob kept an even tone with his teammate. “My analogy would be advancements in medicine wouldn’t happen without diseases, but yes.”

Billy had been listening closely. “That’s crap. Without the diseases, we wouldn’t need the medical advancements. Without the drunks, we wouldn’t have needed MADD.”

“But that doesn’t change my theory.”

Billy grunted tiredly. “No. I just don’t like the setup.”

David scowled at them both. “Why would a Creator need to make bets anyway? Never understood that part.”

“Maybe He’s bored.” Jacob held up a quick hand as the others all started to protest. “I didn’t say that makes it okay. I’m simply offering a theory.”

“I’d like to know what the bets and tests are for.” Mark drew out a chunk of wood to begin a new carving. “Are the strongest being picked for a special place in Heaven? Are the losers forced to suffer more? What’s the deal?”

Jacob shrugged. “I don’t have a theory for that one yet.”

“I do.”

The men rotated toward Alexa, bracing for more harsh reality.

Alexa leaned against the garage wall, running a hand over the writing. “There’s another war coming, or already happening, and the Creator wants the strongest souls to help Him fight it. He tests us, seeing how much we can take, how strong our minds are, so He’ll know where to place us in that fight.”

Silence held for almost a minute as they considered her theory.

Billy controlled his anger but not his tone. “That’s a hard pass. Fight your own damn battles; leave me out of it!”

The other men nodded.

Alexa smiled. “I’ll bet He loves your strong mind. I do.”

Billy chuckled. “You don’t have to kiss up. If you need sex, just say so.”

Alexa’s pupils dilated; her lips parted. “Do I need to say it?”

Billy swallowed. “Never.”

Alexa snickered. “Feed me first and we’ll see.”

Everyone chuckled at her quip. She hadn’t encouraged many physical moments over the winter. They were all horny, including Edward.

“They’re here.” David’s hand slid to his worn holster. “They ditched the cars a mile back and walked in.”

Alexa denied the gunplay. “Let’s see if they’d like to stay for dinner. It will save us those shiny new bullets.”

Her men laughed.

Footsteps echoed on the bottom ramp.

“Hello in there!”

Alexa gestured.

Daniel used a welcoming tone. “Come on up. We made soup.”

Jacob snickered.

A group of shadowy figures came up the ramp, all smiling and tensed for a fight.

The Gate Hunters approached without hesitating even though they saw hungry fangs and glowing eyes. They weren't afraid of death, only of never getting what they needed to shut the gates between realities.

"One chance to live," Alexa warned. "I don't have the blade you seek. Only Safe Haven can shut the gates. Have a bowl of soup, warm up, and go in peace."

"Get her!"

"Find the knife!"

Alexa sighed as the group ran toward them. "Some people just refuse to change."

"Get the magic user!"

"She has to help us!"

"Only if you can capture me." Alexa signaled her crew. "Let's eat."

Alexa let her men go first, walking slowly while they swarmed the Gate Hunters. Loud screams began to echo into the night once again.

Alexa frowned. "We cause that noise a lot. Maybe we'll cut an album and become the first bloodthirsty rock stars of the new world."

She saw Jacob struggling with a large man carrying an axe and flew forward to help him.

Not a single shot was fired. The Gate Hunters didn't have bullets and the vampires didn't need them.

An hour later, Alexa slid down the garage wall and found a semi-comfortable seat. “Story time, my pets. Pick a spot and learn something new about me, be it good or awful.”

She was aware of their immediate eagerness to listen. Her tales of the past often provided glimpses of what she had been like before the war and what she had come through. It gave them what they wanted most—her.

Alexa’s good mood was overlooked this time in favor of a tale. She hadn’t given them one in months, though they’d brought it up often. Edward now assumed they would only get stories when they were on the road. It made them even more special.

“I don’t have good stories about my childhood. You already know that. I do have tales of dangerous adventures that I managed to survive. They made me who I am.” Alexa began rolling a smoke from what they’d found, relishing the crisp smell of tobacco that hadn’t been burnt yet.

“Those adventures began when I was very young. I went through most of them alone, though my family occasionally featured for a quick cameo. As I aged, the challenges became odder and I grew harder, colder. One of those moments formed a relationship with my brother that stands strong to this very day.”

It was fascinating to think that Alexa was bonded to someone other than her father and her

team. Her crew settled around the small fire to listen, eager for the surprises that always came from her tales.

“Elliot and I loathe each other and we always will.”

Mark laughed. “And here I thought it was going to be something nice between you two.”

Alexa snorted. “I love him because he’s family. When he needed help, I didn’t hesitate to go. And someday, I will probably kill him like he deserves.”

Silence fell.

Alexa went on now that she had their full attention. “Shortly after leaving my Uncle Brandon’s farm in Alaska, I was sent to the mountains for training. All Mitchel children went to this winter camp alone. Some of us didn’t make it back. Others returned injured, damaged. It was not a safe, sane place.” Alexa sighed deeply. “I was devastated when the scientists dragged me back to the lab. They were eager for the results of yet another field trip, but I wanted to stay and continue my work.”

Billy grimaced. “Are you saying you were sent to those places by the government?”

“Yes.”

Edward was horrified all over again. “You said it was part of your family training.”

“It was. The government needed to test us to determine if we could be corrupted, to see if we could increase our gifts, and to find family members they wanted back in the lab.”

David began to hate Adrian a little more for allowing it. “I thought daddy dearest arranged all of it.”

“My dad designed the training program long before he had children. The scientists adapted it to their needs and then saw it through, ruthlessly. Our parents had little say in the matter.”

Daniel remembered her other tale, where Adrian had come to her rescue. “And what about after you were rescued?”

“After they *let me go*, my father tried to influence their choices and give me the training he knew I would need for this moment, this quest. But he couldn’t stop it. He did the next best thing—he helped me through it with visits, specific challenges, and a promise that has held me up for almost three decades now.”

Edward stored that information. It confirmed the range of Alexa’s age. They had a pool going on it from all the way back in River City. Next, they needed a way to find out the exact number. “The promise was that you would get to be with him after it was all over, right?”

Alexa snorted. “He swore we would hunt down my tormentors together until not a single speck of their DNA remains.”

None of her men doubted she would still desire that once this quest was over. It did make them wonder how they would fit in to that hunt.

Alexa shared a warm look with her crew, but she didn’t promise they would be along for that ride.

Half of her crew now had a future they'd carved out for themselves. Even Billy knew what he wanted when this quest ended. They would be free to go live those lives. She would honor their sacrifices by not asking them to stay with her for another dangerous adventure. *If we survive the final battle.* She was still working on that problem.

“Settle in and we'll have a story. I'm in the mood to spill my guts to the men who now know me better than most of my infamous family.”

Alexa hoped they would remember those words later if they began feeling like outsiders. *That, my pets, you shall never be.* “My host at the winter camp was Lenore...”

Chapter Six
Truth Rule

1

“**T**hat, my unwelcome guest, you shall never be given from us, so don’t expect it. Mercy is for the weak!”

Alexa stared at the cold woman without fear. “I have no desire to be like the others who’ve begged you for compassion and didn’t get it. I have only hatred for you, and if you aren’t careful, a bullet.” She patted her empty holster.

Lenore’s torn blue jumper dropped more dirt onto the wooden floor as she struck out with a huge hand.

Alexa nimbly ducked the slap, but the teenager didn’t retaliate against her host. The rules of hospitality applied here, though it wouldn’t save her. Only descendants were bound by those rules. Lenore wasn’t a magic user. She was a giant.

Lenore grinned down at her with hard, huge eyes that glinted bright green. “Elliot started off like you.”

Alexa wasn’t upset at the mention of her brother, though it was intended to catch her off guard. “His results won’t be mine.” *I may melt, though. It’s hot as hell in here.*

The fire in the kitchen pit was filled with trees that were refilled daily. Alexa knew it never stopped burning by the cruddy layers of soot on the walls and ceiling. It made the room very uncomfortable for her.

Aware of her host staring expectantly, Alexa resisted the urge to ask questions yet. It wasn't time to flip those eggs.

Lenore got tired of waiting for Alexa to ask for special treatment. She pointed at the far door in the tall kitchen. "You live out there."

"Thank you for your hospitality." Alexa went to the mud porch, shutting the thick kitchen door behind her. Despite the blast of icy wind, she was instantly more comfortable than being in Lenore's sweltering den.

She didn't mind the size of the enormous furnishings she would have to climb to use, and she wasn't bothered by the sly leers of the mountain troll tribe who'd been listening from the adjacent living room that was lined with enormous leather couches and nothing else. She also wasn't scared of the unspoken threat in Lenore's tones, though Alexa had already taken that to heart. "My problem is the diet."

Alexa dropped her duffle bag by her feet and then studied the porch. Screened in, it would stop most of the snow but none of the cold air. The piles of freshly ripped-off tree branches wouldn't keep her warm for long and burning them was out of the

question as it might catch the house on fire. Alexa looked up.

The narrow, muddy porch was covered with an angled roof to let the precipitation run off. Alexa headed for a corner while studying her newest testing ground.

The giant homestead was split down the middle by a wide, snowy concrete road that Alexa was certain the soldiers had built so they could get up here without hiking. It was easily 300 feet above the interstate that had brought her here.

Buildings sat on both sides of the road. The fresh wood glinted at her in another clue. Most of this had been built recently. Only the cave-like home carved into the mountainside had been done by the giants. “But that camouflage paint job wasn’t their idea, either.”

Alexa scanned the yard through the screen, wincing at the cries of the small wolf pups who’d been split from their mothers. They were cold and hungry. “Much like I’ll be for this run.”

Alexa opened her duffel bag and retrieved a few items. She felt attention on her through the windows and through the porch screen, but most of it wasn’t hostile. It felt curious. They were all wondering what she would do now that she’d been banished to an inhospitable place with only the supplies she’d brought along.

“I packed carefully for this trip.” Alexa began uncoiling the thin, tough rope she’d picked from the well-guarded government shelves. “The lab always

offers me the best.” Alexa began tying the tree branches together into a bed. It would be solid after she wrapped it enough.

Crisscrossing the ropes around every small trunk took time. Alexa spent it studying her new home instead of wasting time complaining about the icy fingertips that already hated this work.

The giant den was built into the mountain, but it had wooden walls and a thick wooden floor that had sounded hollow as she’d come over it. Alexa suspected there was a hole under it. She hadn’t spotted any stairs. She didn’t think there was an upper level, though the wide rooms had stretched beyond her sight, so that wasn’t certain. The only remarkable thing about the home, other than the size of everything, was the deep gray paint that exactly matched the skin tone of the giants.

She found it to be a brilliant type of defense. Some predators wouldn’t even know the giants were there if they didn’t move. “And it came from my brother.”

Alexa’s fingers kept working while she examined her surroundings. She’d practiced this skill mentally dozens of times while waiting to be sent here. All Mitchels were required to spend time with this giant tribe. She still didn’t know why. She’d asked that question of dozens of scientists and captives, but no one knew the answer. “I’ll ask my dad the next time our paths cross.”

Alexa tied off the rope and sliced it with her knife. She left the blade next to her hand as she

began to tie the middle of the branches together. “The wind shifted. You lost your cover.”

A giant child rose from the ground by the porch door. He was easily 500 lbs. and 6 foot tall. He wore a blue jumper like his mother. It was filthy and torn in places, also like his mother. Alexa had recognized Lenore’s big nose on the boy. She guessed his age to be around twelve.

He reached for the handle of the screen door, leering at her.

Alexa glared thickly at the boy. “You have an open spot just above your heart. You’ve been told to guard it with your life because it’s how you can be killed.”

The hairy boy stopped, huge hand coming up to cover that spot.

Alexa let her eyes glow red; her voice dropped into that dangerous tone she would become known for. “I’ll take your eyes instead. You won’t be able to see again—ever.”

Terrified now, the boy retreated from the wide screen door.

Alexa kept her red orbs as she glared through the filthy glass window that led into the kitchen.

Then she got back to work. The cold was already sinking in, making her bones hurt; her cheeks protested the breeze. She’d picked a thick coat and all the accessories that came with it, but she couldn’t move well in it. She needed to get this work finished so she could put it on. Her jeans and long sleeved shirt weren’t cutting it even with thermals

underneath. “Would you like to learn something new?”

The giant boy was still observing her and Alexa needed an ally here if possible.

The boy grunted, coming back to the door. He stared at her in curious concern.

“Do you speak?” It was common for giants to communicate with grunts and gestures all of their lives. Education meant little to them.

“I speak.” The boy opened the screen door, letting in a fresh blast of cold air. “Learn what?”

Alexa tied off the middle row of branches and started on the final layer. “You can pick. Counting, science, or humanity?”

“I count.” The boy stepped inside and let the door slam. “I see humans. What is science?”

“Science explains how the world works. Or at least it tries to.”

“What world?”

Alexa flipped the sticks over and began wrapping the bed a second time. “The world is everything around us. Like the snow. Do you know where it comes from?”

“Comes from sky.”

“But how? Is there a giant up there shaking a big tree?”

The boy chortled. “Funny.”

Alexa leaned against the wall, giving her body a small break. She would have to build up to this barrage of heavy wind and icy shivers. “Snow is water that gets so cold it turns into fluff.”

The boy grunted. “What making?”

“So not science. I’m making a bed.”

“Sleep on ground.”

“Not humans. It’s bad for us. Makes us sickly.”

“Giants never sickly.”

Alexa resumed braiding the bed. “How high can you count?”

“Tens.”

“Do you want to go higher?”

“What for? Count out ten bites, throw ten bites, moms cook ten bites. Don’t need higher.”

Alexa cut and tied the rope again and lowered the stiff bundle to the floor without sighing in relief like she wanted to. Showing even normal weaknesses here was a mistake that she wasn’t going to make. “If more giants come, you’ll need more than ten bites.”

“Bored.”

Alexa kept working. “So not counting either. That leaves humanity.”

“See humans. Tiny. Break easy.” The boy’s massive brows came together in concentration. “Sleep on ground too much?”

Alexa chuckled. “Maybe. I meant what makes us human, on the inside.”

“I giant. Not need human inside.”

“Everyone needs a friend, little boy.”

The boy knelt by the door. “Strome. What is friend?”

“I’m Alexa, Strome. Nice to meet you.”

“Tell about friend!”

“A friend is someone who plays with you, cares about you, talks with you, and supports you when you need it.”

Strome considered it harder. Alexa could almost see his clunky mind working. She finished tying the bed and then unwound more rope.

Strome watched her climb the porch rail, still working on the topic.

Alexa pulled the bed up by the rope she'd left on it. She tucked the end into the rafter and began tying it in place.

“Strome needs a friend!”

Alexa fought a shiver. The breeze was stronger up here. “Most humans are friends with other humans. You could pick a giant friend like you.”

Strome smacked the wooden porch. “No others like Strome here. Lab took them.”

Alexa glanced down at him. “Why didn't they take you?”

“Too small. Grow more, then go. Moms mad, so they agree.”

“She didn't want you to be taken.”

“No. Only kid here she says.”

“So there haven't been any kids born to the giants since you. Interesting.”

“The lab sends the meds. Other moms don't want more kids. Sad when gone to lab. Never come back.”

“Ah. Well, perhaps there are others who could be your friend. More creatures.”

“Just giants and wolves.” Strome pushed onto his big feet. “You be friend. Teach some.”

“You want me to teach you how to be friends with a human?”

Strome grunted. “We talk and play, and then Strome not be alone.”

Alexa double knotted the bed in place and then started tying the other end to the rafter. “I might be willing to do that. If you tell me something.”

Strome frowned. “Tell what?”

Alexa stared down at him with glowing blue eyes. “Where is my brother, Elliot?”

Strome looked toward the kitchen.

Alexa waited. Elliot hadn’t been seen or heard from since his trip here. It was logical that he was dead and the giants were hiding it, or he was being held against his will. She was here to find out. Her testing and training made it a double goal for the lab. Alexa didn’t care about that. She cared about the Mitchel code.

Strome leaned toward her. “Can’t tell.”

Alexa hopped down from the rail and dug in her bag for her coat. “Can Strome show?”

Strome considered that. “Moms say no tell... Didn’t say no show. Come.”

He went to the screen door and shoved it open, rattling the porch.

Alexa followed him while fastening her coat and then pulling on the gloves and scarf in relief. Even after being in Alaska, she wasn’t used to this

environment, but she would still accomplish what she'd come here for.

The government wanted to determine if she could survive in this harsh place with these creatures while spying on them. Alexa wanted to know what had happened to her brother. *And then I'll decide what to do about it.*

Strome trudged through the deep snow around the house, easily kicking it out of his way.

Alexa walked right behind him, saving her energy by using his cleared path.

Strome led her around the side of the house without any windows. Then he pointed. "Brother there."

Alexa's lids narrowed. The smokehouse was putting off thick clouds of steam even though it was buried in snow. "Inside?"

"Was too cold for him. Cried a lot." Strome laughed rockily. "Not cold now."

Alexa went around the giant child, plowing through the drifts determinedly. She flipped the latch on the huge door and used all of her strength to pry it open.

Strome grabbed the door and shoved it, sending down a cloud of snow that covered Alexa.

Alexa chuckled. "Thanks."

Strome laughed, nicer this time. "Look like small tree."

Alexa held her arms out and waved them gently. "Better?"

Strome fell over in the snow laughing. “Tree dancer!”

Alexa left him there and entered the sweltering smokehouse.

Set up with the fire and smoking meat on one side and animal pens on the other, it took her eyes a minute to adjust. She swept the pens and found a lump of dirt that didn’t belong. “Elliot.”

The lump shifted. It rose into a sitting position and stared at her with madness and complete misery. “Lexi.”

Fury went through the girl at his condition. It came through in her voice. “I see you’ve been making friends again.”

Elliot’s bright blue eyes filled with tears. They ran over his cheeks and cut deep paths in the layers of dirt.

Elliot was naked, covered in earth from the floor, and his bones were showing through the skin all over his emaciated body. His condition was awful. It was amazing that he was still alive.

Alexa drew a small bag from her coat pocket and tossed it through the bars.

Strome pushed his wide body through the entrance and tugged the door closed. “Must stay shut.”

Elliot scrambled into the rear of the dry pen, but he snagged the bag as he went.

Strome leered. “Boo!” He laughed cruelly again.

Elliot curled into a ball to protect his gift.

“Go slow on that. It may be a while.” Alexa didn’t have a plan yet, but one was building itself in her brain.

Elliot dug into the jerky with a moan that sent Alexa’s anger to new heights.

Alexa faced Strome. “Where’s the key?”

Strome ripped off a strip of the wolf carcass that was being gently smoked. “Moms.”

“Which mom?”

Strome tossed the strip into Elliot’s cage. “Don’t know.” He pointed a huge finger at Elliot. “Got food today. Water tomorrow.”

Alexa clenched her fists to keep her anger under control. “One or the other each day, but not both?”

“Moms mad at Elliot.”

“Which mom?”

“All.” Strome stopped the carcass from swinging.

“What did he do?”

Strome held out his arm. “Hurt Strome.”

Teeth marks were clear in the giant’s skin.

“Why did he do it?”

Strome gestured at the whole carcass that hadn’t been gutted. “Let one go.”

“He helped the wolves?”

“Let a mom out. She went down mountain. Never found.”

“So he let a female wolf go and you tried to stop him.” Alexa fought the need to wipe sweat from her brow. It had to be 100° in here. She definitely

wasn't cold anymore. "Will you show me where it happened?"

Strome went to the door. "Then we play?"

"We'll play on the way. It's called trivia."

"How play?"

"I ask questions and you try to answer. Then you ask questions and I try to answer. The winner is the one who can give the truth the most times."

"What is truth?"

"I'll explain it while we walk." Alexa stopped at the exit and glanced back.

Elliot was still crying and chewing, but there was now satisfaction on his filthy face, as well. "Three months."

Alexa marked the number. That was how long he'd been surviving this way. Ninety days on the edge of death. That would require a huge price. "Dawn."

She left and shut the door, with Strome's help.

"What dawn?" Strome locked the door.

"That's when the sun comes up."

"Why say that to brother?"

"I want him to see a sunrise before he dies."

"Not die. Just punish."

"He's dying, Strome. Human bodies can't be on the ground and they can't go without having food and water every day. In another week or two, he'll get sick. Then he'll die."

Strome glanced at the sun and shielded his eyes. "Dark not good for giants; not sick, but go slow."

“I’ve heard you build up a tolerance to it, but it still slows you down.”

“Yes. Makes Strome sleepy. Love the sun.”

“Me, too.”

Strome smiled. “We play now, friend.”

“Show me where Elliot did the bad thing and I’ll start asking those questions.”

“Good time.” Strome stomped away from the smokehouse, kicking up dirty snow. “What is truth rule?”

Alexa stayed close to the boy, now using him as a buffer against the wind and a path-clearer. “The truth is what’s real. You have to say the real, not the lie.”

“Don’t understand.”

“What color is the snow?”

“Snow is white.”

“If I said the snow is green, that is a lie.”

Strome knocked a branch out of his path. “Snow is not green.”

“Exactly. Never lie.”

“Okay. What ask?”

“Where are all the boys like Strome?”

“Told you. Lab take them.”

“Where are all the *little* boys?”

“No boys. No babies anymore. Told you.”

“Good. Your turn.”

“Brother friend?”

“No, Elliot is not my friend.”

“Feed him.”

“He’s my family, Strome. I have to help him.”

“Why?”

“It’s what Mitchels do.”

Strome stopped and pointed. “Bad thing happened there.”

Alexa gawked at the huge wolf pen below them. The mountain walls had been excavated, with explosives, in an enormous oval the size of a football field. At one end, a wooden gate stopped dozens of wolves from escaping. At the other end, a long ditch along the mountain cliff held wolf pups that were sleeping, scratching, playing, and howling. In the center, a line of adult wolves was lying down or patrolling, keeping the gate wolves away from the thin pups. “Those are the males.”

Strome didn’t realize it was a question. “Males eat pups, too. Moms protect.”

“How do you get the mothers away from the pups to take them?”

Strome pointed again at a large barrel sitting atop one of the stone walls. “Feed them scraps from bites.”

Alexa realized it was the same setup as with Elliot. There were no natural springs in this cage and no food, though the snow was providing small pockets of water on the muddy ground and the steep stone walls. When the giants dumped food in, all of the adult wolves likely rushed for it, leaving the pups unprotected. It was crude, brilliant. “Who built this, Strome?”

“Brother.”

Alexa felt the pain of the trapped animals as if it was her own. “Elliot hated it after it was done and tried to let them out?”

Strome nodded. “Built it, then tried tear it down. Moms punish.”

“Your turn.”

Strome stared at her with more intelligence than she had given him credit for. “You punish moms for punish brother?”

Alexa was caught by her own rules. She wasn’t supposed to lie. “Yes, Strome. I’m going to punish the moms for hurting my brother.”

Strome put a hand over the spot on his chest. “Strome?”

Alexa smiled at the boy. “I don’t punish my friends.”

Happy again, Strome led them away from the wolf pen. “Play new game. Hide and find.”

Alexa followed him with another large smile. “That sounds like fun.” But her eyes never lost that Mitchel glaze of fury. It wouldn’t fade until someone paid.

Chapter Seven
Family First

1

A high-pitched ringing bell brought the kids out of the knee-high slush along the road, where they were gathering snowballs and pretending the bitter weather wasn't bothering them. Cold and bright, the mountain was a rough place to live, even for giants.

Strome began to trudge back toward the farmhouse. "Dinner!"

Alexa followed him with a blank face and a churning stomach. She was glad to delay the snowball fight that she was certain to lose and sustain injuries from, but she'd been dreading this moment since arriving. Lenore's kitchen was littered with charred fur and meat that had been easily identifiable.

Alexa had eaten many exotic foods over her lifetime; all of it during trips like this one. The lab served a standard tray of just enough slop to keep them alive. They didn't want their subjects to get fat or to enjoy the fare.

Giants came from the warm house as the bell continued to sound. Most of them were naked but covered in so much hair that it was all she could see.

Alexa was grateful. The only way to tell the men from the women was by the wider, curved hips and the smaller hands.

Many of the giants leered at Alexa as she and Strome reached the house, but they didn't initiate contact. It was time to eat. That was all they cared about right now. Living on a mountain didn't allow for fun activities or events. Food was all they had to look forward to.

Alexa followed the crowd, slowing to keep distance between them. The tall, wide giants were like walking boulders. They only had a couple of weaknesses; she had no intention of triggering a fight with them.

Alexa glanced at the smokehouse and found Elliot's desperate face pressed against the filthy glass, gazing at her in confident despair. "Yet."

Next to the house, a large, deep hole had been gouged out of the frozen earth with picks, shovels, and huge hands. In the bottom of this 20-foot pit was a stack of fresh branches placed over long, sharpened wooden stakes. It would be a death trap for anyone who fell in.

Alexa spotted a wooden wheel under the charred, spiked platform, but she wasn't sure what it was for.

Lenore threw a small orange canister into the pit and then struck a flare. She tossed it onto the tree limbs.

The giants clapped and cheered when a large fire immediately sprang up.

Alexa recognized the gear Lenore was using. There was an exact duplicate of it in her kit. “Did Elliot help you build this?”

Lenore came over to Alexa.

The other giants hurried back toward the front of the house where the wolf pups were huddled miserably in the wooden pen.

“Your brother helped with many things.”

A stream of giants came back through the yard, each carrying one of the whimpering pups under a huge arm. There were ten of them.

Alexa forced herself to observe every moment of the awful atrocity, letting the anger and hatred burn a hole into her heart that would allow her to carry out any plan her devious mind settled on.

That there was going to be an ugly plan hadn’t been in doubt since before coming here. The scientists let their subjects pick most of their own supplies for each outing, but not all of it. One of the items the lab had provided as part of their specially selected gear had revealed an unmistakable clue about how this would all end. Her holsters were empty, but a side arm wasn’t always the right tool for every job anyway.

Alexa kept an even tone. “If you skin them first and then gut them, the meat will taste better.”

Lenore was still waiting for Alexa’s tears and outrage at their treatment of the pups. The slaughter was ongoing. “It doesn’t matter to us. No sense of smell and only a little taste.”

Encouraged by the answer, Alexa kept going. “Then why do you cook them at all?”

“It hurts our teeth. We miss rotten vegetables, but too cold to grow up here.”

Alexa verified a suspicion she’d had all day. “Why not leave?”

Lenore’s big hand swung toward the road. “If we leave, soldiers will hunt us. They brought us here. Only the end of the world will free giants from this prison.”

Alexa stiffened and then forced her shoulders down. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and that will happen sooner than you expect.”

“Funny.” Lenore waved at Max, her hairy mate, to begin pulling the platform up while she spoke with Alexa. “You will help us get the next crop of food.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Lenore was once again waiting for outrage and had to give an answer because she didn’t have anything else ready. “Run in and grab.”

“Okay.” Alexa looked around as if she didn’t already know where the big wolf cage was located. “Now?”

The listening giants liked her eagerness. Lenore even laughed. “Tomorrow when it’s warmer. Wolves too fast at night.”

The platform came up as Max and two other giants pulled on one end of a large rope that was connected to two trees at the top of the pit. It appeared to be a big rubber band setup and it

worked very well. It was definitely Elliot's design. Even as a toddler, he'd been an amazing engineer. "I've heard you slow when you get older."

"Not older. The cold."

Alexa gestured at her thick coat and wet gloves. "I understand."

Alexa scanned the land and found barren areas directly around the wild property and even near the base of the tall mountain that the home was built into. "Why don't you grow a winter crop and let it rot?"

"No starter seed." Lenore's face softened. "Miss growing."

Alexa remembered traveling through Nebraska on the way here. "We passed farms that stretched for miles and miles with the sweetest corn. It had such a strong scent I could smell it inside the transport truck with all the windows up. Corn may be my most favorite thing on the planet."

Lenore watched her without scorn. "You were right. Not like the brother."

"That is one of my goals in life." Alexa gestured. "That's a lot of cleared area. The mountain will go bald if you stay here much longer."

Lenore leaned forward eagerly, bending over like a candy cane. "How do we get out of here without the soldiers killing us, Seer?"

Old magic filled the air between them, giving Alexa no choice but to help someone in need. "I have to see the gates that keep you in."

“No gate. Soldiers on the roads.” Lenore hunkered, keeping her voice surprisingly low for being a giant. “You mean run for it.”

“Of course. They’re never going to let you go willingly.”

“We’ll die if we do that.”

“You’ll die if you don’t. Wolf pups are small and skinny from harvesting them too soon. Lab probably took your younger kids to slow it down.” Alexa was impressed with the way her mind was automatically adjusting to how the giants talked.

“Trying to keep us alive?”

“Maybe. The humans in the big world often imprison the last of a species while trying to save it. Are you the last?”

Lenore regarded the mountain peak in longing. “Giants all over the earth before humans took over. Now, just us and Rocky cousins.”

Alexa used her fast mind. “Isn’t that where we are now?”

“This is Cascade.”

“Okay, well, take me for a stroll so my puny body doesn’t break down while I’m here.” Alexa waited as Lenore processed what she said, trying to determine how intelligent the huge woman was.

“Cover for why we go to the road?”

The other giants around them were listening but not following along. Alexa could tell that from their quizzical expressions. They were also distracted by the reeking meal that had almost reached the top of the pit. “Are you going to feed me first?”

All of the giants were surprised now, and a little impressed with her bravado. They also thought she was bluffing. She was handed one of the first chunks of charred meat that was ripped out.

The giants observed her with sly leers. They expected her to spit it out like Elliot had done when he found out what it was.

Alexa bit into the forbidden delicacy without hesitation. It tasted bad and it hurt her heart as it sank into the fiery furnace in her gut. Every moment here was sending that heat to a new level. Alexa didn't think it would be long before it boiled over.

She swallowed and resumed their conversation. "Are you the leader of the giants?"

Lenore headed for the road to show Alexa what she'd asked for. "No leader."

"No king or president?" Alexa kept eating as she followed. She didn't have a choice. She'd given Elliot her food.

Lenore plowed through the snow much like her son had done earlier—effortlessly and barely noticing it. "Have the moms."

"What is that?"

"Have kids, get to make choices for your family. Up here, moms work together. Wasn't like that before here."

"Where do the giants come from?"

Lenore looked south with another longing expression. "Warm and water."

Alexa stared at her large host in surprise. "You swim?"

“And go deep, too. No need for air like puny humans.”

Alexa chuckled at the joke; she didn't look at the smokehouse as they went by. She did keep eating. She could feel Elliot's horrified anger at her actions.

Lenore showed her intelligence again. “You don't like the brother.”

“Not really.” Alexa sighed deeply. “His personality sucks.”

“What's that?”

“He's ugly inside. Makes me feel ugly, too. He's been like that since he was born.”

Lenore nodded in understanding. “Soldiers are at the bottom of the road. Worse than feel bad.”

Alexa was done with the meat, but she was already freezing again and she was getting tired. “This will go faster if you carry me over your secret path, right?”

Lenore was surprised; she stopped, hands coming to her wide hips. “What path?”

Alexa pointed toward the snowbank, where the shadows of sunset were starting to cover small tunnels in the waist high drifts. “Strome showed them to me. It's too frozen and slippery for me to walk on, but with those huge feet, it's perfect for you.”

Lenore laughed loudly and reached out with a massive hand.

Alexa held still this time and let the giant lift her under the knees like a small child.

Lenore shifted the girl onto her wide back. “Watch for branches.”

Alexa tried to burn that into her mind. Lenore wasn't going to duck whenever a low tree branch crossed their path.

Surprising them both, Alexa leaned down and wrapped her arms around the giant's hairy neck. She put her chin on Lenore's shoulder. “All set.”

Lenore grunted again. “Definitely not like the brother.”

It only took a minute to reach the bottom of the hill as Lenore slid through the icy snow tunnel like the most elegant figure skater in the world. It dropped them out into a deep snowdrift where Alexa jumped off at the exact right moment and rolled into it, laughing aloud.

She and Lenore rose from the snow, sharing grins.

Lenore led them to the next path through the snow.

Alexa kept prying up egg corners. “What did you eat before Elliot showed you how to trap the wolves?”

“Same, just had to chase them. Ate trees when we missed.”

Alexa felt the presence of the soldiers before she reached the bottom of the hill. She picked a tree that matched the color of her coat and quickly scaled it to get a better view.

Half a mile away, three white vans sat side-by-side, blocking the road. In front of them were two

big machine guns and at least a dozen soldiers patrolling the area. She didn't recognize any of them. "What about other roads?"

"Same, but more guns."

Alexa scanned the location of the vans, calculating the incline of the hill and the possible weakness of a small thicket of nearby trees where the giants had ripped off most of the branches. She also studied the soldiers again, searching for anyone she knew.

Lenore stayed quiet, letting her work.

Alexa took a few more seconds to verify her calculations; she climbed down from the tree and marched back up the snowy path.

Lenore followed her this time, anxious for an answer but refusing to break the silence until the girl did.

Alexa started with the easiest ideas. "You could lure them away from those guns, and steal the vans. It would be a squeeze, but you'd all fit."

Lenore shook her big head, throwing snow and slush in all directions. "Tried, many times."

Alexa pointed to the trees as they went by. "Roll trees into the guns and crush the soldiers. Kill any who survive. Some giants will still die."

"Also tried. And with rocks. Only ten of us left now."

Alexa got stuck in a deep snowdrift. She wasn't able to pull her leg up as the ice melted from her body heat and immediately started to refreeze around her.

Lenore lifted the girl free easily. She set Alexa onto the clear spot behind her.

Alexa wiped her legs and gloves off, hating how cold her fingers were staying. “Have you tried using snow?”

Lenore snorted. “Can’t control the snow.”
“Wanna bet?”

Lenore stopped and turned. “I never bet against a Mitchel.”

Alexa laughed even as she wondered how the giant knew that. “We do have a special code.”

Lenore nodded. “Family first.”

Alexa acted like she didn’t notice the confirmation. Lenore had too much information for this to all be pure coincidence. “Always, even when we’re wrong.”

“Tell me some of the right words.”

“Right words?”

Lenore tried to explain. “I want to talk like humans.”

“Why? You’ll never be able to hide it from them. Too big.”

“Not hide it. We’ll be neighbors. Neighbors talk.”

“The humans will never accept you.”

Lenore gave her a sly look. “They will have to after the big war.”

Alexa stopped again, unable to hide her reaction. “You know.”

Lenore gestured toward the eastern sky. “We all dream it, many nights. Soldiers say we can go home after that.”

“You know the soldiers can’t be trusted.”

“Yes. We need help. *You* help us.”

Alexa’s tone dropped into stone. “What do I get in exchange?”

“Your brother.”

Alexa snorted harshly. “No deal!”

Lenore studied the girl, narrowing in on bags under her eyes, pale skin that held too many scars for her age, and a haunted look that hadn’t left her face even once. “Freedom. We’ll let you escape. Steal van.”

Alexa immediately nodded. “Deal. Can you read?”

“Some.”

“I’ll write it in small words. I’ll work on it tonight.”

Lenore frowned. “Why not wait for tomorrow?”

“I’m bite-snatching with you tomorrow, remember?”

Lenore laughed and headed back up the path.

Alexa wasn’t amused.

“How do we send snow down the mountain? Can’t yell that loud.”

Now Alexa smiled. “I was thinking about something different. Tell me about the items in your shed and kitchen.”

Alexa snapped awake with a chill running over her spine and a scream stuck in her throat.

She took a deep breath of the icy air and calmed her racing heart and mind. She had nightmares often. That one had been particularly disturbing.

Talking with Lenore about the coming war had woken her mental images of what that moment would be like. The massive loss of life was terrifying, but even worse for her were the images of being a prisoner in a bunker that no longer let her out for trips like these. “I’m not going back this time. They’ll have to hunt me out of this damn mountain.”

Alexa knew she couldn’t change all of the future. Too many of them had dreamed of a nuclear world war now. That wasn’t going to be stopped, but smaller moments, like where she was when it happened, could be changed. “I just have to keep them from trapping me.”

Alexa checked her watch in the bright moonlight. It was 3:03 a.m. Cold wind was pushing through the screen around the porch in weak blasts, making her glad for the winter gear she’d chosen.

She scanned the courtyard and house in one quick turn of her head and found everything dark and quiet. She pushed her fear aside. The family honor was at stake.

Alexa glanced at the window of the smokehouse and found Elliot once again staring at her through the window.

Alexa looked down and saw her open notebook on her lap. She'd been writing the information that Lenore wanted when she'd fallen asleep. It had been a long day.

Alexa finished the sentence she had been working on and then considered for a moment how she wanted to end the communication. Then she copied it down.

If you survived my retribution, then know that wasn't my idea. You took a Mitchel captive for months and there has to be a stiff payment for that. I decided to take the only thing you seem to care about. I'm not proud of that choice, but family first means more than just words. Next time, don't cross a Mitchel.

The giants will be free now. Over time, you will be tempted to invent some fantastic story about how you were driven out of this mountain. Some will believe it and others will pretend to because they don't want to face your anger. When you think about what really happened here, don't ever lie to yourself, Lenore. You were beaten by a puny human girl. Never underestimate our ability to be meaner than you.

Go into hiding. Don't bother being neighborly with your human neighbors. Try to keep them from finding out what you really are. If they do find out, run away. If I hear that you've harmed a single human, even in defense, I'll come for you. Don't make me regret my generosity. I could just as easily

have brought down the house with all of you inside it.

-Alexa

Alexa dropped the notebook onto the porch, next to the kitchen door. Lenore would find it at some point and know what it was.

Alexa donned the rest of her gear and packed her things. She didn't try to be quiet. The snowstorm that was over the top of the mountain now would muffle most of her noises, but her host no longer considered her a threat, thanks to how well she had blended in all day. It hadn't taken long to convince the giants that she could help them because they were desperate.

“And I am going to help them. I always keep my word.”

Alexa dropped from the rafters, pulling her kit and the bed down with her. She put the kit on over her coat and then left the small comfort of the porch with the bed under her arm. An awful plan had fallen into place as she worked on the notes for Lenore. Her nightmare had helped to cement that plan. Now, it was time to carry it out.

The empty wolf pup pen and the smell of burnt fur pushed her along even when her fear of the dark tried to mess with her mind.

Elliot watched his sister enter the tall shed on the other side of the smokehouse.

She didn't come back out for a long time.

When she did, she was carrying something he was very familiar with. A smile crossed his face for the first time since he arrived here. “Boom!”

Chapter Eight
I Plan It All

1

Alexa paused with the lit flare throwing hot sparks over her hand.

It was almost whiteout conditions now. She was half frozen and exhausted from her trip up and down the hill and then her work here at the wolf pen. It had taken a lot of mental control to get this set up, though sliding down the icy path on the bed she'd woven had been a thrill. Her mind had tried to hurt her the entire time, but not because of what she was about to do. She hated to be alone in the dark. "Another gift from my lab sessions. And from my brother. Elliot loved testing me and everyone else. They never had to force him to do any of it."

The wolf pen didn't have guards or alarms. Alexa knew Elliot had done that on purpose. He loved a challenge. He could design anything, for any purpose. Then he saw what those inventions did and he was filled with remorse and regret. But it never stopped him from doing it the next time and the next. Even designs that killed family members weren't enough to slow his reckless nature.

All of the adult wolves in the stone pen below were studying her mistrustfully. When she had first

arrived, many of them tried to reach her by jumping up the slippery stone, but Elliot had devised a brilliant trap here. The only weakness was the gate where Alexa was standing.

She stared at the hydrogen peroxide mix she had placed right under the large latch. The gate was made from thick tree trunks, and it was well built, but there was no way it would stand up to what she was about to do to it.

Alexa considered this action once more to be sure. A single day here had proved she could be accepted by the giants, welcomed for her brain and her courage. The diet stank, but she could get the giants to be more humane to the animals before they were slaughtered. She might even be able to get starter seeds for some winter crops. The soldiers could be bribed; she knew that for sure. Until the lab took her back, she would have an odd home where she was valued.

Alexa thought about Elliot.

She shivered in anger this time. “But it’s not enough to counter the family legacy. Even the killers among us deserve our support. Never, ever cross a Mitchel.”

Alexa dropped the flare into the center of the chemical bomb and then darted over to the protection of one of the stone walls.

Kaboom!

The gate blew up, sending shrapnel in every direction, including into the pen. The wolves ran

toward the ditch where the few pups were cowering with their mothers.

Alexa clasped her hands over her ears. She hadn't expected it to be so loud through the snowstorm. It was a lesson learned for dealing with explosives. She had only heard how to do this. It was her first time actually using that dangerous information.

Thick smoke and flames belched up with the gate, rising into the sky to compete with the snow. Fat flakes were coming down lightly, like they had been for hours, but it would take a while to put out this fire.

Alexa heard heavy steps pounding toward her. She stayed where she was, only standing to view the destruction.

The center of the 10-foot gate was completely gone. Both sides were on fire.

Alexa gave a shrill whistle that broke through the crackling flames.

The wolves weren't capable of speech, but they were incredibly intelligent. As soon as they realized the gate was gone, the animals flew toward freedom, whimpering and snapping at each other. Mothers grabbed a pup by the scruff of the neck and ran for it, leaving the others behind.

Mothers that had already lost their pups to the giants grabbed orphaned pups and followed their pack.

Alexa stayed still so she didn't draw their attention but also to enjoy the show. It was a

wonderful feeling to know those animals were now free. They might be hunted and killed later, but at least they would have a chance to fight for their survival. This pen didn't allow for anything except a miserable death. She wasn't surprised that it had come from her brother.

Lenore spotted the burning gate and fleeing wolves as she charged over the slippery path. "Stop them from getting away!"

The other giants pounded toward the gate to try to stop the flood of growling, snapping animals.

Lenore grabbed Alexa by her arm and jerked her into the air. "We'll eat you instead!"

Alexa didn't fight. She laughed. "You can't kill me. You can't kill humans at all or the soldiers will come up here."

Lenore shook her by her arm. "How do you know that?!"

"Because my brother is still alive." Alexa's eyes lit up bright red. "Now put me down! I've had enough of your manhandling."

Lenore dropped Alexa as if she'd been burned.

Strome ran over to them with heavy steps. "Who let the food go?"

Alexa kept her attention on Lenore as she flipped another egg. "Did Elliot tell you how to manipulate me?"

The fire continued to burn away at the gate. Wolves were running out between the slow giants who didn't move well at night. Some of those giants

realized it was a losing battle and came over to surround Alexa.

Lenore stared at the girl in hatred and didn't answer the question.

"Let me ask what really matters." Alexa stood up straight and tried to look Lenore in the eye. "What did he demand from your deal?"

There was no reason for Lenore to hide it now. "Freedom, the same as you!"

Alexa wasn't intimidated by the ugly snarl. Lenore had already verified her suspicion that the giants weren't allowed to kill their human guests. "What did he promise to give in exchange for that freedom?"

Lenore pointed a big angry finger. "You take his place. Said you're smarter. And you are!"

"Yes, I am." Alexa sighed, miserable and eager at the same time. It came out sounding like the whine of the wolves that were still escaping their cage. "I'm also meaner."

Alexa snatched the knife from her tool belt and spun around, stabbing Strome in his weak spot. She buried it up to the hilt, loving the feeling of causing death, of extracting justice for her brother.

She also hated herself for it.

Alexa took off running as Strome fell and the giants rushed to him.

Lenore's awful wails of pain and rage filled the air. "Kill her!"

Alexa ran to the slippery secret path. She dove into the snowbank next to the tree at the top of it and went still.

The giants chasing her slid down the path, assuming she had done the same.

Lenore's cries for help and vengeance echoed louder, covering Alexa's mutter.

"That was a very bad thing to do, Alexa Mitchel. Your father will be unhappy when he hears about it."

A new explosion went off at the bottom of the hill. More screams came from the soldiers guarding the road and from the giants that had been chasing her.

"He'll also be very proud."

2

Alexa opened the door to the smokehouse right as an ugly dawn broke over the mountain.

The giants were scouring the rocky landscape for her, or mourning the loss of Strome with loud wails and angry snarls. It had been going on for hours now, telling her where they were.

Elliot was waiting for her. His incredibly thin hands held onto the rails of the pen; he surveyed her excitedly. "Mitchel justice."

"Yes." Alexa tugged the heavy door shut so it wouldn't draw attention yet. She tossed a snowball into his pen and frowned as he scrambled for the moisture.

Elliot sucked on the snowball in delight. He crunched through part of it as he stood, moaning.

Alexa stayed quiet as he finished it. She examined him without sympathy as he sucked the drops from his fingers. “I know what you did, Elliot.”

Elliot cringed at her tone. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You helped make the giants lazy with that pen. It slowed them.”

Elliot stared at the ground. “I love animals.”

“Yes, you always have. It’s your single good quality.” Alexa stared at her younger brother with no love or warmth. “You told them about the family code.”

Elliot went quiet and still.

“I could have forgiven that, but you told them how the magic works! You told them how to force me into helping.”

Elliot didn’t deny it. “I knew the lab would send you. I knew you’d free the wolves.”

“And yet you told the enemy how to hurt me, how to control me.”

His pathetic face morphed into dangerous anger. “Yes! You’re always so perfect, so wanted. Try being perfect now!”

Alexa’s lips thinned. “Just as long as I don’t have to try being you. That would be too low even for me.” She headed toward the exit.

“Wait! You have to get me out of here!”

“You’ve broken the family code, Elliot. There’s nothing I can do for you now.”

“Wait! Wait!” His screams continued as she shut the door to the smokeroom.

Alexa took the kit off her back. Freezing fingers took out the unusual item the lab had sent with her. She began assembling the rifle while moving to the best position for a gun battle. She had picked it out within minutes of arriving.

Alexa slammed in the magazine, hearing the heavy feet of giants coming from the empty wolf pen.

Alexa heard a faint noise behind her and spun around, rifle ready.

A large wolf stood there.

Almost as tall as her on all fours, the wolf’s singed fur and low hanging teats were a perfect complement to its furious eyes.

Alexa’s finger tightened on the trigger.

The wolf stared at her, trying to communicate. It didn’t know how.

Alexa lowered the rifle. “You don’t have to talk. I understand revenge.”

Sirens echoed in the distance, telling her the soldiers were on their way to regain control of the situation. The giants were also arriving, carrying Strome’s body while crying and grunting. There was a lot of noise.

Alexa lifted her rifle; she turned her back on the wolf and opened fire.

The giant in front of Lenore fell to the ground, huge hands coming up to cover the weak spot in his chest where Alexa's first bullet had hit dead center.

Alexa fired again.

Another giant fell.

The rest of them took off, dropping the body and leaving Lenore to haul it by herself.

The wolf behind Alexa took off running. It leapt at Lenore, raking long claws across her face while sinking its teeth into her enormous shoulder. Blood, dark green, squirted into the dirty snow.

Alexa didn't interfere, instead aiming for the scattering giants who had left Lenore there. She wounded two more of them, very aware of how close the sirens were getting.

The wolf bit Lenore on the back of her big ankle, dropping her to the ground.

The wolf sank its teeth into her jaw next, drawing a scream and drips of blood. Then the animal stopped and retreated.

Alexa fired again, keeping the other giants from going to help Lenore. She didn't kill any more of them, however. As far as she was concerned, Lenore was the leader here and therefore responsible for everything that had happened.

The wolf retreated a few feet to the body they'd dropped; then it began to eat Lenore's dead son.

Lenore's scream was awful, but she couldn't win in her injured condition and certainly not with Alexa and her rifle to make sure of it.

The sirens grew louder; the soldiers were coming up the hill now.

Alexa fired one more shot, trimming Max in the leg. Then she hurried toward the thick, snowy woods.

She snagged her kit along the way and began digging in it for the extra magazine of ammunition. She had only gone through half of the first one, but she might need the second mag to get out of here if the soldiers reached the top of the hill before she blended into the woods.

Wolves streamed through the slippery paths and through the trees around her. None of them touched Alexa. They ran at the giants that had caused them so much misery.

Alexa saw two transport trucks with snow tracks on them coming up the hill. She aimed carefully at the center tree she had worked on last night.

The bomb exploded, blowing the entire thicket of weak trees down the hill.

Both of the transport trucks were hit in the blast. They flipped and went rolling down the mountainside.

Being chased by the wolves, the giants ran by the wrecks and the stunned, injured soldiers in the chaos. They were no longer trapped here.

Alexa turned toward the mountain and began to climb. She followed the heavy paths the giants had

cleared through the snow while they searched for her.

The wolf that had attacked Lenore followed, offering protection.

“I kept my word to every one of you.”

Alexa refused to think about what she’d done or the boy she’d killed. “I’m a Mitchel. This is how we survive. If you wanted me to be peaceful, you should have birthed me into a different family.”

Alexa didn’t expect an answer from her brief comment. God never answered anyone directly. She assumed she would pay for this when she died. “Until then, I’ll uphold my family name and beat every challenge that blocks my path.”

The wolf padded closer and nudged Alexa’s hand.

Alexa put her cold fingers on the wolf’s warm fur and hiked steadily up the mountain.

In the smokehouse pen, Elliot kept screaming and begging for mercy that would never be given.

3

Two hours later, soldiers were erecting barriers at the ends of all roads out of the mountain. Dressed for the cold, the soldiers passed the time talking while they worked.

“I can’t believe we’re watching out for giants.”

The blond soldier put another barrier board in place. “Just watch out for the girl, Erik. She’s who they sent us here for.”

“I’d think giants are a bigger problem.”

“The giants don’t matter now. They’re almost extinct; the lab wanted them disposed of. It was a perfect opportunity to test a subject.”

The rookie regarded his team leader in confusion. “So they sent a little girl?”

“They sent a killer.”

“Maybe this is all a coincidence.”

“Then why did they give her a rifle?”

“I don’t have an answer for that, but I do have a question. Why would she leave her brother here if she did all of this to free him? You saw how bad off he was and screaming for her when they brought him down the hill.” Erik sneered. “I guess your Mitchel code doesn’t apply to him.”

The blonde man shrugged as he went to the rear of one of the trucks to get another board for the barrier. “I see it just the opposite. She left Elliot for us because she knows the lab medics will put him back together.”

“But he’s still a captive.”

“That’s the punishment he’ll pay for going against her.”

“Why send him here at all?”

“Elliot was sent first because he’s very good at causing death to those around him, but he couldn’t withstand the cruel treatment and environment. He made a deal with the giants. So they locked him up,

starved him, hurt him, and would have eventually eaten him.”

“We would have wiped them out for that.”

“Yes. The scientists decided to send in Alexa instead of attacking, testing the family bond and her skills, brain, body.”

Erik shook his head. “I can’t take all these mind games. How do you keep up with them?”

Adrian smiled coldly. “It’s easy. I plan it.”

4

“I spent the rest of that year right there, hunting survivors who weren’t smart enough to face the soldiers instead of me. When I found them, they left the mountain or they died.” Alexa shut her eyes so she didn’t have to see the expressions of her men. Their tones would be bad enough.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.” Edward really didn’t. His thoughts were hectic.

“I do. How could you do that to a kid?!” Jacob was offended and revolted.

So was Mark. “You told him you didn’t punish your friends.”

Alexa didn’t hold back. “I lied. That’s something else Mitchels are known for.”

“But it was just a kid, Boss...”

Alexa held in her anger as David joined the others in scolding her. “He was a cruel monster who tormented my brother for months. He saw nothing wrong with killing wolf pups and eating them.

Giants do not have remorse. He would never have been different.”

Alexa’s crew considered that, but they kept returning to Strome’s age and her lie. It made them view her in a different way.

Alexa had known what their reaction would be before she told them the story. “What else? Get it out now.”

“How can you love your dad after everything he’s put you through?”

Alexa finally opened her eyes and pinned Jacob in place. “How can you love me after everything I’ve put you through?”

Jacob grimaced. “I don’t know. But I do. You can’t drive me away, so stop telling us the worst of your past.”

Alexa snorted lightly. “That’s not even close to the worst.”

None of the men asked her to prove that; it wasn’t in doubt.

“Is Elliot the brother the soldiers tried to trap you with in my store tent?”

Alexa nodded at Edward. “They assumed I would run to his rescue again.”

“Maybe they need you to clear out another nest of monsters.”

David gestured. “My thoughts exactly.”

“I have a question that doesn’t matter.”

Alexa braced for it. With Daniel, she never knew if he was going to be serious or humorous when he said that.

“You don’t have a problem with trolls, like Jendon. And it seemed like you were okay with the giants until you found out about your brother. Are there any creatures you hate?”

“All of them. I just know how to separate my emotions and get what I need from the situation.”

“You don’t like any of them?”

Alexa ran a tongue over her fangs. “This one’s growing on me.”

Laughter rang out, breaking some of the tension.

“Are trolls and giants different?” Jacob was fascinated by the conversation even if Daniel wasn’t being serious.

“Giants are very hairy and usually smarter than trolls. Jendon is an exception in the brains area. Time around humans has rubbed off on him.”

Mark caught her attention. “Are there giants in Port City?”

Alexa was proud of Mark for making a connection to what they would soon face. He was usually in the middle during these moments. It was nice to see him get it first this time. “And maybe wolves as well.”

“Do you mean the actual creatures or people with those traits?”

Alexa chuckled. “Why does it have to be one or the other?”

Mark laughed. “You really aren’t in the mood to give a straight answer.”

Alexa scanned the dark sky they could view through the open side of the parking garage. “I’m practicing.”

Mark took another guess. “For Port City?”

“For my family. They’ll try to dig into each of us and draw out threads that we don’t want to share. Some parts of our adventures are just ours. I’d protect them.”

Each of her men immediately began trying to duplicate her mentally. Answering questions without actually giving an answer that held any information was hard. Only politicians and lawyers had been great at it before the war. After the war, the truth had been prized.

Alexa wasn’t happy about going back to double speak, but her family didn’t need to know every little detail of their quest. It wasn’t that she thought they would use those details against her, though they would if it helped them with a goal. And she wasn’t ashamed of her bonds with her men or the bonds they’d formed with the people and creatures they’d met along the way. *I just want to keep something for myself. I’ve earned that and then some.*

“What you did was very bad, Alexa.”

She tensed, then dropped her chin as the other men nodded or stared. “I know.”

“Are you sorry for it?” Jacob braced for her answer. He already knew what it would be.

Alexa sighed tiredly. “Not even a little bit. Never cross a Mitchel. Our justice will take

whatever you love the most and leave a gaping hole in its place.”

Alexa shut her eyes and leaned her head back. Then she went to sleep so she didn't have to see the condemnation in their quick glances. *I am a perfect product of my upbringing. Nothing will ever change that.*

Chapter Nine
Shopping Spree

1

At dawn, they were back on the road. No one mentioned her tale, but it lingered on all their minds, including hers, as the bright sun tried to fry them like eggs.

Alexa was still trying to build their tolerance to sunlight. After twelve hours in the shade, the harsh light was cruel, but tolerable for the group. They walked single file in the center of the weedy road that quickly narrowed into two cracked lanes winding through the dead countryside. The longer they traveled, the more destruction they saw. It told them a ground zero site was nearby, but even in this post-nuclear wasteland, they saw life struggling to continue.

Oddly colored bugs the size of tuna cans trundled through the sandy debris, enlarged bodies twitching as the fighters went by. In the distance, they could make out the occasional flying shadow dipping behind hazy mountain peaks. Rats scurried through the molded garbage, long tails forked on the ends.

The group kept their hands on their weapons, ready to act. The rodents were an aggressive, hard to hit threat.

“Standard formation.”

The group moved in a wide V behind their leader, in perfect sync now. There were no buildings in sight, no signs of life. It was just the sand-covered relics, the wind, and the uninviting mountain peaks that got closer with each step.

The team walked in silence, studying the landscape or their thoughts about Alexa’s story; it stayed that way until dusk approached.

A flat area at the base of the mountain appeared as they crested the hill they’d been climbing all day.

The shapes in that flat space were a surprise to her men, but not to Alexa. She’d been tracking the faint signs as they traveled. Her crew had been dwelling on parts of the giant tale that they’d overlooked last night in their revulsion.

Vehicles winked in the hazy light of an orange sunset, shoving those distractions out of their minds.

“It’s a trading caravan!” Daniel stared in delight as the men realized their impression of no people being around here was false. Men and women walked endlessly through the large circle of vendor vehicles.

“Mind your lines,” Alexa instructed tonelessly.

The males stood straighter as they were noticed. Being a member of Alexa’s crew was an honor they

flaunted at every opportunity. This would be no different.

The stores were built into the vehicles, with shelves and baskets hanging from mirrors and bars that extended from inside. Above each, hung a glittering name—Mary’s Maps, Digger’s Tools, Grante Gold Exchange. All the shops had burly, half-naked female guards defending the wares. Around these rusty cars, trucks, and wagons were lines of disheveled, impatient customers. Tattered, thin, and weak, they haggled with the merchants, trying to get enough supplies to continue living.

Some are having more trouble than others. Alexa scanned a desperate woman with three small blond boys. They were cringing away from the contempt of a vendor. That clerk was holding a can of fruit, mocking her harshly for being unable to buy even a single one. Then he offered the food in exchange for her boys.

Alexa’s men heard her deceptively soft sigh of rage and began searching for the cause of it.

Alexa narrowed in on a group of female riders approaching the gold exchange next to the fruit truck. Hard...*dangerous*.

The eight women were dressed much the same as Alexa and her fighters, in long coats and light, tight gear. All appearing to be related, they were likely slave traders and Alexa was striding into their territory with six healthy, unmarked males.

Do we need anything here so much as to risk such a battle?

They didn't, but Alexa led them to the first truck anyway. She wasn't in the habit of avoiding risks. If the family clan challenged her, there would be a fight. It was that simple.

David also noticed the eight women. Of all those here, only that group wore the same sense of alertness. It was sexy; he wondered briefly if Alexa might let them spend a few hours with a Caravan Slammer.

He caught sight of the objects of his contemplations, their strung-out faces and jerky movements marking them as dirty, and he pushed the repulsive option away. Maybe in the past he would have lain with one of them, but after Alexa, he couldn't stomach even the thought.

Of the thirty customers, and the two dozen vehicles with their owners and guards, none of them missed the arrival of Alexa and her men and certainly not the group she and David had noticed. Those eight females were part of the clan ruling this zone uncontested. Anyone who came through was required to pay a token of respect to Raven and her Reapers.

The seven younger females waited for their mother to give the command to attack Alexa, but it didn't come. Raven, once an activist supporting equality for males in the female workplace, had a very bad feeling as she watched the hardasses come closer. The moon had risen wrong for her last night, sending a wave of need into her guts that had

brought her here to trade for a fresh male—until she'd spotted the poor specimens on display.

Raven stared hard at Alexa's crew; need raged at the sight of their challenging stride, those thick, vainly held arms that were not marked like those of a slave...

“Mother?”

Raven ignored her youngest, knowing her other daughters were shushing her with quick gestures and shakes of their heads. Mandy was only along for a store ride, not yet an official member of mommy's coveted crew.

Raven studied the men...and already feared their leader. Training women who wanted the same thing was easy when you birthed them all. Reprogramming six adult males took a heat that Raven wasn't sure about stepping in front of blindly.

She also wasn't in the habit of refusing to give her body what it needed. The rage illness made the choice for her. “We'll follow, maybe do a snatch after dark. Get our shopping done and get out of town.”

Very adept at reading lips, Alexa dropped a golden nugget onto the small counter with a scowl, ignoring the flinch of the redheaded clerk. “Four of every kind you have.”

The pig-faced man, who clearly hadn't been eating his own stock, gasped in shock at the demand. His face wrinkled to become even thicker, uglier.

“Problem?”

At her raised brow, he hurried to fill the order before she could take the gold back.

Alexa’s men were pleased at this latest sign that they were following the right person. They were already sure the order wasn’t for their own stock. They’d found plenty, and she always had them take seven of each, no more or less, without fail.

As they waited, Alexa ran slow, bold eyes over every inch of the caravan that she could see, giving a warning to those currently planning to take what was hers.

Most of the faces dropped, telling her their level of threat, but when she came to the family group, a battle of wills began.

Raven didn’t want to face the blonde warrior, but she’d be damned if she’d let herself be cowed in front of her crew, either.

They stared in open challenge, unblinking, until Edward stepped in front of Alexa, saving her the loss of having to look away as the clerk finished stacking her order on the counter. “Where do you want it delivered?”

“You already know. By two and watch your six.”

Edward nodded to Billy and David, who fell in to guard while he carried the three large boxes over to the woman with the crying kids—all at the same time, showing off his strength. He didn’t like the way they were being scanned by the family clan, but

it was more than that. Pride was something Edward held a great deal of.

The woman with the crying kids listened in stunned silence as he explained that all the food in the boxes now belonged to her. He stayed for a long moment that ended in a quick hug from the smallest of the three boys.

Edward didn't return the affection, but he allowed his lips to smile. "Alexa. That's her name."

He returned to his leader's side proudly.

The few witnesses who could still feel such an emotion were flooded with shame. Others saw it as a weakness, but that wasn't enough to consider attacking her for her males. Yet a few more of those watching saw it as a clever ploy to win the support of those who lived in the area, assuring an easier trip through. Only Alexa's men guessed correctly; she did it because she cared about the lives they came into contact with. It was one of the reasons they followed her so loyally.

Alexa went toward the next store, where a familiar vendor waited with shifting, yellow eyes and bushy brows the color of blood.

Her men recognized him immediately as the troll came out of the wagon and greeted them.

"Jendon."

"Lady!"

The troll appeared exactly the same, from the tufts of yellow hair that came from his ears and moved on their own, to those reptilian orbs that could put men into trances.

Alexa's crew smiled at the troll. Jendon was odd, but he had won them over. The same couldn't be said of the merchants around them who were now glaring and muttering. They clearly didn't want the troll here, but they didn't know how to get rid of him. They had no will to attack.

"How goes things with the baby?"

Jendon blinked, confused for a moment, before brightening. "Good. All settled and happy, last I heard."

"And the twins?"

"Safely tucked away."

Alexa stepped closer. "Perhaps they could be sent west to help defend my friends."

Jendon nodded quickly. "That is a good idea. Yani and his tribe are still searching for them."

"I assumed he would be. Tell the girls not to snack on my friends. That would displease me."

"Never, Lady." Jendon dug in a bag and came up with seven small vials in his huge hand. "Your order."

Alexa handed a vial to each of her men according to the label.

The men remembered giving the troll parts of themselves to make the potions, but they still didn't know what the potions would do for them.

Ignoring the fresh mutters of the other vendors—humans were usually given first consideration in any Caravan—Alexa pointed to three of his stock potions. "Fresh."

Jendon started a fire in the pit next to his wagon.
“Quick or good, Lady?”

“The difference?”

“Backfires are common in sloppy loads.”
Jendon flashed one of those harsh smiles.

Alexa’s men shared amused looks. When they’d first met the troll, his smile had disturbed them, as it did to those watching.

Alexa snorted at the common gun joke. Reloads were rarely dependable. Edward’s skill with that was remarkable. None of her other men could match him yet. “Good, then, as I have little desire to miss what I aim for.”

The troll livened at her words. “Aye, Lady. An hour for the reds, three for the blue.”

“You’ll bring them by later?”

He shook his head regretfully, but Alexa could tell he really wasn’t. She still made him nervous, intentionally. A creature like Jendon had to be handled wisely.

“We stay until dawn and then leave. Have to stay on the move. I’ll keep them for you.”

Alexa gestured at the gold exchange vendor.
“Can I trust him?”

Jendon shrugged, sending yellow tufts of hair into further disarray. “As much as any. Most of these humans understand it only works if customers are satisfied. They don’t want other caravans starting.”

Alexa dropped two thick pouches onto Jendon’s rickety table, then yanked out a blonde hair. She

motioned to her men and stood watch as each of them did the same.

When the troll finished collecting all of it, he dropped the hairs into a charred, cruddy can together, humming happily. Sliding into his work, he poured in liquid and powders with graceful, artful sweeps and drops that he seemed unaware of.

“Potions, charms, spirits...”

That sent a light chuckle through her crew, reminding them again of their first meeting with the troll.

Alexa went to the gold exchange before she could join in the amusement. When they'd first met Jendon, she had been sure they would be hard enemies. What a pleasant surprise to be wrong! She didn't experience that often.

In better humor now, she made rounds of every store and bought something from each. She was keen to help keep these people alive if she could. Despite being bad off, they were still here, toughing it out with no signs of resorting to the usual tactic of theft. That alone was reason enough to give aid.

Their last stop was the auction block.

Alexa didn't spare her fighters from seeing their fellow males chained like animals, but they knew she didn't condone it. In the places they'd come through, slaves had been much worse off than these lightly marked men. None of them were starving, scarred, or even bruised.

The auction block was a wide wooden platform set onto the rear of a rusty, flatbed semi. A group of

twelve tethered slaves were currently on display while another dozen were being allowed to eat while they rested in the shade of the truck.

Their guards were six of the thickest females Edward had ever seen. He was careful to mind his place as Alexa's right hand. She wouldn't like it if he began shooting without provocation.

Alexa studied the marked, subdued slaves. Over two thirds were strung-out; they were more easily controlled if they were kept drugged. Most of the others wore the dazed gazes of men pushed beyond their limit. None of these slaves would be willingly bought by the shrewd customers here that only wanted healthy, trained males, but none of the men seemed ruined to her. *They deserve a better life. We all do.*

Very aware of how the slaves were staring in longing at her own fighters, Alexa thought she might be able to change the mood with a simple purchase. Humans always wanted what they believed someone else valued.

She stepped lightly to the biggest of the traders, a 6' bald female with dusty overalls and a shotgun. "You have a virgin?"

There was a stunned silence from those listening. An unbroken adult male was so rare it was almost a myth.

The tall, mean-looking woman glared down angrily. "No."

Alexa gestured toward the slave block. "You'll let me use them? I've got gold and dust."

The clerk's thick face was getting redder, telling Alexa she cared about her property. "No!"

"What are the prices?"

The answer was given in rush of the normal pandering routine. "A thousand per head, or ten gold nuggets!"

Clink!

A quick movement from Alexa placed a heavy pouch on the stage that drew attention from even the dazed slaves. That was the sound of someone being bought.

"I need two gentle men with no plans of rebellion, only helping and peace. No addictions or diseases."

The witnesses snorted, but the red-faced clerk understood the questions had been a test. Her rough voice now held an edge of respect. "The two on the end, jeans and arms marked with one line."

Alexa went toward the chained men, not missing the weight of the gold. Now that mankind's numbers were so low, it was more abundant than they were.

Her uneasy fighters followed. Her words said these new men would not be fighters, nor were they so near to death as for her to kill them in mercy. Alexa had never bought a slave. Would they have to endure such from her? Inside, they knew better, but surrounded by the waves of misery coming from the chained males, the worry was hard to ignore. Only Edward was sure of what she was doing. Billy could barely look at her or the slaves.

Alexa knelt in front of the sitting men, words too low for even her own group to pick out. She spoke quickly.

The two slaves listened in hopeful attention.

When she finished, they both stood, slowly, and waited to be unchained from the rest.

They were healthy enough. Alexa gave the guard a nod. “My thanks.”

The guard had been just that before the war, helping to keep animals away from the public. After the war, the woman had discovered the animals were better than currency.

“Go now, and remember my words.”

Both of the bare chested males gave Alexa longing stares that said they’d do anything to stay with her, to be part of her beloved crew.

Alexa shook her head. “She has more need of you than I do.”

Disappointed, they reluctantly moved toward the woman with the kids who were no longer crying, but happily eating while sitting on the hood of their banged up truck.

Alexa rotated to observe the other vendors and customers instead of the coming show.

Everyone else in sight watched the two slaves approach the woman carefully, hands held out, and be accepted as the gift they were meant to be. Alexa had seen the woman’s need, and she’d reminded a few of them of the old ways—the ones that hadn’t always been about greed. She’d forced them to face their own selfishness merely by helping a stranger

and her children survive a bit longer in this new world.

When the woman would have thanked her, Alexa turned away to stop it. Gratitude wasn't required.

Raven and her daughters also observed the moment, but with tolerant loathing. If womankind was to survive, the breed needed to be purified. The struggling female that now owned two new slaves was one of the few remaining families that Raven's clan hadn't been able to take over or force out of Georgia yet. If you lived around here, in this part of the eastern Georgias, you served the Reaper.

"It seems we'll have a few stops to make tonight." Raven was forming the plan as she observed. If the warrior woman believed those two slaves were good enough to gift, then Raven could use them to ease this flaring need. The poor woman and her kids would be dead before dawn. *Finders, keepers, my Reapers will be by.*

The idea that Alexa valued the slaves was a thought had by more than just the Reapers. The clerk stayed busy selling stock for the next half hour.

"We'll be providing a guard for the woman and her kids tonight. Two off on a recon."

Alexa's words told her men the stop had gained more than just what she'd purchased.

Edward waved Jacob and Mark to it. Both men were fast thinkers and vicious fighters.

The males quickly took off into the dusty landscape to find out where the poor woman was making camp or hiding.

Not concerned about the family clan that was still studying them, Alexa kept their pace steady, her hands ready. If Jacob or Mark needed to kill, they would. Sending only two of them signaled that to those wise enough to understand the message.

2

Full dark found all seven of them together, defending the content, careless poor woman from a hillside vantage point. Exchanging shy smiles and information, the new family was already trying to improve their misery.

It made Alexa's men grateful again that she had chosen them. They'd had some bad times on this quest, but they'd also done great, heroic deeds.

“Do not take a drop of their blood, my pets. Anything else goes.”

Before her crew could ask what Alexa meant, the faint, familiar noise of riders came to them.

The vampires eagerly followed their leader into the darkest shadows and vanished.

Chapter Ten
Not Even A Clue

1

Raven and her clan had lost the two male hardasses, but the poor woman and her kids had been easy to follow. The small group was sitting by an open fire eating cans of fruit and ignoring the dark, lethal landscape around them.

Raven motioned her daughters to split up as they neared the edge of the hill that was providing cover from the family.

“You shouldn’t do that.”

Raven knew who it was, realizing her mistake. The angry leader gave her clan a slow head shake. “Stand down.”

She faced the warrior woman, ready to die to defend her daughters, her territory.

Alexa and her team rose from their crouched place in the shadows. The men got ready to grab their guns and fight.

Raven and her daughters got ready to die. They knew they were doomed. Alexa’s experience gave her the advantage.

Edward flanked Alexa and kept a hand on his open holster. His hard gaze warned Raven that her end would come from his gun.

Alexa felt sympathy for Raven and her daughters. She didn't want to, but it was there and stopping her from triggering the slaughter. "It doesn't have to end that way for you tonight, or for us. It doesn't always have to come to death."

Not expecting an attempt at peace, Raven hesitated.

Her girls stared at their mother in surprise.

"Let them die on their own." Alexa indicated the poor woman and her now happy kids. "She's clearly no challenge for you."

Raven's face lit up in denial. "She has something I want!"

Alexa understood. "Something you need to combat the rage illness."

Raven flinched. "It's under control."

But it obviously wasn't. Alexa saw it in her tight stance and flaring nostrils as she smelled the healthy men surrounding them.

The two leaders stared at each other; their guards exchanged long glances full of hot curiosity. Both groups had been with only their own teams for months now and the females were putting off waves of need.

Alexa broke the silence. "May it be bought somewhere else?"

Raven snarled. Being around these unmarked men was torture to the new fever that was raging through all of them. The disease had only crossed her home once, but it had been enough to damage

them forever. “There isn’t time to find another procurer!”

“You stand before one,” Alexa answered coldly.

Raven was shocked, but it didn’t stop her from wanting to agree. She’d had a fleeting thought of slaking the urges with one of these men, but a single glance at their leader had denied even the chance. To find out it might be possible sent the flames higher. “The cost?”

Alexa studied her fighters; most of them were willing. “Deal with them. I don’t own slaves.”

Despite her procurer statement, her meaning was clear. She approved of the arrangement, but only if her men were willing and they would be the ones to set the fee.

Raven moaned this time...and gazed at Edward in fearful longing. She knew he was the XO. That made him more valuable to her than the others. “Name your price!”

Edward gestured toward the new family that was still eating, unaware of their fate being decided. “Besides all of their lives?”

“Too high!” Raven protested. “My daughters have needs, too!”

“On top of their lives, *we* require the right to give and take pleasure as we see fit.” Alexa’s men wouldn’t stand for being controlled after the freedom she’d allowed.

Raven heard only one word. “We?”

Edward was sure of what his mistress had intended and he was grateful. The ailment these

women suffered wasn't something he had to fear; his body was already preparing for use. He scanned the others and saw who was willing and who wasn't. Then he turned back to Raven. "Five of us will be at your convenience until dawn."

"Done!" Barely stopping herself from lunging forward, Raven focused on Alexa in confused pain. "Why?"

"We are sisters, are we not?"

Raven nodded hesitantly, unable to believe her good fortune. "More so than those I've met."

"Sisters share, spare each other hardships when they can. They follow a path of light, even when it seems impossible to find."

Humbled, Raven wanted to explain how awful the need was, how strong.

Alexa stopped her with almost kind words. "Afterworld has many side effects. I'm no stranger to them." She faced the road, hands going to the butts of her guns. "When he says dawn, he means it. Don't waste your time."

Raven thought to divide them up, but she remembered Edward's price. She answered bravely, not sure if these men would hurt them, but unable to wait any longer to be sure. "Make your pick."

Edward stepped toward Raven with a quick step, claiming her before the others could. He stopped in front of her, hand going to his belt.

Raven flinched despite it being her idea.

The Horseman gave an intense promise. "You're all safe with us. *Her* word on it."

He unbuckled his gun belt and let the deadly tool slide to the ground. Around them, the others did the same.

Raven let go of the rest of her doubts. She stepped against his heat.

Edward swept her against his chest eagerly. Being one of Alexa's fighters never failed to bring some sort of unexpected bonus or benefit.

Edward subtly eyed Alexa to discover if she felt jealous at all, but he saw no signs of it.

Daniel joined Alexa, preferring to be faithful to Lorey. He also wasn't attracted to these women. Alexa was the only other female that held any lure for him now.

Alexa kept her face and mind blank so her crew wouldn't know that she had felt something this time. She didn't want Edward sharing his body anymore, but until the quest was over, it was unreasonable to ask him to refuse those pleasures when she wouldn't do the same.

Left to sort it out amongst themselves, the remaining groups moved off into the darkness in different directions. When their sounds came, they were full of passion and pleasure, not fear.

Alexa stood guard over the new family that had no idea she'd provided them with a future where there hadn't been one before. It was a nice feeling, something she wasn't used to, but Alexa stopped herself from dwelling on it. What fate gave, it could easily take away.

An hour before dawn found the men dozing contentedly next to warm, naked skin—except for Edward. He was watching Alexa as she stood guard from the top of the hillside that he and Raven were lying on. Even with the powerful explosion he'd just experienced...*the third*, he amended with a prideful mental chuckle. Despite being exhausted, he still wanted Alexa. If she came to him right now, he would have no trouble giving her needs detailed attention.

“Where do you go...her, I mean? Where does she take you?”

Edward thought of how Alexa hadn't questioned the vendors for information on their quest. She already knew what they would find in Safe Haven Mountain. “Anywhere...everywhere.”

Understanding that line of conversation was forbidden, Raven didn't waste their last bit of time with words that didn't matter anyway. “Will you...? Can you...?”

Edward sent his eyes over Alexa's pat stance, remembering hot, magical moments, and felt his body start to wake. “Aye, Lady.”

He looked down at Raven, aware of how similar in nature she was to his leader. “Would you take or be taken?”

He had allowed her the lead, despite his rules. He wanted her to be satisfied.

Raven swallowed her sudden fear to ride the wind. “Taken!”

Edward obliged.

3

“Why won’t anyone help me?!”

Billy snapped awake at the mental shout.

The Reaper in his arms barely budged. Her naked body was still wrapped around his in sated snores.

Billy slowly untangled them and covered her with his cloak while he dressed. The nightmare replayed over and over in his mind. Leeann was in trouble. She was calling out in her dreams because she was afraid to ask for help while she was awake. “I’m going to kill him when we get there. At least now I know why.”

The Reaper stirred at the hint of his anger. “Is everything okay?”

Billy smiled at the woman as he pulled on his boots. “Right as rain.”

The woman chuckled, eyeing the clever tarp above them that he had erected in short minutes when the drizzle started. Then she went back to snoozing. “Thank you. May your journey be fruitful.”

“It’s my honor.” Billy donned his cloak and got ready to join his team. *I don’t need fruitful. I need speed. We have to go faster.*

He hurried off to rejoin Alexa and Daniel who were now taking the first steps back toward the wet, weedy road. They'd lost half a day here. It was more than time to go.

As dawn arrived—a reluctant light with little warmth—Alexa moved toward the cliffs that were now in reach. Within minutes, each of her men fell into their places. The light rain was a match to their moods.

Alexa felt their unhappiness. She scanned each of them and found only Daniel content with himself. “Why are my men restless after a slam?”

Edward refused to say it hadn't been as good because it wasn't her.

Billy didn't want to talk about the nightmare that had ruined his mood.

David enjoyed the cool breeze on his skin as they walked. “I don't feel a connection to anyone we meet. I'm barely connected to this team. Maybe I'm one of those souls who are supposed to end up alone.”

Jacob frowned at the morose Blacksmith. “Relationships just weaken you, hurt you, and change everything. Avoid it as long as you can.”

David didn't start an argument with the scarred Preacher. He understood Jacob's experiences in love hadn't been good. David's love life hadn't been anything. He'd never felt love for a female until Alexa and even that wasn't the same as being in love.

Mark admitted his issue with a sad sigh. “You and Claudia, Boss. No one else is good enough now. You’ve ruined me for other women.”

Alexa chuckled. “It’s my honor.”

Their bonds strengthened in that moment, even for Daniel. He knew exactly what Mark meant and he hadn’t had to have unsatisfying sex to see it. He also didn’t begrudge the others these moments. They had helped Raven and her family hold out a little longer against the rage illness that was slowly turning them into monsters. He respected Alexa even more for trying to help instead of just killing them.

“Thank you for sending more protection to Claudia and her group.” Mark didn’t mind that it was vampires. In fact, he was glad of it because Vera and Heather would be faster and stronger than human fighters.

Alexa handled his mental state like she felt he needed. “There’s no point in letting fear rule your mind. Either accept that it’s out of your hands or go to her right now and give up this quest.”

Mark scowled, hands clenching. “I won’t ever do that.”

Alexa’s kinder nature came out once again, drawing Edward’s attention.

“You don’t owe me for getting you out of that slam. After your performance on this journey, I consider us more than even.”

Mark snorted. “It’s not for that debt, which I do still owe. It’s about love of country. If Safe Haven

doesn't come home, all of this ugliness will keep getting worse. We have a chance to fix it. It would be so wrong not to do it that my happiness with her would wither away."

"I'm glad you know. Still, you've fulfilled your duty to me, as has Daniel. Either of you may go in peace and try to find the happiness that eluded you before this quest."

The two fighters responded immediately.

"Never."

"Thank you, no."

The rest of the team wondered if Alexa would also release them if they found a satisfying relationship.

Alexa increased her pace. "You do yourselves proud. Never doubt it."

"Do you think any of Raven's Reapers will survive?"

Alexa shook her head at David's quiet query. "But I refused to hurry it along, thus no blood was taken from them." Alexa was certain her men had obeyed her on that. "The rage illness doesn't allow for recovery and a long life. The best they can hope for is more moments like you've given them to delay it."

"Maybe I should have asked before we slept with them, but won't we be infected through sex?"

"No. Edward will tell you why."

Jacob glanced at Edward.

“We can’t be infected with other diseases now. The vampire venom kills everything. Also, the rage illness only attacks females as far as we know.”

Mark made sure his cloak was tied down properly. “Was that intentional?”

“Yes.” Alexa shared a theory she’d developed. “Whoever let this loose on the population knew women were going to take over. I believe they were trying to give the men a fighting chance.”

Jacob did a check on each team member. “But the rage is so ugly that it backfired and now even men are terrified to face it?”

“Exactly. Playing with the natural design never goes well for anyone involved.” Alexa decided it was time to change the subject. “We’ll reach Safe Haven Mountain tomorrow evening. I do not expect a generous welcome from anyone calling that haunted place home.”

Edward did have some hope of that. “The soldiers might be willing to trade with us. If so, we can get in there and dig around.”

“Maybe.” Alexa didn’t tell him how much she wanted that. She didn’t need to.

Billy also wanted it desperately. *Please don’t let me find her body. Please don’t let me find her body.* He couldn’t help the fear even though he had dreamed of Leeann calling for help.

“If conditions are favorable, we’ll stay a night there.” Alexa didn’t speak of his fear and make his anxiety worse, but she mentally echoed his plea. Billy had been through enough. “The ocean is a

week away now. Our journey has seen a lot of miles and challenges that most survivors would have run from. You've all done well."

Five of her men straightened and enjoyed the praise.

Edward studied her in concern at yet another display of kindness and comfort. *Something is very very wrong with her.*

"Will the people joining us be infected, too?"

Alexa chuckled at Mark's query. "I was waiting for someone to bring them up."

Mark shrugged. "Took me some time to figure out how to slide it in."

"Really? I thought you had that covered pretty well."

Everyone laughed as they understood her crude joke.

Alexa scanned for trouble and then rotated for a check of her entire team.

Jacob was right on time with his own check.

Alexa gave him a nod of approval, then rotated to face the front. Her men were chatty right now. She didn't shut it down. "I have no way to know if they'll be infected. I haven't had contact with most of my family in a long time."

Daniel frowned. "Why do you guys go so long without seeing each other?"

"Didn't you listen to the giant story?" David gestured. "They're not all like her."

“That is very true, though many are tolerable. I avoid them because I don’t want the job they’re always trying to insist that I take.”

“What job?”

Edward had already figured that out. He answered Daniel. “Head of household.”

Alexa’s lip curled. “Something like that.”

Daniel had been curious about how her family hierarchy worked for a long time. “Who has the job now?”

“My father, though not alone. We have a small council.”

Daniel was confused. “But Adrian hasn’t been here in years.”

“And that’s why they’ll try to give me the job, but my father is still leading them even though they don’t recognize it. Every choice he’s made since the war has benefitted our family.”

David didn’t argue with her. He was done blaming Alexa for Adrian’s mistakes, but he couldn’t agree with her opinion of that ruthless man. “Are any of them like you?”

“Yes.” Alexa shrugged. “They’re also like my father. Some traits are impossible to resist.”

“Like what?”

Alexa sent a wave of need over Mark and brought desire to life for both of them.

Mark chuckled. “Point taken.”

“David asked because he’s hoping for a single version of you.”

David snickered at Billy's teasing. "Or a double. I could go for another double."

"You never know what the future will hold, but I doubt you'll find that during the meeting in Port City."

Mark did a check of his team. "Why not?"

"Because they take their jobs too seriously to be distracted by drama until after the decisions have been made. Once it ends, they may come to you if you make a...memorable impression." Alexa laughed with her men and tried to find a way to ensure a great future for her team. David deserved a happy life after their quest was over. She didn't think he was going to get it, but there was nothing wrong with hoping for the best while planning for the worst. *I'll find a way to save them all. My word on it.* Her visions of that final battle were brutal and heartbreaking.

The sun slid behind another rain cloud, allowing shadows to blanket the land. The fighters didn't waver or slow. They kept their attention on their leader and followed her relentlessly, like they'd been doing all along, but they were glad of it. Walking in the light had become much harder for them since their encounter with the vampire baby.

Alexa swallowed the need to claim a different job that would give her this feeling in bigger waves. *I don't need it. I can live without it.*

Edward studied her again and tried to connect the clues he'd been gathering, but he didn't believe

it was physical this time. Whatever was wrong with Alexa was mental.

Daniel felt like talking. “So what do these potions do?”

So did Mark. He missed pillow talk. “And how do you know so much about potions, spirits, and charms?”

“Mitchels have always been interested in chemicals. The labs were a great place to learn what each chemical will do for us, to us. The scientists certainly enjoyed the experiments. So did my brother.”

The men frowned, understanding a little more of why she hated Elliot.

“Still, it taught us to use those things to survive, and to achieve our own goals. We pass that information to our family at rare gatherings, expanding our information banks. Most of us hide nuggets for ourselves, as well.”

“Your father told you.”

Alexa chuckled at Edward’s guess. “Of course. His notebooks were very detailed.”

“What happened to those books?”

“Some were lost in fights and flights. Others were stored for safe keeping. Most are gone now, I would imagine. We can’t leave them laying around for our enemies to find.”

Now they knew why she’d burnt the notebooks they’d found in the sewer stash.

“As for the potions, I’ll tell you when the time comes. There’s no point in being tempted to use them before they’re needed.”

“Not even a clue?”

Alexa shook her head. “Some temptations are too great, even for this crew.”

The sun rose higher as they wound up the mountain, cutting through their garments with painful blasts and making them all miserable.

Around noon, Alexa finally picked a dark crevasse in the mountain and led them to it.

Edward and Daniel climbed in eagerly, always willing to explore.

Their disappointment came a minute later.

“Just a hole, Boss.”

“Small and tight.”

Alexa swallowed another crude remark and joined them without putting anyone on guard duty. If an intruder woke them, it would be the last time they ever did so.

Exhausted, the team piled together along one cool, dark wall and settled in for sleep.

Billy begged for his to be dreamless. *I’m coming, Love. It’s just taking too long.*

Curled around Billy’s back, Alexa caught his thought and added her own vow. *If she’s dead before we arrive, I’ll help Billy find justice in any way he wants it.*

Chapter Eleven

The Context Is Missing

1

Alexa and her crew reached the snowy path to Safe Haven Mountain 15 days after leaving their den in Gainesville. It was another days' hard hike to where Safe Haven had lived; they found the remnants of border camps right as the sun began its descent.

Occasional tent poles were standing next to small graveyards of cars and trucks that were mostly buried in mud. Overturned Port-o-lets peered at them from the dust. Hundreds of rickety crosses waved in the breeze as they went by. The refugees who'd made this campsite had been dying, but they'd still stayed.

The remains of the camp stretched for over a mile, impossibly big to the seven fighters. Reminders of the old world were everywhere—books, stacks of chopped wood, rope, jugs, and mugs winked in the dim light next to lumps of mildewed trash that used to be clothes...or people. Bones and skeletons were scattered among the relics in every direction.

Alexa kept them moving. She was glad when the camp fell behind.

So were her men.

As they rounded a steep turn in the path, Alexa stared at a long runway that had been cleared on a nearby cliff. She doubted it had been used. That layer of concrete would remain for a century or more and never be used. It was sad.

They followed the snowy road through another narrow path between the peaks, and emerged into a bottleneck where the road shrank to a single lane and the dark cliffs around them revealed entrances into the mountain.

“Caves.” Jacob caressed the butt of his .357. It was about to get used again. He felt it coming.

The caves were set high into the stone, dark and ominous. The entire team unfastened their holsters in tandem. Danger was closer now.

The group hiked steadily past the first cave. As they neared the second entrance, Alexa slowed her steps. They were being watched again, and as usual, those eyes were full of madness.

Jacob did a check on his team. “Something moved behind us.”

Edward nodded. “In front, as well.”

“How many?” Alexa was keeping her attention on what might be ahead of them.

“Too many for being on the ground.” David’s tone was pointed, worried gaze returning to the dark caves they hadn’t reached yet.

The road narrowed again, squeezed by snow that had accumulated. It let them out into a flat area where several vehicles sat half-covered in snow.

The bodies in and around those jeeps wore familiar uniforms.

Edward picked out military gear and tattoos that proclaimed the same. “They didn’t make it into the mountain. That’s why we didn’t hear the soldiers bragging.”

Alexa had already come to that conclusion. “They likely stopped here for a night or two when the weather was bad or hunters came. They never left.”

“This isn’t all of them, though.” Billy had been counting corpses. “The radio calls said there were more than a hundred men in their group.”

“That’s who’s watching us.” Edward drew his gun.

“Incoming.” Jacob also drew his gun, heart thumping. Death was on his shoulder, gleefully picking out targets.

Human shapes emerged from the caves; red, insane faces bulged with hatred and infection. They leapt from the cliff ledges with strange, clever movements, their legs and naked, hairy bodies grotesquely distorted from the constant contamination in which they lived. Unlike Raven and her daughters, these were true dangers and the fighters stopped to face them like they always did. Gunfire filled the air in a ceaseless succession of sharp cracks and vivid blasts that rang out for miles.

The males formed a tight circle around their leader, weapons barking death as Alexa spun continuously in their protection.

Her deadly Colts picked off two horrors about to drop in on them from the snowy ledges. Alexa ducked a flying form trying to grab her and break their circle, firing into the creature as it went over. Blood sprayed.

It was salty copper in the stale air; the smell of it sent the cold haze of battle into her hands. She fired at everything outside their ring and didn't miss.

Soldiers fell from the cliffs around them, blown out of dark doorways and off jagged rocks as Alexa unleashed the ruthless part of herself that had brought them this far alive.

The men ducked to give her a clear line of fire. Their low aim handled the sick soldiers that had made it to the road. Their shots took a toll, too, but it was Alexa's twin Colts that made the most difference.

When Alexa knelt, reloading, her men stood straight, determined to do their share. More bodies fell, but the ill soldiers refused to give up. Nature's hatred was in them, fueling their attack.

When the men had to reload, Alexa was there to keep the death toll rising.

Shots echoed continuously as the soldiers also advanced in their awful, stumbling runs. The pile of corpses around the questers grew higher.

“Down!”

Alexa's shout put them all on the ground as a group of four attackers tried to jump into the circle together.

Bang-Bang-Bang-Bang!

In rapid succession, the four soldiers stumbled to the ground in sickening thumps and splatters.

Thud!

A fifth soldier dropped into the circle behind Alexa.

Jacob fired from the hip, nailing the slobbering monster in the head.

It's bloody hand gripped at her cloak as it fell, ripping the cloth, but Alexa paid no attention as she continued to shoot at threats coming from the caves.

How many are there?

Three dozen... No, four. And more soldiers leered at them from the caves, drawn by the noise. Their advantage was in how long it took the soldiers to reach a ledge on the steep cliffs that was close enough to lunge from.

“What the hell is that?!”

Edward's tone was awful to hear. Alexa followed his line of sight to where the sky was darkening too fast.

“A storm?”

She shook her head at Billy, then rotated and fired at another sick soldier about to jump at her from a cliff ledge. “Birds.”

Daniel fired at small forms scurrying toward them on the ground. “And rats.”

The hungry rodents had gathered around the fighters while they were distracted; the crew was now surrounded by dozens of dangerous predators.

Their circle wouldn't hold against something so small.

Alexa dug in her kit as Nature's army neared, and her men staved off the remaining two dozen soldiers with beautiful shots that she would admire later. Alexa pulled what she needed from the pouch and began to spin it.

She twirled the Caller in a high, tight arc, using a powerful arm to wind it up. The sound echoed through the area like a bomb blast.

"Whhoooooooooooo...!"

It went on and on, growing in pitch. Her men were relieved to see it having the same effect on these attackers as it had back in Nebraska. It drew them without exception.

"Whheeeeeeeeeee...!"

There seemed to be no end to how high it could go. The ear-splitting tones bounced off the cliffs in piercing waves.

The battle had frozen with the noise. All of their attackers had paused, listening with their heads cocked. Time seemed to slow as the Caller spun in a blur, holding them all spellbound, even the circling birds.

"Whhhiiiiiiiiiii....!"

Alexa's arm forced it to stop; the Caller wasn't exactly inanimate. She slung it to the ground at her feet.

"Whhoooo... thud!"

Alexa threw her hands out, where orange flames were now dancing on their tips. The fire made a

ribbon of heat that wound around her as she spun. The faster she went, the bigger the flames became. When she stopped, the flames didn't just surround her, they came from her, twining in and out of her body like a serpent while her demon face glared arrogantly at all of them.

A wall of flames slammed into the enemies closest to them, knocking the rats and birds into the cliffs, where they began to burn. Fire hands stretched out from her chest, reaching for the caves. The rocks crumbled under her assault, collapsing those entrances, and trapping the remaining soldiers inside.

There was a burst of movement as Nature's attackers now fled in terror.

Alexa's men reloaded and held their formation, waiting. It wasn't the first time they'd seen what was really inside of her; they weren't afraid of being hurt. They just wondered if they looked like that inside now, too.

Alexa slowly pushed the demon back into her mental place. She retrieved the Caller and stepped onto the road, smearing blood from her boots into the dirty snow. "Let's roll."

2

The snow clouds above them loomed near enough to touch as the group reached the summit of Safe Haven Mountain and entered the clearing from the main road.

Another long-deserted refugee camp was spread out in front of a main cave where cords swung in the heavy wind, their light bulbs broken. The weary travelers saw rotted boxes of supplies next to rusting animal pens, some with graying skeletons inside. There were personal items still set up for use, construction equipment covered in grit, and even spotlights plugged into huge generators attached to poles staked deep in the ground. These people had left everything, and that only happened when you were running for your life.

“They fled.”

Alexa nodded at Billy’s comment. “They had no choice. Whatever took the soldiers below also forced Safe Haven out of this den.”

Alexa moved away from her men. “Find the message. Spread out—watch your six.”

They walked with limited space between them, trying not to let frozen cars and snow-covered equipment block their view of each other. Pieces of debris shifted in the cold wind; each of them walked with their hands ready.

Daniel pointed to a ledge above the blocked main entrance, where words had been painted in red that had faded. “There.”

Radiation Zone! Get out!

And below that, in hastily chiseled letters, was what Alexa had come for.

Pitcairn Island

60 Lat 120 long

Pitcairn Island. Safe Haven really had gone on that merciless ocean. Now she had proof of it.

The silence was thick as each of her men considered what that meant. Nothing had halted their mission thus far, not storms or fires or even the wolves they'd had to fight their way through in the bloody fields of Nebraska. Alexa was as relentless as the ocean itself. They were going on the water next.

Considering the training they'd done in the lake, each of them felt true fear.

Alexa surveyed their surroundings again. This peak was contaminated. No true life would grow here, and really, was there any other choice? She'd spent her life following Adrian. She wasn't going to stop now. *We have to be strong enough to survive it.*

As if in reward for her determination, the wind shifted. Magic filled the cold air.

The ghosts of people swam into hazy view, becoming clearer, sharper. Each of the fighters stared, captivated, at Safe Haven as it had once been.

Across the camp, Angela sighed in relief and motioned the workers to keep going. Storm clouds were gathering and the wind was shoving in, meaning they wouldn't be able to keep going for much longer. She wanted this finished before the rain forced them under cover.

She scanned the cliffs around them, but couldn't feel the heat of Adrian's gaze. She knew he was there, waiting for her to signal him, waiting to carry out any chore she assigned. It was impossible not to miss him. He'd done more for her, for these people, than he ever got credit for. He'd known it would go this way; he had planned to sacrifice himself to force his camp off this continent so they would be safe. He didn't deserve this fate.

"Yes, Angie, he does."

Angela turned around to discover Jennifer standing behind her.

"I know you love him, and from your view, I guess I can even understand why. What I don't understand, is how you can be so strong and so smart, and not recognize him for what he is."

Angela glanced back toward the cliffs, letting her XO feel her pain for a brief moment. "He was taken from his mother, trained to kill, taught to betray our kind, and yet he created all of this. Evil can't build things, Jenny. It never creates. You know that."

"Half evil, then," Jennifer conceded. "He would have given us all up, if not for you. You know that."

Angela nodded. "Yes."

"Then you do see him for what he is!"

"Yes. I always have."

"And you followed him anyway, let him train you to..." Jennifer fell silent as she realized Angela

had taken power, not been gifted with it, as they'd thought all along.

"It was the only solution I could come up with." Angela sighed miserably. *"No one else was going to be able to cover everything. Because I'm a freak, I was the best choice."*

"You're not—"

"Stop."

Jennifer did. The revelation didn't shock her, didn't change her opinion of Angela, but it did fill in some of the unexplained parts. Falling for Adrian was a side effect of gaining leadership.

"I wanted it from the moment our eyes met." Angela kept scanning the dark cliffs. *"I knew he wasn't worthy. And now that I have it, I hate being responsible for all these lives."*

"You're good at it."

"Yes, but it comes at a high price. You'll find that out someday, I think. We'll see what doors open for you in the future. I'm positive you'll pick wisely."

"There's another entrance!" Billy's call drew them all to an open hole in the side of the mountain. In the vision, the entrance beckoned. Dozens of people came and went from the mountain lair. In one of the groups, a cute girl walked with her friends and giggled as they passed a familiar pony-tailed guard.

The vision was gone then, as suddenly as it had come.

Billy groaned in frustration. Thick snow and ice was covering that entrance. It would take days to dig their way in and they would be in danger the entire time from the lingering radiation.

“If you need to go in and make sure her body isn’t there, or lay it to rest, we’ll do so. I have iodine tablets. It might hold us for a few days.”

Alexa’s kindness drew Jacob’s attention this time, too. He and Edward stared at her.

David put his hand on Billy’s tense arm. “I was here the day they left, man. I rolled out right before the main group and found a high point to wait for the crowd to leave. I saw it all. They lost two people in the bugout and both were adults. Your girl didn’t die here. I would have told you that sooner, but I didn’t know you were worried about it.”

Billy held in tears. His mind had been playing images of her body rotting in there for a year now. “I had a nightmare. She was calling for me.”

Alexa was still working on that problem mentally, as she had been since finding out about it. “Did she know who you are in the dream?”

“She didn’t hear me at all. It’s like she’s trapped and can only get a call out. Nothing gets in.”

Alexa frowned. “It sounds like a DOC lock.”

“A what?” Mark scanned for problems while waiting for her answer.

“Descendants can be locked so they can’t access their gifts, like we’ll have to do in the final battle. There’s also a way to erase their memories, though

I've heard that only holds for a short time. DOC locks can hold forever under the right conditions."

Mark didn't like the sound of any of that. "Why would Safe Haven lock Billy's girl?"

Billy's face tightened. "To keep her from coming to find me."

"We'll be there soon, and then we'll know. Stressing over it only causes problems." Alexa rotated toward the path and then paused.

"Something's coming." Daniel picked it up quicker than the others this time, hand reaching for his radio.

"Nice."

Daniel shrugged off Alexa's praise. "It's not like it's hard to do."

Daniel's abrupt tone drew frowns from the men.

Alexa sighed. "Taking such a long break was a bad choice."

Daniel switched on the radio. The immediate noise made them all flinch.

"We're on her backtrail! She just killed all the soldiers up here at Stone Mountain. These bodies are fresh!"

The radio blared with a jumble of responses trying to get through.

"Shut it off." Alexa got them back on the road. "They're right behind us. Get ready."

Billy's sadness flipped to rage in an instant.

Jacob was also furious. “Shouldn’t we tell everyone those soldiers were ill and they attacked us?”

Alexa kept walking. “Would it do any good to claim self-defense? They already believe we’re the evil that stalks the night.”

Jacob realized she was right. “It just sucks. I hate you being blamed when you’re not guilty.”

“But I am. Those men are dead now, are they not?”

“Yes, but—”

“And I did it, did I not?”

“With help, but yes.”

“So only the context is missing.”

“The context is important!”

Alexa finished the unplanned lesson. “Agreed, but most people don’t care about the reasons why something happened. They want to assign blame and move on with their lives. A rare few actually want to determine what caused the problem so they can prevent it from happening again. It’s easier to lay blame and forget it than it is to change.”

Jacob got her point. “And that’s why we only have survivors now instead of peace.”

“Exactly.” Alexa’s hand went to her belt. “And speaking of survivors...”

The team rotated in tandem, putting Alexa in the rear, where she was harder to reach.

“I want no one to walk away from this encounter.” She hadn’t realized there were so many Gate Hunters. She was hoping this would be the

final time she had to kill any of them. They hated her and wanted what she couldn't give. They were stupid, but not evil and they were normals.

Edward held up his free hand. "Let them get close so we can verify it's the entire group."

A large crew of Gate Hunters crested the rise on foot and spotted the team. Dressed in thick plaid shirts and jeans, they were all thin, lightly packed, and almost frozen. Misplaced anger was the only thing driving them.

They ran forward, each hand clutching a weapon.

"I don't think they want to talk." Mark got set to draw his rifle. After so much practice, he now preferred it to his sidearm.

"Hold." Edward loved being the XO in moments like this.

The Gate Hunters shouted and ran faster, converging into a large mass of bumping, stumbling bodies.

"We want that blade!"

"Kill the Mitchel! Get her men!"

"Find the knife! She has to have it!"

Alexa used the moment as another training session, following her father's lead without guilt. "Spin and stab!"

Jacob and Mark drew out their nunchucks. They spun and advanced together, swinging the dangerous objects in a circle around themselves to slow the crowd. The twenty Gate Hunters didn't have guns in hand so far. Alexa's crew needed to

break up the crowd to keep the team from being overwhelmed.

Alexa also drew the nunchucks from her belt.

Even in a moment of danger, the men noticed it.

“Duck!”

“Boss has her spinners out!”

“Ah, shit!”

Mark and Jacob were already fighting through the front line. They couldn't stop and duck. They swung faster, delivering wounds and broken bones with vicious blows.

Edward and David crouched, using their knives to slash legs and stomachs as the mob swarmed them.

Daniel felt a blow coming and dropped to the ground.

Alexa's nunchucks flew by his shoulder as she struggled to control the new weapon.

Alexa spun the nunchucks harder, muttering.

Daniel stayed on the ground. Alexa was more dangerous than the mob.

More shouts and threats filled the air, along with screams and moans as the Gate Hunters fell to ugly injuries.

Alexa swung too hard and felt the nunchucks slip out of her cold grasp. “Heads up!”

All of her crew dropped to the ground this time.

The spinning weapon slammed into three big Gate Hunters and knocked them into the remaining mob. The weapon fell, hitting Mark in the side.

“Boss!”

“Damn.” Alexa drew her gun. She opened fire on the mob, making up for her mistake by clearing the rest of the threat.

There were no survivors.

Chapter Twelve

Enemies

1

Fanatic Camp

“**T**he soldiers are dead.” Crystal raised her voice to be heard over the fanatics who were once again arguing about what to do next. “The soldiers in the mountain are dead!”

Silence slowly fell through the graveyard. Covered in thick weeds and vines, it was the perfect place to plot and fight, but it was a bad place to live. They’d been here for a month now and flaring tempers had become violent.

Delilah lowered her fist. “Say that again.”

The fanatic she’d been hitting swung, nailing Delilah in the cheek.

Crystal lifted her arms in victory toward the cold afternoon sun. “They’re gone! Alexa killed them. There’s only Soldier Town left!”

“The Mitchel is against us.”

Delilah waved off an older woman’s comment as she rose to her feet. “Alexa Mitchel is against everyone who takes something that’s hers. If they’d just left her out of it, she never would have hunted us.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she has a harem of her own! She’s been running around with those six men for a year. She has her own slaves. Now it’s time that we got ours back!”

Most of the fighting fanatics began celebrating, forgetting their anger over the meeting that had gotten out of control.

Delilah kicked out, taking her opponent to the ground. She put a knee on the woman’s throat, cheering with the others.

Crystal shut off the radio and pulled her mother up easily with her new strength. “Let it go.”

Delilah kicked the choking woman and stood. She stomped the woman in the chest and then marched into the center of the graves. “We can conquer Soldier Town and have slaves again! We can do it now!”

“We need gear.” Crystal smiled as the other women scanned Delilah and muttered. “And I have an idea I think you’ll all like.”

Delilah wiped her bloody fist down her red shirt. “Let’s hear it.”

And all of them were listening now. When Crystal spoke, the words usually mattered. She’d built a solid reputation among their kind.

“Bunker 11 has been calling for fighters, for guards, for hunters, for doctors. We’ll split into small groups and apply for those jobs. As soon as we’re outfitted, we meet near Soldier Town and use that gear to wipe them out.”

Delilah smiled. “That’s my girl.”

The woman Delilah had been fighting crawled toward her as the other women agreed on the plan.

Delilah felt it coming even without her daughter's pointed looks. She kicked backward, catching the crawling fanatic in the chin.

The woman's head snapped back with a loud crack. She dropped to the ground with blood rolling from her ear.

Delilah didn't stare at the body; she didn't care. She scanned the group for the next threat. "Do we all agree with Crystal's plan?"

A loud cheer filled the graveyard.

"Wait! One more thing." Crystal regained their attention. "I'm sick of the infighting. I'm calling a leadership vote right now. I want my mom in charge of this battle. She's mean enough to make this happen."

Another small squabble broke out among the women.

Delilah sat on one of the headstones to wait it out. Despite telling her daughter that she was too old to be in charge, she absolutely did want the job.

"Shut up!" Crystal once again got them in order. "Let's hear what she has to say."

Delilah knew she needed something special here, but the rage illness was eating away at her control. She kept it short and sweet. "We'll take Soldier Town and get those slaves or I'll sacrifice every one of your lives in the attempt. We will win or die."

The other females let out a shout that surprised Delilah. She hadn't realized how far gone they were. "I get it now. You're all insane."

The women cheered louder.

Crystal hid her smile and her fangs and watched as her mother was chosen to lead them.

2

Bunker 11

"How are you enjoying leadership?"

"It's a hard job and I love it."

"We're glad you're here for us, Madam President."

Jerry rolled his eyes at the sucking up happening on the other side of the door. He was in the communication room using the computer while Jeanie and her loyal minion strolled the busy bunker and acted like they were doing something important.

Jerry had been brought on board here shortly after Alexa named Jeanie Pro Tem. Jeanie had been eager to welcome any enemy of the Mitchel, but he'd been hired instead of enslaved because he delivered wild game by the truckful. He was an excellent hunter and the bunker was filling up with stomachs that had to be sated or it would weaken Jeanie's leadership and reputation.

"Are you ready to tour the lab?"

“I want to check on messages first. You can make sure the hounds have been fed.”

“I’ll do it right now and meet you in the lab.”

“Fine.”

Jerry typed faster. He hadn’t expected the women to come here yet. This was usually Jeanie’s last stop on her rounds.

The door began to open.

Jerry sent the message and then disconnected the link. He straightened, hand going to his knife hilt as Jeanie entered the room.

Jeanie paused, surprised at finding a male in here alone. “Jerry, right?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing in here? Men aren’t allowed to use the technology.”

Jerry considered attacking her and running off, but he didn’t want to lose the box of gear he’d gathered from the weapons room. He still had one more long, cold trip to make through dangerous territory. “I was sending an alert.”

“Who gave you permission to do that?”

Jerry thought fast. “One of your guards said to send an alert about undead near the main entrance.” Jerry retreated as Jeanie approached. He would fight to get out if he had to, but killing the Pro Tem might even bring Alexa back here and that wasn’t part of the plan.

Jeanie motioned him over by the door. She didn’t want him so close in this small space. Her left

hand went to the gun in her pocket while her right hand opened the activity log.

Jerry tensed as she found his message. He tried to think of an excuse she would buy.

Jeanie read it aloud. “There are more slaves and traitors hiding in the bunkers around you. Don’t stop hunting for the revenge you deserve.”

Jeanie saw it was directed to an older bunker that was supposed to be empty. Her fast mind added the clues. “Marcella.”

Jerry prepared to run.

Jeanie deleted the copy of the message and then cleared the activity log. “You should go now, before someone else discovers you.”

Jerry gawked. “Aren’t you going to arrest me? Or at least warn Alexa?”

Jeanie smiled coldly. “Why would I do that? I want her dead as much as you do.”

Jerry didn’t know what to say.

Jeanie did. “Gear up and get out. If you come back here, one of my protectors will claim you as their slave. Free men are about to become even rarer.”

Jerry didn’t ask why again or what was happening to the other free men. “Thank you for your hospitality, Madam President.”

Jeanie smothered the pride and inclined her head. “Happy hunting.”

Jerry strolled toward the exit. “The hunting part is finished. Now, I just need her to keep rolling east.

Don't pull her away from the quest and you may never have to see her again."

Jeanie let him go without answering, but her thoughts were ugly. *She'll end you, my reckless, brave friend, and then continue on to her father. You're not man enough for Alexa Mitchel.*

Jeanie shut off the computer to conserve power. "But it never hurts to let you piss her off and give her another target. When she finds out you've put Marcella on the hunt for her friends and family, there won't be any place you, or Marcella, can hide from that rough Mitchel justice."

Jeanie went out into the quiet hall and shut the door. "This just keeps getting better and better."

3

Bunker 09

"A message just came in, for you."

Marcella rotated the chair. "A direct message?"

Nichole was still typing. "It came from Jeanie's bunker."

Marcella came over to the screen, frowning. "If it's another general message, just delete it."

"She'll know we opened it."

"I don't care about that." Marcella hadn't responded to any of the laws or messages Jeanie had sent to all bunker locations, mostly because they didn't have anything to bargain with yet. They still didn't.

The small bunker was clean and quiet around them now. Their troops were on downtime. The two women were in this command room alone.

“It’s not a threat. It’s a warning.” Nichole tilted the monitor so Marcella could read it.

Marcella studied the words thoughtfully. “That’s not from Jeanie.”

“No. And it’s the second one we’ve gotten like this.”

“It seems the Pro Tem has her own traitor. Beautiful.” Marcella read the message again. “Let’s take that advice.”

Nichole switched the screen back to her program and resumed typing. “I’ve almost gotten through the passcodes for this location. The program I created will be finished in a few more seconds.”

“Good.” Marcella swiveled to the front of the command center. This bunker only had a few rooms. It was just meant to hold supplies or a squad of troops being transported between stations, but it was perfect for her small group of twenty. It was also a honeypot. If she stayed here, Jeanie would continue to grow without interference.

“I’m in!” Nichole moved the screen again. “I have a list of active bunkers.”

“How many?”

“Five. This one, Jeanie’s, and three more. One is deep in the west and has to be ours based on the location. The other two are Midwest and borderlands.”

Marcella studied the large screen as Nichole switched the map to the main monitor. “Details on them?”

Nichole scanned the data. “The deep west is definitely ours. The population count dropped again.”

“That was expected, as we summoned most of the fighters for our failed battle with the Mitchel. Without troops there to keep control, chaos took over.”

“The Midwest bunker is locked, but I can tell the power is on.” Nichole kept typing, trying to get more details.

“Cameras?”

“Maybe, but I’m still trying to get into that part of the system.”

“What about the last one?”

“I’m showing a single person, Captain Green.”

Marcella tensed. “Green survived?”

“It appears so.”

Marcella’s mind flew through the possibilities. “Pull up anything you can on that bunker.”

“I only have access to the supply numbers there right now.”

“That’s a start. What’s he been using?”

Nichole scanned the lists. “Food, water, medical gear...” Nichole paused. “That’s interesting.”

“What?”

“He’s using the search system to locate specific gear.”

“What has he been searching for?”

“Books, on newborns and birthing.”

Marcella leaned back. “He’s not alone.”

“I see calls to *this* bunker before we sacked it.”

“This bunker was full of Alexa fans. They were screaming for her while we enjoyed the spoils. Which means...Green switched sides.” Marcella studied the red dot blinking steadily on the map. “Now what would make him do that?”

“A deal with Alexa?”

“What deal would she make with him? He doesn’t have anything she needs. None of us do.”

“We’ve heard she’s sending people to protect a group of survivors in the west.”

“He’s in a bunker.”

“Maybe he’s hiding with a woman.”

“No, Green was an obsessed zealot when we met. That wouldn’t allow for a relationship.”

“Then he’s protecting someone.”

“Yes. Find out who it is and start prepping for our next conquest. We’re not staying in this honeypot. We have a Midwest target now.”

4

Claudia’s Homestead

“Alexa wouldn’t do that. There has to be a reason.” Marshal patrolled the front of the camouflaged house, avoiding the holes by the windows that held hibernating snakes.

“Maybe the soldiers attacked her.” Claudia forced her large stomach back into the sweatpants that were getting too small.

“Maybe. I think she’s being blamed for someone else’s actions.” They’d listened to the radio in dismay. The previous transmissions seemed to lend proof to the accusation. Marshal knew there was more to the story, but he wasn’t going to call Alexa for details and maybe give away their location.

“They all hate her in the east, so that’s possible.” Claudia belched and flushed. “Sorry.”

“More room out.” Marshal took her arm to assist her up the porch steps. The girl insisted on coming out three times a day for a full walk of the perimeter. It was great exercise, but Marshal assumed that would have to stop soon. Her stomach was growing bigger by the day.

“Great job finding that deer. It will hold us for another week.”

“Good. I’ll go hunting again in a few days and see what else is out there.” Marshal had drained the blood, even cooling a few jugs in the nearby creek, and brought back the meat to feed their growing household. It had worked out well.

Claudia put her hands on her back and rubbed lightly. Carrying this much new weight in front made her spine hurt. “What do you think of Vera and Heather?”

“Good kids. A little behind in the times, but they are vampires.”

Claudia laughed.

Marshal chuckled with her and tried to ignore his bad feeling.

Claudia's mirth faded. "I feel it, too. Something's going to happen soon."

Marshal swept the empty landscape around the house that was bathed in deep sunset shadows. "I think we should relocate to a new den. Too many people have tracked us here."

"Just hunters and vamps." Claudia tried to smile again, but the bad feeling increased. "I'll talk to the others about it."

The rest of their group was cooking, studying, sewing, or cleaning. There was always something that needed to be done.

"Take a nap before dinner. You look tired."

Claudia rubbed her active stomach. "I wish he could be here for this."

Marshal was supportive. "He'll be back when they finish their quest." He also wanted Alexa and her team to return soon.

Now Claudia scowled. "If he survives."

"Alexa will keep your man alive. It's her job. And she loves them. It would kill her to lose even one." Marshal gestured. "Or to lose you. Go take that nap now."

Claudia was grateful for the help Alexa had sent. She tried to have faith. "I will."

Marshal resumed his patrol as the door shut and locked.

He strode by a deep hole along the basement window without glancing down. He didn't like to look at the snakes in there. None of them did.

In the hole, human eyes opened and glittered in the cool dirt.

Bright scales shifted slightly as the Elder curled around the other sleeping reptiles. Her mind ran through the conversation and cemented a plan. Then she went back to sleep, waiting for the right time to strike.

5

The Caravan

"Potions, spirits, charms..." Jendon kept packing the potions into his wagon as he called to the newest arrivals he could hear walking through the caravan. The sun was setting and most of the merchants were making a meal.

"Charms..." Jendon paused, catching a familiar scent. He rotated with a welcoming smile. "Master..."

Yani glared. "Hello, Jendon."

Four of Yani's tribe stood behind him, also glowering at the troll.

The human merchants in the caravan observed in disapproval, assuming Jendon was once again getting customers that should have been theirs.

Yani stepped closer. "We'd like a word with you, about several topics."

Jendon blinked. His red brows came together; his long yellow hair rolled up, adding height... And then he fled, moving so fast that even the vampires couldn't stop him.

His cart jerked forward and then he was gone, leaving a cloud of dust.

A loud cheer came from the other vendors.

Yani held up a hand to stop his group from chasing the wayward troll. "We'll meet him again, I'm sure."

Finding a troll on Alexa's backtrail wasn't a surprise. Everyone in their tribe knew of Jendon's mistake and punishment. Outcasts survived as best they could. Joining a human caravan was odd, but not a rarity. The surprise was in how the other vendors were reacting.

Shopkeepers surrounded Yani's group, shaking hands while offering rewards and gratitude.

"Thank you for getting rid of him."

"We don't want creatures here."

"We couldn't do that. Thank you."

"Take this gold dust."

"Can we offer you anything?"

Yani took advantage of the situation. "We seek information about a group of questers who came through here. Six men with a hardass blonde woman."

The vendors scowled, muttering.

"He means the woman gunner."

"She dealt with the troll before us!"

"She bought slaves and gave them away."

A thin woman who sold coffees and teas from plants she grew in her truck eased closer to Yani's strength. "I thought she was going to kill us all."

One of the vendors cracked a hard laugh. "Raven and her Reapers didn't mind. I heard they spent the night with her girls. Might be some Reapers will have a baby quester come fall."

Mirth went around the group.

Yani's tribe didn't laugh. Anger came off them in waves.

"More hybrids." Yani's fangs descended.

The vendors began to realize their mistake. They retreated. The smartest one took off running toward his truck.

Yani bared his fangs eagerly. "Dinner is served."

The vampires attacked, doling out fast injuries that stopped the humans from escaping but didn't kill them yet.

The single man who'd ran made it to his truck and peeled out of the site. He was swallowed by Jendon's dust cloud.

Yani let him go because he drove west. No one would be allowed to go east and tell Alexa what they were doing. Her Gainesville den had been empty; her trail was easy to follow. All they had to do was search for bullet-ridden bodies left to rot, or withered husks that had been drained dry. They'd found both over the last weeks.

Yani held the sobbing coffee and tea woman by the throat. "Where are these Reapers?"

The woman pointed south; she wasn't getting enough air to speak.

Yani smiled coldly. "Thank you."

He bit into her neck, moaning. He didn't have to take blood anymore, but there was nothing else on the planet that he enjoyed more.

Chapter Thirteen

I Did Something Different

1

“**D**o you want to listen to the evening address if she’s able to get through this time?” Daniel knew Alexa was listening for something from Jeanie, though he hadn’t figured out what it was yet.

“Yes.” Alexa scanned the silent, cold environment outside the small cave where they were taking shelter from the heavy snow. They’d made it to the bottom of the mountain in record time. It seemed fine on this side of the stone cliffs, with no signs of radiation or threats, but the weather was too much even for them. “I expect the Pro Tem to break our deal as soon as she’s sure we’re far enough away.”

That explained why Alexa had been listening to the radio more than usual.

Billy barely stopped another rant about Jeanie being put in charge.

Daniel tuned the radio and found it quiet. “Maybe we’re late.”

“Or early.” Alexa motioned at Jacob to serve the meal. “Leave it on while we eat.”

Daniel increased the volume and set the radio near the fire where it wouldn't be forgotten when they broke camp. He would charge it up using the solar pack in the morning. He did that every day while they got ready for travel. He couldn't do it while they walked because the metal pieces might glint in the sunlight and draw attention.

"What's the estimate for contact with our backup?" Edward glanced over. "I'm almost finished with the first list of supplies and gear we'll need for a larger group."

Alexa chuckled. "And fishing for information again."

Jacob sniggered. "Told ya she'd catch it."

Edward shrugged, smiling. "Had to try."

Alexa settled against the cave wall and rested her hands over her growling stomach. "Because Mitchels rarely come together, things can get wild, dangerous. Some will view it as an opportunity for vengeance, while others will take the moment as a sign that it's time to match mates and plot about making the family larger, stronger. A few will use it to record stories of survivors or to fill in new gaps in our line."

"So they can fill them with their own matches?"

She shook her head at Edward. "So they can determine if it's time to challenge someone for a seat on the council that guides our family into the future. There's no way the council will miss this moment even though my father isn't here to chair them. The apocalypse changed everything."

Daniel wanted to know what to expect. “Can we also assume there will be fights, schemes, and death?”

“I certainly hope so.”

The men snickered with her, but none of them were sure if she also meant that.

Daniel kept the conversation going. “Are you close with them?”

“Absolutely not. But we’re Mitchels. A few visits in our lifetimes are usually more than enough contact. We tend to avoid pushing those moments. It’s not good for us to kill each other.”

Daniel grinned. “And yet you’re hoping for deaths.”

“I didn’t specify *who* would be dying, my pet.”

Edward snorted. “Good one.”

“And do we show our...lack of normal?” Jacob hated to say the word despite loving his new state of being.

“If we need to. I doubt my family will miss it.”

Jacob stirred the pot. “A lot of rumors have spread by now.”

Edward nodded. “Speaking of rumors, what are the odds we’ll run into any of Marcella’s people? Or Jeanie’s?”

“Poor.” Alexa sniffed the air. Her nose slammed shut at the odor of the food Jacob was finishing. “Both women are hoping we’ll die on our quest, but they know better than to try arranging it. The best they can hope for is to hurt someone I love.”

Billy controlled his wince, but his mind went straight to that purple Hummer, to Cedrick climbing in behind him while the drugs prevented any resistance.

Mark thought of Claudia.

“There are some hospitality rules. The biggest is that guests never have to cover their basic needs. Whoever calls a meeting has to provide food, drink, shelter, and information. Those arriving will certainly bring supplies to help with that, but it isn’t required.”

“Do you mean for those we’ll meet in Port City, or just the ones joining us before we go in?”

Alexa paused to smile at Edward. She loved his fast mind. “The joiners. As my XO, you will be responsible for their needs and comfort. The rest of your team will help, but it falls on you to make sure it’s correct.”

“Does it need to be anything specific, or will what we already have suffice?”

“Any decent food, drink, shelter, and information is fine.”

“Wait. Information? I’ll be telling them what we’re doing?”

“No. You’ll tell them to act like Mitchels when they demand to know my plans. We never share those until the moment arrives.”

“Good to know. What else?”

“There is no rule about behavior. As such, things often get out of hand among our family. It’s part of who we are. You must keep the peace as

much as possible. If you fail to stop a fight, it looks bad.”

“And I assume I can’t just knock someone out to stop that fight.”

“Violence can never be a first resort. You must match my aloofness and choices as much as possible.”

Edward caught her tone. “I’m sensing this is getting personal.”

She stared at him openly, letting him see her feelings. “It is.”

Edward didn’t push for more on that topic. As long as Alexa wanted him, he was willing to do whatever it took to be accepted by her family. “As someone who has to cover information, I’d like to ask what’s wrong with you and get a straight answer.”

Everyone went quiet, staring between them.

Alexa’s contentment faded. Her eyes went cold. An icy breeze ran through the cave. “I want Jeanie’s job.”

Edward wasn’t surprised. “And?”

“I’m forcing myself to accept that I can’t have it.”

Edward was relieved that it wasn’t something bad. “Don’t give up on that, Boss. Maybe the rules can be changed.”

“No. They were put in place to protect the normals.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing all along?”

Alexa chuckled, but her tone wasn't warm. "My byzan side is tempting me. Speak of it no more. I will not change my mind."

"As you wish."

Alexa took the bowl from Jacob and scooped a hearty bite.

Jacob quickly backed away.

Tears came to Alexa's eyes as she forced herself to swallow. She couldn't make herself repeat the move. "What the hell happened? You were getting better."

Jacob cringed. "I did something different."

"Obviously. What?"

"I cooked."

Alexa scowled instead of laughing. "Say that once more."

"The others have been doing it for me, so we don't have any more torpedo nights. It was impossible to do that right now with you watching everything."

The others braced for a scold.

Now Alexa's amusement rang out. "And kept me from noticing. Very nice."

She scowled at Jacob. "Them, not you. You're in deep shit."

Jacob took the bowl from her.

Alexa drank from her canteen. She hated punishing her men, but if she let him get away with this, it would encourage his disrespect. "Eat it. All of it. Keep going until every last bite is gone."

Jacob's face went green. His stomach flipped over. "I'm sorry."

"I believe you. Get to it."

Jacob didn't think about refusing. He deserved it for lying to her. Jacob sat on his bedroll and got started.

Alexa wasn't done. "Though I admire your skills, I'm the leader here. If you hide things from me, then I'm not really in charge. Get over there and help him with the first bowl—all of you."

The men hurried over, happy to help Jacob. He'd made a large pot. It would take a while to consume.

David gulped down huge bites, trying to spare his teammates.

Mark swallowed and then belched painfully. "How can you do that to food?"

Jacob was embarrassed. He lashed out. "How can you sleep around on that girl?!"

Mark shoved the bowl back without taking another bite. "I refuse to commit to something that may only be in my mind. If she wants me when this quest is finished, then we'll get married and I'll be loyal for every second of it."

Jacob was sorry he'd snapped. He glared in remorse. "I'd be there for the wedding."

"You will be, as long as you survive this punishment." Mark went out into the snow next to their camp and threw up.

David was sure he'd be doing the same shortly. He still shoved in big bites and hoped the upset stomach didn't last long.

Edward was very aware of his teammates right now. He recognized David's behavior. The blacksmith was still trying to earn his way back into everyone's good graces. "You were forgiven for your doubt."

"That's your perception." David took the empty bowl over to the pot and filled it while taking more bites.

Edward shrugged. He didn't have a problem with David helping Jacob. *But I'm not eating any more of that.* "Did you even taste it before giving her a bowl?"

Jacob shook his head.

"Have some respect!"

"I will from now on."

"You have to learn to do this, rookie."

"I will. I'm sorry."

Edward sighed. "So am I. I should have insisted you learn instead of covering for you."

Jacob grimaced. "I'm going to be sick a lot tonight."

David bumped into the pot and knocked it to the ground. The rank soup splattered along the cave wall. "Damn it!"

The men held in laughs.

Alexa stood and pinned him with cold blue eyes.

David maintained his innocent anger. “I got a cramp and tripped.” He took the bowl he’d filled over to Jacob.

Jacob began shoving it in, grateful for his team.

Alexa turned away before she let them see she wasn’t angry. It was another sign that her team was bonded. They cared for each other and that meant more to her than a punishment that was too harsh anyway.

Alexa’s stomach twisted, causing her to stumble.

Her team regarded her in surprise. She was never clumsy.

Alexa’s hands went to her stomach. “Full steam ahead, my pets. We’ll kill them with something and it won’t be kindness.”

The radio let out a belch of static.

Edward drew his gun.

“Bunker 09 has fallen! There are bodies everywhere.” The woman’s voice was cruel. “But they’re only men, so let’s drink a toast, ladies. We’re another bunker closer to ruling the world!”

Alexa’s crew felt the pain from the deaths of soldiers they’d never met.

Alexa tried to figure out who was making the call. “Do any of you recognize that woman’s voice?”

No one did.

The responding cries of victory made her stomach roll harder. “Shut it off.”

Daniel did it quickly, not sure how to handle his anger this time. Men were being hurt, enslaved, killed, and those sickos were celebrating it. “I don’t understand the new world we’re living in, Boss.”

Alexa motioned him over. “It’s the same world, Daniel. The people have just gone insane. All you can do is follow your honor.”

Daniel rested his head against hers when she leaned against him. “Thank you for proving not all females are like that. I don’t want to hate anyone, including our enemies. Hatred is a festering wound that causes ugly things to happen in your mind.”

Alexa knew he was talking about his suicide attempt. “You have a loving team to help keep those nightmares at bay now. Never forget that.” She kissed his cheek.

“I won’t.” Daniel tugged his cloak open and wrapped it around her to protect them both from the cold.

In the distance, cheers echoed again, not needing the radio to travel. Another group of men were gone. The future, cold and dark, offered no comfort—only Alexa did.

2

“Don’t make any sudden moves until I assess the situation.” The threat wasn’t in view yet, but Alexa still felt it.

Finally at the ocean, the view that met the relentless warriors was the same as everywhere else—a drab landscape with nothing moving but grit and debris. The sound of the ocean was loud to them. A thick line of trees was all that separated them from the huge body of water that some of them had never viewed in person.

Alexa increased their pace, hands dropping to her guns. Danger was in front of them, and it carried a deeper sense of menace than most of the enemies they'd faced on this trip. This was something she had worried over for most of their quest. The water was there, but they couldn't reach it.

They moved through the trees and stopped in surprise.

“What the hell is that?!” Edward was already tired of asking that question.

“Sand guardians.” Alexa had only seen drawings in her father's notebooks. “I wasn't sure if they would be here.”

To get to the water, to follow Safe Haven, they would have to defeat the totally remorseless masses of grit and glass. This would not be the easy victory of their last fights. The sand guards would never stop. They had no fear to prey upon and no weaknesses.

Alexa's mind spun furiously.

The men around their clever leader waited silently. They had no experience with the seven-foot monsters defending the coastline.

It had taken them another day to reach the vast expanse of the ocean. The sights were even less encouraging than what they'd found on other shorelines. The main difference was the water.

It stank here, horribly, like mildew and rot; it was strong enough to sting their noses. The ocean was sour. There were no signs of life in its dark depths, no birds overhead, and nothing moved on the beach except for the sand guards, who had just noticed them standing a quarter mile away. Waves of menace surged in their direction.

With a heart not quite pounding yet, Edward made a gesture to the other men, and was rewarded by them falling into the protection detail they had learned together so long ago. Controlling the grin that wanted to spread across his face—he loved proof of his position—Edward circled the group with his hands resting on the butts of his guns.

Alexa scanned her crew in open concern. They wouldn't survive this. Even vampires stood no chance against sand guards.

She regarded Edward, tone emotionless. "Stay here."

He nodded, face asking her not to go alone, but the blonde strode toward the beach with a curt motion that none of her team could mistake. *Stay here!*

The cloaked leader trotted down the roughly sloping hill of stinking sand at a fast pace; dark grains shifted treacherously beneath her boots. She studied the enemy, but she found not a single place

to slide through the line of sword-wielding warriors. The monsters were guarding the water's edge as far as she could see. There was no way she could get by them alone, and yet she marched steadily closer as the wind howled in warning. She needed to determine the battle line.

The beach guardians were moving now, flexing, preparing to fight.

Alexa marked the spot with a memory of the rock pattern. She saw their cone-shaped bodies spread eagerly into long, clawed hands and fast, sleek legs. That was the alert line. Good to know, but she needed the place that would make them charge; she kept going as each creature drew its sand sword and hissed angrily.

The sound was revolting, like nails on a chalkboard. Alexa swallowed an automatic flinch. That would have to be taken into account, as well. If it could draw such a reaction from her, it would likely disable her men for seconds at a time during the fight. That was another strike against them surviving.

Glittering, malicious eyes watched as she approached the tangled brush that lined the beach. Alexa saw their shifting muscles ripple and their tense, gritty fingers tighten on glinting hilts. Before her boots touched the foul-smelling shoreline, the guardians left their posts, coming to greet her—all of them.

Alexa stopped abruptly.

The guards traveled like tornadoes, legs spinning furiously as their long arms stretched out for her.

Alexa stayed still a moment longer, noting how they automatically adjusted for two of the largest that were viciously blowing through the mob to reach her first. They were the Generals; she marked them well.

Alexa got moving as the creatures made it to the brush. She hurried back the way she'd come.

Glad to not hear them on her heels, she didn't stop until she was at the top of the slick rise with her team.

She spun around to find the sand guards had already resumed their constant vigil near the murky water, swords sheathed. There was one more thing she needed to know. "When did they turn back?"

Edward had that answer. "The second you were out of the brush they stopped. The two with the ruby eyes went a few feet into the weeds and then motioned the others back. They were the last to resume their posts."

Alexa waved a hand at the dense thicket of decaying trees that lined the road to their right. "We'll stay there."

Her gaze stayed a moment longer on the restless black waves. There were jeers in the roar of the ocean, arrogance in its defenders. No one like her had been here yet to challenge them. Or they hadn't survived the encounter. That was always possible.

She followed her team with a grim mood. *This might be an enemy we can't defeat.*

3

They set camp deep in the petrified forest that was half a mile wide and much deeper. It was out of sight of the sand guardians that were still watching for them from the shoreline.

Soon to leave the country where they'd been born, emotions weren't allowed to disrupt the flow of their quest, but they were felt. The fighters couldn't see the endless water they were going to cross, but they could hear the mocking roar. It warned them that the battle to leave would be fierce.

Nestled between two thick trunks, Alexa sat outside the flap of their tent, enjoying the warmth of the large bodies around her. "Some of our kind have the ability to produce monsters from their mind. The old world jokingly called them conjurers. Like us, they were myth and legend, but the sand demons you saw today are proof that such creatures exist, even if you overlook yourselves."

"How do we fight them?" Edward was sure any blows or bullets would go right through the sand warriors without harm. "Do they have a heart or brain?"

"They are held together mostly by the will and power of their conjurer. Once such beings have been conjured for so long, they develop a life of their own. Even if their creator dies, they retain half

of their will to exist. There is no heart or brain. They cannot be swayed or scared.”

Her men were unhappy with her information. They didn't know how they would win this fight.

“If Nature conjured them, we may not be able to defeat this barrier.” Alexa didn't say that would trap them here. There were always other options. “If their creator is a descendant, we have a shot.”

“You think there's a conjurer nearby.” Mark grinned at her approval for being first in thought again.

“Yes. I have not found such creatures anywhere but here. It makes sense that they're protecting Port City from invaders.” Alexa glanced toward the ocean. “Everything is vulnerable to water. It's the single hardest threat to survive in any environment.” Her tone dropped. “And we're going on it soon. It will either allow us to finish our quest, or kill us.”

The men felt something coming, catching it together this time. They all turned toward Alexa.

Alexa was now listening to the whispers in the woods around them. “For our next challenge, we're going to Port City to meet my family and kill a conjurer. That's why I called them together. This is a challenge we cannot conquer alone.”

Chapter Fourteen

They're Perfect

1

Silence met Alexa's announcement.

"I have not been to Port City since before the war." She handed Edward a carefully covered sheet of folded paper. "Draw up a training plan for triple our size."

The honor lit up his face. "Now?"

He waited a brief second to verify her answer, then moved off to a secluded corner of the small camp.

Alexa waved Jacob to cover Edward, then she joined Daniel and Billy on the rotating watch. "Our company is close."

Things were going faster now. In two days, they would play a card, take a chance, and then it would be fate's turn to flip one. *Will there be a ship? Can we get through Nature's line? Did I risk their lives for nothing?*

Daniel could almost feel the eyes on them. "When will they arrive?"

Alexa swept the eerie, dead forest. "Shortly."

All of the men tensed. They weren't ready to share their time with Alexa.

"Good or bad?"

Alexa shrugged at Billy. “There is both in each of us. It’s mankind’s fatal flaw.”

Alexa spoke a bit louder, so her voice would carry through the trees. “We will be joined by two groups much like ours. They are seasoned fighters to help with the quest. They will view us the same. The third group only seeks to gain what they’ve missed in the past.”

Edward asked what they were all thinking now. “Who leads?”

Alexa forced out a reasonable answer. “We will come to an agreement.”

“I won’t follow someone else!”

She focused on Mark with a hard tone. “Even if I do?”

Mark flushed, but his voice didn’t change. “I follow you!”

Instead of a scold, she gave the truth. “It would be no easy task for me to step aside.” Alexa let out a rough sigh that none of her men cared for. “We will do whatever we have to so that we may complete our quest.”

The men didn’t argue, but it was clear they were going to at some point.

Billy studied the shadows now. He could almost hear their company getting closer. “I assume our guests will be Mitchels and their crews.”

Alexa shook her head. “Mitchels with Mitchels.”

“What?”

“They’ll have their children and mates along.” She answered the next question before it could be asked. “When you marry a Mitchel, you lose your name in place of ours.”

“Males, too?” Billy glanced at Edward, who was listening raptly.

“Yes.” Alexa confirmed the future she hoped to enjoy. Her team already knew anyway. It would become public knowledge when they merged with the other groups that were coming. “He’ll be Edward Mitchel.”

The other men smiled at Edward. Alexa actually saying it made a happy future seem possible for all of them.

Edward felt fierce joy that he controlled. “I’ll wear it with honor.”

Alexa dropped the other shoe. “Not so fast. No less than five true Mitchels have to approve the match for the name change to apply. As we meet the family, you’ll notice not all of them share our name or keep to the naming structures. That’s how you’ll know the ones who weren’t approved.”

Billy took over the questioning as Edward got to work on the training plan. “I’m surprised you don’t remove those who weren’t approved.”

“Never. Mitchels allow people to live their lives as they see fit. We just don’t approve it unless we mean it.”

“So they’re not treated differently?”

“They can’t vote in our meetings.”

Billy did a check in the other direction and found Jacob doing the same. “What do you vote on?”

“The direction our family will take, who will be on the council next, who we need to kill to advance our family name.” Alexa stopped the questions. “We have hashed and rehashed enough. Now, it’s time to work. I want everything ready for our guests by the time they arrive. We have one hour.”

A somber group began setting up spare tents; the usual jokes were absent, mostly because of the uncertainty of who would lead them now. Alexa’s crew wouldn’t let her be pushed out without a fight. All of them got ready for battle.

2

An hour later, they had three tents erected, all stocked with blankets, food, water, and personal items. Thanks to Alexa’s leadership, they had a large reserve, though to see them travel, one would think they were desperately light on supplies. It was another of the things she’d taught them.

When Alexa began to gather wood and rocks for fires outside the other tents, her men hurried to help.

It only took a few minutes more to rock off the firepits. Alexa scanned the larger camp in approval. Then her head turned west. “Remember your lessons, my pets. Make yourselves proud.”

Her crew squinted, using their vampire sight to detect anything living in the darkness.

Edward picked out two tall shadows, but nothing moved.

Alexa greeted their guests. “Welcome.” She waved her hand at the unnatural stillness around them. “To all of you.”

Shadows came toward them now, walking in familiar formations. Almost all of them were dark-haired, tall, lean, and scarred. They looked like Alexa’s crew.

Alexa’s men hoped they also had the same ethics and honor.

Addison led her crew into the center of the neatly made camp.

The baby on Addison’s back cooed sleepily at her father as he and the others lined up behind their team leader.

Alexa’s team studied the newcomers from where they were, frowning at the man among them who was covered in dirt from head to boots.

Addison snapped her fingers.

Her crew immediately drew their longest staffs and began spinning them aggressively. It wasn’t perfectly in tandem, but it was close enough to make all of Alexa’s men nervous. When Edward stepped closer to Alexa, the rest of their team did, too, hands dropping toward their weapons.

Behind them, another group entered their camp.

Levi circled a finger in the air while glaring at his ex-wife.

The group behind him drew their knives and began running through their practice routines. This group *was* in tandem. It drew Edward and the rest of Alexa's team to her flank. None of them pulled their weapons yet, but all of them were ready to do so upon the first threatening gesture.

Addison stayed still, as did Levi; their hot glares said Alexa may not be the target if violence happened here.

Addison and Levi signaled their teams at the same time. Weapons were quickly stored and then the fighters froze, waiting for the next instruction.

A third group stepped into view, coming from the south.

The first two groups tensed and then fell into their fighting stances. It rippled through the air and hit Alexa's crew head-on. All of them unfastened their holsters.

Emmie led her team forward. The Canadian hunters didn't show off a skill like the others had. They did quick scans of all the people and the environment, and then focused on Alexa with expressionless facades. It was intimidating.

Now standing in the center of controlled chaos, Alexa grinned. "We do like to make an entrance." Alexa went to Addison first because she had arrived first. "Welcome."

Edward stayed on Alexa's heels as the rest of the team formed a half-moon barrier between her and the third group. The way the others had reacted

proved where the biggest problem might come from.

Alexa walked the line of Addison's crew, shaking hands with all of them except for Jordan, who she embraced like a long-lost friend.

Edward wasn't surprised by the reaction this time, but it did add another layer of concern for him. He didn't know how Mitchels usually greeted each other but he doubted many hugs were involved. Alexa had told them she wasn't close to any of her family, except for her father.

Edward stopped a deep frown as he remembered her giant story. *She also told us she lies.*

Jordan stepped back and gave a respectful nod. "It's great to see you again."

"My thoughts exactly." Alexa turned to Levi with a genuine smile. "Welcome, Uncle."

Levi embraced Alexa warmly, but the cool glare on his face didn't fade.

Alexa also went through Levi's crew, shaking hands and giving respectful nods until she got to Eva. Alexa gestured toward the woman's flat stomach even though it was covered in layers of clothes and hides. "Congratulations."

Eva beamed. "I wasn't sure. Thank you."

Asher removed his hat before shaking with Alexa. "It's nice to meet you."

Alexa's snorted at his joke. "I wonder if you'll feel that way a few days from now."

Asher chuckled. "Well, it wouldn't be a Mitchel meeting without some action, would it?"

Alexa snickered. “Indeed.”

Edward studied the bald man harder as he realized they had the same hawklike profile.

Everyone went still and silent as Alexa faced the final group.

Emmie came forward and embraced Alexa without hesitation. The rest of her crew stared in admiration or hatred. There was no in between.

Alexa shook hands with Alice. Her fangs descended.

Alice waited, not sure what to expect.

Alexa moved on, shaking with Madelyn and then she stopped. She turned her back to Wyatt and Damon, causing her men to tense in anticipation of the fight starting.

“We’ve prepared lodgings and gear according to what we thought you might need. If we are lacking, tell my XO and he will remedy the issue.”

Addison and her group went to the tent on Alexa’s right.

Levi and his team went to the tent on the left.

There were still no words between him and Addison, but everyone knew there would be.

Emmie went to the large tent across from Alexa’s canvas and began removing items from her cloak.

Alexa and her team became the recipients of bags and pouches from all of the new people. Edward assumed they were sharing their supplies or maybe even offering a payment for the fully stocked campsite. As each person tossed a bag or handed

over a pouch, they scanned Alexa's team in open curiosity.

"We'll take the first watch." Emmie motioned her crew into place around the dark perimeter.

Alexa's men stored the supplies in their tent to be sorted through later. They kept an eye on all the groups, but especially the one now taking guard positions in the shadows. Wyatt and Damon were observing every move Alexa made and exchanging dangerous glances.

Addison joined Alexa in the center of the camp.

Levi stayed in front of their tent, sulking.

Alexa's lips thinned. "I see you brought more than skills along. I have no need of your drama, as I already have enough of my own."

Addison flushed. "I am sorry about that, but life rarely allows an existence without drama."

Alexa chuckled. "Fair enough."

Addison carefully took off the baby sling and handed the infant to Alexa.

Alexa took the three-month-old baby and pushed the blanket aside so she could see the child's face. "Name?"

"I waited for this meeting. We've been calling her Sweetie."

Alexa regarded Isaac. She didn't need to see the resemblance to know it was the dirty man's child. He'd been making faces at the girl instead of studying everyone else. He didn't care about Alexa or her reputation. He cared about his family. "Do you approve of this?"

Isaac nodded easily. “I’m more than happy to have you name our daughter so that she may carry the protection of your family.”

Alexa motioned him over.

Isaac ignored Levi’s glares as he joined the women. He smiled at his baby again. “Who’s daddy’s girl?”

The child gurgled happily.

Levi’s growl echoed across the firelight.

“And on that happy note, I declare this child to be a member of our family.” Alexa ran a soft hand over the baby’s head. A deep blue spark traveled the infant and vanished. “Let no one ever harm her or bring down the wrath of every one of us.”

Addison sighed in relief. “Sweetie Mitchel.”

Alexa nodded. “Sweetie Mitchel has been accepted into the clan, along with her father, Isaac Mitchel.”

Isaac grinned. “Really? I thought I needed a few others to approve me.”

Addison was thrilled. “Alexa and her father have a full vote on matters like this. What they say goes.”

“That’s awesome. Thank you.”

Levi stomped out of the campsite, unable to continue watching but not willing to trigger Alexa’s wrath by interrupting. These moments were somber. Respect was required.

Alexa handed the baby to her father. “When it happens, I will not interfere on either side unless I have to.”

Addison hadn't expected it. "I hope he'll settle for a few slaps and some shouting."

Alexa frowned. "He'd better settle for less. My men will not tolerate a female being abused."

"I was thinking of me doing the slapping."

Billy's expression flooded with rage.

Alexa knew it was there without looking. "Yeah, you may want to rethink that, as well. The slavery laws have left permanent marks on my men. They won't tolerate much from either side."

Addison glanced at Alexa's crew in approval. "We weren't sure at first. After seeing them in action for weeks, all doubt has faded. It's a good team."

Alexa's men straightened in pride. It was obviously a high compliment coming from what they assumed was a full-blooded Mitchel. Edward and the others were all curious about the relationship. Was Addison a cousin? Aunt? Niece? They wanted to know how everyone was related to Alexa.

Addison and her little family rejoined their crew in front of their tent. She gestured. "Get set for the night. We'll be up late. Fill your time wisely."

Eva came from Levi's tent and joined Alexa. "I'm sorry about him."

Alexa smiled at the mother-to-be. "His actions do not reflect on you or his crew, only on himself."

"I had hoped that giving him a child would ease his anger at Addison."

“Once he’s had time to realize he is getting most of what he wants, then perhaps his brain will kick in and his hard feelings will fade.”

Eva laughed bitterly.

Alexa blew out a sigh. “You’re right, of course. Mitchels don’t forget things like that, but they can be convinced to let grudges go. Perhaps you and I can find a way for them to make peace. Ten years is much too long to hold hatred for someone you used to love.”

Eva frowned sadly. “Mitchels are not known for forgiveness. I fear we have a hard task in front of us.”

“As do I, but we’ll meet it head-on and conquer it if possible. If not, it will at least know who it faced in the end.”

Eva hugged Alexa quickly. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor, Aunt Eva.”

Eva went back to her tent to help finish setting things up for the night. In a little while, there would be food and conversation and maybe some drinking. She hoped Levi wouldn’t ruin this good moment. Port City was very unlikely to offer another chance at a night as calm and welcome as this.

The team on guard duty spread out so the entire perimeter was surrounded. Even though there were only five people, their strategic positions allowed most of the camp members to feel safe. They weren’t glaring or chatting. They were watching the darkness for threats.

Alexa's crew was able to relax a little at the demonstration of dedication to their duty, except for Edward. He studied the two men Alexa had put her back to. It was a clear sign; those men were a problem.

Alexa scanned them all with her knowing gaze. "Let the fun begin. Downtime has started."

3

Alexa's crew went to their usual places for a calm evening. Edward settled near their tent entrance and dug out his gun cleaning kit. He would resume working on the training plan after everyone else went to sleep. There was no way he could concentrate on it right now.

Billy handed Edward his gun, then got out the newest model he was building.

Mark sat his gun near Edward's leg, then drew his rifle. He laid it across his lap and began to work on the carving he'd been laboring on since they left Gainesville. He wanted it clear that he was a killer. Like Edward, Mark believed they would end up fighting some of these people.

Their actions got attention from the new groups, though nothing was said yet. All of them examined the men, trying to discover why Alexa had picked them.

David knelt next to their tent and started his evening workout.

Jacob sat on a fallen log and took out his Bible.

The two other teams made their beds in the tents, unpacked supplies, or handled personal care. Cloaks came off, revealing hard, scarred bodies that matched Alexa's crew.

Alexa's team saw the scars, but the clothing held their attention. All of Addison's team were wearing red shirts and scarves.

Edward frowned. "Are you fanatics?"

Jordan scowled right back. "We were wearing red before those nuts claimed it."

"I hate that color." Billy wasn't getting aroused this time. He glared at the women. "Our enemies wear it. Might be hard to tell the difference in a fight."

Jordan glowered when her team started to remove their scarves. "So you were abused. Most of us were. We don't let it rule our lives like you're doing."

Billy flinched at her fast observation.

Jordan gestured at her crew. "Leave the clothes on. He'll adjust or his team will handle him."

Billy flushed, embarrassed and angry.

Edward looked at Alexa, not sure what to do. They were babying Billy, but they all felt he needed it.

Jordan came over without fear of his reaction. "What are you building?"

Billy was forced to control his emotions. "A Camaro this time."

“Really? My uncle drove one of those when I was a teenager. He used to let me take him to the store. It’s how I learned to drive.”

Billy was snagged by the conversation. He loved cars. “You learned to drive in a Camaro?”

“Cool, right?” Jordan knelt to admire his handiwork. “Great job on the glue. That’s not as easy as it looks.”

Billy held it up to give her a better view. “Thanks.”

Alexa was impressed when Billy seemed to relax. He and Jordan fell into a conversation about cars, something he was always willing to ramble on about. Jordan had always been good with mental moments.

Edward realized Jordan was placating Billy and distracting him to help him get over a weakness. He recognized the tactical maneuver from his time on Alexa’s team. “You’re the XO.”

Jordan lit up for a brief instant. “It’s my deepest honor.” Then she resumed admiring Billy’s model while leaning close enough that the shirt was almost touching his arm.

Billy knew what she was doing. The surprise was that he was tolerating it. *Have I been using the guilt of my team as an excuse to feed my hatred and avoid recovering?*

Jordan smiled brightly at him. “Do you play cards?”

Alexa’s men snorted.

Billy grinned. “No, but I always win.”

“So you cheat.” Jordan dug out a deck of worn playing cards from her pocket and dropped down next to him. “Morning chores says I’m better than you.”

Billy put the model aside. “What game?”

“Cheating.”

Billy grinned. “Deal.”

“I’m doing it!”

They shared a grin that sent a nice wave of camaraderie through the camp.

It broke a second later.

“Why do you waste your time reading that? You’re a killer. You have no use for religion.”

Silence fell through the camp.

Jacob peered up at Alice. “Why do you assume the two are mutually exclusive?”

Alice didn’t understand.

Jacob used smaller words. “Why does one rule out the other?”

Alice tugged on her short black curls. “Killers can’t be religious. Are you hoping for atonement?”

“Enlightenment, and yes, we can.”

Alice frowned. “That doesn’t make sense.”

Jacob tried again. “All books contain knowledge of some sort, even if it’s useless.”

“What knowledge are you searching for in a Bible?”

“The answer to why humans are so mean.”

“It’s just a bunch of made up stories. How can it explain human nature?”

“When the flood came, the sinners didn’t believe Noah and they drowned. People often miss what’s right in front of them.”

Alice knew he was making a point, but she didn’t know what it was. “You make my brain hurt.”

Jacob chuckled at the cute, heavily scarred younger woman. He was betting she hadn’t reached 21 yet, but she had as many scars as he did, just not on her face. That was flawless. “I make you think. That often gives people headaches.”

Alice frowned. “Are you messing with my brain?”

“I’m afraid it isn’t needed. Your brain seems already messed.”

Alice laughed. “Fair. Tell me more about the flood story.”

“Did you know almost every religion on the planet shared similar stories?”

“No. Like what?”

“The flood, plagues, sacrifices.”

Alice forced her mind to work. “Why would they all be the same if they came from different Gods?”

“That is a great question.”

She scowled, hands coming to her hips. “Do you ever give a straight answer?”

“Do I need to?”

Alice laughed again and walked away. “Crazy.”

“No, but he was messing with your brain.” Addison smiled at Jacob. “Fastest gun or knife?”

Jacob patted his holster. He wasn't the best shot, but he was the quickest drawl.

Addison scanned the other men. "Which one is the blade master?"

Daniel lifted a finger. He had stayed next to Alexa, protecting her.

"Care to prove it?"

Daniel frowned at Addison. "When I'm off duty I'd be happy to give you a demonstration that everyone can bet on."

Addison approved. "Nice team."

Alexa shook her head. "They're not nice at all. They're perfect."

Chapter Fifteen

Tell Me Everything

1

“**S**hift change.”

For a brief moment, no one responded to Alexa’s call. Conversations stopped; crew members turned toward their team leaders.

Alexa didn’t stop sorting through the supplies in front of their tent. She simply expected to be obeyed, like she did with her own crew.

Emmie’s group left their strategic positions around the campsite.

Addison signaled her group to take over guard duty.

Drinking and talking resumed, but it was subdued.

Alexa’s crew assumed guard duty would rotate every four hours, in the order everyone had arrived. That meant they wouldn’t be on duty until after dawn. None of them were looking forward to standing in the sun while everyone else slept, but it was also a relief to know they would be resting while Emmie’s group was on duty. None of them trusted that crew to behave during downtime unless they had strict supervision.

Emmie and her group took off their heavy packs and retrieved the kits they had already placed inside their tent.

Everyone watched curiously as the quiet crew unpacked shiny metal poles and faded blue pieces of plastic.

Daniel recognized what they were doing right away. He studied the bikes more than the people as they began to take shape.

Edward was glad that group had something to keep them occupied. He didn't care about the bicycles, but he was curious how they would fit into the training plans he was going to work on later.

Levi was standing in the doorway of his tent. He motioned Edward over. "As the information officer, I have questions."

Edward joined Alexa's uncle, not staring at his scars or his wild blond and black curls. "How can I help you?"

"How does she plan to get through Port City? I can't make arrangements for my team without that information."

Edward was disappointed. "I was expecting you to try to trick me, not to ask for the information outright."

Levi shrugged. "I'll get to the mind games later. So, what's the plan?"

"We'll do whatever it takes."

Levi made a face. "You don't know her plan, right?"

Edward stuck with an evasive answer, like he'd been instructed to do. "I'm not the leader."

Levi was already sure he was going to like Edward. "No, and that's how it should be."

Edward didn't get offended. He knew Levi was searching for minor weaknesses first. The harder evaluations really would come later. "You're her uncle."

"By blood."

Edward inclined his head in recognition that he was standing before a true born blood Mitchel. "Are your accommodations and supplies satisfactory?"

"Don't waste my time with useless questions!"

Edward's smile faded. His usual coldness flew out in waves. "I was given a job and I'll do it to *my* satisfaction, not yours."

Levi grinned. "Excellent. Now, let's talk about what you really want from me."

Edward was quickly adjusting to Levi's bluntness. He matched it with his own. "I couldn't care less about your approval, but it will make her happy and that I do care about. Tell me what you want from me, and I'll accomplish it."

People stared at them, shocked.

Wyatt and Damon glowered at Alexa.

Levi studied Edward. "If you want my approval, you'll earn it."

"By deeds or brains?"

"By duty."

Edward relaxed. "Duty is my life."

“Good, because my niece respects that more than anything else.”

“How do you already know?” Edward hadn’t planned for it to become public knowledge yet. “You’ve only been here a few hours and we haven’t had any contact.”

Levi snorted. “I know because we’re having this conversation. You wouldn’t be talking to me about this if it wasn’t what she wanted, too. She wouldn’t allow it.”

Edward frowned. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“No, but I did verify a suspicion.”

Edward laughed. He began to respect Levi even though he already had a mark against him for cheating on his ex-wife. The story had already spread through camp. Edward hoped that had been a singular event, because he wanted to be good friends with Alexa’s uncle and being a serial cheater would make that impossible.

Levi decided to give the answer. “You check on her constantly, but she didn’t tell you to mind yourself. She likes it.”

“That could just be team check ins.”

“Not with that much warmth showing. Mitchels only treat their mates that way.”

Edward stored the information that Alexa had shown signs, too. “Thank you for telling me.”

Levi scanned him again. “She hasn’t shown any interest in a relationship for 29 years. You must be something special.”

Edward didn't know what to say to that even though it did bring a flareup of pride. He chose not to say anything, so he didn't sound arrogant. He also noted the age. No one had won the bet on how old Alexa was.

Levi's stiff stance relaxed. "Always remember duty before honor, even when it's the hardest thing you've ever done."

Edward understood Levi was trying to give him hints for maintaining a healthy relationship with Alexa. "Thank you."

"It's my honor. And your death if you hurt her."

Levi glared at Addison as she went by him to take her place in the shadows. Then he went into his tent. "Bring a drink and keep me company so I don't become a problem for you."

Edward pulled a bottle from his cloak that he'd had stashed for months without knowing why he was holding onto it. He ducked into Levi's neat tent, nodding respectfully to the other team members who were already settling into their bedrolls for the night. There was nowhere else he would rather be right now, except in Alexa's embrace and that wasn't going to happen until this run was over. Physical contact was off the table for now.

As soon as Edward was out of sight, Damon and Wyatt immediately headed toward Alexa.

Daniel was sitting next to his team leader, mending her torn cloak. He whistled rudely. "Over here, dogs. Talk to me and leave her alone. She clearly doesn't have anything to say to you."

The two men started to ignore him.

All of Alexa's team reached for their guns, including Edward, who was back in the flap of Levi's tent. All of them glared harshly at the two new men.

Wyatt detoured toward Daniel, tugging Damon along.

Edward gave both men a last glower and then joined Levi for the drink.

Levi's chuckle echoed over the crackling fires. "Her father knows how to pick a team, too."

Alexa got up and joined David near the side of their tent for her daily workout.

It was another sign that she didn't want to have contact with Wyatt or Damon.

Daniel motioned to the torn clothes both men were wearing and then pushed his sewing kit toward them. "It looks bad on your team leader for you to be improperly attired."

Both men dropped down across from Daniel and began taking out needles. They easily threaded them and quickly started sewing the rips in their shirts and cloaks.

Wyatt stuck the needle through the material gently. "We haven't found thread in a while. It's not her fault."

Daniel dug out an extra spool of thread and tossed it to Emmie.

Emmie caught it with one hand and a furrowed brow. She marched into her tent and dropped the flap.

Daniel wasn't sure what he'd done wrong.

Damon jerked the thread through and knotted the end. "You offended her by providing something that she couldn't."

Daniel resumed sewing Alexa's cloak. "Pride must never come before the needs of the team."

"And that's why she left you alone instead of ripping your guts out." Wyatt examined Daniel's heavily scarred body and then quickly dropped his eyes back to the needle and thread.

"What's your beef with Alexa?" Daniel didn't mind asking questions where everyone could hear the answers. He wanted the information for his team; they needed to make plans for the future fight they knew was going to happen.

Neither man wanted to answer Daniel. They continued to sew and keep their heads down.

Alexa paused in the middle of a push-up, muscles bulging slightly in her arms. Her eyes glittered with malice. "I said no, to both of them."

Damon glowered at Wyatt as Alexa resumed her workout. "You proposed to her?!"

Wyatt kept sewing. "It was a long time ago. You can let it go or I can kick your ass."

Edward spoke up from inside Levi's tent. "I'm trying to get drunk in here. If you interrupt me, you won't like the results."

Wyatt and Damon both glared toward the tent and then resumed their work.

Levi's voice echoed again. "That's good, but it's better when you don't have to speak the threat."

Edward sat down across from Levi, noting the tent was set with three areas, like theirs. “She’s still training me. One day, I’ll be able to do it like she does.”

Levi laughed. “About that, I only have a little doubt left. Open the bottle. It’s time to get as drunk as a Mitchel can.”

Levi’s XO, Colton, exited their tent and sat down near the rocked off fire ring. He got a fire started and began brewing a large pot of what smelled like coffee.

Alexa approved. Levi and Edward might need that later. Mitchels weren’t able to get drunk on almost any alcohol, but thanks to Edward’s knowledge about that, the bottle he was now chugging from would definitely do the trick. He’d gotten it from Jendon.

Jacob and Mark didn’t like it that the two new men were still so close to Alexa. They joined her and David and began doing hard, fast push-ups that revealed some of their strength.

Alexa rolled over and lay there staring at the starry sky while she regained her breath. “Perhaps we’ll have a good night here after all.”

Everyone was relieved to hear that. A little more of the tension broke.

Jacob and Mark decided on a karate workout. The two men began sparring, running through the beginning lessons they’d learned from the videos.

Jacob tripped repeatedly over his troublesome foot and recovered with quick rolls and a flushed face. It had been a long day for him.

Jacob had long ago accepted that he would be hindered by the limitations of his body, but he still hated the feeling of everyone staring at him in sympathy or surprise. “Mind yourselves!”

Jacob knew Alice was still watching him. It made him try harder. On the last run, he was able to do the complete set without stopping or tripping, though his ankle was throbbing in time with his pulse as they finished.

Alexa took Jacob’s place. “Sit this one out while Mark runs me through it.”

Jacob knew she was trying to help him save face, and he was grateful for it. No matter how hard he worked that leg, the ankle never got stronger. He assumed it never would, but he refused to let that stop him from fully participating in everything the quest required and everything that he wanted to learn or do.

Mark restarted the set, going slower so Alexa could copy his movements. It wasn’t the first time she had joined them for a karate session, but it also hadn’t happened very often. Alexa relied on magic or brute strength when it came to fighting.

Jacob joined Daniel at the softly crackling fire and leaned back on his elbows.

Alice came over to him again, drawn even though she wasn’t sure why. “What’s up with your foot?”

Silence fell through the camp; workouts and cups that were halfway to lips paused.

Alexa's team realized they didn't know how Jacob's foot had been injured. It brought shame to all of them, including Alexa. As much as he struggled with that, they should have already known what caused it.

"I was born with a twisted leg. Back then, they wouldn't do surgery on a baby unless it was life or death. When I got older, the state wouldn't pay for the operation."

Alice stared at him, trying to figure out the clues in his statement. Surprising them all, she came up with one that none of his team had guessed. "You were an orphan."

Jacob nodded. "I was an abandoned baby. My mother was a drug addict. My father is unknown to this day."

Alice was filled with sympathy. "Now I understand why I'm drawn to you."

Jacob met her eyes. "I assumed it was because we're both scarred."

"I think it's because we're both orphans."

Alexa snorted.

Emmie's face twisted in pain.

Alice hurried to explain. "I mean, I know who my mother is, but she didn't want me around and neither did my father. I'm only on this run because Emmie didn't have anywhere else to send me."

Jacob wasn't surprised at the information, though it did make him feel even less hospitable

toward Emmie. “You can join us if you want to. I’m sure Daniel has more thread tucked away.”

Daniel pulled another spool from his cloak and tossed it over to Jacob. “You’ll have to use one of Jacob’s needles. Be careful, he keeps his sharper than mine. It’ll give you a good prick.”

Laughter flew through the campsite.

Daniel blushed as he realized what he had said. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Alice laughed. “I don’t mind a sharp poke every now and then. It keeps life interesting.”

Alexa was chuckling and not paying attention to the lesson. She gave Mark an apologetic nod. “Another time.”

She went over to the fire where Colton was blowing on the coals to make the flames burn hotter. The smell of real coffee hit her nose. “That’s not chicory root.”

Colton smiled. “We’ve been hunting big game and cleaning out railcars along the way since almost right after the war. We’ve had real coffee the entire time.”

“Maybe we can do some trading.”

“I would imagine so.” Colton took several mugs from his cloak pocket. They were all wrapped in thin towels to prevent noise and breakage. “For now, I gladly invite you to share my pot.”

Laughter went around the campsite again.

Alexa dropped down next to Levi’s XO. “Just the coffee, please.”

Alexa's men looked over while the others chuckled. She rarely used that word.

Alexa waved them off. "Mind yourselves."

Colton handed her his own mug and then resumed blowing on the coals. "It will be a few minutes still."

"I'm enjoying the air over here. Take your time."

It was another insult to the two sullen men sitting with Daniel while still stealing subtle looks at her.

Colton glared toward the two men. "We're probably going to end up killing them before this run is over."

Alexa nodded. "My thoughts exactly."

Both new men shifted slightly so Alexa was no longer in their line of sight.

Alexa studied the mug in her hand. It was plain white, though that had yellowed from repeated use. There were no decorations on it whatsoever.

She looked at Colton in time to see him stare longingly toward the cup. It was obviously special to him.

Alexa set it on the ground next to her leg and saw his expression relax. She didn't ask why he cared so much about a piece of ceramic. She checked his fingers and found a discolored area where a ring had once been. She studied his thin body and the bags under his eyes and figured out the cause of his misery. "You're a widower."

Colton blinked. Deep sadness filled his face. It was quickly replaced with an icy demeanor that she respected. “The war was unkind to many of us. That was her cup. Other than a single picture, it’s the only thing I have left.”

Alexa sent a wave of peace toward the man. “You also have the memories, XO.”

Colton blinked away the tears that tried to form. “And I relive them daily to keep them alive.”

“As do I.” Alexa patted his wrist, surprising many of their witnesses.

The good moment lasted this time without being broken. Edward and Levi’s slightly drunken laughter echoed from the tent. The smell of brewing coffee wafted across the campsite. Light sweat broke out on those doing workouts. Clicks and clacks of bikes being cared for added to the concerto of their gathering. For exactly two minutes, the beautiful, unplanned noises of life surrounded them in comfort.

Then the ocean roared a threat and the stiff wind blew through their campsite, dropping dead leaves and twigs that made several of them twitch. Nature didn’t like it when humans were happy.

Colton poured Alexa the first cup of coffee from the pot and then took one for himself, using his team leader’s cup. Levi wouldn’t be ready for it for a while. Levi didn’t get stinking drunk very often, but when he did, he went all the way.

Alexa glanced over and found Alice leaning in to Jacob. The Preacher didn’t seem to realize she

was so close, but Alexa knew Jacob was aware of every move the scarred girl made. Some people would have assumed love was in the air, but Jacob's tense shoulders told Alexa he wasn't as receptive as he probably should have been.

She ignored the two men sitting across from Daniel, though she was grateful that her Biker was keeping them at bay. She didn't want to be around Damon right now. Wyatt was tolerable. Damon wasn't. She agreed with Colton that Wyatt and Damon were probably going to die, but it didn't have to be tonight or by her hand.

Alexa swept the large tent where Edward was getting drunk with her uncle, but she didn't linger on it. She didn't want either of them to think she was trying to listen to the parts of their conversation that were being spoken too lowly for everyone else to hear.

Alexa saw Billy and Jordan were still playing cards and having a good time. It didn't appear that Billy was aware of anything going on around him, but Alexa knew that wasn't true. As she watched, his finger rose and pointed directly at her. Alexa smiled and moved on.

She centered on David, who was mending a small tear in a pair of his socks while studying everyone. He didn't seem unhappy, but Alexa knew he was. After traveling together for so long, she was in tune to the moods of her men. Alexa lifted a brow.

David shook his head without looking up.

Alexa left him alone. When he was ready to talk, or he felt like he needed to in order to keep her happy, it would happen. Until then, her men needed the same space that she required for herself. All of the mothering they had done with Billy over the last months wasn't required anymore. That was clear in the way that he was enjoying time with someone wearing red without getting aroused or angry. Billy was recovering.

She wished she could say the same for herself. Even with all the distractions around her, Alexa was still furious that she couldn't have the job she wanted. She hated it that Jeanie was in charge of the country. *That job should be mine!*

Alexa forced the thought away and leaned toward Colton. "As the information officer, I have questions."

Colton had been waiting for her to bring it up. "We arrived early. We went to Port City last week to see the lay of the land around it."

Alexa focused completely on him. "Tell me everything."

Chapter Sixteen
Shall I Prove It?

1

“Where the hell did that ace come from? I’ve been watching you the entire time!”

Billy laughed. “You could search me, but you still wouldn’t find it.”

Jordan leaned over and began patting on the muscled driver. “You have to be hiding them in your shirt!”

Jordan was no longer trying to help him over his mental issues with the color red. She was genuinely fascinated by how he was able to slip extra cards into his hand even while she was watching.

Her red silk scarf brushed Billy’s cheek as she laughingly finished patting him down. A spark of intense arousal flew between them.

Jordan quickly leaned away. “I’m not going to help you live out your sick, twisted fantasies unless you promise to do the same for me.”

Billy snickered instead of getting embarrassed. “That depends on what they are.”

Jordan heard the serious note and pointed at the cards. “You deal this time so I can keep watching you.”

Billy was curious about Jordan's issue. He remembered her implying someone else in this group had been abused. He assumed it was her and immediately guessed what her fantasy was. Because she hadn't had sympathy for him, he didn't have any for her. "Daddy issues, right?"

Jordan flushed deeply, face matching the color of her clothes.

Those who were still listening to them chuckled or shook their heads in disapproval.

Billy picked up the deck of cards. He didn't apologize. He felt people should be able to take it if they dished it out.

Jordan picked up the cards as he dealt them. There were a lot of things she wanted to say. She chose not to pick a fight. "Seriously, where are you hiding the cards?"

Billy laughed again. "Show me yours and I'll show you mine."

Jordan sniggered. "Didn't we just go through that?"

He met her eyes. "We only went halfway. You didn't verify."

"And I'm not going to. Keep dealing."

Billy liked Jordan. Despite hearing such awful things about Mitchels, he thought Jordan was a good person for trying to help a stranger. He decided to return the favor. "You can't get through it if you can't talk about it. I know."

Alexa ignored them physically. Mentally, she was listening to every word. These moments were

helping her judge the stability of not only her own crew but also of the new people she already felt responsible for.

Jordan started to deny him again and then let out a miserable sigh. “It’s painful. It’s also private.”

Billy swept the dark, dead woods around them. “Care to go for a walk and talk?”

Jordan turned toward Alexa.

“You don’t have to ask her. I’m not a slave!”

The entire camp went quiet at Billy’s rough shout.

Jordan quickly explained. “I didn’t know if she would get upset since you two have a physical relationship.”

Now, the crackling fire was the only sound; even Levi’s drunken chatter stopped.

Billy wasn’t ashamed of their relationship. He also knew theirs wasn’t a long-lasting set up like it might end up being with her and Edward. “Everyone on our crew is free to do whatever they want. Relationships are not the bonds that tie us together.”

“I don’t believe that’s true for your XO.”

Billy shrugged. “If he had a problem with it, his team would know. Stop creating drama to deflect from your fear. Your team won’t thank you for doing that. Again, I know.”

Alexa was proud of Billy. She was also aware of the surprise she was getting from her family members and from the two men whose proposals

she had refused. "I'm a Mitchel. I can do whatever, or whomever, I want."

Light laughter went around the campsite.

Billy stood and held out a calloused hand.

Jordan reluctantly took it, suddenly unsure of herself. She didn't like this feeling, but she suspected the sexy man staring knowingly at her would help her through another layer of the mental issues that came from being abused for so long. She let him pull her to her feet.

They walked into the darkest part of the woods without speaking.

In the quiet moment, Alexa checked on her crew again.

Mark and Jacob had resumed working on their karate lessons; they were now reading along in the book and trying to figure out the next stage.

Colton rose from the coffee-brewing fire where he now had several pots ready and went over to the men. "I've been a black belt for over a decade. Would you like a private lesson?"

Mark flipped the book shut. "That would be great. The instructions don't make enough sense."

Colton joined the Convict and the Preacher. Their appearances and reputations didn't intimidate him. He had his own heavy past to carry. He didn't have time to be concerned with theirs.

Alexa checked in with David and found him still holding a shield over a small pebble while trying to keep it in place against the stick in his other hand. David had recently become obsessed with working

on the magical side of who he was. Some of the tests he had come up with to train himself were interesting and gave her ideas to use later.

David glanced at her while keeping enough concentration to maintain the shield.

Alexa nodded at him for the check in and then turned toward the final member of her team.

Daniel was still mending clothes. He had finished with all of Alexa's garments, as well as his own. He had a neat stack of items from the rest of the team sitting next to him; they were also finished.

Daniel did a quick sweep of everyone in the camp, ending with Alexa. Then he resumed sewing one of Jacob's gloves.

Damon and Wyatt noticed the quick check in. Both men recognized it for what it was. Now sitting at the fire drinking some of Colton's coffee, Damon sneered. "You can stand down. She's obviously not in any danger."

Wyatt didn't want a fight to break the calm mood. "Maybe she hasn't told him to yet."

Alexa spoke directly to Wyatt and Damon for the first time. "I never told him to stand guard at all."

Daniel smiled at Alexa this time, and resumed his fast sweeps of the campsite while mending the glove.

It was yet another sign of how loyal her team was.

David let go of his shield and dropped the stick. "I need a break. Switch."

Daniel stuck the needle into the glove and then set it down. He did a stretch, popping his spine. "It's all yours."

Alexa stood up. "We'll be here for exactly 30 hours, from now."

Many people checked their watches to determine when that would be.

Emmie was sitting in front of her tent, being ignored by everyone except for Madelyn, who was chattering and rebraiding her long hair. Emmie held up a bottle with familiar symbols; it had been brewed by a troll. "How about a drink?"

Alexa moved that way. "I thought you'd never ask."

Inside Levi's tent, Edward moved away from the flap where he had been subtly observing everyone. He went back to the seat across from Alexa's uncle and sank down while taking the bottle. A healthy swig later saw it emptied.

Both men were drunk now, but not showing any signs of it.

Levi was impressed with Edward in many ways. He was also curious about what Billy had said to Jordan. "I don't understand how you can share your woman."

"We're not married, and we don't own each other." Edward frowned at the older man. "Pick a new topic. This one is really none of your business."

"But you're sharing her with another man. Doesn't that..." Levi caught Edward's tiny flinch. He dug into Edward's mind and saw a hot moment

with a lot of bodies before he was shoved out. “It’s not just one.”

Edward stiffened. “I think our night is about over.”

Levi recovered from his surprise, chuckling. “Well, she is a Mitchel.”

Levi pulled a bottle out of the bag sitting to his right. “Don’t be a stiff. Your mistress certainly isn’t.”

A surprised laugh flew from Edward’s lips. “You have no idea.”

More laughter echoed into the night.

In the deepest shadows around the campsite, uninvited ears listened to the merriment in jealous excitement, eager for the bounty and unafraid to die in an attempt to claim it.

2

“Shift change.”

Half of Levi’s group had been waiting for the call. They took over guard duty without being upset that their team leader didn’t join them.

Off guard duty now, Isaac got a fire going outside their tent and washed his hands before starting a hearty meal for their crew. Then he began a generous batch of fresh bread. He had no doubt Addison would want to share it with everyone.

Addison took the baby into the tent to get her changed and fed. Being able to breastfeed was a Godsend when there was no formula to be found.

Austin joined Isaac to get it all finished faster. He was learning to cook from his teammate.

Some of the other groups around them also began to prepare a meal. Other people vanished into the dark woods for a bit of privacy.

Alice came over to Jacob, who was now reading. “Would you like to take a walk and talk?”

Jacob put a marker in the book and set it on the cloak he had removed a while ago. “What would we talk about?”

“I don’t know. The ocean? My family? How about orgasms?”

Jacob blushed. “I’m only familiar with one of those.”

Alice leered. “Good, because I don’t really want to talk about my family or the ocean. Come on.”

Jacob quickly followed her into the woods.

Alexa chuckled. Then she frowned at Emmie. “You’ll ruin her. Let her go to a crew where she’ll be taught and valued.”

Emmie took a quick swallow. “I only brought her along because she wouldn’t stop following me. She was right about that. My daughter is determined to follow in my terrible footsteps.”

Alexa snorted. “She just wants to be one of us. She doesn’t care about you at all.”

Emmie scowled. “I’ll handle it once this run is done.”

“Accepted. Your turn.”

Emmie glared. “I haven’t forgotten that you killed two of my cousins.”

Madelyn sensed things were getting serious between the two team leaders. She went to the fire for a cup of coffee and hoped things stayed calm.

Alexa didn't deny the accusation. "Do the circumstances matter?"

"No. They were family."

"Understood." Alexa surprised them all by being reasonable. "If you wish to match up after this run is done, you may request it."

Emmie knew her choice would anger her crew, but she delivered it anyway. "I'd rather stay with you for a bit and let some of your light rub me the right way. I've been living among bastards and thieves for too long."

Alexa saw the crow's feet around Emmie's eyes and the papery skin around her neck. She was starting to show her age. It snapped together an instant later. "You're about to retire."

Emmie nodded in the stunned silence of her crew. "Yes. I want good places for them. You'll know where they fit, even the ones who may not deserve such an honor."

"I will consider your request."

"Thank you."

Both women grinned at the same time. Family business was done. Now they could move on.

"Let's have that drink."

Alexa held up a finger to stop Emmie from handing her the bottle. "I have information my XO is waiting on."

Edward appeared at her side seconds later and handed her the folded paper. He smelled of alcohol, but that was the only sign that he'd spent the last hours drinking.

Alexa added the details she had gleaned from Colton about Port City. Alexa wanted to write it down now so Edward could work on the training session. She needed to know what Emmie's group was good at and where they excelled.

Damon and Wyatt were both glaring at Alexa again. They didn't like it that Emmie was retiring; they were furious that Alexa was going to decide their future.

Edward stared at Emmie, coldly. An icy breeze ran through the camp.

Emmie grunted in recognition of his displeasure. "They're not all bad inside. Try not to kill them if you can help it."

Edward lifted his chin. "That's entirely up to them."

Edward went to the clear space in front of Alexa's tent and got to work. The sooner he finished, the sooner he could return to Levi and resume their downtime.

3

"Your crew is incredibly well trained." Emmie pushed the bottle across the fire toward Alexa. "I don't understand how you and your father manage to always bring out the best in a team. I work my ass

off for the one I have and it's still never good enough."

Alexa and Emmie were both drunk now.

"They're very determined to impress me and everyone else." Alexa was enjoying the family time. She doubted that would be the case once they hit the city.

Emmie belched and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her black shirt. "I think it's all you and your training."

"Shall I prove it?"

Emmie's eyes lit up. "Yes. I'll bet you the rest of this bottle that you can't teach even one of them a new lesson in one try."

Emmie's crew all dropped their heads. They always had to be shown multiple times.

"I accept that challenge. You pick the lesson so it's a fair contest."

Around them, everyone started placing bets and eyeing her crew again.

"Triple shields."

"They already do that."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

More shame went through the campsite that Alexa's team had skills they didn't, and it wasn't just Emmie's crew this time.

"Blindfolded evasion."

"We've been doing that since the beginning."

Emmie was starting to get frustrated. "You pick something!"

Alexa scanned her excited men. They all wanted to prove themselves to her family, especially Edward. Alexa chose something she wasn't entirely sure any of them could do yet. "Standard sets with triple shields."

Alexa's crew tensed. They'd never done sets while using their shields at all, except for David, who grinned at the challenge.

"Place your bets."

Alexa's crew lined up near her, waiting for her call.

Edward took over the lesson like he was sure she wanted. "Shields up."

It was easy for the team to bring up three layers of shielding like they had been practicing the entire time they were in Gainesville. It was incredibly hard to keep their shields up as Edward signaled the beginning of their training set. Mark dropped his shields right away.

"Out." Alexa motioned.

Mark came over to her side, upset. "I'll work hard on that, Boss."

Alexa nodded. "I have no doubt of it."

Jacob fell next, unable to keep his shields up while dealing with his extremely stiff ankle.

"Out."

Jacob joined Mark. He had returned from his walk with Alice in the exact same mood he had left with. Alice had stomped into her tent and dropped the flap.

“Damn it!” Billy dropped his shields next, unable to concentrate through the roll that brought them up at Alexa’s feet with a gun in hand.

“Out.” Alexa didn’t know what had happened between Jacob and Alice to ruin the spark that had been building, but the same couldn’t be said of Billy and Jordan. They were exchanging the occasional satisfied look that said they’d both gotten what they wanted from the moment.

David was able to roll, holster his gun, and keep the shields in place, but he tripped over the edge of the cloak he had forgotten to tie down. His shields fell.

“Out.”

Daniel and Edward were the only ones left now. Halfway through the set, both men were struggling, but all three shields were up and their movements were still smooth.

Edward decided to see if he could force Daniel out before his own shields gave out. He brought up a fourth barrier, showing off.

Daniel groaned, struggling to bring up another layer while striding forward with his knife in his left hand and his gun in his right.

He rolled, bumping into Edward and dropping all of the shields. “Son of a bitch!”

Edward finished the roll and came up at Alexa’s feet again, even adding on yet another layer around himself. Straining, he shifted those shields over Alexa as he stood up.

Almost everyone in the camp clapped or whistled.

Daniel flipped Edward a rude gesture. He stalked off toward the woods.

Edward blinked away the drunken haze, staring in surprise.

“Get back here, blade master. You promised me a demo we can bet on.”

Daniel glared over his shoulder at Addison.

Addison pointed at a tree branch that was rubbing the top of a tent across the camp.

Daniel flipped his knife out and nailed the branch on the first try. It wasn't enough to satisfy his anger at the loss.

“Now do it blindfolded.” Emmie scoffed at Daniel. “Unless you're not really the blade master.”

Daniel pulled his shirt over his face and left it there. He took a second to steady himself, listening for the scratch of the branch against the canvas. Then he threw left-handed, impressing everyone when he hit the branch in the exact same spot and knocked his first blade to the ground.

Emmie laughed. “You're right, it's their determination.”

Edward came over with a mug of coffee and handed it to Alexa. “It's her. It will always be her.”

The rest of Alexa's men nodded in agreement. They didn't care about failing in front of the others; it was hurtful to fail in front of Alexa.

“That means I win.” Emmie began downing the rest of the bottle.

Alexa pushed the coffee cup back into Edward's hand. She didn't want to sober up yet.

Edward sipped on it while watching as she rose and stumbled into the training area.

Everyone stilled to see what skill she was going to show off.

Alexa took out her nunchucks.

"Boss has her spinners out!" Daniel quickly grabbed his knives and darted into their tent. "Goodnight!"

Edward and the rest of her team followed. They went inside and dropped the flap.

A shout of pain echoed.

Edward sighed. "I was hoping the alcohol would help."

Another loud cry of surprise echoed through the camp. Other people were following the example of her team now and getting out of the line of fire.

"Should one of us do guard duty over her?"

Edward shook his head at Billy. "That's a drunk Mitchel out there trying to master a new skill. Only a dead man would challenge her right now."

Mark wasn't worried about Alexa. Now that the entertainment portion of the evening was over, his mind had already returned to Claudia. Spending time around these new people was making him worry more; he was tempted to call her. He wanted to warn her of the danger that was coming, but he didn't want to give away her location or his own.

Jacob saw Mark eyeing the outline of the radio in Daniel's cloak. "One fast check in won't give away her location."

Mark shook his head. "It gives the enemy something else to use against us; it will make her a bigger target."

"She probably already knows it's coming, based on her fears when we all met."

"I'd say you're right, but that doesn't stop me from worrying."

"Have faith."

"In what?"

"In her and in the protectors the boss sent. She knows you need that girl."

Mark sighed. "It's not just the girl. I need the hope that comes with her, the love. I can't be a killer forever. There has to be something more, for all of us."

Outside the tent, Alexa's nunchucks flew through the air and smacked into the fleeing shoulder of Wyatt. His loud cry of displeasure made Edward grin. "There's always revenge and humiliation, Mark. You may not want to be a killer in the future, but it's impossible to change who we really are inside. Don't push away the part of you that this team needs the most."

"I won't. I'm all in."

Edward looked at Daniel. "Are we good?" The surprise in Daniel's behavior was that he'd done it in front of the new people and embarrassed his team.

Daniel forced a nod that he didn't really feel. Most of the time he didn't mind coming in second best to Edward; tonight, it had hurt.

"We'll work on it."

Daniel nodded again. He had to master these loose emotions before it got him or one of his team killed. They would never recover from that and he was smart enough to know it.

Chapter Seventeen

Standard Forms

1

“**T**he boss is coming.”

Alexa’s crew adjusted their positions to make room for her. All of her men were in the tent except for Edward, who had resumed duty right outside the flap to keep an eye on things, on her. Other than the alert team on guard duty, everyone else was already in their tent or passed out next to a dead fire ring.

Alexa stumbled into the tent and dropped to her knees in the center of the body pile. She held still while Jacob and Mark popped the buttons on her clothes so she would be comfortable. She was too drunk to do it herself.

Edward entered the tent and dropped the flap, enjoying the lingering scent of fresh bread. Everyone had gotten a large chunk; it hadn’t lasted long. Isaac was a great cook.

“Did you have a good time?”

Alexa nodded at Mark and then quickly shut her eyes as the tent spun. “Emmie and I used to sneak out together. I went on explorations. She went to see her forbidden future husband.”

Alexa slid in between the warm bodies of her men. “We would meet back under the window as

dawn struck, satisfied and bonded in our rebellious natures.”

All of the men were a bit surprised to hear that. They had assumed Alexa was drinking with an enemy to dig out information, like she had with the snake leader, Hemi.

“She’s the only soul with a Livingston connection that I can stand. She’ll always be a Mitchel to me, no matter who she married.”

Edward removed his cloak. “Didn’t her husband have to take her name?”

Mark laid down. “Maybe he wasn’t approved for it.”

Alexa stifled a nasty belch. “He was from a founding family. Main lines keep the normal old-world naming structure. She became Emmie Mitchel-Livingston when she married Joel and birthed four kids for him.” Alexa’s voice deepened into anger. “Then he stole another son from her and cast her out for a younger version who died in her place. Not many women could have survived his abuse.”

Edward held up a hand. “Stop. I can’t take any more ugliness tonight.”

Alexa’s eyes flew open. She leered at him.

Edward shook his head. “You would only be doing me to rub it in that they can’t have you. Come to me when you really want me.”

Alexa smiled. “I will and thank you for your honor.” She passed out, snoring lightly.

Mark got her settled while Edward sat along the wall of the tent and began snoozing.

Outside the tent, the other groups also settled down to sleep. Those who had taken a private moment in the woods snuggled together and ignored the loneliness of those around them.

The group on guard duty around the camp breathed a sigh of relief. It was a lot easier to focus on their duty without so many distractions. No matter what their personal feelings were about members of this new, much larger team, they still wouldn't allow anyone to be attacked. They did their duty.

In Emmie's tent, Alice and Emmie snored loudly. Madelyn tossed restlessly as another apocalyptic nightmare ran through her dreams.

Wyatt and Damon sat together for a bit longer, whispering as they compared the information they'd gathered tonight. Alexa's team was going to be a challenge.

“We need to find a way to get her alone.”

“You make the plan and I'll make it happen.”

2

Alexa's team was on guard duty just after a cloudy day dawned. Almost everyone else was still asleep. None of them spoke.

Alexa and Edward both had hangovers, though his was worse. Edward assumed that was because she had more experience in gatherings like this than

he did, but he wasn't sure. They had definitely drunk from different bottles.

Edward swept the quiet camp. There was only one center fire still burning with hot water for tea.

Addison emerged from her tent and went to get herself a cup. Her pale face said she hadn't slept well.

Levi came out of his tent.

Edward and the others tensed, expecting a problem. All of them gave Levi disappointed or warning glances that were ignored.

Levi held out his cup.

Addison filled it up. They shared a quick glance without speaking. They clearly weren't angry now.

Edward did another scan in every direction and then looked back in time to see Levi leaning in toward Addison to kiss her.

Addison dropped her mug, splashing the hot water over the fire, dousing it and Levi's legs. She stomped into her tent.

Edward was disappointed in Levi. He obviously hadn't learned from his mistake.

Levi went back into his tent and dropped the flap.

Edward hoped that would be the end of it. His head was pounding. He didn't have the patience to deal with anybody's bullshit right now.

Alexa peered deeper into the trees as she rotated, feeling a change in the wind. She studied the foggy woods that were lightening; her hands slid to the Colts on her slender hips.

Her crew felt the mood shift. They got ready to react.

Crunch!

The sound of something snapping under a careless foot drew an immediate reaction from the team. Guns were in hand an instant later.

Heavy feet rushed toward Alexa through the fog.

Alexa tried to estimate the threat by the noises.

Edward wasn't sure if he should call an alert to everyone else. That was answered when Alexa signaled them into a fighting formation on either side of her. They were going to handle it themselves.

A dozen shadowy figures emerged through the thick fog.

Alexa grabbed a handful of the blades from her belt pouch. As she threw the first one, nailing the careless attacker in the front, her men followed her lead. Knives flew in brutal tosses, sticking in chests and necks with amazing accuracy.

The dozen attackers were cut in half. The rest of them rushed toward Alexa while bringing up shields.

Alexa used her gun this time. She could already tell the attackers weren't strong enough to keep shields up against her Colts.

Gunfire rang through the chilly morning air, bringing everyone out of sleep. Harsh screams came next.

Alexa didn't waste bullets. Every shot she fired took down an attacker. There was very little for her men to do but admire her aim as the bodies fell.

Edward signaled Levi and the rest of the group to stay back. "She has it covered."

The gunfire died out. Alexa reloaded her warm guns and then holstered. She motioned her crew forward to verify there were no survivors.

Edward stayed next to Alexa to provide protection for her while the rest of their team searched the bodies and stripped the gear they could use.

"Who was that?" Emmie was angry they had been attacked. Like Alexa and Edward, she had a nasty hangover.

Alexa had identified the leader of the group. "A crew of distant Shalet-Mitchel cousins who weren't good enough to be taken onto a true blood team."

Alice scowled. "And they thought attacking us was a good way to get approved?"

"They probably tried to claim a bounty. I doubt they knew how many people were actually here. We've done well on guard duty at not letting them get this close. They assumed the fog would be a good cover." Alexa rubbed her temples and tried to get the headache to go away.

Addison grinned. "Never mess with a Mitchel anyway, but one who has a hangover is lethal."

Levi gave his choice. "It's almost two Mitchels."

Edward stood straighter. He'd gotten his first vote.

Alexa nodded at her uncle. "Thank you for approving him."

Levi snorted. "I'm sentencing a good man to a lifetime of taking shit as a member of our family. Don't thank me for that."

"I do anyway. And..." Alexa hugged Levi, whispering in his ear.

Levi pulled away and stomped back into his tent.

Everyone was curious about what she had said to him, but no one asked.

Edward had been close enough to hear it. Alexa had threatened to kill Levi if he kept damaging the family reputation. Edward approved completely.

Alexa and her crew resumed guard duty, leaving the stripped bodies where they had fallen.

Some people went back to bed, but most started their morning routines.

Eva went to the fire and began to cook a group meal.

Edward didn't meet Eva's eye as she did periodic scans of them and the environment. He didn't want to give Levi away, but he also didn't want to upset the pregnant woman. In his opinion, it was always best to stay out of other people's issues until there was no other choice. Then the truth would be delivered, even where it wasn't welcome.

“Line up for a training session. Everyone.”

There was a brief pause of the entire camp once again. They’d all been waiting for Alexa’s call for shift change. Emmie’s group had been set to take their places. No one had expected this.

All of the crews looked around to see if their team leaders were going to challenge Alexa for the lead. She had already been calling shift changes without getting approval. If they responded to this order, it officially put Alexa in charge of everyone.

None of the team leaders spoke up. They also didn’t move right away. They had their pride.

Alexa didn’t care about their emotions. She only cared about protecting the men she loved and teaching the new members to work together. “For the education of my team, please tell them why.”

Levi waved. “You have a very well-trained crew. We all know we can’t match that in enough ways to deserve the lead.”

Addison agreed. “It’s almost like being trained by your father. All of us want that.”

Emmie’s face was green with nausea and envy. “It’s the Mitchel way. Pride has to be put aside.”

The team leaders had been expecting a moment like this, though each of them had assumed at least one of them would be stupid enough to challenge Alexa for control. Levi’s crew had been the most likely for that because they were so loyal to him, but they weren’t as well-trained. It was a source of jealousy, embarrassment, and admiration. That was

a common feeling among the famous family who excelled in so many different ways. They had already learned to accept it.

Alexa waved at Edward. “Get us rolling.”

Edward hadn’t been expecting the lead in the training session he’d designed. He adjusted quickly to being in the spotlight. “We’re moving to the cleared area on the west side of these trees. Don’t get distracted by the view of the ocean.”

He headed for that location without waiting to see who followed. He was already certain all of them would, even if they didn’t hurry.

Edward took them to the large, weedy field that ran alongside the broken highway they had hiked for the last few hours of their journey here after leaving Safe Haven Mountain. They were able to see the restless ocean and it was louder without the trees to muffle it, but they couldn’t see the sand demons.

Edward didn’t know if the other groups were aware of the gritty monsters waiting for them at some point along this run, so he had chosen not to draw attention to it in case Alexa didn’t want them to know yet. He hadn’t forgotten the awful screech the demons made that had forced a reaction from Alexa. If they could do that to her, then it would happen to the rest of them. He hoped being out here where the water was louder would at least cover them against some of the noise.

“For the purpose of this session I will be referring to each team as A, B, C, or D. Alexa’s crew

is A. Everyone else is alphabetical in the order of arrival.” Edward stepped onto the road and began pointing. “We’re forming a rectangle. Groups A and B will take east and west; groups C and D will take north and south.”

As the teams got into place, Edward continued to give out information they would need during this first lesson together. “We’ll be starting with the standard formations. Leave enough space to account for mistakes of the team closest to you. I don’t want any contact. Watch your lines. We go on one.”

Edward didn’t give them time to dilly-dally into place. “One! Standard forms.”

Alexa’s team reacted immediately, sliding into a neat V that wasn’t quite perfect because it had no point without Edward in the line.

Addison’s crew pulled their staffs and began the same routine. They were grossly out of time with each other, thanks to Isaac and Lilya not being in position when the call came.

Levi’s group kept their knives in hand for the entire run, while also pulling longer blades during the middle of the rolling recovery.

Emmie’s group held blowguns in their left hands, with right hands out to simulate holding onto the handlebars of their bikes.

Even Edward was distracted as Emmie’s team mimicked jumping off those bikes and running alongside, then rolling over the seats to fire their darts. He observed in appreciation as their legs

pumped continuously and their tight grips never wavered. It was obvious the team was used to riding and fighting.

“Reset.” Edward waited while everyone got into their places. Then he readjusted his training plan on the fly for that special team. “Bikes out!”

Emmie’s team brightened. They quickly pulled the pieces of their rides from their cloaks and began the assembly.

“Everyone else, standard form again, twice as fast.” Edward didn’t know what terminology the other teams used, so he was keeping it simple to make sure everyone understood.

By the time the other crews were halfway through the faster set, Emmie’s team had assembled their bikes and mounted them. It only took a second for them to jump into the routine in that exact spot. Once again, everyone was distracted as they observed the bikers in action.

Daniel was enthralled. Without taking up more than 20 square feet of space, all five bikers ran through the set without bumping into each other or even crowding a teammate. Their bikes were held perfectly in control between their knees for the fighting portion. It was amazing and incredibly distracting.

Edward didn’t scold anyone. He motioned at the bikers. “Run it twice more while we watch so everyone can get their fill of your amazing abilities. Then I’ll nail everyone’s ass to the wall for slacking off.”

Emmie's group loved being the center of attention. They rarely got to show off their skills because they kept it quiet until needed. During a fight, it was an incredible diversion that almost always worked, but they rarely got the credit they deserved for it. Even Wyatt and Damon gave Edward a nod for providing that.

Emmie's crew ran through the set twice without stopping, never missing a roll or a turn. When they came to a stop, everyone clapped or whistled.

Edward gave them a minute to catch their breath if they needed it. None of them appeared to be breathing hard, however. It was impressive. "Standard forms, all groups. Rinse and repeat with cover switches on the second run."

Everyone liked it that Edward was now getting detailed and slightly complicated. They were Mitchels. They got bored easily.

4

An hour later, every man and woman standing in the field while Edward drilled them was ready to be done. It was noon now, with a dull sun and a cold breeze that was keeping them wet from carrying surf spray over their training ground. They still hadn't taken a break.

Edward walked alongside the bicycle crew as they ran the simple fighting routine yet again. "Loose cloak!"

He studied the rest of them as he made another round of the field. “Keep those elbows up! You’ve almost hit yourself with the handlebars three times now. Watch your lines!”

Emmie’s team was glad when Edward moved on to the next group. They liked a hard workout, but Edward was being the drill Sergeant they had all expected from Alexa when she called this session. They now understood why her crew was so good. With an XO like that, no one would slack off.

Edward walked by Levi’s group with only a quick glare at Colton for stepping a few inches out of his line before he rolled. It brought him up too close to Eva, who had to jump aside to avoid his mistake. Edward didn’t need to yell. Colton’s face was beet red from embarrassment. It was obvious he didn’t make mistakes very often. When it came to these routines, Levi’s group was right behind Alexa’s. He obviously worked them regularly. They didn’t need to be humiliated.

Edward paused by Addison’s group. He peered down at the baby, who was on a blanket a few feet away. He had been doing regular checks on the child the entire time they’d been here.

The girl peered up at him with bright blue eyes and a curious smile.

Edward denied the baby. “Wait until we’re finished. It’s rude to distract me right now.”

Sweetie Mitchel shut her eyes and went back to sleep.

Without looking at the crew, Edward continued to do his job. “Watch your lines, Isaac!”

Isaac quickly hurried back into position. He hadn't liked Edward standing over his daughter, but then, he didn't like anyone they didn't know being around his baby. Sweetie was more important to him than even Addison. It was his only child as far as he knew, his only living blood relative. That was part of why he fit in so well with the Mitchels. Family was everything to Isaac.

“Corral that wild hair! Tie it up or cut it off. I'm tired of seeing you shove it out of your face every time you come up from a roll.” Edward glared at Madelyn as she started to protest. “Out of formation until you fix the problem!”

Madelyn stomped over and dropped down next to the baby so she could dig out a hair tie. She loved having long braids, but wearing them outside of her cloak for vanity was incredibly inconvenient.

Edward didn't say he felt better having someone next to the baby while they were all distracted. Much like her father, Edward was already bonded to the baby and didn't want to see anything happen to her. He hoped Alexa would take Sweetie's presence into account when they hit Port City. It was very likely that the baby would be in danger simply because her mother was.

Edward scanned his crew and found all of them sweating, glaring, and moving in a perfect rhythm that made him wish for a brief moment that he could be part of it instead of leading. It sucked to get to

that point. It required an enormous amount of willpower and control over their bodies, but accomplishing a perfect set was an incredible rush that always left them in a good mood after a rough workout. “Five-minute break.”

The other teams stopped immediately. All of them were exhausted.

Alexa’s crew continued through the run. They had hit that perfect groove and none of them wanted to stop until they finished.

The other teams observed in appreciation for how hard it was to reach that moment. None of them achieved it very often because their leaders didn’t work them as hard. They were a little in awe and also relieved now to not be on Alexa’s infamous crew. It required a level of work that not even the team leaders wanted to put in.

Edward nodded to Alexa, letting her know the first part of his training set was done. She had taken a fast look at it this morning while they got ready to take over guard duty. The second part he had designed needed to be led by her. When it came to magic lessons, he couldn’t keep up.

“Three minutes left!” Alexa began walking the training field, drawing attention. Many of the exhausted people tensed, not sure what to expect now that she had taken over.

Jordan perked up. “Now we’ll learn something magical.”

“How will the normal keep up?” Damon was in a foul mood. He hadn’t worked this hard on Emmie’s crew, ever.

Wyatt was also upset with the harsh training. “Why was a normal allowed to join the family at all?”

Asher ran lightning fast, pulling his knife.

Edward blinked and Asher was already on his knees, holding a blade to the baby’s throat while Madelyn was still reaching for a weapon.

“That’s why.” Asher quickly retreated and sheathed his blade. He smiled softly at the child, then resumed his place while people gawked and his team clapped.

Addison and Isaac glowered at the bald man.

Edward frowned deeply. He’d only seen one other person move that fast and she was staring at Asher with fondness. “Duty over the boss and the baby for the next session.”

Asher inclined his head in recognition. “You call it and I do it.”

Chapter Eighteen
I Love This Job

1

“Keeep those shields up!” Alexa ignored the groans at her call. “Hold!”

Alexa fired a weak fire blast at Addison, who was struggling the most out of her team. The new mother wasn’t good with her magic. Alexa knew it was because of what Addison had gone through in the lab, but she didn’t have sympathy for the scarred woman. “Hold!”

They’d been working on their shields for two hours now, with no signs that a break was coming. The team leaders were all sorry they hadn’t practiced this with their crew. It was a valuable tool in any fight; it embarrassed them that their crews were having so much trouble.

Alexa used a strong blast of fire that covered the shields of her own team completely. Dark smoke rose into the sky.

Edward and the others shared a triumphant glance as the flames moved on to torment someone else. They hadn’t been able to do this before. No matter what else was going on, they could always count on Alexa to teach them something new.

Levi braced as Alexa's flames hit his shield and engulfed him. As a true born Mitchel, more was expected out of him, but even 43 years couldn't stop his first reaction of fear. *The lab loved playing with fire, burning people alive...*

Alexa met his eyes through the smoky shield.

Levi nodded shakily.

Alexa moved on, delivering short and long blasts at people based on what they could handle. Then she added a bit more, making them learn, making them grow.

"When we hit Port City, it will be a lot hotter than this. Concentrate!" Alexa didn't know if flames would be the threat, but it was one of the hardest things to fight. If they could hold against her fire, they stood a chance at other dangers.

Alexa glanced toward the ocean and held in a shudder. *At least we don't have to face that yet.* She was worried about the sand demons, but she was afraid of the ocean.

Alexa headed for their campsite. "One hour break. Then we'll do it the Mitchel way." She pointed at Daniel. "Cook, for everyone."

Mark regarded Levi, who was gasping for breath as he dropped his shield. "What's the Mitchel way?"

Jordan brought up a fiery shield around herself. "Leaders and XOs defend while our crew attacks."

Mark grinned. "I love this job." He went after Alexa, taking the first shift over her.

Alice fell in with Jacob for the short walk back to their campsite. “Sorry about last night.”

“I’m not.” Jacob wasn’t upset. He was honest. “You want something I can’t give. When it’s just sex, feel free to let me know and it will have a different outcome.”

“Why are you afraid to have a relationship?”

Jacob knew his teammates were listening. They wanted that answer, too. “Because most of us will die in the final battle. We all know it and I’m not good at playing pretend.”

Alice stepped into his path and kissed him. Deep blue sparks ran over the couple, drawing attention. That was the sign of soulmates.

Alice pulled back. “We should live while we can, Jacob. If I only have a short time left, I don’t want to spend it alone, afraid.”

Jacob left her warm embrace. “I don’t want to leave a kid on its own without parents to guide it and protect it. Being an orphan is hard.”

“Yes. I believe that’s why you cling to religion. God’s like an absent parent.”

“No. I lean on faith to get me through the hard times.”

Alice ran a soft hand over his scars. “That’s what a mate is for.” Then she walked away.

Jacob watched her in fear and longing.

Edward stayed near Emmie. “Can I have a minute of your time?”

Emmie snorted. “You’ve already had hours of my time. What do you want?”

“I’d like to talk to you about Jeanie and the Presidency.”

Emmie saw his eyes go to Alexa’s stiff form ahead of them. She shrugged. “I could vote for that. As long as it’s not her father, you could convince most of us to vote for it.”

Edward inclined his head. “Thank you for your time.”

“Yep.” Emmie waited for him to move on. When he didn’t, she sighed. “Don’t push me, big man. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Is there a question I can answer or a demonstration that I can give to secure your approval?”

“No. I can’t be bought or pressured. I’ll either like you or I won’t.”

Edward chuckled. “Fair enough. Thank you for your time.” He still kept walking by her.

Emmie realized he was providing guard duty over a team leader. She tried not to get emotional and failed. “My team has never done that automatically.”

Edward wasn’t surprised. “Why do you take in unwanted souls on your crew?”

“I pity them.” It surprised Emmie that a stranger had noticed. “You’re smarter than I thought.”

“And you’re nicer than I assumed.”

They exchanged a brief smile, then walked in silence.

While the others were distracted or busy cooling down, Damon headed for Alexa. She only had a single guard right now. The rest of her team was half a mile away.

Mark felt it coming. He rotated with a deep scowl, holding up his tattooed fists.

I Will Kill U.

Damon stopped, realizing Mark might be too big of a challenge.

Wyatt pulled Damon toward their tent.

Mark glared at Emmie.

Emmie and Edward weren't sure what had happened, but they knew Damon was the problem.

“What will it take to get him to leave her alone?”

Emmie snorted again. “What would it take to get *you* to leave her alone?”

“Her saying the words. I have honor.”

“Well, most men aren't like that and especially not Mitchels.”

“So he needs to die in the crossfire. Got it.”

Emmie was loyal to her crew. “If that happens, you'll never get my approval.”

Edward stiffened. “There are other Mitchels I can bond with on this run. It doesn't have to come from you.” He allowed his true feelings to show. “And frankly, after seeing how you let them run

over you and break rules, I'm starting to doubt that your approval holds any weight anyway." He nodded stiffly. "Excuse me."

Edward dropped back a step, then continued to provide guard duty over her.

Emmie was ashamed and impressed. He didn't have to do it and he clearly didn't like her, but he was doing his duty. "My team means everything to me. I allow their mistakes because they're my children."

Edward was shocked. "All of them?"

"Yes."

He grunted. "Damn. That makes things harder."

"It always does. Joel took them from me at birth. I was never allowed contact as they grew up. Each of them found me after the war. My guilt gives them control."

Edward was horrified, but it didn't change his answer. "Then you aren't really leading your team—they are."

Emmie already knew that. "It's why I'm retiring. They'll learn on different teams, away from me...again."

Edward began planning a way to keep Emmie from being split from her kids.

Emmie went into her tent.

Edward took up a post in the nearby trees.

Several other team members did the same, joining him without being assigned. His sense of duty was already rubbing off.

Alexa was thrilled.

Edward was suddenly nervous. It was a lot to live up to when he was the only one doing it.

All of their team glanced at Edward, offering silent comfort as they felt his distress.

Edward relaxed. *I'm not the only one. I have my team and that's more than enough.*

3

“That is not good. Seriously.” Billy spat out the spoonful of soup.

Daniel flushed, glaring.

“Did Jacob help you with it?” Billy walked away, spitting again. “It’s rubbing off.”

Daniel added more spices and some sugar to the three large pots to counteract some of the salt.

Jacob laughed. “It’s not me this time.”

Billy scolded him. “It should be. She gave Daniel the job even though it’s your turn because she wanted everyone to get a good meal.”

Jacob dropped his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be. Go help him.”

Alexa overruled that. “Not good is infinitely better than revolting. Let Jacob read. Daniel will fix the meal.”

Daniel was mortified, and angry. He was staying that way now. He didn’t like it, but he also didn’t know how to stop it.

Across the camp, Addison’s baby was in a walker, cooing and chewing on her hand. She saw Edward, who was still on guard duty.

Edward refused to smile at the child and get distracted, but it was easy to see his own daughter in the infant. He hoped Alexa's children would be just as sweet. Her name was accurate.

"He likes kids." Jordan joined Alexa by the fire ring that now held an eternal pot of coffee. Her tone was snarky. "Does he know you can't have them?"

Alexa lifted a brow. "Who says I can't?"

Jordan smiled cruelly. "You're a vampire. Vampires don't reproduce."

The camp went still and quiet once again. Only one of the crews had known.

Alexa sipped her coffee and didn't answer.

Jordan shrugged, unaware that people were staring in surprise and disgust. "Maybe your boy will find the cure."

Now Alexa glared, warning her.

Jordan stared back coolly. "You don't get to drill me all day and still keep your secrets, your arrogance. You aren't my team leader."

"But I am. Let it go." Addison didn't glare at Jordan; she didn't need to.

Jordan walked away.

Edward realized his assumption of the hug had been correct. Now he wanted to know why Alexa had greeted an enemy that way.

Jordan struck out at Edward as she went by. "Don't ever ask me for approval because you won't get it!"

"What's her problem?" Billy didn't like anyone talking to his teammate that way.

Addison stiffened. “Ask someone else. I wouldn’t tell you even if I knew. I’m loyal to my people.”

Lilya and Austin nodded. They loved being on Addison’s team.

“And I thought we had too much drama.” Billy walked away without asking Alexa.

For that, Alexa gave him an answer. “I wouldn’t approve her as a mate for my father.”

Billy’s face fell as he made the connection. “That’s why she came to me.”

“Yes. She’s trying to get back to the past.”

Her team realized they’d judged that one wrong. All of them had assumed it was Emmie’s team who were chasing ghosts.

Billy decided it didn’t matter since he wasn’t interested in a future with Jordan anyway. All he wanted was the occasional orgasm and someone to cheat at cards with during downtime.

The wind gusted sharply. The trees above them creaked in ominous warning.

Everyone looked up except for Isaac. He ran. Dirt dropped from his clothes in slow motion.

Addison saw the thick tree branch fall. She also took off running, knowing she wasn’t going to get there in time.

Most of the people flew toward the child, too late.

Isaac dove, stretching out with all his length.

The tree branch slammed into his shoulder as he covered the baby. It knocked him to the side.

Isaac rolled, groaning in pain.

The baby gurgled happily as the only thing to touch her was a leaf.

Addison scooped the baby into her arms, heart thudding painfully. She hurried over to Isaac. “Thank you! Thank you!”

Isaac swallowed another moan as he was helped to his feet.

“Check him out.”

Jordan stepped forward to do as her team leader wanted. She was the only medic among the entire gathering. Everyone noted it for future reference. They also eyed the swaying trees in anger. It could have been an accident, but they were all certain it wasn't. Nature had targeted their weakest member.

“He's fine. Nasty bruise coming in.”

Addison shoved herself into Isaac's arms. This time she didn't care how dirty he was.

Isaac wrapped her and the baby in his protection and kissed her back; the pain in his shoulder was forgotten as Addison expressed her relief and her gratitude.

Levi's control snapped. He marched toward the family with clenched fists.

Edward saw it coming and neatly slid between them.

Levi shoved Edward aside.

Edward spun smoothly and brought up his shield around the angry man.

Levi fired immediately, using ice that swarmed the shield and started to crack it.

Edward brought up another barrier over that one and kept going, smothering Levi in too many layers to fight through. “Calm down. This is a no-fighting zone.”

Levi fired again, now spewing profanities.

Addison and Isaac took the baby into their tent. They trusted Edward to keep control.

“I’ll make you pay for this!”

Edward wasn’t expending much energy yet. He doubted Levi was really trying hard. “It’s my job to keep the peace. I’m doing it.”

Levi continued to blow off steam.

Edward was able to keep him contained, drawing claps and low whistles from their witnesses.

But not from Daniel. “That fucking figures.” He dropped the big spoon into one of the pots, splattering soup onto his shirt. “Mr. Perfect strikes again.”

Alexa and her team were shocked.

The witnesses were surprised but also gratified to discover Alexa had drama issues in her crew, too.

Edward stared at Daniel. “I’ve always known you were jealous of me and I’ve never treated you differently. Remember who we are!”

Shame flooded Daniel. He resumed cooking. He didn’t apologize.

Levi stopped fighting. He drew in a ragged breath. “I’m good now.”

Edward lowered his shields.

Levi stood there, not sure how to explain that he'd needed a release.

Edward pointed toward the creaking trees. "Let's walk and talk. You can vent to me."

The two men went into the deeper woods without another word.

David laughed. "You were right, Boss. Fun times."

Alexa snorted. "This is calm compared to most Mitchel gatherings. You'll see."

David grinned. "Awesome."

Laughter broke the tension and sent them all back to preparing for the bad meal. Many of them took dried staples from their supplies in case it was really bad.

Alexa glanced toward the ocean. The baby almost being hurt had pissed her off. One day, Nature would meet her on the battlefield and it would be ugly. *One of us will die, you evil bitch. You have my word on it as a Mitchel.*

4

Levi's eyes lit up bright red as he and Edward stopped in the thickest part of the dead woods.

Edward sighed in commiseration. "Maybe I'd feel the same, but that doesn't change the facts. If you keep acting like this, you'll eventually lose your crew."

Levi huffed. He was too angry and humiliated to talk calmly.

“You’re embarrassing them. Alexa’s father did the same to his team, from what I’ve been told, and they abandoned him. Your crew loves you. It’s easy to see, but you already know love can be crushed. Don’t you?”

Levi thought about the huge mistake he’d made by cheating on Addison. He nodded, but he still didn’t speak.

Edward was tired of playing peacekeeper. Levi’s behavior offended his ethics on every level. “What will it take for you to let her go?”

Levi’s rage returned. “Death!”

Edward nodded coldly. “Your choice is so noted.” He walked back to camp without another word.

Edward went straight to Daniel.

Daniel was dipping soup into bowls while cursing himself. “I’m sorry.”

Edward waited. Like Levi, he knew Daniel also needed a release.

Daniel handed the full bowls to Jacob, who was helping pass them out. “I mean it. It won’t happen again.”

“I just want to know why it happened at all.”

Daniel refused to relive the childhood heartbreak that had torn him apart. *The girl who rode bikes with me also chose someone else.* “It was a leftover reaction. Let it go.”

Edward got it when Daniel’s eyes went to Alexa and quickly flinched away. “No soup for me. I have a shoe to chew on.”

Daniel chuckled. “Save a sole for me. This is rough.”

Everyone waiting for a bowl frowned.

Everyone with a bowl in hand hesitated.

The few who had taken a bite promptly sat their bowls on the ground and forced a swallow or spat it out.

Edward leaned in.

Daniel didn’t want to confess, but his team leader was waiting for an honest answer. “It reminded me of another time. It’s not really about the boss at all.” Daniel meant that. “I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

“I hope you’ll always be around to share that joy with us.”

Daniel chortled. “I’d be happy to be the third wheel in your romance.”

Edward chuckled. “I was thinking of an alternate when I screw up.”

“Oh, no, big boy. You wanted it and you got it. Now you have to live up to it.”

Edward laughed. So did Daniel.

Alexa rolled her eyes. “And yet there’s still confusion as to why most women want slavery.” She didn’t say male drama was holding them all back, but everyone knew it was the truth. “I’m not property. I have a mind. I will make my own choices!”

Alexa calmed suddenly, smiling tolerantly. “Next session in ten minutes. Save your energy for that, my pets. I promise, you’re going to need it.

You'll all be too tired for drama when I'm done with you."

No one doubted her.

Chapter Nineteen
I Smell Your Fear

1

“**L**ast call for mud.” Colton glanced around the quiet camp of sore, grumpy fighters.

No one took him up on the offer. It was 3 a.m. and they were about to leave. No one wanted to break form for a bathroom stop on the way to the city.

Alexa’s crew had already disassembled all of the tents and packed them away in their cloaks. They were lingering around the other campsites, spending time with the people they could tolerate while keeping an eye on those they couldn’t.

Alexa had worked them until after sunset, ate from her dried staples, then went to bed, leading by example. All of them had gotten six hours of sleep, but it hadn’t been restful. Besides the nightmares, every creak of the trees above them had brought flashes of the baby almost being hurt. It was an unspoken agreement that the next camp any of them made would not be in the woods or anywhere that something could fall on them.

Emmie’s crew had cleaned their bikes after the lesson. They were sitting on them now, at Alexa’s order. They were going to split up and ride along

both sides of the formation to provide protection from any stray rounds that might be fired as they approached the city. Alexa didn't think that was going to happen, but a good leader didn't take unnecessary chances with the lives of their crew, and she now had a lot more lives to protect.

Alice felt Jacob watching her, but she refused to respond. She was respecting his wishes and leaving him alone until she could accept what little he was willing to give.

Jacob continued to observe the cute girl with a deep frown. He didn't mind that she was a Mitchell-Livingston. Nor was it a bonus. He has other fears preventing him from responding. *Why couldn't she just want to get laid?!*

David joined Billy by their dead fire ring. "My best blade."

Billy grinned. "My sharpening kit."

"Deal. Within the next 24-hours."

Billy scanned Alice and then Jacob. "Not until the run's over."

Edward chuckled. They were betting on Jacob's love life.

Jacob didn't laugh. He also didn't protest. If it had been anyone else, he would have been part of the betting, too. As it was, he didn't know if they were going to be right. A new door had opened up for him, but he was scared to step through it.

Edward resumed sweeping the shrunken, foggy campsite. In a few days, only the rotting corpses in the trees would reveal that they'd been here.

Levi and his group were sitting around the fire ring that Colton was now dousing. All of them were nursing mostly empty cups and rough attitudes.

Levi's behavior while they'd been here was a source of discomfort for his crew. Unless they were around his ex-wife, Levi didn't act this way. His crew was considering no longer tolerating it. Being near Alexa, even for such a short time, had reminded them that it was possible to retain their honor in a difficult situation.

Addison's group was gathered around the baby, giving the infant some needed attention. There wouldn't be much of that for her during this run and Sweetie had been very good. The adults wanted to reward that, but they also enjoyed spending time with her. Descendant babies were hard to resist.

Levi glanced over at the happy family, once again unable to contain his jealousy. "Be careful, Isaac, or she'll be playing with someone else's child a year from now."

Scowls and disapproval flew toward him from everyone in camp, including his team.

Isaac calmly handed the baby back to Addison and turned to face Levi.

When he marched forward, Levi hurried to his feet, understanding he'd finally pushed hard enough to trigger a fight where he could kill Addison's new man.

Addison glowered at Levi. "You're going to be sorry you did that."

Austin got out of the way. “Now you’ve done it.”

Lilya glared. “You had to keep winding him up!”

Edward got ready to intervene again, but he didn’t want to.

Isaac didn’t stop until he was chest-to-chest with Levi. “Apologize to my wife.”

Levi growled, hand sliding toward his knife. “Slam you!”

“As you wish.” Isaac felt Edward coming his way. He used a gift that was rarely employed. Only his team knew he had it.

Alexa stared in surprise as Isaac tugged on the timestream and brought it to a crawl. The wind slowed; falling leaves floated like feathers.

Isaac wasn’t stuck like everyone else. He had learned how to push forward through the thicker atmosphere. He’d been too drained to use it when the branch fell.

Isaac leaned in and sniffed Levi. “I smell your fear.” His tongue came out, forked on the end. His pupils dilated in a reptilian reaction.

Edward kept trying to fight through the slowed time, but he was impressed with Isaac for being able to keep this hidden. It explained why the man was always dirty and quiet until provoked. He clearly loved the earth; he was a snake hybrid.

Billy felt rage as Hemi’s memory flashed, but the time slow was powerful. He had no hope of getting free until Isaac let it go.

Isaac swayed dangerously, eyes blinking and dilating.

Levi struggled to get away. He was terrified of snakes.

Isaac touched Levi's cheek with his forked tongue. "I'll enjoy eating you."

Alexa broke free of Isaac's hold.

Isaac's head snapped toward her. He prepared to fight.

Alexa had had enough of Levi's behavior, too. "As you were."

Levi's terrified eyes flew to Alexa.

Alexa shook her head. "I warned you. If he follows though, you deserve it."

Isaac wanted to, but they had to work together and eating a true born Mitchel wouldn't make him any friends, even if the man did deserve it.

Isaac retreated and let go of the timestream. He was the second most powerful descendant in this group.

Time snapped back into place; tree branches fell, making people flinch.

"Apologize to my wife."

Levi tensed to fight. Then he did as ordered. "I apologize."

"She left you because you cheated on her with Eva. She had every right. You were wrong."

Levi was genuinely sorry about that. He looked at Addison. "I am sorry."

Addison lifted her chin and then her daughter to her hip. She went to stand duty in the shadows until they were ready to leave.

Levi sighed. "I don't deserve her forgiveness."

"No, you don't." Isaac focused on Eva, who had been quiet since they arrived. "Maybe you should follow Addison's lead."

"I will if he doesn't stop." Levi hadn't told her he was married when they'd first met. Eva never would have encouraged a relationship if she'd known.

"No!" Levi hurried over to Eva. "Don't leave me. I need you!"

The normally cheerful brunette moped. "As a replacement for Addison?"

"No. You're my second chance."

Eva let Levi hug her, but she wasn't convinced, and neither was anyone else. They all knew he wasn't going to change his behavior.

Alexa rotated toward the road. "Let's roll."

As she went by them, Wyatt and Damon watched with malicious expressions. Now that Emmie had announced her retirement plans, they felt like they could do whatever they wanted.

Wyatt caught Emmie's eye and motioned.

Emmie didn't have a choice. Besides being her children, she owed them a favor that had been promised in exchange for them coming to her when they finally escaped their father's custody. She'd been honored then by their willingness to give her a

chance to love them. Emmie nodded angrily and walked on.

Mark saw all of it. He fell in right behind Alexa and began whispering in their lowest vampire register so that only his team was able to hear it.

All of the crews fell in behind their team leaders, who fell in behind Alexa. As they reached the road, Alexa circled her finger in the air.

The entire group slid to the sides and made a large, neat V with the bikers on both sides like wings. They traveled in that formation all the way to Port City.

2

“There’s an ocean around it.” Alice gawked at the twenty-foot wide, fast-moving water barrier that surrounded the city.

“It’s a moat.” Alexa sighed angrily. “He always loved castles.”

Alexa walked toward the narrow bridge over the water before anyone could question her comment or agree with the observation. A few of them understood who was waiting for them. They were furious about it, too.

The city was blocked off by a high steel wall that prevented them from seeing anything but the tops of dark high-rises and factories.

“That’s a water plant.” David was familiar with that type of utility. “I worked in one a long time ago. I’d say it’s running.”

Alexa and the other vampires were able to discern a thin trail of smoke coming from the wide stack.

“Where did they get fuel for it?” Despite the name of this city, Addison didn’t see any place where a large ship could make port to offload fuel.

David gave the most likely answer. “Probably a city oil reserve or a natural gas stockpile.”

“I thought water plants ran on water power.”

David chuckled at Alice’s comment. “Green energy was created with fossil fuels.”

“Did you know there’s really no such thing?” Jordan frowned at the disbelief from the teammates around her. “Really. Oil and gas are created by bacterial interactions. They never came from fossils at all and they form a lot faster than we were told. They just need the right conditions.”

“Did you know they were able to make oil from raw sewage?” Levi swept the apocalyptic landscape. “At least, they could before the war.” No one was making fuel of any sort now.

“Can we table the education session for another time?” Edward motioned. “If the bridge doesn’t hold, remember to use your shields. That moat is deep. I suspect it leads straight into the ocean.”

People nodded. If they fell in, they would likely be attacked while being washed out to sea.

Alexa was still studying the wall. It had narrow tunnels where water flowed high and fast into the city. It was an amazing, familiar construction.

“Wait. Are we supposed to use those boats?” Colton pointed. “I don’t mind the water. I *hate* boats.”

It was surprising to Edward how many weaknesses the Mitchels had. He’d been expecting something much different. “Yes. Once we get over the bridge, we take the boats into those tunnels. The current will pull us along.”

“It’s a defense system and a natural transportation line.” Billy was fascinated by all forms of travel. “Whoever built this is genius.”

Alexa stepped onto the bridge. “Yes, he is.”

The walk across the bridge was nerve-racking. It wasn’t wide enough for them to travel in formation; a single file line provided no protection for those in the front or the rear.

Alexa led them with Mark on her heels, ready to react. The only good thing about this was the sturdy construction. The bridge didn’t sway in the stiff breeze and it barely vibrated under the sturdy boots of so many travelers.

Everyone was glad when they made it across without a problem. The deep water underneath the bridge moved rapidly. They couldn’t see through it, but Mark was certain it contained wildlife none of them were set to handle. Fighting under the water was completely different than fighting on land.

The wide platform at the end of the bridge dead ended on one side. On the other side, a concrete path took them to the dock.

“Stay with your team.” Alexa went to the first rowboat and stepped down into it without concern. Unlike the others in this group, she wasn’t worried about being attacked yet. Her enemies wanted her securely inside before triggering their trap.

All of the teams got into the boats and waited for Alexa to untie hers before following her lead. Now that they were here, none of the crew minded her going first, except for her own people.

As soon as Alexa untied the front boat, the rushing water immediately began to pull it away from the dock.

“No oars. How do we control it?” Jacob didn’t like this set up at all.

Mark repeated that answer pointedly even though he shared Jacob’s concern. “The current will take us where we need to go.”

The salty water tugged the boats into the center of the moat and then swiftly rushed them toward the side of the city they hadn’t been able to see upon arrival.

As they made it around the side of the immense steel wall that surrounded the city, they stared in surprise at the numerous tunnels appearing in that wall.

“Which one, boss?” Despite not having oars, Edward was confident they could direct the boat in any direction Alexa chose. It would just take strong arms and maybe even a strong leg or two.

Alexa pointed at a tunnel coming up in front of them. “It’s pulling us into that one.”

Everyone hoped that was the right choice.

The boats began to go into the wide, pitch black tunnel. Alexa lifted her shield.

The teams behind her did the same, overlapping to cover each other in layers.

It was dark and quiet inside the tunnel, even with the water under them. Alexa spotted flood lines all the way to the top of the steel walls. She shined her light to make sure the other teams saw it as well. Huge wooden doors were hanging above their heads, covered in mildew and rot.

“They can drop those to trap visitors in here.”

Alexa nodded at Mark’s comment. “Then the water will rise and drown those visitors. It’s another perfect build.”

Alexa shut off her light. “Anyone who leaves this way will not get out of the city alive unless the boss here wants them to. If it comes down to that, pick a different path.”

The familiar sound of a radio activating echoed through the tunnel. A firm female voice greeted them. “Welcome to Port City, weary travelers. You are being taken to the reception area. Please follow the rules. Punishments here are...harsh.”

Silence fell again as the speaker deactivated.

The entire team stayed tense, especially the people in the rear who were now staring up into the dark ceiling in alarm. Whoever had designed this knew exactly what they were doing. It was menacing.

“I see a light.”

Alexa kept her shield up as the tunnel let them out into a current moving along at a higher speed. It pulled them roughly to the right, causing everyone to hold tightly to their boat.

As they emerged from the tunnel, another giant steel wall met their gazes. Shadows under the water drew attention.

“I think that was an apartment building.” Jacob was still staring as they sailed by it. “The city is under us.”

David pointed. “Only parts of it. There’s a gap in the wall. Check it out.”

His comment shifted everyone’s attention to an entire city block left. It was on the opposite side of the water, where it couldn’t be reached without a rough swim. As they sailed by, more of the city came into view. Some of it was damaged; occasional blocks were pristine. Many of them stared in longing at the signs of the world that had been destroyed.

The water pulled them around another curve, where electric lights on the wall revealed a narrow dock. The boats bumped into the dock and each other, gathering there.

Alexa jumped out of the boat while keeping her shield up.

The rest of her team was able to do the same.

The other teams had to release their shields to concentrate on making the two foot jump from their boat to the dock. There was no other way to reach it.

Edward and his team stayed ready to catch anyone who missed the jump, but it wasn't necessary. They all made it onto the dock and gathered around the single door in the tall wall.

The door slid open. A tall, bald woman in a long robe with a torch and a fake red smile greeted them calmly. "I'm Monica. Welcome to Port City. Please follow me."

The other crews began asking questions, except for Alexa's team. They were studying the woman and already finding things they didn't like.

"Are other people waiting for us?"

"Who runs this city?"

"Can we talk to your boss?"

Monica kept walking. "No new business will be done until the run is finished. Please follow me." Her repeated reply was in the exact same tone, making everyone uneasy.

Edward caught Alexa's sigh. "Is she AI or a hybrid?"

Alexa shook her head. "Charmed and can't break free is more likely."

The men immediately began making plans to free the woman from her captivity.

Alexa shut them down. "Make no plans until we see the rest of the setup. Things are not always as they seem when dealing with a conjurer."

Mutters and mumbles went through the group at the reminder, but it was harsher now, personal. They were getting angry.

Edward lifted a brow at Levi, hoping for an answer.

Levi motioned at the brilliant construction. “This was done by a Mitchel. To get out of here, we’ll probably have to kill one of our own.”

The red and black robed female leading them stopped suddenly. Everyone saw her struggling mentally.

Monica turned toward Alexa. She wasn’t able to ask for help, but her eyes begged for it.

Alexa let out another deep sigh of rage that drew attention from her crew. That sound meant someone was going to die.

“I will consider your request.”

The charmed woman rotated toward the tunnel. “Welcome to Port City. Please follow me.”

Monica led them into another long, dark tunnel. She stopped near a door that was open but revealed only more darkness,

“Please wait in the courtyard and you will be handled in the order of arrival. Check in on the screen with details about trade items or the reason you’ve come to our wonderful city.”

Edward stepped closer to the woman. “I have a couple of quick questions. Can you help me? Can I help you?”

Monica shuddered. She blinked. “No business will be done until the end of each run.”

Alexa headed for the door, muttering. “Another clever trap for those who have to help someone in need. Here we go again.”

As soon as they were all through the door, it slammed shut behind them and locked.

No one was surprised.

Chapter Twenty

Bitches and Snitches

1

The dark tunnel began to lighten as the group moved through it. They were able to pick out the wide, rotting doors above them once again. Alexa assumed they would find that set up throughout the city. The designer of this giant mousetrap wanted to make sure their rats weren't able to escape.

The tunnel let them out into a square courtyard that was easily the size of a sports field and filled with hundreds of people. Mitchels of all ages and ranks were everywhere. Most were tall and dark-haired, but their mates and kids covered all other sizes, shapes, and colors. Many of those sported fresh bruises and bandages that said the family fun had started without them.

Alexa's crew swallowed thick saliva at the smells of so many people. They were starting to get thirsty again, but everyone in this crowd of drinking, training, reading, and resting people was off-limits.

The courtyard was set around what had obviously once been the city center. The dirt path around it held no clever statues or dazzling floral arrangements. It was barren here.

The large, pristine gazebo in the middle was surrounded by several camped groups who looked up as Alexa came through the tunnel.

A loud cheer broke the air.

“It’s Alexa!”

“Alexa’s here!”

“Right on time, like I told you she would be.”

“Clear a path!”

The hundreds of people now observing their approach shifted closer, while those around the gazebo slid to the sides to allow Alexa access. There were leers, smiles, nods, and relief. There were also sly gleams and exchanged glances that said she wasn’t safe here.

Edward retreated to allow Asher the guard position over Alexa, ignoring the surprise from the rest of his team. Asher was the fastest among them and he was fond of Alexa. Edward wasn’t taking any chances with her safety.

Edward saw every type of hairstyle and clothing he could think of in the crowd, but almost every single person wore a long cloak with pockets sewn into the inside. He assumed it was a family thing.

People scanned Alexa’s team as they walked behind her, seeing scars and skills that spoke for themselves. Some of them smiled in welcome. Others sneered in contempt. Edward chose to ignore them all and match Alexa’s aloofness like he’d been instructed to do.

Levi frowned. “If you shut them out, you’ll never get approved.”

Edward didn't reply, but he did smooth out his expression. Being friendly was something he would have to work on if that mattered.

Asher rolled his eyes. "Alexa wants it. They'll approve him before this run is done."

Levi chuckled at the wordplay. "Probably. Her happiness matters to a lot of us."

Asher bit his lip to keep from saying something sarcastic to his team leader.

Edward saw Eva's relief, but he doubted anyone else had. At some point, Levi's team was going to challenge him and he was going to lose.

The same steel wall that had greeted them upon arrival surrounded the piazza. Seams in the wall implied parts of it would open, but there were no buttons or handles. Alexa's crew found cameras attached to the corners of the wall; they were all being watched.

Signs on the walls gave them basic rules. There were only a few.

No stealing.

No sexual crimes.

No sedition! The punishment is beheading.

Edward frowned. After seeing the amazing construction here, he had expected something less medieval.

A large screen was welded to the ground just to the right of the tunnel. Edward noticed it as he scanned their rear. The wide, gray and yellow screen was an old construction alert sign that flashed helpful information in bright letters.

Rules to live here; no exceptions!

A. Earn it by doing jobs for the boss. From removing threats to finding supply stashes, this method will take a long time.

B. Win residency by running the gauntlet. There are four areas to make it through. This will take days.

C. Take it from someone. If you can kill one of the three lowest ranked residents, you will be granted immediate approval. If you kill the wrong person, you'll be gutted and left to bleed out in the moat.

*No business will be done until the end of the run.
A run is in progress.*

Alexa's crew was reading the words that flashed on the screen. Alexa focused on the center gazebo, where the other three council members were standing up from bright yellow benches to greet her.

Asher stayed close, hand hovering over his knife. He had been given a huge honor. He took it seriously.

As the sign continued to flash, keeping the attention of the newest group, it allowed everyone else to study Alexa's team for weaknesses.

Status in our city is earned by rank. When children turn 18, they have a month to earn a slot. If one is not empty, they go on a waiting list and must leave until a slot comes open.

People are ranked by their jobs, contributions, and the time it takes to run the gauntlet. All members have to make the run at least once.

Edward assumed not everyone made it through the gauntlet. It was actually a brilliant way to keep control of the city, as there would always be open slots to be earned. It was also harsh and disappointing. It bore no resemblance to the America that had existed before the war.

The team turned back toward their leader and found her entering the gazebo with her hands on her Colts.

Whistles began to ring out from those in the crowd. It was the call to attention.

Asher stood on the other side of the wooden railing but still within reach of Alexa.

Edward studied the council members as people rose from their campsites and moved toward the center. When Alexa had told them a council ruled the Mitchel family, Edward had envisioned four old women with hairy knuckles and disapproving profiles.

He wasn't disappointed. The only difference in his expectations was that two of the members were men. All of them were older than Alexa and taller. The hairy knuckles, hairy arms, and long beards existed on all three of them. Even the one woman had a braided beard down to her flat chest.

While everyone else got set, Levi joined Edward to deliver a few details. "They are the oldest

members of their family branch. They've killed more people and suffered more losses than anyone else. Getting a place on the council is hard because very few Mitchels live beyond the age of 40. Those who do reach it guard their lives more actively to keep it." Levi hoped Edward caught the hint about his lack of effort with his team and in general.

"How did Alexa get a seat?" She wasn't the oldest of her family branch or the last. Levi was standing next to him and she had at least two brothers that Edward knew of.

"Alexa negotiated with the government to improve our living conditions in the labs and she was only 16 at the time. She had just eliminated the giants and spent a year in solitary confinement for the deaths of three dozen soldiers who were sent to bring her out of that mountain. Her first request upon being released was to help her family and not herself. When the council found out, they voted her in and removed someone who wasn't filling the duty as it deserved."

People around them nodded at the reminder of why Alexa was respected among their family. She was a badass fighter, but her honor and commitment to the future of their family had earned her that place.

"She's been a full member of the council since that moment. Every vote she's cast has been taken seriously. Many people will wait and see how she votes before making their own decisions. They all know our family is more important to her than the

other petty issues that will come up in front of this council today.”

“Who actually leads the council?”

“Her father has had that honor for many years now. He rarely shows up for any of the meetings, however. Some people assume Alexa’s votes and decisions come from him.”

Edward doubted that would be the case for this meeting. Alexa hadn’t had contact with her father in a long time. “I wouldn’t lay money on that.”

Levi chuckled. “Neither would I. My niece knows her own mind. She doesn’t need anyone to make her choices for her.”

The crowd quieted as Nora, the eldest council member, glared at all of them.

“Let’s get started. Beggars, bitches, and snitches go first.”

Everyone cheered. A Mitchel meeting was now underway.

2

Edward quickly understood why it had been phrased so bluntly. A long line had formed in front of the council, with people begging, complaining, and telling on each other. He observed in fascination.

“I’m begging for a marriage to a founding family line. There are only three of us left. Our branch is going to die out.”

“The council will consider your request, Gwendolyn. Next?”

“I’m begging for help training my crew. I don’t have anything else to teach them, but they refuse to go to another team.”

“I have room for training sessions.” Franklin, the oldest male on the council, motioned toward his XO, who was standing by with a clipboard. “Arrange times with him.”

“Next?”

“I’m begging for support in my run for President against the current Pro Tem.” The man glowered at Alexa.

Alexa showed no emotion at the silent accusation that Jeanie should never have been put in charge.

“The council will consider your request. Next?”

“I’d like to bitch about the slavery law. It shouldn’t be allowed!”

“So noted. Next?”

Nora was keeping things rolling while Franklin and his XO took notes. Alexa and the other man, a handsome blonde who kept eyeing Alexa in ways that made Edward frown, kept shields around the entire council and studied the growing line of beggars, bitches, and snitches.

“I’d like to bitch about Alexa calling us here and not providing for our needs. My group is low on food. We used up everything we had to get here.”

Edward was already reaching into the pouches in his cloak as Alexa signaled. He tossed the extra

supplies the crews had provided upon meeting them in the woods.

“Next?”

“I’d like to bitch about the lack of progress in our family estates. Now that the apocalypse has removed the need for money to buy property, all of us should be given plots and the equipment to work them.”

“The council will consider your request. Next?”

A sly looking teenage girl leaned toward the council members, scarred hands on the rail of the gazebo. “I have information on Patricia, who was accused of kidnapping two Mitchel-Abbot children.”

David stiffened at that name. He quickly smoothed out his expression and refused to think about her so no one would pick up her location from his mind. He wasn’t a Mitchel. He didn’t have to abide by their rules.

“You may give your information to the council so we can pass it on to those who have been wronged.”

“They gave me sanctuary over the winter. They’re living under an old grocery store in St. Louis.”

“Your information has been recorded. If there’s a reward, you’ll be notified. Next?”

The lanky girl slunk off into the crowd.

David kept track of her. He had left the family, but he still wanted them to be safe. The accusation was bad, but the two children were happy where

they were and well-cared for. He couldn't imagine ripping them away from their mother and giving them to the man who had raped her for their conception.

"I'd like to beg for help in tracking down those who robbed me while I was held up by the government after the war. My entire homestead was ransacked. My dogs were killed. My wife was driven out and died on the road."

"Do you have any proof that the person or people are still alive? The council will not approve a search party without it."

"I tracked them to Nevada after the war. I believe they're soldiers hiding in a western bunker."

Alexa spoke up for the first time. "The western bunker is ruled by Marcella Pruett. All men there are slaves. Any team going to that location would do well to have a female leader bringing her own slaves along for infiltration purposes."

The man who had been robbed quickly nodded. "I have no problem with any plan the council determines is appropriate, so long as I receive justice."

"The council will consider your request." Nora gestured. "Next?"

"I'd like to beg for an alliance between my branch and any other who can prove they are capable of defending my females. As most of you know, our branch does not fight. We procreate to continue the family line and make matches that advance the status of everyone on our tree."

Emmie cleared her throat. "I'm open to such a match. Both of my sons are single and childless."

Damon and Wyatt glared at their mother, but neither man spoke up. They weren't allowed to protest her choices as the eldest living member of their branch.

"The council will consider that request and solution. Next?"

Despite the fascinating family threads, Edward began to get bored. He had to force himself to pay attention.

A fight broke out in the rear of the crowd.

Nora fired a powerful anger spell, sending her displeasure over the two women and everyone near them. "I said next!"

The fighters retreated, glaring and groaning.

Edward hid a smile. Nora felt like Alexa to him. It was comforting.

"I would like to speak for Roger, who was accused of child abuse. Roger was my best friend. He was falsely accused. He wasn't even there at the time."

Nora scowled deeply. "The charges that were brought against Roger by this council came because of a drunken admission from Roger himself. Our decision stands. As soon as he is found, Roger Mitchel will stand trial before us for the abuses suffered by his neighbor's children. Next?"

"I'm begging the council to clear my branch of our bad reputation for being aligned with the government. The three people who did that are now

deceased. There are no more Livingstons by blood on our branch. We no longer wish to be associated with that founding family.”

Nora studied the middle-aged woman who stood before her with a well-rounded stomach. “Father of the coming child?”

“A Mitchel, a Thatcher, or an Abbot.” The woman smirked. “It was a wild party.”

“So noted. A paternity test will be done upon birth. Providing you have told us the truth and there is no more Livingston blood in your branch, the council will consider your request to clear your family name.”

“All three of the possible fathers are deceased, as well. Like I said, it was a wild party.”

Nora looked at Alexa.

Alexa took a step forward. “You will show me the truth or you and the child will die.” She held out a hand.

Unlike Brian, who had bluffed Daphne, Alexa had evolved with a gift that did force people to tell the truth. She rarely used it because she rarely needed it. Her mind was sharp enough to identify the clues of a liar. In this case, she was already certain the woman was telling the truth.

The woman reached out and put her fingers against Alexa’s.

Alexa dug into her mind like a tornado, blowing through the events that had been stated and then things that came before and after. She didn’t trust the Livingston line. None of them did.

Alexa lowered her hand. “You have been judged honest.”

Nora motioned at the woman. “Your family branch has been cleared. Raise the child with honor and stain yourself no more.”

The woman held up a finger to keep from being dismissed. “I would like to beg for a spot on a family-oriented team where my child and I will be safe until after the birth. At that point, I will go my own way if not offered an official slot on that team.”

Silence held for a moment while the council waited to see if anyone would volunteer to take her in.

Emmie opened her mouth, unable to resist the need of someone who just wanted to protect their child.

Alexa pointed at her. “Due to matters we have already discussed, you are forbidden from accepting any new members onto your crew.”

Emmie hated to be embarrassed this way, but she was also grateful for the decision. Anyone she took onto her crew would just have to be relocated.

“You may stay with us for six months after your child is born.” It was the woman who ran the procreation only branch. “We’ll see how it goes from there.”

The pregnant woman beamed. “Thank you for your generosity.”

“It’s my honor.”

“Next?”

Edward's mind drifted again as Nora continued to deal with the shrinking line of people who were waiting to ask for things, tell on people, or complain. Most of them seemed to want to add to their branch, or to somebody else's branch, to make themselves stronger. It was an odd gathering, but so far none of the requests had been.

Much like Edward, the rest of the crew was now observing the courtyard and their environment. There were no obvious exits except for the tunnel they had come through. The steel wall went up at least 25 feet and let in the bright sun and the stiff, cold breeze. Several of the walls had narrow platforms near the top, indicating other entrances near those places.

The courtyard was completely empty of furnishings except for the gazebo and a few trees that were placed around the edges of the courtyard. The apple trees either hadn't fruited yet or they had already been stripped, as the branches didn't even hold leaves.

"My name is Damon Livingston-Mitchel. I'm begging for information on my father, Joel. Has anyone seen him?"

Alexa's crew snapped back toward the council as they realized Damon had gotten in line without them knowing it.

People in the crowd began to answer.

"He was in South America last I heard, searching for some of our nomads."

“I heard he’s dead and good riddance. Sorry, kid.”

“Joel Livingston was killed during the International Detention Center fight.” Alexa’s voice rang through the courtyard. “The soldiers were still gloating about it while I was in the Hawaii bunker.”

“When was that?”

“Almost a year after the war.”

“Thank you for your information.” Damon held up a hand to stop Nora from moving on. “I’m also begging for a vote on leadership of this council. Anyone else should be running it. Alexa’s branch forfeited that right when Adrian left with his boat of sheep and didn’t take any of his family along!”

Silence fell as everyone, including the other council members, looked toward Alexa.

Alexa didn’t appear offended, though she was. “That is already on the docket, as it is every time we gather. Anything else?”

“No.” Damon retreated toward his surprised team, leaving the floor open. They didn’t know why he wanted to find the man they all loathed. Wyatt assumed it was for revenge.

“Next?”

Alexa glanced around all of her large group. “Have your say now. Once we start the council meeting, we may not get back to open time.”

Addison, pulling on Isaac’s arm, moved through the curious crowd. “This is my daughter, Sweetie, and my husband, Isaac Mitchel.”

Clapping and whistles went through the group to acknowledge a new member of their family had been approved.

“Next?”

Emmie stood in front of the council but faced the crowd. “I’m retiring. I’ve asked Alexa to place my crew with good homes. They’re solid men and women, even the rookies. Love them and they’ll love you back.”

Several people lifted a finger to let the council know they were interested.

“That item is also on the docket. Next?” Alexa knew there was one more surprise to get through and she knew who it was coming from, but she didn’t know what it was.

Edward stood in front of the council with straight shoulders and pride in his voice. “I’d like to beg you to nominate Alexa Mitchel for President of this country.”

Silence fell for a few seconds and then became loud cheers. Even the council around her was willing to entertain that idea.

Nora studied Edward. “The council will consider your request even though you are not a Mitchel.”

Edward tried to sound humble. “I have two votes.”

“Almost halfway there.” Nora knew drawing attention to it would help him get the rest of the support he needed.

People in the crowd began evaluating Edward in surprise as they realized Alexa had finally chosen a mate.

“Good luck.” Nora gestured. “Next?”

Alexa grunted as Edward went by her and resumed his place with their team. “I didn’t see that coming, but I should have.”

Still standing next to her, Asher grinned. “I might have given him that idea after the training session yesterday.”

Alexa observed Edward’s satisfied face. “I doubt you gave him that idea, but you did provide the path for it to be possible. Thank you.” She glared at the bald man. “And slam you.”

Asher smiled. “It’s my honor, Lexi.”

Silence fell through the courtyard again when no one else got into line.

Nora moved into the center of the gazebo. Her hairy hands dropped to her twin Glockes. “Let’s roll.”

Chapter Twenty-One
Utter Chaos

1

“**T**he first order of business is food. It has become very hard to find. Use these notes to keep your branch fed.” Nora motioned at Franklin to get them started. The council had been here for two days, collecting information from everyone.

“According to the information that has come in, the west is still being covered in volcanic dust from the eruption of 2013.” Franklin cracked his hairy knuckles, something he enjoyed. It had given him arthritis in his fingers, but he still wouldn’t stop. “Should the council approve plots for people, the borderland between the west and the midwest will not be considered, as it is not suitable for growing anything.”

Franklin was aware of Alexa’s nod. Even the council liked it when she agreed with their choices. “The railways have been cleared from the eastern coast all the way to Ohio, but Canada is still full of wild game. Those wishing to hunt should go north. Those depending on the rails should go west. Does anyone have information on the south?”

Several people called out answers.

“We’ve been scavenging there for the last year. There’s no game and hardly any survivors.”

“We did well fishing in the lakes, as long as we stayed ready for the things that come out of the water.”

Alexa’s crew grew nostalgic at the memory of killing a squid at the lake in Gainesville.

Nora went next. “Several of us tried to leave the country for more temperate climates, but the sand demons are guarding almost the entire eastern shore.”

The announcement wasn’t a surprise to most of those here. They had checked the areas around this city before entering it.

“Does anyone have what we need to weaken them?”

Alexa lifted a finger. “I have parts of it. I hope to collect the rest while we’re here.”

Alexa waved toward her crew, taking her turn. “I want Emmie to get a place on this council when a slot opens up. The condition is that she must side with me against her sons, in all matters.”

Emmie was already shaking her head. “I gave them my word. I won’t break it.”

Edward scowled at the woman. “Then they’ll die the minute they threaten her, and you can watch it.”

Emmie didn’t keep the fight going. She had no doubt that would happen, but as a Mitchel, her word was sometimes the only thing she could rely on.

The witnesses approved and disapproved at the same time.

Bradley moved on to the next topic he wanted covered. The council got to state their issues just like the crowd, then they would hold votes on each item. “Are there any new prime targets to take over? The matter of the family estates is also one that I share.”

Franklin scowled at his fellow council member. “I say we stop conquering and start building. Why take over some shitty little village? We’ll build something, much like what we’re standing in right now.”

Many of the witnesses called agreement. Those who liked fighting and chaos booed loudly.

Franklin kept the floor. “I want to know if we’re going to fight with Safe Haven in the final battle or stay out of it like we’ve been doing.”

It was Bradley’s turn again. “We’ve all heard the radio addresses from Jeanie calling for fighters, doctors, and other skills, but there’s another rumor going around that she’s killing off rivals. I want to know who we support when the slavery moratorium expires.”

The floor came back around to Alexa. “Creatures roam among us now, too many to name. I want some of them protected. Hybrids have a right to exist.”

No one was surprised she had brought that up, considering she and her crew were hybrids, but several people were shocked when other Mitchels

began to reveal themselves as also mixed with a creature of some sort. The snakes were the most common and the least welcome.

Alexa's crew stepped closer to Isaac to help protect that family if there was a problem.

"How can you be out here in the sunlight?" Bradley was fascinated by that.

Alexa grunted. "A lot of work."

"Save the personal talks for later." Nora waved at Alexa. "I want her leading this council in place of her father."

Alexa sighed tiredly. "I already have a full-time job."

Bradley frowned. "Your quest will be over soon. You can take his place then."

Alexa's voice rose in anger. "My father has done a wonderful job for our family!"

Bradley wasn't cowed by her anger. "He isn't here!"

"The other founding families are being wiped out, one by one. My father ensured that we would be among the final families standing and we are. Show some respect!"

Franklin took the floor as it came around to him again. "I think we should talk about her mate's suggestion."

People stared, reminded that Alexa had picked a husband.

Alexa stood silently while Edward stood straighter and met their gazes with a calm, friendly expression.

Franklin pushed the moment. “I agree with him that Alexa should be our next President.”

Alexa shook her head. “It’s not allowed and you all know that. I’m honored, but no.”

Edward spoke up even though he wasn’t supposed to. “All rules can be changed.”

Alexa glared at Edward. “I said no!”

A new voice weighed in on the discussion. “Don’t I get a vote?”

Everyone peered up to see a tall, thin man with bright blue eyes standing on the platform above them. He was flanked by descendants on each side, all dressed in long black, plush robes like their master. Their dense shields glinted in the sunlight.

“Welcome to Port City, Mitchel family.” Elliot’s scornful gaze raked them all. “You’ll notice things are done differently here. I make the rules and for four years, we’ve had peace. I won’t allow my family to ruin that.”

Alexa chuckled mockingly. “Then you shouldn’t have let us in, brother.”

The descendants on either side of Elliot brought up flames on their fingertips, preparing to fire.

Many of the crews on the ground reached for weapons or brought up weak shields that were rarely used.

Elliot focused on his target. “I know why you came here, and I’ll give it to you...on one condition.”

Alexa braced for the trap to be sprung. “What’s the condition?”

Elliot smiled widely. “You have to survive a run through my gauntlet.”

Alexa snorted. “I didn’t come here to be your entertainment.”

Elliot delivered an ultimatum he already knew she would refuse. “Then you may leave, but hybrids are forbidden. Abandon your crew to their demise and go on without them.”

Alexa laughed long and hard.

One of the descendants standing next to Elliot was severely offended. She fired a nasty magical attack that latched onto Alexa’s gifts and began pulling them away from her.

Elliot smirked. “I’m not a defenseless kid anymore, sister.”

“That’s an enforcer!”

The entire crowd drew weapons or shifted closer to a fighting group. Enforcers were terrifying.

Jacob drew his gun faster than anyone else and aimed it at the enforcer who was still trying to rip away Alexa’s power. “Before this is all over, my bullets will end your life!”

The enforcer let go of Alexa when Elliot signaled.

An uneasy silence fell as everyone waited for someone to make the first move and trigger the fight.

Alexa wanted to, but she needed something from this run first. She glared at the enforcer. *You’re dead. You just don’t know it yet.*

Elliot tapped his long staff to get attention. “Some of you were given special instructions when you signed in upon arrival. I suggest you follow those instructions now.”

Half of the large gathering immediately began moving toward the tunnel where they had all entered.

Elliot began pointing at others. “Lock them down.”

Enforcers fired locking spells that didn’t work on everybody but caused enough chaos to allow the chosen half of the group to flee into the tunnel and leave the city.

Alexa’s group had all brought up their shields in multiple layers. Several of them included family members around them who needed protection.

Elliot’s gloating voice echoed across the chaos. “If you’re alive at the other end of the run, your debt to me is forgiven.”

Then he began to point out those he wanted dead. “Kill every member of the council except for Alexa.”

Alpha death spells flew through the air.

Nora was hit in the first wave. She dropped to the ground near Alexa’s boots, staring up at her in agony.

Alexa knew the woman couldn’t speak anymore. She gave a promise. “I’ll make him pay. I’ll make *all* of them pay for this betrayal.”

Asher tossed his knife as hard as he could.

The enforcer next to Elliot fell off the platform.

Edward instinctively put his shield around Bradley, who was too stunned to react as a death spell missed him by inches.

Another enforcer fell from the platform as Mitchels in the crowd struck back.

Franklin had a shield up, but it wasn't strong. His XO was already dead and he didn't have a team here other than that.

Daniel came to his side and enclosed the man with him; Franklin sighed in relief and gratitude.

Now shielded temporarily, their group watched as Elliot pointed out enemies and his defenders removed them. It was an awful moment that none of them would ever forget. Knives, bullets, darts, and magic flew through the air, but it wasn't enough to stop the enforcers.

No one had been expecting a direct attack. They fought back, but the enforcers were used to throwing hits and bringing their shields back up to deflect the bullets and knives. They fired death spells in return, not needing to rip away anyone's magic.

Edward watched Alexa, but he was already sure she wasn't going to order them to fight yet. Her hands weren't on her guns and though she was furious, it wasn't a haze of battle in her eyes. It was satisfaction.

The chosen half of the family that had made it to the tunnel didn't come back to help anyone, even when screams of rage and grief echoed through the

steel walls. When it came to moments of survival, they were only in it for themselves.

Everyone else huddled with a stronger group and waited for the slaughter to end.

“Enough.” Elliot stared in contempt at the large group of survivors. “Your run starts shortly. Good luck.”

Alexa took charge because no one else did. “How long do we have?”

She wanted to fight, but there was no way to protect the people around them and still remove all of the defenders on Elliot’s side. She didn’t have another choice. There were already twenty less Mitchels in the world now. She wanted to save as many of these survivors as she could.

“When the iodine pills run out, we won’t let you out. You’ll become undead.” Elliot tossed a small bag down.

David quickly scooped it up, remaining inside his shield to do so.

“Rules?”

Elliot beamed at Alexa again. “You’re Mitchels. You don’t need rules.”

“Perks?”

Elliot scoffed. “Why would I allow that?”

Alexa took a guess. “Your residents will bet harder and your take will be greater.”

Elliot stiffened in offense. “My only take from this run is the punishment of the people who’ve wronged me! But I will give you a perk. Ask for it.”

“I want to make a bet.”

Elliot laughed, while the people around Alexa looked at her as if she was crazy.

“Agreed. First, there’s someone here who wants to say goodbye before you start your run.”

Elliot pointed toward a doorway on the platform. “I’d guess you two have a lot to talk about, though we won’t have time for it.”

Edward stiffened, fury filling his mind. “You son of a bitch!”

William came through the doorway with a cane, scars, and fury that radiated off him so strongly even Elliot’s defenders stepped aside. “Welcome to hell, Edward.”

William was in rough shape. He was thin and weak. He was also insane. “I claim a life from your crew in payment for your treachery!”

Alexa was stunned. She recovered enough to answer him, but her voice shook with rage. “Can you prove that you were betrayed?”

It infuriated William to have her act as if this was still part of the meeting. “You invited us there. I was hurt under your watch!”

People muttered around her. That was a big deal for their family.

Alexa crossed her arms over her chest. “You got drunk and attacked one of my men. He defended himself.”

“That’s not true!”

“Can you prove it?”

William couldn’t. The only people who had been there were the people he was accusing. He

hadn't expected Alexa to lie about it. Listening to her quest moments on the radio had revealed a staggering sense of honor. "I ask for the council, those who are still alive, to decide this matter."

Alexa had no choice but to agree. She glowered at Elliot. "You sold me out again."

Elliot's rage overflowed. "You left me there! You left me there!"

The enforcers retreated further.

Elliot regained control over his emotions. "I may be the black sheep of this fucked family, but I am still a member of it. Here are my choices..."

Edward quickly spoke up. "I'm calling a vote right now on removing Elliot from the Mitchel family, effective immediately."

Elliot scoffed. "You're not approved. You can't make that call."

Levi stepped forward angrily. "But I can. I do."

Addison's eyes were bright red. "So can I. I vote to remove Elliot Mitchel."

Everyone else voiced their decision at the same time, and loudly.

"Out!"

Elliot screamed while William glared.

Alexa continued to lead the negotiations. "You have been found guilty of betraying your family more than once. You are no longer a member of the Mitchels. From henceforth you shall be known as Elliot Abbot."

"You still have to survive to get out of here!"

Alexa noticed the shadow of a woman standing behind William. “I’ll place my bet and go for a run. When I survive, I will seek justice for William’s lies against my crew! The justice I want is her.” Alexa pointed at Monica. “She goes with me at the end, as my slave.”

“Agreed!” William was delighted that Alexa had fallen for the person-in-need trap. If she got lucky enough to survive, the magic charm over Monica would force the woman to kill Alexa. Either way, Alexa and her crew weren’t getting out of this alive. “If you survive, she will be your reward. If you lose, she dies. too.”

Alexa’s crew was incensed at this betrayal, but none of them felt it more than Mark. The Convict drew his knife and threw it while everyone was distracted.

Elliot vanished.

The knife stuck in the steel wall where he’d been standing, vibrating eerily.

Blow darts hit the hall an instant later as Emmie’s crew added their fury.

Elliot’s ghostlike laugh echoed through the air. “Enjoy my run, Mitchel family.”

Seams in the walls began to split open. The ocean rushed in, forcing hard choices.

People began fleeing toward the exit tunnel that had already slammed shut. The seams in the walls continued to split, revealing pathways—some with clear escape routes and some with walls of water that headed straight for the courtyard.

Alexa grabbed the arms of both council members and pulled them with her. She spoke to Edward. “Divide by two. Keep them alive.”

Alexa and the council members hurried toward the nearest clear path that had opened in the wall. Other people tried to follow her, but the rush of water swept them toward a different exit.

Alexa hoped they all survived. She had given them a fighting chance. That was the best she could do. It would already be difficult to protect the council, even for her. She hoped Elliot would concentrate on making her run rough and overlook everyone else.

Edward shoved Daniel toward Emmie’s group.

Daniel grabbed Billy’s arm as he went by, taking the driver with them.

Jacob and Mark fell in with Addison’s group, keeping their shields around the running mother to prevent the crying baby from being soaked as more water splashed into the courtyard and swept away entire teams.

Edward and David tried to cover all of Levi’s larger group while watching Alexa disappear with the council members. No one wanted to be split from her, but they also understood the honor they’d been given. She trusted them in two-man teams to take care of everyone else. It was a huge responsibility.

On top of the platform, Elliot stepped out of the tunnel with his arm around Monica’s thin waist. She

tried to resist going fully into view, but the charm Elliot had over her mind didn't give her a choice.

“You had no right to bargain away my mate!”

William watched to see which path Edward took. He hated Edward the most for getting the drop on him in the attic of the Gainesville Museum. “That’s not a mate. Monica is a slave you torment because she came from Safe Haven. You can always find another target.”

Elliot was attached to Monica, but not so much that he couldn't see William's point. He let go of the charmed woman and allowed her to disappear into the tunnel that would take her back into the part of the city where his residents lived. Most of them had observed the entire encounter on monitors that had been set up specifically for this event. Large bets and wild parties were currently taking place all through his city.

William rotated suddenly and glared at Elliot. “Will she make it through?”

Elliot wanted to say no, but he nodded instead. “She has a talent for survival that the rest of them don't. She may lose some of her crew, but she'll keep her life.”

William had been forced to make deals with Elliot because of his injuries and because of Elliot's defenders. The ten men and women around them were the strongest, the coldest. None of them showed any emotion for the enforcers who had died in the short fight. Neither did Elliot. “You promised me all of them would die in the run.”

“No, I promised you all of them would be dead by the time the run was over.”

William limped by Elliot and went into the tunnel. “If any of them survive, you’ll regret it. Your enforcers can’t rip out my soul. I don’t have one.”

Elliot wasn’t worried about William’s threat. He had survived in this city for years after the war, building and creating a home for himself that no one could take away. He had only agreed to William’s plans and presence because it was a way to test Alexa. He didn’t fear William or the woman vanishing into the undead fields. “You’re not perfect, sister. This run is going to prove that. By the time it’s over, you’ll wish you had gotten me out of that wolf pen.”

In the courtyard below, people who had been stunned by magic use or injured were overwhelmed by the flood of water that was still coming through the walls. Most of them drowned; a few were rescued by other family members who tried to get them through the rising water to reach an open tunnel. It was utter chaos.

Elliot loved every minute of it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stop It

1

“**K**eeep those shields up!” Alexa still had an arm around both council members. She was pushing their trio up the tall, grassy hill away from the water that was still rushing into the field behind them. Her breath came in steady pulls, but her lungs were starting to hurt. They’d come a mile now through chest-high grass and weeds; she needed a break.

The older men were grateful for the help, but they struggled to maintain their shields as more undead bunched up all around them with snarls and angry swipes. Alexa hadn’t stopped to fight yet, but both men knew it was coming soon.

Franklin groaned. “I’m in trouble.”

“Hold that shield, Frankie, or I’ll make you pay!” Alexa needed to get them to a place where they would be safe while she fought. Unlike the crews they ruled over, these council members didn’t fight anymore. “Elliot wanted you to suffer. That’s why he didn’t order his enforcers to keep trying to kill you.”

Franklin’s fury allowed him to keep the shield up as more undead ran at them from the weed-filled alley they were passing.

“Get those Colts ready.” It was Bradley’s way of telling Alexa he was struggling, too.

“Even I don’t have that much ammunition.” There were at least 50 undead all around them now, with more being drawn by the noise. Making even a few feet of progress at a time was incredibly hard. They were lunging and hitting the doubled shield with no end in sight.

“Damn it!” More undead were coming from the top of the dirt road Alexa was laboring up. This wasn’t going to work.

Alexa used her vampire strength to pull the two men toward the side of the street. She took them toward the alley between two apartment buildings.

“We’ll be trapped.” Franklin was exhausted. “We’re not gonna make it out of this.”

Alexa shoved through the snarling, fighting, reeking mob with an angry grunt. “Would you like to wager on that?”

A surprised chuckle came from the weary council member. “I never bet against a Mitchel.”

Alexa forced them through the mass of churning bodies. Halfway down the alley, she stopped and tried to catch her breath. “In one minute, you will drop your shields and jump.”

The men glanced up and found a rusty fire escape within reach.

“They’ll be on us too quick. No time to jump.” Bradley was feeling his age and the lack of training. He’d depended on his crew for protection for the last 10 years and he’d left them at home to guard his

house and kids. *If I get out of this, I'll go back to training every single day for the rest of my life.*

Alexa prepared to defend the two men while they climbed. “Just jump and get out of the way. I’ll be coming up fast.”

The men weren’t able to spend a minute catching their breath like Alexa was doing because they had to keep their shields up. Neither of them were certain they would be able to reach the fire escape in a timely manner, but they didn’t want to disappoint Alexa. She was the only one who had cared about them when chaos struck. That deserved their full effort.

Alexa saw another large mob of snarling, shoving undead run into the opposite end of the grassy alley. They were faster and angrier than the ones already bunched up around the shields. There was no way the elderly council members were going to hold against that. “Drop and jump! Do it now!”

Alexa’s Colts rumbled as the shields went down. She fired with both guns, rotating in a constant circle that delivered a final death with every quick pull of the trigger.

Franklin jumped, but he didn’t have the strength left to pull himself up onto the fire escape.

Bradley grabbed the man by his legs and shoved hard.

Alexa shot an undead as it grabbed Bradley’s arm, blowing brains all over everyone. She brought her shield up and quickly dispatched the three undead who were trapped inside it. Her Colts roared

through the cold morning air, echoing across the city in a familiar pattern.

Alexa was grateful for the training she had done with her crew. She was able to keep her shield up until the two out of shape men managed to climb the fire escape. As soon as there was enough room, she also jumped, dropping her shield in time to wrap both hands around the slippery metal.

Alexa pulled her legs to her chest and hung there as the mob piled up below her. Bony fingers snagged her cloak and tried to pull her back down.

Bradley grabbed Alexa by the front of her shirt and used the little strength he had left to pull her up onto the next rail of the fire escape. Alexa's cloak tore where it had been mended, dropping some of her gear onto the undead, who scrambled for it.

Bradley held Alexa in place against his big chest. The feeling of familiarity that he had already experienced during the council meeting grew stronger.

Alexa rested her head on his chest for a minute, trying to regain control of her body. She wasn't as tired as the men, but she was still feeling rough. The mile of pushing against the mob might have been one of the hardest feats of strength she had ever accomplished and that was saying a lot.

Alexa leaned out of Bradley's sweaty embrace. She did a fast sweep in all directions, evaluating their situation.

The undead continued to enter the alley, drawn by the noise and the bloodlust of the mob. There were easily 100 of them filling the alley now.

Franklin moved further up the fire escape so Bradley and Alexa could do the same. He stopped on the small platform near an apartment window that was covered in four years of dirt.

Smack! A slobbering face pushed against the window, lunging at him and growling in hunger.

Franklin sat on the platform and put his foot against the window ledge, gently pushing downward in case the window wasn't locked. He leaned against the cold railing and tried to recover from the grueling walk.

Alexa signaled Bradley to join him on the platform. She stayed standing on the rail below, watching to see if any of the undead were smart enough to jump up and grab the rail. She'd seen them do intelligent things before. It was impossible to know for sure how much of their brains were still working as each one of them was different—just like all humans.

“Why do you want Emmie on the council? Her supporting those wild boys against you isn't a good sign.”

Alexa continued to take deep breaths. “I view it just the opposite. She has honor. I tried to buy her loyalty with a place on the council and she refused. She'd be a good addition.”

Neither man had thought about it that way. Now that it had been explained, it still didn't make sense.

They assumed she had a reason she wasn't ready to share.

Franklin stretched his sore spine. "I'll think on it when you tell us the real reason."

Alexa chuckled. "Fair enough."

"How do you feel about the conquering versus building?"

Alexa didn't look at Bradley as she gave him an answer. "When Safe Haven returns, they're going to be the true power in this country. Let them sort that out. If we don't like the answers, then maybe we'll do something about it."

Bradley frowned while Franklin nodded.

Alexa continued the impromptu meeting while they all recovered. "How are you guys feeling about the hybrids?"

Neither man wanted to anger her considering that she was a hybrid, but it didn't stop them from giving the truth.

"Hybrid creatures are an abomination. If we allow that to continue, hybrids will take over the family. Everyone will want the special abilities that come from it."

"I agree, up to a point. If we put rules in place to make sure that doesn't happen, then I could be convinced to vote for it." Franklin was the more reasonable member of the council. The wildest member had been killed in Elliot's attack. Bradley and Alexa were usually in the middle on most decisions.

“What if we put a cap on the number of hybrids and the type?” Alexa had been considering this issue for months now. “Maybe we can make it an approval only set up.”

“But how would you verify that? No one has the manpower to go out and make sure people aren’t creating new hybrids.”

Alexa thought about the tribe she had weakened during her last run. “I happen to know a group who would love to have that job. They’re completely against hybrids in any form, so they would have no problem sniffing out offenders.”

Bradley shook his head. “I’m not going to approve of that, ever. Yani and his tribe can’t be trusted to keep their word.”

Alexa stared at him curiously.

Bradley shrugged. “You’re not the only one who has encountered that particular clan.”

“Explain, please.”

Bradley peered at Alexa’s mouth, but he couldn’t see her fangs. “At one point, I also considered becoming a hybrid. Not being able to trust my Maker, and I mean that in all forms, put a stop to it.”

Franklin scowled deeply. “Why would you ever consider that?”

“Do you feel how your muscles ache right now? Do you feel how your lungs might pop out of your chest? Are you feeling the embarrassment that without her we would both be dead?” Bradley didn’t pull any punches. “I don’t want to die and neither

do you, so climb down off that high horse. We don't have room for it up here."

Franklin considered snapping back, but Bradley's words were the truth.

Alexa admitted to a mistake. She hated the feeling, but it wasn't the worst one she'd made. "I'd like it known that my conversion was an accident. I rescued a baby that was more than human and then I made a careless mistake with that same child."

"And what of your men?"

Alexa's eyes glowed bright blue. "That gift was given to them with love so that they may live forever."

Alexa's feelings for her team were already well-known. It wasn't a surprise that she had changed them intentionally. Both men also believed her about the mistake that had started it all. Alexa rarely had to make that admission.

"Do you really have pieces of the artifact?"

Alexa nodded at Bradley. "I've been gathering them along this quest, hoping they wouldn't be needed."

"I don't want to talk about the sand demons. I'm not leaving this country." Franklin gave Alexa a stern tone. "Let's talk about the mate you picked and expect us to approve."

Bradley perked up. "Yes. We have questions."

Alexa didn't get defensive. "Edward will be with us shortly. Direct your queries to him."

Both men looked down at the grassy alley of unwelcoming undead and then at the steel walls blocking off both sides of the street.

Franklin scoffed. “Over these obstacles?”

“Yes, and he’ll have the entire group I assigned him to, as well.” Alexa knew what her men were capable of.

“That would be impressive. I would have to approve him.”

“Same. With Asher and Levi’s votes, that will be four of the five he needs.”

“That’s nothing compared to what he’s already done.”

Bradley smothered jealousy at her confident tone. “I assume he’s a great fighter.”

“No, he probably has gun skills. She appreciates that.”

Alexa denied their guesses. “Edward has taught me how to love. I’ll never be able to repay him for that.”

“You’ve never loved anyone before now?” Franklin found that hard to believe.

Bradley had been listening intently to the radio for a year now, following her adventures. “What about the father of your son?”

Alexa looked back knowingly, confirming what they both suspected. “The government stole a child from us.”

Sadness filled them as the truth was revealed. Bradley was Brian’s father and she was Brian’s mother, but neither of them had spent time with him,

other than the short weeks when he had been with her on this quest.

Bradley had felt that special tug each time he'd heard Brian's voice over the radio. He knew his own kind even if he didn't know the boy yet. "I'd like to meet him."

Alexa slowly nodded. "That will be his choice, but I will make sure he knows you exist."

Franklin didn't care about their personal drama. "Are we setting a time for the bet?"

Alexa grinned. "Before sunset. Edward won't spend the night away from me without a damn good reason."

Bradley waved his hand. "This deathtrap isn't a good reason?"

"No." Alexa carefully dug in what remained of her cloak and pulled out her baggie of maps. She unfolded the one she needed and began comparing it to what she could see around them.

Bradley glanced over her shoulder and recognized it. "How do you have a map of this city?"

"I purchased it from a caravan. They had a map maker. Elliot has made mistakes and it will haunt him. Have no doubt of that."

Neither man cared about Elliot's emotions. They wanted him dead.

Alexa didn't bother explaining her meaning. She was busy with other goals.

Bradley watched Alexa run her finger over a portion of the map. "Is that underground?"

Alexa didn't answer. She didn't want either man to be more tense than they already were with so many undead still trying to reach them. Their hearts and minds needed a break. Stress was an aggressive killer of the elderly.

Franklin leaned over to get a glimpse. "That is underground... You don't care about the sand demons, either!"

"On the contrary, I care about them very much."

"But that's a submarine dock. You never intended to sail off in a boat!"

Alexa snorted. "A submarine is a boat, Frankie."

"Don't call me that!"

Alexa chuckled. "I remember you liking that name."

Franklin flushed. "It was a long time ago. You're not the cute little girl who used to ride on my dogs anymore."

"Indeed." Alexa stored the map. "Go up as far as you can. We'll do some rooftop travel for a while and see if we can leave our unwanted company behind."

Both men were relieved. Neither of them wanted to fight through that mob again while trying to maintain their shields. They carefully climbed toward the roof, trying not to make a lot of noise.

Alexa lingered at the bottom of the fire escape for another moment, considering her options. Without her crew, she was limited in the amount of fighting she could do because the council members would be overwhelmed even if she was successful.

Rooftop travel was only going to work for so long, however, because eventually they would come to a gap between the buildings that was too wide to jump. “Keep an eye out for a long board we can take with us.”

Franklin didn’t know why she wanted that and he didn’t ask.

Bradley immediately understood why she wanted it, but he refused to protest. *We’re Mitchels. We’ll do what we have to do to survive.*

The undead below them were unhappy about their meal getting away. The grunts and growls got louder. More fights broke out in the mob, but none of them tried to jump up and reach the fire escape to follow. Alexa and the council members stepped onto the roof and out of sight in relief.

“Shouldn’t they all be dead by now?” Franklin had been stewing on that since they’d first run through the field and been surrounded by hungry zombies. “In the north, there are no more undead.”

“These aren’t from the war.” Bradley had also been observing the dead. “A lot of them still have clothes in decent shape and shoes that haven’t fallen apart from their endless walking. They’re fresh.”

“Very good.”

Alexa’s praise made Bradley feel good. He fought the feeling. “What’s your theory?”

Alexa ignored his slightly snotty tone. “These are the people who didn’t make it through this run, or maybe they annoyed the ruler of this city. Elliot did it.”

“You believe he’s been turning people undead to provide this trap?” Bradley thought that was too clever even for Elliot.

“I doubt that it was just for this moment. Elliot has always been talented at causing death and destruction. I also think it was part of his plan for a long time. He knew I was coming west. He knew I would come here.”

Franklin cracked his knuckles. “How would he know?”

“Because the government dropped him here after the war. They tried to use him against me back then.”

The council members followed her across the roof while considering the new information. If it was true, that implied Elliot was smarter than either of them had believed him to be.

Alexa didn’t want them to feel bad. “It’s not an intelligence issue. You didn’t make a mistake. Sometimes pure evil is hard to recognize. Unless you get right up in its face, it’s able to blend in so well that it can’t be identified.”

“Are we really going to go underground so you can see if there’s a submarine here?”

Alexa didn’t answer since it was obvious. She needed that ship to protect her team from the ocean and from Nature.

Bradley shook his head at Franklin when the man opened his mouth to protest. “She’ll keep us alive. It’s what she’s good at.”

Alexa dug in her cloak again and pulled out a baggie. “Put a few of these pills in your pocket. Take one of them now. Take one every day that we spend here.”

Bradley did it without question.

Franklin fingered the capsule. “Why are you giving us iodine pills?”

Bradley was the one who supplied the answer. “Because if Elliot is making undead, then there has to be a radiation source around here somewhere. Remember how he said we had to get out before the pills were all used? This entire city is a toxic trap. The longer we’re in, the more likely we won’t make it out.”

“No, we’re going to make it out and when we do, things are going to get ugly.” Alexa quickly swallowed one of the pills and dropped the others into the pocket of her pants. “Stay by my crew when it happens. I’ll be too busy to protect you like I’m doing now.”

Bradley started to express his gratitude.

Alexa shook her head. “Don’t thank me until I’ve accomplished it. This is no easy task I’ve set for myself.”

Bradley smiled at her for the first time. “I have every faith that you’ll succeed.”

Franklin faked a gag. “If you two start being nice to each other it will make this fun trip unbearable. Stop it.”

Laughter echoed from all of them, denying their witnesses the misery they were hoping for. Cameras

all along the buildings were picking it up in clear detail.

Alexa fired a single shot into the air, reloaded the one slug, then holstered.

Franklin had flinched. “What was that for?!”

“I’m leaving a trail my crew can follow.”

“You expect *all* of your crew to catch up to us?”

“Yes. We will not stay separated. It’s our number one rule.”

“But you only fired one shot.”

“That’s all they need.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
The Sweet Taste

1

“**T**here it is. She’s okay.” David stopped using his mental grid, head pounding. He’d been trying to track Alexa through the steel walls. It was hard and painful.

Edward didn’t reply. He already knew Alexa was alive. The first barrage of shots had been a quick set to clear a path to safety. Her single shot afterward was so they could track her now that she’d been forced to take a different route, not to let them know she had survived. Alexa wouldn’t waste a bullet on that. “Let’s pick up the pace.”

They’d been listening to fights for survival all around them as other groups and teams tried to outrun Elliot’s trap, but none of them had approached their group so far.

“Pass out those meds.” Edward hadn’t made them do it sooner because this was the first chance they’d had to catch their breath. The water had chased them for almost a mile.

“Oh, yeah.” David passed out the iodine pills from the bag Elliot had tossed down. He winced as something sharp poked his hand while he drew out the last capsule.

David angrily squished the tiny spider and stored the pouch in his cloak.

Edward led them toward the sound of Alexa's gunshot, winding through an overgrown path with a red brick center. They weren't on a normal street. It had gradually sloped upward, leaving the flood water behind, but the easy exit made Edward nervous. Something wasn't right.

Levi stayed in the center of their large group, sulking. Edward had placed him here, openly doubting he was as skilled as the rest of his team. It bothered Levi that it might be true. He didn't always workout or do guard duty. He assumed that was what Edward had based his choice on. Like when dealing with Alexa, Levi hated it even as he respected it.

Edward stopped suddenly. He knelt down to examine something on the path.

The crew behind him paused while doing bored checks of the environment. They were getting used to Edward's periodic pauses.

Bringing up the rear of the group, David faced the opposite direction to keep an eye on anything coming up behind them. He didn't know what was making Edward so nervous, other than being separated from their team, but he knew he wouldn't like it.

David scanned the wild green growth on either side of the path that went all the way to the steel wall on both sides. Chest-high weeds and plants were growing between thick tree trunks that didn't

look like any he'd ever seen. They appeared fake, but he didn't think it was a good idea to touch them and find out. This entire setup was one huge trap.

Behind them, the faint outline of the steel wall where they had entered was still visible, but David didn't see anything moving behind or around them.

“Let's get those shields up.”

David immediately obeyed.

Everyone else frowned at Edward's call.

“We're all still drained from the workout yesterday, and we've had them up for hours already today.” Eva was hot and sweaty despite the cool breeze. The jungle-like surroundings held in a lot of warmth and they were all taking turns shielding Asher, who didn't have gifts. “Is there something we need to be on watch for?”

Edward stood, pointing at the ground. “That's a pile of cat shit.”

Eva chuckled scornfully. “We can probably handle a cat.”

Levi was close enough to see what Edward was looking at. He made a face. “That is a big pile of poop.”

Edward lifted his shield and pointed at something sticking out of the thick bushes to the right. “It's a big cat.”

All of them read the sign.

Tired chuckles quickly faded.

Big cat enclosure. Stay out!

Shields came up all through the group; hands dropped to favored weapons.

Edward led the group forward with light steps and a swiveling head. He already knew they were being watched. That had been going on for at least the last 10 minutes. “Hold those shields!”

It sent everyone straight to the training session. People automatically got set for action.

Edward moved faster over the path, hoping the overgrown area was hiding the normal concrete and space barriers of a wildlife habitat. He didn't have any faith that it had contained all of the animals, however. The pile of droppings directly on this path said something had escaped and it definitely wasn't dead. That scat was fresh.

“How in the hell did Elliot get big cats into a city?” Asher looked around at the other team members. “Was this a refuge area before the war?”

David walked backward, checking the rear again. “The only animal facilities inside cities were slaughterhouses and zoos.”

Nerves went up another notch as everything around them fell into place. The trees didn't seem normal because they were fake. The plants weren't native to this area because they had been brought in to provide a suitable environment for animals from different lands. It probably wasn't just the cats they had to worry about.

A loud screeching echoed from ahead. The thick sound of strong wings came next.

“Keep your shields up. We're going to try to walk through it.” Edward wasn't sure if that was the right decision, but he was confident everyone in this

group would be able to keep their barriers up for a reasonable amount of time even if they were under attack. He had drilled them hard yesterday. All of them were talented with their shields. He had faith it would come through for them when it mattered, mostly because of who they were. Mitchels hated to fail at anything.

In their short time together, Edward had realized these groups were actually on his level, just in different ways. All of them had the instinctive survival instincts Alexa had culled in her own team. He just had to be a good enough leader to bring it out in them. “Update me.”

David resumed scanning with his mental grid at Edward’s call. He found problems all around them. “To the right and behind!”

Eva saw movement, too. “Left!”

“They’re pack hunting!”

“Get us out of here!”

“Hold those shields!” Edward’s shout cut through the fear. “Bounce them off!”

“What?!” Colton grabbed his knife.

“Do not kill them!” Edward didn’t know if the cheetahs were extinct in other countries. He didn’t want to harm these because of it.

David grunted at a wild swipe from a wide paw with claws longer than his fingers. “Get us out of here or they’re going down!”

Edward hurried over the path, holding his shield against a large female with a nasty growl. She leapt, attacking him with a deadly hug.

Edward staggered at the force, the weight, the hot breath fogging up his shield. “Damn it!”

David echoed that curse as two cats leapt from the rear.

A shot rang out, echoing loudly.

A rear cat fell to the ground.

The other cats took off at the unexpected noise.

Eva lowered her rifle as she brought her shield back up. She shrugged at Edward’s glare. “It wasn’t the last one. Save your animal sympathies for the next attack.”

Edward knew her choice had been correct. He swung toward the path without arguing.

Eva kept her rifle in hand as they walked. She doubted the cats would stay gone. Cheetahs were amazing hunters and this group was the only thing moving through here.

A clear area with a concrete center met them around the next curve. Two paths waited for them, one at each end of the center display cage.

The cage was almost as tall as the steel wall that was clearly visible again. A wide hole in one side of the fencing revealed where the big cats had gotten out.

Edward peered into the cage and found a tree-lined pen with a large pond along one side. A cathouse sat on the other. Edward saw bones inside the wooden structure. “They were starving in there, probably eating each other. It’s amazing that they got out.”

The rest of the group didn't share his fascination. They preferred the animals had died, so they didn't have to face them now.

Edward examined the two paths. One of them went by rounded huts with yellow plastic tops that were cracked and chipped. That red brick path wound out of sight.

The other path was gravel and went into a thickly weeded area next to the cat enclosure. He assumed that had been how employees reached the pen to feed the animals or maybe even to handle their medical needs. *We're not going that way.*

Edward searched for another option.

The steel wall glinted at him, mocking.

Edward sighed. He followed his instincts even though he already knew it would lead to a personal close call. He didn't mind risking his life during this quest; he hated it that Alexa wouldn't get to see him do it. "Colton and David will layer the group in shields. Eva and I will do recon."

Eva came forward willingly. She knew he'd picked her for her special skills. She was the only one of her team who had a rifle.

"Recon what?" Levi didn't want them to split up. Eva wasn't Addison, but he did love her and she was carrying his child.

"A new path. This one was left clear for suckers and I'm not falling for it." Elliot wanted them to die. This path appeared to be a safe way to get through, but they'd already found out it wasn't.

Edward began climbing up the green, rusted fence. "Keep me alive."

Eva followed him up. "I do like a challenge."

David continued to hold his shield and scan their surroundings for the big cats to return. He didn't believe Edward would have a problem on the fence. He was headed up for a better look around. David was certain Alexa would have made the same decision. Staying on the marked path was a bad choice.

Edward moved steadily upward, scanning while he climbed. The zoo took shape the higher he went, but he didn't get distracted by dozens of exhibits that still had life still in them. The fences had holes and gaps between the poles, allowing the animals to come and go in search of food. He was sure inbreeding had also allowed survival of the species in some cases. A few of the smaller animals weren't formed correctly.

He also saw human bones. This zoo had been open when the war came. Some of the visitors hadn't gotten out alive; the same was true of almost every public place, from grocery stores to barbershops.

The fence weakened as he climbed. It became harder to find a place without holes or missing rails. Edward placed his feet and hands carefully.

The team on the ground scowled as he went to the very top and then maneuvered toward the steel wall that was holding them captive.

David also frowned, but only at himself for not guessing what Edward was really doing.

Eva stopped halfway up the enclosure when Edward motioned. She stayed ready to use her rifle.

Edward moved to the end of the fence with careful steps. He found a brace for his feet against the sturdiest looking bar up here. He was 25 feet in the air now. It was easier to view the rest of the habitat for the big cats, but there wasn't much to see. The canopy of thick trees, both real and fake, prevented him from getting a good view into the other enclosures that wound along the brick path.

The team on the ground observed in confusion. He was already up high enough to pick a different route through this trap.

Colton kept his shield at full strength as he watched. "What is he doing?"

"No idea."

"He's Alexa's XO. Maybe he's trying to impress us."

"There are easier ways to do that." Eva was halfway up the fence and resting against the sturdy connector poles. She thought she knew what he was hoping for. She stayed ready to defend him, but she doubted it would be needed, considering what he was about to do. *Even the big cats aren't that crazy.*

Edward judged the distance between the fence he was on and the steel wall that was keeping them prisoner. There were multiple gaps in the seams of the wall where nature had been battering it during

storms. There were holes big enough to fit his head through in some places.

Edward leaned against the rail and drew out his two longest, sturdiest knives. He took an iron grip on the hilts and then carefully crouched, hoping the fence would take what he was about to do to it.

“Is he crazy?”

“That’s not going to work! Make him come down from there.”

Levi ignored the complaints of his team. He did a fast check on their surroundings and found it calm. He focused on Edward, eager to see if the man could complete such a daring move. His own team would never have tried something so dangerous. As far as he was concerned, there were always other options. Even fighting their way through the wildlife here seemed like a better idea than this.

A wide smile split Edward’s lips. The feeling he enjoyed during challenging moments on Alexa’s team overwhelmed him. There was almost nothing he enjoyed more than taking an extreme risk and making it work.

“Is he smiling?”

Levi nodded. “He doesn’t have the name yet, but he is definitely one of us.”

Colton snorted. “That’s beyond even what a Mitchel would do. He’s nuts!”

“That must be why Alexa loves him.”

Everyone watched nervously as Edward lifted his arms. His blades glinted dully in the cloudy sky.

Edward jumped.

“Holy shit!” Colton was shocked. “I didn’t think he would do it!”

Edward smacked into the steel wall with his chest and immediately began to slide down it.

Edward tried to force his body to stay against the wall. Sharp pain ripped into his leg as he smacked a wide gap in the steel. As he slid by that gap, Edward plunged both knives into the seams on either side of it.

A horrible shriek filled the air as one blade went through. The other blade bounced off the hard metal and flew out of his hand. The first blade that stuck stopped his momentum. Edward hung by one hand as people below ducked his falling blade even though they had shields up.

Edward fumbled for another blade from his belt. His hand was already beginning to slip from the first one. *This might not have been such a great idea.*

Edward carefully placed the second knife blade into a hole that already existed in the steel. He evened out the weight between both arms and then glanced down between the wall and his chest, searching for a place to put his feet.

The anxious team below breathed a sigh of relief as Edward started to climb the steel wall by placing his knife into holes and putting his feet into the gaps. Some of them noticed a red stain on the wall as he climbed. He was alive, but he hadn’t gotten through it uninjured.

Edward took steady breaths and moved carefully. The top of the steel wall was no longer

sturdy. The metal popped and groaned as he forced it to hold his weight. Pieces of rust and metal dropped from the wall, hitting the shielded people below.

Edward finally reached the summit of the wall. He didn't lean his weight on the bent, twisted top panel. He carefully peered over it while keeping his knives in the holes below. It was an uncomfortable position, but if the top panel fell, he would be able to catch himself.

The view from up here was astounding. It reminded Edward of their time in the high-rise. He suddenly missed that more than he had the day they'd left, but it was impossible to deny the rush of excitement that he was existing on right now. No one he knew would have done this, including Alexa.

Edward spied half a dozen other steel walls spread around them in long rectangles that divided the city. He wasn't able to see down into most, but the one next to them was a normal city street with businesses that still had unbroken doors and glass in the windows. Nothing was moving over there except debris being shifted around by the wind.

Unfortunately, Edward didn't see a place where the entire team would be able to climb down from this wall. He didn't expect them to make the leap of faith, either. He needed to find a place where they could get through.

Edward used the height advantage to scan for holes in the wall further down. He squinted, using his vampire sight.

A mile ahead on this side of the wall, a tall building appeared to be very near to the barrier. On the other side, Edward was barely able to make out the scaffolding from leftover construction. Whoever had built the wall had forgotten to remove that platform, or maybe they had left it up to do repairs. Either way, he had found a way out of the zoo.

Edward glanced down at the impatiently observing team, feeling the unhappiness of his body as the wind and steel reminded him he wasn't supposed to be up here. "Now I just have to get down."

Everyone observed tensely as he began to turn his body around along the wall. It was a tedious inch-by-inch process where he found small holes to hold onto with his knives while advancing his boots along gaps and rips in the steel. It took long minutes, where everyone was distracted.

Edward finally succeeded in getting rotated. He kept his back flat against the wall as he prepared to make the jump. He was 10 feet above the cat fence now and he wasn't sure if it would take the blow when he landed on it. He wasn't light and nothing had received repairs since before the war. "Clear a path!"

Eva quickly climbed down from the fence at Edward's shout. She was stunned by what he had done and a little jealous of Alexa. Her team was perfect. Her mate was perfect. She never failed at anything she set out to do. It was impossible to live up to.

Edward waited for Eva to reach the ground. Then he jumped again.

Edward slammed into the fencing and bounced, flying into the air. His body twisted, searching for anything he could grab onto.

Levi and Colton dropped their shields and lunged forward, trying to catch him.

Edward slammed into both men and knocked all of them to the hard ground. Grunts and groans filled the air.

“Crazy!” David clucked. “I’m telling the boss you did that.”

Edward forced his abused body to roll off the two men. He wanted to see if they were okay, but he was in too much pain.

Levi slowly sat up, a bit dazed. Other than that, he thought he was okay.

Colton moaned as he sat up. “Don’t you ever do that again!”

Levi chuckled. He pulled Colton to his feet and gave the man a quick once over to be sure he wasn’t injured.

“Just some bruises on my ass. Wanna rub them?”

Levi shoved Colton away, chuckling. He turned to Edward and froze.

Edward kept his hand over the heavily bleeding hole in his leg where a piece of the fence had gone through. “Some help, maybe?”

Several people began to dig in their bags, while David hurried over.

Levi knelt by Edward. “Blood will draw the predators back to us.” Levi ripped Edward’s pants open and then brought up flames on his fingers. “Try not to scream. You’ve already rattled us enough and I mean that in every way.”

Edward gritted his teeth and clenched his fists as Levi put his fire fingers against the injury and cauterized it.

Edward screamed, making everyone wince. It hurt too much to stay quiet.

The smell of blood and burning flesh filled the air and wafted through the zoo. Bushes rustled ominously all around them.

Levi stood and wiped his hands on his cloak. “Did you find what you were looking for up there?”

Edward blinked the tears out of his vision. Being burnt hurt, a lot. “A mile up on the right is a way we can cross over. The area alongside us is a normal city street; nothing was moving on it. I don’t think the animals have gotten through there yet. I didn’t find any gaps in the wall big enough for them or us.”

It was a relief to know Edward found a way out. Colton helped him to his feet and then clapped him on the shoulder. “You just got another vote.”

Edward limped back toward the path. “That is what I live for.”

Edward took another step forward.

An orange blur flew out of the bushes and leapt from the side.

Edward didn't have his shield up. The cheetah clamped onto his arm and bit down.

Edward screamed as he was yanked to his knees.

The big cat shook her head, trying to rip off a chunk of food. Blood splattered them both.

Levi's team rushed forward with their knives.

David stabbed at the big cat while trying not to hit Edward. Blood flew over him and the bricks.

Edward's fury overwhelmed his mind. Rage turned his eyes bright red. He lunged forward and sank his fangs into the cheetah's neck. He crunched through the bones, killing the animal.

Levi's team froze in horror as Edward began to drink. Blood from his arm and his leg puddled around him as more red drops ran over his chin and pattered to the brick path.

Eva glanced away. "Nobody needs to see that."

Levi observed in fascination. "I wonder if Alexa might consider sharing."

Some of his team blanched, while others nodded.

Edward ignored them all as he sucked the blood down. He didn't care that he was injured and in pain. He was enjoying the sweet taste of revenge.

Chapter Twenty-Four
You Have No Idea

1

“**T**hat was Edward.” Mark was walking behind Addison, in the bodyguard position. Isaac was right behind him and sulking about the positioning. When Mark had insisted on it, Addison hadn’t argued, so Isaac couldn’t either.

Walking in the rear of the group, Jacob rotated for a scan of the flooded road behind them. “He’s ahead of us.”

They had been hearing fights for hours now, though only a few of the gunshots and shouts had been familiar.

Addison increased her pace without being told, but the ankle-high water still slowed her down. It was impossible to tell what was under the murky liquid. She’d already slipped more than once and startled several snakes that thankfully swam off without attacking. She doubted her luck would hold until they got out of here.

All of the team had shields up, but they were getting tired. It had been hours now traveling through this waterlogged area; it was exhausting. Rocks and debris shifted under their boots and water ran inside their footwear as they sank down into the

muck and had to pull themselves free. It was impossible not to splash the person behind them; everyone was soaked and miserable. Adding to their suffering, was the bugs. If not for their shields, all of them would be in agony.

Mosquitoes were thriving in this environment. There were thousands of them coating every surface they encountered and some of them were huge. Even though the team was nearly at their energy limit, no one wanted to lower their shield even for a minute of recovery time.

Mark moved up next to Addison, hoping she would be reasonable.

Addison knew what he wanted without being told. She signaled him to take the lead, secretly relieved.

Mark pointed at her staff. "Can I borrow that?"

They both dropped their shields for a few seconds to exchange the weapon.

Mosquitoes swarmed them, smacking into their hoods, cloaks, and gloved hands.

That was another part of their misery. As soon as they'd entered this area and spotted what waited for them, everyone had donned full gear. They were now hot, wet, sweaty, itchy, and frustrated at not being able to reach any of the other groups fighting for survival around them. The steel walls were immense on both sides of the street.

Mark quickly brought his shield back up and spent a moment crushing the dozens of mosquitoes that had made it inside. He was bitten repeatedly on

his face and neck, producing large red welts that immediately began to itch.

Mark used Addison's long staff to stab the water as he led them. He marched quickly, stabbing and cursing every time a mosquito made it into the shield that he hadn't perfected keeping up while using a tool.

That would be the next thing he worked on now that his rifle skills had improved. He envied David's proficiency in this area. The Blacksmith was able to use his weapons with his shield up. Other than Alexa, he was the only one of their team who could do it.

Mark scanned as he marched, searching for a way out. It didn't look like the water was going to get any lower. It was dark and still, and covered in layers of leaves and larva. Inhospitable was an understatement.

"I hope Alice isn't in an area like this."

Jordan peered over her shoulder. "Shouldn't you be worried about your team members?"

Jacob snorted. "No. I know they can survive." Edward's screams had made him angrier, but it didn't scare Jacob. Whoever had caused their XO to make a noise like that was dead now.

Jordan turned around and moved faster to keep up with the line of people ahead of them. "Don't underestimate Emmie's training. She loves her kids. She gave them the skills they need to survive."

"Even those two scheming backstabbers she calls sons?"

Jordan grinned. “You definitely pegged them correctly.”

“I don’t know why they think they’re going to get anything over on Alexa.” Isaac was sold on the infamous woman. “She knows they’re planning something. As soon as they make a move, she’ll cut them down.”

Jacob wasn’t certain of that now. “She promised to place Emmie’s crew with good homes. It will be hard to do that if she kills them.”

Isaac made a funny face at the uncomfortable baby in the pack in front of him. “She’ll just maim them, then.”

Jacob chuckled. “That’s entirely possible.”

Jordan shook her head while trying not to step so hard that she splashed Jacob again. “Like I said, don’t underestimate the talents Emmie has given to her children.”

Jacob huffed. “I didn’t notice anything special while we were training.”

“Did you show everything *you* know how to do during the sessions?”

Now Jacob frowned. “Of course not.”

“Exactly. They haven’t survived this long while being such assholes without developing some serious skills.”

Jordan’s confidence that Wyatt and Damon were going to be a problem Alexa might not be able to handle sent Jacob’s anxiety to a new level. “Go faster.”

Mark increased their pace while cursing Elliot and his enforcers. “When we get out of here, I want every person on this team to target one of Elliot’s enforcers. We aren’t waiting for Alexa’s call on this one. When I say go, do it.”

There were nods and frowns at his order, but everyone understood. Elliot was Alexa’s brother. There was a chance she might hesitate to kill him when the time came.

“I think the water is getting higher.” Isaac was desperately worried about getting his wife and child through this situation. He was observing bubbles under the water as they went by that implied something was alive under there. Even worse, he was comparing the level of water on Addison’s boots every time she took a step. He was almost positive she was sinking down further now.

Mark paused and brought his shield up completely, glad for the respite from a gazillion hungry mosquitoes that were still biting him even as he squished them against his hands and arms. Despite being a blood drinker himself, he hated them intensely. Being so small, they were very hard to fight and impossible to evade.

The tall steel walls had narrowed as they traveled, forcing them into a 50 foot wide path that had no end in sight, just endless water. Mark’s bad feeling continued to get worse. “We have to get out of this bathtub before it fills up.”

He had already noticed water lines on the steel walls that went up at least 15 feet. If Elliot triggered

a new flow of water through here, there was no place for them to go. Even the telephone poles that ran along one side of the wall might not be high enough. Not that it would be a solution anyway. Getting stuck on rotting telephone poles while mosquitoes drained them dry would be just as bad as drowning.

“Give me two minutes for recon.” Jacob kept his shield up as he stomped through the water, hoping he made enough noise so anything under it would move away from his slushy boots. He slipped numerous times on slick, sludgy debris as he went to the nearest telephone pole.

Mark motioned the team to follow Jacob. He didn't want them to get separated, even by 20 feet. In this water, it would still take time to reach the Preacher if he had trouble.

Jacob had to lower his shield as he climbed the telephone pole; mosquitoes began to eat him alive the instant his barrier went down.

Larger mosquitoes flew up from the water, following the carbon dioxide in his breath and then the scent of blood as the first wave began to penetrate every inch of his exposed skin. Jacob climbed the rough telephone pole as fast as he could, not being as careful as he normally would have been because of the pain. Splinters entered his skin and went deep.

As he reached the top of the telephone pole, Jacob stopped and brought his shield up. He

groaned in relief as the sharp pricks and pokes stopped and the throbbing itches began.

“He found something.” Mark shielded his eyes against the bright sun, trying to see Jacob’s movements so he could determine what it was.

Jacob slid back down the telephone pole, using his boots as a brace while his hands lightly clung to the pole to keep from falling. Several more splinters went through his gloves, causing fresh pain and drawing more blood.

He jumped the last few feet into the water, splashing some of the team. He brought his shield back up and began squishing the annoying insects. “There’s a carousel about half a mile up.”

Lilya stared. “What?”

“A children’s carousel. You know, plastic horses with scary smiles that spin in a circle.”

Addison tried to identify any debris that would verify her suspicion. “Is this an amusement park?”

“Not sure, but I saw a paddleboat on the other side of the carousel. I think it’s in good shape.” Jacob slapped another large mosquito on his arm and ground it in. “We can paddle our way out of here.”

Everyone was relieved to hear that.

Mark got them moving again. He had to get this team out of the water before one of them were attacked by something he couldn’t kill with his gun or his knife. He didn’t have much faith in the staff in his hand that he was using as a walking stick.

Jacob resumed his place in the rear of the team, pleased with himself but also in pain. He stuck his gloves in his pocket and began digging pieces of the telephone pole out of his fingers as he walked.

Austin moved behind Jacob and took over guarding the rear.

“Thanks.”

Austin nodded at Jacob but didn't encourage conversation. Now that they had a possible method of transportation, Austin was in a hurry to reach it. The upset stomach he had developed upon seeing the rising water was getting worse. They needed to get out of here before something went wrong.

“Heads up on snakes.” Mark stabbed out in front of him with the staff again, forced to ignore the mosquitoes this time as two large, brown snakes floated on the top of the water. They were only a few feet away from the team. As far as he knew, a snake could lunge the same distance as the length of its body. They were all in range.

Both snakes swam off, leaving ripples on the water.

“Do you hear that?” Addison was observing the environment in growing dismay. Every step they took into this swampy area brought them closer to death. She could feel it lurking, waiting for them to make a mistake. “Sounds like wings.”

Mark and Jacob both nodded. The distant noise wasn't one they were concerned with right now, however. Snakes, rising water, and mosquitoes were more than enough to worry about at one time.

Trees began to appear on both sides of the watery path. Tall and covered in black mold, their bushed-out leaves and debris made it harder for the sunlight to get through, producing a swamp effect. No one was happy about that. It gave them less light to see by and more possible problems to deal with if the trees were weak enough to fall over.

“There’s the carousel.” Mark kept stabbing with the staff and fighting the mosquitoes.

The carousel came up in front of them on the left side. It had water up to the hooves. The worn plastic faces all looked as if the horses were screaming for help.

On the right side, a small line of faded yellow and blue paddleboats bobbed gently in the thigh-high water, disturbed by the rising current. They bumped into each other and produced mild thuds and creaks that made the entire team uneasy.

Mark led the team to the paddleboats. He was relieved to see they didn’t have holes in the bottom. The boats all appeared to be in good shape. He cut two of them free and directed Addison, Lilya, and Isaac into the boat with him.

Everyone else got into the boat with Jacob.

As the weary travelers settled into the damp, filthy seats, they kept their shields up and spent a moment getting their breath back. Everyone’s legs were tired, but their energy banks were almost empty. All of them hoped paddling fast enough would leave the mosquitoes behind and allow them to lower their shields for a while to recharge.

“Stay together.” Mark gently pushed on the pedals. The boat responded immediately, gliding forward smoothly. “The levers on your right turn it to the right. The levers on the left turn it to the left.”

Mark led them out slowly, waiting for Jacob and his half of the team so they didn’t get split up.

The boats moved into the center of the murky water easily, bumping into debris but holding the weight of their passengers without a problem. The team paddled steadily, now able to take the time to properly scan their environment.

“That’s a sewer wall.” Mark peered over as they got closer. “It’s completely dry on the other side!”

Lilya scowled. “So this watery hell we’re in was done on purpose?”

Mark grunted unhappily. “Yeah, we’re probably paddling right into another trap.”

Lilya shrugged tiredly. “It’s not like we have a choice.”

“No, but we’re still going to pay for it.” Jacob whistled sharply to get Mark’s attention, then pointed at the water where larger bubbles were starting to appear. “Something is right under us!”

Before anyone could respond, the paddleboat rose up in the front and then flipped over, spilling Jacob, Jordan, and Austin into the waist-high water.

Mark and his group tried to paddle in reverse, but the boat didn’t work that way. Their momentum continued to carry them away from the teammates who needed help.

Jacob surfaced with a hand already wiping the dirty water from his face. His shield was down and his gun was useless now that it was soaked. He grabbed a knife in each hand and dove back under the water.

Jordan struggled in the stone grip of the giant that had grabbed her around the throat as soon as she went under the water. She stabbed it repeatedly in any place she could reach with her smallest pointed staff. It was the only weapon she had been able to reach.

The giant squeezed tighter, enjoying her pain. The huge creature loved lying under the water while dreaming of home. Only killing unsuspecting travelers pleased him more.

Under the paddleboat, Austin also stabbed a giant, hitting it in the stomach. Green blood began to ooze into the water, but the giant didn't let go of the grip on his leg. Moving fast meant nothing in this situation. Austin relied on the fighting skills that had kept him alive this long. He stabbed the giant again, aiming for its wrist this time.

The giants moved slowly in the water, but they understood the humans needed air. They held them under the muddy liquid as their frantic struggles continued.

Jacob peered through the filthy water, trying to find the right place as he swam by one of the giants. He lunged upward in the water and brought his knife down in between the giant and Austin. He drove the hilt into the giant's chest, hoping he'd hit the spot

Alexa talked about in her story. Under the water it was impossible to tell exactly where it was.

Jordan was out of air. She screamed under the water, stabbing out again. Her staff slid into the giant's mouth. She used both of her arms together to drive it all the way through.

The giant let go of her, falling, but Jordan was out of time. She began to sink to the bottom of the water.

Jacob got an arm around Austin and shoved him out from underneath the paddleboat. He peered around desperately, searching for Jordan.

Mark appeared in the filthy water next to Jacob, also searching for Jordan. The two men swam around the boat, stirring up silt and debris from the bottom.

Jacob felt something hairy and reached out for it. The hair became a body.

He pulled Jordan into his arms and quickly kicked toward the surface.

The rising water was now up to his chest. He held Jordan above it so Mark could reach her.

Mark and Jacob did CPR on her right there while Austin swam over with his staff to stand guard. "I owe you one."

Jacob grunted. "Your sister has it covered."

Austin nodded, now impressed with her team. "That, she does."

The overturned paddleboat began to sink next to them. The body of a giant was pushed to the surface.

Addison and Isaac finally got the first paddleboat turned around. Their legs pumped furiously to get the boat back to their teammates.

Jordan coughed water into Mark's face.

Mark leaned back to give her space.

The bodies of the two giants began to be pulled away by the increasing current, along with the overturned paddleboat that was still sinking.

Isaac gave Austin a hand into their boat and then held his arms out so Jacob could pass Jordan to him.

Jordan continued to cough up nasty water as she was put onto the front seat. She huddled there, shivering. She'd been under the water less than two minutes, but it had felt like a lifetime.

Mark and Jacob climbed into the crowded paddleboat with the rest of the team. They would stay together now.

As Isaac, Lilya, and Austin began to paddle them up the flooded street again, Addison regarded Mark and Jacob. "I'm willing to approve Edward as payment for saving them."

"You don't have to pay us for doing our duty." Jacob grinned. "But we'll take it anyway."

Mark wiped water from his face, grateful that the mosquitoes were leaving them alone for a minute. "Edward will only want it if you think he's earned it."

"Then he's already acting like one of us." Addison scanned the two resourceful men. "I'd also vote for both of you to become Mitchels."

Neither of Alexa's men had considered that option. They exchanged a glance that was identical.

Mark shook his head. "We're both the last of our line. We'll keep our own names."

Addison wasn't surprised. She was just relieved that the men had reacted so quickly when things went bad. With the baby on her back and the paddleboat going in the wrong direction, she had been helpless; she hated that feeling. "If we get out of this, our team is going to start training in water."

Mark and Jacob flashed back to their time with Alexa in the Gainesville lake. Jacob spat out more of the nasty taste. "Been there, done that. I don't recommend it without a good plan and a strong rope to pull everyone out."

Addison believed him. "Thank you. Losing any of our teammates would have crushed us."

Jordan rubbed the sore throat that was now blooming with bruises from the giant's harsh grip. "You have no idea."

Everyone stared as the boats went by the bodies.

The giants were covered in open sores that oozed yellow puss. Their greenish gray skin was missing in places and their fingertips had no nails.

"They were sick." Lilya dug in her cloak and withdrew a pouch of pills. "Take one of these and hope I'm wrong about what it is."

Jacob swallowed a pill. "What is it?"

"Radiation sickness. Every drop of water here is toxic."

Isaac opened one of the capsules and dumped the powder into the baby's mouth. "Will these cover us?"

Lilya grunted. "I have no idea. I suggest we double time it as fast as these boats can go."

Chapter Twenty-Five

They Bite!

1

“Dismount and store.”

Emmie’s crew stopped and got off their bikes. They immediately began to disassemble the valuable rides.

Billy climbed off the back of Damon’s bike, while Daniel hopped off Wyatt’s. Alexa’s men moved into a rotating pattern around the stopped group. Gravel crunched continuously under their boots.

Damon and Wyatt were both glad to have the extra weight off their bikes. As soon as Emmie had said to double up, Alexa’s men picked them. Damon and Wyatt knew it was for intimidation purposes. The vampire hybrids had drooled on their necks as they rolled along.

Emmie finished storing the pieces of bike in her deep, wide cloak pockets and then studied their environment again. They had been riding through this apocalyptic city for half a day now, with no idea where this gravel road was taking them. The street was walled in by the same steel barrier that had greeted them upon arrival; the road through the

middle was made from deep, thick gray gravel that made nonstop noise and shifted treacherously under their wheels.

“It isn’t safe to ride our bikes now.” Emmie loved their mode of transportation in a new world where fitting through small spaces was required, but the bikes were a hindrance when the ground wasn’t solid.

Daniel and Billy walked the perimeter while listening for any new sounds of fighting. They’d only heard Alexa’s guns once. They had been hearing other gunshots and screams off and on all day, but they were too far away to identify them. It made it harder to keep track of everyone when they couldn’t communicate.

The steel walls here were too slick to climb. They’d already tried. There was no other choice but to continue up the gravel road that was completely devoid of buildings or structures. There was just the steel wall, the gravel, and the occasional rat scurrying out of view as they rolled by.

Emmie led the group forward with a hand on her knife hilt. She felt danger heading their way and assumed it was coming from under the gravel. She had already led them around deceptive-looking places she was certain would have collapsed under their weight. They were reaching another one of those areas now; she couldn’t tell how wide it was, so she had switched them to foot travel. Even professional bikes couldn’t compare to the fast reflexes of a human body.

Emmie tripped over something hard in the gravel. She staggered to the side and then went back, kicking at it with her boot.

A large chunk of orange metal met her gaze.

As soon as Billy saw it, he knew what it was. “That’s a Cat.”

Emmie snorted. “Cats aren’t made of metal.”

“No, the other kind. It was used for construction projects.”

Emmie dug out a little more of it with her boot. “Why is there construction equipment under the rocks?”

No one had an answer. They walked around the spot.

“There’s another one over here.” Wyatt went around. “It has sharp edges. I think it’s a bulldozer.”

Billy shook his head. “That’s a plow bucket.”

Damon frowned at him. “How the hell would you know?”

Daniel chuckled. “Because it has wheels.”

Emmie and her team were confused.

Billy didn’t explain the joke. If it had wheels, he’d spent time driving it. The plow actually had tracks, but he wasn’t enough of a nerd to ruin Daniel’s joke by explaining that.

Gravel shifted under Emmie’s boot, sending her sliding to the left. A hole immediately opened up and began swallowing that part of the road.

Madelyn grabbed Emmie’s arm and pulled her over the opening hole.

The rest of the team jumped over as it continued to widen, hearts thumping in that familiar pattern of excitement and danger.

Emmie got them moving, staying in the direct center. The last two holes and the construction equipment had been on the sides. She could only hope that whatever was under them in the middle was solid enough to hold.

“I wish we could get up that wall and see where the hell we’re going.”

Everyone agreed with Damon, but they’d tried to climb it several times using knives, hands, and rope. The bottom 10 feet of it were too slick to get a grip anywhere and there was nothing to put up against it to give them a boost.

Emmie slipped again. This time, the hole opened up directly underneath and swallowed her up to the waist.

Members of the team hurried forward, grabbing her by the arms to pull her out.

The ground under them also began to shift.

Billy ran forward and used his vampire strength to shove Alice and Wyatt out of the path of the widening sinkhole. He landed on his knees behind Emmie. He wrapped his big arms around her waist and pushed off from the falling side, dragging her free while jumping over the hole.

The rest of the team split around it and joined them on the side of the road near another orange patch that said a piece of construction equipment was buried there.

Emmie held onto Billy's thick arm and tried to get control of her emotions. She didn't normally mind being so close to death, but that one had almost taken two of her kids along. The feeling was worse than awful.

Billy waited a moment for her to catch her breath and then he gently pushed her out of his arms. He began picking up some of the heavier pieces of gravel.

Daniel joined him while directing the others. "Grab the bigger rocks."

Billy tossed them, using a zigzag pattern to identify weak spots in the road. Gravel shifted ominously nearby.

Billy led them out this time, tossing rocks and cursing Elliot. "It's going to be a race to see which one of us gets to kill that bastard."

Everyone nodded angrily and followed Billy down the side of the street.

Billy tossed the rocks into the center of the road. Nothing moved.

He went back into the middle. He was almost able to discern another sinkhole area coming up in front of them. There were slight impressions in the ground. He began watching for that while throwing the rocks.

As soon as Billy's hands were empty, Daniel passed his own collection of rocks into the man's hand. After they'd used all of his, he would start passing up rocks from the rest of the crew.

Emmie's team was impressed with the organization, but not enough to comment on it. Other than being another strong body, they still weren't sure why these two were members of Alexa's team at all. Neither man had done very much during the time they'd all been together. Only the fact that they could keep up with Alexa spoke good about them.

Billy used his vampire sight to peer ahead as they came around a narrow curve. He spotted telephone poles on one side and a few pieces of unburied construction equipment on the other. The equipment was faded from the harsh environment and not tall enough to use to climb the wall.

Billy swallowed a groan of frustration and kept throwing rocks as he headed toward the equipment. "Now that's a bulldozer."

The team snorted or rolled their eyes at his tone, not really caring at this point.

"Guard duty by two. Everyone else, stand by to help me move this thing."

Emmie was curious about what he had in mind and didn't protest about Billy taking charge. She signaled her crew to do guard duty while she observed the ponytailed man.

Billy climbed up on top of the rusty bulldozer, judging the height. "This'll be perfect."

"Perfect for what?" Damon wasn't going to waste his energy moving something this heavy unless there was a good reason for it.

Billy regarded Emmie. “Have you ever been zip lining?”

Damon scowled at being ignored.

Emmie looked at the bulldozer and then glanced at the telephone poles, where the thick cables were still attached and swaying in the breeze. “You’re out of your mind.”

Billy climbed down from the bulldozer. “I’ll take that as a no.”

Billy studied the rubber tracks on the bulldozer, trying to determine if anything was stuck in them that would prevent movement. “Let’s have that battery charger.”

Daniel dug the small piece of equipment out of his cloak and handed it to Billy. “It’s been two days since it was charged with the solar pack. No idea how long it will hold up.”

Billy went to the battery compartment of the bulldozer and pried it open. “We only need to move it about 15 feet.” Billy gestured. “Toss rocks between here and there and find us a clear path.”

Madelyn and Wyatt were already eager to be rid of the weight of the rocks. They tossed them wildly all over the gravel road.

Billy connected the battery charger and then took a set of master keys from his cloak pocket. He didn’t know if he had one that would match up to construction equipment. He had never tried them on that particular set of wheels.

Daniel stayed close to Billy, providing protection while the man started trying the different

keys on his master set. It reminded them both of moving the railcars and facing the hoppers. They missed their team even more.

Emmie's crew hoped Billy had a key that worked. None of them wanted to manhandle the bulldozer into place so they could reach the top of a telephone pole.

The sound of an engine cranking weakly filled the air. Sighs of relief went through the group.

Billy left it alone, allowing the battery charger a minute to provide enough juice to fire up the engine. He scanned the crew and decided it was a good time to handle a personal issue.

Daniel's hand dropped to his gun in case the conversation went badly. He already knew what Billy was about to bring up. It was the same thing that was on his own mind and had been for days now.

“What will it take to get you guys to leave Alexa alone?”

Wyatt and Damon both tensed.

The women stayed out of it, hoping Billy was able to broker a peace. They didn't want to fight Alexa; they wanted to join her crew. Now that Emmie was going to retire, this was the only other team they wanted to be on.

Billy pushed the moment. “There must be something you two want that we can provide.”

Daniel added support. “Something has to be worth more to you guys than a petty revenge

moment that will most likely get you killed. You have to value your lives more than that.”

The calm statements got through to Wyatt, but he knew it wouldn't work on Damon. “I'm just supporting my brother.” It was his way of telling them he could be bargained with if they found a way to get through to Damon.

Billy met Damon's eyes. “What if I make a deal that you can't refuse?”

Damon didn't admit to having a plot going against Alexa, but he still snorted. “You have nothing I want.”

Billy bared his fangs at the man.

Damon stared in fear and fascination. He had wondered what it was like to be a vampire hybrid; he hadn't considered becoming one.

Until now.

Daniel clamped his mouth shut, refusing to embarrass a teammate by forbidding it. He was sure Alexa would handle that.

Billy gave the man time to think about it as he fired up the engine on the bulldozer. It came to life this time on the first key turn, echoing loudly and belching out dark, stinky smoke.

Daniel disconnected the battery charger and stored it in his cloak while Billy shifted the bulldozer into gear.

The large building tool shuddered forward, throwing gravel toward the team that quickly backed away. It slid forward roughly and then smoothed out, gliding across the uneven terrain.

Billy held his breath as he drove the bulldozer across the gravel road. Rocks shifted and slid, but the road held.

Billy stopped the bulldozer a few inches from the telephone pole. He killed the engine reluctantly. It was unlikely that this amazing machine would ever be used again. He found that sad.

Billy stored the key in his cloak and then got up onto the top of the bulldozer again. “We’ll still have to climb a few feet.”

Madelyn was eager to be off the gravel road. She climbed up onto the bulldozer with him. “How does this work?”

Billy imitated holding onto the handlebars of a bicycle and then lifted his arms. “We’re flying, on your bikes.”

The team began pulling out the handlebar pieces while grinning. It was a use for their rides that they’d never considered.

“Make sure the grips are on tight or take them off. No gloves.” Billy began climbing the telephone pole. “We have to go three poles ahead to leave room for everyone. Lightest people will double up. If you start to fall, let go of the handlebars and grab the power lines. We’ll come back for you.”

No one on the team agreed to drop part of their bikes, but all of them knew they would if they had to. They would also drop to the ground to retrieve those pieces.

Billy held his hand out for Madelyn's handlebars. "You fly with me. Get up here and climb on."

Madelyn scaled the telephone pole like a monkey in its natural habitat. She climbed onto Billy's back, grinning widely.

Billy nodded in approval. "You're definitely one of us."

Madelyn snickered and held on around his thick chest instead of his neck so she didn't choke him.

Billy took a few seconds to balance the new weight and then he slid the handlebars overtop of the thick power lines. He tugged harshly to make sure they were still well-connected. When nothing gave, he put his other hand on the handlebars and got set to fly. "Wait until the boss finds out about this!"

Everyone was still chuckling as Billy swung his body out into open air and used the handlebars to control their progress across the thick power lines.

Damon motioned toward Alice. "Hop on." They were the next two lightest people.

Damon tried hard to copy Billy's exact movements. He didn't like the man, but he did admire his courage and like Madelyn, Damon was eager for a new adventure. Not just anyone could say they had ridden telephone poles on a bicycle handle. It was definitely something he wanted to add to his post-apocalyptic resume.

Damon swung out over the road with a small shout of excitement as they began to slide across the

wires. Because of the way the telephone poles were starting to lean in the direction of the road, they were able to slide all the way to the next pole without being stopped by gravity or sagging lines. It was almost a perfect setup.

The hardest part was stopping.

Billy's feet slammed into the next telephone pole. He could already hear the idiot behind him following too closely. It forced him to use his bare hands to dig into the side of the telephone pole and lean around so Damon didn't hit Madelyn in the back.

Damon smacked into the telephone pole with his knees, grunting in pain, but he kept ahold of the handlebars.

Madelyn reached around and hit him on the side of the head. "It wasn't your time to go yet!"

More chuckles went through the adventurous team that didn't seem to be bothered by hanging 20 feet in the air, suspended by old pieces of wire and plastic.

Billy moved around the telephone pole while Madelyn put the handlebars over the wires this time. Billy reached up for them carefully and twisted his body around to face in the correct direction. "Wait until we get to the next pole before you go."

Damon felt bad for that. "I will. Sorry."

Billy was encouraged that the man had finally shown any type of accountability. "I understand. A short time from now we'll all be flying along and enjoying the lovely view."

Billy shoved off from the telephone pole while Damon chuckled. He hoped to continue building good moments with the man so he could make a deal. *But he isn't going to become a hybrid. I'm absolutely lying about that. Not only would Alexa never approve it, I don't want him to be like us.*

Madelyn held tightly to Billy's chest and tried to peer over the steel wall that was still too far away for them to jump onto, but close enough to allow her occasional glimpses of the area on the other side. As Billy came to an abrupt stop on the next telephone pole, Madelyn filled him in on what she had seen. "There's a city street next to us with a lot of undead. We might be better off staying over here."

Billy shook his head. "My boss is over there."

Madelyn groaned. "I hate fighting the undead. They bite!"

Billy burst out laughing. "So do I and you don't seem to mind me."

Madelyn snickered again. "You're a Mitchel inside. I know my own kind."

Billy was honored by the comment, but he didn't have time to keep the conversation going as the next part of the team began to slide across the wires behind them. He didn't know how long the poles would hold up, but he did know this type of travel would take the strength out of them quickly. As soon as he found a place to cross over, they would use it.

Billy took a quick glance back to verify that everybody was on the move. He found smiling

people easily holding onto the handlebars and supporting the weight of another team member. Emmie's crew was in good shape from all the biking.

Billy reevaluated his opinion. If everyone could hold out, they would travel like this the entire way. Being in the air in a place like this was much better than being on the ground.

The gravel underneath the bulldozer gave way suddenly, sending up a cloud of dust and debris that smacked into the telephone pole where Daniel was putting Alice's handlebars over the wire. The Biker quickly shoved himself forward and out of the path as the telephone pole tilted.

Billy was relieved when the telephone pole didn't drop into the sinkhole that was swallowing the bulldozer, but there was no way to know how long it would remain standing against gravity. He swung the handlebars over the wires and pushed off again, eager to get them all ahead in case that happened. If one telephone pole fell, it was likely to take down the entire row.

Madelyn was still observing everything as they flew by. Holding on tightly with one hand around his chest and her legs securely locked around Billy's waist, she pointed.

Billy followed her finger to a small shed that was next to the steel wall. The top panel of the wall had been ripped off, presumably in a storm. On the other side of it was a telephone pole with power lines.

Billy nodded as he hit the next pole with his boots and brought them to a hard stop. A new path had just opened up and they were going to take it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Next?

1

“Drop those shields and climb.”

Franklin and Bradley let go of their shields in relief and moved toward the fire escape at the end of the empty alley. Water splashed them and the side of the five-story yellow brick apartment building that Alexa had brought them to this time. Both men were sweating and soaked. Today had been rough on their older bodies.

Alexa watched both ends of the alley while scanning the water that was up to her ankles. Bubbles were everywhere. She wasn't sure what type of lifeform was living in this water; she was just grateful that it hadn't made an appearance yet.

They had spent most of the afternoon trudging from rooftop to rooftop, only coming down when they were forced to find a different way across. Alexa had decided not to carry a board along to use as a ramp between buildings. She had spotted several she thought might work, but she didn't have faith that the men with her would be able to balance themselves well enough.

The roofs were slanting, damaged, and covered in wind-blown debris that shifted as they went by.

Both men had slipped and fallen on almost every roof they'd come across. Everything was wet from the salty spray being carried in on the stiff breeze. The closer they got to the ocean, the wetter the surfaces were becoming.

Alexa climbed the fire escape, tugging the lowest rail up as she reached the first platform. She had done that in every instance to keep the undead from being able to easily follow them. Not all of the fire escapes required a jump.

She hadn't seen any undead in the last two hours, but she was positive she had heard them in some of the buildings as they went over.

Alexa didn't spend time peering into any of the windows of the apartments as she climbed. The only life here was ill and she didn't need any more weight from supplies to carry. She was feeling weak and sleepy, something that was unusual for her in the middle of a run. She thought about the iodine pills in her pocket and hoped the chemicals would be enough to cover them. Almost all meds were over their expiration dates by years now.

Alexa reached the rooftop and found both councilmen staring at the skyline in fascination. She joined them as she realized this building was taller than the steel wall around the city. The view was amazing.

To the left of the apartment was a jungle area that was also walled in and appeared to have wooden structures that were appropriate for animals. Alexa didn't know of a zoo or preserve in

this city, but it was obvious that there had been at one time.

She couldn't view down into the enclosures, but she had a clear view of a cracked concrete courtyard that held a dusty center fountain surrounded by tall, filthy aquarium walls. She assumed it had been some sort of an animal show. She could almost make out the corner of stone bleachers set into the side of the aquarium. She was positive the other end of the concrete courtyard held a large pool where animals had once been exploited for human entertainment. It made her think of the film, *Blackfish*.

Alexa grimaced. That show had scarred her. *It's part of what caused my fear of the ocean.*

On the other side of the jungle area, the ocean rolled out in hazy green and blue waves that disappeared into a hazy blue sky. It appeared calm from here.

To the right of the street they were on was another walled-in area that appeared to be completely flooded. Tall, sickly trees lined the path, but that was all she could see. The canopy over top of it was too thick to tell what it had once been.

On the other side of the flooded section, the ocean greeted them with another beautiful example of Nature's handiwork. It was endless.

Franklin pointed. "The jungle area stops at an intersection and then goes up a hill. The end still looks like a jungle, though."

Bradley was studying the water area. “It’s exactly the same set up over here on this side.”

“I’d be willing to wager that the street we’re on does the same.” Alexa went to the edge of the apartment roof and sat on the driest area. She began prying her boots off to dump out the liquid. Waterproof boots only stayed that way if the water didn’t go up over the boot itself.

“So this run will end in the same location for everyone who makes it through.” Franklin had been making a mental map while they traveled. This was the best view they’d had, allowing him to finish that mental diagram. “It must be the fourth area Elliot talked about.”

Alexa slid her boot back on and then repeated it on the other one. “We’re going to be let out into the ocean, not an exit.”

“You don’t believe he’s going to let us out of here.”

Alexa shook her head at Franklin. “I *know* he’s not going to let us out of here.”

“So what do you plan to do about it?” Franklin delivered a hard look. “And don’t give me any crap about not sharing your plans until it’s time to put them into action. I’m a council member. I want to know what we’re doing!”

Alexa frowned right back at the man. “Perhaps you’d like to be in charge?”

Franklin immediately took a step back. “Don’t be absurd.”

Alexa's lips curled. "Exactly, so show some respect!"

Chastised, Franklin let out a deep sigh. "It bothers the hell out of me when I don't know what's going on."

"As a fellow byzan, I understand." Alexa didn't give them time to recover from the surprise that she knew they had both evolved or that she had also reached that new level of power. "I'm sure Elliot has arranged a lovely finale for us, but I need to see it before I can figure out how to conquer it. In the meantime, keep looking for a way out of here once it's all over."

"What do you mean once it's over?" Franklin's voice rose. "If we find another exit, I'm out of here now!"

"No, you're not." Bradley spoke bluntly. "We became part of this run as soon as Elliot killed Nora. If you don't finish this, the family will vote you off the council for being a coward."

"Half of those people ran off and left us!"

Bradley snorted. "It's almost like you don't know what family you belong to."

Franklin flushed.

"Mitchels save themselves first, and if they have time, the people around them." Bradley's eyes went to Alexa. "It's a rare soul in our family who puts others before themselves."

Alexa inclined her head in recognition of that compliment. "I'll try to rub off onto more of us."

Franklin and Bradley joined her on the mostly dry and clear corner of the roof. The top of this building was easily 50 feet long and 80 feet wide. None of them wanted to consider how many undead might be crawling through the rubble of the apartments under them.

“I hear it again.”

Alexa and Franklin didn't respond to Bradley. All of them had been hearing the sound of wings as they traveled. Alexa hoped they didn't get a chance to find out what was making the noise. Anything that loud from a distance had to be large.

“I see the sub entrance from here.”

Alexa squeezed water out of what remained of her cloak. “From the street, it was just a dark tunnel going into a sewer with metal stairs, but it leads to an amazing underground submarine dock.”

“It's completely submerged.” Bradley studied it, only able to identify the location by a dented military sign on the pole above it. “I think the water zone over there has started to leak through the walls. That's why we were walking through water for the last hour.”

Alexa was still feeling the pull of something unknown. “I probably couldn't have gotten the submarine out even if there is one down there. It would still be usable even though it was underwater, obviously, but the exit tunnels were likely damaged or even destroyed in the war.”

Neither of the men had seen a submarine dock at all, above or below the water. They had no idea how it worked and no desire to find out.

“Now you’re stuck.”

Alexa snorted at Franklin. “I’m a Mitchel. We aren’t stuck anywhere unless we want to be. The labs taught us that.”

Bradley studied Alexa. “You’re thinking about going down there anyway.”

Alexa wasn’t shielding her thoughts from them. She was tired and it didn’t matter. “I’m talking myself out of it.”

“You could probably use a torpedo to blow your way out if you were blocked by rubble.” Franklin grumped at the surprised looks from both of them. “I’m not advocating for violence. It’s just a way out.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “How long can you hold your breath?”

Franklin rolled his eyes. “I don’t even go swimming anymore.”

“But you used to.” Bradley caught on to what Alexa was hinting at. “You coached a swim team for years and before that, the Navy loved having you as a guest trainer for their divers.”

“I’m not going down there and my experience with water is the reason why.” Franklin pointed rudely. “She could probably do it by herself, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Wait until her mate gets here and then he can talk her out of it. Or he can go with her if he’s that crazy, too.”

Alexa smiled. “He is.”

Both men looked toward the setting sun; neither of them brought up the bet yet. There was time left.

Bradley kept digging. “Why do you really want to go down there?”

Alexa glanced over her shoulder toward the entrance of the sub dock. “There’s something down there related to Safe Haven.”

Bradley didn’t feel anything, but he believed she did.

“I see something moving.” Franklin pointed toward the watery area alongside their street.

Everyone peered in that direction, spotting something yellow and blue bobbing in the water.

Alexa’s heart returned to a normal beat as the familiar shapes came into view.

“Yours?”

Alexa nodded. “With the team they were assigned.”

“How are they going to get over here?”

Bradley gestured toward the open area ahead that they hadn’t reached yet. “They’ll have to go all the way down and come back.”

“And they’ll have valuable recon information with them when they arrive.” Alexa removed a mirror from her pocket and flashed it toward her teammates to let them know they’d been seen. She had little doubt they’d already spotted her and the two council members on this roof as they came over the last rise.

“I’m hearing a new sound.” Franklin peered at the street they had come over. He narrowed in on something in the air. “Are those birds?”

Alexa was also observing that direction now. “Just more of my flock.”

Bradley chuckled. “They certainly are well trained.”

Alexa didn’t flash her mirror at the team riding bikes on the wires, not wanting to blind them. After a minute she was able to see they were sliding on the handlebars. “I’m going to reward whichever one of them thought of that.”

The council members were also amazed. They watched the team glide toward them in appreciation.

Alexa rotated, searching for the others.

Nothing moved on the jungle side.

Franklin felt her unease. “It’s almost sunset.”

“He still has a few minutes.” Alexa didn’t care about the bet. She cared about the team that was still unaccounted for.

“One of your flock is signaling.”

Alexa saw Billy pointing behind them. Her hand automatically dropped to her gun.

“I see a line of people...” Bradley let out a laugh. “Your mate has been tracking us!”

Alexa chuckled as Edward and the rest of the team came into view on the flooded street below. They had come from between the apartment buildings. “If we had kept going, he would have caught up right as I was going back to search for them.”

Both council members liked knowing she would have gone back for her team, but it also said they weren't perfect and that was a relief. It was very hard to live up to the reputation Alexa and her men had earned.

"It looks like they had some problems."

"Yes." Alexa fought the urge to fly down the fire escape to check for herself. She had already noticed Edward's walk was more of a limp. As they got closer, she was able to see a bandage on his arm and a torn pant leg revealing a nasty charred injury. She was able to guess what had caused that. Mitchels were famous for using their fire hand to cauterize wounds. The only one on her branch who had never used that ability was her father. Alexa believed it was one of the limitations he had. His magnetic gift was his biggest skill, evening things out.

David and Levi helped Edward onto the fire escape, but Edward pulled himself up the rest of the way on his own. Blood broke through the bandage on his arm and dripped down the rusty metal.

Franklin brooded. "He's very prideful."

Alexa smiled again. "I've noticed that, too."

As soon as Edward reached the roof, Bradley grabbed his arm and helped him over to Alexa. "Welcome to the family, Edward Mitchel. You've gotten all the votes you need now."

Edward looked around tiredly, fighting a yawn. "I only count four."

Franklin pointed at the bicycle team that was now descending a telephone pole across from the

apartment building. “At least half of them will vote for you because your teammates brought them through this city alive.”

Edward stiffened. “I only want it if I earn it!”

Bradley was unable to help feeling a little jealous. Edward seemed to be all honor and pride. It made everyone else feel substandard.

Edward held still as Alexa began tending his injuries.

David went to the edge of the roof and stood guard over the team that was now hurrying toward the fire escape.

“Mark and Jacob will be along shortly, coming from ahead of us.” Alexa pried the bandage off Edward’s arm and winced at the jagged holes. “Wolf?”

Edward grunted. “Cat.”

Bradley backed away from the injury, stomach churning. “That had to be one big ass cat.”

Edward grunted. “You have no idea.”

Daniel, Billy, and all of Emmie’s team hurried up the fire escape to join everyone else on the roof. They were eager to talk about their adventure, but the sight of Edward’s injuries drew them closer in concern.

Billy pulled antibiotics out of his cloak, while Daniel took out a medical kit in search of gauze and alcohol.

Franklin scoffed. “Why are they so worried? He’s a vampire.”

“Even vampires can become ill from infections.” Bradley had studied vampires a lot since the war. “They also heal faster.”

Edward held still while she cleaned the wound, added ointment, and then wrapped the bandage tight around his arm, but he groaned lowly at the pain. It was impossible to remain silent when he hurt so much.

Alexa finished tending to him as much as she could with the supplies they had. Then she placed a light kiss on his lips. “Next?”

Edward chuckled as he limped over to a dry corner of the roof to take off his boots.

Daniel slid in front of Billy, jokingly bumping the driver out of the way. “Me, Boss!”

Alexa scanned him from head to toe and then placed a light kiss on his lips, too. “Next?”

Billy held out his torn-up hands.

Daniel handed her the supplies she needed from the medical kit as she dug the splinters out of Billy’s fingers that he hadn’t been able to remove himself.

The other teams observed in fascination as Alexa doctored her men and then rewarded them with a small show of public affection. It was a vast difference from the way most team leaders handled their crew, no matter how well they did.

A little of the magic rubbed off. Emmie and Levi began caring for their crew in much the same manner. Emmie even patted the hands of all her children in an extremely rare display of emotion.

When she got to Alice, the girl blinked back tears. “Thank you.”

Emmie didn’t smile. “Next?”

Laughter echoed at her attempt to sound like Alexa.

Alice scanned Alexa’s team and found Jacob absent. “Where is he?”

David pointed at the road in front of them. “Watch there. It won’t be long.” David had also spotted the paddleboat in the flooded area on the other side of the wall.

Alice stood next to David and didn’t look in any other direction.

“We’ll spend the night right here and clear the last area in the morning.” Alexa lifted a brow. “Unless you’d like to vote to handle it tonight?”

Everyone shook their heads, including her hybrid team. They wanted to be able to see whatever was trying to eat them.

“Get some food going and a couple of tents up in case Nature decides we’re too comfortable and decides to piss on us.” Alexa gently pushed Edward toward a flat place under the edge of an air conditioner compartment that didn’t have that appliance there anymore. It had been ripped out and presumably stolen at some point, though she thought Elliot could have used it for the residents who were approved to live here. “Take a nap.”

Edward went gratefully. After draining the cheetah, he had expected to regain his strength, but

it had only made him sluggish. A nap sounded wonderful.

Alexa frowned at his easy acceptance of her order. She swept the others and found most of them itching, yawning, or looking dazed. “I want everyone to take another iodine pill with the meal. No exceptions.”

Those who hadn’t already taken one paled as they realized they had been traveling through the city all day without any type of protection. The iodine pills blocked the thyroid from absorbing as much of the radiation. It wasn’t foolproof and it wouldn’t last, but it was still better than nothing. People began swallowing pills all over the roof.

“I see him!” Alice waved excitedly.

“As soon as you get food rolling, clothes changed, and pick a place to sleep, you’re on downtime. Group A will take the first shift.” Alexa snorted at Edward when he immediately turned back toward her. “Not you.”

Edward didn’t argue. His bones were aching.

Alexa’s team moved into guard positions around the roof but left room for the other two members who were now hurrying their people down the street.

On a far corner of the roof, tiny cameras captured every move they made and every word that was said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Decisions

1

“I’m so glad you made it through!” Alice wrapped her arms around Jacob’s neck as soon as he reached the top of the fire escape.

Jacob held onto the soaked girl in surprise. He wasn’t ready for the emotions that filled his heart.

Alice felt his coldness and quickly retreated. “Sorry. I’m just glad you’re still alive.” She retreated out of his way so he could reach Alexa.

Jacob followed Mark to the boss, but he stared over his shoulder at the girl.

David met Billy’s eyes pointedly.

Billy shook his head tiredly. His arms were aching. “I stand by my choice.”

The two men didn’t explain what they were talking about. Bets on Jacob’s love life were only open to his team members. Billy was still certain Jacob would only be receptive to Alice’s overtures when the run was over. David thought it would happen a lot sooner than that, but he had forgotten how determined Jacob was to avoid a relationship.

“There’s a clear area about a quarter mile up. Several roads dead end into one concrete street, including this one.”

Alexa scanned Mark from head to toe for injuries. She frowned at the large red welts all over his neck and face. She got the medical kit back out and applied cortisone as he gave them the rest of his information.

“The concrete road goes up a steep hill. I took a fast run up there and saw an empty parking lot around a large tunnel. I’m not sure where it goes. There were a lot of tall plants and grass. It’ll be a squeeze to avoid it.”

Alexa finished rubbing in the cream. “I checked it on the map. I think it’s a stadium entrance.”

The thought of attending sports games while drinking, eating, and enjoying time with friends and family brought warm memories to a lot of the group.

Alexa scanned Jacob and found him soaked, bruised, covered in the same red welts, and holding out his hands. These splinters made her uneasy. They were deeper than Billy’s had been and the wounds were already bright red.

Alexa dug out the pieces, internally wincing every time Jacob did.

As she finished, Alexa gave him the same light kiss that she had delivered to Mark and then pointed them toward the other team members who were on guard duty.

Alice pouted over the display of affection that Jacob clearly liked.

Jacob and Mark went to their places willingly and with their heads up. It hadn’t been easy, but they had brought an entire team through alive, without

Alexa. It was a new milestone in their personal progress. They were eager to tell the story as soon as their shift was over.

“Let’s get that food rolling.”

Alexa’s call reminded people that she had given out instructions. Everyone got busy, while exchanging stories about what they’d gone through today.

Bradley and Franklin joined Levi’s large group as soon as they saw Colton pull a bag of coffee from his cloak.

Alexa studied the apocalyptic city around them as the sun began to sink below the horizon. She wanted everyone fed, but the cooking fires were mostly for the light. It was about to get very dark. If anyone else had survived, they would see the light and follow it here. Alexa hadn’t forgotten that everyone on this run was family.

Alexa made a complete circuit of the top of the apartment building, peering down all the way around to make sure there was no place someone could climb up easily or without them knowing. Then she motioned Asher over to help her block off the door that led up to this roof. They placed debris in front of it after jamming a thin stick into the keyhole to prevent it from being opened from the other side.

Asher glanced over at Edward. “Is he okay?”

Alexa grunted. “No, but none of us are as long as we’re on this run.”

Asher was a little surprised that she had decided not to push forward even though it was getting dark. “You could change your mind.”

“But I won’t.”

Asher was relieved by her decision. He had no desire to trek through this city during the day, let alone in pitch black conditions. Being fast wasn’t helpful if he couldn’t see where he was going.

Asher lingered with Alexa instead of joining his team for a meal.

Alexa studied the Invisible man. “I sense you’re not happy with the team you’re on.”

Asher regarded her in surprise. “I’m *very* happy with my team.”

“Then why do you want to be put somewhere else?” Alexa had pulled it from his mind days ago. “I assumed you would ask for it at the meeting.”

Asher looked toward his team leader, who was busy getting everyone settled for the night. Then he focused on Eva. Open longing flashed across his face and was quickly smothered.

Alexa groaned. “I thought you didn’t want to be like your father!”

Asher shook his head. “That’s why I need to be reassigned. I don’t want to come between them. I refuse to endanger my team.”

Alexa respected that. “So why didn’t you ask for it?”

Asher sighed. “I am now.”

“The council will consider your request.”

Alexa's words carried, triggering Franklin. He hated to be out of the loop. "We have a lot of issues to settle. Let's roll while they cook."

Alexa joined the councilmen at the small campfire Colton had already gotten started. He had moved on to food while the other teams were still picking a place to start their fires. In her opinion, Levi's XO deserved his position. "You have the floor first, Frankie."

Franklin scowled, but he didn't protest the name again. He took a minute to mentally run through the items they had discussed, and the things people had requested. Then he got them rolling. "We don't have to settle a marriage for Gwendolyn to a founding family line. She was killed, along with all of her branch."

Anger flew through the entire group at the reminder of how this run had begun.

"We don't have to track down the people who robbed Christopher while he was held up by the government. He didn't survive Elliot's attack either."

Bradley rubbed the itchy spots on his arm. "I think we should seek justice on his behalf anyway."

Alexa nodded. "That also has my vote. Just because Christopher is dead, that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve justice. I also don't like the idea of leaving killers and thieves to go free."

"Agreed!" The loud vote echoed into the darkness, drowning out the few who didn't agree.

After each vote, Franklin recorded the decision in his book.

Emmie spoke up even though she wasn't on the council. "Both of my sons will make good husbands and fathers after they've had a little more training. They're vicious fighters and they aren't afraid of any challenge."

Franklin frowned at her. He didn't like Emmie because of her sons. "I think it would be a good idea to keep your boys together. We'll arrange a match with sisters in the procreation branch, if they survived. The goal will be for them to change that from a procreation only line into a normal team tree. That way they won't need to keep begging the council for marriage matches at every meeting. They'll be able to defend themselves."

People looked toward Alexa to see her choice.

Alexa felt Wyatt and Damon glaring at them. "I agree, but only if the men are willing. I don't care what the new Pro Tem decides. Men are not slaves!"

"Agreed!"

Wyatt and Damon were both happily surprised by her decision and the vote.

Bradley moved them on to the next issue. "I will not vote for Emmie to have a spot on the council as long as she continues to support whatever plot her sons have going against you." He'd been paying attention.

Franklin quickly nodded. "Agreed."

Alexa hadn't expected anything different. "I'd like to leave this on the table for the next meeting."

“Fine.” Franklin waved at the dead skyline. “I’m not going to vote for conquering anymore. Now that the apocalypse has destroyed society, very few people know of our family history. I’d like to help change our image to the public so we don’t have to hide anymore or be under constant attack. I want the Mitchels to have peace where possible.”

Alexa nodded. “Agreed.”

Bradley scowled. “You two won’t conquer anymore, and I can already tell Franklin agrees about letting Safe Haven decide who gets land and equipment. Where does that leave our family?!”

Alexa swept the darkness around them. “It leaves us in limbo with all the other survivors and refugees from the war. I trust Safe Haven to do right by all of us.”

“And if they don’t?”

Alexa’s eyes narrowed. “Then this council will ensure that our future is secure, even if we have to have that future somewhere else.”

“Agreed!”

Only a few of those listening were unhappy with that decision. Many of them had been to other countries. They didn’t mind the thought of leaving America and claiming some other paradise. Like Bradley, they preferred to be conquerors instead of beggars.

“And that brings us to Safe Haven itself. When they return, they’re going to be calling for fighters. We don’t have many details on what we’ll be facing in that final battle, but I assume we can expect it to

be the ugliest struggle for survival that any of us of have ever faced.” Bradley glanced around at the suddenly eager people. “Mitchels never shy from a challenge. I say we fight with them. Then we’ll be guaranteed rewards.”

Franklin took the cup of coffee Colton handed him. “I don’t know why we need to get involved at all. Safe Haven will be a powerhouse when they hit these shores. They don’t need us.”

Everyone expected Alexa to say she and her team would be fighting with Safe Haven and that was the end of it.

Alexa couldn’t do that now. “I’m going to make a deal. They have to allow the existence of hybrids or I won’t be able to support them, or you two, whether it be for control over the country, our family, or in that final fight.”

Everyone was shocked, including Alexa’s team, who was listening to the meeting in fascination while taking quick scans of the darkening environment.

Alexa didn’t say she loved her team more than she wanted Safe Haven to be on their side. She didn’t need to. Her statement had done it for her.

Bradley adamantly shook his head. “Hybrids are a horror. I know many of our family are now mixed, and I’m willing to grandfather them in, but I simply cannot vote to allow it to keep happening. As a protector of our family, I view the hybrids as an extreme danger.”

“I’m willing to have hybrids in the family as long as we have rules and conditions about their creation.” Franklin was acutely aware of how many of the people around them, making sure they survived, were crossed with creatures. “I also believe Safe Haven will make a deal with you because of your father. That will overrule Bradley with a 3 to 1 margin.”

“I say we bring this topic up at a later date, when we have more information.” Alexa hoped to make several deals with Safe Haven.

Bradley nodded. “Fine. Does that cover everything?”

David shook his head. “I didn’t mention it earlier. I know where the Mitchel-Abbot kids are that were supposedly kidnapped.”

Heads rotated toward him in surprise and disapproval.

David stared at Alexa as he spoke, trusting her to help him if it was needed. “I stayed with that family for years. Those kids are happy and healthy, with parents who love them. Taking them away from their mother and returning them to the family branch that allowed their mother to be raped would be a travesty of justice.”

Franklin abhorred sexual crimes. “This is the first the council is hearing about that. Please provide details.”

David joined the council members as Isaac took his place on guard duty. “Their mother, Patricia, told me she was raped by a Mitchel. They’ve been in

hiding for years to keep that person from finding them.”

“And who was this Mitchel?”

“She said his name was Roger. I believe that’s Adrian and Levi’s brother.”

“That information fits with what we know of Roger’s character.” Franklin already loathed Roger. “Do you have any idea of his whereabouts?”

“No, but I think she does.” David gestured toward the street, where a group of survivors were limping down the center. All of them were pointing at the firelight.

Many of them were injured, but it appeared to be minor. Alexa was furious about that. William and Elliot had made sure her men would suffer the most on this run.

Alexa narrowed in on the lanky girl who had told them of the missing children’s whereabouts before Elliot’s attack. “We’re about to have company. Give them their own space, keep them separated until we know if they can be trusted. There are several people in that group who were not approved to join our family.” Alexa looked at David. “Bring her in front of the council.”

David hurried over to the top of the fire escape while waving at the new people. He didn’t shout down at them and make noise, but he made sure they understood they were welcome up here.

Alexa took the cup of coffee from Colton, aware that he had given her the same undecorated, special mug again. She sipped the strong coffee while they

waited. They had settled most of the council business. Once this last issue was covered, all of them would need to get some sleep so they could wake up ready to handle the next part of the run. She had no doubt it would be just as rough as the first day had been. The few other items they needed to settle would wait.

David took the arm of the lanky girl as she reached the top fire escape. Her thin jacket and threadbare clothes were more obvious now. Even her shoes were falling apart. “The council would like a word with you.”

The girl stopped and immediately started to shake. “About what?”

David didn’t like her fear. “They just want to talk. You’re not in trouble.”

That didn’t stop her reaction. It told David she might have done something she was about to be punished for. He suddenly regretted bringing it up.

Bradley and Franklin also recognized how scared the girl was. They let Alexa handle the moment, hoping that would make things easier on all of them.

“State your name for the council.”

“Ria Mitchel.”

Alexa studied the girl who had their coloring, that Mitchel jawline, and a scarred body that said she was family. Alexa didn’t recognize her. “What branch?”

The girl didn’t have a choice but to answer them. “Roger is my father.”

Everyone was surprised. As far as they knew, the two missing kids were Roger's only offspring. It explained Ria not being recognized, as well. Roger had spent his life on the run, starting with his first sexual assault right as he became a teen.

"Where is your father?" Franklin stepped closer to the girl. "Don't lie!"

Ria flinched. "He didn't make it through the war."

"Details!"

"He was shot while trying to grab some kid. Her mother almost killed me, too!"

Alexa tried to calm things down. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"Because I want the council to go find my brother and sister! They're the only blood left on my branch!"

David and everyone else realized the girl was lonely.

"Can you verify or disprove the accusation that your father is responsible for assaulting Patricia?"

Ria's shoulders slumped. "He abused every female he encountered and quite a few of the males. Why would she be any different?"

Bradley had caught a possible hole in her story. "Why didn't you make contact with your brother and sister while the family gave you shelter? What part of that story is a lie?"

Ria retreated from his anger. "I was hiding in the same area they were in. They never saw me. I was afraid if I made contact they would take off again."

“So you gave the council half-truths.”

Ria nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m so tired of being alone!” The girl burst into tears that none of them were in the mood for.

Alexa gestured. “You are forgiven the offense, this time. Next time, you’ll pay with your life. Lying to the council is a death sentence.”

“There won’t be a next time!”

“Good. Dismissed.”

David led the girl over to the fire so she could start drying off. She was drenched. “It’s over now. Please stop crying. My nerves can’t take it.”

Ria tried to get control of herself.

More survivors came up the fire escape and moved toward Alexa. With her team on guard duty and the others distracted, no one was taking charge of keeping them separated.

Edward forced his weary body up as the new people began to surround his boss. Instead of going over to defend her like Asher and Austin were now doing, he took the moment to say a few words to some of them as they walked by.

Many of those people nodded in agreement, though some ignored him or glared at his request. It didn’t really matter to them who became President. All they cared about was surviving the here and now.

Addison joined Edward with the baby in her arms. “Do you mind? She’s been asking about you all day.”

Edward didn't know how that was possible since the child was too young to talk yet. He carefully accepted the baby from her mother and smiled down at her. "What can I do for you, little bit?"

The baby cooed at him happily, trying to communicate in the same way she did with her mother and father—mentally.

Edward was entranced. He sat down under the empty air conditioner compartment and let the baby into the front of his mind. He kept the ugly parts shut against her curious tugs, not wanting her to see the ugliness.

"She likes you." Addison was a little surprised. Other than her father, the baby hadn't shown an interest in any other male. She definitely preferred the company of women.

Edward smiled. "I have a way with Mitchels."

Addison chuckled. "Well, that one needs to be burped. Watch out for it or you'll end up wearing it."

Addison went back to their fire without worrying. Edward was staring at the child the same way Isaac did. If danger came, she would be protected.

Isaac wasn't happy about it, but he didn't protest. He had also been listening to the baby ask about Edward the entire time they'd been traveling. He didn't know why the infant wanted to be around Alexa's XO, but as long as they were in sight, it was okay. He still kept an eye on them.

“You seem calmer now.” Jordan joined Isaac and Addison by the fire while rubbing the bruises on her throat. It hurt to talk. “Something changed for you.”

“I was reminded that Addison deserves respect. My issues are not her fault.” Isaac glanced toward Alexa. “And being around her makes me want to try harder.”

Addison slid into Isaac’s arms and kissed him.

Alice groaned. “Get a room!”

Chuckles went through the group.

Jordan glanced over at Billy and lifted a brow, silently asking if he wanted to spend the night with her.

Billy shook his head. “See me when this run is done.”

Jordan understood his decision. It was hard to relax enough to enjoy a physical moment in a situation like this.

Standing on guard duty near the small team, Daniel met Jordan’s eyes. “Why weren’t you approved for Alexa’s father?”

There was an obvious age difference, but Daniel didn’t think that was the reason.

Silence fell across the rooftop; nearly everyone rotated toward them, wanting to hear that answer.

Jordan flushed bright red. She glared hotly. “That’s none of your business!”

Daniel shrugged. “Maybe not, but I will find out. You might as well tell me.”

Jordan waved bitterly toward the child Edward was playing with. “I can’t have kids. I wasn’t good enough because of that.”

Alexa tensed under the disapproval that hit her from many of the witnesses. “If it was your branch, you wouldn’t approve her either for that reason alone. If you can’t produce a child to help further the family, then you’d best be an amazing fighter with a sterling reputation and unbeatable ethics. Jordan failed to meet any of those qualifications.”

From what he’d heard, Billy thought Jordan had done well fighting the giants. “Didn’t she kill one of them?”

Jacob motioned to Jordan’s bruises. “She killed one, but it took too long and almost ended her. She can barely fight, she can’t have kids, and she’s sleeping with you because you remind her of Adrian. The boss is right. She isn’t good enough.”

And with those words, all of the peace they’d made on this trip vanished. Jordan and Alexa became bitter enemies once again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Carry On

1

“**A**re we done?” Bradley was ready to drink a little and then try to sleep. He was certain tomorrow would be rough; he wanted to be ready for it. He also wanted some downtime with Alexa’s team.

Franklin checked his notes again. “That’s it for us. Nora’s issues were also settled.”

Both men looked at Alexa.

Alexa swallowed the last of the coffee in her mug and then gave it back to Colton. “I have two more things to cover. But first, check the waves and see if there’s an address.” Alexa had been keeping track of the time.

Daniel switched on the radio and put it next to his knee. He was sitting by Edward, who was trying to rest now that little Sweetie was back with her mother.

Jeanie’s confident voice came through the radio, bringing quiet to the rooftop so everyone could hear it.

“...still need your skills here, New America. I have room for medics, fighters, weapons experts, and magic users. You’ll be treated fairly and taken

care of. You can also bring your men with you. They'll be safe here."

Billy snorted bitterly.

The radio address continued. "The evening market has grown since it first started. You can find medications, warm clothes, food, and weapons at the many stalls. The prices are low and it's well protected. Stop by and get what you need while receiving support from your fellow women. We know it's been a long, hard road. Come have a drink with us and spend a few hours remembering good times. You're always welcome here, Ladies."

Alexa scanned the rooftop group as the address continued, counting. There were more than fifty people up here now, but it was still light compared to how many had entered this gauntlet. Her eyes went back to the dark city street below as the address went on.

"Reno Rodney has withdrawn from the Presidential race, sadly. I'm sorry to see him go, but I'm sure you all agree that we don't need another man in charge of our lives after everything that's happened to our country. I thank you for all the support that's been coming in from all over New America. It warms my heart."

Billy snorted again. "Can't warm what you don't have."

His team nodded.

Alexa kept watching the street.

"The bounty on blood drinkers has been doubled. I'm also now paying for sightings, though

you have to prove it with a picture. Help me clear New America of these vicious killers and we'll build a brighter future, together. Good night and happy hunting.”

Daniel shut off the radio to save the battery in case Alexa wanted to use it again before he could charge it in the morning.

Alexa faced the expectant family members waiting for her last two items. “I want Soldier Town protected from Jeanie and everyone else.”

Austin barely stopped himself from openly asking for team lead on that job.

So did Lilya.

“While I’m gone, defend *any* groups of men who are willing to fight for their freedom. The reward will be favors, gear, and support from my father.” Alexa was certain Adrian would want it that way.

Most of the people nodded to let her know they were willing; it didn’t need a vote. Mitchels hated slavery in any form.

“I’m also offering a bounty on Jeanie as soon as she breaks our deal.”

“Are you sure she will?”

Alexa nodded at Addison. “I’d bet my guns on it.”

“What’s the haul?”

Alexa gestured at her team. “A trial spot on my crew.”

Alexa’s men scowled. None of them wanted a new teammate.

The family members brightened. Plans to infiltrate Jeanie's bunker began to form in multiple minds.

"Is that it?" Franklin wanted to be done now.

"Yes. Curfew is midnight. We leave at dawn." Alexa turned back toward the darkness, not giving anyone time to argue with that choice.

No one considered it. Alexa was in charge of this run and the others were grateful.

"What about a bounty for Elliot?" Levi was still furious. "He needs to die for this!"

"I'll handle that one myself." Alexa drew her gun and fired a shot toward the ocean so the stray round didn't hit anyone.

"What are you doing?" Franklin was tired of that sound. He enjoyed being retired.

"She's drawing survivors to us." Edward groaned as he sat up. The sound had brought him to full alertness even though he knew it wasn't a threat. If there was a problem, the tension of his team would have already alerted him.

Mark scanned the darkness. "Do you think there are other survivors?" As soon as he said it, Mark rolled his eyes. "Of course, there are. It's all Mitchels."

Alexa didn't say she felt bad that she hadn't been able to help all of them through the city. Her crew knew.

"Can I talk to you?"

Alexa didn't turn around. "Sure. Join me in my office."

Alice snickered as she came to Alexa's side at the edge of the rooftop.

Bradley and the others turned away to give the women privacy. It was easy to guess what Alice wanted, though most of the witnesses doubted she was going to get it.

Jacob stared at them, torn. He wasn't sure how to react.

Bradley sat down next to the Preacher and gave him a friendly bump. "You're being treated like a Mitchel. How does that feel?"

"Good." Jacob sighed. "And wrong."

"Exactly." Bradley dug in his cloak and brought out smoking material. "Will she agree?"

Jacob shrugged. "No idea."

"No." Edward cradled his injured arm and leaned against Daniel, who hadn't left his side since their guard shift ended. Their entire team was here, surrounding him with body heat and protection. "She won't give you away unless it's what you want."

Jacob's mouth opened. Then it snapped shut.

Edward grinned weakly. "And that's also why she won't say no."

Jacob flushed as the others chuckled. He hated feeling this way. He was used to being a man who made a choice and stuck to it.

"What's the holdup?" Bradley lit a rolled smoke and puffed.

Jacob refused to answer with so many people listening.

Bradley shrugged. “We all fall for a tight hole at some point, rookie. There’s no dishonor in it.”

Jacob scowled. “It’s not like that! And don’t call me that!”

Bradley grinned, blowing out smoke. “Whatever you say, *rookie*.”

Jacob’s temper exploded. He lunged across his team and punched Bradley in the face.

Edward caught the cigarette that flew from Bradley’s mouth. He inhaled as they fought, leaning out of the way.

The rest of Jacob’s team tried to pull him off the council member.

Alexa kept scanning the complete darkness around them. Jacob’s behavior wasn’t okay, but it had been expected. He was under a lot of pressure right now. They all were.

Alice also ignored the fight, though she was aware that Jacob had attacked a council member. He had the same reckless nature that she did. “Why won’t he give me a chance?”

“He’s scared.” Alexa eyed the pretty girl, seeing the scars on the inside as well as the outside. “Why do you want him?”

“I dreamed about him.” Alice gestured. “And we have the spark. You all saw it when we kissed. We’re supposed to be together.”

Alexa didn’t doubt that. “But why do you want him?”

Alice frowned. “I don’t understand the question.”

“Is it because he’s a member of my team? Is it because you think no one else wants him? Is it because of the ruthless fighter you see inside?”

“All of that and more.” Alice smiled longingly. “He’ll be an amazing mate and father. I really did dream about it. We were very happy.”

Jacob and Bradley rolled across the fire, scattering logs and people.

Alexa continued grilling Alice. “You know he’s not the type to be content with just a calm, boring life.”

“I do.” Alice shrugged. “Neither am I. That doesn’t mean we can’t have a home and a family. We just have to account for our wild sides, too.”

Alexa frowned. “I’ll consider your request.”

“But I haven’t made it yet.”

“Don’t play games with me, Alice Livingston!”

Silence fell behind them at Alexa’s sharp tone. Even Bradley held back on the next swing he’d been about to deliver. He loved to brawl, but he didn’t want to fight with Alexa.

Alice had stiffened. “I know that’s why you don’t like me.”

Alexa huffed. “I never said I didn’t like you.”

“Don’t play games with me either!”

Alice’s shout drew Jacob, hard. Anyone who had the sand to yell at Alexa was special.

Alice dropped her eyes to the dark street, but her voice was rebellious. “You’ve been blamed for your father’s actions all your life. Why would you do that to me?!”

Alexa faced the girl. “Because your father was evil and I’m worried that will cost Jacob his life. Tell me you’d die for him and I’ll reconsider.”

Alice grunted. “I don’t know him well enough yet to die for him.”

“I understand. As I said, I’ll consider your request.”

“But coming from you, that’s the same as saying no!”

Alexa pointed. “We have more survivors on the way. Get some food ready for them.”

Alice stomped off as cheers went up from some of the others. It was a source of pride that so many of their family had made it through the gauntlet.

Alexa turned, eyeing the team who was disheveled again from scuffling. She focused on Jacob, who had blood dripping from his nose and a wild gleam of rebellion blooming in his eyes. “Until she proves herself, I will not agree.”

Jacob didn’t want a relationship, but he also didn’t want anyone making life decisions for him unless it was in battle. “Lorey and Claudia didn’t prove themselves.”

“Mark and Daniel had no doubts about them. You do.”

Jacob understood Alexa would approve the match if he was willing. He settled back down into confusion. “Thank you, Boss.”

“It’s my honor.” Alexa refused to allow Jacob to be trapped into anything, but especially not a

marriage to a Livingston. She lifted a brow. “Is it the name?”

Jacob shook his head.

“Good. I have that covered for both of us.”
Alexa resumed searching the darkness as the small group of survivors began climbing the fire escape.
“Carry on.”

Bradley immediately punched Jacob in the mouth.

This time, the team stayed out of it and let Jacob express his displeasure. When Bradley hit the wall and slid down it, they cheered and enjoyed being part of a Mitchel family meeting.

Damon got up while people were distracted.

Wyatt whistled loudly, trying to help his brother.

People looked at Wyatt as Damon got closer to Alexa.

Edward started to get up.

Bradley shoved Jacob off of him and wiped blood from his lip. “It’s covered.”

Edward waited, willing to trust the council member. He liked Bradley.

Jacob decided he’d vented enough. He let Bradley get up and return to his spot.

Across the roof, Damon stepped around Levi’s crowded hearth.

Asher stuck a foot out.

Damon tripped, falling forward.

Asher slammed his elbow into Damon’s ear, rattling his brain.

Damon dropped to his knees.

Asher casually propped his leg up on Damon's back, pushing the man down. Asher smiled at the people who turned toward them. "He just needs a nap."

Austin laughed. He leaned over and tapped Wyatt on the knee. "I have something for you."

Wyatt smiled at him. "Cool. What is it?"

Austin hit Wyatt under the chin with a beautiful uppercut.

Wyatt's teeth snapped together. He crumbled into a ball, groaning.

Emmie scowled, but she didn't protest. Her wild boys needed these corrections.

Asher and Austin resumed what they'd been doing.

It reminded Edward strongly of Alexa. He settled back and tried to let the pain pills work on his arm.

Bradley reached out. "May I?"

Edward held out his arm.

Bradley sent a sharp bolt of yellow light and then let go.

"That wasn't healing." Edward sighed happily as it took effect. "A painkiller. Nice."

"It's the best I can do. Mitchels kill. Only a rare few of us have any healing skills."

Jacob wiped blood from his nose as he sat back down in his spot. He felt a little better now. "Is that why there are so many of you, like in war-torn countries where they breed ten kids in hopes that at least one will survive?"

Bradley sniffed and spat. “No, we just like to fuck.”

Laughter rang out, drawing more survivors. They hurried down the dark street toward safety.

Levi slid over next to Franklin at their fire. He began whispering in the man’s ear.

Mark was watching Alexa. He saw her face tighten. Her finger tapped against the butt of one of her Colts. Then it was gone, but Mark knew what he’d seen. Alexa had just made a final choice on something and it was going to be ugly for whoever had angered her.

Mark turned his head toward Edward and acted like he hadn’t noticed. He had faith that whatever she’d chosen was for the greater good of their quest or for her family.

Billy used his hand to ask Mark what was wrong.

Bradley gestured toward Alexa. “Your boss isn’t happy.”

Billy groaned. “It’s Mitchel hand code, right?”

Bradley chuckled. “We learn that before we count or read.”

“I should have known.”

“Well?” Bradley regarded Mark. He was very observant. Alexa’s body language was tense.

Mark shrugged. “When she wants us to know, we will.”

Bradley liked Alexa’s team. He felt comfortable with them. “Mind if I share your fire tonight?”

All of them shook their heads, even Jacob. Bradley was a council member, so it wasn't a good idea to say no anyway, but he was also like them. He fit right in.

Edward handed the cigarette to Daniel and then leaned back on his good elbow. He swept the other groups and the newest people now joining them from the fire escape. The feeling was peaceful, with an edge of alertness that he assumed would remain throughout the drinking and sleeping. There was no way to know if Elliot had another surprise waiting for them tonight.

Alexa turned. She found Edward first.

Edward warmed. The headache faded. He smiled, revealing the love he held for her. Then it was gone and he turned back to Bradley. "So you all like to fuck, huh?"

Bradley laughed. He was beginning to understand why Alexa and Edward were together.

David passed on the smoke. He motioned to the lone girl sitting near the fire escape, watching them sadly.

Ria hurried over. "Do you need something?"

David pointed at an empty spot next to their fire. "Warm up. Have something to eat."

Ria was thrilled. Her happiness rolled out in thick waves, bringing smiles. Her main gift was mood control.

"Very nice."

Ria perked up even more at David's praise. She didn't start babbling or begging. She just enjoyed being welcome.

"We have more survivors coming up."

People moved over to clear space at Alexa's call. The rooftop was getting crowded now.

Jacob caught Alexa's eye as she did another check in. "I expected Gate Hunters to follow us in."

"So did I." She shrugged. "Perhaps we've finally cut their numbers down."

Ria accepted a cup of hot tea from David. "They won't come here. Elliot hates them. He wants the gates to remain open."

Everyone around their fire stared at the girl.

Ria tensed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" David nudged her hand so she would unfreeze and start breathing again.

Ria took a fast sip and didn't answer.

David questioned her before the others could. "Have you been here before?"

Ria nodded. "I went to school here before the war."

"Did your father live here, too?"

Ria's face fell. "No. He stayed on the move. He left me here until I came of age. Then I joined him for a few years."

More questions were forgotten as the injured survivors reached the top of the fire escape.

"There are cheetahs down there!"

"They were pack hunting. We lost half our team!"

Edward held up his bandaged arm. “They’re hunting for the meal that got away.”

The new people came over and joined their fire, eager to share stories.

Other groups across the rooftop realized Alexa’s team was drawing the most people. Many of them gravitated that way, not wanting to miss out on the tales or the company.

Daniel stayed next to Edward, guarding him like Edward had done right after his suicide attempt. Jealousy didn’t matter right now.

Edward studied Bradley.

The council member stared back.

The silence between them lingered.

Edward finally broke it. “He looks like you, a little.”

Bradley’s swelling face lit up. “Thank you. I didn’t want to ask.”

It was hard for Edward to be upset considering what the family had gone through. He mainly felt sorry for the man. “He’s a good kid.”

Bradley frowned. “Then maybe he’s not really a Mitchel.”

Billy shared a memory of Brian’s skill with a gun.

Bradley observed mentally, absorbing every detail. “No, that’s definitely her son.”

Bradley smiled at Alexa as she did another check in.

Alexa nodded back and continued her sweep to include the entire group around the fire with her team.

All of them looked back, automatically responding to her. Even the newest survivors paused in handling their injuries.

Alexa focused on Levi's crew, where none of them were paying attention except for Colton.

Colton lifted his mug to her and then went back to listening to the funny story Franklin was telling.

Alexa resumed scanning the darkness, hoping for more survivors.

2

“Are we just going to let them have a fun night?”

Elliot sipped his wine and didn't answer. He was enjoying the family time even though he wasn't there or welcome. This was as close as he'd been to them in years.

William longed for his health back so he could take charge, but the line of enforcers and his own weak body were standing in the way. “Come on!”

Elliot shifted on the throne to stare at William with annoyed blue eyes. “What would you like me to do?”

“Send an attack! Do something!”

“I am doing something.” Elliot pointed his staff toward the screens where they were watching the

large group of survivors. “You won’t get her off that roof, even if it rains, which I can’t control.”

“Then conjure something that can reach her! You promised me she would die!”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve almost worn out your welcome, William.”

William didn’t care about Elliot’s displeasure. “Why are you letting them have downtime?!”

“Because they’re Mitchels!” Elliot evened out his voice as his adoring fans turned from the screens, drawn by his anger. “Let them drink and fight and stiffen up. Let them sleep badly and have nightmares. Let their wounds fester and slow them down. Let your potion work.”

William understood he wasn’t going to be able to force Elliot to obey. He considered trying anyway, but he only had the energy for a few good hits now. He had to pick his battles wisely.

William also hated feeling irate and out of control. He didn’t know when he’d contracted the rage illness, but it was wearing away his patience.

Elliot gestured at a nearby seat. “Try to relax. Stress is bad for your health.”

William dropped down into a hard chair and glared at the monitor. It was all he could do.

Behind the two men, Monica stood on guard duty by the exit. With Elliot busy watching the monitors, his power over her mind wasn’t as strong. She stared at the throne while tears rolled over her cheeks. *I had it all and I threw it away. I’m so sorry, Molly.*

Elliot tapped his staff.

Monica hurried to his side, leaving the tears for him to see.

Elliot smiled widely. "I love it when you're miserable. Carry on."

Monica winced. Fresh tears rolled over her cheeks.

Elliot settled back on his throne. "Perfect."

William tried to relax. It was obvious that Elliot was a true bastard. He just had to hope that would be enough to cause Alexa's death. *And if it doesn't, my backup plan will cover it. Elliot's right. All I have to do is sit here and watch her die.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Panic Mode

1

“**T**ake another dose of antibiotics.” Alexa rewrapped the bandage around Edward’s arm. The puncture wounds were showing signs of infection and he was running a light fever, but it had finally stopped bleeding. “Dose the crew.”

Alexa didn’t like the sight of their injuries. Even the splinter wounds looked rough.

Billy handed out the antibiotics while Daniel fastened the medical kit and followed Alexa as she made rounds of the teams, medicating people and getting them ready for the rough day ahead.

They’d all slept badly and woken early. Now that dawn was finally breaking over the city, everyone was eager to leave. Angry, sore fighters packed their gear and waited for Alexa to finish so they could go.

Alexa eyed the purple and yellow bruises on Jordan’s throat and then moved on. Other than giving her a pain pill, which all of the team leaders had already done for their crews during breakfast, there was nothing she could do about the woman’s injuries. They would have to heal up on their own, much like the many bruises and scrapes everyone

had suffered on their first day of trekking through this deadly city.

Jordan sulked as Alexa walked by. Last night's humiliation was still fresh in her mind.

The new people who had joined them last night gathered near the fire escape and waited for instructions. Half of them had lost a team captain to Elliot's attack. Without a leader, they automatically relied on Alexa to get them through. It was what she was known for.

"We're taking point, with Addison's crew. Levi and Emmie's teams will take drag." Alexa scanned the new people. "Stay in the middle. Do what we do. If you run off, we won't be able to help."

Bradley and Franklin lined up right behind Alexa's team. They assumed it was the safest place to be.

"Let's roll." Alexa went down the slick fire escape first.

It took a minute for all of them to reach the alley that was still covered in water. Alexa was relieved to see the water was lower than it had been yesterday. She waited at the end of the alley, scanning the entrance to the submarine dock. Whatever was hidden under the street was still calling to her.

Jacob also heard it. "Is that something we need?"

Alexa brooded. "I hope not because we aren't going down there after it."

Alexa circled a finger in the air to get everyone into their standard formations. Then she led them down the street, kicking up murky water with every step.

The street began to slant upward, revealing a slick concrete road where painted lanes blinked at them through layers of debris that was being washed down the hill in every storm. Papers, clothes, and trash covered the surface.

The apartment buildings lining the road became a long stretch of empty storefronts and businesses that none of them were tempted to explore. Everyone in this large group just wanted to be out of here. Even the lure of supplies they hadn't seen in years wasn't enough to tempt them to break formation.

As the group moved out of sight, the water over top of the submarine entrance rippled. A periscope broke the surface and rotated to watch their exit.

Under the completely flooded tunnel, a small submarine rested on the concrete rails at the bottom. The nervous crew inside that submarine waited tensely as their redheaded captain examined the situation.

Saul withdrew the periscope. "They're leaving. Resume normal duties."

The submarine crew breathed sighs of relief and went about their daily chores of caring for the sub and themselves. They had been hiding under this city for months. They didn't care if the rest of the

world stopped turning. All they cared about was their own survival and that meant staying off the radar of anyone who could track them.

Saul rubbed the ugly scar along his neck that still ached from time to time. It had been a rough escape from Australia once he had broken free of the descendant charm that had been placed upon them. It had almost cost him his life, but he and his crew had gotten out of there and found another submarine that had allowed them to evade being recaptured. “And we’re going to stay free as long as I have breath in my body.”

Saul began programming new coordinates into the computer of the submarine. As soon as the fighting above them restarted, he and the sub crew would find somewhere else to dock that didn’t have as much traffic. They had only come here because this underground facility had a refueling station. It had taken a month of hard work to pump out enough water to be able to access it, but they were once again full of fuel.

Saul missed the nuclear-powered submarine they had once enjoyed, but he didn’t miss the people who had taken it from him. “I hope we never see any of them again. Every one of those fighters are damned and I’d just as soon that their fate didn’t rub off on us.”

“We’re going into the jungle again.” David’s frown took up his entire face. “If this run continues much longer, I’m going to absolutely hate nature, in any form.”

Many of the fighters behind him nodded in agreement. Trees had started to shrink the road as they walked. Now that they were at the end of the street, the trees and chest-high weeds had taken over everything except for a narrow path that had already forced Alexa to put them into 2 x 2 formations instead of being spread out like they were used to. It limited their fighting range and put the groups in the front and rear in extreme danger.

Alexa moved them toward the entrance of the stadium without examining it morbidly or in awe like many of the others were doing. She scanned for durability and found it lacking.

The stadium walls were falling apart. Pieces of metal and large rusted silver screws were all over the ground where the jungle environment was trying to hide them. Travel through the weeds wasn’t recommended for that reason, among others. It was impossible to tell what would be under their boots. The only open route was taking them directly into the stadium, like she had guessed. “It’s a fitting place for a crowd to enjoy a violent game.”

Walking behind her, Edward fought the pain in his arm and leg and tried to maintain his normal alertness. He felt like hell. He wasn’t sure how much assistance he would be in a fight, but he was determined to give it his all.

Addison's team walked behind Alexa's crew with long, sharpened staffs in their hands and eyes rotating continuously.

The faded sign on the entrance of the stadium reminded them not to park here or they would receive a large fine.

"Where the hell are we?" Isaac had woken in a bad mood that was only getting worse. "I thought I'd been to every coastal state. I don't recognize this stadium at all."

"This used to be Columbia." Billy had also traveled a lot. "It doesn't look anything like it did when I came here on vacation. To be fair, that was 20 years ago and it hadn't been blown up yet."

Now that it had been pointed out, people were able to place the unfamiliar landscape with what they remembered of South Carolina, but only in distinct areas, like the one they were in now. The rest of the location was completely foreign even to those who had been here before.

Like Isaac, Alexa didn't remember the stadium. She was certain it had been here, though. It was old, and building steel walls during an apocalypse was one thing; putting in a stadium would be a complete waste of time, energy, and supplies that even Elliot wouldn't have done. Still, it bothered her that she didn't remember the structure.

The long tunnel leading into the stadium was wide, dark, damp, and also being smothered by the same weeds and grasses that were growing all

around the structure. Alexa led them in with a sense of danger falling over her mind. “Get set.”

Her team drew weapons.

“No guns.”

Half of the other groups didn’t understand her order.

Alexa didn’t have time to explain. She automatically ducked as the air shifted. Something large and heavy flew overhead, barely missing her.

“The walls are moving!”

“Those aren’t walls!” Edward ducked as he felt something coming toward him. He was hit in the side and blasted into the concrete tunnel wall. He collapsed, groaning as his mind spun and his body cried out in protest.

“Something grabbed Isaac!”

“Shoot it!”

“No guns!” The ricochets would take the wrong lives. Alexa rolled further into the tunnel while digging in her cloak. She rolled again as something heavy came down, just missing her.

“Stab that thing!”

“Help Isaac!”

Alexa struck a flare and rolled again. She tossed it behind her, illuminating the tunnel.

“Roll, Boss!” Mark flew toward Alexa as a giant stomped after her, rattling the tunnel.

Alexa kept rolling, going off-balance. She hit the wall and quickly used it to push herself onto her feet. She darted around the enraged giant trying to stomp her to death.

Isaac struggled in the giant's grip, unable to draw in any air. He stabbed it repeatedly, but the giant only squeezed harder. Without air and in full panic mode, he didn't think about using his magic.

The others didn't use magic either. In such close quarters, it was too likely they would hit Isaac and everyone else, too.

Addison, now able to see thanks to the flare, leapt into the air. She slammed her short staff into the giant's chest, nailing it directly in its weak spot.

Isaac fell to the ground, coughing and gagging as he tried to refill his lungs.

The giant fell against the wall and hit the ground.

Addison was knocked aside as another giant ran through the tunnel, crashing after Alexa.

Austin dove between Addison and the wall, protecting the crying baby in her backpack.

Alexa whistled loudly. "I'm up here, wolf killers!"

The giants abandoned their other targets and ran after Alexa.

Asher darted in between the giants, sliding his blades along their legs as he tried to catch up to Alexa.

Behind them, most of Alexa's crew also gave chase. Others stayed there to help their fallen teammates as the rest of the large group finally made it into the tunnel.

Alexa spun around suddenly. She leapt up against the wall and used it to get enough height to

come down with her blade in hand. She drove it into the giant's chest, missing the weak spot in the gloomy dimness of the tunnel.

Asher was there to slam his knife into the correct place.

Alexa caught Asher's arm as he dropped. She balanced both of them and then pulled him to the side as another giant reached out with a huge arm.

Alexa pulled Asher through the dark tunnel, not stopping even though she could hear their teams trying to catch up.

Asher recovered his balance and kept pace with her as he fumbled in his cloak for another knife. "Just like old times!"

Alexa ran faster. "Time for something new, Ash!"

The giant behind them pounded on the walls, roaring in frustration as they stayed ahead of him.

"On two!"

Asher didn't know what was going to happen at the count, but he kept a firm hand on his knife hilt and spun around at the right moment.

Alexa climbed up Asher's hip and then pushed off his arm. She flew through the air with her last knife in hand and a scream of fury on her lips.

The giant grabbed Alexa's throat as she landed. Its big hand came up to protect its weak spot.

Alexa plunged her blade into one of its eyes. Liquid squirted over her face as the giant staggered backward. She yanked the blade out and began ice-picking its face, trying to reach the other eye.

Asher used the giant's flailing arm to boost himself up so he could reach the weak spot.

Alexa and Asher stabbed at the same time, hitting an eye and a chest hole.

The giant fell, taking both of them along. Three bodies dropped in a heap in front of rattled teams that were just now catching up.

Mark hurried over and helped Alexa to her feet.

Alexa pulled Asher up with her, still grinning.

Asher laughed, surprising their witnesses. "It's good to see you, Lexi!"

Alexa's amusement filled the tunnel.

Jacob held the flare up higher so everyone had a clear view of the tunnel. Another flare had been struck in the rear of the group, providing enough illumination for everyone to see the threat had been eliminated.

Alexa swept the group and found only minor injuries, except for Edward, who was limping along between David and Daniel with a dazed expression. She rotated toward the dark path again. There was no time to handle those injuries unless they were life threatening. She had to get them out of here while everyone was still on their feet.

The team followed Alexa with weapons in hand and rage in their hearts. There was little doubt that Elliot had brought the giants here with a promise of revenge against Alexa. That had failed, but winning this battle wasn't going to be enough. Only Elliot's death would satisfy his family now.

3

They reached the end of the tunnel to find thick trees planted across the exit. They were so close together that the teams were forced to enter the stadium one at a time, leaving all of them open to an attack.

The sound of wings filled the air.

“Watch your line of fire!” Alexa’s Colts thundered through the stadium.

Those who hurried through the trees quickly slid aside to avoid the attack.

Vultures of every shape and size flew or ran toward them. The entire stadium was their den. Huge nests covered the ground and seats with hungry predators that didn’t care if their food was alive or dead when they ate it.

The vultures fought each other for position as they attacked the humans who had dared to enter their lair.

The sound of gunfire grew louder as more of the team made it out of the tunnel, but it didn’t make a dent in the number of predators. Team members were forced to bring up shields to defend themselves, no longer able to fire or use a weapon.

Alexa and her crew bunched up on one side of the tunnel, automatically putting Edward behind them. They emptied mag after mag, taking down dozens of vultures, but it still wasn’t enough. Sharp talons and beaks sliced through boots and gloves, drawing blood. The scent of it filled the air, drawing

more of the vultures who were just realizing the food had come to them this time.

Emmie and her crew finally made it through the trees. Still on their bikes, they pedaled hard and fast to make it by the wave of vultures. They crunched smaller animals under their tires while rolling under the huge wings of the adults.

Emmie steered with one hand while firing rapid darts that took down everything they hit. The tips were poisoned with snake venom.

Emmie's crew followed her into the middle of the stadium, also shooting darts and throwing knives. They didn't know where their team leader was going, but they were willing to follow her to Hell if that was what it took to get out of here.

Levi's team used their knives and brute strength against the vultures, especially Colton. His thick arms punched blades through chest plates and his powerful kicks snapped hollow bones. They battled their way along the stands to the right, trying to clear an escape route for the rest of the group that was still hiding in the tunnel. Most of the new people who had joined them last night were not fighters.

Alexa reloaded and slammed her Colts into her holsters. Her shield was being attacked by several vultures. She and her team brought up multiple layers to hold against them.

In the tunnel, Franklin huddled with the non-fighting people and waited for it to be over.

Bradley slid through the trees, determined to do his share. He usually relied on his mind in

dangerous situations, but that wouldn't be enough here.

A large vulture darted forward, shrieking.

Alexa lunged, shoving Bradley to the ground but also losing her concentration. Her shield dropped.

The vulture clamped down on her ankle, drawing a scream and her wrath.

Alexa put her gun to the vulture's head and pulled the trigger repeatedly, fury reaching a boiling point. Fire broke out all along her skin. Flames leapt toward the nearest vultures, burning them alive.

That triggered the other Mitchels to do the same. Magic flew through the air, hitting vultures and people by accident.

There was no call to watch the line of fire this time. Alexa was too far gone to be concerned with what anyone else was doing. She threw flames to the left, ducked a sharp talon, and then fired flames to the right. Birds went into the air on fire, dropping small sparks all over the decaying stadium.

Bradley made it to his feet and hurried over to join Alexa's crew, who were still behind their shields. When Alexa got like that, it was best to stay out of her way.

Levi's group advanced, still trying to clear a path through the stadium. Levi's flames blasted out in front of him.

Following on his flank, Eva fired her rifle and tried to provide protection, but the smoke from the

fire was making it hard to see now. She felt death land on her shoulder. “Levi!”

Levi rotated to find a large orange blur flying toward Eva. He lunged, knocking her out of the way.

The cheetah leapt from the side, teeth finding flesh. The big cat crunched through Levi’s neck from the side, killing him instantly.

“Ahh!” Eva jumped onto the cheetah, wrapping her arms around it. The two females rolled across the stadium floor in a life or death battle with one of them growling and the other screaming.

Asher couldn’t get a clear shot at the cat while Eva was wrapped around it. He dove on top of them with his knife and managed to get his blade into the cat’s stomach. He ripped it open brutally, disemboweling it while Eva broke its neck.

The bullets and the fire were making a dent now. The other cats that made it through the tunnel were quickly dispatched by Alexa’s crew as they came through the trees. The survivors in the tunnel had shields up; the cats didn’t pay any attention to them. The felines were still tracking Edward.

Alexa sent another blast fire around the side of the trees, catching one of the cheetahs. Fire ran all over its lean body. The cat took off across the stadium like a moving torch, howling.

Emmie motioned to Damon. “Stay with her!”

Damon and Wyatt realized this was their chance to get Alexa alone and pedaled after her.

The sound of wings echoed louder as Alexa reached the far end of the stadium. She was alone over here where the jungle was too thick to see where she was going. Alexa set it on fire without remorse. She had felt Levi's death. This place was going to burn to the ground now.

A large vulture flew at her through the smoke, letting out an awful shriek of rage.

Alexa blew its brains out, dropping low to let the body go flying over her.

Damon appeared on her right.

Wyatt took her left.

They rolled around her in a circle, firing darts at everything that moved.

Alexa reached the other end of the stadium and found an empty tunnel waiting for them. All around the tunnel were nests with eggs. There were hundreds of them.

Alexa began burning them, spewing her guilty rage at losing not only another family member but someone she had been sworn to protect.

Silence fell behind her as the other team members reloaded and gathered around the entrance or around Levi's body.

Alexa kept going. She wasn't ready to face that yet. She continued to set the stadium on fire, not caring about the smoke that was starting to make people cough. This trap would not be left to do this to anyone else.

As she entered the tunnel with Damon in front and Wyatt on her heels, the huge door above them dropped, just missing Wyatt.

Another door came down in the main entrance tunnel, decapitating a survivor who tried to run under it.

“We’re trapped!”

The survivors fled into the burning stadium.

“We’re trapped in here!”

“Watch out!”

“Alexa!”

There was no answer.

4

Alexa’s crew knew what she would want them to do.

Daniel took control of the panicking people when Edward didn’t. Their XO was too injured to do his job. “Let’s roll. Shields up!”

Franklin stayed tight on David’s heels. He didn’t ask where Alexa was, but his eyes swiveled continuously, searching for her. He saw Levi’s body and winced, but he didn’t break away from the fast pace Daniel set across the stadium.

Bradley went to Levi’s widow and gently pulled her to her feet. “Bring his body.”

Eva collapsed into Bradley’s arms, sobbing.

Colton and other members of the team picked up Levi’s body, then fell in with the line of survivors now marching across the burning stadium.

Alexa's team took the rear while scanning to make sure everyone else was still with them. They were all upset that Levi had been killed, but they were also relieved that his had been the only death so far. This was a horrible trap. They'd gotten off lucky.

Edward took two steps and then slid to his knees. He fell over in the smokey weeds without saying a word.

"I guess we didn't get so lucky after all." David scooped Edward up over his shoulder and trotted across the stadium. "Boss! We need you!"

Alexa still didn't answer.

Billy almost ran into the door in the tunnel. The smoke was too thick to see through. He pounded on it. "She's trapped over there!"

"We're trapped over here!"

"Find a way to get it open!"

"Go back!"

"There's too much smoke. The cats will pick us off. We have to go forward!"

The survivors shoved against each other, in full panic mode now.

David stayed in the rear of the group with his shield over Edward, while mentally shouting for Alexa. If she didn't come back for them, all of these people were going to die.

Chapter Thirty
Do It Now!

1

“There has to be a way to open it!” Wyatt pounded on the door, roughly searching for a switch or a lever.

Alexa used her vampire strength, trying to force the incredibly heavy door to go up. If they could just get it up a few feet, the three of them could hold it while everyone came through.

Thick smoke poured through the top of the tunnel where the door had been hanging. The panic on the other side came through clearly, along with coughs and people gasping for air. They didn’t have much time.

Damon slid closer to Alexa. His eyes narrowed in on her neck.

Wyatt ran at the door. He smacked into it hard enough to rattle it, but the door didn’t go up.

Damon took another step forward.

Alexa helped Wyatt to his feet. “We’re going to blast through it!”

Damon lifted his hand.

Alexa knew he was there. “If you’re going to do it, do it now!”

Damon struggled with his anger and the sense of honor that Alexa and her men had been rubbing off on him... He tossed a powerful blast of energy, hitting the door as hard as he could.

Wyatt and Alexa hurriedly retreated as splinters flew from the impact.

Damon let his anger out for the first time since they'd all met up. He blasted the door with all of his jealousy and unhappiness. Huge chips of wood flew into the air and smacked the tunnel wall.

Wyatt and Alexa backed out of the tunnel and found themselves on a narrow beach that was completely walled in all the way into the ocean.

Damon threw another blast. It blew a hole in the door the size of a fist.

People on the other side retreated as they realized someone was coming through.

Damon hit it again, not ducking as shrapnel flew back and embedded itself in his face and hands. He blasted the door again and again, letting out all of his anger.

Smoke poured through the hole and over the top of the door, making it hard to see on this side, too. The sound of the spreading fire grew louder.

Alexa triggered Damon's rage. "I said no because you're not good enough for me."

Damon exploded, blasting the door with hit after hit until it shuddered and fell apart under his wrath.

Damon was shoved aside as people rushed through to avoid the smoke, the fire, the predators, and the burning door.

Alexa caught Damon as he fell and pulled him out of the tunnel. She pushed him up against the wall and defended him with her body from the crush of survivors coming through. “You know I lied.”

Damon nodded. “You used my anger.” He shivered at the cool ocean breeze on his sweaty skin. “Tell me why?”

Alexa stayed where she was even as half of her team came through and surrounded them. “I couldn’t love anyone back then. I only had hatred in my heart. There was no room for anything else.”

Damon rested his chin on her shoulder while sucking in deep gasps of air. His energy bank was empty and so was his anger. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Alexa leaned against him. “Thank you for your honor.”

Damon kissed the top of her head. “If you ever need me, I’ll be there.” He shoved her roughly away from him and stomped over to join Emmie.

Wyatt smirked as he kept her from falling. “It’s nice that you two have made peace.”

Alexa snorted. “We didn’t.”

“Boss!” Daniel hurried over to Alexa with Edward’s body.

She knew he needed medical care, but she had to finish this run or they were all dead.

“Stand by.” Alexa examined the beach again, where debris from the water had stacked up in 10

foot high piles of toxic leftovers from the war. “This is the source.”

Jordan knelt to see if there was anything she could do for Edward. Her medical skills were learned, not magic. She was very limited.

Bradley joined them. “We have to get the hell out of here!”

Alexa studied the walls next to the tunnel. She narrowed in on a small round spot with a glossy finish. “Did you enjoy the show?”

People frowned at her comment, not understanding.

Alexa slapped the camera that was embedded in the wall. “We’ve made it through your run! Honor our deal and let us out of here.”

Other than coughs and groans of pain, the group went quiet, hoping to hear an answer.

Only the sound of the fire and the roar of the ocean replied.

“She called it!” Franklin started panicking. “He’s not going to let us out!”

Alexa’s eyes narrowed. Her voice dropped into the deadly tone her team knew so well. “Let us out of here right now and we’ll give you what you want.”

“What is she talking about?” Franklin was out of patience.

Alexa rotated and focused on Isaac. “We’ll make time go backward.”

Isaac wasn’t sure how it would all end, but he trusted Alexa. He lifted both of his hands and

grabbed ahold of the timestream, slowing things down.

Alexa rotated to the camera, not having any problem fighting the pull this time. She had already adjusted to it. “He isn’t the only one who can do this.”

She lifted both hands and helped Isaac hold the timestream. Between the two of them, everything began moving in slow motion.

William’s voice came through the speaker, drowning out Elliot’s weak protests. “We’re opening the door!”

Isaac and Alexa let go of the stream at the same time. The backfire from their actions ripped down the beach, slamming into the ocean. A small tidal wave immediately rushed out into the water, rolling east.

Smoke continued to pour through the tunnel. Half a dozen fighters stood guard next to it, defending the rest from any animals that braved the smoke to hunt them. Everyone else waited tensely for a door to open.

Alexa drew in deep breaths of the salty air while they waited, lungs hurting from all the smoke she’d inhaled.

The seams in the door next to the tunnel split open. A narrow entrance appeared.

Monica stood there with a torch and another fake smile that reminded people of the plastic, painted horses they’d left behind. “Your run is done. Now we’ll have some fun.”

Alexa fired her strongest charm-breaking spell at the woman.

Monica shuddered. For a brief moment, she was back in control of herself. She met Alexa's eyes in misery. "When you get to Safe Haven, tell Molly I'm sorry."

Elliot's charm took back over Monica's mind. The scary smile reappeared on her painted lips. "Your run is done. Please follow me."

Alexa signaled the others to go first, waiting on her team as smoke continued to come through the tunnel. The big cats and vultures that had survived would soon find the courage to follow their prey.

Alexa and Isaac were the last ones to enter the tunnel, making sure all of their people were rescued before they placed themselves into the hands of the enemy.

As they entered, the wall behind them creaked shut. Isaac stepped closer to Alexa. "I hope you know what you're doing with this bluff."

Alexa sighed deeply, still blowing smoke out of her lungs. "So do I."

It was only possible for them to manipulate time for a few seconds, not to completely reverse it. When William found out she'd lied, everyone would be in danger again.

The narrow tunnel had dull lights at the top and slowly began to widen as they traveled north into a part of the city they hadn't been in yet. The dark walls lightened into bright white paint, while the

ceilings held neon lights and cameras. The sound of people cheering and clapping came to them.

The tunnel widened suddenly into a hallway full of city residents who had obviously watched them on the monitors. Congratulations and approval flew through the air.

“That was amazing!”

“They only lost one man from the main crew. Pay up!”

“Great run!”

“We’ve never seen a run like that!”

Billy noticed all of the audience was female. It didn’t look like any of them were charmed, but many of them were fanatics. Their bright red clothes and wide smirks brought his wounded anger back to the surface.

The hall continued to widen, becoming 100 feet long and twice that in depth. Flourishing fruit trees in assorted varieties grew out of planters in the steel walls. Plastic tubes ran between them, carrying water through charcoal filters. Taps for drinking dripped, forming damp edges where thick rows of vegetables growing out of the dirt floor were being watered by the regenerative agriculture system.

At the far end of the hall, Elliot was sitting on a large wooden throne, wearing a silver crown. He clapped sarcastically as they neared him.

The enforcers around him glared at the survivors.

Jacob spotted the enforcer he'd threatened for attacking Alexa. He grinned, mimicking a trigger pull.

The woman paled. Her death was in his cold grin.

Around the limping survivors, bets were now being paid off while monitors highlighted the fights and areas they'd gone through. One of those screens showed a stadium in full flame.

The clapping grew louder.

"Great run!"

"This was the best run we've ever watched!"

"Will you do it again if we pay you this time?"

Alexa's low growl told her crew these people were now doomed for enjoying the pain of others.

"Look." Asher pointed.

There were still family members in the gauntlet. The survivors saw it on the monitors and felt bad, but it was obvious from the way they were getting sick and attacking each other that they hadn't had any iodine protection. Letting them out would only endanger everyone else.

"I think the walls in here are lined in lead." David's frown was deep. "That's why these people aren't sick."

Alexa nodded. "It also explains why they're so stupid."

The crowd laughed at her comment.

Fanatics in the crowd spotted Billy and smirked at him. They knew who he was. The residents here had been following Alexa's quest since it started.

Jordan moved up next to Billy. “Those bitches deserve your anger. Let me know if you want help clearing some ghosts.”

Billy didn’t answer. He was busy scanning for exits. He found no doors at all and only one tunnel behind the throne. Even the bathroom area only had curtains that could be pulled around the toilets and showers.

Alexa knew that was from Elliot spending so much of his life caged. She focused on the man next to her brother as they reached the throne.

The audience members filled the walls all around them. Many of the women waved and blew kisses at Elliot. It was obvious they loved his leadership.

It was easy for Alexa to understand. Almost all of the residents were female, so assaults were probably nonexistent here. It was a safe place for them to hide, but also a way for them to enjoy revenge against the men they hated each time one of them had to run the gauntlet.

William stood near Elliot with fanatical eyes. “Do it now! Turn back time!”

Alexa glowered at him. “We have things to settle first. Tell the council you lied about your accusations against my crew.”

“But I didn’t! It happened exactly the way I said!”

Alexa waited, forcing William to understand that she wasn’t going to give him what he wanted until he gave her what she wanted.

William forced out the words. “I lied.”

Alexa pointed to Monica who was standing on the platform above the throne. “I want her. Bring her down now.”

Elliot was furious at being ignored. “You’re ruining my game!” He sounded like a petulant child to everyone except for his adoring audience.

“I have to be rewarded, dear brother.”

“Damn Mitchel rules!” Elliot waved at Monica. “Get down here!”

“Unlock her first. I don’t want a slave who obeys anyone but me.”

Elliot made an ugly face as he waved his hand again. “She’s yours now!”

Alexa motioned Monica toward her crew. “Keep my men happy, in any way they want.”

Playing along, Alexa’s crew ogled the woman who was now looking around apprehensively, making people believe she had been chosen to be their sex slave.

“Your reward for surviving my gauntlet is your life.” Elliot sprung the trap. “But not those of your hybrid crew. All of them will be removed now.”

Alexa focused on Elliot as everyone prepared for battle. She gave him what he thought he wanted. “I’ll trade you for their lives. Stop killing hybrids and I’ll stay with you so you can torment me until you die.”

Protests came from every one of the survivors in their group, even the people who didn’t really like her.

Greed made Elliot's decision for him. Trapping Alexa here was his main goal and had been all along. "Very well, but send them out right now or I'll change my mind."

"No!" William roared. "Not that one!" He pointed at Edward's body. He could tell the man was still breathing. William also wanted Alexa trapped, but that wasn't enough. "I want him dead!"

Elliot mocked her. "Sorry, sister, but I made a deal with William first. Your XO stays. The rest can go."

Alexa motioned the survivors toward the narrow tunnel behind Elliot's throne. "There's just one thing I need to know and then you and William can fight over who gets to hurt me first."

"What?!"

"Why didn't Safe Haven take you with them?"

Elliot pounded the arm of the throne. "He didn't wait for me! Our father left me behind, just like you did!"

Alexa turned toward William. "I was talking to you."

Alexa had spent most of the winter thinking. The time she normally would have spent enjoying the bodies of her men had been put into her byzantine brain. She had connected her suspicions to observations she'd made about William during their time in the museum. "Answer the question."

William was already enraged about it. This reminder was salt in an open wound. "I had to earn a place! I wasn't good enough!"

“What were you asked to do?”

William refused to answer, but flames burned in his eyes from the memory.

Alexa called forth old magic. “The time has come to honor your deal.”

A powerful presence pushed in on the room, dwarfing all of them. It didn’t speak, but the feel was terrifying.

Magical bonds surrounded William and prevented him from firing against her like he tried to do.

Elliot stood up; his enforcers moved closer “What is she talking about, William?”

William couldn’t answer. He was fighting the magic.

Alexa smiled coldly. “He promised to kill someone for Safe Haven. In exchange, he would be allowed to join them.”

“Who does he have to remove?”

“You.” Alexa pointed at William as Elliot’s enforcers turned toward William in fury. “Do it now!”

William was unable to resist. He fired his most powerful death spell at Elliot.

Elliot vanished.

His enforcers attacked William, grabbing his magic and his mind.

Elliot appeared on the platform where Monica was still staring down at all of them in fear and confusion. “Kill him!”

Elliot's adoring fans backed up to be out of the line of fire, but they didn't leave. No one wanted to miss this closing scene.

"Open fire!" Mark lifted his gun.

Addison's team responded immediately. Pointed staffs blasted out, hitting the distracted enforcers before they could use shields or magic. Bodies fell all around the throne.

Enforcers tried to rip out gifts and were gunned down in seconds.

"No! Stop!"

Elliot was ignored; his defenders were removed.

The other angry crews behind Alexa and her team brought up shields or drew their weapons.

Daniel fired. He hit William in the chest with three slugs, knocking him into the side of the throne.

Jacob lovingly pulled the trigger twice, double tapping the stomach of the enforcer who had attacked Alexa. He rushed forward and leaned over the dying woman as she fell. "Tell me everything you know about Heaven, Hell, and God. You're about to see one of those in person."

Alexa whistled, cutting through the den. "Timeless, my pets. Do it now!"

Her crew remembered the potions they'd received from Jendon. None of them hesitated to drink them even though they didn't know what would happen.

Alexa downed her potion while Elliot drew power to hit her with a charm. She marched forward

angrily. “For exactly three minutes, we are beyond time. React accordingly.”

Elliot fired at Alexa.

The charm died as it reached her, going up in a puff of smoke.

William fired at Elliot again, unable to control his magic anymore. He began to wither from the lack of energy.

Elliot lunged backward; the spell missed him by inches. He laughed crazily. “Slam you all!”

Monica ran forward, hands out. She hit Elliot’s back as hard as she could, knocking him off the platform.

Elliot crashed into the huge throne. His skull cracked sickeningly against it as he landed sprawled in front of it.

A furious enforcer fired a death spell at Monica.

Monica staggered to the side and fell from the platform. She was dead before she landed next to Elliot.

Alexa shot that enforcer in the chest and advanced. “My debt to you is done, brother. Go straight to hell where you belong.”

Alexa stepped by Elliot’s body, headed for William. “Now you’ll never be allowed into Safe Haven.”

William realized she had tricked them all. He opened fire on her with everything he had left, throwing death spells.

None of it touched Alexa or her team. The timeless potions surrounded them like a perfect shield, not letting anything through.

Billy and the others ran forward on either side of Alexa, firing their guns rapidly along with hers.

Now Elliot's audience began to flee into different areas of the wide room, but none of them were able to reach the exit tunnel behind the throne with the deadly battle happening there. They were forced to cower behind plants and shower curtains. Elliot's design had doomed them.

Alexa strode forward and straddled William's bullet ridden body. She put her gun to his forehead...and paused.

"What are you waiting for?!" Daniel was furious about everything that had happened, but mostly because a teammate had been hurt and may not recover. "Kill that bastard!"

Alexa reloaded her guns and holstered. "All in good time."

She pointed at a small stack of sharpened wooden poles that were being used as stakes for the vegetable plants. "Pick out four of those. Make sure they're sturdy."

David gestured at Bradley. "Get everybody out of here." He understood what was about to happen. "We won't be long."

The survivors quickly moved through the exit.

Both council members went with them, keen to be out of this mousetrap.

The three teams who had joined them stayed there to observe the moment and enjoy revenge.

Colton brought up a shield over Edward and Levi's bodies in respect.

Alexa waved at her crew. "In order of rank on swings."

William still wasn't dead. He had taken another amazing amount of abuse, but it was very hard to kill a byzan descendant. He could already feel his body trying to regenerate enough to allow him to fight back and find a way to escape.

Alexa knew that was happening, too. She drove the first stake into his calf, using her vampire strength. His terrible scream brought a smile to her lips. "Such pretty music. Do it again!"

"Anything for you, Boss." Daniel lifted the mallet from his cloak. He drove a stake through William's other leg and into the ground with a huge smile.

Alexa smiled at the resulting shriek. "Absolutely beautiful."

William's cries followed the survivors through the exit and out into an area that led to the boat dock where they had entered the city. Everyone quickly climbed into the boats. William's screams stayed with them the entire way.

In the rear boat, Franklin lifted a brow toward Bradley. "Are you still thinking about going with her?"

“Yes!” Bradley let out a deep sigh of longing. “Listening to the sound of that, I don’t believe I’ve ever wanted anything more. She’s perfect.”

Franklin faked a gag and then grinned. “You could do a lot worse.”

Bradley scoffed. “I have absolutely no interest in a relationship with a woman that bloodthirsty. I do, however, want to put my life into her hands. She’ll teach me things I never thought I’d learn and keep me alive while doing it.”

“Until you piss her off.”

“That, my friend, I will never do. I’m not stupid.”

Another awful scream echoed through the city and carried across the moat.

Bradley nodded in satisfaction. “Never cross a Mitchel. The punishment is...harsh.”

Chapter Thirty-One
No Survivors

1

“Port City has been liberated!” Radios resounded through Elliot’s throne room with the councilman’s happy voice. “Bodies of family may now be collected.”

Elliot’s fans hurried to shut off their personal radios, cringing at the fresh attention.

Alexa sighed at the call. Franklin was getting ahead of himself, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Alexa limped to Elliot’s body and dug in the remaining deep pocket of her ripped cloak. She pulled out an axe and removed the cover from the sharp blade. A wide smile came over her lips.

“What is she doing now?!”

Everyone looked toward Alexa, drawn by the concern in Wyatt’s voice.

Alexa swung the axe, severing Elliot’s head from his body in one hit. It bounced and then rolled, making people wince.

Alexa stuffed his head into a large pouch and then tied it to her belt. She had already removed the other item from his body that she’d come for. It was

safely tucked away in her pants pocket. Her cloak was too damaged to hold anything else.

Wyatt didn't repeat the question. He was too grossed out.

Jordan laughed about it. "Mitchels do like souvenirs."

Alexa's crew doubted that was why she'd taken the head. They studied the immense hall while waiting for her next instructions, but there wasn't much to see. The bare white walls and lack of furniture said Elliot hadn't cared about personal comforts.

Elliot's adoring fans were still cowering behind cots and useless curtains, though a few of them were taking fast peeks around those items to see if the violence was over now.

Jordan leered at a handful of fanatics trapped in the bedroom area. "Let's go take out the trash and clear your ghosts."

Billy scanned the defenseless females. The need to spill their blood wasn't there now. "Leave them alone."

"Why?"

"It's up to the boss to decide their fate."

Jordan paused. "Don't you want revenge?"

"Only against those who actually harmed me. I've recovered enough to see the difference." Billy was thrilled with his new progress. "Those bitches only hurt my ego. Death isn't required for that offense."

Jordan put a hand on her one remaining staff. “Well, I don’t have that limitation.”

Billy now understood Alexa’s words. He stepped in front of Jordan with a sharp glare and a firm tone. “Your lack of ethics has denied you a lot during your lifetime. You should consider working on that before it gets you killed.”

Jordan was surprised by his reaction. She was also a little intimidated by how fast he could go from warm and friendly to lethal killer. She acted as if it didn’t matter. “As you said, Alexa will decide their fate.”

Billy stayed standing there to make sure Jordan didn’t dispatch the fanatics anyway. His brief idea of ending this run with another slam in the woods was now dead. Just like Jordan hadn’t been good enough for Alexa’s father, she was no longer good enough for Alexa’s crew, either.

Jordan joined Alexa, hoping to get an order to remove the fanatics. She didn’t like cults and she hated slavery, but she had been embarrassed numerous times on this trip. She wanted an easy target for that rage.

Damon frowned at Jordan. He was observing everyone while doing quiet guard duty over Alexa.

Alexa was busy examining the throne Elliot had been perched upon. She shook her head distractedly. “Billy made the choice.”

Jordan realized Alexa wasn’t going to give her a release. She chose the next best thing. “When do we loot?”

Alexa huffed. “I should have mentioned it was also your lack of intelligence that went against you.”

Jordan stared in fresh embarrassment as Alexa walked away from her.

Alexa examined the left side of the wooden throne. Elliot had been left-handed. It made sense that his controls would be on that side.

She felt a small impression and pushed it.

The throne began to lift and then slide to the side. A dark spiral staircase appeared under it.

“Why are we leaving already?” Wyatt agreed with Jordan that they should be allowed to loot. “We can search Elliot’s supplies for medication and stay here while people recover. Your mate is severely injured.”

Edward had regained consciousness during the battle here, though he hadn’t been strong enough to join in. He forced words out. “Fall in line! We’re leaving.”

His hard voice got most of the crew members into formation with their teams.

The team leaders followed Alexa. Elliot was dead; they were content with that. Looting didn’t matter to them.

Elliot’s survivors were relieved, but they still didn’t come out of their hiding places.

Daniel and Jacob, both limping, each put an arm around Edward and followed Alexa as she descended into the dark tunnel.

Colton stayed near them and extended his shield over all three men.

Damon was right behind them, ignoring the concern of her crew. Things had changed for him.

Asher slid by the others and got in front of Damon. He still didn't trust the man.

Mark went to Elliot's bloody body and removed his cloak.

David scowled. "I thought we weren't looting."

Mark folded the cloak small enough to fit inside one of his pouches. "The boss needs a new one. I'll surprise her with it after I get it cleaned up."

David approved of that. It would be a nice moment and each time Alexa reached into her cloak, she would be reminded that they had made it through another stage of their journey.

Jordan smirked. "Souvenirs."

David frowned, not sure who was correct now.

Daniel helped Jacob get Edward down the stairs. As they manhandled their XO, he realized the unhappiness he had been feeling since childhood was finally gone. "I'm no longer suicidal."

"Congratulations on your recovery." Jacob's voice dropped into a mutter as they went down into the damp darkness. "I may have taken your place in that."

Edward tried to make his bad leg work as they labored down the steps. "Tuck and roll me if you have to."

They laughed at his joke, but they didn't let him fall.

“We’ll get you fixed up shortly.” Daniel resumed their conversation, speaking to Jacob. “I saw you talking to the enforcer as she died. Can I assume you didn’t like what you were told?”

Jacob grunted. “You could say that.”

People around them were surprised that Alexa’s men were having normal conversations, considering how many people were injured, Levi had died, and their boss was carrying the severed head of her brother on her belt.

Edward kept an arm around Jacob’s strong shoulders as they finally reached the bottom of the stairs. “Are you ready to talk about it with your loving team?”

Jacob followed the torch Alexa fired up. The tunnel was pitch black without it. “I am, but at the same time, I’d rather wait until I can sit down and take my boots off. If we can stand the smell, we’ll talk.”

Daniel chuckled. He was certain everyone’s feet were reeking. It had been impossible to stay dry.

Billy waited at the entrance to the escape route, letting the others go first. He was counting to make sure everyone was with them.

David waited with the driver, taking a minute to get his head back on straight. Battles were always chaotic on this team and he normally enjoyed that, but he’d been distracted this time.

Billy realized a handful of the people who’d joined them on the rooftop last night were still here.

They hadn't gone through the main exit with Franklin and Bradley's group.

"We want to go with you."

"We're good people. Safe Haven will let us join if we can get there."

The group of four didn't wait for an answer. They moved by Billy and went down the stairs. They were completely confident in their moral line, and therefore in their approval.

It made Billy feel like he was lacking. He doubted Safe Haven would think he was good enough to join again, though he didn't want that anymore.

David stared at the lanky girl now walking toward them with an expression that said she expected to be denied.

Billy saw Jordan hesitating on the steps below them, eavesdropping. He scowled. "Mind yourself!"

Jordan understood their relationship was over. She stomped through the tunnel, muttering.

Billy went down the stairs and waited at the bottom, giving David privacy but not leaving the man unprotected in case Elliot's survivors decided to attack him.

David wasn't sure why Billy had left him alone with the girl. *It's not as if we have a relationship.*

As soon as he had the thought, David realized something had changed for him, too. He stared at the anxious girl, trying to figure out what it was.

Ria had been watching David. She felt he was more compassionate than some of his teammates were. “I’ll pull my weight. I can fight, track, and run like hell.”

David didn’t let her attempt at humor sway him. “It’s not up to me. Alexa makes those choices for our team.”

Ria doubted that Alexa would agree. She needed to get someone on her side. “I can cook! I went to culinary school before the war. I can make anything taste good. I’ll also wash your clothes and—”

David held up a hand. “You used to teach people how to cook?”

“No, I went to school to learn how to cook.” Ria tried to ignore the bloody bodies nearby. She was glad William had stopped screaming. His eyes were open, though. He wasn’t dead.

“Did that include teaching other people at all?”

Ria brightened as she realized she might know something he wanted. “I was the teacher’s pet. I helped make lessons and graded the other students sometimes. If you want to learn how to cook, I could probably teach you.”

“How long would it take?”

“It depends on how much you want to learn. I could probably show you how to make a dozen decent apocalyptic meals in about a month. Two months, if you want repeated sessions to make sure you’re good at it.”

David gently put a hand on her arm and directed her toward the stairs. “I’ll put in a word with the

boss for you. She'll set the limit. If you've been a valuable asset to the team during that time, then she might let you travel with us. If not, maybe we can stash you somewhere until things settle down and then you can ask Safe Haven for entry when they come back."

Ria beamed happily. "Deal!" All she wanted was to be taken into a branch where she was welcome and could make a friend or two.

David went down the stairs and found Billy standing there, smiling knowingly. "What?"

"Do you realize what just happened?"

David nodded, quickly following the girl. He didn't like being split from their team. "I may have bargained a tutor for our rookie."

Billy chuckled, but he didn't reply. He wasn't certain about his suspicion yet. It was entirely possible that he was wrong and David wouldn't develop feelings for the twenty-something girl. Despite the time they had put in together, Billy still didn't know very much about David. He hoped to change that once they were able to take more downtime. The months spent recovering in Gainesville had convinced Billy that the relationships with his teammates were just as important as the relationship he would have with his mate.

Light began piercing through the darkness of the tunnel, revealing thick concrete walls with torch holders and torches that had never been used. Cobwebs hung haphazardly along the walls where

they had been swiped aside as the line of fighters went through.

David itched the spider bite on his hand and hurried to catch up with everyone else.

2

“For being a conjurer, we didn’t see him conjure anything.” Asher stayed on Alexa’s heels as they neared the exit of the escape tunnel.

“I didn’t say he was good at it.” Alexa shrugged as Asher chuckled. “Elliot spent his time working on the skills to escape any situation. He was never a true conjurer.” Alexa exited the tunnel and did a fast sweep.

Asher spotted the sand demons guarding the beach. He shuddered lightly. “I’d say he was good enough.”

Alexa didn’t wait for anyone to get into formation. She also didn’t signal for support. She marched straight toward the beach while untying the gory pouch from her belt.

The sand demons rushed forward to meet her as if they knew she wasn’t going to stop at their line.

These sand monsters were smaller, but otherwise the same as the ones near the petrified woods, even down to the Generals with ruby eyes and the sandy swords they drew as they barreled their way through the other monsters to reach her.

Alexa pulled Elliot’s head out by the hair and tossed it at them.

Magic flew out and hit the sand guardians. It rippled down the beach and out of sight.

The sand demons moved faster with no visible effect.

“I thought it was supposed to weaken them!” Asher ran behind Alexa, but he had no idea how to fight such a creature, let alone so many. There were two dozen sand demons now spinning toward them with more being drawn from further down the coastline.

The crews who’d joined Alexa hurried toward her now to give support. They drew weapons and prepared to fight to their deaths.

The sand demons screeched in tandem.

Alexa flinched from the pain and then forced herself to keep going the same as she did with the sunlight that wanted to burn her alive.

Asher was disabled, along with everyone behind them. The noise was intolerable, freezing them in place. All they could do was watch as Alexa neared the enemy.

Alexa tossed an item from her pocket. She’d taken it from Merrik, back in the Killing Fields.

The thin golden triangle was covered in ancient purple writing; it landed on the beach with a dull thud.

A musical sound echoed, hitting the sandy monsters, but it still had no obvious effect.

Two more golden artifact pieces followed it. One was the talisman that Alexa had taken from the wizard before they went through the portal in

Tennessee. The other was the piece from Elliot's pocket.

The powerful pieces touched the sand and made more musical chimes.

The sand demons slowed now, drawn.

The artifacts slid across the sand and snapped together into a 3-D triangle. Magic flew out of it and hit the sand demons. It blew them apart, spraying gritty sand in all directions. The magic swarmed the coastline, exploding each monster it touched.

Silence fell across the beach.

The frozen people were released, but they didn't move yet.

The artifact began to sink in the sand. It was quickly out of sight.

Alexa didn't try to dig it up. It had served the purpose she needed it for. Now, it would stay hidden here until someone else found it or until it found its way to someone else. Magical artifacts often had a life of their own. They were also hard to control, so they were kept separated until needed.

A light rain began to fall. People brought up their hoods against the drizzle and looked around, finally scanning their newest environment.

Alexa's team tilted their faces toward the rain and enjoyed the feel of it washing away some of the dirt they had accumulated in the city.

Alexa swept the area around them and then stared like the others were now doing. The exit tunnel had been built into a sandy hillside. Above it

was a flat area with very familiar structures and objects.

“Is that an airport?”

Wyatt smiled at his brother. “Yep.”

Damon chuckled against the pain in his face and hands where shrapnel was still embedded from blasting through the door. “Down boy!”

Wyatt whimpered. “But it even has planes! And they’re in good condition. I can see it from here!”

Alexa limped in that direction. “Elliot made sure he had all of his bases covered. I’d be willing to bet there’s also a ship moored around here somewhere.”

“With the sand demons gone, we can take his boat out of here.”

Austin frowned at Lilya’s assumption. He looked to Alexa. “Aren’t we joining the other survivors? They still need protection.”

Alexa shook her head. “The council will stay with them, or they’ll all go about their lives with new stories to tell.”

Billy spoke to Addison, now ignoring Jordon. “What about the rest of your family? The ones who ran off. Will they be punished?”

“In a way.” Addison revealed a truth that only a few of them had realized. “Alexa knew the family would be thinned at this meeting. She also knew the worst of us would reveal themselves to the rest. The groups who ran from the fight will never be welcome at another meeting or in any of our homes for the rest of their lives. She did it for our family.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

Addison looked directly at Alexa. “I admire her and I loathe her. She’s awful, and amazing.”

Billy nodded. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Alexa smiled at both of them and didn’t reply.

“What about William? He isn’t dead.” Asher didn’t know William, but he knew the man was dangerous or Alexa wouldn’t have handled him so roughly.

Alexa’s hand slid to her gun as she reached the rise above the tunnel. “I have plans in place.”

The teams hurried up the hill behind her and then stopped.

A long line of pale, heavily cloaked men and women stretched out across the dirt runway in front of them.

“Are they vampires?” Damon was fascinated.

Alexa sighed. “They are lethal enemies who must be handled carefully.”

Damon wasn’t scared. “We’ll help you remove them.”

Alexa stepped forward. “All in good time, my pet.”

Alexa’s team scowled at her use of their nickname.

Damon straightened proudly and stayed close to her.

3

Yani stepped forward to meet Alexa.

Alexa's men flanked her, making the rest of their group drop their hands toward their weapons. Anyone Alexa's crew was worried about was definitely a threat.

Edward stayed behind his team so he couldn't be used against them, but he drew his gun. He didn't have his usual fast reflexes right now. He needed to be ready to go before the fight started.

Austin and Asher flanked Edward without being told, pleasing the rest of Alexa's team.

Alexa stopped, letting Yani come to her.

Yani hated her arrogance. He and his tribe moved closer with clear intent.

"Update me on your progress."

Yani stopped a few feet away, sneering. "Progress on what?"

"On removing hybrids."

Yani tensed for the fight.

Alexa stared at him. "I knew you would follow me, Yani. Your hatred of hybrids wasn't a secret. You did exactly what I wanted you to do."

"You wanted us to clean up the messes you left behind." Yani's anger rose. "You tricked me!"

Alexa scorned him arrogantly. "I let you prove your true intentions."

She didn't seem angry. Yani wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Shouldn't you be upset?"

"You removed future problems so I didn't have to. The caravan was full of bad people who shunned a widow with three kids. They would have watched that family starve to death without ever lifting a

finger to stop it. There's no room in my world for that type of cruelty."

"And the Reapers your men enjoyed?"

"Were infected. I couldn't let them keep stealing slaves and passing their illness."

Alexa's men winced as they realized she had never intended to spare those women.

Yani studied the people behind Alexa. "If you knew we would follow, then why did you let any of the hybrids in your group survive? Or do you wish us to also handle them because you are related?"

Hybrids and their teammates tensed.

Alexa gestured toward the steel walls of Port City. "I had hoped you would be more interested in a job than in vengeance for something we didn't do." Alexa went on before any of her team could protest the deal she was about to make. "No hybrids without approval. In return, I'll let you keep your rage-fueled army in case I need it in the future."

Yani stared at her in stunned silence as he realized she knew what he had been doing with rage victims and she was planning to use them, the same as he was.

Alexa was able to tell what he was thinking by his expression. "I have no desire to go to war against Safe Haven, but I also refuse to sacrifice the hybrids that stand before you now. All of them will be given immunity in any final deals that are made. All unapproved hybrids must be destroyed."

Yani's eyes narrowed. "And who will make sure everyone sticks to that arrangement?"

Alexa grew colder. “You’re only going to get this job offer one time. If you refuse it, or if you ever go against me again, you’ll end up in the same position as the last two villains we’ve faced.”

Yani was only slightly intimidated by her threat, but the fact that he felt that way at all gave him pause.

Alexa looked at the city again. “Only Mitchel survivors are allowed. After that, go back to your lair until I have need of you.”

“We want vengeance!” Trenton, Yani’s brother, shouted at her. “Heather and Vera killed my mother. They have to pay for that betrayal!”

“You may come before the council at the next meeting with your request for justice.”

Yani waved off Trenton’s coming tirade. A possible chance at the girls in the future was better than scouring the country now and never finding them. Yani tried to buy time to make sure this wasn’t another elaborate scheme that would take more strength out of his tribe. “We will need to discuss this.”

Alexa’s eyes lit up bright red. “Now or never.”

Yani felt intimidated again. It was easy to make plans and threats against Alexa when he wasn’t staring directly into her eyes and seeing his death. “We will do as you say.”

Alexa’s hard face morphed back into calm and reasonable. “Excellent. There is a tunnel directly behind us that will take you into the residential section of the city. After you clear that out, there are

also gauntlet areas that we were forced to run. It would be wise to make sure there are no hybrids lingering there. We were driven through too fast for me to be sure.”

Yani and his people realized they were going to get some action here after all. It lifted their spirits.

As Yani headed in that direction, Alexa caught his attention. “Remember what I said. Mitchels and their teams have immunity. Everyone else dies.”

Yani nodded and quickly glided down the sandy hill with his tribe.

Alexa’s large group retreated to let the full blooded vampires through. The sense of menace that accompanied them was too clear to be missed.

The few hybrids in the crowd slid behind someone else and tried to avoid detection.

Alexa stayed there until Yani and his people were out of view. Then she waited until screams began echoing faintly. “Justice never sounded so sweet.”

People realized Alexa had never intended to spare anyone in Port City. She just hadn’t wanted to do it herself.

“He’ll find William in there.” Edward chuckled weakly. “That’s hilarious, Boss.”

Alexa snickered. “I try.”

“What’s he talking about?” Wyatt hated to be left out of a good joke.

“Yani will find William and finish him off, thus getting the blame for killing him.”

“No. He’ll get the credit and have a point in his favor when Safe Haven returns.” Alexa’s voice cooled. “Or he’ll die in Port City of radiation sickness while they hunt hybrids that don’t exist and we’ll never have to see that bastard again.”

“You lied, to everyone.”

Alexa regarded Asher. “Of course. I couldn’t leave the traitors who should have sworn themselves to our father instead of Elliot. They stayed here and allowed Safe Haven to battle it all alone.”

The Invisible man smiled. “And now none of them will be here to challenge our father when he returns.”

“They also can’t copy our method of leaving and follow us.”

Jacob frowned. “Yani can still sail out on a boat.”

Edward trudged up the hill with his team. “They don’t have any iodine pills. Yani and his tribe might stay here forever.”

Jacob wasn’t convinced. “If they survive, they can find another boat and follow us straight to Safe Haven. It’ll be easy for them to follow our boat’s signature.”

Alexa limped toward the airport. “We’re not sailing.”

Cheers and laughter echoed.

Jacob didn’t understand why they were celebrating. “We don’t have a pilot, Boss.”

Chuckles went through the crowd again.

“What?”

“Mitchels can drive, ride, fly, sail, and climb.” Asher grinned, thinking of the giants in the tunnel. “We also fall very well.”

More laughter lifted another layer of tension.

Jacob was still trying to sort through everything that had happened. “Why did you get rid of the sand demons if we aren’t sailing?”

“I cleared the path for Safe Haven to land on these shores without a battle. Everything I do is for them, for the quest.”

Billy swept the group. “Who has the flight experience?”

Almost every person held up a hand or finger, including Alexa. Then they all pointed to Wyatt, who was trying hard not to beg for the job.

Wyatt grinned widely and hurried toward the plane. “I love my family.”

Alexa lifted a brow. “Who’s ready to learn something new?”

Billy’s hand went up this time. So did Edward’s, though it was a weak gesture.

Alexa felt extreme reluctance coming from one of her crew. She turned to regard him.

Mark stared back miserably.

Alexa sighed, reaching for her radio. “My heart is full of love for you, and also pain.”

Mark braced at her warning.

Alexa keyed the mike on the radio that Daniel had charged this morning and given to her to carry,

at her request. “Marshal, are you there? I want an update.”

Tense minutes went by without an answer.

Mark felt something coming this time; he knew it was bad news.

Jacob put a hand on Mark’s shoulder to lend comfort. He also sensed it wasn’t going to be a happy call.

“She’s gone, Boss.” Marshal’s voice over the radio was appalled. “Claudia’s been taken.”

Mark slid to his knees, chest squeezing. “I should have gone back for her.”

In the control room of the terminal, a woman keyed her radio in panic. “Marcella! She’s here at the airport! Alexa didn’t die in Port City!”

Marcella’s cool voice came right back, drawing recognition and anger. “Join me. Your work is done.”

Alexa grunted. “I really thought she was lying about having a family member controlling an airport.”

Colton eyed the sandy ground for a good place to bury the body hanging heavily over his big shoulder. “Would it have made a difference in your choice?”

“No. America’s constitution has to be followed.” Alexa’s eyes narrowed as the woman in the airport terminal ran toward a dirt bike near the entrance. “Who wants a sniper credit?”

Hands went up again.

Alexa pointed at Eva, who was wearing her pain openly.

Eva wiped tears from her eyes and lifted her rifle. “No survivors.”

“Exactly.”

Mark flinched at the single shot when it came. “Please. Please.”

The radio lit up with angry and happy people, all passing word on Alexa’s survival and location.

None of them were Claudia.

Chapter Thirty-Two
That's Not Right

1
Fanatics

“Hurry up!” Delilah ran through the chilly woods outside Soldier Town. “We’re falling behind!”

Crystal obediently increased her pace, but her heart wasn’t in it. “Half of our group is still at the Presidential bunker, trying to get gear. There aren’t enough of us to do this yet!”

Delilah tried to go faster, but her legs refused. She wasn’t used to running. “The Mitchel survived. We’re out of time. We have to follow through before she comes here to protect them!”

Ahead of the mother and daughter, four dozen fanatics charged through the woods with new guns and determination. It had been a very active morning after weeks of almost complete radio silence. The only information traveling the airwaves right now was centered around Port City and the battle that had apparently happened there. When Delilah had insisted they go to Soldier Town early, the other fanatics had agreed.

Except for Crystal. She kept her hand tight around her mother’s wrist, being pulled along while

trying to think of something she could say that would make the zealous women change their minds. Crystal wasn't afraid of fighting the soldiers, but she was afraid of losing everyone in their group. They weren't hybrids, like her. "We have to stop and think!"

No one listened. Most of the women were already so far ahead they didn't even hear her.

Soldier Town began to take shape through the bare trees as the small army advanced. The soldiers had put a gate around the town with wire fencing, but it wasn't finished. Furious women hurried through the gaps.

"Incoming!" The soldier on watch duty called the alarm while drawing his sidearm. "Incoming! Incoming!"

The call flew through the calm town, drawing soldiers from their warm beds and other pursuits. They hurried toward their stations, all hoping it wasn't Yani's tribe returning.

Gerald ran to the main gate and quickly jumped up onto the firing platform where a line of rifles waited.

Other soldiers climbed up around him.

Gerald took aim on the red garments of the women who had almost made it to the gate now. "Fanatics! Kill them all!"

The women opened fire.

So did the soldiers.

A loud volley of gunfire filled the cold air without pause. Screams of agony and rage accompanied the awful symphony of war.

Delilah fired at a soldier who came out of a doorway near them. She shouted in triumph as blood sprayed the building and his body fell.

Crystal shoved Delilah aside as a man on the gate fired in their direction. “Don’t kill them! We came for slaves!”

The insane women around her paid no attention. They fired kill shots as they advanced.

Delilah popped off three quick rounds toward the men on the gate to provide cover while she and Crystal ran between a section of the fence that hadn’t been finished yet. “We’re in!”

Crystal fired her gun at two soldiers coming around the corner of the building next to them.

She missed.

Furious with herself, Crystal ran forward with her vampire speed and used her claws to disable the man on the right.

He screamed as she sliced through his shoulder muscles and then drove her teeth into his ankle.

Delilah rushed forward, shooting the other man before he could get his gun out of the holster. None of the soldiers had been ready for an attack.

“Stop killing them!” Crystal was horrified at the way things were going.

“Do your share!” Delilah spun around, heading for the gate.

A small round hole opened up in her forehead.

She took another step and then staggered to her knees. She fell over in the dirt.

“Mother!” Crystal ran, shoving gleeful fanatics and terrified soldiers out of her way. She dropped down next to the body. “Mom!”

The battle raged on. Bullets flew past her and people ran by. Crystal didn’t care. She sobbed, holding on to her mother’s body. “You were right. I should have been in charge!”

Gerald quickly slammed another magazine into the rifle and spun around to handle a small rush of fanatics coming up behind them. He fired in full auto, sending bullets spraying across the town.

One of those bullets hit Crystal in the jaw, opening a large hole in the side of her head as the bullet exited. She fell over on top of her mother’s body, killed instantly.

Gerald fired again, catching two of his soldiers, but also eliminating five fanatics who were shooting everything that moved. All of them went down under his anger.

“Get out of here!” One of fanatics ran back toward the gaps in the fence.

Half a dozen remaining fanatics followed her.

The soldiers cut them down.

Gerald flipped his rifle back to individual shots, then scanned the town for survivors.

Carlos hurried over to him, bloody and grinning. “We ran them off!”

Gerald wasn't ready to celebrate. "Get ready to trigger the traps. I don't want any of them to try this again."

Carlos hurried onto the platform next to the rifles and flipped open the control panel to the surprise he had labored on all winter. He'd finished it right after Yani's visit. "At your call!"

Gerald waited for the last few fanatics to reach the edge of the trees where they'd come from. When they got to the right location, he triggered another bloodbath. "Now!"

Carlos hit the buttons rapidly.

Metal poles flew out of the ground, strung with wire that was already bloodstained from the soldiers who'd put it in place.

The women didn't notice it in their panic. They ran into the wire and were cut into pieces, spreading a fresh layer of gore across the ground that had already seen too much of it.

The soldiers cheered. They had left the gaps in the fence for exactly that reason, though they had hoped to use the wire when someone was attacking, not when they were retreating. It was a relief to know they weren't defenseless anymore, and the idea had come from Safe Haven. Their story of defeating the slavers was a legend.

Gerald reloaded his rifle. "Clear the town and then reset the wires."

Carlos climbed down from the platform. "I will, but I don't believe we'll need it. They won't be back."

“Probably not, but they’re not our only enemy, are they?”

Carlos thought about Yani and nodded. “We’ll have it all reset within the hour.”

Gerald also headed into the town to help clear it. He took his rifle along. It had become his new best friend.

2

President Pro Tem

“The fanatics attacked Soldier Town!” Donna fell in with Jeanie as she hurried through the busy bunker. “We’re getting calls from their survivors, asking for help and shelter.”

“I heard!” Jeanie marched toward the communication room. She had been glued to the radio for the last 24-hours. She had only left to get a meal, but calls were coming in too fast for her to be away for even 10 minutes.

“Should I tell them to come here?” Donna still disliked fanatics.

“I don’t have time for them right now. Lock us down. No one goes in or out, for any reason!”

“For how long?” Donna knew some of their residents wouldn’t be happy with that order.

“Just do it!” Jeanie moved faster, leaving her Chief of Staff behind. She entered the radio room, checked to make sure it was empty, and then shut and locked the door.

The radio on the desk was quiet for the moment as everyone waited for new information from Port City. Finding out Alexa was at an airport made everyone sure the next call would be someone sighting her flying out of the country.

Jeanie took advantage of that, quickly sliding behind the desk and activating her microphone. “This is an Emergency Alert Broadcast from the President of the United States.”

The radio stayed quiet.

Jeanie waited until she heard the main bunker doors starting to creak shut. Then she broke every deal she’d made. “The moratorium on slavery has been lifted! All men must have an owner, effective immediately. Bring them here to the Evening Town bunker so they can be registered. While you’re here, pick up some free supplies to keep them fed. I’ll also buy any males you don’t want, no matter their age, race, or condition. I pay premium prices. Happy hunting, New America!”

Jeanie let off the radio and held her breath. It was entirely possible that no one cared, thanks to Alexa’s travels. The Mitchel was the center of attention right now. An emergency statement might not be able to compare.

The radio lit up with the voice of a greedy bounty hunter. “How much will you pay for two unbroken teenagers, Madam President?”

Jeanie answered quickly, firmly. “Triple the going rate.”

“Damn. I’m on my way. Two days out.”

“Awesome. Who else?”

The radio went crazy as bounty hunters and slavers flooded the airwaves.

“The big bunker is paying triple for males! Who has a location on a prime target?”

“We’ll meet at Soldier Town!”

“Soldier Town was already attacked. We need a new target.”

Jeanie listened to the replies in satisfaction. The women were changing. They didn’t want Alexa’s peace. They wanted to rule the world. “I understand completely, and I’m going to give that to us, ladies. This is the next stage.”

Jeanie heard residents of the bunker expressing the same eagerness she was hearing on the radio. Calls were coming in from all over the country now. Her grin widened.

A new sound echoed outside the communication room, one that made Jeanie and most of the other women here very happy. It was the sound of men begging for mercy. All of the males in this bunker would now be claimed and rounded up. No exceptions would be made.

Jeanie leaned back in the chair and silently gloated. Because she had jumped on here with a prime price so soon after the chaos started, this bunker would receive most of the slaves. After the fighters used them, of course. The spoils of war had to be enjoyed.

The radio cleared for a minute.

Jeanie felt an important call about to come through. She leaned forward eagerly to hear it.

“I’m going to kill you for that.”

Jeanie chuckled and didn’t respond to Alexa’s threat. She was secure inside this bunker and Alexa was hundreds of miles away. She seriously doubted the woman would return for revenge when she was so close to finishing her quest. “I hope you had an amazing visit with your family, Alexa, because while you’re gone, I’m going to hunt them all down. Those I don’t kill will be delivered to the scientists in my lab. We’ll soon find out if Mitchels really can survive anything.”

3

Marcella and Nichole

“I’m way ahead of you, Madame President.” Marcella retreated from the door and signaled Nichole to open it. Marcella and her small army of UN troops and descendant fighters were gathered in the cold, dark hallway while the radio blared through the door they were about to breach. The people inside were listening to the calls and shouting in dismay. They weren’t paying attention to what was happening around them. “And it’s going to cost you everything.”

Marcella gathered energy for a powerful spell.

Nichole hit *Enter*, then quickly stored the control pad while retreating into the protection of

the fighters like she'd been told to do. Marcella was using all magic for this fight.

Inside the bunker, three distracted occupants abandoned their breakfasts and looked toward the door in horror as it slid open.

Brian dropped everything and ran toward Daphne and his daughter. He brought up a shield, but he wasn't able to concentrate enough to keep it up. Fear was in control; his shield failed.

"You!" Green reached for his gun.

Marcella fired her sleep spell.

The descendants around her added memory charms and DOC locks.

Three bodies fell to the dirty floor. No other shots were fired.

Marcella strolled into the small Midwestern bunker, pointing. "Get him handcuffed."

She walked by Green, who had landed on his back with his gun in hand. He'd been fast, but not fast enough.

Marcella stopped next to the teenage boy, picking up waves of familiarity. Her lip curled. "That's a Mitchel."

Nichole scolded the descendants who were roughly putting handcuffs on Green. "Be gentle, ladies! These are not your average slaves."

Nichole scanned the sexy woman wearing glittery clothes. She was on the ground next to a small bassinet. "They had a live birth." It had been impossible to tell if the baby had survived just from

reading through supply requisitions and search terms.

Marcella went over to the bassinet and peered down. She frowned darkly. “That is not a normal child.”

Nichole joined her and recoiled in disgust. The baby appeared to be two months old. She was dressed in bright pink. She had dark black hair and mesmerizing blue eyes; the problem was in her mouth. “Is that a rat?”

Marcella nodded. “It’s a hybrid.” She studied the woman next to the baby. “So is she, I’d bet.”

Nichole took Marcella’s arm and led her away from the new captives so they could be bound. Descendant spells sometimes wore off quicker than expected.

Marcella went back to the teenage boy. She studied him, trying to figure out who he was.

“What would a hybrid Mitchel family be doing down here with a soldier? I thought they were bitter enemies.”

Marcella was also trying to figure out the answer to that question. She swept the boy’s scarred body and spotted the shiny Colt on his hip. It all snapped into place. “It’s her son.”

“Whose son?”

Marcella pointed toward the radio that was still blaring with calls from across the country. “My niece.”

Marcella knelt next to the boy and began searching him for identification to verify it. “This capture is even more valuable than I assumed.”

Nichole didn’t want to draw Alexa’s wrath. She was too strong for them to handle. “Maybe we should walk away.”

Marcella snorted harshly. “I’m a Pruett. We only walk forward.”

“But it will draw her here!”

“Not if we follow the number one rule of all successful kidnapers. Go quiet. I don’t want a single whisper of this to get out.”

Nichole was completely confused now. “If we don’t tell her we have the boy and her grandchild, then why even keep them?” After conquering the last bunker in the same manner, they had used the men and then disposed of them. Men ate too much and there was a high probability that they would try to escape, violently.

“Because she isn’t going to be gone forever. When Safe Haven returns, Alexa Mitchel will be with them and we’ll have a powerful bargaining tool.”

Nichole smiled as she understood. “And if she refuses to support you, you’ll have a target for revenge.”

“Yes. I won’t hesitate to slaughter her branch. It would only be justice for her betrayal.”

Nichole took charge of the magic users, putting half of them on guard duty while sending the rest to clear the other rooms. She was positive no one else

was down here, but it paid to be careful. Now that they had such valuable captives, Nichole planned to be on her guard at all times. There was no guarantee that Alexa wouldn't find out and come here. If that happened, they would probably all go down in a blaze of glory.

Nichole glanced over at the chewing child in revulsion. *That little monster will be hit in the crossfire. I'll handle it personally.*

4

The Rabbit

“I think we should stay here.”

Paul stepped by the complaining soldier with a heavy bag in his hand. “Two bunkers around us have gone dark over the last few weeks. Something's coming. That makes it time to relocate.”

Tabitha followed Paul, also carrying a bag of gear in front of her rounded stomach.

The soldiers had learned to listen to Paul's instincts over the months they'd been hiding in this bunker together. He had helped them collect food and supplies, as well as thwarting attacks by women who hadn't been obeying the slavery moratorium. Now that it had been officially revoked, women would start hunting in force.

The low-ranking soldier wasn't convinced. “It's not safe anywhere and this is a bunker. I think we should stay.”

Dion, the highest-ranking officer here, followed Paul and his girlfriend toward the exit, also loaded down with a box and two bags. “We’ve already been attacked here enough times to convince me that we are not off the grid like we’d hoped. It’s time to roll.”

“Where are we going?”

Dion had already discussed that with Paul. “To find a Mitchel nest and blend in. At least those snakes have honor.”

5

Marshal

“You found her?” Marshal led the two-man search party toward the vampire girls.

Heather pointed at the small metal building behind them. “She’s in there.”

Marshal hurried toward the shed with dread in his heart.

Jason walked slower. He hated being away from Carolyn now that the cancer was about to kill her, but he also didn’t want to see Claudia’s body.

Marshal stepped by the vampire girls who were clearly on guard duty. “Is she okay?”

The girls shook their heads and made faces.

Jason stopped and stayed where he was at that reaction. Anything that could repulse a vampire was nothing he needed to experience.

Marshal pushed the door open and stared in alarm. Blood was puddled across the entire floor of

the shed, nearly half an inch deep. It was sprayed across the walls and the one small window. Even the ceiling held red splatters. “Claudia?”

Claudia brought the hatchet down again, chopping off a finger. “She was going to cut me up and eat me.”

Marshal scanned the dissected body of the snake Elder. He didn’t know what to say as Claudia chopped off another finger and tossed it into the pile with the others she had already collected.

Claudia wiped her arm over her face, smearing more blood across it.

Marshal saw she had been beaten. Her clothes were torn and her cheek was turning purple. Some of the blood on her face was from her nose and lip. Another drop rolled out of her ear. He stared in angry discomfort, not sure how to handle this.

Claudia tugged a ring off the dripping finger and pitched it over into the corner. The ring sank down into the blood and vanished. “Somebody needs to run to the house and bring me the bag of Tomcat pellets.”

Marshal frowned. “What do you need poison for?”

Claudia regarded him with bright red eyes still full of fury. “We’re going to get rid of every snake around the house, using *her* body for their death feed.”

Marshal quickly nodded. He was relieved that Claudia seemed to be okay, and she wasn’t having trouble with the pregnancy, but he was also

extremely worried about her state of mind. He didn't want to upset her further.

Claudia didn't care what any of them thought. "I never want to see another snake for the rest of my life!"

Jason turned away from the view that he was getting through the open shed door. "I'm going back to the house."

Marshal suddenly wished he could go in Jason's place. He didn't want to enter the shed even long enough to help Claudia to her feet. It was a gory mess.

Claudia slid around in the blood and began removing one of the Elder's shoes. "Grab a knife and start chopping."

Marshal staggered backward and tried not to get sick. "I have a call to make."

Marshal keyed the radio on his belt, taking deep breaths to settle his stomach. "We found her. She's okay." That wasn't entirely true, but he didn't want to say that over the radio.

Mark's relieved voice came right back. "Tell her she'll be the first person I come to when this quest is finished!"

Claudia recognized Mark's voice. She smiled sweetly through the doorway while blood dripped from her bruised, scratched fingers. "Tell him I'll have dinner waiting."

Heather groaned. "That's not right."

Vera giggled. "I like her. She's one of us, just without the fangs."

Marshal went to the nearest bush and threw up.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Close

1

Mark handed the radio to Alexa while accepting the pats and slaps of his relieved team. The light drizzle covered his tears. Mark had known how important Claudia was to him for a while now, but this moment had driven it in. “I’m finished after this run, Boss.”

Alexa stored the radio instead of giving it back to Daniel. “This will be your last adventure before you settle down with the loving family you deserve. Enjoy the excitement to carry you through the calm boredom of everyday life.”

Mark didn’t think that was going to be a problem, but he also knew better than to doubt something Alexa predicted. “Maybe you’ll still need a convict every now and then.”

Alexa smiled warmly. “Anytime you need to get away for a while, bring your gun and that sexy grin and come find your team.”

“I will.” Mark rose from the wet, sandy ground where he had stayed, waiting for word. In the hour they’d been listening to the radio calls, they had also heard Yani and his tribe moving through the city. It sounded like he was following Alexa’s orders. No

other survivors had emerged from that doomed place yet.

The other teams were also lingering outside the plane that Alexa had chosen. Some of them had placed gear inside the bird, but almost everybody had waited out here with Mark for word. Now that it had come, it was time to make final decisions and say their goodbyes.

Addison scanned her group. “You’ve all done well on this run. I’m very happy with you.”

Her team welcomed the praise, except for Jordan. Jordan was sitting outside the plane, staring sullenly toward the cockpit where Billy was now snoozing. She understood he was tired. They all were, but she also knew he was avoiding her.

“Let’s take a vote on where we go from here.”

Addison’s order triggered the same decision-making moment for all of the teams.

Emmie didn’t have to take a vote. She already knew what her team wanted. “How about dropping us off at the SA compound on your way to Safe Haven? And if you need help for that final battle, pick us up on your way back.”

All of Emmie’s team nodded.

Alexa gestured toward the plane.

Emmie and her group hurried on board, glad that they had been approved to go and glad to get out of the rain.

Damon nodded to Alexa as he went by, but he didn’t linger.

“I say we stay here and keep the council members alive or at least escort them to where they want to go.” Isaac didn’t want to leave this country. He wanted to find a place here to take shelter so his wife and child would be protected until Safe Haven returned. They’d had too many close calls on this run for his liking.

“I say we go.” Jordan hadn’t given up on getting more time with Billy, but she also still wanted a chance at Adrian and that could only happen if she was allowed to go.

Lilya shook her head. “I’m going to stay here and find a group of men who need someone like me to fight on their side.”

Austin regarded Lilya. He’d been thinking about finding a group of men to join even before Alexa’s comment about protecting Soldier Town. He wanted to fight the slavery law with every drop of blood in his body. “Do you want a partner for that trip?”

Lilya nodded happily. “I was hoping you might see things my way.”

“I do.” Austin leaned over and kissed her, publicly declaring his intentions for the first time.

Addison shrugged. “I have no problem with staying. We can visit the SA compound some other time. Let’s go find the council members and escort them to their dens. After that, we’ll find some resistance fighters and encourage them to keep resisting.”

Addison's team was mostly content with that. Each of them went to Alexa and shook her hand or said goodbye.

Jordan followed her teammates reluctantly. She already knew Alexa wasn't going to approve her to go along unless her entire team was there. She waited in the rear of the group, unhappy.

Alexa embraced her brother and held him tightly for a moment. Austin was one of the few blood Mitchels that she truly enjoyed spending time with. He played a mean game of chess. "Congratulations on your match." It was her way of telling him that she approved of Lilya.

Austin kissed her on the cheek. "Good luck on your quest, sister. I expect to hear from you as soon as you get back."

Alexa nodded. She didn't watch them leave. She did scan her team to see who had figured out that she had brothers among this group.

Her team rolled their eyes or snorted. They'd known for days now.

Alexa focused on the other group that was trying to determine what the future held for them.

"Before we decide where we're going, we have to pick a team leader." Colton glanced toward the newly dug grave, where Eva was mourning her fallen mate. They had buried Levi quietly and quickly, as with any teammate they lost, but this one would be felt forever. "Then we'll ask Eva what she wants to do. She might prefer to go with the council and Addison's group."

Eva rose from the damp grave with tears still dripping down her cheeks. “I vote for Colton as the new team leader.”

The rest of the team immediately voiced support for that. Colton was a solid, steady presence that all of them depended on.

Eva joined her team. She glanced around at the others. “I believe Asher should be our XO.”

Asher was shocked by the choice. “What?”

So were the others.

“Why him?”

“But he’s a normal!”

“Actually, he’s a willing Invisible who doesn’t want to be like Adrian.” Eva wiped drizzle from her wet face with hands covered in deep wounds from the cheetah. “Asher has more honor than anyone I’ve ever known. Our team needs that influence.”

She refused to say more.

Asher immediately wondered if she knew he’d been planning to leave rather than to come between her and Levi. He was still willing to walk away, but not until he knew she would be taken care of.

“All in favor of Colton as team leader and Asher as XO?”

Every hand went up.

Eva glanced toward the dirty red and white airplane. “I can go either way on leaving or staying.” It would be hard for her to leave the gravesite, but that was going to be hard on her whether they stayed in this country or not.

“I think if we take time to recover from this loss then we may not recover at all. Levi’s death will remind us how easy it is for everything to fall apart. We’ll become too careful and lose our edge.” Asher refused to look at Eva as he said that. He wanted her stashed away somewhere, but he would never say that to her or anyone else. They were teammates and teammates didn’t make choices for each other. They made them together.

Colton glanced toward Alexa through the drizzle.

Alexa shrugged. “The choice is yours.”

That told Colton she was fine with them coming along. He motioned toward the plane. “Let’s go visit our family in South America. Who knows? We may like being nomads and stay there.”

Levi’s team headed for the plane, but they didn’t rush off and leave Eva behind. They made sure she was in the center of their group, feeling the love they had for her.

Colton grinned at Alexa as they went by. “It’s always a great time whenever the family gets together. We never do just a meet and greet.”

Light chuckles went through a lot of the people who were listening, but not Eva. She wasn’t ready to laugh yet. When she was, Asher would be the one she turned to for it.

Colton’s team boarded the plane, joining Emmie’s crew in the middle section. They assumed Alexa would take the first-class area and the rear of

the plane would be used for storing supplies and personal moments.

Alexa heard steps behind her and rotated to see Bradley walking down the weedy street next to the airport. He went by the fresh, soaked body of the airport worker and her wrecked dirt bike in the weeds without noticing.

Alexa pointed at the plane, chuckling.

Bradley ran for it with a huge smile on his face. He hadn't been sure he would be welcome, but he desperately wanted to go.

People greeted the council member in surprise and welcome, motioning him to join the two teams who were storing their gear and getting comfortable.

Wyatt went to the pilot's seat to start getting them ready to leave. He had already checked the fuel and other fluids the plane needed. He was positive Alexa wouldn't wait much longer to go.

Alexa glanced at the other small group who had come out of Elliot's city with them. She bobbed her head toward the plane without speaking.

All of them hurried to board, relieved.

Ria waited. She needed to be sure she was welcome. She couldn't take another minute of being the odd man out.

Alexa glanced thoughtfully at David...then motioned toward the plane.

Ria gave Alexa a huge smile as she went by. "I'll cook first."

David and Jacob helped Edward onto the plane next. He had insisted on staying outside with everyone else while they waited to find out if Claudia had survived.

Alice spotted Jacob entering the plane. Now that the run was over, she had decided to try again. “Wanna curl up with me in a Coach seat?”

Jacob got Edward into the seat and straightened. “Of course, but that’s where it ends.”

Alice was tired of his resistance, but she respected him for it. “Why? I can tell you want a happy life with someone.”

Jacob didn’t hold back. “You are *not* them.”

“I could be.”

“We’re not a perfect match.”

“Those don’t exist.”

Jacob looked around, landing on Edward. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Alice gave in. “Friends then?”

“With benefits?”

Alice leaned toward him, leering. “Absolutely. You make me hot. I want to rub your scars while I rub your—”

Jacob grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder as he ran toward the rear of the plane.

Alexa stopped at the bottom of the stairs, scanning the environment as people laughed.

As if in response to her silent request, the drizzle stopped and the clouds parted.

Alexa lowered her hood. These were the last painful sunrays she would feel from this soil. “Time

is flying by with no true way to stop it, but it never carries us to exactly where we want anyway.”

It was completely possible that she would never see her homeland again. She took another minute, thinking about how much she loved her country and how much she had sacrificed for it. If this quest claimed her life in the end, it was worth it as long as her country survived. “But not the travesty that exists now. It’s time for Safe Haven to come home and put things in order.”

Alexa entered the plane while activating her radio. “This is Alexa Mitchel, coming to you from the outskirts of Port City. There’s big news, my friends. I’ve decided to rescind my previous choice to let Jeanie run this country. In fact, I’m now running against her!”

The entire plane of people cheered loudly.

“If you want a place in my administration, kill any fanatic leader, any snake Elder, and of course, the slavery-loving Pro Tem herself. Go to Evening Town bunker and remind her that we’re still waiting for justice against the previous government who caused the war. She’s one of *them*. Please treat her accordingly.” Alexa dropped the radio into Daniel’s lap as she limped by, enjoying the approval from those on the plane.

Daniel lowered the volume on the radio as people began to call in response, both threatening Alexa and promising to support her. “Excellent.”

Billy was still snoozing in the copilot seat. He was vaguely aware of what was going on with Alexa, but he had finally made a connection to the girl waiting for him on Pitcairn Island. She was standing in front of him now, as clear as anyone else on the plane.

Leeann gazed at him in misery. "If he doesn't stop hurting me, I'm going to kill us both."

"No!" Billy snapped awake.

The girl vanished.

Everyone stared in concern.

Alexa already knew. "Get this plane off the ground right now."

Billy went to pull up the plane's stairs and shut the door, while Wyatt rechecked to make sure they had enough fuel for the trip. This 747 should just get them to the compound. It would have to be refueled then, so Alexa and her team could continue on to Pitcairn Island.

"Uh, Boss? Can you come back here for a minute?"

People chuckled at the sound of Jacob's halting voice calling for Alexa.

"Maybe he doesn't know what to do!"

People laughed louder at Asher's quip.

Alexa lightly smacked Asher in the back of the head as she walked between the seats.

Asher grinned, thrilled to have been given any affection.

The curtain between Business and Coach slid open. A man that was only familiar to some of them

came down the passage with Jacob locked in his tight grip. There was a gun in Jacob's side and a knife against his neck.

Jerry's eyes glittered dangerously as Alexa's hands inched toward her guns. "You'll kill me, but you'll be a man down. There's no way I'll miss."

Behind them, Alice followed along, but she didn't have a clear shot. She was afraid to shoot the man from behind and cause him to hurt Jacob.

Everyone expected Alexa to fly forward and trigger a possibly deadly encounter for her teammate.

Alexa focused on the girl over Jerry's shoulder. "Are you willing to die for him?"

"Yes!"

"Then save his life and earn my approval."

Alice immediately dove forward, wrapping one arm around Jerry's neck while the other went to the arm that had the gun. She plunged her fangs into Jerry's neck, moaning.

Alexa lunged forward to grab the arm that held the knife, but not before it slid into Jacob's side and began letting out his blood.

Alice withdrew her fangs from Jerry as Alexa jerked Jacob out of his arms.

Jerry screamed in rage, frustration, and fear.

Alexa pushed Jacob toward his team members for care. Then she focused on Jerry. "How nice of you to join us for this flight."

Jerry screamed again.

Alexa lunged forward and plunged her fangs into his throat, stopping the noise.

Everyone was surprised when she pulled back without killing him.

Alexa smiled again with lips reddened from his blood. "It's a long flight. Keep him alive so we can extract justice a little at a time."

People cheered while Jerry tried to scream and couldn't because of where she had injured him. All he could do was whimper.

Alexa refused to feel mercy. "We're going to have some time together before you die, Jerry. You're going to tell me everywhere you've been, everyone you've spoken to, and every plan you've made against me."

Jerry's face drained of all color as he considered the things he'd done over the last four months.

Alexa nodded. "We'll have a lot to talk about. Make him comfortable."

Alice roughly bound Jerry's hands and then went over to check on Jacob. She didn't care that the teams, including her own, were staring in shock. None of them had known she was a hybrid. Alexa had noticed it right away and that was all Alice cared about.

Jacob wasn't seriously injured, though he was bleeding a fair amount. "He tore my favorite shirt!"

Alice chuckled as she dropped down into the seat next to him, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. "I'll find you a new one."

Jacob took the bandage from Daniel's hand and slapped it on his side. Then he stood and grabbed Alice by the hand. "You're not getting off that easy. You promised me benefits!"

Everyone laughed as he pulled the girl into the Coach compartment and shut the curtain. Like Alexa, Jacob had suspected Alice was a vampire hybrid since their first contact. That had never been his problem with her.

Alexa pushed Jerry over next to Edward, who was glaring weakly. "Have a drink, but make it a small one."

Edward drove his fangs into the man's arm. They'd all been tempted by the smells of the humans in their group, but they hadn't shown signs of it. This was a wonderful treat.

Jerry's muted scream echoed through the plane as Wyatt got them moving.

Alexa sighed contentedly. "I'll never get tired of that sound."

Asher chuckled. "Well, you are a Mitchel."

Alexa nodded. "Don't you ever doubt it."

People snorted. There was no way to deny what family Alexa, or any of them, belonged to. They didn't shy from danger, and they recovered from tragedy better than before it had happened. They were adaptable, strong, and if Alexa was successful, they would have their honor returned. The future was now brighter for all of them.

Sitting across from his teammates, David noticed the spider bite on his hand was red and

swelling. He itched it and then quickly covered it with his sleeve.

Wyatt increased the speed of the plane so he could get them into the air. “I think this is the part where I say you’re supposed to be in your seats with belts on. Feel free to laugh.”

Some of them did laugh. Others buckled in and got set to relax for the first time since they’d arrived here.

Alexa dropped down on the other side of Edward and leaned against his arm. She was exhausted and her ankle was throbbing. She was almost certain the vulture bite was already infected. Most of this flight would be spent doing medical care and sleeping so their bodies could recover. She didn’t want to limp into Safe Haven and feel the pity of her father. She wanted to stroll into his camp and bask in his pride.

Edward rested his head against hers while licking Jerry’s sweet blood off his lips. “Good job, Boss.”

Alexa drifted off to sleep with the sound of his praise in her ears. There was only one other man on the planet whose approval meant more to her now and they were on the way to him. If things went well, she might be with her father in just a few days.

Edward put an arm around Alexa and leaned his head back. “We’re on downtime now, folks. React accordingly.”

The End

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

1

“This is a good spot.” Alice turned to Jacob and stepped against his chest. “Hi.”

Jacob chuckled as he automatically returned her embrace. “Yeah.”

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now, considering that she was a Mitchel and Alexa had always taken the lead in their physical encounters. He waited, letting Alice decide how far things would go.

Alice knew what she wanted. She nuzzled his rough cheek softly. “We can talk about the future later. Let's enjoy the moment.”

Jacob tensed. He didn't respond to her warm lips on his, though the feel of her sharp teeth did confirm a suspicion. He retreated from her embrace. “Maybe we should have that talk now.”

Alice didn't understand the problem. “Do we have to? There's plenty of time to talk about kids and marriage.”

“You can have kids?”

“Of course. I'm not that changed.”

Jacob took another step back as she tried to hug him again. “No.”

Alice stopped, confused. “No?”

Jacob kept space between them. “There aren’t going to be any kids.”

“Why not?” She eyed his lean body. “Are you too changed?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You.”

“Huh?”

“You’re assuming a lot.”

“I picked a mate. And I know you want me.” Alice sighed. “Just for sex?”

Jacob nodded. “But not because of you or me. The future is ugly. Relationships aren’t in that future for me.”

“Why not?”

“I may not survive it.”

Alice ignored his concerns. “Alexa will keep you alive and so will I. Don’t stress that pretty brain about it. Mitchels have you covered.”

Jacob was offended and at a loss for words. He turned neatly toward camp and left her standing there.

Alice didn’t know what she’d done wrong. “Wait.”

Jacob kept walking.

Alice followed in a hurry, making the couples in the woods around them tense.

“Wait up!”

Jacob stopped, but only so she wouldn’t shout again. He could feel people turning toward them. He didn’t want a scene.

“What is your problem?!”

“You!” He glowered. “You assumed and then you condescended to me. I told you no and you blew me off. The problem is you!”

Alice huffed. “I treated you like men have been treating women for centuries.”

“That doesn’t make it right!”

Alice calmed. “Fair enough. I’m sorry. Can I try again with better words?”

Jacob headed for camp. “No, thank you. Our visions of the future are too different.”

Alice stared in hurt surprise as he left her there. She marched after him, angry, but she went straight to her tent to keep from having to endure the pity of her crew. “No one wants me around. It’s the story of my life.”

Deleted Scene Two

Billy was already fully hard as he followed Jordan into the woods. Alexa hadn’t been very physical with them over the winter and the brief stop with Raven’s Reapers hadn’t been satisfying. He was expecting this to be better because his true needs would be fulfilled.

Jordan stopped near the far end of the petrified woods. “Good?”

Billy snickered. “I hold my own.”

Jordan laughed. “Well, I’ll hold it this time.”

Billy popped the button on his jeans to allow her access.

Jordan manhandled him like she knew he wanted. She didn't mind taking charge, shoving him against a tree trunk, claiming his pouty mouth.

Billy pinched her cheek instead of delivering the slap she wanted because it would make too much noise.

The pain made Jordan arch against him. "That'll do it."

Billy repeated the move as she jerked on his clothes and forced his mouth to stay locked against her. Thick waves of need flowed through the trees.

Jordan spread her legs and lifted one, thrusting forward as he pinched again.

Billy slid deep, groaning. "Bad girl!"

Jordan clenched around him, already close to the edge.

Billy delivered a mild slap that wouldn't echo.

Jordan came all over him, gasping.

Billy slammed in and out until he joined her, moaning in satisfaction.

The couple held onto each other and got control of their breathing. It had only been three minutes, but they were gasping.

Billy put both hands on her ass and lifted her. He rotated them so she was against the tree this time.

Jordan groaned in delight as he restarted them on that primal path to pleasure. "Good boy! Good boy!"

Billy took his time, working them both up slowly, firmly, roughly. He whispered in her ear as he slid in deeper. "Someone's watching us."

Jordan's hand went to her shortest staff, flipping it around to the dull end. "To the left."

Billy shifted his hips and then her body.

Jordan threw her staff, hard. "Mind yourself!"

Someone grunted in the darkness and hurried out of range.

Jordan held on as Billy pumped steadily between her legs.

Billy laughed against her neck. "Very nice, little girl."

Scalding heat ran over her thighs. "Do it again. Now!"

Billy slapped her ass, not caring about the noise this time.

Jordan shoved her tongue into his mouth. They climaxed together, moans and groans echoing to the couples around them who suddenly felt boring in comparison.

Billy sucked in air, holding them in place. He was having too much fun to stop. "Three and then a breather?"

Jordan shuddered against him. "If you get me to four, you've broken a record."

Billy got back to work. "I do love a challenge."

Deleted Scene Three

A run is in progress. No business will be done until the end of the run.

William read the neon sign in annoyance. The courtyard around him was empty except for a gaudy gazebo with brightly painted benches that beckoned to his weak body. He didn't bother reading the rules for residency that began to flash on the large screen. That wasn't why he'd come here.

William limped toward the benches on his cane, grimacing. He didn't care if the ruler here saw how damaged he was. "What I'm offering is worth more than humiliation."

William heard multiple cameras turning to observe his slow movements. He also heard water rushing around the city. A storm was coming; the ocean was very angry. It had made the moat crossing a breath-stealing experience, but William hadn't let that stop him from entering this decaying city.

He eased down onto one of the wooden benches and sighed in relief. His leg and back hadn't healed well, thanks to the locations of the injuries and the lack of daily food. Jerry and the soldiers had been gone for weeks at a time to chase down game in the north. Between those moments, where they'd made it home just in time to save the day, everyone had starved. More than a dozen soldiers had died over the winter. "But I'm not that weak!"

William glared toward the camera embedded in the wall of the gazebo. “If you keep me waiting, I’ll help someone else kill Alexa Mitchel.”

A cold breeze went through the courtyard.

William nodded. “I understand completely. She betrayed me, almost killed me, and then left me for dead.”

William smiled coldly. “We have a lot in common.”

William shifted toward an opening door in the wall near the gazebo. He nodded at the thin man who appeared with a torch in one hand and a long, pointed staff in the other. “Elliot Mitchel.”

William scanned the man who glided forward with his thick cloak flowing over the dirty ground. “But not in the flesh.”

Elliot stopped, surprised. “How did you know?”

William chuckled bitterly. “I’m much more observant since encountering your sister. You’re a conjurer. She’s a killer.”

Elliot tapped his staff against the floor. A dozen powerful enforcers came from the tunnel and advanced toward the gazebo.

William brought up a thickly layered shield, but it cost him energy he couldn’t afford. His still-healing body wasn’t able to handle a fight. All he could do was defend and even then, not for long. “Alexa is on her way here.”

“We’ve heard that.”

“I don’t want her to leave. Ever.”

Elliot tapped the staff again.

The enforcers paused, leering at William hungrily.

Elliot's ghost stared without emotion. "Explain yourself."

William didn't look at the enforcers so he didn't trigger a fight. All of those men and women were bored and eager for a battle. "I want Alexa and her men eliminated. If you insist on her survival, as is your right of family ties, then I'll settle for trapping her here in this city where she can be punished for her actions. Her men have to die, especially her XO."

Elliot laughed.

The sound was like glass crunching between steel teeth.

William lowered his shields as a sign of trust. "Make a deal with me and we'll torment her together forever."

Elliot stopped laughing. "I already have plans in place for my sister. Why do I need you?"

William reached into his pocket; the enforcers lifted hands to attack.

William held up a vial from his pocket. It glowed bright pink. "Because I have your backup plan."

The enforcers paused, glaring at the vial. Potions were dangerous to them.

William stored the vial. "A troll named Jendon brewed it for me. He was singing of Alexa's exploits, never knowing he was brewing her doom."

Elliot wasn't scared or impressed. "Some details would be good."

William adjusted his aching leg. The damaged nerves in his spine often made his limbs go to sleep when he sat down. "This potion makes people ill and it can only be reversed with whatever infected them. It works on animals, objects, and bodies of water. It's a perfect poison that only targets your targets."

Elliot's eyes became bright, revealing horrible plans happening inside his mind. "Mosquitos, giants, cats."

"Yes. I've heard you have a gauntlet."

"She'll run it."

"Promise me they'll all die in it and I'll go away, since you obviously have it covered." William was counting on the vicious intelligence he saw in Elliot's conjured ghost.

Elliot frowned. "I promise they'll all be dead by the time the run is done."

"That's not good enough. You need me." William crossed his hands neatly over the thick cane and waited.

Elliot could have ordered his enforcers to attack, but he was already certain that William would break the vial during the fight, intentionally. "I could find a troll to make my own potion."

"True."

"And maybe I'd miss her." Elliot understood William was going to get what he wanted. "How do you feel about the Mitchel family?"

William felt the trap, but he didn't care. "I absolutely detest your family. Their instance on doing whatever they want and hurting whoever they want is reason enough to slaughter every last one of them."

Elliot smiled kindly. "Welcome to Port City, William. Follow me to your new quarters. Lunch will be served shortly."

William rose as the enforcers fell back. He realized Elliot knew who he was and assumed the radio calls were responsible. He followed the ghost into the darkness without concern. "Why are you so thin? I've been told you have more food here than a thousand people can eat in a year."

Elliot's rage flowed off him in thick waves, heating the tunnel. "It's a reminder of why I detest my sister."

William limped along, smiling. "I definitely came to the right place."

Book 8



1

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

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

Mark eyed the map that showed their location. The plane 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. “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-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 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. The sun was starting to set. He was hoping for signs of survivors in every area they flew over. “I think 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, but his actions hadn’t verified it.

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 those 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 ask for details; he 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. He 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 on a Ferris wheel 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 late teens.”

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

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

Mark nodded. “I think so, too. 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 sleeping in first class. The new people were there, too, resting and trying not to show how scared they were of flying.

Most of Alexa's team had moved into Coach for rest and recovery time, even 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.

The only person moving about was Ria. She was running the food and drink compartment, keeping good smells flowing through the plane. 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?”

“Family 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. In 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’s team wound up in the lead.” Wyatt regarded him with a hard expression. “She showed us the doors hanging in those tunnels and yet, 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 turned back toward the huge windshield, where a darkening sky framed the empty space. “Thank you for your honesty.”

“Is this going to be a problem?”

“No. And yes,” Wyatt explained, lowering 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 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.”

“She 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 seat, 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.”

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

“Too quiet.”

Both men looked toward the rear 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 all sleeping off the fun time from Port City.

Mark was worried; something was wrong.

Daniel shut his eye. “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 easy when people weren’t awake.

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 blanket.

Jacob curled onto his side, holding his 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 dropped 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.

“We’re in charge.”

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



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